What a congregation knows: The deep wisdom behind odd practices

by James R. Nieman in the April 27, 2016 issue

My second call in pastoral ministry was to an urban church composed almost entirely of Alaskan Natives. Their preferred hymnal consisted of four-part, shape-note gospel harmonies and texts from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These hymns were decidedly tilted toward end-times imagery—derided by outsiders for their “pie in the sky by and by” theology, with language and melodies that sounded quite at odds with the Lutheran roots of the congregation.

Denominational officials were blunt with me that, as soon as possible, I should replace this hymnal with one more attuned to the orthodoxies and ethnicities predominant in American Lutheranism. Clearly, they argued, the members didn’t know how inappropriate and retrograde these hymns really were. When given a better option, they would surely become more spiritually sound and faithful.

Somehow, fortunately, the replacement never happened. Besides, there were just too many flaws in the simplistic claims of those officials. For one thing, while the hymns might have been unusual for this denomination, the overall worship patterns were not. What’s more, the members were mainly third- and fourth-generation Lutherans who had been introduced to the faith long ago in their rural home villages. They thoroughly knew Luther’s Small Catechism, yet were also quite comfortable speaking to the spirit of the salmon they dip-netted from the local streams.

And it wasn’t just religiously that these members negotiated a dual reality. Every day at work, in stores and businesses, during public encounters, they were treated

with a corrosive disregard that reduced them to living as nonpersons in a white-dominated world. Far from being unaware, then, these members were deeply attuned to their setting and their traditions, operating with delicate nuance in nearly every facet of their lives.

The same held true of the hymns they sang during worship. By holding on to songs first taught to their ancestors, music with a striking similarity to the tones and harmonies in Native Alaskan chants, they preserved a heritage that gave stability and strength in difficult times. The end-time images of these hymns offered not escapism but expression: a cry for justice, an eschatological longing, a hope for something more.

For people who tread carefully between dominant and subordinate cultures in order not to succumb to the former or abandon the latter, these hymns gave an alternate worldview that could both assure and orient. No wonder their use was especially intense on difficult occasions, times of acute loss or tragedy. And this larger awareness helped me recognize just how much was packed into an apparently backward relic from generations gone by.

Whenever we encounter something in a congregation (or really any group) that makes no sense to us, it’s easy to conclude that it makes no sense at all. Far more difficult is to retain an open posture toward such practices, to await an alternate rationality that may be driving the strange thing we have only newly encountered. After looking at many faith communities, I’ve learned that even when local ways have become unhealthy or unsustainable, that rarely means they are senseless or stupid. It’s more likely that I just don’t understand yet as the locals do.

So what does it take to recognize this deeper knowing that local practitioners seem effortlessly to hold? Perhaps nothing obstructs such understanding as much as the failure to realize that these practices bear serious wisdom in the first place. Of course, we’re all familiar with, even accepting of, the idea of wise individuals. Our imagination strains a bit, though, with the notion that a community can have that same capacity.

At heart I’m pointing to the often unnoticed practical knowledge that is so basic to faithful living, whether separately or in our life together. Such knowledge shows up in every part of daily life, such as family or work, places of healing, and popular culture. Practical wisdom is at the core of Christian life and is closer to practical than

to abstract reason—closer, that is, to embodied, situated knowing-in-action than to disembodied, theoretical cognition. Marginalizing this kind of knowledge, as often happens in the academy, can in turn damage living communities of faith. By contrast, fostering it can strengthen and enhance those communities. For any of that to happen, though, you must first become attuned to noticing such knowing, which is no simple task. My focus through the years has therefore been to show within faith communities the vibrant and varied forms of such wisdom at work.

Another instance of this practical wisdom became evident to me many years later while investigating the common life at Zion Lutheran Church in Laurenton, Iowa. When you first try to understand a congregation, many bits of evidence may be helpful, even mundane things like financial statements. To be sure, sometimes such reports are just what they seem: a means to track the church's resources, not soaked with further significance. Other times, though, they become the window into a congregation's soul, unintentionally revealing its deeper wishes and worries. That's what I came to realize at Zion.

I was struck that the financial statements showed a disproportionate share of the congregation's revenue coming in not at Christmas or at Easter, as might be expected, but during October. A modest notation soon revealed the reason: "Auction," an entry that accounted for nearly a quarter of the congregation's income. That strangely veiled reference led me into a rich set of stories about the congregation, especially its character as a resilient yet anxious place.

In the mid-1960s, Zion first felt the strain of providing for its financial needs. Starting then and ever since, their response was to host a community fund-raiser to keep the ship afloat—the auction. By established pattern, it was set in motion by a potent committee comprised entirely of women from the most prominent clans of the congregation. The committee's work far exceeded the day of the auction itself, including many elaborate annual rituals of planning and evaluation. Due to the importance of this event for Zion, this months-long process was closely watched by all members.

