

CONFESSIONS OF A LITURGICAL ARTIST

HOW ONE WOMAN DISCOVERED A CALLING AND A CHURCH FOUND A PLACE FOR ART

Ellen Phillips

A About five years ago, I was called to be a liturgical artist. Although I had been a professional artist for years and had been a worshipping Christian all my life, I never realized that the two could be combined into a profound calling until then. I had seen glorious stained glass work and awe-inspiring sanctuaries, but in my experience very little visual art was ever included in services of worship. On occasion there would be a weary felt and glue banner gathering dust in a corner, a remnant from some prior attempt to include a bit of color and festivity, but most of the celebratory art seemed to be confined to fellowship halls. I sometimes wondered if I was the only artist who attended church, or whether there was some obscure theological reason that prohibited the presence of art in Protestant sanctuaries. What did I know?

Therefore, when I was asked those five years ago if I was familiar with paper lace-cut banners, my initial reaction was to think it might mean some sentimental greeting card-like design cut into cheap paper. I was wrong! I am delighted to say that since then I have become educated in not only the banners, but in all the variety of liturgical art that does exist. I have learned that the visual arts can be used to powerfully enhance worship and that the artist as listener and translator can be respected and

encouraged. Furthermore, I am now a liturgical artist, a calling I never would have expected, but has been one of the greatest joys of my life. The following is the story of my introduction to liturgical art and some of what I have learned about artists, churches, and the creating power of the Holy Spirit.

When I began creating those first 3 x 9-foot paper lace banners, I only had one resource, *Spaces for Spirit* by Nancy Chinn.¹ Since the banners were to be used during Advent, the first thing that I did was to read the scripture passages assigned for the first week. I prayed over it and meditated upon it, and at some point (probably when I was doing 70 mph on the expressway) the design appeared in my mind. When I got safely back to my drawing board, I sketched it out, sought approval from the church staff, and we began work on the first banner. The project was off to an inspired start.

When I designed the second banner, I followed the same pattern. Read, pray, meditate, and draw; again, the design flowed easily onto the paper. I do not think that at any time of my life have I been so aware of prayer being so directly and immediately answered. It was a frightening and humbling experience to know that God was so obviously present in my endeavor. Most artists are aware of the deeply spiritual



element in creating. A work of art begins to take on a life of its own and frequently an artist will step back from her piece of work and wonder, “Where did that come from?” When an artist gives herself over to the flow of creative energy, the result is that the art is often greater than the artist. To realize that you have simply been the hand that held the brush and that a Power far beyond your ability has produced what is on your canvas is one of the most humbling experiences imaginable. As a Christian and an artist, I can only echo *Soli deo Gloria*—to God be the glory—for truly I can see that the work I call “my” art is really not mine at all. I can bring the idea and the brush and the canvas together, but God brings forth the art. This certainly was the case with these banners. Being new to liturgical design, there was no struggle on my part. The design seemed to just flow directly on the paper, and I was awed and humbled and grateful and deeply aware of the mystery of creating.

After such awe-inspiring experiences, naturally I expected the third banner to come just as easily. But no design would come. Finally, in frustration I paged through a book of art history, gazing at manger scenes, shepherds, and stars when I came upon a picture of a tapestry done by Hildegard of Bingen. There was the very design I was meant to use. There was no question in my mind that Hildegard had designed our banner several centuries ago, and all I had to do was to translate it into a paper lace-cut banner. It was a beautiful, joyful design of stars that seemed to vibrate and dance with springs breaking forth in the desert, and even the mountains conspired to look glad! Once again, I felt a sense of awe and gratitude that the hand of God was surely in this project. I did not need to despair, because the design would be provided. And so the third banner came into being and, frankly, it is my favorite. The final banner design had been with me since the very beginning. An angel who could not be confined within the 3 x 9-foot parameters blew its trumpet to announce the coming of the Christ. And

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with that, my initiation into liturgical art was complete.

I tell this story to point out several critical elements in creating liturgical art. First, I had no preconceived ideas about what should be done and, thus, was open to God’s clear guidance. Second, I was forced to rely only on the scripture given and divine direction. I knew when the design was right just as I knew when it was not right. Third, the person who had asked me to create these banners was supportive and encouraging; he never tried to tell me what to do, and he respected and appreciated the designs when I showed them to him. This is the best situation for any artist and certainly for me because it allowed me to listen to the prompting of God without being confused by the dictates of people.

Since that year, I have worked on many liturgical art projects. I have done more banners and other celebratory works of art, and the procedure is always the same. I need to empty my mind, fill it with the Word of God, allow it to percolate, and then create the work.

