

Seminar of “Faith & practice in the Chinese Churches”

LWF China Study Program

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The Liturgical Renewal Movement and the Renewal of the Church in Taiwan

Dr. Thomas Yu

I am very happy to be able to participate in this seminar. When I received the assigned topic I had to admit that I had much hesitation. My hesitation had to do with the following questions: “ Was there such a thing as ‘the liturgical renewal movement’ in Taiwan for the past fifty years?” “Has there been any trace of church renewal which was resulted from the influence of the liturgical renewal movement?” The popping up of these two questions made me wonder whether I was given an unrealistic task which could hardly be supported with the minimal substance. Fortunately, I have only 15 minutes. And I hope I have something meaningful to share before I run out of time.

Was there any liturgical renewal movement in Taiwan? If there was, perhaps one could only find some level or trace of such movement in the Catholic circle. As far as the Protestant circle is concerned, I am afraid there was very little sign of such happening. Then, how about the question of church renewal? Are there significant signs? Yes, there are. But most of them have to do with the charismatic, rather than liturgical renewal. Great majority of the pastors and congregations in Taiwan yearn for revival and renewal. However, they opt for the charismatic movement far more than the liturgical renewal.

As to why they embraced the charismatic, rather than liturgical renewal? I think the reasons are simple. First, most of the Lutheran pastors in the past routinely repeated the fixed Sunday liturgy week after week, and year after year without warmth, joy and zest. Instead of drawing the worshipping congregations into wonder and mystery of God’s love in Jesus Christ, many pastors who led the worship in an unengaging way tended to create the impression that the liturgical worship was formal, dull and impersonal.

Secondly, the congregation was expected only to follow the liturgy passively, rather than to participate it in a heart warming, faith affirming, and mission empowering way.

Thirdly, the congregations were rarely taught to appreciate the rich tradition and meanings of the liturgy. Without a fundamental understanding of its richness, how can we expect the congregation to draw from it comfort and strength week in and week out?

Fourth, no matter how good a liturgy is in form and how rich in meanings, after a long period of time, due to the changes of language and circumstance, it requires revision or needs to create a new one to make the worship more relevant to the contemporary context.

Another important factor that contributed to the de-emphasis of the Lutheran liturgical worship has to do with the closure of the TLC-related seminary in Taichung, and the CELC-related one in Chiayi in the mid-sixties. The closed down of the two seminaries meant that the instruction and study of the Lutheran liturgy had come to an end. As a result, four other Lutheran missions not related to the TLC and CELC established the former China Lutheran Seminary in 1966. Before the new cooperation in 1989, the style of worship in the CLS was more influenced by the Reformed and Free church tradition than by the Lutheran. The liturgical worship was then something alien to the community.

I could still vividly recall that five years ago when we first experimented the present communion liturgy I brought from the LTS in Hong Kong, it caused concerns among part of the student body. Although they tasted for the first time the richness of the liturgical worship and the depth and joyousness of the Eucharist celebration, they had some uneasiness. Part of it had to do with the close connection of the Lutheran liturgy with the Catholic one. In spite of the initial uneasiness, the great majority of the community response was positive. We made it clear that the new liturgy was for experiment. When we learned and used it for a period of time, it could be accepted, or revised, or set aside.

We were so thankful that when we experimented the new liturgy, the revised edition of the Hymns of Praise was published in time. The combination of the two created a new atmosphere, and later a new spirituality in the CLS community. We may even say that the participation in the new liturgy and the solemn joy as well as the deep unity we experienced made the CLS emerged as a new community—a new community that finds its identity and mission in the meaningful worship of the Father in the Son through the Holy Spirit.

To return to the two questions we raised at the beginning of this report: Was there any liturgical renewal movement in the Lutheran churches in Taiwan? Has there been any trace of renewal resulted from such movement? Well, we have to say that there has not been any identifiable liturgical movement in Taiwan's Lutheran circle.

Though no such movement in formation, there is nevertheless a small spark of the liturgical renewal which continues to refresh and nurture the CLS community. The members of the CLS community finds source of strength and joy, sense of identity and solidarity, assurance of hope and motivation for mission through the participation in the corporate liturgy. It is our prayer that this small yet bright spark of the liturgical renewal will keep burning and transforming our community—a community in worship and for mission.

As to whether it will someday become a movement in Taiwan, we can not foretell. One thing we do know: when we worship God in truth and Spirit, in love and joy, it will draw people to the throne of God's grace, and enable them to find life's deepest fulfillment in the true communion with God.