Whose Context Is It Anyway?

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Music shapes the worshipping assembly week by week. The liturgy we sing becomes both praise and proclamation in the mouths of the gathered congregation. So how are we to know what it is we should sing? Our worship books are now filled with music from around the globe, from perspectives not even known to most of us just a generation ago. Is that music part of our local expression, and if not, how are we to make it so? This address will outline a process, responsive contextualization, which invites a local assembly to enter into the process of engagement with worship materials from a variety of cultures and contexts.

I think a soft contact lens, the kind that is permeable, is a perfect image for describing how our worshipping communities could work. A contact lens in fact has a very defined surface, even though it may have some color or be completely clear. One of its primary properties is that it is permeable. A lens allows for the transfer of materials from its inside to its outside, and from outside to in. The lens is flexible; it can be bent in many different directions. But ultimately it holds the shape of the retina to which it adheres. Taken a step further, it helps the eye to see outside of itself with clearer and more distinct vision than it could on its own. It helps define and, at the same time, expand the inherent limits of the eye.

Each of our worshipping communities also has a defined surface. It has particular boundaries: a church building perhaps, a group of members and others loosely-affiliated, a neighborhood, a particular location. All of these things give that community its character and its definition.

Every gathering for communal worship is bound by the space, time, and people who gather there. The permeable nature of its borders acknowledges that it receives influences and also gives its own particular influences to others. Imagine that contact lens now with arrows pointing both into and away from it. Such sharing of influence happens through connection with larger expressions of the church: churchwide, ecumenical and other. It can also happen through local sharing as specific communities come into relationship with one another.
Let us first consider the arrows pointing outward. Here we are looking at a local setting influencing others outside itself. Let us see how that works in our own settings. If we had worshipped together recently, I could sing the greeting from that liturgy, and you would likely be able to reply with the correct response. What would have happened? I would have relied on the community that had already begun to form from our worship together and invited you to sing something we already had in our common memory. In other words, I would have known that we already have our context together. Even as loosely as we are a worshipping body together, I could rely on those borders we had already experienced and recall us into them at a moment’s notice.

I am going to proceed with a caution. There are perils involved in participating in these arrows. Most of us can attest to the dread that we have experienced when a parishioner visited that really quaint church over vacation and brings back the bulletin for us to intricately examine for our congregation’s use. The judgments that we bring to bear at that moment are instructive. We can see how things in another context do not just automatically equate and transfer to our own setting, and so we feel justified when that summer bulletin just happens to fall off our desk into the wastebasket a few days later.

Lest we be a bit smug at this, we need to be wary of our own susceptibility here. One reason many people come to the Institute of Liturgical Studies each year is to consider what might be taken from there and used in the home setting. That is how the process works. Many of the things we say and sing at Institute work because of where we are; we, the hearty worship leaders who have survived another Lenten season; we, who come to worship in the marvelous space of the chapel with the resources of a university. These things also do not necessarily transfer back to our home bases. I hear stories each year of things that people took from here, tried them at home, and could not figure out why it did not work there. My response these days is that it takes a lot of our attention to really understand our own contexts.

I will attempt here to address this fluid process which healthy worshipping communities constantly undergo. This process relies on the basis of a common core that undergirds this whole endeavor. I call this responsive contextualization, a process of seeking meaning in the local community. It is a process of observing, naming and exploring deep meaning in each local context. Later I will lay out a five-step process which a local assembly can take up which will lead to informed and expressive choices in worship planning. I will use music as the prime
candidate for this process. There are other candidates: visual art, dramatic presentation and liturgical prayer come immediately to mind. Music is what I know best; it is also the most pervasive art form in Christian worship, and one that, by its very nature, draws the whole community into participation.

Music’s importance to the Christian assembly centers on its ability to convey text. We Lutherans know the primary place that Luther gave to music’s prominence in worship. Music was so important to Luther because it was a means through which the gospel could be carried to others. It was more uniquely suited to this task than any of the other arts. Luther writes, “God is thereby praised and honored and we are made better and stronger in faith when his holy Word is impressed on our hearts by sweet music.” Luther believed that singing the gospel not only edifies the singer, but also the hearer. The gospel is continued through this never-ending chain of proclamation and reception.