I have been using the singular pronoun up to this point, but I need to clarify that I was never alone in this process. I have made it clear that I was not alone in a spiritual sense, but neither was I alone in a human sense. As soon as word got out in the church that art was being done and used and appreciated, visual artists began appearing every time I turned around! Painters, potters, woodworkers, needleworkers, and computer designers, and others approached me. They were all interested and willing to help in any way they could. Thereby, a liturgical art program was born.

Not only is it helpful to have other people with whom to discuss ideas, but a group of people with diverse skills is necessary. The artist comes up with the design but then the real work begins. In the case of paper lace banners, the design needs to be transferred and enlarged to the size that is to be used. (Knowing someone who is familiar with the CAD system is a great help!) Much of the design work can be computer drawn so that repetitions are possible with just a few

correctly punched buttons. Afterward, the design can be transferred and plotted onto blueprint paper that can be laid on the banner paper and used as the pattern. There are other ways of accomplishing this, but if there are creative people who can take a sketch and turn it into a formal design it helps tremendously.

The next step is the cutting process. A group of people armed with exacto-type knives is needed at this point. This is a wonderful time of fellowship for people of all ages, and since no expertise is necessary, any number of people can literally have a hand in the creation of the banner. When it finally comes time to hang the banner (especially if it is hanging high), you will need those brave and clever souls who are able to figure out how to attach the banners and then climb ladders to lofty heights and put them in place. There is a need for a diverse array of people and skills to bring such a project to fruition.

Of course, banners are not the only type of liturgical art. There is no limit to ideas and methods of using the design elements of line, color, texture, shape, and movement. Most important, however, is a deep understanding of and appreciation for liturgy. A liturgical artist needs to know and honor the community of faith that worships at the church where the art is to be used. At least some theological and historical background is also necessary. Artistic and craftsman-like excellence are important, but when a deep understanding of and commitment to the liturgy is present, artistry and craftsmanship bring a depth to liturgical art that is not found in mail-order products.

These are strong words, but they contain truth. Liturgical art is not decoration. It is not there to look pretty, or distract from the service, or to promote the artist in any way. Liturgical art is created to glorify God and to augment the activity of worship. It should be well designed and executed, but it is not fine art. Fine art is about the creative ability and inner vision of the artist. Liturgical art is art in service to God. It is sacred art. This is not always an easy task. Liturgical art can frequently be banal, controversial, or ugly. Gregory Wolfe, editor of the journal *Image*, points out that

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“nearly everyone has a collection of stories about their favorite liturgical art nightmares: dreary churches that look like roller rinks, lumpy sculptures that were better left on the potter’s wheel, felt banners with sentimental mottoes in Day-Glo colors.”²

For that reason, it is of utmost importance to choose carefully those who would design art that is to be used during worship. It is also helpful to have a committee that is educated about liturgical art as well as good and appropriate design. There are many publications that include information and illustrations about liturgical art and some professional liturgical artists who visit churches in order to help with designs or educate congregations. Good art is not necessarily “pretty.” It is neither sentimental nor simplistic. Art can educate, and while that may be one of its functions, that is not the sole

purpose of liturgical art. Good art can intrigue and challenge and awaken our minds to new and deeper ideas. Most importantly, good liturgical art will glorify God and edify the body of Christ, which is the church.

My own experience has been that the congregation is very enthusiastic when art is used. Liturgical art presents opportunities to use designs and ideas from other cultures and other periods of history. After 2000 years, the Christian tradition has built up a rich repertoire of symbols, some with which we are familiar, but many that are not as frequently used and can rouse people’s curiosities. I have enjoyed hearing church members wonder about some of the less familiar symbols. I am glad to answer such questions as, “Why is there a unicorn up there?” What a wonderful way to appreciate our history and our diversity. Generally, we do print a few paragraphs in the bulletin to explain the idea and facts behind our designs.

Children are among the most enthusiastic about the art. Our baptismal banner has a beaded curtain behind it to represent water. When young children stand with their families while a tiny sibling is baptized, it is all they can do to keep their hands off those shiny “water” beads. Truth be told, they frequently touch the banner, but that is all right and

perhaps they will carry that visual and textural image with them long after the baptism is over. During one Lenten season, a series of draped fabrics in different colors were hung on each Sunday. On one particular Sunday, the artists involved decided that the color that was to be used was too garish for the season, and so a new color did not appear that day. On Monday, we received a reproachful letter from one of our six-year-olds demanding to know where the fabric drape was and telling us that she looked forward to seeing the different color each Sunday and how very disappointed she had been. We wrote her an apologetic letter of explanation. Never again will we suppose that what we are doing is going unnoticed by the children (or adults for that matter)!

