

# **Liturgy and Identity: What does the Liturgy Make of Me?**

**Interpreting the Effect of the Liturgy on Personal  
Identity in a Fresh Expression of Church**

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**Submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MA in  
Ministry (Oxford Brookes University)**

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**May 2009**

## Abstract

This dissertation is concerned with the effects of the liturgy of corporate worship on personal identity - with what our worship is doing to us. It focusses this interest on fresh expressions of church, which are constantly creating and developing new liturgies. An adaptation of Stoddart's (2005) interpretivist two-stage model for investigating the effects of the liturgy on personal identity has been used for this research in a case study fresh expression of church. The model is based on a social constructivist methodology which considers identity to be emergent and contextual and therefore open to being shaped by the multidimensional event of the liturgy. Participant observation and interview methods were used to obtain data, which was then analysed in two stages. In the first stage, a framework proposed by Downey (1997) for studying spirituality was used to sift the data which produced a thick description of the spirituality behind the liturgy. In the second stage, this thick description was analysed in the light of a model of personal identity (Collicutt, 2007), which enabled an interpretation of the possible effects of the liturgy of the research community on personal identity. The adaptation of Stoddart's (2005) two stage model was found to offer an effective research methodology which, in spite of the insufficiency of Collicutt's (2007) model to deal with the complexities of Christian personal identity, produced insightful results. The trends of the effect of the liturgy on personal identity were towards movement and change rather than rootedness and stability, and to a focus on future development rather than the limitations of present realities. The research raises important questions about how churches deal with the paradoxes of the Christian faith in their liturgies, and about what skills might be needed for practitioners, particularly in the developing fresh expressions movement, to generate healthy and life-giving liturgies.

## Conclusions

This research has called attention to the intricacy of the task of putting together different elements which will constitute the liturgy of the people in corporate worship. This is because the text, including words and images seen, heard and spoken which engage all senses, along with the performance of the liturgy, has a shaping effect on personal identity and on personhood. The consequences of these shaping effects are by no means isolated to the individual, but have an extensive reach due to our interconnectedness as persons - “as persons-in-relation, my personhood is inextricably linked to my enabling you to be a person...*How* I and my community worship has implications for the personhood of each one of us.” (Stoddart, 2005, p101). There are profound implications for persons, for communities and for the mission of God to the world, all of which the church is intimately concerned with. The lack of work to date on liturgy and personal identity is therefore surprising.

It may be that the complexity of Christian identity, which this work has encountered, along with the likelihood of contested interpretations of the positive or negative effects of a community’s worship, hinders research in this area. But this research project has demonstrated both the feasibility and value of interpreting the effect of the liturgy on personal identity in a particular worshipping community. Stoddart’s (2005) two-stage model has revealed firstly the usefulness of Downey’s approach to studying spirituality in the context of liturgy, offering a relatively simple means of establishing through thick description the story that is being told through the liturgy of corporate worship. And secondly, in sifting this thick description with a model of identity, that it is feasible to interpret the possible effects of the liturgy on the conceptual ‘me’. Generating an

interpretive piece of writing in the first person singular was found to bring such a study alive in a way which provokes engagement.

What such a model enables is an interpretation which generates a consciousness towards the *trends* of the effects of the liturgy on personal identity. Considering such trends gives the means to assess the implications of choices made about what will be done and how in corporate worship. And whether the trends are considered positive or negative will be a matter for each worshipping community to determine within their particular context and theological understanding. What this research signals is that developing this consciousness toward the effects of the liturgy on personal identity is a vital part of leading a worshipping community.

The important questions raised by interpreting the effects of the liturgy of the research community on personal identity have implications for the church as a whole. How does any church in its liturgy deal with the paradoxes of Christian identity, particularly as they relate to stability and innovation, and facing the limitations of reality and moving beyond current constraints? The dangers are an oversimplification which does not help people to live creatively in the tension of paradox, but tips the balance in a particular direction. Healthy, life giving liturgy needs to offer space for both a deep rootedness and stability, and exploratory innovation and movement. It should both encourage a facing of reality, and open doors to unimagined futures.

In focussing on liturgy and identity in fresh expressions of church, this research highlights a number of pertinent issues for a movement currently developing its resources and growing in influence in many countries of the Western world. Concern to engage with postmodern cultural connection points needs to be tempered by the prophetic challenge of

the Gospel which should transform culture. Graham Tomlin (2008) speaks of the importance of setting expectations, “the creation of an atmosphere that gently encourages goodness and discourages deviousness, deceit and divisiveness” (p74). This is the task of the liturgy.

Learning to engage with postmodern culture in a Christian way requires developing skills of seeing and making sense, and becoming conscious of what is influencing this sight and interpretation. In other words, coming to inhabit a hermeneutical circle which facilitates “reading the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (Kubicki, 2005, p221). Conversations begun on fresh expressions websites could go a long way in generating and sustaining such a hermeneutical cycle. Ultimately, it is the understanding of culture and of the Gospel which will impact decisions made about what is done and how it is done in corporate worship.

As there is ongoing development both of the formal training of pioneer ministers, and of guides and resources relating to good practice in setting up and sustaining fresh expressions of church, now is the time for serious consideration to be given to the skills needed for developing liturgy in worshipping communities. Such learning will need to incorporate an appreciation of the complexities, dynamics and potential of the liturgy, and a growing depth of theological understanding which will inform and support the Christian narrative we seek to communicate through the liturgy. What is it that we invite people to in the liturgy? How might people be shaped through the performance of the liturgy we have created, as it encourages particular ways of relating to God, to ourselves and to others? The offering of broad principles for consideration in the development of liturgy, such as those proposed by Susan Smith (2006), offer a more helpful guidance I feel than supplying a list of suggested ingredients for worship. Smith’s (2006) principles for the creation of

liturgy call for discernment of the experience and need of the worshipping community, the judicious and sensitive use of Christian ritual and symbol, the support of the contraries of cross and resurrection, an encouragement towards life and the reign of God, and a recognition of expressing and representing action on behalf of the whole church.

In speaking about the principles of learning for pioneer ministry in the context of fresh expressions of church, Steven Croft (2008) suggests that “building habits of ongoing reflection, supervision and support is more important than advanced preparation”. This supports the importance of ongoing conversation between practitioners, and also, the relevance of having tools to make an interpretive assessment of the possible effects of the liturgy on personal identity. This research work has initiated an important process of beginning to open up conversations about liturgy and personal identity, considering the question, ‘what is our worship doing to us?’ And it has been able to demonstrate the potential of Stoddart’s (2005) two-stage model as an assessment tool in this area. It is hoped that this research might go some way towards enabling practitioners to develop a necessary consciousness towards issues of liturgy and personal identity. And that the fruit of this for the church and the world might be life-giving and life-transforming encounter with God, self and others.