Music carries this continuous chain in oral form. In the Worship and Culture Studies produced by the Lutheran World Federation, Mark Bangert writes about the unique way in which music bears this role of proclamation in the Christian assembly. Bangert sees this combination as an essential link in the oral nature of the gospel. “This is at the heart of being Lutheran: that is, Word is taken to be an oral thing, an enfleshed event, seeking a voice (vox), longing for fulfillment in song, hymn, or dance.” Bangert’s own work examines various cultural musics and considers the various ways that cultures convey the same gospel in different musical forms.

As Gordon Lathrop has taught many of us in his book, Holy Things, Christian worship is built upon the pattern of juxtaposition, placing two different things next to each other. Music in the church is constantly juxtaposing text and tune, ritual and music, sound and silence. Music is the only art able to carry text within its form. It is this pattern of doing things in two ways that builds meaning in the Christian assembly. Word and music can combine in multiple ways in this juxtaposition pattern. The

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interplay of a spoken text, a sung text, and a wordless piece of instrumental music creates multiple possibilities for word and music. Because of this close relationship between word and music, music takes primary place among the arts in worship. Of all the arts, music is in the best positions to convey the gospel.

Music provides connection in a community through its combination of word and organized sound. This combination serves to create meaning for those who join the song. As a community sings, so it may come to believe and live. Music connects individual feeling to communal expression, and gives voice to unexpressed emotions.

The cultural anthropologist Victor Turner noted this effect of group meaning making through its communal gatherings. Communitas is what he calls that spontaneous, immediate form of relatedness that occurs when a group of people enters into a liminal experience. This might be as simple as an undefined period for a Taize chant, a time of confession or open prayer. It is an experience in which all persons present have equal access and participatory ability. Turner notes the power which communitas engenders in a cultural context. “If the cultural form of communitas – as found in liminality – can correspond with an actual experience of communitas, the symbols there presented may be experienced more deeply than in any other context.”

Christian liturgy opens itself to communitas as it enacts the great stories of salvation history, as it gathers the assembly around the table for the meal, as it affirms the newly baptized into the whole community. Singing its way into the ritual action, the community affirms in a common voice the response to God’s actions to humankind.

When we take this notion of communitas and apply it to our Christian and Lutheran assemblies, we find music at the heart of the development of communitas. The contemporary ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlman notes the connection between a church’s worship book and the development of communitas. As many church bodies are currently in the process of developing new resources for our churchwide expressions, I thought Bohlman’s findings to be of particular interest.

In his study of German-American hymnals of the nineteenth century, Bohlman notes the connection which music makes with the religious lives of both Jewish and Christian German-Americans. The hymnals of these communities held an important place in the lives of the immigrants who used them. Hymnals were more than books for these German-Americans.

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They were the tangible connection of a community to its ritual and music. Bohlmann writes, “the music that resulted from performing out of the hymnal was, in fact, a representation of the community, a representation animated through performance and animating because it brought the community into existence as they sang.”

Bohlmann asserts that the hymnals functioned to establish the relationship of these specific communities to God and each other. “The hymnal shaped the sacred boundaries of ethnicity and ascribed identity.” The performance of the music created the community in which these German-Americans could develop and solidify their identity as Christians, as Germans, and as Americans. Music was the medium for the creation of that communal identity. Music grounded the community in expression, giving it form and space in worship.

Thus music was the basis of the development of *communitas* among immigrant German-Americans. Bohlman notes that music allows the bringing together of the past into the present. This fusion creates a new present, bringing people together with a new sense of a forged community. Bohlman builds on Turner’s notion of *communitas* in describing the effect of the hymnals on these communities. “The hymnal’s music, moreover, perpetuated the community, giving it a chance to resituate the past in the present, that is to perform its history through a new sense of *communitas* immanent in the music of a religious body.”

Bohlman points out the way music can engage multiple senses of time. As a community encounters its own past in a hymnal, it interprets that past through its own present context. This is the power the hymnal enables in the present community. If that is the case within a community with a long-standing tradition, might it also be a way one community can participate with another community? As a culture performs another’s music, might it not in the same way encounter another community’s history, and in performing it, reinterpret it?

I think this is key to understanding the way cultures influence one another. The German-Americans who sang the songs of their ancestors did not become their ancestors; rather, they were connected to them and enriched through their memory. So, also, in performing another’s music, one remains one’s own community, but enriched and enlarged through

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4 Ibid., 2–3.

