

## WELCOMING THE STRANGER: A PUBLIC THEOLOGY OF WORSHIP AND EVANGELISM

How the congregation's participation in the *Missio Dei* affects worship planning

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*Welcoming the Stranger* is a welcome contrast to the plethora of works that claim assimilation must happen through teaching visitors and new members to live the way we live; and that the way we live is in accordance with God's divine order. Keifert describes God as a self-giving, self-sacrificing God who "is the host of public worship" and "a gracious God who gives to the stranger."<sup>1</sup> The directional nature of Keifert's work is the opposite from assimilation strategies which hope to assimilate new members into the present church "family."<sup>2</sup> Instead, Keifert proposes Christian communities imitate God by learning "how to host the stranger,"<sup>3</sup> allowing the stranger to remain the stranger. He proposes that effective integration of evangelism and worship are possible through public ritual.<sup>4</sup>

Keifert describes God as the "irreducible Other, the ultimate Stranger."<sup>5</sup> God is also the "ultimate host."<sup>6</sup> Jesus turned the tables from stranger to host many times during His public ministry.<sup>7</sup> Keifert suggests that we can do the same in our public ministries, which "begins with the death of the empirical ego in baptism and 'a reception of the self from [the Stranger,] the Other. That is to participate in God.'"<sup>8</sup> Once we have gained our Christian identity in God, we should imitate the ultimate host by receiving the stranger in our worship services and lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992, 58.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 15, 89.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

Keifert's logical and theological premise has more strength than his practical suggestions. Keifert's practical suggestion is to engage members and visitors in public ritual: home games for members and away games for visitors.<sup>9</sup> He says:

Because church worship in America and other Western countries is voluntary, Western Christians have succumbed to the temptation to 'pay their games at home.' The modern undercurrents have encouraged Christians to keep worship as private as possible and to avoid ritual whenever possible. Stripped of its ritual, Christian worship loses its public character, substituting performance to an audience for the ritual involvement of the entire community in the presence of the self-giving, self-sacrificing God.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than being passive observers of worship, Keifert encourages worship leaders to facilitate for members and visitors to become active participants in worship ritual; and "[b]y going through the motions of humanity as defined by that culture, we become human."<sup>11</sup>

Some of Keifert's practical examples of ritual could be defined differently: the cross<sup>12</sup> could be defined as a symbol, and whether you are handed a worship folder<sup>13</sup> could be defined as an informal rule, for example. Although Keifert states: "Simply knowing that hospitably deployed ritual leads to enjoying the company of strangers is a necessary but not sufficient component in a pastoral-theological strategy for effectively integrating worship and evangelism," Keifert's suggestions may be best applied in their broad sense. As an intentional interim pastor I join a new church every 15 to 18 months. I am very familiar with the stranger concept. Yet, in my pastoral role I imitate Christ as a host in each ministry setting, while yet a stranger. Being aware of and maintaining tension between these two roles offers opportunity for personal learning and ministry. The intentional Interim Ministry Conference (IMC) utilizes many similar

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 96-99.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 129.

(but possibly more practical) concepts for ministries in transition and among strangers. For example, there is a service for entering and exiting, and there is emphasis on succession planning and organizational change.

Keifert's position that the worship service is God's service, where he hosts us in His Pascal feast, fits well with the concept of *Missio Dei* (God's mission). Keifert says "Our worship organizes itself around the presence of this God and our response to such a presence."<sup>14</sup>

#### Reference

Keifert, Patrick. *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 93.