

# Assembly in Exile

## Worship at Mount Olive Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, MN

by David M. Cherwien



**T**hroughout the pandemic, churches have maintained their liturgical practices through a variety of means. Some, having already initiated the practice of livestreaming prior to the pandemic, continue providing livestreamed liturgies each Sunday with a small number of physically spaced leaders and musicians in an otherwise empty nave. Some encourage individuals or households to observe liturgies in homes and provide materials for this, most of them fasting from eucharist. Livestreaming has worked well for many churches; many have seen increased attendance and participation from audiences from across the country or around the globe.

However, Mount Olive—where I serve as cantor—has made a conscious decision not to livestream liturgies until assemblies are once again able to gather safely and the eucharist again be celebrated together. The reasons for not streaming are multifaceted, but an influential factor is the absence of the assembly—a foundation for the practice of liturgy at Mount Olive. This article provides the context and developments that led to that decision, its reaffirmation, and thoughts about what might be next.

### Context

In comparison to its sibling ELCA congregations in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul (MN), Mount Olive is a medium-sized parish with close to 600 members. It calls itself socially



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*Interior of Mount Olive Lutheran Church, Minneapolis*

NANCY J.P. ANDERSON



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progressive yet liturgically conservative, embracing the historic liturgies of the church.

Liturgically, Mount Olive places a high value on the assembly's role in the liturgy through active attentiveness; intent-filled spoken and sung responses; individual gestures such as bowing, making the sign of the cross, kneeling, and inclusion of incense—making full use of the body's senses. Children sit near the front so as to be able to see and participate. Congregational singing is a well-supported and highly valued gift within the weekly celebration of the eucharist.

Depending on the liturgical season or festival, the vested leadership in the chancel for each liturgy includes 6–10 people who reflect various forms of ministry, including the ordained, those training for ordination, and lay ministers. The liturgy is co-led by the presiding minister and assisting minister (a lay representative from the community), both set apart by special vestments. The sacristan, a trained lay person from the congregation, coordinates logistical aspects. The preaching and presiding at the eucharist are carried out by the called and ordained pastor, and the vicar (pastoral intern) also preaches on occasion under the supervision of the called pastor. The music is cared for by the called and trained cantor, whose primary role is to be the steward of the congregation's song, a role that includes coordinating groups of musicians from the congregation, such as choirs and instrumentalists. In addition, there are supporting servant roles coordinated by the lay people of the church through the worship committee, including crucifers, torchbearers, communion assistants, the altar guild, greeters, servers, lectors, bread bakers, and more. The celebration of any liturgy involves a large number of people—both seen and unseen.

Congregational song has long been extremely vibrant, robust, and creative, and includes a wide repertoire of songs from various times and places. It is common for us to include stanza alternations for hymns with more than three stanzas, assigning different stanzas (and sometimes parts of stanzas) to treble voices, lower voices, choir, children's choir, organ or instruments, and by asking all to sing in unison or harmony. Following the practice developed by Cantor Paul Manz (who served from 1946 to 1983), extended chorale prelude introductions, as well as improvised settings and accompaniments, are an integral part of the congregation's hymnody.

### **Exile**

During the week that followed Sunday, March 8 (Second Sunday in Lent), all liturgies at the church were suspended due to the rapid spread of COVID-19 caused by the novel coronavirus. The building was closed indefinitely.

It was clear that liturgy needed to continue, but the question was how and where. Also present in our minds was the approaching Holy Week with all of its liturgies and rites. A decision was made early on not to livestream but rather to encourage liturgy in the home; materials were provided to maintain the sense of weekly rhythm, with the common lectionary readings, a new contextualized sermon, and corporate prayer. The intent also was to empower and train people to be prayer and liturgy leaders in their own homes. Congregational song would also be included by utilizing several years' worth of liturgy recordings in order to provide opportunities for full-voiced, vibrant congregational singing. Since the cantor could safely play the organ alone in the church, it was decided that newly recorded organ music could also be provided with weekly worship materials.

For several weeks, worshippers received materials via email that included .pdf files for printed texts and links to either YouTube videos or SoundCloud music files to be used for home liturgies. During Lent, this included a Kyrie, a recorded video of the prayer of the day, the printed lessons, a



video of the sermon, a recording of the hymn of the day on SoundCloud, printed prayers written by the assisting minister, and a closing hymn. The eucharist was not celebrated. With each passing week, we experimented with ways to make materials more user friendly, with fewer and fewer clicks needed to gain access. Those with limited access to technology received CDs that contained audio tracks of this now-digital content.

As the weeks stretched on, some in the congregation asked why we did not livestream each Sunday, which had increasingly become a common practice among many congregations, both locally and nationally. However, it didn't feel right for Mount Olive. And yet, the proposition still warranted review and consideration.

