

What Every Congregation Ought to Know About Worship:
Planning, Preparing, Participating
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Christian public worship is an activity of the entire assembly gathered about the Word, the feast of the Lord's Table, the waters of Baptism, in praise and lamentation, for the glorification of God and the sanctification of all that is creaturely, Liturgical worship is both prayer *and* ritual action (rite), receiving *and* responding; it is radically dependent on the promises of God, the riches of Christian tradition, and the present activity of the Holy Spirit. Thus it asks of us "full, consciousness and active" participation. Growing together into such participation invites the gifts of the whole congregation, not merely of the leaders. Authentic and vital worship requires being educated into the forms of prayer, the congregation's singing practices, the cycles of time and narrative, and into the primary symbols of faith. Every congregation desiring to worship God in Christ more deeply must both "know about" the basic forms, symbols and practices, and "know how" to celebrate as church the mystery and grace of God. All this is always culturally embedded and embodied in local and historical traditions. Yet, all local and historic "ways of worship" are continually subject to the mystery and grace of God's continual self-communication. Spontaneity requires formation; adequate formation invites ever-deepening levels of participation and improvisation.

Some essentials for every congregation are:

1. A working knowledge of Christian origins and formative traditions (texts and practices)
2. Familiarity with the basic "structures" or patterns of Christian worship:
the so-called "canon": --Christian initiation (baptism'/confirmation'/renewal)
--the Holy Meal (eucharist and love feast, or "agape")
--daily prayer (morning, evening, night)
--the cycles of time (Christian week, year, and day)
--the "pastoral offices" (rites of passage): burial, marriage, anointing, ordination, and others such as commissioning
3. Familiarity and growing knowledge of hymnal, worship books, and related worship materials
4. Capacity to participate in the basic elements and forms of various types of service: including how to prepare oneself for such participation {e.g. prayer forms, visual symbol, readings, creeds/affirmations, sermon, litanies, ritual gestures, blessings, communing, singing....}
5. Appreciation for the diversity of social/cultural backgrounds, convictions, life experiences, "aesthetic perception" of those with whom we worship (mutual respect and understanding)
6. Appreciation for and willingness to enter into the "non-verbal" dimensions of worship
7. Conviction that what Jesus Christ "said and did" is now a *present* "saying and doing," and that these point always to God's future for the world, to a "new creation."

These "essentials" are ideal, and rarely found fully developed in our local congregations. Yet when congregations come alive to the mystery and grace of worship, these points (and more) come into play. They have to do with identity, authenticity, vitality, and with relevance to human existence, and hence, to human culture. Coming alive in public worship requires awareness of both theology and culture, focused in the particularities of this particular people's history and what influences them. Dom Gregory Dix, the great Anglican scholar once observed that the "study of liturgy is always and everywhere a study of the lives of women and men."