

## Worship session 2: Structuring an Act of Worship

Hello, and welcome to the second of our sessions on Worship, replacing for now our planned Worship Roadshows. My name is Lindsey, and I am the Mission and Training Officer for the Eastern Synod of the United Reformed Church.

This session is entitled “Structuring an act of worship” and is intended to give you some initial pointers on where to start when putting a service together.

In the first session Paul gave us a brief theological grounding for why we worship and why it is important: it helps to bear these things in mind when putting a service together.

### **What is the purpose of worship? Recap**

The number one reason for us gathering together is **to give God his worth: it should therefore be reverent, holy, and full of praise**. We are looking for a way to enable a connection between God and those of us who are gathered; to facilitate an encounter. It should be transformational, an inevitability if we are encountering God, and of course relevant to people’s lives now, speaking prophetically into their present.

### **Introduction**

We should not underestimate the importance of our role when planning and delivering worship: we are shaping the prayers of the congregation; we are selecting the texts and themes from God’s Word that He will speak through.

We should also think carefully about who is joining us in worship. Despite all that we don’t know about them, consider what we do know: each one of them is bringing their whole self to worship: body and soul, brain and heart, doubt and belief, sadness and joy. How can we acknowledge all those things in the worship we lead?

Before rushing into planning a service – tempting especially perhaps when we have been called at the last minute - Prayer, Bible study, and this consideration of the congregation are all important. These things will provide a spiritual foundation for everything that follows.

### **Where do I start?**

So where should we start? How do we make decisions about what happens in our service, and in what order? Do we go for what is simplest, for what we always do, for what we think the church members want, or for what we think visitors might want? Are we led by what the leadership would normally do, or by who we happen to have available to help that Sunday? Are we trying to keep people happy, encourage spiritual growth, reach out to outsiders, enable people to grow their gifts?

Our concerns about all of these things can befuddle us, but considering them prayerfully will inevitably help us to put our service together.

We first need to decide on our theme or our guiding text. It then helps to decide on the order of the service, which we will look at in the next slide. From there we can make lists of

the details, including who else will be taking part and what gifts they will bring, the hymns and readings and other elements. While not always possible, all of this is best done as a team.

### **A framework**

Many of our churches follow an established worship pattern. If you are visiting another church they will often send you their 'normal' order of service. It is sensible to start your planning there.

Look for the theological or spiritual flow in the pattern you have seen or been given. Any major changes in the pattern, if they are needed, should be thoughtfully done and preferably with the collaboration (or at least the consent) of others.

Some feel that a given structure can be too constraining. Constraints, however, can help with creativity: some limitations or boundaries are needed within which to work, and they often provide a wise framework to build on.

If the church you're arranging worship for doesn't have a formally established pattern, think for a moment about the implicit pattern that might be there: what normally happens?

There are various models or guides available that can help your planning. We will look at a 'classic model' shortly. No structure is right or wrong biblically: getting it right is not about what order you put things in, but about how effectively you give worth to God, and how the service helps others to engage with him meaningfully.

### **The key elements**

The four key elements identified in Isaiah 6 in the introductory session are praise, confession, forgiveness and the sending out. In practice you will have many more than this. The feel of the service and its impact will change according to where you lay the importance and emphasis: if your emphasis were on these 4 things what would that feel like to the congregation? Where do you want your emphasis to be?

In this slide we can see the standard elements of a familiar service:

There are many more elements here than the four identified in Isaiah 6, the most noticeable being the importance of the Word, but they group together in a similar pattern. The service begins with worship and praise, it flows into our confession and pardon in readiness to receive His word, and ends with us being sent out into the world refreshed and renewed. While to some people this pattern may seem over familiar, or unexciting, it undoubtedly has a flow to it, and proves a useful framework to build from. From this there are endless variations. Sometimes the scripture readings will be separated; some speakers like to break their talk up into two or more shorter sections; some leaders like to have several songs or hymns of praise all together at the beginning of a service, or in the middle, or at the end; some will include some form of presentation, or drama, artwork or music from members of the congregation at some point; still others may wish to include someone's testimony.

It is also worth noting that this conventional order of worship does not dictate your style of leadership, or what creative responses could be used to bring it to life. This same order, with variations, is used the world over with congregations of 500 or of 15, regardless of cultural, social or economic difference. It is universal enough to be considered a classic.

### **The specifics**

Once you have your framework, you can begin to flesh it out.

Most people start with the biblical text or texts that they are going to use, whether that has been decided by the church calendar, the lectionary, or your own calling. Bearing in mind that text or theme, you can then begin to list the specific Biblical texts, hymns or songs, and occasions for prayer. In this series Sessions 5 and 6 will focus on prayer and Session 7 will look at ways to use the lectionary, so we won't go into further detail here. You might also want to start making a list of who else will be taking part, thinking about their strengths and gifts and how they could contribute.

For some, the way the church is decorated can be important for reinforcing the theme of the service and to reach out to more visual members of the congregation. Using props, such as coloured cloth or objects, or using the projection of images can be helpful. You may want musical contributions other than congregational songs or hymns, such as a choral item, vocal solo, instrumental solo, percussion, or recorded music. Some worship comes alive with the use of flags or movement. We will be talking more about creative ways to worship in Session 6.

It might be helpful at this point to guard against a couple of common pitfalls: the first is, out of enthusiasm, to squeeze in as many exciting and new features as you can; the second is to try and cater for what you think are all the different preferences of the members -or groups of members-of the congregation: both have the potential to result in a bit of a shambles and obstruct the message. Similarly, using technology or props that you're not familiar with. Keeping things simple, particularly if you're new to leading worship, will give your message the smoothest passage.

### **The flow of the service**

One reason to start with the order of worship is to protect you from making choices that don't flow well in the service. Squeezing in your favourite hymn, for example, is tempting, but may be counter-productive if it gets in the way of the message.

There are songs and hymns that are moving and meaningful regardless of their positioning, but many become so much more powerful and effective when carefully placed, perhaps following a particular prayer and time of silence. Consider the style of song, as well as the words. Choosing celebratory and uplifting hymn tunes for the beginning and end of services is helpful, but think about the words, too. Hymns following confession and pardon might be selected for a gentler, more reflective effect. There is also a balance to be struck between wanting to introduce new and inspiring music to a congregation, and obstructing their experience because they are fumbling through an unknown tune: if you have been 'warned' that a congregation doesn't know a hymn – as I'm sure many of us have - but you want to

use it anyway, ask for it to be played, or better still sung, through a couple of times before they join in, and share with them why it is important to you and the service.

There is real significance in explaining to the congregation during the service why you've made the choices you have. If you connect your choices of readings and songs and other elements to your message, it helps you to reinforce that message.

### **The ending**

The last hymn or song will form part of an intentional and meaningful final stage of the service. Your final words are significant: a blessing, and a 'sending out' or commissioning, will both be welcome to the congregation, and will often both happen within the same final words or prayer. Making a clear distinction can be helpful. Also helpful is tying your theme or guiding text into your final words, to reinforce the message of the service.

### **Response**

We all know it is hard to please all the people all of the time. Keep in mind that some worshipers may respond well to a certain hymn or song, another to a particular prayer, another to the use of the visual props. One listener may respond to one point you have made, one to another. Often you can be surprised when someone has been moved by something you said that you had thought almost incidental.

Your careful planning of the flow may be unnoticeable, and no one may be aware of all you've done to plan the service. But with the presence of the Spirit many will have been enabled to worship, had that encounter with God, and will be going out with joy.