PLANNING WORSHIP

Your church wants to explore more contemporary worship services. Or you’re starting a new worshiping community. Where do you begin?

This is a suggested process for churches to follow:

1. First, spend time learning about our worship traditions. All worship participates in a long tradition that goes back to our Jewish ancestors. There are reasons why we do the things that we do in worship that you need to know so that you can be within the trajectory of the tradition while also being contemporary with your particular congregation.


   b. Consider the purpose of worship. What is it that makes for good worship?

   c. Understand what is unique about Reformed Worship. All good worship, regardless of musical or liturgical style, is contemporary, according to the principles of Reformed worship.

   d. Consider the overall order of worship, where it starts and where it ends. Each order of worship implicitly shapes faith and our way of being Christian in the world. Understand the two basic historical forms of the order of worship that inform Reformed practice today and examine what kind of faith they seek to shape.

   e. Know what each part of worship intends to do.

   f. Consider following a lectionary or a sermon plan based on the leadership’s discernment of how the community is being called to grow in faith at this time in its history.

2. Once you have a good understanding of what worship is and what values Reformed worship seeks to embody as a whole, and what each part of worship is intended to do, you’re ready to start planning a particular worship service, keeping in mind that good liturgy moves us more deeply into God’s heartbeat for the world.

   a. Start with the scriptures for the service since it is at the center of Reformed worship. Ask:

      • What is God saying to the church through this scripture?
      • What themes and images will the preacher highlight?
      • Where in the service does this Word happen best? These are parts of the service that will be high points with regard to ritual word and action. For example, if the gospel reading is the good Samaritan passage, then the announcements, prayers of intercession, minute for mission, and/or charge may be the place in the service where you pray for those in need and invite congregants to serve others who need their help. If the pastor is preaching on Psalm 51, the confession of sin is where this Word reverberates in the service. If the sermon will focus on praising God, musical praise needs to be especially prominent.
• What will not be highlighted in the scripture that other liturgy can bring out as another element to have in play? This can add another dimension to the Word's happening, like adding texture to a work of art.

• How can the other liturgy work to invite us to live into and embody the Word? How should we gather to hear this Word, respond in thanksgiving to it, and live it out in the world? (Note that these are the four major parts of the traditional order of worship.)

b. How will the service flow? If you were to chart it as dramatic action, like the plot of a play, what will be its high point? What other high points will there be? While all flows out of the deep well of Living Word, how this liturgically happens will vary. It will not always be the sermon. It could be a commissioning, or baptism, or the sending hymn. Pay attention to the ritual language and action embodying what it needs to do at these parts particularly.

c. Similarly, consider how the rhythm of the overall service will go. Will it start out with quick joyful praising rhythms and move through ever-slowing plodding to an agonizing slamming into the silence of full stop, as on Palm/Passion Sunday? Or will it start with a slow steady death-knell prelude and then move to the sudden Easter announcement, “Christ is risen!”, followed by an exciting, bombastic rhythm or a rhythm that slowly dawns on us as it grows in awareness?

d. How will the parts of the service lead into and out of the high points? How does each part relate to what has gone before and what will come after?

e. The different elements of worship are not just to be in service to the sermon. Nor are they items to check off an agenda. They have their own integrity even as they serve the whole of a service’s flow. We praise God because God is God and worthy of praise. We pray for the world because we are the body of Christ, ordained with our baptism into the royal priesthood of Christ who prays for us. Make sure that each part of the order of worship is functioning the way it needs to at that point in the service. For example, are we calling for the Spirit to illumine us as we listen to scripture, or are we asking that God accept our words? Is each part of the liturgy doing what it needs to do?

f. Consider what other things are happening that may be out of the ordinary—i.e. commissioning a mission team or teachers, Memorial Day, graduation, etc. Human events, while not to eclipse God, do factor into our plans. Seek to bring such things appropriately before God. Make sure that God is the primary focus under which all human events occur, not vice versa. The idolatry of nationalism does not belong front and center in church, for example. However, we can thank God for the sacrifice of those who gave their lives for divine principles of freedom and justice: that is in accord God’s Sovereign Rule. So why not mention this in the prayers of the people?

g. In choosing music, what tone are you hoping to set at that point in the service—somber, joyful, reflective? Will this piece of music do this? Work with your musicians’ gifts in this area.
3. Meet with your worship team to plan worship far enough in advance so that all can bring their gifts to the process and enlist others’ gifts. Make sure it is clear who is doing what and how all will be coordinated and communicated.

4. Continually assess how worship is going, what is going well, and what could use some reconsideration. What criteria will you use to determine this, and are these criteria in accord with the gospel? Consider using theological norms for good worship to do this.