

Artists in worship: The church as patron

by [Jesse James DeConto](#) in the [November 29, 2011](#) issue



COURTESY Jon Reischl

Of the 60 people who gathered for the Good Friday service at House of Mercy Church in St. Paul, 14 had fashioned artistic symbols of Christ's body to serve as stations of the cross. Found-object artist Maria Bianchi had turned an old wicker laundry basket into a human torso by weaving willow branches and satin ribbons through the basket and then stamping it with Jesus' words, "Do not weep for me, but

weep for yourselves and for your children."

At the 14th station, Bianchi and the other artists laid their art pieces on Sonja Olson's handcrafted pall on a communion table. There was a pile of sculptures of human limbs or wooden boxes depicting a head or a rib cage.

"We think of each other as parts of the Body," Bianchi said. "This was really moving."

Bianchi, who manages an art gallery, creates art for House of Mercy two or three times a year. "It really stretches my creative power. It's integral to the worship experience for me."

One of the worshipers was Joshua Melvin, 22, who moved from station to station in his wheelchair. "It was very humbling to follow Christ in his footsteps, to see what he saw, to suffer what he suffered, to feel what he felt. I had never done anything like this before," he said.

In 1996, Mark Stenberg and Russell Rathbun teamed up with Debbie Blue to start House of Mercy as an American Baptist mission church. Rathbun had trained in theater at Bethel College and Seattle Pacific University, and Blue's husband is a painter. All three of the pastors quickly became immersed in the Twin Cities arts scene.

"When our friends have an art opening or their band is opening somewhere," said Rathbun, "they send postcards. So we sent postcards to all our friends and said, 'Hey, we're starting a church on Sunday.' Friends who never really went to church before came to help us out." They found that artists were craving a way to express their own spiritual experiences through original art and in-depth dialogue.

Using original art for the stations of the cross began at House of Mercy's first Good Friday celebration. The church has also been distinct in its musical style, featuring traditional country gospel music and songs by artists like Hank Williams and Johnny Cash (see "[New harmonies](#)"). (Before he died, Cash gave the church rights to use his songs in its hymnal.) The church has published its own hymnbook; many of the songs are played on Radio Mercy through the church's website. House of Mercy Records has produced 26 original albums. The church sponsors concerts at the Turf Club music bar in St. Paul, and local bands and songwriters perform at most of the regular Sunday night worship services.

Minnesota musician John Hermanson started attending House of Mercy because of its old-time gospel music. He had attended conservative evangelical churches that were trying out 20th-century musical forms, and he found that many of the musicians who played in that style were uncomfortable with the theological narrowness of the lyrics.

"These musicians didn't want people to know that they're playing in church," he said.

House of Mercy has bridged the gap between the church and the arts scene by inviting musicians to perform their songs at Sunday night services, where there's "no fear of being known as a church musician." On Sunday evenings, Hermanson said, "there's this creativity and unexpected sort of thing: each Sunday you don't know who's going to be there."

Paul Erickson, who directs evangelical mission for the St. Paul Area Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, noted that music, paintings and poetry offer people an open-ended way to engage with the gospel without having to accept a particular interpretation. Art "can mean something different for everyone," he said, and that's the approach House of Mercy takes to faith as well.

"People who are attracted to House of Mercy really have the BS detector keenly tuned. It's about as far from simple answers to life's honest questions as you can get."

By 2006, Stenberg decided to try transplanting this artist-centered approach into the liturgy of Lutheran worship. He joined with Kae Evensen, an ELCA pastor, to start Mercy Seat Lutheran Church with the help of a \$250,000 start-up budget from the ELCA's Minneapolis synod.

Unlike House of Mercy, Mercy Seat's worship is rooted in the Lutheran tradition. Familiar texts like the Kyrie Eleison and the Sanctus are given new melodies.

"The book readers, the artists are leaving the church," Evensen said. "There's not a place for them." She pointed out that in the past the church often served as a patron of the arts, but today a reliance on technology rather than original creativity has left congregations using projector screens and showing uninspired clip art.

"Let's give the people the stories and [let them] just give back through art, music, filmmaking or whatever, and let people figure out what it is for themselves," Evensen said.

"Christian art is sometimes just praying hands, or Jesus carrying sheep over his shoulder or . . . an American flag or an eagle soaring. It's illustration, it's not art," she said. "In some churches I served, people . . . just didn't think about art.

"You go to the Minneapolis Institute of Art—and then you come to church and a puppet show will do?" she queried. People know that there is more to faith, she said, "it's just that they don't have any vocabulary, don't know how to articulate it."

Evensen thinks the decline of ecclesial art goes hand in hand with an overall dumbing down of Christian teaching. "My friends didn't go to church because they just couldn't handle a lot of platitudes from the sermon. They'd read Nietzsche in college, and then they come to church and get puppy stories," she said.

On Easter Sunday, Mercy Seat music coordinator Wes Burdine led his Mass for the End of the World, a Beach Boys-meet-Neil Young setting of the Lutheran liturgy. Unlike the acoustic pop of Nashville-inspired contemporary Christian music, Burdine's mass is a kind of mellow pop of layered guitars and chantlike vocal harmonies that presents the apocalypse with reverence and peace. Burdine's is one of about a dozen musical liturgies that Mercy Seat has commissioned over the past five years, in styles ranging from jazz, alt-country and folk to punk, rock and 1950s doo-wop.

