

Toward A Communal Worship

AN INTERVIEW WITH PHYLLIS TICKLE

Phyllis Tickle, for many years Contributing Editor in Religion to *Publishers Weekly,* the international journal of the book industry, is frequently quoted in sources such as *USA Today, Christian Science Monitor, The NY Times, PBS, NPR,* and *The Hallmark Channel.* Tickle is an authority on religion in America and a much sought after lecturer on the subject. The following is her interview with **Inside Worship** magazine.



How have you found your own devotion to God increased/decreased in the company of community?

First of all, I would have to say that there are all kinds of communities and, as a result, all kinds of ways of being – and also of not being – in community. But when you say "community" to me, whether it's in the context of worship or not, the first thing I think of is my own parish.

Now, the community church Sam and I attend is basically Anglican in its liturgy, but with a strong overlay of charismatic and Pentecostal praxis, along with all the technological adjuncts one finds in most community churches. And I have to tell you that my parish, first and foremost, is my community – those people, those praise songs, those hand-clapping, toe-tapping, aisle-dancing worship services.

When you say "community" to me, you're saying Sunday morning and Sunday lunch afterward, and lots of week-day contact and tons of e-mail "hello's" and work/prayer requests. You're saying intimacy 24/7; and that 24/7 intimacy is a big part of what makes worship a refreshment to my

soul. That is, there's a kind of humor... or humorous grandeur, if you will... in knowing people so completely. We really are neat, you know, we human beings. We really are amazingly ugly and loveable all at the same time; and because of my parish, I know that everyday. Because of them and being part of them, I know in my bones how it is that God must love us beyond all saying... which makes worshiping Him delicious as well as instructive. But there's another side to community.

Sam and I have seven children and, for several years prior to her death, my mother lived with us as well. In that sort of domestic situation with its no-privacy-ever, 24/7 context, it was escape from community which fed me. The times appointed for fixed-hour prayer were not only ones of instruction and worship for me, but also of restorative withdrawal. (Even small children will let one go away to pray, provided one is quick about it.)

The point here, I think, is that for all of us, even those of us in less dramatically overcrowded circumstances, it is central to the Christian life that one learn to worship outside of, as well as from within, physical community. Of course, paradoxically, physical community is what shows us how to do that and also enables us as we do it.

Had I no physical community, how could I possibly perceive and appreciate the communion of saints into which I enter at the keeping of each office every day? And beyond that, could I (or would I) persist in any exercise of worship and adoration were there no history of a Church that has so worshiped since the beginning of the Abrahamic faiths? History itself is no more and no less than our spiritual community's very physical and corporate memory, albeit one caught, as if in an affectionate still-frame, for the sake of all of us both here and forthcoming.

In what ways can we truly participate in worship expression that is communal, in contrast to the more individualistic expressions we engage in within the contemporary Church?

My first reaction... and my second and third, as well... is that I would never think of the contemporary church as engaging in individualistic worship expressions, save only to the extent that charismatic experience is, by definition, experiential and therefore not precisely communal. Moreover, there is little which is more powerful than music and praise for welding a bunch of individuals into a community of worshipers. My suspicion, though, is that your question seeks something a bit beyond those immediate observations; and if that be the case, my answer is much more pedestrian.

It is in what we do, either together or with intent beyond our self, that makes all the separate one's and two's of us into citizens of a larger whole. There is no better example of "individual-in-community" worship than the observing of the daily offices — the keeping of fixed-hour prayer – especially when one is absolutely, physically alone at the time. Fixed-hour prayer, by its very structure, is deeply communal, just as surely as it is pure worship.

The minute one commences with the psalms and prayers appointed for that particular office for that particular day, whether one is in choir with others or alone in some washroom or office retreat, one is immediately and reassuringly aware of all the other Christian voices within one's time zone that are being raised in those same psalms and prayers. By any definition, it is the communion of saints in real time and real worship.

Likewise, one is very aware that those words of adoration are the ones which were just offered before the throne of God only an hour before by Christians in a more eastern time zone, just as we who pray now will shortly pass them on to Christians in the next, more western time zone. We are, in other words, participating in the "constant cascade of prayer before the throne of God" that St. Paul speaks of and urges upon us. It is community beyond all the barriers.

Are there other ways for us to engage in a true community worship expression?

Obviously there are other ways as well – some of them seeming almost antique, they have gone unobserved for so long – but which now seem to me to be returning to us as if to people in great need. But antique or not, they are ancient ways that the astute worship team will find ways of introducing to their congregants as well as to themselves. The return of the home prayer service, for instance, is one of these. Whether those who come together are spouses or parents with children or apartment mates or internet companions using IM technology does not matter.

The observation itself fastens the day and its closing into both worship and human affection. Where there are children, the return of the old-fashioned Bible story hour as a family in the evening seems to be making a remarkable come-back, a come-back, I might add, in which adults appear to be learning as much as (perhaps more than?) the children to whom they are reading. It is likewise a return that can be both taught and enabled by the worship team.

One of the most remarkable of the ways that contemporary Church, in this country anyway, seems to be creating strong community in worship is in the keeping of Sabbath as once it was kept. By this I do NOT mean going to corporate worship and then calling it a day... or going to services and then calling it a day for Little League or the mall.

What a growing number of contemporary Christians are exploring is Sabbath observance as it was kept in early Christianity and still is kept in Orthodox Judaism... a Sabbath that begins with quiet time – perhaps even a celebratory meal together – on Saturday evening where the purpose is to acknowledge and welcome the coming day of rest as sacred time; where after services, time is spent with family or a small gathering of friends in order to read, perhaps nap and rest, share the diurnal and the non-gossipy personal, but not to do the week's collection of household chores; where Sunday evening is again marked by a meal of left-overs and prayers that thank God for the gift of holy leisure and that pray for the return after six more days of such another time; where the whole thread running through the 24 hours is thanksgiving and the recognition that time is a gift not to be taken lightly; and where a sense of "being a people set apart" is forged by the very activity of observance itself.

The list certainly can go on, but you get the drift... namely, that much of the ancient practice of the early Church was concerned with forming and solidifying community in conjunction with worship; that this emphasis on individual and familial discipline and exercise for the sake of communal health was encouraged by the leaders of the early Church; and that it is in returning to some of those old ways that we both re-discover and apply to our benefit the wisdom of our forebears.



Phyllis Tickle is a member of the Episcopal Church and served as a Lay Eucharistic Minister and Lay Reader as well as, from time to time, a vestry member and teacher. She serves presently, as she has in the past, on a number of advisory and corporate boards. She is the mother of seven children and, with her physician-husband, makes her home on a small farm in rural West Tennessee.