**Gathering, word, meal and sending**

By Elizabeth A. Eaton

Liturgy is important—not each constituent part—but the basic structure of corporate worship: gathering, word, meal and sending. It’s a discipline Lutherans willingly undertake because it helps individuals and the entire community express our connection with other Christians throughout the world and across the ages.

When we gather, it’s not simply a group of like-minded individuals. We gather in Jesus’ name and we gather as the body of Christ. “So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another” (Romans 12:5).

The African concept of *Ubuntu*, “I am because we are,” captures this. South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu explains it this way: “I need you in order for me to be me, and you need me in order for you to be you. We are bound together. I need other human beings to be a human being. A person is a person through other persons.”

We gather in the presence of Jesus, God with us, in whom we all have our ultimate identity.

I’ve often heard it said that one can worship God in the beauty of nature. I’m glad that people are moved to awe and praise when encountering the majesty of God in the created world. We all should stop and notice the divine presence! But corporate worship is something else. This was made beautifully evident to me when I visited the Community of Sant’Egidio in Rome.

This community of laypeople gathers regularly for Scripture reading, prayer, and to serve the poor and broken in the city around them. Sant’Egidio takes particular care of those who are mostly homebound during the week. Weekly worship with the rest of the community is a celebration for these people. They are reunited with the rest of the family—all gathered to worship the Lord. Their joy is palpable.

**We gather around the word**—Scripture, preaching, song, prayer and creeds, but especially around the living Word, Jesus Christ. We are not the focus of our worship—God is. Worship is not primarily about “me” or about “us.” Worship is not a performance for the community, but an offering directed to God. Jesus promised that when we gather in his name, he is in the midst of us. How would our worship change if we understood literally that Christ is present and we are offering Christ our worship and praise?

**We gather for the meal.** Gathered around our tables, we are gathered around the one table. We are fed and forgiven, reconciled and released, crucified and raised. In the words of institution, we hear the Jesus story—the story of Jesus, broken and shed, who gives himself completely for the life of the world. If your congregation uses the prayer that surrounds these words, you also hear the history of salvation. While each individual receives God in the sacraments, no individual receives this grace alone apart from the rest of the community.

**We are sent.** Gathered into one by the Spirit, carrying and bearing the word, never separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus, we are sent into the world. Some of the most important words spoken in the liturgy are “Go in peace. Serve the Lord.” Out we go, serving this world God so loves. Jesus meets us there—in our struggles, joys, life   
and death. Then we gather again in worship to   
be strengthened and restored.

Peasants in France would take a loaf of bread with them into the fields. They would take a bite of bread, throw the loaf down the row, and begin the backbreaking work of hoeing and tending their crops. When they caught up to the bread, they took another bite and threw it down the row again. In this way they could keep on going. So it is with us as we receive the bread of life and serve the world.