The worship committee met to review, and perhaps revise, our practice, formulating a full statement of purpose to communicate to the congregation. Through careful study and conversation, the committee reaffirmed the earlier decision not to livestream and not to record vested leaders in the nave, even though several parishioners had suggested it would be comforting to see the chancel leaders vested and present in this way. The worship committee prepared a letter outlining these conversations and decisions, which was sent to the congregation on May 7, 2020. What follows is a summary of that statement's points, including several verbatim excerpts (framed by quotation marks).<sup>1</sup>

We began by noting that the work of the church continued even if the church building was temporarily empty: "We are in a time of exile and suffering, as a community, and as a world. ... It is not the first time the people of God have been in exile, separated from each other. There is much we can do without gathering as a community, much we are called to do for the world and our neighbor, even though we still cannot safely gather to sing, pray, eat and drink together."

- The committee felt that pretending to carry on as "normal" would be unhealthy: "In this time of quarantine, we are worshiping in a way

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that focuses our hearts, minds, and bodies in unity as a community with the same readings, the same stories, the same hymns, the same actions without pretending that we are actually together, which is not true."

- We decided to continue creating "videos of lessons, sermons, prayers, in homes and not livestream or record the videos in advance from the chancel, nave or balcony (with the exception of organ recordings that Cantor Cherwien could make in advance in isolation)." The letter continued with this explanation: "Liturgy is a holy action of the people to praise and thank God. It is a communal action in which we have the possibility of encountering the Holy through the presence of Christ. Liturgy is not a religious experience performed by others for us to sit back and watch, to be consumed. Liturgy is rather our thoughtful and conscious participation in a holy drama, the drama of becoming."
- Transmitting images of a few leaders with an empty nave was far too incomplete a representation of our values in liturgy. Livestreamed or newly recorded music with just a few singers cannot represent what is at our core: the full assembly, with the organ accompanying an equal force of singers in the assembly. The lectors, presider, preacher, prayers are to be recorded in homes, as we are all in the same situation—exiled from gathering. And so, we wrote to the



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congregation that “recording worship leaders in a chancel at Mount Olive with an empty nave wouldn’t be bad or wrong, but neither would it be true to our values or situation of exile. Seeing worship leaders recorded in their homes as they lead us in the liturgy is an honest acknowledgement of our exile.”

- We will continue our fast from the eucharist, following articles written by several theologians that, along with the bishop of the ELCA Minneapolis Area Synod and the ELCA churchwide Presiding Bishop, urge congregations to refrain from sharing the Lord’s Supper remotely. As explained in the letter to the congregation, the reason is that “the meal of the Eucharist is celebrated when we gather—and is a shared act with the community, with real materials of the earth that are broken, poured and shared. Holy Communion is just that—communion, a sharing, related to the word ‘common.’... In 1 Corinthians 11:17 Paul uses the words ‘when you come together, do this’ in reference to the Lord’s Supper. ... Since we are not able to gather, we will wait for Holy Communion until we can come together and be a true holy communion. ... This fasting is deeply painful for all of us but seems to us to be the most faithful response to this crisis.”
- For hymns and psalmody, the committee decided to continue using the archives of recorded hymns in all of their fullness—with a large body of congregational singers, with stanza alternations, with extended and interpretive introductory improvisations—including “imper-

fections” and ambient noise such as energetic children, the sound of traffic, and coughing that remind us of our full context and surrounding community. Corporate singing, an unusual act in modern culture, is best created in company with other singers! With many years of recorded liturgies, we are able to offer materials that encourage singing along at home. The hymn recordings are now rendered as videos that include musical notation and text, allowing physically distanced singers to join the full company of singers—including voices on those recordings that now sing with the choirs of angels and saints!

This liturgy-at-home practice continues, though we continuously strive to improve the ways in which these materials are compiled and shared. We now provide a service folder with instructions for ritual actions that can be printed; the corresponding video also includes all that is necessary for participation. Using the application iMovie, the entire liturgy is now presented as one video file uploaded to our YouTube channel. The liturgy video is sent out as a one-click link at 6:00 a.m. on Sunday morning, or on the afternoon of a festival day, and is also available on the homepage of the Mount Olive website. It includes:

- instructions to light a candle;
- prelude (from archives or newly recorded);
- entrance hymn (from archives);
- greeting and prayer of the day (recorded by presider);
- first lesson (read as video by lector);
- psalm (provided with or without antiphon, sung);
- second lesson (read as video by assisting minister);
- gospel acclamation (from archives);
- gospel (video read by presiding minister);
- sermon;
- a time of silence for reflection;



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*Interior of  
Mount Olive  
Lutheran Church,  
Minneapolis*

- hymn of the day (from archives);
- prayers of the church (written and presented in video by the assisting minister);
- sharing of the peace;
- offering or anthem (recorded from prior years);
- Lord's Prayer;
- benediction;
- closing hymn (from archives)
- dismissal (read as video by the assisting minister); and
- postlude (from archives, or newly recorded).

