

Presidential Plenary Exploring an Ecumenical Feast of Creation

A Free Church Perspective and Attending to the Experience of Ordinary Worshipers

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I attended the March 2024 ecumenical conference in Assisi online in my capacity as the Mennonite Church Canada representative to the Consultation on Common Texts.¹ The positive energy around introducing the feast was palpable—even on Zoom, even at 5:00 am! Personally, as someone who serves as the Director of Anglican Studies at a Roman Catholic university, and whose tradition of origin and ordination is Mennonite, I am grateful for the ecumenical nature of this initiative and its potential to speak into my context, where “transformative leadership for the well-being of the planet” is one of three university priorities. In my brief time today, I will address the feast from two perspectives: a Free Church perspective, and from the perspective of ordinary worshipers.

A Free Church Perspective

How might Free Church traditions—such as Mennonites, Baptists, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals—relate to a potential Feast of Creation?² I must acknowledge upfront that Free Churches are likely to be *followers* rather than leaders in this ecumenical endeavor. This is certainly the case for Mennonite Church Canada and USA, where we face three challenges that are shared with many other Free Church traditions.

1. “A Liturgical Opportunity; An Ecumenical Kairos: An Emerging Consensus to Enhance the ‘Feast of Creation’ and Honour the Creator,” seminar report, Assisi, March 14-17, 2024, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/10rBHfy0GIJwvcyqxoS8kLmFhpqzyoQyW/view>.

2. In *Worship and Power*, an edited collection emerging from the Free Church Traditions meeting at the North American Academy of Liturgy, Andrew Wymer and I envision three defining characteristics of Free Churches: separation from civic intervention, local congregational autonomy, and individual voluntarism. Sarah Kathleen Johnson and Andrew Wymer, “Introduction: Liturgical Authority in Free Church Traditions,” in *Worship and Power: Liturgical Authority in Free Church Traditions*, ed. Sarah Kathleen Johnson and Andrew Wymer (Eugene: Cascade, 2023), 6-9.

First, there is *no centrally authorized liturgical calendar*. No one can determine which days and seasons a local congregation celebrates other than leaders in that local congregation. The implementation of the feast relies not on authorized bodies making decisions, but on good communication and robust resourcing directed toward local leaders, both lay and ordained.

Second, many Mennonite congregations and other Free Church communities have a *minimalist approach to the Christian year*. Most celebrate Christmas and Easter, and some mark other seasons and days. There are also certain communities that follow the Revised Common Lectionary (sometimes), which is one way that congregations may be invited into the celebration of this feast. However, in this minimalist context, the greater the weight given to the feast, and the celebration of the feast on Sunday, would be beneficial for its reception.

Third, many Mennonite congregations *mark a diversity of days in worship that are not related to the Christian year*: stewardship Sunday, Peace Sunday, Truth and Reconciliation Sunday, Christian camp Sunday, even Earth Day. These days can reflect important community connections and ethical commitments. In this context, the Italian distinction between *la Creazione* (God's act of creation of the cosmos)—Creation as theological mystery—and *il Creato* (the result of the act of creation)—Creation as the created universe—is important.³ Introducing a feast that is about telling God's story, that is about God's action, is distinct from marking a day that is primarily about caring for creation through human action. Focusing the feast on God's act of creation is an important corrective for Free Church traditions (such as my own) that may be eager to embrace an ethically oriented celebration. An emphasis on God's act of creation may also be a point of access for Free Churches that are unlikely to embrace a celebration seen to focus on social and ecological justice.

Despite these challenges, I hope efforts are made to engage Free Churches in celebrating a Feast of Creation, especially as Free Churches are growing and thriving in many regions of the world in a diversity of forms. I also hope that addressing the challenges associated with Free Churches might be an opportunity to enrich the experience of non-Free Church traditions. My hunch is that, even in traditions with a clear calendar focused on telling God's story, the distinction and connection between *la Creazione* and *il Creato* will be significant. Even in traditions that celebrate a fulsome Christian year, a Sunday celebration with greater weight would assist with widespread recognition. And even in traditions that can authorize a feast, good communication and robust resourcing would support its thoughtful and contextual reception.

