

The Movable Feast: Expanding Worship from the Church Building Into Our Homes and Across Our Town

One Alternative to Gathered Worship for Congregations
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During this time it may not be possible for people to gather as usual in the church sanctuary. There will be longing that many experience, and comfort to be offered for grief. At the same time, unique mercies will emerge during this season of reduced mobility and public activity. Discussion is growing on blessings such as more personal phone calls, the revival of handwritten notes, the discovery of the daily office, prayer inhabited without haste, service to the most vulnerable in our communities. Among the gifts can be the rediscovery of the home as a sacred space for the practice of personal or family worship. This can be supported or led by the pastor and perhaps engaged in in concert with others across the congregation.

Though we change the ways we will worship and service, during these days, we will not be taking a break or “cancelling church.” Christ’s church cannot be cancelled! People need their churches. And our communities urgently need their churches to be nourished and empowered to step forward rather than hunker down in the midst of critical needs. This is Christ’s church in mission in God’s beloved world today.

What follows is just one model among many of approaching shared congregational worship. It blends common elements, such as a worship order and a printed or streamed homily, with means of engagement that are specific to each person or family’s home worship context. It is enhanced by the ability to use video – either livestreamed or recorded – but is not dependent on worshippers having internet access. If you livestream, you likely already have routines in place. This model is based on recorded video that is accessible on Vimeo, Youtube, and other platforms (and that can be paused). The rhythms for preparation for pastors and others may be both surprisingly familiar – and fresh.

PLANNING WORSHIP – WITH OTHERS?

After you’ve selected your text and identified a theme, fill the usual order (gathering, Word, response, sending), making the most of the flexibility and personalization of the home context. It may be a joy for all involved to collaboratively plan, perhaps via videoconferencing, with a music leader, worship committee member(s), pastoral colleague. Your usual resources, such as the *Book of Common Worship* and your hymnbook, will be handy. Simplify the bulletin format to an 8 ½ x 11 document so that it is easy to view on a computer, or print at home. You may have a longer bulletin as you include a bit more content for those who are worshipping without video. Remember to include footnotes for sources of liturgy. Print and mail in advance of Sunday for those without internet. If you are using video in addition to print materials, you can lead people through the entire service. This can be a help to those who have never worshiped in their homes.

GOD'S PEOPLE PREPARE FOR WORSHIP

Before the day of the service, or before the service begins, in print and/or by video, encourage people to prepare for worship. You are helping them grasp that Sunday is still the Lord's Day, that their hearts and physical space can be specially primed as they encounter the living Lord. Rather than just "tuning in" as they wash the dishes or sit with the dryer running, give them permission to make this a distinct moment, like they would for Christmas dinner, or presenting a birthday cake. Think of our Jewish friends, many of whom do this so well in preparing for observing the Sabbath. Ideas to share with them: You can still "dress" for church if you like – put on something comfortable but special. Maybe the kids stay in their jammies and that is special, or maybe everyone gets dressed for worship. You can have "refreshments" ready, or a Sunday meal in mind for after worship- something easy or a favorite in the crock pot. Settle into a favorite chair, or gather around the dining table with a cloth. Light a candle, or three. Get your Bible and a good cup of coffee or fragrant tea or cocoa for the kids. Establish new rituals that will become a meaningful anchor during this time. (Think of all those Advent and Lenten home worship resources you have created and used over the years.) This is a great season in which to start a journal – have it and a pen handy. Print out the worship bulletin to work through it, or have it in front of you as you tune into the recorded service. If it's just you, enjoy this intimate time devoted to God, or call up a friend to share on speakerphone. If there are others in your household, settle down together.

On your end as worship leader, prepare similarly. You may want to lead from the pulpit so that people see their usual space. Or you may find that leading from your desk/study lends personal warmth (rather than an empty sanctuary seeming – well – empty and unusually quiet). Dress in a way that indicates it is Sunday but is comfortable for your congregation. Maybe that's a robe, or a stole, or a sweater. Choose lighting and an angle that helps them see you well. Have a backdrop that helps them connect to worship – a couple of lit candles and a cross added to your bookshelf, or a parament. Perhaps you are co-leading with someone if that works – it might help people "sense" togetherness (and also see their beloved choir director). As you begin your recording, greet them and talk them through settling in since you probably don't have the musical cue of a prelude.

