



# Is There a Future for Traditional Worship?

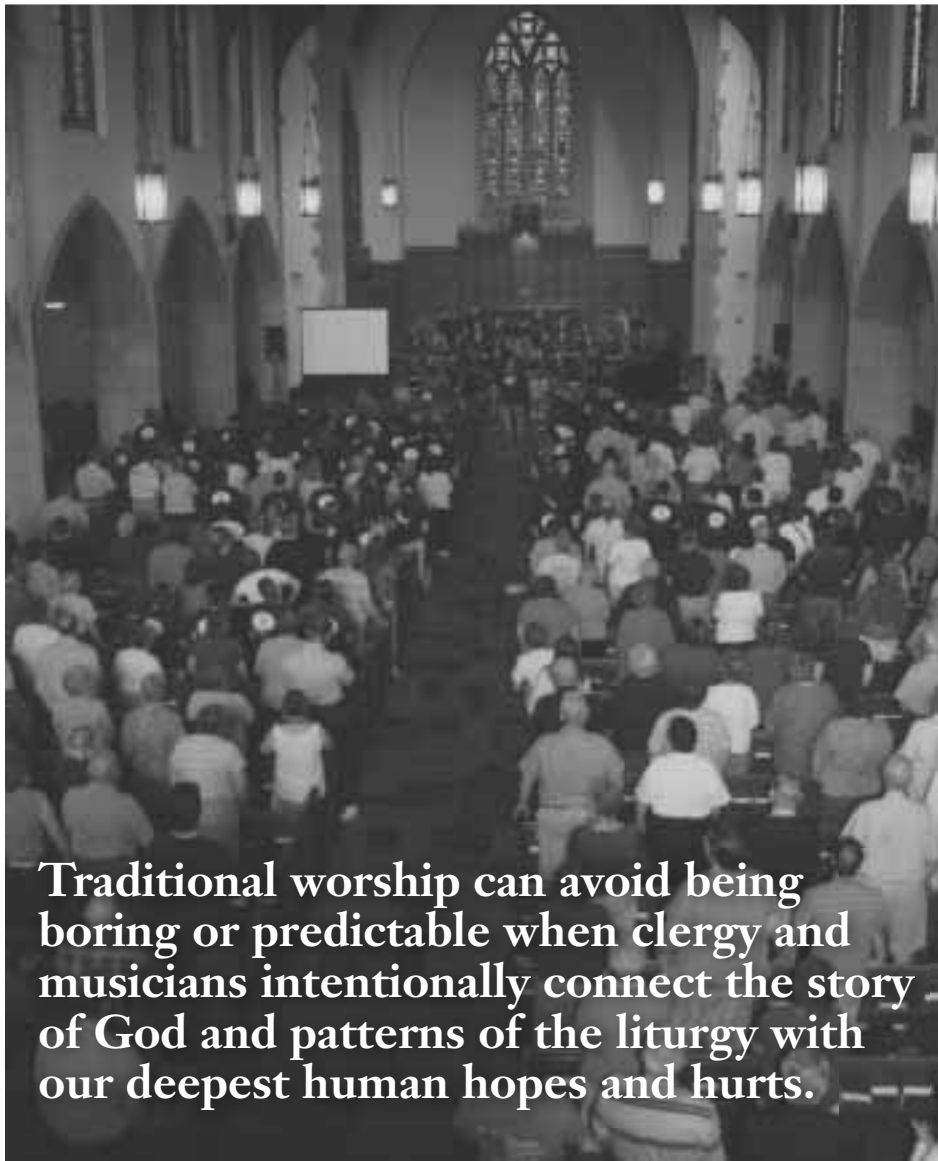
By Ken Carter

One of my divinity school professors, Robert Wilson, was co-author of *What's Ahead for Old First Church?* (with Ezra Earl Jones; Harper and Row, 1974). He told me once that the book spoke to a basic question that

many congregations, inquiring pastors, and concerned laity were asking: Is there a future for the downtown, flagship church? That question, spoken or unspoken, has a parallel in our time among those who lead and care about the weekly gathering of the faithful: Is

there a future for traditional worship? In this era of innovative worship experiences, new technology, and changing cultural expectations, most of us are trying to discern an answer to this question.

My own experience across twenty-



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seven years of parish ministry in a variety of churches has led me to see this as a more than intellectual exercise. I am convinced that traditional worship has a future; it need not be our exclusive pattern of worship, but our way of life will be impoverished without it. This is clear to me when I focus on the *meaning of worship*, the significance of tradition, and our call to *embrace the tensions* of who we are as United Methodists.