3. "A Liturgical Opportunity; An Ecumenical Kairos," 15.

Attending to the Experience of Ordinary Worshipers

While we can designate a Feast of Creation as liturgists and church leaders, how might ordinary worshipers relate to a potential feast? Much of my research focuses on listening deeply to the lived experience of ordinary worshipers, especially those whose perspectives have rarely been considered in liturgical studies, including occasional religious practitioners,⁴ young people, and simply people in the pews. A striking pattern in this research is the *absence* of connection between ordinary lived experiences of Christian liturgy and attention to God as Creator or the call to care for a creation of which we are part. I will share two specific examples, first from the Anglican Diocese of Toronto and second from the binational Young People and Christian Worship project.

In focus groups, more than 500 active lay people in the Anglican Diocese of Toronto were invited to imagine their local parish and the diocese five years in the future as having new life, and to consider what changes are necessary to get there.⁵ In response, many people describe changes to the liturgical life of their local parishes. Practices of worship are central to their experience of being the church, and to their vision for the future of the church. In contrast, attention to creation is not, nor do participants make a connection between liturgy and creation.⁶

This absence is especially striking in the Anglican Church of Canada where, at the national level, “to steward and renew God’s creation” is one of five transformational aspirations.⁷ At the diocesan level, “creation care” is also a stated and resourced priority.⁸ Furthermore, in 2013 the Anglican Church of Canada baptismal covenant was revised to include a commitment “to safeguard the integrity of God’s creation, and respect, sustain and renew the life of the Earth,” which is now repeated multiple times annually.⁹ Despite these formal efforts, lay Anglicans in Toronto do not speak about creation when envisioning liturgical renewal in their parishes or a vibrant future for the church, for themselves and future generations.

4. Sarah Kathleen Johnson, *Occasional Religious Practice: Valuing a Very Ordinary Religious Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025).

5. I was an adjunct member of the consulting team giving leadership to this visioning process. While I did not design the research process, I was responsible for qualitative coding and analysis of the data. Anglican Diocese of Toronto, “Cast the Net: A Strategic Visioning Process for the Diocese of Toronto” (2024), <https://www.toronto.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/CastTheNet-Report-web.pdf>.

6. The code “relationship to creation” occurs only 7 times in the context of 4,695 coded segments. In contrast, “liturgy” occurs 198 times and “younger people,” the most frequent code, occurs 296 times.

7. Anglican Church of Canada, “A Changing Church. A Searching World. A Faithful God. Five Transformational Commitments for Our Church” (2023), <https://changingchurch.anglican.ca/>.

8. Anglican Diocese of Toronto, “Creation Care,” accessed April 11, 2025, <https://www.toronto.anglican.ca/diocesan-life/social-justice-advocacy/creation-care/?lang=en>.

9. Anglican Church of Canada, *Book of Alternative Services* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1985), 159.

A second example: over the past year, Nelson Cowan, Emily Snider Andrews, and I have undertaken an ecumenical, binational, multisite, mixed-methods study of how teenagers and emerging adults experience Christian worship.¹⁰ Those of you who are part of the Contemporary and Alternative Worship Seminar and the Free Church Traditions Post-Meeting will hear more about this study during this meeting.¹¹ Among other data, the first phase of research included focus groups with 187 highly religious teenagers, and individual interviews with 69 highly religious emerging adults in six different geographic regions and Christian traditions.

We are in the very early stages of analyzing this data. However, in a simple word search of focus group and interview transcripts, “creation” is mentioned only 5 times and God is named as “Creator” just 4 times.¹² Comments on God “creating” or of the world as “created” are rare. “Climate” and “environment” are never mentioned in relation to the earth. Young people are *not* making a connection between their current liturgical experience and creation or God as Creator. When asked to envision “the best worship service ever” they also do not make this connection. This absence is especially striking in relation to the emphasis at the recent Catholic seminar on engaging young people through the Feast of Creation.¹³

