

# Rhythms of Worship

*The Planning and Purpose of Liturgy*

John G. Stevens  
and Michael Waschevski

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# Introduction

When worship works, in us and among us, we know it. Something connects. Something speaks powerfully within us. A divine contact is made at the center of our lives. Diverse things link up for us. We are stirred, perhaps moved to tears or filled with joy. We are motivated to action. We want to talk about it and to share what has touched us deeply.

Of course, that doesn't always happen. It doesn't happen just because we want it to or just because we call it worship. The day of worship arrives, the doors are opened, and the lights are on. There is music. People assemble. Someone reads. Someone addresses the gathering. Everything seems to be in place, but somehow it doesn't work. It falls flat. It leaves us empty. We may have no idea why.

The difference between worship that works and worship that somehow doesn't work is never totally under our control. Spirit blows where Spirit wills! The serendipitous is not subject to our control. But there are things we can control, and plan, and manage—and we should. It

only makes sense to give to the Spirit the best preparation and creativity we have to offer.

Congregations have much at stake in planning and providing excellent worship. Such worship is key for a spiritually alive and healthy congregation and for each member's spiritual growth and effectiveness as a contemporary disciple of Jesus Christ. The more that leaders and members of a congregation share a basic perspective concerning the elements and dynamics of Christian worship, the more likely it is that a congregation will benefit from collaborative worship planning and deeply satisfying participation.

For such worship planning to be effective, a shared perspective on the meaning of worship is helpful, if not essential. Each person involved in helping to plan a congregation's worship will bring his or her own perspectives, drawn from many sources and personal experiences. Our hope is that this resource will help to provide planners with a *shared* basic theology of Christian worship and a sense of the meaning of what happens in all the parts of worship on a Sunday morning and throughout the seasons of the Christian year.

This book is for *congregations*. There are many books available for liturgical experts, but there continues to be a huge gap between those who are comfortable talking scholarly language and most members of most congregations. This book aims to help bridge that gap in order to develop a shared understanding among pastoral leaders, musicians, worship committee members, and all who make their way to church each Lord's Day to worship God.

Our aim is to describe in clear everyday language why we worship as we do and to help equip worship planners

and leaders for excellence in their ministry. The sequence of each movement within a typical Lord's Day service is explained in terms of how it expresses our Christ-centered faith. The feasts and festivals of the liturgical year are described in clear language and with an eye to understanding what they mean and how they contribute to the enrichment and development of our faith. There is also a full chapter on music for worship, singing in an expanded variety of genres and styles, the use of technology, and the use of other art forms in the liturgy. The book closes with a strong affirmation of worship in the life of the church and for our faith as disciples of Jesus Christ.

We hope that as you read and discuss these chapters you will find them clear and practical. Rather than trying to be exhaustive in scope and detail, we have tried to paint the big picture, to describe the flow and direction of congregational worship, and to suggest ways of enhancing its rhythms and dynamics. Questions at the conclusion of each chapter are for use with small groups, worship committees, and worship planners as they engage you in conversation. We look forward to being in "conversation" with you as you seek to offer worship that inspires and equips your congregations for faithful discipleship.

John G. Stevens  
Michael Waschevski

## The Order—Not Just a Grocery List

Take a look at your congregation's worship bulletin. It is a description of what typically happens in your service of worship. First there is this, and then there is that. You begin at the top, and when you get to the bottom you are done. After socializing a bit, you can go home. Simple enough.

But worship is not just a random "grocery list" of things to do when we gather together. There is a dynamic, a flow, a sequence that makes worship meaningful and satisfying. There is a beginning, a middle, and an end. One action prepares for another, and that action flows into the next. When things are out of sequence, you sense that something is wrong. This isn't just a matter of what you are used to. Something that is just stuck in somewhere is likely to violate the logic of worship. It will feel stuck in.

We are speaking here of the *order* of worship.<sup>1</sup> The order makes sense. It follows an understandable sequence. It is similar to the order that is involved in going to dinner at the home of friends. You arrive at their house, go to the door, and ring the bell. The door opens, and there

is a ritual of welcome, which continues as you enter their house and exchange comments and greetings that express the joy of being together and of sharing time with one another. This is followed by a time of conversation and visiting. Then you gather at the table and share the meal, enjoying the food and the company—an informal ritual celebrating the joy of life. Later there is a final ritual of departure at the door in which you express thanks and good wishes as you leave to go home. It just doesn't make sense to reverse or mix up anything in this familiar sequence.

In the same way, there is a pattern of worship that reflects the church's long history and tradition, a four-fold pattern that remains common within most mainline denominations:

1. Gathering in response to the love and invitation of God
2. Hearing and responding to God's Word
3. Sharing the meal and giving thanks
4. Departing to serve God in the world

This common pattern is remarkably similar to the pattern of having dinner with friends. It too is a sequence that makes sense.

There is no need to start from scratch in order to establish the basic shape of a congregation's worship. It does not need to be reinvented. It is a part of our heritage. Beyond this basic shape, or order, a congregation should give careful attention to its own denominational standards. There is just too much accumulated wisdom and experience in our denominational traditions to ignore.

Look again at your worship bulletin. In addition to

major headings that reflect the fourfold structure of Christian worship and headings that indicate the specific actions within each of those sections, does the bulletin provide texts and tunes and actions to facilitate congregational participation? If the answer to this question is no, then your service has the character of a monologue. With the exception of the songs and hymns sung by the congregation and perhaps music provided by a choir or soloist, the only voice that is heard is the voice from the front, usually the voice of the pastor or worship leader. The congregation's role is limited, passive, and submissive. But if the answer is yes, there is an expectation that the congregation is to participate actively in the service of worship. Every opportunity for the congregation to speak or sing or act in some particular way is in fact a kind of symbol that the people who have assembled for worship are invited and expected to participate actively (and probably not just in worship but also in the life of the congregation and in its witness and service to the world).

In this section, we have identified two important aspects of Christian worship. The first is its historic fourfold order, its overall sequence. The second is its interactive, responsive, participatory character. Both are crucial if the congregational worship we experience is to be as spiritually powerful and effective as it can be.

Worship forms us to live as disciples of Jesus Christ, here and now. In worship, God calls us into a disciple-forming dialogue, a living and continuing conversation. In worship we experience God's welcome, grace, and love. In worship we are addressed, nurtured, equipped, and motivated to be God's people, living our lives as part of God's reign of love for all people and for the whole creation. Worship is not a time of escape from our real

lives. It is not a fantasy journey into the long ago and far away. It is always a matter of what is happening now.

In the chapters that follow, we will consider what happens in each of the four major movements of a service of worship, looking at the content and dynamics of each segment. The purpose is to give a sense of the feel and function of each segment of the service of worship, and how it prepares for and flows into the next segment.

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. What elements of the worship service are most engaging for you? Why?
2. Gather several weeks of your congregation's worship bulletins. Do you find the order of worship fairly consistent or quite varied? Does your order of worship make sense to you? Why or why not?
3. Do you find major movements in your service of worship? Are they identified by understandable headings? How do they help identify where the service is going?