Beyond Words and Rituals: John Bell on Making Worship Meaningful in a Changing World

In a conversation during the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe's Worship Consultation in Frankfurt, Scottish hymnwriter and liturgist Rev. John L. Bell reflects on participation in worship, hospitality at life's turning points, and what European churches can learn from worship traditions around the world.

What makes worship meaningful? Is it the familiarity of well-established liturgies, the beauty of sacred music, or the carefully chosen words of a minister? Or does meaningful worship require something more: the active participation of a community, the freedom to express genuine emotions, and the willingness to encounter God through unfamiliar voices and traditions?

These questions lie at the heart of contemporary discussions about liturgical renewal, particularly as European churches seek to engage with societies in which traditional patterns of religious belonging are changing.

The Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) is holding its Worship Consultation in Frankfurt am Main from 2 to 5 November 2026. Organised jointly with the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau (EKHN), the consultation brings together representatives of Protestant churches to reflect on occasional services, blessings, and the Church's ministry at significant transitions in human life.

Among the contributors is Rev. John L. Bell, a minister of the Church of Scotland, hymnwriter, and member of the Iona Community. Known internationally for his work in congregational song and participatory worship, Bell co-founded the Wild Goose Resource Group, which has developed resources encouraging churches to rethink how worship is created and experienced.

In an interview during the consultation, Bell offered reflections shaped by decades of experience across different ecclesial and cultural contexts. A central concern emerged: worship must become something in which people genuinely participate, rather than something performed for them.

From Passive Listening to Active Participation

For Bell, one of the challenges facing Protestant liturgy is its historical dependence on spoken words and predetermined forms.

Tracing this tendency to the influence of Reformation traditions, particularly the liturgical arrangements associated with John Calvin in Geneva, Bell observed that worship has often been understood primarily through what the minister says and what the congregation hears.

Yet meaningful liturgy, he suggested, requires a much wider range of human expression.

Drawing on his experience of developing worship resources, Bell identified five important dimensions: sound, silence, movement, colour, and togetherness.

These elements invite worshippers to engage not only intellectually but also physically, emotionally, and communally. Lighting candles, moving within the worship space, sharing prayers, and allowing different voices to read Scripture are not simply decorative additions. They can change how a congregation understands its relationship to worship.

Instead of receiving a liturgy prepared entirely by others, members of the congregation begin to recognise themselves as participants in its creation and expression.

Bell argued that this change also requires ministers to trust the theological imagination of their congregations. He questioned the assumption that the most effective liturgies must always be prepared exclusively by ordained clergy. Rather, he advocated collaborative preparation in which laypeople explore biblical passages, raise questions, and contribute their own insights into how a worship service might unfold.

He illustrated this approach through the healing of the man born blind in John 9. While the narrative may initially appear straightforward, Bell recalled how a colleague with an architectural background drew attention to the different locations through which the story moves.

This observation opened new liturgical possibilities. The narrative could be presented through multiple voices, with movement and music marking its different stages. Instead of simply hearing the story read aloud, worshippers could experience something of its movement and drama. The congregation could then be invited to reflect on what it had discovered through this different encounter with Scripture.

Such an approach does not diminish the biblical text. Rather, it allows the text to engage the community more fully.

Bell offered another example from a recent Catholic Mass he attended in Brussels. Unlike the familiar arrangement of pews facing a sanctuary, worshippers sat in a circle, with the priest among them.

After reading the Gospel, the priest encouraged participants to discuss how its message might change their lives. People of different ages shared their reflections, while the priest welcomed their contributions before offering some additional theological context.

What impressed Bell was the trust expressed through this arrangement. The priest retained his particular liturgical responsibilities while recognising the experiences and insights of the congregation as valuable contributions to the encounter with Scripture.

The example points towards a significant ecclesiological question: can churches understand liturgy not merely as something entrusted to religious professionals, but as an expression of the faith of the whole worshipping community?

At Life’s Turning Points: Hospitality Before Familiarity

The importance of participation becomes particularly evident in occasional services such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals. While these have distinct theological meanings,

they often bring people into church buildings who have little connection with organised religion or who are unfamiliar with Christian liturgical practices.

For Bell, this places a particular responsibility on churches to make their worship understandable and welcoming.

Traditional liturgies, he observed, sometimes contain language, assumptions, and patterns of authority that are no longer readily understood by those attending. Simply expecting people to know how to behave, when to respond, or what a particular ritual signifies can unintentionally create distance between the Church and its visitors.

Bell therefore emphasised the importance of explaining what will happen during a service and why particular actions matter. But accessibility is not merely about providing instructions. It begins with genuine hospitality.

Recalling a Catholic funeral he had attended, Bell described how the priest explicitly welcomed those who did not belong to the Roman Catholic Church, acknowledging that their presence was valuable to the gathered community.

For Bell, such gestures can transform the atmosphere of a service. People who might otherwise feel uncertain or excluded are reassured that they genuinely belong in the gathering.

His reflections on weddings offered an equally practical example. In many church traditions, guests arrive, take their seats in orderly rows, and wait for the couple to enter. Bell suggested that the couple could instead greet guests personally at the entrance before the service begins.

This simple encounter creates a sense of community before the formal liturgy starts. The significance of the gesture lies not in its novelty but in its understanding of Christian hospitality: those gathered are not merely spectators at a ceremony but a community sharing in an important moment of life.