While many congregations may appreciate the benefits of liturgical art, there are those who have difficulty justifying spending money on its creation. Art just does not seem *necessary* in a society that has been inundated with cheap images mostly bent on selling a product. Is it really good stewardship, some ask, when the money spent on art could be used for any number of worthy causes? While at first glance that argument may seem well-grounded and responsible, in reality liturgical art is in service to God and the church, and has the ability to connect us and engage us more deeply in the mystery of salvation. Liturgical art is an expression of faith that inspires faith. Furthermore, there is powerful precedent for the use of liturgical art. In Exodus 25:2a, 3b–8a, 9a, the Lord says to Moses,

Tell the Israelites to take for me an offering; . . . gold, silver, and bronze, blue, purple, and crimson yarns and fine linen, goats' hair, tanned rams' skins, fine leather, acacia wood, oil for the lamps, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, onyx stones and gems to be set in the ephod and for the breastpiece. And have them make me a sanctuary . . . In accordance with all that I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and of all its furniture . . .

The Lord was not describing minimalist design! This was a lush and colorful sanctuary with elements that appeal to every sense. This was no doubt an expensive sanctuary as well, and it seems the Lord is interested and involved in every aspect of its design.

Later in Exodus, the Lord commissions the first group of liturgical artists:

“. . . The LORD has called by name Bezalel . . . he has filled him with divine spirit, with skill, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft. . . He has filled them with skill to do every kind of work done by an artisan or by a designer or by an embroiderer in blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and in fine linen, or by a weaver—by any sort of artisan or skilled designer. (Exodus 35:30–35)

Consider the intricate patterns that abound in nature as well as the sounds and smells and touch of wind and rain. If God is so generous in the beauty that God gives to us, how can we justify not using our every creative ability to give back in gratitude and worship?

This is an artist's dream commission! Go! Use your best skill and the finest materials! This is art done to glorify the Lord our God! Indeed, what better way to use our time, our talents, and our money to glorify God in worship? The liturgical artist who listens to God continues an ancient tradition of giving to God his or her very best.

Truly, the Lord creates and inspires people to use their talents to glorify God. God has not withheld anything in the extravagance of God's creation. Consider not only the

lilies of the field but also the thousands of varieties and shapes of flowers that God created. Consider the intricate patterns that abound in nature as well as the sounds and smells and touch of wind and rain. If God is so generous in the beauty that God gives to us, how can we justify not using our every creative ability to give back in gratitude and worship?

Nancy Chinn writes,

As a member of a community, the artist becomes not the deviant, but the listener, questioning and absorbing diverse answers. We artists note the

tensions and unresolved assumptions. We then retreat and respond . . . Listening like this is a mysterious and powerful process. To be heard is the source of great healing, of love, of life-giving spirit. Is this what we are called to become as artists in the church: conduits of healing?³

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul explains that there are a variety of gifts; no one gift is greater than any other but all are necessary for the healthy functioning of the body of Christ. He describes each of the members of the body of Christ in terms of our physical bodies. This is an excellent analogy because we all know that it would be senseless to disparage the ear or the toe or the elbow because each has its function, and without it the body does not work as efficiently. I would propose that the artists are the intuition in the body of the church. The artist is able to listen on a deep level, and then using brushes, fibers, wood, paper, or fabric, portray what he or she has heard and learned and felt about the community of faith and the presence of God. In our scientific, concrete American culture, we tend to discount our own intuition. In the same vein, we tend to see the artist somewhat of a deviant, out of sync with what we call reality. Yet, just as our own intuition is of vital importance to our well-being—even necessary for our survival—so the artist is necessary to the body of Christ to interpret the voice that we hear. Nancy Chinn continues, “Listening like this is a mysterious and powerful process. To be heard is a source of great healing, of love, of life-giving spirit.”⁴ The liturgical artist puts flesh on intuition, and we are able to see beyond what we have seen before, even when we thought we knew and had seen all there was to see.

Just as God the Creator breathed life into the clay figures that were Adam and Eve to make them living beings in God’s very image, so each artist breathes a bit of her or his soul into every work that she or he creates. If the artist, like us all, was created in the Creator’s image and is listening and being guided by the Holy Spirit, the art that results cannot help but reflect some aspect of God.

E. E. Cummings writes:

i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun’s birthday; this is the birth
day of life and love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth
.....
now the ears of my ears are awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened⁵

This is what we ask liturgical art to accomplish. We ask that for those who experience it as they worship, the eye of their eyes be open and they might view beyond the tangible lines and values and shapes and colors to see a bit of God’s vast and limitless love.

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Notes

1. Nancy Chinn, *Spaces for Spirit: Adorning the Church* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998).
2. Gregory Wolfe, “Editorial Statements: Liturgical Art and its Discontents,” *Image* vol 19 (Spring 1998), www.imagejournal.org/back/019/editorial.asp.
3. Chinn, 11–12.
4. *Ibid.*, 11.
5. E. E. Cummings, #65 from *The Collection Xaipe* (1950), in ed., George J. Firmage, *E. E. Cummings Complete Poems 1904–1962* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 1991), 663.

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