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Celebrating Communion

Understanding the Worship Service

Our Reformed tradition understands that learning is a form of prayer. Faithfully and actively searching for greater understanding and insight is a profound and authentic act of praise; we love and worship God with our minds as well as our hearts and bodies. This worship resource integrates learning and worship in overt and intentional ways. While this service could be used any time, it might be especially useful as part of a World Communion celebration or a project for a confirmation class.

The order of this service corresponds to the pattern of worship in the *Book of Common Order* and to the narrative structure of the vision and call of the prophet in the opening verses of Isaiah 6.

Isaiah 6:1-4 - Adoration

Isaiah 6:5 - Confession

Isaiah 6:6-7 - Pardon

Isaiah 6:8 - Listening and Responding

However, the material can be easily modified to conform to the usual pattern of worship and the theological context of the local congregation.

The service is written to be led by two voices; however, it can be adapted to use more or fewer participants.

THE GATHERING

Prelude

Welcome and Call to Worship

Words of Introduction

Voice 1

This morning we gather on the first day of the week to praise God and to celebrate holy communion. In our worship, we join with people gathered around many tables in many churches and countries and of different traditions and denominations throughout the world.

Voice 2

Holy communion is a mystery. When we encounter a mystery, we do not give up thinking about it because we might never fully grasp it; instead we try to learn more, focus more intently on the topic, and pursue the matter more ardently. In place of (or in addition to) a sermon this morning, there will be brief reflections on aspects of the service so that our understanding of holy communion and the worship we offer to God will be enriched and deepened.

Voice 1

The Lord's Supper has been part of Christian worship since the night Jesus shared a meal

with his friends and followers and instructed them to “do this in remembrance of me.” The meal was an essential part of worship in the early church and preferred as an important component of weekly worship by many who reformed the church in the 16th century.

Voice 2

The sacrament we celebrate today is known by many names.

Some call it the “Lord’s Supper,” reminding us that this is an intimate meal instituted by Jesus wherein his friends and disciples are called to share fellowship and a meal with him.

Sometimes the celebration is known as “Holy Communion,” for in this feast we come to meet, or “commune,” with Christ who is present with us in the sacrament.

The oldest name Christians have for the feast we share today is “Eucharist,” which simply means “thanksgiving.” This name for the meal emphasizes the deep gratitude we have for the grace and sustenance we receive from God.

Whatever name we use, this is a meal of hope and of joy shared with Christ and those whom God loves and those who love God.

Voice 1

The Presbyterian Catechism says that, “All those who love the Lord Jesus and belong to any Christian church may participate. We come to the Lord’s table not because any individual goodness gives us a right to come, but because Christ welcomes us. He loved us, gave himself for us, and invites us to receive his body and blood to our spiritual nourishment and growth in grace.” (*A Catechism for Today*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, Question 84)

Voice 2

Today our service begins as it always does: with singing. This is our first *corporate* act of worship. Psalm 95 reads,

“O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise...let us come into God’s presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!”

In joining our voices into one voice, we are transformed into the united body of Christ. John Chrysostom, an early Christian, wrote,

“As soon as the singing of the hymn begins all the voices in the house are united and gathered into beautiful singing. Young and old, rich and poor, men and woman, slave and free sing the same song...together one choir is formed...the inequality that existed in the world was put aside, forming a single choir with equal voices; the whole earth imitating heaven.”

Voice 1

Prayers of adoration, confession, and the assurance of pardon follow the gathering hymn.

In many ways our opening prayers are acts of memory.

In the prayers of adoration we remember the goodness, fidelity, love, grace and mystery of God.

After recalling God’s goodness, we remember our own failing and how we have missed the mark and sinned against God and one another and have failed to be who we have been called to be.

The assurance of pardon reminds us that we are forgiven, that we are loved, that we are set free and given a new start by God who is “slow to judge and quick to forgive.”

Let us join our voices together by singing our opening hymn.

Hymn

Prayers of Approach

(Prayers for this and all Sunday morning worship are available on the Presbyterian website.)

Adoration

Confession

Silent Confession

Assurance of Pardon

Focus on Youth and on Faith

A service like this might be an opportunity to invite children and youth to remain in the sanctuary so they can be participants in the whole service. Regularly inviting children and youth to participate in the planning and leadership of worship is an important part of formation for lifelong service in the church. Some congregations put tables in the sanctuary where young children can gather while the service proceeds. If the congregation often has a “children’s time,” this

might be a good opportunity to talk about baptism and how each of them is special and precious to God and welcome to join in the family meal.

Hymn

WE LISTEN FOR GOD'S WORD

Words of Explanation

Voice 2

Whenever families gather for celebrations, especially if there are many generations present, they always tell important family stories.

The same is true when the Christian family gathers to worship. The readings we are about to hear from the Bible are our family stories - told and retold and passed from one generation to the next. They refresh our understanding of who God is, who we are, where we come from, and where we ought to be going. "The Bible has been given to us by the inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life" (*Living Faith* 5.1). Biblical readings and stories teach, build community, inform our faith, inspire trust, and equip us for service.

