

## Contextualizing Resources

### *When is a Chevy Not a Ford?*

A Travel Free Learning Article

By

Dick Hamm

Ministry Partner with The Columbia Partnership

Voice: 317.490.1968, E-mail: [DHamm@TheColumbiaPartnership.org](mailto:DHamm@TheColumbiaPartnership.org)

Web Site: [www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org](http://www.TheColumbiaPartnership.org)

In recent decades denominations have become more open to the traditions of other denominations. While many individual Christians continue to have a preferred approach to Christian faith and being church, few denominations now claim to be the only true church. We realize each Christian tradition has part, but not all, of the picture of what it means to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

Let's hear it for humility!

Besides being a small but important step toward Jesus' prayer for the unity of his followers "so that the world may know that I was sent by God" (John 17:21), there are many other benefits. One is a new openness to sharing worship resources and best practices with each other. This has enriched many churches in marvelous ways. For example, many non-liturgical churches have rediscovered the spiritual practices of the ancient Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions.

As a Protestant from the radical wing of the Reformation, I remember as a young minister hearing people react to candles as too Catholic. Thank God such prejudices have begun melting away. Some Protestants seemed to have been more concerned with distinguishing themselves from other Christians than in distinguishing themselves from the world itself! In my current day job as executive director of Christian Churches Together in the USA, I help Christians of disparate traditions rediscover each other and to appreciate one another's history and traditions. I celebrate the new openness Christians are expressing toward one another!

Some caution is in order when borrowing from the resources and best practices of other denominations and Christian traditions. It is not so simple as *click, drag, and paste*. You wouldn't take a Chevy transmission and drop it into a Ford without some serious adaptation. There are still important differences between the ethos, polity, and theologies of the various traditions and denominations. When one tradition borrows from another, it is important to contextualize the borrowed things; that is, to adapt them to the new context. Not to do so will likely do violence to the integrity of the borrowed item or practice, and is also a sure fire path to serious conflict or failure in your own setting.

For example, dragging a praise song out of a contemporary worship service and dropping it into the middle of a traditional worship service will likely be a very unsatisfactory experience. Traditional worship in my Church follows a liturgical path that is a rehearsal of the salvation drama: confession, forgiveness, thanksgiving, hearing the Word proclaimed, and being sent forth into mission. Simply dropping a praise song into the midst of such a traditional drama will most likely create confusion among those who are worshipping. A Chevy is not a Ford.

Setting up a video screen in front of the cross that hangs above the chancel in a traditional sanctuary, and flashing up PowerPoint during a traditional worship service is not going to be well received. Inserting a Bach organ Fugue in the middle of a contemporary worship service is not likely to win friends and enhance the worship experience for those accustomed to singing with guitars and drums! Public testimony is being rediscovered by many traditions that left it behind decades ago. But unless it is properly framed, it can easily become show time and simply draw attention to the one testifying rather than to the witness it is supposed to make. A Chevy is not a Ford.

Years ago as pastor of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, I discovered the potential power of healing services while attending a worship seminar. However, when I mentioned the possibility of doing healing services to my board, it was obvious that it conjured up images of Oral Robert's tent meetings of the 1950's. This was not an image that matched up very well with our neo-colonial building and our fairly high worship services. It took a lot of adaptation and education to dispel the fears of lay leadership. A Chevy is not a Ford.

We began offering very quiet, dignified opportunities for people to seek healing of body, mind, and/or spirit in the small prayer services we were offering in our chapel on Sunday evenings. Eventually, we were able to offer monthly opportunities for people seeking healing of various kinds to come forward during our regular Sunday morning services. In our context, it worked best to have two elders and I stationed at three different places in front of the chancel. Those who wished to receive prayers for healing were invited to come at a designated point in the service to one of us to share their need quietly, disclosing only as much as they wished. The person to whom they came would lay a hand on their head or shoulder and quietly offer a private prayer for healing or for them to be an instrument of healing for someone else.

While this was happening, soft music was being played and those remaining seated in the pews were encouraged to pray for those coming forward and for their own healing needs as well. This felt and looked very different from the way it might be done in a Pentecostal congregation, but the purpose and impact were the same. Many people came to look forward to this monthly offering, even if they themselves did not come forward. I enjoyed shocking my Disciples colleagues by blurting out at ministers' meetings, "We offer healing services at First Christian!" They were shocked because they imagined us doing something totally discontinuous with ordinary Disciples worship. Once I explained how we contextualized it for our setting, many wanted to have copies of our service so they could ponder offering something like it in their own settings.

One blessing of the new openness to each other that we see among so many Christian traditions these days is the ability to borrow from one another. Nevertheless, it is important to consider your specific context and to adapt the new thing appropriately, taking account of the sensitivities, theology, polity, etc. of your own setting and honoring the integrity of that which you have borrowed. A Chevy is not a Ford.

### **Important Things to Know**

Dick Hamm is a Ministry Partner with The Columbia Partnership. He is also executive director for Christian Churches Together in the USA. His most recent book is ***Recreating the Church: Leadership for the Post-Modern Era***. He is available for speaking and coaching with leaders, congregations, denominations, and parachurch organizations.

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