
THE INAUGURAL SERVICE: SOME LESSONS FOR BIG LITURGIES

The 85th anniversary of church union provides an opportunity to reflect on the Inaugural Service of The United Church of Canada and what I call Big Liturgy—that is, worship services of 1,000 people or more. On June 10, 1925, 8,000 people gathered in Arena Gardens (later renamed Mutual Street Arena) in Toronto to liturgically enact the birth of the United Church. If you’ve ever had an experience of worship at General Council, Conference, Christian festivals or mega-churches, you know that such gatherings present unique challenges. Choreographing large numbers to allow for ease of participation takes careful logistical planning. Creating an atmosphere of worshipful engagement in both celebrative praise and prayerful intimacy takes liturgical and artistic skill. By all accounts, the Inaugural Service was an impressive and moving occasion, reported in papers across the country and around the world. It offers a few lessons in Big Liturgy (and, arguably, for all worship), among them:

Creating sacred space: While the “church of hockey” may be a place of devotion for many Canadians, a hockey arena, like hotels, conference centres, and other secular spaces, is not a liturgical space. Archival photos suggest that Arena Gardens was effectively transformed for the Inaugural Service by the use of lush plants, Christian symbols, careful lighting, a good sound system, and a raised platform for improved sight lines. Transforming the space is frequently overlooked in planning Big Liturgy, allowing an otherwise good worship service to fall flat because, as architects like to say, “The building will always win.”

Making movement work: The planners of the Inaugural Service were smart to see in the throngs of people a central liturgical symbol of the union. Three streams of delegates from the founding traditions (Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregationalist/Local Union Churches) arrived to converge into one, thus enacting the union they were celebrating. And because moving one’s body can also be emotionally “moving,” one can imagine that the result of that first United Church procession was a heightened sense of anticipation and excitement in coming together. Note also how the first moments of gathering in worship are

always critical in creating a sense of community and setting the tone for the entire service.

Hospitality enables participation: Upon entry, people were handed a beautifully designed 38-page order of service, professionally printed on high quality parchment-like paper, containing the full text of the liturgy, its prayers, hymns, and music. All participants (especially visitors) feel more welcomed and less anxious in worship when they know what’s going on, what’s coming next, and when the quality of media (print or otherwise) speaks of careful preparation and concern for their participation.

Diversity for inclusivity: Hymns characteristic of the founding traditions were sung: “All people that on earth do dwell” from the Scottish Presbyterian psalm tradition; the Methodist favourite “O for a thousand tongues to sing” by John Wesley; the Congregationalist “O God of Bethel,” and “When I survey the wondrous cross” by the British Nonconformist, Isaac Watts. A liturgical highlight was the Hallowing of Church Union, in which representatives of each of the founding traditions ritually named and offered their unique contributions to the new union. Paradoxically, Big Liturgy is made more inclusive by the celebration of diversity and pluralism.

Unifying liturgical gestures: One particular feature of the celebration of communion at the Inaugural Service was not evident in the liturgical text but was widely noted in the press. After distribution of each of the elements (pieces of bread followed by individual cups), the congregation was asked to wait in order that all could partake as one. Simultaneous communion thereafter became a beloved custom in United Church liturgical practice. Thus, on that June day in 1925, 8,000 individuals became powerfully united into one body. Big Liturgy, like all worship, is well served by sacramental gestures of common union, *ut omnes unim sint*, “that all may be one” (see John 17:21 and the United Church crest).

William S. Kervin is Associate Professor of Public Worship at Emmanuel College, Toronto.

First published in *Gathering* Lent/Easter/Pentecost 2010, and reproduced with permission of William S. Kervin.