

OUR ORDER OF WORSHIP

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The order of worship that centuries of Christians have adapted from the pattern of Jewish worship is an ancient order that is intended to move us more deeply into intimate communion with God in Christ. There is a reason why we do what we do when we do it. Understanding this structure may help you move more fully aware into the divine presence as you worship.

WE ENTER

To Greet One Another in Love

The church is not an institution but the gathered community of faith. “Wherever two or more are gathered in my name,” Jesus said, “there am I in the midst of them.” The church is a gathering of people who need God and are interested in participating in the journey of faith in Jesus Christ, the Way. When we gather together in worship, we are watching the body of Christ assemble like Ezekiel’s dry bones coming together in the resurrection power of God’s Holy Spirit. We should greet one another in love like family, for even if we haven’t met, in Christ we are brothers and sisters, children of God. As we come together, there may be announcements, instructions regarding the service, family news.

To Be Still and Know that God is God / Prelude

A musical prelude provides a way of entering into a more meditative, receptive mood to examine our hearts as we prepare to meet our Maker. The prelude is like a curtained door into another place where we can meet God. Times of silence in worship are for your individual prayer and meditation. The prelude is a time to get quiet in your soul to prepare yourself to meet God in worship. Open yourself to God and ask God to speak during worship as you prepare to give God glory.

Entrance in Light

In some churches, acolytes process up the aisle to light the candles on the table. This is to symbolize the entrance of Jesus Christ, the light of the world, into our midst as we gather together. Some churches don’t have acolytes, but the lit candles remind us of the presence of Christ that precedes us and is waiting for us.

Call to Worship

This is usually a brief responsive reading that basically says, “Hey, let’s worship God!” It is God’s invitation to enter into the divine presence. The word worship comes from an old English term that was not originally religious in connotation. Worship simply meant “to ascribe honor to something or someone because of its/their ultimate importance.” This is what we do when we worship God.

The call to worship calls us to leave our daily cares behind to focus on what's really important—God, the Creator of all; Jesus Christ, the divine and eternal Word; and the Spirit which binds us all together as brothers and sisters yoked in Christ.

It is often responsive in form so that one person calls, and there is a response. This represents God's call to us and our response-ability to respond to the divine. Though the words may be from human beings, it is ultimately God (through even the likes of people like us) who calls us into right relationship, God whose loving call initiates our response.

Hymn(s) of Praise

We enter into God's presence delighting in the glory of the Lord and reveling in the humbling notion that the Almighty actually wants to be in relationship with us. So we sing praise with all we've got (even if that's a little out of tune), just enjoying God for who God is. As we open up the pathways of breath to sing praise, we make space for the Spirit breath to fill us.

CONFESSION OF SIN AND RESPONSE

Call to Confession

Even as we praise God and encounter the the Lord's Spirit/breath, we realize there are impediments that keep us from our best desires to worship. God loves us enough to call us to confess whatever gets in the way of having a good relationship with the Holy One of Perfect Love. When someone wrongs us, we have the responsibility of calling it to their attention so that the relationship that has been harmed can be restored and healed. If we fail to say anything and just ignore them instead, we are not exhibiting love. A call to confession is a call to further love, which God does with a reassurance of divine good intentions toward us so that we're not afraid to confess our shortcomings in the light of God's love.

Confession of Sin

Sin is not just what we've done wrong, though committing sins (wrongdoing) is the result of sin. Rather, sin is a *condition* in which we fall short of God's hopes for us and in which we are separated from God. It is a state in which it is impossible to make amends on our own; we are caught by the recognition of sin and our inability to set things right. The only thing we can do is turn to Christ and ask that he forgive and conquer sin for us in our current situation.

Sin is both individual and social in nature. Even though we don't want or mean to, we sin just by belonging to certain groups who sin against others. Sin is complex and inescapable. So Presbyterians are big on having confessions of sin in almost every worship service since the greatest sin may be the unwillingness to admit that we are sinful.

Because sin is corporate in nature, as well as individual, we say a corporate prayer together for the sin we live in and sins we commit as groups; we also have time for silent prayer to confess our individual sin and sins and to offer up our shortcomings before God

so that we might be drawn closer to God, live more in accord with the Lord's good desires for humanity, and be transformed more and more into the likeness of Christ.

Assurance of Pardon

As we confess our shortcomings and God offers us the assurance that in Jesus Christ—who lived, died, and was raised to show us the power of God's love that conquers the power of sin—we are forgiven and loved regardless of what we have done in the past. We have the assurance that we are continually being made new into the Image of Christ. The slate is wiped clean and we can live in hope toward the future without being enslaved to our past failures. In Christ, we have the power to work with God's Spirit who is continually making all things in accord with the divine purpose.

Response

Because the assurance of pardon in Christ is such good news, we've got to respond to the message of God's love with joy and thanksgiving. Usually we do this in song that comes bursting forth with full-throttle praise or reflective wonder.

