‘Traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ worship in the LCA
A discussion paper

David Schubert
February 2004

I. Discussion of the issues

Recently, after a service using the ‘Sing the Feast’ setting I had been held in one of our suburban congregations, the pastor said to one of the worshippers, ‘Wasn’t that a great contemporary service?’ The reply was a definite ‘That wasn’t contemporary!’

Why wasn’t this service considered ‘contemporary’? The wording has been modernised, and the musical setting is a bright 1990s style. A variety of musical instruments was used, and there were modern songs as well as some older hymns. So what do the words ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ (or ‘modern’) mean?

The distinction between ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ seems to be widespread in our church and regarded as important. The changes and variety in worship styles since about the early 1970s have brought many blessings. For instance, language has been modernised and contemporary forms of music have been adopted, and many people have felt more at home in worship and been able to participate with greater understanding. And yet there is still confusion and unhappiness in the area of worship. Perhaps the distinction between ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ needs to be looked at more closely.

There are two main reasons why we need to examine this distinction. One is that it is not at all clear whether people really know exactly what they mean by the terms ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ (and it may be even more doubtful whether different people mean the same thing). And the second is that the words are not neutral labels.

Let’s take up the second point first. On the face of it, the words ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ may seem to have clear-cut designations of meaning, simply denoting a particular style. But in fact that is not so. Alongside the designated meanings (whatever the denotations actually are), and hiding behind these meanings, is a set of emotional connotations.

To put it simply, to a large number of people in our society the word ‘contemporary’ feels good and the word ‘traditional’ feels bad. This may have to do with our strong and usually unquestioning belief in progress. ‘Contemporary’ to such people implies being up-to-date, with the times, relevant, free and open to change, open-minded and flexible, youthful and full of life, and democratic—and these are regarded as good; and ‘traditional’ implies the opposite: being out-of-date, behind the times, irrelevant, hidebound and closed to change, closed-minded and inflexible, symptomatic of old age and decline, and elitist—and these are regarded as bad.

As children of our culture, most of us can probably sense the pull of these feelings; but it

may be mentioned in passing that in fact rapid change and continual newness are largely counter both to keeping and nurturing the faith that has been passed on (the traditions!) and to effective ritual (which needs continuity and collective memory).

(On the other hand, to some people the word ‘contemporary’ has negative connotations; they feel it signifies things that are ephemeral, undignified and mere entertainment.)

Often the words ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ are given as labels (supposedly clear and neutral), and then the connotations are taken as an argument for ‘contemporary’ services by those who want such services. The argument, usually implicit, goes something like this: ‘Now we have these two kinds of services, traditional and contemporary. Which of these is more important, which should have first priority? Obviously the contemporary, because of course we want a church that is relevant, moving with the times and so on. Perhaps we need to keep some traditional services, for the sake of the older people who can’t or won’t adapt to change, but these out-of-date services are not good for the church and will soon die out.’

Most of this isn’t articulated but just implied by the emotional force of the labels. And there’s probably no conscious conspiracy. But services labelled ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ may in fact not have the characteristics implied by the emotional connotations of the words ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’.

Now let’s return to the first point: what do people who want ‘contemporary’ services really mean by the words ‘traditional’ and ‘contemporary’? What sort of things actually make a service ‘contemporary’ for them? This is a difficult question to answer precisely, because when you ask people they are generally not at all articulate about it, and it seems that the reasons they give for wanting a particular sort of service are not always the real reasons. It seems to be very much a matter of what people like, even though they may not know why. So we have to make guesses from what is done and not done in the two sorts of services.

First, it is clear that although ‘traditional’ used to mean using archaic language with ‘thou’ forms and so on, it doesn’t any more in our circles. There are a few people who like that kind of language and think it is beautiful and perhaps reverent; but there are very few regular LCA services which still use that kind of language—certainly no longer any officially approved ones. However, probably those who want ‘contemporary’ worship would consider that the language of ‘traditional’ services is heavier and more formal and that of ‘contemporary’ services simpler. So perhaps it’s more a question of language register than of archaic or modern English.

Second, it doesn’t seem to be simply a matter of when the music was written, although clearly 16th century music, for example, is not contemporary. ‘Contemporary’ services can have music written 30 or more years ago, as well as the occasional old hymn, and ‘traditional’ services can have modern songs and apparently complete musical settings written recently (eg the Alternative Form and the Sing the Feast settings). Perhaps how the music is played is more important than when it was written.

The instruments don't seem to be crucial either. A page 6 or Alternative Form service played on a piano or keyboard apparently is still not counted as contemporary, although on the other hand probably most 'contemporary' service fans would not be happy about using the organ for their service.

