

Bodies at worship: Formed by liturgy

by [Scott Walters](#) in the [September 22, 2009](#) issue

I learned to install a door one day in small-town Arkansas, on a nondescript tract home with pinkish, mottled brick that was dated even before the mason finished his work. The door was delivered from the lumberyard as a unit, already hinged and hung in its jamb, and my boss, Dave, gave me all the information I needed to install it. He told me how to make sure the studs on the hinge side of the opening were plumb in two directions, and how to tack up shims to correct for the framers' hurry. He explained that a push on a corner in one direction would effect a logical movement in another. All I had to do was fill the framed opening with the door, making all things plumb and flush.

But when he returned an hour and a half later, Dave found me struggling at my task. I had all the information I needed, but in my inexperienced hands the seemingly rigid door behaved like a balloon. A push in one spot created a bulge somewhere else. A gentle shim tap created a whirlwind of chaos somewhere else. Dave stepped in, gave a few knowing bumps and shoves, and in a matter of moments all was right with the door.

The goal of any apprenticeship is the transfer of knowledge to the hands. The result is the properly fit thing: a flush door, a mitered corner.

I grew up in a Christian tradition that places a great deal of value on religious information. But although I couldn't have said so as a child, I had a hunch that my knowledge of the faith wasn't making its way into some important parts of my self. I felt like a clumsy apprentice; I had sufficient information in my head, but my hands remained ignorant and inadequate.

Liturgical worship assumes that bodies learn too. It's not enough to fill one's mind with a collection of facts established by pope, prophet or sacred text. Something happens, something is communicated into our selves when we bow, stand, kneel, sing and process together. Colors and smells and even the arrangement of furniture deliver information to different parts of us.

Can we imagine our hands, knees, noses, bellies—our whole bodies—as curious, as wanting to know something of the mystery of God as surely as our minds do? We claim that faith is an interior reality that can and should make its way to the surface of a life. But what if we paid more attention to the way that works, the way the concrete actions of bodies in the world infect faith with life? We might then understand liturgy—“the work of the people”—in terms of formation rather than expression.

Even conspicuously liturgical traditions can ignore or deny liturgy as a means of formation. Sometimes worship gestures and movements seem to function as secret signs that someone possesses the right information about how to worship (and that someone else doesn't). “Did you see that guy make [or fail to make] the sign of the cross at the *Benedictus Qui Venit*? Clearly he's not one of us,” we think.

More and more people are coming into church blessedly oblivious of traditional liturgical signs and gestures. These people are a gift to the gathered assembly because they haven't learned to read the signals. The newness of the gestures and motions, perhaps even the clumsiness with which they are first employed, reminds us all that sometimes grace is out at our fingertips first. It may take time and motion for it to settle inward.

Liturgical converts are open to the possibility that liturgy is meant not so much to express who we are as to transform who we are. Liturgy changes us because we not only think thoughts about God but also live and move and have our being in God. The movement of our bodies is an irreducible, irreplaceable way of knowing.

Perhaps the liturgy is like that door I struggled with as a carpenter's apprentice. The transformation it works on us is a bodily transformation, affecting all of ourselves—mind and body. Maybe I'm meant to struggle with the liturgy until its wisdom makes its way into my hands, into my belly, into my bones.