### **Worship**

Worship, very simply, is not for us. Worship is for God. But we can lose sight of this truth when we focus too much on stylistic preferences. Sometimes a new person will come up to me after a service and say, “We’re church shopping.” And my mind immediately

races to the refrain from children’s literature: “*This soup was too hot. This soup was too cold. This soup was just right!*”

We all form opinions about every aspect of life. We are comparison shoppers, and we make most of our decisions in this way. But this consumerist mentality has spilled over into worship in the past few decades, sparking debates that some observers term the “worship wars”: contemporary versus traditional, praise choruses versus hymns, casual attire versus vestments, my favorite style versus your favorite style. Music is often made to be the scapegoat—and the pipe organ is the piñata we strike so that everything bad about the church falls out!

There can be profound worship in any style—I am not privileging in one over another—but going down the road

of style leads us to the wrong destination, because it places everything in the context of personal preference and taste. At its best, traditional worship is shaped by content—for United Methodists, the profound hymns of Charles Wesley are an example, drawing deeply from the scriptures. To reject classical hymnody for stylistic reasons is problematic. Worship is not about your preference or mine. It is something else altogether.

### **Tradition**

Beyond mere “style,” worship should guide us through a process of redemption and response to God. Each element of traditional worship plays a part. The best guide for a Christian is the deep and living tradition of the Old and New Testaments, filled with guidance about worship: Passover feasts and upper rooms, extended sermons and intercessory prayers, songs of praise and psalms of lamentation, baptisms and offerings, benedictions and processions toward and recessions from the throne of God.

We see a rich picture of what worship looks like in the sixth chapter of Isaiah. Isaiah is in the temple, overwhelmed with the beauty and glory of God, having a profound experience of God that we all have a chance to experience when we follow this biblical example for our worship services.

There is **praise**: “*Holy, Holy, Holy, the whole earth is filled with his glory.*” Then Isaiah makes a **confession**, an acknowledgement, a true statement about himself: “*Woe is me, I am lost. I am a man of unclean lips and I live in the midst of a people of unclean lips.*” And then there is good news, an **intervention**: “*Your guilt is taken away, your sins are forgiven.*”

But that is not the end of worship. Worship is more than a relationship between God and the individual. When worship is authentic, when it is an experience of the holy, there is unfinished business. God has our attention and gives us an **invitation to respond**:

“*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, whom shall I send, who will go for us? And Isaiah responds: Here am I, Lord. Send me.*”

These are essentials of worship, independent of musical style or other personal preferences. Worship is all

about praise, confession, and forgiveness, and from worship there flows the desire and the call to reflect God's glory beyond the temple, outside the sanctuary into the world. If we focus on these essentials, we are a long way from church shopping, we are a long way from sizing up a deity who matches our temperaments and tastes, our styles and status. The roles have been reversed, the world has been turned upside down, and all of a sudden we are a part of someone else's agenda. At its best, we name this other agenda *tradition*.

## Embracing the Tensions of Worship

I am confident that there is a future for passionate traditional worship. Traditional worship can avoid being boring or predictable—the spirit can move within it, allowing it to “breathe.” This occurs when clergy and musicians intentionally connect the story of God and patterns of the liturgy with our deepest human hopes and hurts.

Some people think that for Methodism to flourish and attract new people we need to replace traditional worship with more contemporary forms. But I do not think that continuing to marginalize traditional worship through benign neglect is the answer to our denomination's declining numbers. I am not convinced that demographics is destiny—that a particular age group or cultural segment necessarily values a particular style of worship over another. Our future can include vital congregations engaged in traditional worship alongside worshipping communities engaged in alternative, contemporary, and emergent forms.

We have confused worship with evangelism as we try to attract people to our services based on what certain stereotypes say those people enjoy. In so doing, we have neglected the calling to evangelism, and for that reason—not any stylistic choice—have witnessed the decline of church membership and worship attendance.

Traditional worship can shape us in becoming disciples who know the story well enough to encounter human need and respond to cultural change. We can understand the perennial human experiences of exodus and exile, the depths of human sin, and our cor-

responding need for divine grace. I am convinced that traditional worship, at its best, can hold faithfulness and relevance in tension, and that this is in fact who we are in the Wesleyan tradition: both catholic and evangelical. We can cherish the biblical tradition as we proceed into the future because God has been our help in ages past, and I am convinced that God will also be our hope for years to come. □



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*“Let us press on to know the LORD...who will come to us like... the spring rains that give drink to the earth.”—Hosea 6:3*

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