These two examples show that active lay Anglicans in Toronto and highly religious young people across Canada and the United States do not connect their current liturgical experience, or their vision for liturgical renewal, to God as creator

10. The purpose of the Young People and Christian Worship (YPCW) study is to listen deeply to how teenagers and emerging adults (aged 13-29) experience public Christian worship in a range of liturgical expressions—Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, evangelical, and charismatic. This is a binational (Canada and the United States), multi-site, mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative), ecumenical study that incorporates social scientific and theological methods. The first phase of qualitative research took place during the summer of 2024 at six summer programs held on university campuses for high school students that are focused on Christian worship. Research included focus groups with high school students (185 participants), individual interviews with emerging adults (69 participants), a short survey (155 responses), and participant observation of worship services (29 days, 38 liturgies). Samford University Center for Worship and the Arts and Saint Paul University, “Young People and Christian Worship: Experiences, Stories and Values,” accessed April 11, 2025, <https://www.samford.edu/worship-arts/research>.

11. Nelson Cowan, Emily Snider Andrews, and Sarah Kathleen Johnson, “Understanding Young Worshipers through Mixed-Methods Research: Introducing the Young People and Christian Worship (YPCW) Study,” presentation in the Contemporary and Alternative Worship Seminar, North American Academy of Liturgy, Valparaiso, IN, January 4, 2025; Emily Snider Andrews and Sarah Kathleen Johnson, “Young People and Christian Worship: Free Church Connections,” presentation at the Free Church Traditions Post-Meeting, North American Academy of Liturgy, Valparaiso, IN, January 5, 2025.

12. These absences are notable in the context of more than 202,000 words of focus group and interview transcripts.

13. “The Feast of the Mystery of Creation in Christ: A Historical, Theological, and Pastoral Exploration from the Roman Catholic Perspective,” seminar report, Assisi, December 6-7, 2024, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/17pxJ9PPTJe1ukYS73xEYYNUGu0Djz26/view>, 30.

or attention to creation. Introducing a feast may be one way to begin to make this connection. However, we must also be cautious about this claim.

Feast of Creation as Germinal Ritual

Later today, I am sharing a paper coauthored with Joshua Zentner-Barrett in a joint meeting of the Liturgy and Cultures and Critical Theories and Liturgical Studies Seminars.¹⁴ In this paper, we develop a theology of *germinal ritual* drawing on the parables of Jesus, botanical science, ritual theory, and a qualitative study of a diffuse visual art installation in which ceramic feathers were distributed to every parish in the Anglican Diocese of Ottawa as a symbol of a commitment to truth and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.¹⁵

Germinal ritual is a way of thinking theologically about the relationship between liturgy and ethics. Germinal ritual describes ritual acts that are seeds—that are small beginnings; that are planted in different soils—that yield varied outcomes dependent on context; that grow as wheat among weeds—that coexist with contradictory rituals; and that grow in stages in secret—depending on human agency, while operating beyond human awareness and control. A theology of germinal ritual can help us avoid putting either too much or too little weight on these practices.

It may be helpful to consider a Feast of Creation as a germinal ritual. It is a small beginning for engaging the fullness of a theology of Creator God and the overwhelming reality of a climate in crisis. It will be received in different ways in different contexts—in some, flourishing, and in others, withering. It will coexist with contradictory and competing rituals—in liturgical structures that are anthropocentric and colonial. It will grow—or not—in ways that we cannot fully control or understand. How can we both recognize the limitations, and embrace the potential, of the unique opportunity to introduce an ecumenical Feast of Creation?

14. Sarah Kathleen Johnson and Joshua Zentner-Barrett, “Germinal Ritual: Can Liturgical Practices Seed Social Transformation?” presentation in the Critical Theories and Liturgical Studies Seminar and Liturgy and Cultures Seminar, North American Academy of Liturgy, Valparaiso, IN, January 3, 2025.

15. More context for this case study can be found in Sarah Kathleen Johnson, “Looking and Listening for Lived Theologies of Truth and Reconciliation: Learning from a Diffuse Art Installation in the Anglican Diocese of Ottawa,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 40:2 (2024): 176-192.