5 Ibid., 3.
connection to another community. Crossing cultural borders creates new connections with others. It neither eliminates nor duplicates any previous community. It is a process of enlarging one’s local context.

When worship materials from diverse cultures are juxtaposed in a worship setting, they interrelate in a new and creative way. A prayer from Korea spoken before a hymn from South America will give both a new context. The contrast between them also creates the potential to interrelate in previously unknown ways. Now in this new context they are placed in a new and dynamic interrelationship. From this place, new meanings can begin to develop as close proximity yields heightened contrast.

All of us engaged in the inception of new worship resources can learn from Bohlman’s findings. When we bring a hymn from a previously published hymnal into a new hymnal, it is no longer the hymn it was in the old hymnal. People and assemblies newly recreate the hymns as they sing from it. “Blessed Assurance” comes to mind as such a hymn, one that holds deep meaning for many in our current generation, yet those who sing it today come from a completely different context than the one in which the hymn originated.

As music crosses from one time to another, or from one culture to another, we see its meanings and emphases shift. As music travels from one community to another, it shares both a commonality with other communities and also a uniqueness that it acquires in each new community. Responsive contextualization is the term I give this point of contact between cultures as a community engages. Gordon Lathrop sees music as a vehicle to enable a community’s expression. “The time of the meeting comes to expression as musical time, as rhythm and meter enabling the common timekeeping of this moment.” Music is the mode in which people gather and together present their praise and thanksgiving to God. Music’s ability to express multiple layers of time recalls sacred time. It also calls forth the interaction of the community, with its invitation to join the church’s song. “The mysterious power of song, pulling heart and mind into harmony, proposing order, making room for dissonance and for single voices within a final resolution and a pervasive community, suggesting transcendence with its sometimes unearthly sounds, must be broken.” What Lathrop suggests needing to be “broken” is the possibility of music’s becoming disconnected from a community and focusing attention only on itself. Lathrop is here suggesting that the power of music

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8 Lathrop, 112.
9 Ibid.

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must be attached to the meaning of the assembly, to its ritual actions. Without this connection, music becomes detached from the community and no longer expresses its deep meanings.

Music that is contextualized within the local community remains engaged and connected to the worshipers. Through this deep connection in the community, worshipers also experience their connection to the sacred, and their relationship to God. “In Christ, Christians believe they have come into the harmony of God, with all its great room for dissonance and single voices, a harmony only suggested by any of our holy songs.”

Lathrop here uses the language of music to say that religious experience can open us to the reality of God’s diversity as larger than even our most diverse human imaginings. Lathrop characterizes the harmony of God as including a range of dissonance and consonance, expressed by single and multiple voices. God’s harmony is greater than ours, encompassing a wider breadth of expression than our music can ever achieve, or even imagine. This should encourage us to seek the widest diversity in our musical expressions, with the broadest range of symbolic expressions in order to approach God’s image of harmony in diversity.

It is due to Fr. Anscar Chupungco that we as North American Lutherans are even having such conversations as I have been relating. Lutherans Bangert, Bohlmann, and Lathrop have all built upon the ideas that began in another time and in another church. Fr. Chupungco began many of these ideas as a result of the expanded expressions of worship following Vatican II and coined many of the terms we freely use today. In his book Liturgical Inculturation: Sacramentals, Religiosity, and Catechesis, he articulates and distinguishes many of the terms we freely use today in Lutheran conversations. Chupungco defined the terms indigenization, contextualization, adaptation, inculturation and acculturation to describe the various ways that culture intersects with the western liturgical rites. In so doing, he has given the western church a lens for understanding the substantial changes in liturgical and ritual practice that continue to challenge the church’s worship life.

Chupungco used the word inculturation to describe the process of bringing together the universal rites of the Roman Catholic Church and the newly invited, culturally-specific practices. He raises an important issue for maintaining the integrity of cultures as interaction develops between them. “One important principle of inculturation is that it must neither

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10 Lathrop, 113.
debilitate nor damage the identity of any of the parties involved. Inculturation means mutual enrichment, not destruction.\footnote{Anscar Chupungco, Liturgical Inculturation: Sacramentals, Religiosity, and Catechesis (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 120.}

Chupungco's formula for this is $A + B = C$. He means that when two cultures come into contact through the liturgy, a new entity, $C$, is created, but $C$ disestablishes neither $A$ nor $B$. When two cultures interact, the result is something new, neither completely a part of the former culture, nor entirely of the new culture. He saw this formula useful in understanding what happens when the western rite intersects a local culture. Neither the rite nor the culture is subsumed, but each retains its character as they are combined and juxtaposed.

