

Liturgical evangelism: The Finnish experiment

by [F. Dean Lueking](#) in the [June 13, 2006](#) issue

"The trouble with the church in Finland," a Finnish Lutheran pastor told me, "is that everybody loves it and nobody goes there." Some 85 percent of the 5.2 million Finns are disengaged from the church except for brief pit stops for baptism, confirmation, marriage and burial.

Rather than dwelling on how frozen the chosen are, however, Ollie Valtonen, 56, is impatient to go beyond diagnosis to remedies. He suggested that I join him for a Sunday evening experience of the Thomas Mass in a downtown church in Helsinki. It is a creative venture in liturgical evangelism for which I was altogether unprepared.

When we entered the vast nave of the Agricola Church (named for Mikael Agricola, the first Lutheran bishop of Finland), the sanctuary, which seats a thousand, was almost empty save for a handful of instrumentalists warming up.

Downstairs, in the undercroft of the church, Valtonen related how he and a colleague, Miikka Ruokanen, started collaborating 18 years earlier on a form of liturgical evangelism intended for urban dwellers who had become disenchanted with or alienated from the church. Thus the name Thomas Mass—after the disciple who doubted Jesus' resurrection and held back in unbelief. Among the reasons Valtonen cited for starting something new: "My own needs . . . But it didn't stop there."

When we returned to the nave of the church, I was taken aback: in not quite a half hour more than 800 people had arrived, with more coming in. A choir of 25 men and women had taken their places just off center at the head of the nave, behind a group of a half-dozen instrumentalists. A woman stepped to the microphone, welcomed all, and briefly explained what would follow: prayer and confession, the word and the Eucharist.

I then faced my own first doubts: Would Lutherans actually get up, go forward, kneel down and confess to another person their sins and whatever else was eating them on the inside? Sooner, as Garrison Keillor would say, would Lutherans levitate.

But forward they came to kneel at the chancel rail and speak to one of the clergy or laypersons who bent down to listen and respond with Christ's absolution, more often than not with an affirming touch upon the head or shoulder or arm. Not a few, I observed, wiped away tears as they opened up to God through the mediating presence of someone they did not know but felt they could trust.

While this occurred in the chancel, others got up and made their way to one of a dozen small tables set up around the outside aisles of the nave, each with a lighted candle, sheets of paper on which to write intercessory petitions and a basket in which to place the prayers. Valtonen called this movement of people "holy chaos." It is part, in his view, of breaking the iron grip of the "God is order" syndrome that suffocates liturgy instead of making it the framework in which people can breathe in the breath of the Spirit.

It was not chaos but purposeful movement. Worshipers took a slip of paper from the table and wrote down what each chose to say to God about personal woes as well as wider human concerns. Throughout this time there was singing, either by the gifted singers in the choir or by the congregation, using hymns that ranged from ones in the Finnish tradition to the songs of Taizé. (The mass had begun with a processional led by laypeople bearing the distinctive Taizé cross, a gift to the Thomas Mass from the community in France.)

Host persons from the side-aisle prayer tables then assembled at the front to read petitions selected from the baskets (edited to eliminate personal names) so that all could identify with the petitions offered and thus expand their prayers to God. The prayers provided a sense of the needs of so many who live amid the anonymity and moral drift of this or any city—loneliness, purposelessness, sicknesses of all kinds, joblessness. There were prayers for reconciliation, for peace and justice globally, for those suffering from hunger, for those enduring epidemics. Also voiced were petitions of thanksgiving for the discovery and renewal of faith and for the joys of family and friendship. The prayers revealed one of the prime reasons why the Thomas Mass works: it gives voice to much that is honest, heartfelt, free of cliché, tailored to real persons and expressed in language that is both dignified and clear.

From prayer and confession/absolution the mass moved to several appointed scripture lessons. The homily followed. On this occasion it was a disaster of textless, pointless meandering through trivia to the obvious and the irrelevant. As I sank ever lower in my pew, Valtonen leaned over and whispered, “We can survive this.”

Still, it was an embarrassment that so rich an opportunity was so badly missed. A good homily, Valtonen later commented, is when half the people nod in assent and the other half in dissent. Such a criterion seems to keep faith with the Thomas theme of the mass. Doubt is not sidestepped. It is met head on.

The Eucharist was the high point for most worshipers, Valtonen said. The classic elements were all there: the Great Thanksgiving, Sanctus (sung to samba rhythm, a gift from the Church of Sweden), Verba, Mystery of Faith, Epiclesis (“We really mean it when we pray for the Holy Spirit to come down”), the Our Father, Agnus Dei, and then distribution at a dozen or more stations in and beyond the chancel.

Never have I been more forcefully reminded of the unifying power of the Eucharist and of how we proclaim the Lord’s death to each other as we taste and see his goodness for all. I understood and participated, even though I did not understand the Finnish words.

The distribution took place with each communicant taking a portion of the eucharistic loaf and then a small ceramic cup, handmade in deep, Finnish blue, to receive the wine. A group of volunteers stood by, ready to whisk the used cups away, wash and dry them, and return them for further use—as there were only (!) 500 of them.

By the time of the benediction and recessional, over two hours had passed. I had not once looked at my watch. A reception followed in the room below, now warmed by half the assembly, who made their way there for coffee and conversation. The other half hurried out to waiting trams to get home. The regular tram schedule is tripled on Thomas Mass nights—Helsinki’s version of American megachurch parking-lot efficiency.

The Thomas Mass occurs in 150 other places in Finland and has been celebrated in Helsinki’s largest department store as well as in the Finnish house of parliament. It is financially independent of the Church of Finland, but it has the blessing of the Lutheran bishop of Helsinki (who told Valtonen, “I cannot stop you, thank God”).

Essential to its effectiveness is the strong base of lay volunteers. Some 70 volunteers participate each week, with another group meeting midweek to pray the petitions unread from the previous Sunday. The masses are financially self-supporting; the only paid people are the musicians. Offerings are used to support causes near and far.

What happens to those who attend? Some continue to attend the masses faithfully, some join a local parish, some drop out and vanish from sight. Beyond Finland, the Thomas Mass occurs in numerous places in Sweden and Norway, and has been especially well received in Germany (see ThomasMass.com or DieThomasMesse.com for

more). It is currently under way in Holland and Great Britain. The U.S. is still, as far as I know, untried territory. Valtonen wonders if the mass can be adapted to the U.S., where person-centered rather than liturgically based evangelism prevails.

I believe it can be adapted—not to compete with American-style evangelism but to use in churches that have a liturgical grounding. Those churches will need the elements that make the Thomas Mass flourish: thorough analysis of context, extensive preparation with no skimping on prayer, the use of laity rather than clergy upfront, well-motivated and well-trained volunteers, ecumenical input (especially from Eastern Orthodox churches), the creative embrace rather than abandonment of tradition, a Eucharist-centered service (“People hunger not for a doctrinal head trip but for tasting the goodness of the Lord”), a readiness to confront doubt as part of a growing faith, and an openness to the Spirit’s leading. The primary danger facing the Thomas Mass, according to Valtonen, is that it will be overinstitutionalized and turned into a church or movement, thus stifling the Holy Spirit.

If Finland and much of northern Europe is a spiritual wasteland, with huge numbers of people either frozen into traditionalism or adrift in a soulless secularism, the Thomas Mass gives witness that this is not all there is to say. The Thomas Mass is a rivulet of living water flowing with promise beneath an icy landscape, a rivulet that over time can bring down glaciers of layered obstacles. Who in the U.S. will recognize its promise and find ways to welcome its leaven?