While I was learning about Zion, the selection of committee members underwent a significant change, with consequences no one dreamed. The women who had organized the auction indicated that they no longer had the energy for the job. When a trio of younger women volunteered to plan the event, their offer was gladly accepted by all, including those who now stepped down from their duties.

Nobody I later interviewed about this change of guard noted at the time that these younger women were not from any of the six most prominent family clans at Zion. What was more, all were from “in town,” a code phrase that meant they didn’t live in Laurenton or its adjacent townships but, like many younger members, in other nearby communities. Trivial as these differences may seem, they eventually proved decisive for how their efforts were received.

Without consulting others, the new committee made three strategic changes. First, they would abbreviate the time for the event from six hours to three or four. Second, they would limit the bake sale, one of two key revenue sources, to only a few of the most popular kinds of goods. Third and most daringly, they would replace the traditional sit-down dinner for the entire community with a simple refreshment stand from which attendees could purchase lunch.

Their plans were not hastily conceived but instead drew upon careful observations of the event made over the years, an event to which they had often given their own baked goods and willing help. Their aim was to make the auction more efficient in terms of time and money. Upon hearing of the innovations, though, previous members of the auction committee quickly criticized their younger counterparts for not consulting them. Surely, they said, such changes would lead to fewer participants and lower receipts.

It would be simplistic to treat the disagreements about how to plan and run this event as just another petty power struggle over a tedious and trivial slice of church life. When people expend surprising personal energy and emotions on something as apparently small as this, something far more urgent is usually at stake. The auction was freighted with values strongly affirmed by the older women from the main family clans at Zion. For them it represented a public sign of commitment to the church, not just by members but also by those in the wider community whose participation signified their support. This was why the auction was always held on the same weekend every year, lasted the better part of a day, and included a meal comparable to what you might offer in your home. Through all these signs and others besides, Zion had always shown the kind of place it truly was: reliable, lavish, cordial, where time spent with others was inherently valuable. The script for the auction adhered to by the older women was essential for this public witness.

It’s not that the younger women who now planned the auction were unaware of these values. They instead departed from this received script in order to foreground

other values and alternative goods. For them, the event mainly served an important pragmatic aim of garnering the needed financial resources for Zion to survive. As it turned out, their instincts were right. When the receipts were tallied and all final reports assembled, their new way to conduct the fall auction proved to be better attended than ever before and vastly more profitable.

Embedded within this seemingly innocent example of script and variation was a basic question of what it meant to be church, a practical wisdom about being a community of faith, worked out in particular patterns and behaviors. The real dispute was whether faithfulness to Zion was better shown through a script for the auction that stressed participation or productivity, relationships or revenue.

Claiming to be more attentive to building community, the older women accused their younger counterparts of not caring about the congregation and its deeper values. Stung by these remarks, the younger women retorted that they did all they could for Zion in light of their busy schedules, and that planning the event carried with it the authority to make needed if not long overdue changes. Jackie, one of the trio of new planners, said of the older women, “They see we’re not doing things the way they did, so they say we’re not as committed. They say we’re making excuses—but I think we’re having to make choices.” Such was the grand pas de deux between the generations at Zion, a basic struggle to work out whose steps would take the lead and whose would follow.

The temptation with a struggle like the one surrounding Zion’s fall auction is to oversimplify its terms and thus discount its meaning. At stake were contrasting forms of faithfulness and alternative traditions of how to be church. This is why a deeper, sustained attention to practical wisdom is vitally important, whether in community life, daily work, or other ordinary venues. It’s about striving to appreciate the “something more” that grounds what we’re doing, orients our actions, and so can open us to more compassionate awareness.

Long before my time at Zion, I came to value this “something more” of parish life, but only by thoroughly misreading a situation in my first call. I was the brand new pastor, and after the long and benumbing tenure of my predecessor, it seemed to me that my task was now to do a fair bit of cleanup, revitalizing local practices with up-to-date ideas. For reasons that now elude me, I began with the handling of the collection during the Sunday morning worship.

As in many Lutheran congregations, the usual procedure in this congregation was that, following the sermon and petitions, ushers distributed the offering plates row by row through the assembly. At the end of this process, the offering was brought forward along with the bread and wine in preparation for the eucharistic rite. It was this latter half of the collection that I wanted to eliminate, that of returning the plates to the chancel along with the communion elements.

I had all sorts of supposedly sensible reasons to support this change, a mixture of pragmatic, ritual, and theological claims. Under my plan, the procession of gifts would be simpler and their presentation neater. The focus would properly remain on the meal, not on the money. It would allow me to remove from an overcrowded chancel the side table on which the offering plates rested. And after all, wasn't the collection just a functional matter that could be done in other ways? Wasn't it even a bit unseemly?

The pushback was swift and sustained. Most vocally opposed were Art and Irene, he the high school janitor and she an aide on the swing shift at a nursing home, who still shared their simple house with their daughter, Ann, a young adult who could not fully care for herself due to Down syndrome.