Passing of the Peace

This is an ancient greeting of brothers and sisters in Christ. After the preliminary entrance rites in which we enter into God's presence, we greet one another with the peace of Christ as common forgiven sinners. As we are forgiven, so we forgive. This is also a good time to reconcile with those family members who drove us crazy trying to get to church on time, church members with whom we have tensions, or people we're not so happy to see. What is acknowledged as most important between us at this time in the service is the peace of Christ that passes all understanding (and misunderstanding!).

The peace may also come at other times in the service and function in different ways. A passing of the peace before the offering and communion, for example, is an opportunity to reconcile with our brother or sister before we present our gift at the offering. Regardless of where it comes in the service and how it functions, the passing of the peace stresses what the community has in common—the grace of God in Christ that holds us all in communion with one another regardless of how we feel about it.

TO HEAR A WORD FROM THE LORD

When we are truly sorry, we listen to what it is the person we have wronged would have us do to make things better between us. After the time of confession and assurance that we all live as forgiven sinners in the light of Christ, we move deeper into relationship with God by hearing the Word of the Lord.

God's Word comes to us in many ways—through scripture, special music, sermons. The words spoken are quite human, including those of scripture, yet God chooses to speak through them. Listen for God's eternal Word addressing you with good news about the Lord's love for you and all people among all the human words.

Presbyterians believe the Word is central to our faith; hence, we put the service of the Word right in the middle of our service.

Prayer for Illumination

This is a prayer for the Spirit to open our lives to really hear God's Word among human words. Without the Spirit to help us discern God's voice, the words that we hear are just a bunch of dead letters that cannot adequately convey the living, transformative nature of the Word of God.

Scripture

Since before the time of Christ, the Jewish tradition, which Jesus participated in, has had a list (a lectionary) of appropriate readings (lections) for daily prayer services. The Christian church continued this tradition, though the lectionary was often not used by revival preachers from the nineteenth century on in the United States. Shaped by both revival and liturgical traditions, your church may or may not use the New Revised Common Lectionary, which is a three-year list of an Old Testament, Psalm, Gospel, and Epistle reading for each Sunday and special holy days. When the three years are up, we start over again with Year A. What the lectionary does is help us experience the broad sweep of God's salvific work over the course of the church year. The lections often correspond to the different seasons of the year, which also determines the different colors we use on the fabric arts present in worship. Sometimes the lections are designed to run continuously through a book of the Bible to help form our faith through one particular Biblical book.

Since Psalms were originally sung, the psalm may be chanted or sung. Lections may be used elsewhere in the service in an appropriate place. For example, the psalm is often the basis of the call to worship. Sometimes the epistle reading for the day makes a good affirmation of faith. Those churches who do not follow a lectionary follow whatever the pastor discerns needs to be preached from scripture. Other churches may choose to follow the Reformation's *lectio continua* tradition of reading through a book of the Bible and preaching on its various sections.

Anthem

God's Word can come to us in a variety of ways—not just through scripture and preaching. God speaks through many means, including music. Indeed, many people say God speaks best to them through the music of the church.

Having a choir or band of instruments isn't about good musicians putting on a superb recital in the middle of the service, which is why applause isn't appropriate for anyone but God in a worship service. We are not being entertained by a musical interlude. Of course, sometimes we burst into applause as a way of expressing thanks for the Spirit that has moved us, but we need to be careful that worship is not perceived as us getting something, but about giving ourselves to God in praise and prayer and service.

Sometimes the anthem is done as an offertory, an offering of our gifts in thanksgiving for all God's gifts to us. The choir is intended to be representative of the congregation's voices rising in praise or petition to God. Similarly, God speaks to us through the music of the choir. So when the choir sings, the people become instruments—instruments of the congregation and/or instruments of God's Spirit blowing through them to sing the good news.

Because each piece of music functions differently, the choir's anthem may be more appropriate elsewhere in the service, but if it functions to expound upon the Word, it will be placed here in the service.

Sermon

Though spoken through a person, we are to hear the sermon as God speaking to us. Thus, some sermons begin with the Triune ascription: "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Preaching is the announcement of God's good news in Christ who invites us to participate in the ongoing activity of God at work in the world to bring about redemption, not only for us, but for all of creation. The sermon is usually based upon one or more scripture readings and unfolds the Bible in such a way that we see how God is continuing to speak to us today in ways that are similar to those experienced by our ancestors of the faith. Basically, the sermon is God's dynamic, eternal Word spoken to us in such a way that we might hear what God has to say to us and be encouraged to follow the Lord in faith.

TO RESPOND IN JOYFUL SERVICE

God has spoken, so we respond. All of the following are our grateful responses to hearing God speak to us. We affirm our faith, give ourselves to God and others, pray for the world, and give thanks and praise that God continues to speak.

Affirmation of Faith

The affirmation of faith is when we declare what it is we believe. We have faith as a result of God's Word. As Paul writes, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing the Word of God." This faith is not just our individual belief, but that of the community that nurtures faith. Thus, the affirmation may be a creed of the ancient church or a modern statement of faith that is a consensus of what the church believes. We stand as a way of saying, "This is where I stand," and as a way of standing in continuity with the people of God of ages past, even if it means we're martyred like some of them were.

Hymn

This is usually a hymn of reflection in which we pledge ourselves to the Lord. It may serve as an affirmation of faith or precede it.

