

First Impressions

By Robert John Andrews

My wife and I enjoy watching our PBS British Mysteries, such as “Grantchester.”

Sydney is a vicar in Grantchester, England, who has had an affair and is fighting church and God. Mrs. Maguire is Sydney's housekeeper, saddened that he has decided to lay aside his ordination. He must in order to marry his lover who is divorced. The show is set in the early 1950's.

Mrs. Maguire says to him: “People need you, Sydney. They look to you. Not to the church. They look to you.”

Sydney's best friend is Geordie, a police detective, who also had an affair and has lost his wife and family.

Sydney: “God forgives you.”

Geordie: “I don't believe in God.”

Sydney: “Well then, I forgive you, as a friend. As someone who loves you. I forgive you. I believe in you. I forgive you.” [Geordie begins crying]

To be divine, it needs be human. That which we call God (I find the term ‘God-ness’ tantalizing) acts through skin and time. We call it incarnation. The telling question isn't where is God? But when is God? God is action. Faith, love, hope, God even -- what good are they if mere abstraction? What good are they if only an idea of hope, love, faith? This insight led me, following my retirement after eleven years in my first parish and twenty-eight in my second parish, to wonder about how human is our worship? What changes have I seen in how we worship since my rookie days at Seminary.

My wondering led to my wandering and my experiencing worship at a sampling of ten different local Protestant congregations, from a megachurch with 1,500 at worship to an aging mainline church with twelve worshippers. There would have been eleven samples but when I arrived for worship there was a small sign on the door announcing: “The church has left the building.” Worship instead would be held as a cruise in a paddle-wheel Riverboat in a nearby town.

The settings for worship I visited? Traditional sanctuaries, a gymnasium, the Elks Banquet room, the fellowship hall (I had tried to open the sanctuary door until I read the handwritten note taped to the front door informing us worship would be in the fellowship hall to avoid heating the large sanctuary).

What were my FIRST IMPRESSIONS of these worship services? Appropriately, we fuss about the physicality of our worship service (clarity of bulletins, signage, how greeted, accessibility, parking). Might we also critique the personality and judge the content of the experience?

My bias and professional training asks:

- Is there a sense of purpose to the worship?
- What was my ‘take home’ from the experience?
- Did I leave feeling my time was well invested?
- Was there cultivated a sense of divine joy and peace?

- Was I called upon to get beyond myself, to be inspired to sacrifice?

Take it for what it is: first impressions. Of course, first impressions are crucial in determining whether or not someone will want to return.

What did I observe?

Only three of the sermons to which I listened drilled down on the text and offered me a take-home message I could gnaw on (let alone remember), and one of those was a testimonial. Most sermons were either blithe or blithering. Four of the congregations supplied worksheets for us to take notes during what essentially was Bible study rather than preaching. My notes indicate at no church did the preacher keep the sermon's focus on one verse or passage. There was plenty of quoting scripture passages but only one preacher dug into a particular text in depth so as to make it meaningful for today's challenges. Predominate was to quote as many texts as the preacher thought fitting even though I often was left confused as to how the flurry of texts connected.

One congregation, which included a recitation of a portion of the shorter catechism (for that matter, only in one church, Lutheran, did we recite the Apostles' Creed), came up heavy on sin and judgement without the next part about grace. This church pastor erred two ways: First, in talking about his daughter from the pulpit; Second, by equating her complaining about his parenting discipline with lack of obedience. Well, the children's sermon at that service did instruct the gathered children how their naughty behavior damages their parent's reputation.

Speaking of children's sermons, in one church, however affectionate was their pastor's attitude toward the children, I doubt if the kids who were invited to the chancel steps understood the pastor's reference to Martin Luther feeling down and tired but how we owe the Reformation to him. Plus they got a snack. Never once did I hear a children's talk drawn from the child's world and at their level. Three essentially were lectures, one an object lesson, none simply told them a story. It takes preparation to enter the child's world and help them understand faith through their eyes and souls. The only pleasant children's time of the ten services was when three little girls offered a lovely song.

In over half of the churches the preachers urged the happy platitude that we should love like Jesus. Okay. If only the preachers helped us figure out how. There was plenty of emphasis on 'what' but very little on 'how.' Reliance on screens for visual aids and conversational power-point presentations seem to have replaced studied eloquence. The old adage of 'Bible in one hand and newspaper in another' has been replaced by 'Bibles and bullet-points.' One church did use the screen ably and effectively in supplementing the sermon rather than replacing it by depicting classical images of these Egyptian gods and how the plagues were sent to discredit them, dismantling aspects of idolatry in the culture then and now. The 'thin gruel' of the power-point megachurch sermon contrasted with the smallest congregation where the message there offered hard content that demanded something of us, demanded that we think.

Bible reading also was a mixed bag ranging from the inaudible and ill-prepared to the exhaustively full lectionary cycle, with the most engaging reading delivered by the pastor who offered that thorough and informative explicative exegesis of three chapters of Exodus and related the plagues to modern culture. In one church, scripture was recited by an actor but she lacked sufficient professionalism to shift our attention to the words rather than paying attention to her performance. Often the passages were

displayed on the screen. In another congregation I was at first annoyed at the young man in front of me texting during the sermon until I realized he was focused on reading his Bible from his Smartphone.