As a team, Art and Irene could be personally difficult even on a good day, and within weeks of my liturgical change they insisted I meet them at home in order to set me straight. That meeting went just as badly as I expected—a barrage of loud accusations to which I could offer only feeble, awkward replies. Wasn't their money good enough to be brought forward during worship? Why wasn't the side table, which Art personally helped build, worth having in the chancel? And just who did I think I was, imposing my ideas on folks like them who had been members of this church for their whole lives and surely would outlast me besides?

After a while, the volume and volatility subsided, but Art and Irene weren't finished yet. Suddenly they were no longer talking about last week's offering but about the church's Christmas pageant back in 1962. A long-standing ritual in this congregation was to have the lead role of Mary played by one of the girls who had just turned six. By received practice, then, 1962 would have been Ann's turn.

Fighting back tears that coupled humiliation with rage, Irene recounted in quiet, electric tones how the church matrons had visited her privately that November to say that this year someone else would take the lead in the pageant. Ann was a little

“different,” after all, and they didn’t want to embarrass her. The blatant disregard toward Ann, a treasured only child, was still fresh for Art and Irene. And though they never directly said so, it was utterly clear that I had shown the same disregard with the collection. It was all about whether gifts were received with dignity, and what that says in turn about basic human value.

A month or so later, the same point was driven home in another way. The congregation produced an elaborate annual report detailing all its programs and activities. On the first page of the report was something I had never seen before and found shocking. Each and every donor to the congregation was explicitly listed by name, ranked from the highest annual contribution to the lowest. At first, I could only conceive that such a practice elicited either pride or shame, neither being exactly Christian virtues. Surely this was beyond the pale, I thought, and another candidate for cleanup.

After a few days, though, I reviewed the list and began to notice who was included where. At the very top was the single mother of one of my confirmation students, a woman whose days were spent at the local dairy plant wrapping cheese on a production line. Next was her brother, a married father of three girls who supervised one of the county road crews for near minimum wage. Art and Irene were number five on the list—remarkable in light of their spare means, let alone how Ann had been treated.

In fact, the top ten names included only one of the wealthier members, while most of the poorer households gave a far higher proportion of their income than the well-to-do. This donor list resembled how the offering was handled in worship: like a procession of gifts, a dignifying practice that conveyed worth.

These pastoral mistakes early in my vocation interrupted me just long enough to see that something more was happening. But by “something more,” I don’t mean just strong feelings or social status. One of the challenges with congregations is not to become jaded but seriously to imagine that religious impulses may actually drive a group’s practices, and not just sometimes.

The emotion expended in my first parish on the collection and contributions signaled a deeper faith claim at work—in this case, one about giving, grace, and what we confess through how we spend. It may not represent a very sophisticated or complete stewardship theology, but it was a locally generated kind of faithful

knowing all the same. Over time, this congregation had developed its own practical wisdom. It knew something about what it meant to give. And these kinds of breakthroughs helped me, many years later, to perceive at Zion something more than merely a power struggle between old and young. At heart was a kind of nascent, undeveloped ecclesiology, the previously unstated claim that to be church demands energy and effort, sometimes even disagreement.

Over the years, a kind of cumulative “wisdom literature” about how to look at faith communities has emerged for me. It includes rules of thumb like these:

- Notice the distinctive wrinkles and ruptures in a setting, and seek out the underlying reasoning, the alternative explanations you don’t yet grasp.
- Even as you attune yourself to those matters that don’t make sense, avoid becoming infatuated by what appears exotic.
- Appreciate the ordinary, the mundane and regular in a setting, and seek out the important variations, the ways a broad pattern is locally adapted.
- For any explanation you are offered, regularly and repeatedly ask the sociologist’s main investigative question, “Is that really so?”
- Seek religious work in pivotal activities—where it focuses energy, provides a worldview, supplies an aesthetic, explains a limit, or justifies unusual behavior.
- Approach the study of congregations with caring discernment rather than cynicism, a spirit of love that seeks to see the benefit of certain traditions, even when they are dysfunctional.
- No one story sufficiently expresses the wisdom of a congregation, so listen for many accounts, each with an angle on the wider picture.

This final insight bears closer attention. Because the foregoing accounts of congregations resulted in stories to be shared, they were surely neater than the reality of the events they depict. Any effort to account for the reality as complex as in these congregations is still the product of a narrator’s convictions and decisions, including what to foreground or include and what to suppress or omit.

These narrative decisions may seem a limitation or disadvantage, but in fact they hold the potential for an account that conveys detail, evokes interaction, stimulates imagination, and may even deepen practical wisdom for faith communities. By considering such narratives, congregations gain potent resources about themselves—perspectives that might hold the critical potential for needed change. Such stories can then enrich their Christian practical wisdom to make new

judgments, preparing them for what could happen next.

This essay is adapted form the book Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters*, by Dorothy C. Bass, Kathleen A. Cahalan, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, James R. Nieman, and Christian B. Scharen, just published by Eerdmans.*