Chupungco believes that contextualization is part of the process of inculturation. He writes, "context is a vibrant expression of human culture. If the liturgy is to be inculturated, it must also be contextualized."\footnote{ibid., 21.}

So how are we to develop these fluid communities, enable cultural sharing and maintain one's own boundaries? I will suggest five steps and their rationale in a process called responsive contextualization. I challenge you to consider these steps in relation to your primary worshipping community. As far as possible, think through the implications of these steps on your community. Through the listing of this process, I challenge you to begin to consider ways in which your worshipping community might benefit from addressing some or all of these steps.

**Naming and Identifying the Contextual Location**

The first step in responsive contextualization is the recognition of the specificity and the commonality of each worshipping community. Communities are often identified by denominational affiliation and connections to larger institutions. This process begins by claiming the specific nature of each community and its unique identity, in addition to larger unifying identities. This is also the time to name and identify the common core of the worshipping assembly: what it owns for itself, and with wider expressions of the church. Essential to this process is the contribution of each community member. A look at the networks and structures within the community is important before setting out. How is each member included in the formation, planning, and leading of worship?
It is important that everyone have access to the worship service in a way that allows for participation in its formation. While each person need not participate in planning, it is important that the planning structure incorporates each person’s gifts and abilities that relate to the community’s worship. Is anyone excluded in the planning process? Are there any voices not heard? These questions can be a helpful corrective in developing an inclusive planning process.

Naming a congregation’s location is a process of claiming its identity. It is a way of saying both what it holds in common with other communities and what makes this community unique among others. It also places every community in a context. Every community will have its own way of answering who it is and what creates meaning within it. No one community is normative for another; each creates its own identity from its own members.

This process of naming works against the possibility of a congregation understanding itself as normative. It creates the possibility of mutuality between communities by giving specific identity to each. It works against the idea that one community can simply be duplicated in another location. Each community has unique characteristics giving it an identity. Context adds the unique and particular distinguishing elements from other communities.

*Identifying Meaning in the Local Community*

The second step in responsive contextualization is the identification of meaning as it is expressed in the community. Worship expresses the deep meanings and values of its community. This step in the process brings those meanings into the conscious awareness of the community.

What a community values in its worship expresses its beliefs about what is valuable in all of life. Because these meanings often go unnoticed or unrecognized in the community, this process brings to awareness deep underlying communal values. The process reflects to the community who it believes itself to be under God and with God. The starting place is the Word and Meal. Then the particularities of accent, cultural expression, musical choices and celebration add their particular mark on the community’s identity.

A community can look to its own worship practices to see where and how it visibly expresses its truth claims. Sacramental practices, variety of worship leadership, vitality of congregational singing, all attest to a congregation’s meaning. A community can look at the ways it prays, the
physical set-up for distributing communion, and the way visitors are welcomed to discover what it communicates as important.

Further, the texts used in worship are important for their expression of the congregation’s faith in the Christian gospel. How is God addressed and imaged in the liturgy? What images of God are present? Which are absent? What is the predominant relationship between God and creation? What kinds of ethical claims are made through the liturgy? Looking at worship texts in this light can show which truth claims this congregation emphasizes. It can also give pause to consider omissions in a holistic conception of worship. What is not being said that could be? What aspects of the divine-human relationship are not being addressed? How does the community’s language reveal what it believes about itself and God?

A community may need to probe to uncover its own meanings. Over time, a community may become unconscious about the nature of its expressions. The process of articulating its meanings may help to bring them again to the congregation’s awareness. This can also be a time for looking at what a congregation has valued over its history, and evaluating it for the present community.

Encountering an Expression Beyond the Community

The third step in responsive contextualization is to engage worship resources from other communities, cultures, or traditions. A song, a prayer, a litany are examples which might be considered from another place. As it does this, a community invites into itself an expression that contrasts with its own identity. In this encounter, a community crosses its own borders and enters a new expression. In this exchange, a new presentation of the potential resource occurs in the community. The community interacts with the resource creating a new context for it.

