

How I learned to love church coffee

“The coffee is much better now that we attend a Lutheran church,” I told my husband, wailing.

by [Kay Lynn Northcutt](#) in the [July 14, 2021](#) issue



(Photo by Jessica Silveira on Unsplash)

One Sunday, about ten months into my first pastorate, as my congregation gathered around the coffeepot, I wondered, “Why are these people here?” Sunday morning conversations revolved around the previous day’s Texas Christian University football team’s fate and who’d been kicked off *Survivor* that week. People were gathered ten and 15 deep around the coffee urn and the donuts. *They could have coffee and donuts at home, I thought to myself. Why come to church for mediocre coffee and cold donuts and stand around chewing the fat about yesterday’s football game? Can’t we talk about God? Ecclesiology? Inclusive language? Justice? Liturgy? Anything that matters?*

The confounded equation of coffee + donuts = Christianity had long bothered me. It had even driven me to divinity school, where, in the first minute of the first day of Introduction to Ministry, the professor had asked each of us what we hoped to

accomplish in our ministries. “I’m hoping,” I awkwardly began, “to help rescue the mainline church. From irrelevancy. I hope to make worship as attractive as football, donuts, and TV.”

“That’s quite a trinity,” the professor quipped. Gathering steam, I quickly clarified that I was “pretty certain the revitalization of worship has something to do with deconstructing the ubiquitous church coffeepot.”

“Do not interfere with a Christian’s coffee,” he implored.

But, frustrated that God had to compete every Sunday with something so mundane as coffee (and as deadly as deep-fried, sugar-glazed donuts), I researched my course paper believing I could convince the professor (and mainline Protestants generally) to sideline the coffeepot and frontline God. I read Clifford Geertz’s *Interpretation of Cultures* with an eye toward mastering the function of symbols, specifically the symbolism of the coffeepot. Geertz persuasively demonstrates that religious symbols not only function within a culture but are themselves shaped by culture.

Geertz would have recognized that the coffeepot as a cultural symbol is as important to North American Christianity as the religious symbolism in the sanctuary is to worship. Reading him, I had to admit that my wanting to kick the coffee and donuts to the curb reflected my desire for a purer, cleaner symbol system in church, something set apart and “superior” to the cultural context of football and *Survivor* and coffee. It was disheartening, to say the least, to admit that for cultural anthropologists the coffeepot was not competing with God but was part of a complex system of religious and sociological meaning.

But four years later, I was serving a congregation in the heart of Texas that was, by all standards, too much in love with coffee and donuts. I offered classes on mystics and being-in-love-with-God (poorly attended). I offered classes on parenting (well attended, but the evaluations were filled with complaints about my failure to provide “treats and coffee”).

I did a six-week study of liturgy for the most influential adult Sunday school class in the church. (One had to wait for an invitation in order to speak to the class—even if one was the pastor.) The five women who were already compelled by liturgy took copious notes and were on fire by the end of my course. But no one else in attendance seemed to have noticed a word I’d said on the topic. I began to wonder

if, as my ministry studies had suggested, my congregation expected me to do the heavy lifting God-wise, and they would dutifully remove themselves from the coffeepot when the preaching was about to commence in order to discover what my heavy lifting had wrought that week.

Twenty years later, as a professor of preaching and worship, I was reading Tom Long's engaging book *Beyond the Worship Wars*. In it he tells the story of a young Jewish man who accuses his father of hypocrisy: his father is agnostic but faithfully attends temple. His father responds, "There are many reasons to go to temple. Take Goldman. He comes to talk to God. Me? Well, I come to talk to Goldman."

Talking to God, talking to Goldman: two great but differently motivated impulses for attending church. This tiny parable held for me the missing link. Although Geertz had helpfully explicated how religious symbols functioned within my congregation, the mystery of why worshipers gathered remained. The *why* was (and is) community. One subset of my community gathered each Sunday to talk to God, but the other (much larger) subset came to church to talk with one another.

Until the Eucharist, that is. At the Eucharist, I realized, everyone talked to God. The sanctuary was so pin-drop silent I could hear my pulse. Then? A closing hymn, benediction, rapid obligatory shaking of the pastor's hand on the way to coffee. At least the coffee hour after worship included finger sandwiches and fruit platters.

But it wasn't until the second Easter in the second COVID-tide of not being in church for 14 months on end that I finally understood.

I awoke, greeted the day, said my morning prayers. Then I cried out to my husband, "I want church coffee. Not our coffee. Not McDonald's coffee. Not Starbucks coffee. Not espresso or latte or macchiato or Americano or cappuccino. Only church coffee will do!" My voice grew louder and more urgent as I continued to enumerate every particular kind of coffee that was not satisfying this Easter.

My husband asked if I was "quite OK." I bellowed, "No, I am not OK. I want church coffee."

"But dearie," he began, "you despise church coffee. Church coffee—in all its manifestations—is anathema to you!"

“Not since not having church coffee for almost two years. Now I thoroughly understand its importance. And, anyway, the coffee is much, much better now that we attend a Lutheran church. Lutherans have coffee down pat. It’s an art. I need Lutheran church coffee.” I was wailing now.

Truth be told, I wanted to see Paula and Helen and Ted and Stephen and Joene and Allyson and Ricky and Phyllis and Scott—and to have a cup of coffee with them in the context of the church. I’d even like to see a hologram of Geertz there, sipping coffee with us, smiling. A few of us (very few) would be talking about God. Most of us would be talking about the drought and our governor’s brilliant handling of COVID and how to finance the much needed new church roof.

I closed my eyes, at home with my kitten and my husband on the Best Day of the Year When We Ought to Be Able to Be in Church, and I sobbed. For the missing of almost two years of our lives. For want of church coffee and conversation. For the longing to be held in a cultural context of symbols that can see us through to eternity. But most especially: for the ache to be held within the human-divine embrace that is church.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Church coffee.”