Voice 1

The first reading is from the First Testament that records the story of God and God's people before the birth of Christ. Next in the order of readings is a psalm. The book of Psalms is the hymnbook of the Jewish people, so we often sing or chant these poems as beautiful acts of praise.

There are often two readings from the Second Testament. One reading is from the book of Acts, or the letters written to the earliest communities of Christ's followers. And finally, there is a reading about the life and teaching of Jesus as recorded in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John.

This morning the readings echo themes of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Prayer for Illumination

Holy Scriptures

Worship leaders may wish to introduce each reading with a few sentences of explanation that pick up the themes of the selected readings.

Some suggested texts to consider:

Exodus 16:4-7a / Isaiah 25:6-9

Psalms 34:1-8 / Psalm 23

1 Corinthians 11:23-25 / verses from Acts 2

Luke 24:23-25

The Sermon

While this order of service does not provide a sermon, most worshippers desire a deeper awareness of the presence of God. The primary purpose of the sermon is not to instruct us in the content of our faith (facts about Bible stories), but to deepen our recognition of the very real presence of Christ in our midst. Out of the preacher's sermon on a passage of scripture should emerge a sense of "good news" for our time and contexts.

Hymn

SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION

Words of Explanation

Voice 2

We have sung and prayed about God's holiness and fidelity. We have confessed and have been reconciled with God and one another. We have heard readings from scripture, the written word of God, that point to Christ.

Now we are ready to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

Voice 1

"In breaking bread and drinking wine Jesus told us to remember him. In this action...Christ offers himself to us and we present ourselves to him in worship and adoration." (*Living Faith* 7.7.1)

"In Holy Communion Christ places his table in this world to feed and bless his people. The Holy Spirit so unites us in Christ that in receiving the bread and wine in faith we share in his body and blood." (*Living Faith* 7.7.2)

Soon we will all be invited (to come forward and) to share in this meal and mystery of thanksgiving and communion and receive bread and wine.

We will present our gifts to God in the gathering of our offerings. We will see our gifts to God placed on the table with the gifts of bread and wine that God offers to us.

We will pray the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving (#564

in the *Book of Praise*) together over the gifts. The presiding minister usually speaks most of the prayer alone; however, it is said on behalf of the whole congregation.

Voice 2

The communion prayer first offers praise for God's goodness to us in creation and history and gives thanks for the gifts of Christ and his life and the sacrament we celebrate. Finally, we will pray for the Holy Spirit to come upon us and upon the gifts of bread and wine so that we and the gifts may be made Christ's true body in the world.

After the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving we will hear the story of the first celebration of this feast. We will hear how Jesus did four things:

- he took bread and wine;
- he gave thanks;
- he broke the bread;
- and he gave the bread and wine to his followers to eat and drink.

The celebrant will repeat these four actions and will take, bless, break and give the bread and wine in response to the command of Christ to "do this in remembrance of me."

Gathered around the table we catch a glimpse of what life in community with God and with each other is meant to be. The meal anticipates and displays the coming of God's joyful reign of trust, hope, love, justice and peace.

Voice 1

It is important that we never let the private and personal devotional aspects of the sacrament eclipse the social implications of the Lord's Supper. There are very real, practical and social consequences of this celebration that go beyond these walls and this day.

The theologian Daniel L. Migliore writes, "Christians cannot eat and drink at this table – where all are welcome and none goes hungry or thirsty – and continue to condone any form of discrimination or any social or economic policy that results in hunger or other forms of deprivation." (*Faith Seeking Understanding, An Introduction to Christian Theology*, pg. 225) Likewise, we cannot drink at this table and not concern ourselves with the health and wellbeing of the human body and of the world. We cannot gather around the table where all are welcome and be

satisfied with any form of discrimination or exclusion that prohibits others from making full claims on life. We cannot freely receive the living bread, like the freed slaves from Egypt received manna from heaven, and not seek the freedom of those who are enslaved by any power that stifles life. We cannot receive grace and not share it.

Voice 2

The bread and wine are signs of the presence, generosity and goodness of God, spread before us. They nourish us as we look for and work to establish God's reign in this world and in our times.

"Let us taste and see that the Lord is good."

The Invitation

Presentation of the Gifts

Hymn

Offering Prayer and Great Prayer of Thanksgiving (#564 in the *Book of Praise*)

The Lord's Prayer

The Communion

Prayer after Communion

Hymn

Benediction

The complete text of this service is available as a Word document on The Presbyterian Church in Canada website.

HYMN SUGGESTIONS

- # 527 Eat this bread
- # 530 I come with joy
- # 534 All who hunger, gather gladly
- # 543 Here, O Lord, I see thee
- # 546 Here is bread: here is wine
- # 548 Let us break bread together
- # 556 Now let us from this table rise
- # 775 Sent forth by your blessing