When Grief Must Be Allowed to Speak

Bell's reflections on funerals were particularly striking. While weddings celebrate a new beginning, funerals bring communities together in circumstances often marked by grief, uncertainty, and complicated emotions.

Bell argued that funeral liturgies must be honest about these realities. There can be a temptation, he suggested, to avoid expressions of sorrow, perhaps by choosing only uplifting music or avoiding words that might provoke tears. But Christian worship should not require mourners to conceal their grief.

As Bell asked, "If they can't cry in church, where can they cry?"

For him, the biblical tradition of lament provides an essential resource for funeral worship. The Psalms, with their expressions of sorrow, protest, fear, and trust, give language to experiences that ordinary speech may struggle to contain. Such language recognises that grief is not a failure of faith. It belongs within the life of the believing community.

Bell also raised the more difficult question of how churches should respond when the deceased person has caused suffering. Recalling a particularly challenging funeral, he explained that it would have been inappropriate to portray the deceased in entirely positive terms when those gathered were carrying painful memories.

Instead, he sought to acknowledge the suffering associated with the person's life while still entrusting the deceased to God's mercy. This approach resists the assumption that Christian funerals must either idealise the dead or ignore the experiences of those who mourn.

It also reveals an important pastoral dimension of liturgy: the words spoken in worship must be truthful to the experiences of the people gathered. For Bell, the Church's ministry at life's turning points requires more than the correct performance of established rites. It calls for attentiveness, sensitivity, and the courage to recognise the full complexity of human experience.

Beyond Europe's Familiar Traditions

When asked what European churches could learn from one another about liturgical renewal, Bell hesitated to offer a universal answer. He suggested that individual churches would need to identify what they could learn from their neighbours.

However, he was confident that European Christianity had much to discover through the worship practices of churches in other parts of the world.

Reflecting on visits to Nepal, South Africa, and Paraguay, Bell spoke appreciatively of the spontaneity and vitality he had encountered in congregational singing. His observations challenged the tendency of some European Protestant churches to treat a particular musical tradition as the default expression of Christian worship.

Bell was careful not to dismiss the pipe organ. "The organ's my favourite instrument," he said, "but it's not always the best." He insisted that musical choices should serve the character of the songs being sung, rather than force every musical expression into the same traditional pattern.

A folk tune should retain its folk character. A rhythmic song might be better accompanied by percussion that allows worshippers to experience its movement. The deeper issue is what Bell described as musical integrity: allowing different forms of music to communicate according to their own particular qualities.

His concern extends beyond instruments and musical styles to the wider question of cultural expression in worship. Bell referred to the Second Vatican Council's encouragement, within Catholic liturgical practice, of appropriate engagement with local languages, cultures, and artistic traditions.

In his view, churches in many parts of the world have embraced such possibilities with a freedom that European churches could learn from. He contrasted this vitality with churches in Great Britain whose buildings and worship arrangements, despite their

beauty, sometimes seem preserved in an earlier century. He described visiting churches that felt like “a theme park to the nineteenth century.”

Stained-glass windows, traditional language, fixed seating arrangements, and familiar patterns of congregational behaviour can all communicate a particular understanding of society. Bell’s concern was not that historical traditions should be discarded, but that churches should examine whether inherited forms continue to communicate meaningfully within contemporary life.

The question is especially relevant in societies where patterns of authority, communication, and community participation have changed considerably. For Bell, renewal may require churches to reconsider not only what they sing or say, but also how they inhabit their worship spaces.

He recalled worship experiences in South Africa in which the entire congregation participated in singing processions, rather than leaving movement and musical leadership primarily to a choir or clergy. Such practices illustrate an understanding of worship as something embodied and shared by the whole community. They also challenge European churches to ask whether established liturgical arrangements sometimes unintentionally restrict participation.

Renewal as a Question of Trust

Across the three themes of the conversation—participation in liturgy, hospitality at occasional services, and learning from the wider Christian world—a common conviction emerged.

Bell’s reflections suggest that liturgical renewal involves more than changing hymns, introducing new instruments, or revising established texts. It also concerns how churches understand the people who gather for worship and the role they are invited to play.

Do ministers trust members of their congregations to engage meaningfully with Scripture? Are visitors welcomed as valued participants rather than treated as outsiders unfamiliar with church customs? Can the grief, joy, cultural identities, and experiences of ordinary people find authentic expression within Christian worship?

Bell’s reflections suggest that these questions are fundamental to the future of liturgy. They also demonstrate that renewal need not be understood as a rejection of tradition. On the contrary, the biblical narratives, the Psalms, the Christian practice of hospitality, and the Church’s worldwide diversity provide rich resources for renewing worship.

The challenge lies in bringing these resources into genuine conversation with the experiences of contemporary communities. For European churches navigating changing patterns of religious belonging, Bell’s observations offer both encouragement and challenge.

There is room for beauty, silence, solemnity, and inherited ritual. But there must also be room for movement, laughter, lament, unfamiliar voices, and the creativity of those who are too often expected simply to observe.

Ultimately, the question of meaningful liturgy cannot be answered by examining worship books alone. It must also be asked of those gathered in the church: whether they understand what is happening, whether their experiences are acknowledged, and whether they recognise themselves as part of the worshipping community.

Bell’s reflections point towards a vision of liturgy that is not only performed faithfully but also shared generously—a living expression of faith in which the whole community is invited to take part.

This article is based on an interview with Rev. John L. Bell, conducted by Rev. Sam T. Rajkumar (CPCE) on 2 November 2026 in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, during the CPCE Worship Consultation.