Reception of New Members

It is God who brings people to us; we just receive them in celebration and promise to help them along the journey of faith. At this point in the service, we baptize and/or confirm new members with ancient rituals that transfer our citizenship into the Kingdom of God's sovereign rule over all things. (For more on baptism, ask the pastor for other resources.) We also receive new members by transfer of church letter. In the ancient church, Christians who moved or traveled were given letters of introduction to admit them into other Christian assemblies, important during times of persecution. Receiving members by transfer of letter also indicates our common fellowship as

baptized believers in the universal church of Christ Jesus the Lord. We continue this practice today.

Minute for Mission

This is news of how we can get involved in responding to and spreading the good news of God's love through the various missions of the church. It's not just asking-for-money time; it's a way of telling people how their offerings are furthering the gospel and offering them the opportunity to give of their time, talents, and money to advance God's sovereign reign on earth. Church announcements may occur during this time, and placing them within worship helps us know which announcements are God's calls to further commitment in Christ's work of redeeming the world. The minute for mission may be omitted or be switched with the prayer of intercession.

Prayer of Intercession

Belief isn't just affirmation; it's also action. Saying "I believe" means we care enough to do something as a result of our belief. Thus, the first thing we do is pray—for our world, the church, other people. The prayer is our prayer as a church. One person may pray for us, but we are all praying together as one in our hearts, continuing Christ's ministry of prayer for the world.

Offering

This is the time when we give ourselves, all that we are, and all that we have, to God's service. As a symbol of power and of what is value to us, we make an offering of money to help others and promote the gospel. During the time of musical reflection (known as the offertory), we are also encouraged to think about ways we can give of ourselves in what we do everyday to help out with God's project of healing the world. The choir may sing during this time as their offering to God and to help us offer ourselves to God's ways in the world. Or they just may flat-out praise God since offering all we are in service to God is an offering of thanksgiving in response to all God does for us in Christ.

Doxology/Song of Praise

As we offer our gifts for God's service, we praise God for letting us have use of all the resources the Lord has provided for us, and we praise God for the opportunity to serve on God's behalf. The Doxology is an ancient chorus of praise with a vision of joining all the created beings of all times and places who forever sing praise to God. (Imagine joining the grand chorus of praise ringing through all of creation.)

Prayer of Thanksgiving

This is a prayer that thanks God for being who God is: eternal provider and self-giving lover of all. The first responsive section ("The Lord be with you... It is right to give our thanks and praise") is from one of the church's earliest liturgies. It is also the first part of the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving in the communion liturgy.

When we have communion, we go right into the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving with the same words. Here the prayer is longer, giving thanks to God for who God is, giving thanks for Christ, and asking for the Spirit's presence so that we might commune

with God at this anticipatory covenant meal of the Kingdom. As we offer ourselves, God offers Godself to nourish us to go forth to care for the world. The offering and God's self-offering in the Lord's Supper reminds us that life in God is one great big gift exchange.

The Lord's Prayer

This follows the Prayer of Thanksgiving because it was part of the early, early church's communion liturgy. Even as we praise God, we pray for others, for only when we're in communion with others can we be in communion with God. The Lord's prayer is also one of the tradition's closest links to Jesus Christ whose prayer helps us be in communion with God through its focus on what's important: praising God, straining forward in anticipation of God's will and new order that ultimately rules the earth, asking for the bread of heaven to sustain us, asking for forgiveness, recognizing the need to forgive others, praying for deliverance from the things that destroy true life, and acknowledging that God is God forever. It's a great prayer to really pray, not just recite, at any time. Sometimes the Lord's Prayer comes at the end of the prayer of intercession.

TO GO FORTH TO SERVE

Hymn

We go forth to serve God in all of life, confident in our hope in God, singing as we go, come what may.

Charge

These are the final words with which we are charged to be faithful ministers of Christ in the world we're going back into. The word "charge" has several appropriate meanings and images that apply to this part of worship: (1) to fill or furnish a thing with the quantity, as of fuel, that it is fitted to receive; (2) to supply with electrical energy; (3) to fill an atmosphere with other matter in a state of diffusion or solution; (4) to lay a command or injunction upon; (5) to instruct authoritatively, like a judge does a jury; (6) to ascribe responsibility for; (7) to list or record as a debt; (8) to impose or ask for a price.

Benediction

The minister raises hands over the congregation to simulate laying hands on each person's head. Biblically, laying hands on people was done in prayer for healing and at ordination as a way of symbolizing God's giving of power to accomplish our ministry. We have hands laid on us in baptism, ordaining us all as prophets and priests in Christ, the King's, behalf. The words invoke God's blessing upon each of us.

Postlude

We exit through the curtain of music in which we came. Like God's omnipresent Spirit, the music that draws us into God's presence and undergirds the worship experience also goes with us as a morale booster and a spring of joy as we depart to blend

the work of our individual lives with that of the chorus of praise continually offered up to the ruler of all creation.

Departure to Serve

We go forth into the world to serve God in our daily lives as a continuation of our worship so that our work is our worship until such time as the assembly gathers again.