Several years ago, the Worship Committee in a congregation I was serving decided to make some changes to the Communion service, only to discover we had precipitated a major worship war. At a meeting to deal with the fallout, we were surprised as people began to tell stories of Communion services in their lives. As we listened to these moving testimonies (not all of them positive), we began to realize that many of our responses to worship had been shaped by such formative liturgical experiences. The more we named these experiences and their impact, the more the Spirit seemed to open up a way forward through conflict and change towards mutual understanding and communal renewal in worship.

In "Family of Origin" therapy we examine formative experiences within our family relationships as a means of coming to terms with our identity. It's based on the premise that your past history is the key to understanding your present behaviour. In a similar vein, I'm convinced we all have a "liturgy of origin" (or, perhaps, several liturgies of origin), and how we respond to liturgical conflict, change, and renewal is typically tied to such experiences.

What is your liturgy of origin? One shaped by intellectually satisfying sermons? If so, perhaps worship is primarily a homiletical event for you. Or is it one moved most by music? If so, worship for you may be more an appeal to the heart than the head. Understanding what moves you (and what does not) in worship, and why, is an important consideration in worship planning, celebration, and evaluation. Being aware of such personal tastes is a sign of health and maturity in one's worship life.

Congregations have a liturgy of origin. Just try making a change without knowing your community's liturgy of origin and see what happens! A little historical homework into a congregation's liturgy of origin can go a long way toward anticipating the possibilities and challenges of change and renewal.

The same can be said of denominations as a whole. A denomination has a liturgy of origin — a liturgical ethos which defines its identity and to which new developments must be meaningfully related if they are to succeed. Many American mega-church strategies will probably fail in most United Church congregations because they do not relate meaningfully to our quintessentially Canadian liturgical ethos. Congregations which have successfully brought about worship renewal have typically "transposed" the insights of other traditions and movements into a local United Church "key."

So the next time a conflict arises around worship in your congregation, don't panic or react defensively. Ask one another: "What is your liturgy of origin?" "What is our liturgy of origin?" Then be prepared to encounter rich and moving stories — and wait for the Spirit to show a way forward.

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