Two of the churches offered communion, but one, which required lining up in front and kneeling (for those who kneel), I had to scout at what was going on in order to receive communion. Only after coming forward did I realize that the assistants poured the wine into the little cups we took from the tray. As the ushers nodded to us to take our turn for cup and wafer, they squeezed hand sanitizer into our palms (a modern sacramental act?). The other communion experience occurred as a surprise. The men serving (all men, yes) stood up, a prayer was mumbled, and the cups and chalky crackers the size of a rabbit turd were distributed at the same time. The words of institution were projected onto the screen.

It further surprised me how rarely the Lord's Prayer was used excepting at the mainline congregations. I also smiled at how in my loafers, slacks, white shirt, and suit coat I was overdressed at every single church, this after decades in the pulpit wearing a three piece suit with pocket watch and a true open Geneva Gown from Edinburgh. In three of the churches the pastor wore jeans and a T-shirt. In all but one of the newer congregations, parishioners were welcome to bring their snacks and coffee which they were offered in the lobby/narthex/foyer into the pews. I did experience in one church how a new member was received into membership. She was called forward just before the closing blessing and was briefly introduced to the congregation as a new member.

With regard to the notion of a 'community church,' only one worship service paid any attention to announcements of social concerns or activities beyond the walls of the church. Whether it was graduation weekend or Superbowl Sunday or Memorial Day weekend, the services were detached, insulated, isolated from civic issues and community interests. Three congregations used the screen to deliver commercials about church events. None highlighted achievements of youth participating in the church.

Music: I observed no middle ground between singing five versus of an ancient traditional hymn from the pew hymnal to tedious repetition of incessant praise choruses. How apt, as either the liturgy was heavily scripted with all the pertinent responses and readings printed in the bulletin or it was utterly vague leaving the new attendee uncertain as to what was going to happen next. Three lacked choirs of any kind. The choirs for two were composed of a few elderly members. Half of the churches featured drummers, guitar players, and lead singers who did encourage the congregation to sing out with gladsome voice. The vast majority of the congregation at the megachurch simply listened to or mumbled along with the nineteen musical performers on stage.

A particular song at one non-denominational church prompted in me a theological hiccup. The refrain sang: "God will be mine." Does our theology permit the personal possessive? Or is it the other way around?

Fascinating about the megachurch was when dozens of the folks began gathering up their coats to exit toward the end of the preacher's sermon and before his blessing so they could beat out the traffic.

The prayers of the people varied from the megachurch's rushed mentioning the first names of a long list of people (scrolled on the screen) to the smallest (and oldest) congregation spending time as the members updated each other familiarly and intimately about the condition of their absent members. An uncomfortable prayer time arose when one pastor walked about the nave inviting persons to share

their concerns or joys, whereupon one fellow hijacked the time by gushing on for over seven minutes about his personal problems while the pastor tried to find a way to pull the microphone from him. Two of the congregations used the prayer time only to restate the message of the sermon. One non-denominational church offered no prayers of the people.

The diminution of the significance of the offering was puzzling. In every situation the collection seemed either an afterthought or an inconvenience to get done with haste. Two congregations merely referenced the offering plates in the lobby. Ted, a seminary classmate, taught me about the importance of the offering that he experienced serving in Zambia. In Zambia, he described, they make the offering a highlight of the service to the point of friendly competition amongst the attendees from different regions. Out of their little, they were nourished by being challenged to give. I wish I had heard this at Seminary. Contrast this to my recent worship experiences where it seemed I was encouraged to audit church on my terms. Church marketing books advise how any sniff of grubbing for money offends shoppers, newcomers. Yet, says Ted: "sacrifice is the oldest form of worship in the Bible."

However amiable and affable my worship experiences may have been, they also were ultimately unsatisfying. Some worship services were waffles without the syrup and butter. Some were only maple syrup. What I wanted those Sunday mornings was steak and eggs. From the megachurch to the chapel church, there was plenty of order and liturgical structure (each in its own peculiar form and custom familiar to the regulars) but little ardor in the gathering of Christ's people. I judge most of the worship experiences as tame, bland, monotonous, harmless, polite.

Despite this general geniality and niceness, I left all but three discouraged and disappointed. My wife commented about one church of my own denomination: "I felt as if it was a dying church and the people don't care (or have given up). Given the way they were seated throughout the sanctuary they don't really like each other." That was the same church where the pastor spoke moodily about the church being in 'transition' and their future uncertain. That same church left us confused as to whether the service had ended or not.

With the exception of two worship experiences, it was nice that we were well affirmed, approved for who we are, told we were loved by Jesus and special to God. Yet, I was never shifted in my view of myself nor urged to examine myself, my love, my faith. Only two churches -- the newest church development filled with young people and the smallest church where the youngest person was myself at sixty-four years -- emphasized that Jesus' love requires work, commitment, repentance, responsibility.

Last, in all these adventures I rarely remember any laughter. There were smiles shared, hugs exchanged, even a chuckle or two, but I do not recall the release of pure laughter. 'Tis a pity, especially since laughter makes such a robust prayer. Neither was I ever brought to tears.

I am left reflecting on my own years of pastoral ministry and wondering where I failed to serve the people with stimulating and challenging worship services, with intelligence, imagination, and love.

I wish I had someone venerable critique me throughout my years of worship leadership.

Now, whether or not I would have listened is another matter altogether.

End