

Kimberly Bracken Long. *The Worshipping Body: The Art of Leading Worship*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. 130 pages. \$19.95

In *The Worshipping Body: The Art of Leading Worship*, Kimberly Bracken Long uses the metaphor as well as the physical reality of the human body to help those who lead worship to think seriously about what they do, why they do it, and what effect their actions have on the congregation. While this is addressed primarily to ordained ministers and students, the ideas and examples would also be useful for anyone who leads corporate worship. Making a careful distinction between technical excellence and effectiveness, Long argues that the goal of those who pray or preach or sing or dance or read scripture should be to evoke the worship of the people rather than to call attention to themselves.

Long acknowledges that different worshipping traditions value different styles of liturgical leadership. Nevertheless, she suggests, there are values that transcend style. When people are asked about the qualities they appreciate in a worship leader

you will hear things like presence, authenticity, warmth, grace, humor, reverence. ... As with good art or great music, we may not be able to explain what makes a good worship leader, but we often know it when we see it—and when we don't (6).

Doing things well is important, but doing so in a way that rings true is even more critical.

The book begins with some general observations about what it means to be called out from the body for the specialized task of leadership. As servants of the congregation, worship leaders need to recognize their own love of being up front, while recognizing that “even our best gifts can get in the way of making space to encounter the holy”(10).

In a second chapter, Long offers a thoughtful argument about the embodied nature of worship. Using examples from scripture and from her own life to underscore the obvious—but often overlooked—truth that faith is more than doctrinal affirmations, she makes clear the necessary connection between embodiment and worship. For example, she writes, when Cleopas and the other disciple recognized Jesus as he broke bread with them, “They realized Jesus’ identity in their very bodies—their eyes were opened; their hearts burned. They experienced Christ and learned firsthand that *the body is the locus of the experience of the holy*” (17).

Long organizes the rest of this concise volume around various parts of the body. In chapters centered on eyes, ears, mouth, hands, and feet, Long invites readers to consider the connection between the practical and theological implications of paying attention, using gestures to communicate, and moving from one place to another with dignity and grace. Regarding attentiveness, for example, she points out that the leader sets the tone. When the leader pays attention, it helps congregants know that they, too, should be attending to the liturgical action. A fidgety presider is a distraction. As she notes, “the first step in leading others to attentiveness is to know what to do when you are not doing anything” (46).

Throughout the book, Long gives evidence of a deep respect for and understanding of the ways that God reaches us through symbols as well as words. In a section on gesture at the Eucharistic table, she writes eloquently of the vast universe of meaning conveyed by breaking bread and pouring wine. “We can never explain it; all we can do, really, is act it out. And so we take the bread with humility and confidence and care, and we tear it. It should take some effort, this tearing of bread, for it is a body being broken”(83).

In a concluding chapter, entitled “The Heart: The Spirituality of the Presider,” Long returns to her initial insight that leading worship depends, ultimately, on the integrity and humility of the leader. Seeing each worship service as a journey and the leader as a guide, she

points out that “one cannot lead worship without worshiping” (113). Authentic, effective leaders must let go of trying to control, rather leading with love and respect for the worshiping body with whom they gather.

In reading this book, I often found myself nodding in agreement, thinking that it should be required reading for every seminarian, or anyone who will ever preside at Eucharist, baptisms, or any gathering where Christians pray together. I also found myself quibbling with one or another suggestion, which on reflection was more a matter of differing emphasis than of substance. Whether one agrees or not with every theological or even practical point, Kimberly Bracken Long has provided an important guidebook to leading worship with heart, mind, and body.

Deborah Sokolove

Director, Henry Luce III Center for the Arts and Religion at Wesley Theological Seminary  
Washington, D.C.