It doesn't seem to be simply a matter of 'traditional' services for the oldies and 'contemporary' services for the youth either (although many people say that's what it's about). The tastes and preferences of young people are just as varied as those of older people. Quite a few young people seem to like some forms of elaborate ritual and solemn ceremony, and know and appreciate a range of musical styles including baroque and early music—probably more of them than of their parents' generation. It could be considered patronising and a form of ageism to put all youth into the same category and then give them their own service—rather as it would be sexist for men to say 'this is what women like' and create a special style of service for them.

Yet there are some overall generational differences. It is possible to discern some of the trends of both Baby Boomers and Generation X in the preferences we see in many 'contemporary' services. After all, the growth of 'contemporary' services occurred decades ago in the youth of now older generations; many of the characteristics of such services were not devised by present young people.

Is the crucial difference between 'traditional' and 'contemporary' then a matter of structure and manner? Perhaps this is getting closer, although these ideas are very slippery. People do use the terms 'formal' (assumed to be bad) and 'informal' (assumed to be good), and these probably refer both to the structure of the service (its language and its framework) and to the way it is done. There is also a continuum between 'structured' and 'unstructured'. Another 'good' word for those who favour 'contemporary' services is 'simple' or 'simplified', although again this is a matter of degree and it's not always clear why 'simple' should be good. Many people also seem to want intimacy, cosiness and feelings of belonging, and these seem to go with less formal structures.

And what about culture? Is the difference between 'traditional' and 'contemporary' actually the difference between 'high' culture and art and 'low' culture and art? Some who favour 'contemporary' worship seem to strongly dislike 'high' culture, dismissing it as old-fashioned, elitist, high church and academic; and some who favour 'traditional' worship like the beautiful old music, the poetic language and the stately ritual. But here again people differ.

People also talk about wanting to be 'involved' in the worship. Perhaps here too there is misunderstanding. For some, 'involvement' means taking active part in some way—in the speaking or singing or ritual action. But to many who want to be 'involved' in 'contemporary' worship this seems to mean the kind of involvement of being caught up that you get in watching television or an exciting or moving film or being at, say, a rock concert. You're not doing anything but you are taken out of yourself and immersed in the presentation. So in 'contemporary' worship this may mean fast pace, charismatic

leadership and preaching, and high-impact visual and musical presentation. 'Involvement' in this context doesn't necessarily mean joining in singing the songs or saying responses or personally reflecting and responding in periods of silence.

Probably the perceived differences between 'traditional' and 'contemporary' services involve all of the above to varying degrees: language, music, generation, structure, manner, culture, and involvement. And it appears that the desired mixture of these factors is different for different people. There seems to be enough of a cluster of areas of agreement for congregations to be able to have services of different styles, but enough disagreement for people to still feel somewhat unhappy without perhaps being able to say why. Then they tend to use words like 'boring' and 'irrelevant' on the one hand, or 'confusing' or 'in poor taste' on the other hand. People tend to expect that their personal tastes should be met.

Now, the questions are: What should our attitude be towards all of this? What really is important? What action should we take? This needs much prayer, research, thought, and discussion. There is probably no easy answer. However, the following are some suggestions from the Department of Liturgics.

II. Recommendations (with reference mainly to the holy communion service)

- That we as a church try to avoid using blanket labels for worship services like 'traditional' and 'contemporary' that tend to polarise. The labels mean different things to different people and are emotionally loaded. It is preferable to try to use more neutral and descriptive names. If referring to one of the LCA-approved orders, use its name, eg 'Service with Communion, page 6' or 'Sing the Feast, setting 2'. If using another order, designate it by a key characteristic, eg 'with keyboard/guitars', 'spoken, with songs'.

- That we avoid devising services simply to cater for different tastes and subcultural/aesthetic preferences or for different generations. While the service is set within culture(s) and needs to take account of this, as in language and music, what is most important is that it is clearly first of all divine service (God's action for us), that it is functional (the service as a whole and its parts do what they are supposed to do), and that it is open to congregational members of all backgrounds. We need to listen to people's concerns about worship and teach them what it really is.

- That we retain the historic 'shape' of the liturgy (whatever form is used) and enrich the service with the best of hymns/songs, music, arts, rites etc, both old and new, according to the season and day.

- That the level or register of language reflects our understanding that the service is public and that God is truly present, and so is corporate and reverent, as well

as understandable to Australian worshippers.

- That we recognise that worship is not primarily a means to an end but an end in itself. For example, the service is not primarily for education or for evangelism—although of course it does also instruct and proclaim—but rather it is performative interaction between God and his people (word and sacrament), in which God comes to his church with his grace, and God's people offer prayer and praise.