It is here that issues of contact between communities arise. How much need one community know about another community’s resource before it engages it? Issues such as languages, cultural practices and performance practices will come to bear here. As one community learns about another, it enters an interdependent relationship with it. This is a never-ending process, as one community can always learn more about others. Relationships deepen and become more complex as a community engages more and diverse resources. This growing web of relationships becomes part of the identity of the community.
Care in preparation is an important step in this process. Planners should consider what would create an air of receptivity for a new worship elements. If another culture is involved, how can the congregation learn about it? How could the community be introduced to the things that are highly valued in that culture?

Introduction of the new element also needs careful planning. If the element is a piece of music, the issues of teaching and learning the piece are critical. Are there a variety of presentations possible which would increase the community’s contact with the music and enhance its learning? What gifts within the community might be tapped for presenting and leading this hymn? Repeated presentations over an extended period of time, employing variety, will give a broader learning experience.

Developing Meaning in the Contextual Community

The fourth step is meaning-making. Now the community that has encountered and engaged a resource from another community asks itself if this resource carries meaning for its own community. Is the Word proclaimed for this people in this place through the use of something new? Now the resource moves beyond being introduced, and is presented a variety of times in a variety of ways. This raises the question of repetition. Will the resource be able to bear the repetition of a community over time? In the repetition of the song, does the congregation engage it? Is this resource proclaiming the Word in a way that this congregation can hear and respond? Is the congregation able to express itself through it? Where are the connections between the resource and the community? Did it develop an enlivened presentation by the community?

Here the question of previous omission in the contextual community arises. Can this new resource fill a space within the local community? Does it say something new or fresh, providing a needed contrast to the community’s identity? If the answer to most of the previous nine questions would be yes, then this piece might find its way into the community’s repertoire.

Evaluation and Assessment

Finally, then, the community must decide whether this resource will have a regular place in its worship. Often these decisions happen gradually and without conscious decision-making, as an assembly takes up a new thing and owns it. I believe there is value, though, in assessing the
use of the resource and considering the ways it contributes to the community’s worship. There are values like connections with other communities, enlarging the scope of one’s own community, proclaiming the Word in fresh ways that can come to play here. This is a deeper question than whether the community likes it, and is starting to take to it.

As communities engage new resources, a fusion of horizons between these communities occurs that may enlarge the local community. They gradually embrace a more diverse and enriching whole and expand their own identity in an ever-widening series of expressions. As with contrast in a work of art, the greater contrast provides the greatest potential for a community’s own expansion into greater wholeness.

A community that finds meaning in new and diverse expressions will be expanding its own meaning-making. In the contrast provided by a new resource, a community begins to incorporate new values as its own. Its own base of meaning becomes more complex as it engages an enlarging variety of meanings. Completing the circle with a decision to retain or move on to other resources keeps a community fluid and dynamic, retaining its center and identity while expanding into new expressions. This cycle is continuous, returning to the very first step of naming one’s own place as a regular part of congregational life.

Conclusion

Chupungco might remind us that the contextualization of worship is important in order for worship to remain relevant to the contemporary world. Paul Nelson might remind us of the abs of steel needed in order to undertake the difficult project of deciding on new worship resources for the church. Gordon Lathrop might remind us that as we juxtapose new elements with our cherished rituals, we are creating new patterns of proclamation for our contemporary assemblies. They, however, are not with us to remind us of these things on a daily basis as we work, so it is up to us to decide what to do with all of this.

It is up to you how you will contextualize events such as the Liturgical Institute into your own community. It is up to you how flexible and permeable you will allow your community’s borders to be. It is up to you to discern how your community can best hear the proclaimed Word in your place. The answer is different for each one of us, and only by being attuned and attentive to our community will we come to know how to proceed.
We are not left alone however. We have the dependability of the Word. We have the structure of the Ordo. We have the nourishment of the sacraments. We have the living presence of Christ. None of these depends on our ability to get all the contextualized answers just right. In fact, those gifts of God often shine through our shabbiest efforts to produce them. Luckily we are not responsible for those gifts of God’s grace. God can see to them, and will often use our meager efforts for a purpose beyond us. So we try with faltering steps, succeeding and failing, knowing we are merely earthen vessels. We are in good company here. Paul reminds us “We have this treasure in clay jars, so that the glory of God might be revealed” (2 Corinthians 4:7).