"It's about not being afraid to expand on what liturgy means, but it's not about throwing the liturgy out," explained Hermanson, who leads worship at Oak Knoll Lutheran Church in Minnetonka but worships at House of Mercy and has composed a liturgy for Mercy Seat. "Often when you have a guitar in church," he said, it is used for "praise music or very contemporary stuff as opposed to remaining within the tradition."

Mercy Seat pays liturgy composers \$250 and band members \$50 each when they perform. Including costs for promoting visual art shows, a sound technician and Burdine's monthly stipend, Mercy Seat spends about \$27,000 a year on the arts—a quarter of its annual budget. (The ELCA's Minneapolis synod contributes about \$25,000 a year to the church.) At those rates, the church is one of the better-paying gigs in the area.

"It's nice to bring [musicians] in and say, 'You know, what you're doing is really great and worthwhile,'" Burdine said. "Since the rest of the world won't recognize that by paying you well, we want you to know that creating something is valuable."

Scott Munson, 32, left a career in civil engineering to pursue songwriting. Mercy Seat paid him for a liturgy before he'd ever performed in public. With two of his masses in the worship rotation, the church is one of his key employers. His work at Mercy Seat has led to scoring music for a documentary film and a commercial.

"When someone's willing to pay you actual money and use what you do for their service, it means the world to you," Munson said. "That to an artist is a tremendously dignifying and meaningful thing in the day-to-day calculations of life."

Mercy Seat's liturgies have gotten attention far beyond the Twin Cities. Keith Anderson, a Lutheran pastor in Woburn, Massachusetts, asked Burdine to provide sheet music for a few songs that his church could incorporate into its worship. Anderson learned about Mercy Seat through Facebook.

"What I see in Mercy Seat is this really great attempt to do the Lutheran liturgy with integrity but in a way that uses the music and language of this time, this moment."

Anderson compares the Mercy Seat approach to technological "hacking"—manipulating a piece of existing software so that it serves new purposes. He draws other ideas from emergent churches around the country.

Kevin Aikens, pastor of a newly organized Baptist church in Hamilton, Ontario, said that Hermanson's settings of traditional Lutheran texts are better at helping non-Christians relate to the church's theological claims than is the emotionalism expressed by a lot of contemporary worship music. "They've added a sound that's familiar to a song that's familiar—the old, beautiful, ancient songs sound like they could be on a new [indie rock] album."

The ELCA has been open to liturgical experiments, like those under way at Sanctuary, an emergent church that recently opened in Marshfield, Massachusetts, and at the House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver. The ELCA's St. Paul and Minneapolis synods have supported House of Mercy and Mercy Seat, though they're barely recognizable as Lutheran on the surface. The ELCA has also supported Humble Walk Lutheran Church, a church plant in St. Paul's West End where much of the worship music comes from songwriters in the congregation. Humble Walk has

invited Hermanson to lead its tiny congregation in his liturgy, "Is This the Feast of Victory?"

Humble Walk Pastor Jodi Houge said of her church: "Selfishly, I wanted a place for my friends. They often feel so lonely walking into a normal congregation because nobody looks or acts like them.

"It's not that we set out to be artistic, but art is such a vital part of the community that's already gathered. Through the arts," she said, "we get these glimpses of heartbreak and loss and grief and beauty that we maybe wouldn't normally get in church."

Mercy Seat is planning to publish a hymnal, and it hopes to commission a mass from a big-name artist like Sufjan Stevens, Dolly Parton or Neko Case. Stenberg is hoping that such a work will draw attention to Mercy Seat's liturgical innovation and help the tiny church to grow, much as House of Mercy has done by hosting concerts featuring Ralph Stanley, Charlie Louvin and Gordon Gano of the Violent Femmes.

Erickson believes that other churches can learn how to incorporate the arts to attract younger generations. For Evensen, however, the new liturgies aren't meant to attract new members so much as to affirm local artists. "I never wanted to grow the church," she said. "I wanted to honor people's intelligence and gifts and real lives."

Over at Humble Walk, the congregation of 50 has already outgrown its storefront space. Houge said it can't grow any bigger and still maintain the close-knit relationships that help it to affirm individual gifts—like those of the artists who have been attracted there.

House of Mercy has grown almost by accident, perhaps because its old-time country sound resonates with the Twin Cities alt-country music scene. If there's a formula, Rathbun said, it's not in featuring good art but in responding to the culture of the local community. "I would never say, 'Oh, here's what you've got to do, you've got to have an arts church.' It's a niche market."

Their methods might not work everywhere, but in the Twin Cities artist communities, these congregations are filling a need.

On Good Friday at House of Mercy, as he got in the line to make the stations of the cross, Joshua Melvin thought of the dozen surgeries he's had on his legs. "I've learned to walk over and over again," he said later. "I've had to be crucified with Christ over and over again."

One by one, the worshipers cupped soil in their hands and sprinkled it over the representation of Jesus' body and laid carnations on the symbolic tomb. Rathbun and Blue then covered the body with black linen, just as they did the wine and bread resting on the altar. Two days later, the grave clothes and the dirt came off, and Christ rose again.

Rathbun observed that acting out Jesus' death, burial and resurrection communicated the gospel in a way his words never could. Melvin said, "I could touch Christ in a deeper way by seeing that spectacle. It was one of the most incredible things I've ever experienced."