## Return

Our return to in-person worship will likely be a gradual process. Once an assembly can safely gather for unencumbered participation in the full range of ritual action (including singing), liturgies will resume in the nave. At the time of this writing in June, we have explored the possibility of offering, perhaps ironically, more liturgies per Sunday to accommodate fewer people. Perhaps the choir will sing in “shifts” of smaller groups at first.

We have also discussed livestreaming once liturgies resume, as that would be a gathering complete

with assembly, musicians, and complement of vested leadership. The livestreaming would be primarily for those in high-risk groups who would not yet feel safe attending and joining the assembly. For those unable to attend, a larger home-communion network would be needed—a practice where trained lay people bring the bread and wine from the Sunday eucharist to those not in attendance. In order to begin livestreaming, we would have a number of technological challenges to resolve, but we are confident that they are surmountable.

## New Challenges

On Monday, May 25, just seven blocks south of Mount Olive, George Floyd was killed by police. This precipitated another global crisis—the cry for us to tackle the issue of racism, white-body supremacy, and police violence. During the week that followed Floyd's murder, demonstrations began each evening. On Thursday, Friday, and Saturday evenings, these demonstrations became violent, and hundreds of businesses and buildings were vandalized, looted, set ablaze, and burned to the ground—some just a half-block away from Mount Olive's building.

The following Sunday morning, May 31, was the Day of Pentecost. On the night before this, the



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protests had remained mostly peaceful, and there was no further destruction. The smoke in the air from previous days had been replaced with raw emotion and shock.

The immediate set of challenges was almost overwhelming: caring for the injured (miraculously few), cleaning up, rebuilding of the businesses destroyed—many of which were minority- and recent-immigrant-owned—and, since so many stores were burned, looted, or closed, providing food and supplies to the area. The bus service had also been halted. Items such as cleaning supplies, diapers, and detergent—already in short supply due to the pandemic—were needed. Churches and neighborhood groups, and organizations such as Community Emergency Services, answered the call to serve. Grocery giveaways sprang up all around. Groups of people showed up with brooms, dustpans, and trash bags to help clean. People helping people. As it should be.

The long-term challenge is much more difficult: tackling a racist and implicitly biased world. Profiling among police has long been identified as a problem, yet it persists. Recognizing implicit bias and understanding white privilege is also deceptively difficult. Yet we persist—and we must persist—to overcome these things. May we listen. May we learn. May we act on behalf of all of our siblings in Christ of all racial backgrounds.

When global events and tragedies such as this occur, it has been Mount Olive's practice not to alter the lectionary but to gather around the assigned readings. During these weeks and months, the assigned readings have been strikingly appropriate, providing a lens through which to pray about the situation and, often, providing what action to take as we leave the worship and enter the world as Christ. This has also been the case in previous tragedies, as in the days and weeks following the attacks of September 11, 2001. We at Mount Olive have also discovered this to be the case with hymn texts we have sung many times over; new phrases

poke our awareness as we sing them through new lenses.

The imagery for the Day of Pentecost, that first day of calm, was more than striking. The gospel acclamation included the words “set us on fire with the fire of your love.” Powerful! The chorale “All Glory Be to God on High” (*ELW* 410; *LSB* 947; *CW* 263), which we sang the next week on Trinity Sunday, took on new depth and meaning:

to us no harm shall now come nigh,  
the strife at last is ended.  
God shows goodwill to one and all,  
and peace when troubled sinners call.  
Thank God for grace and mercy!

The hope and expectation is clear: our vigor in worship should match our vigor in the world for both to be true, and they must be in balance, one fueling the other.

The day when we may once again assemble, sing, eat and drink at the eucharist together—without fear, as the Magnificat suggests—seems far too distant. But there is no doubt that we will. We will look back someday and say, “remember when.” Perhaps then, we will know much more about how all of these experiences have changed us to be something new. May it be good.



***David M. Cherwien*** has served as cantor at Mount Olive Lutheran Church, MN, since 2001. In addition, he was appointed artistic director of the National Lutheran Choir in 2002. He is a charter member of ALCM, serving its leadership in many capacities, including as national president from 1993 to 1997.

### Note

1. A full text of the May 7 letter to the congregation, along with examples and archives of past YouTube files, may be found on the church's website, [www.mountolivechurch.org](http://www.mountolivechurch.org), as well as on its YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/user/MtOliveLutheranMpls/videos>.