A word here on contextual references as you walk folks through the service if using video. There are pros to being very specific and noting the things that you are experiencing now in common: "Good morning, it is an encouragement that the sun is out this morning." "I hope everyone is snug after all the snow last night." "We are using the lectionary text for today, March 1." But it can also be useful to use broader references – spring, Lent, "Grace and peace to you" rather than "good morning." One benefit of recorded worship is that people who are not able to worship at the same hour appointed for most of you can do so in the evening, or at another time in the week. Perhaps you share your service with others, add it to a list of links on the website. References to circumstances that do not apply to latecomers could give them the feeling that everyone else has left the building. Or that they are watching re-runs.

For those who do not use the internet: The first week you will want to provide a pastoral note including an explanation of how this works, how to use the resources. Provide enough printed

liturgy in the bulletin so that those not using the video portion will have prayers to pray and hymn lyrics to sing or reflect on. Even those with video may want to read along, or read with others gathered in their household. Beyond liturgy, provide prompts for home engagement in italics: *“Take a few minutes to write in your journal, or share with others, the particular prayer needs that are on your heart this week.”* *“Sing this hymn, or reflect on the lyrics, underlining the line(s) that best reflect your heart this day.”*

GATHERING

Call people to corporate worship in God’s presence. You’ll need to help people to understand that they are still a body, in communion, and are connected to others in the congregation in this shared worship and by the One Spirit. You are all hearing a common Word this week, and sharing in the same prayers. Give a shout out to visitors who are joining you by video. And then mark a moment when you call people to turn to God in worship.

If you use video, model for people embodied worship - that they are really worshipping rather than passively listening to a recording, or watching you worship. So, for example, when you pray, close your eyes and bow your head or fold your hands in their view. Invite them to do the same: *“Let’s all bow our heads together in prayer now.”*

For music – you have a number of options. Maybe you can sing (!) or have someone with you who can sing! Perhaps your church musician(s) can record vocal or instrumental music with which people are invited to sing along, or listen to as they meditate on the lyrics in the bulletin. This could be a great gift as music has access to deep places in our souls. If you are recording, use hymns in the public domain, or take out a license (there are some free ones being offered during this crisis). Depending on the culture of your congregation, you may want to keep it simple and familiar – “heart music” - unless it is a special piece you are inviting them to listen to. You will probably use less music, maybe a Taize chorus and a hymn or familiar praise song or two. You might print the three most relevant verses rather than seven verses of Amazing Grace. Even for those worshipping without video, printing several verses of favorite hymns for reflection will recall good truths (and who knows but they might sing them).

For the confession and assurance, as with other times of prayer, guide them or provide prayer prompts for times of silence and personal engagement. For example on video *“...and in this moment we lift up additional concerns in our hearts to you, God.”* Provide prompts in the bulletin after a printed prayer to those worshipping without video, encouraging them to go beyond the scripted liturgy: *“Continue by praying in your heart, or with others, about other concerns and praises that you have at this time.”*

WORD

We won’t go into content here, but there is good reflection going around about text and theme selection that grounds people in our faith and Christ present during these days. For those without internet access - attach to your bulletin a manuscript, or perhaps a more concise devotional reading based on your sermon. Include reflection questions at the end, for personal use, or for discussion among those gathered for household worship. Thus for those not watching the video,

some of the sermon time can be discussion, or journaling, or perhaps reflecting while taking a brief walk or coloring a mandala (there are free use ones on the internet that you can attach to the document).

For those watching the video, know that one of the nice things about a recorded sermon for worshipers is that they can control your delivery (!). And – they can listen to your sermon twice. Invite them to have a pen and paper or journal handy and tell them that they can pause to talk, or go back as needed. You may want to prepare sermons, and services, that are shorter than your usual ones. An hour is a long time to listen to one voice walk you through worship. 35-40 minutes might be plenty for both you and them. If there are times when people pause the video or are prompted for activities (sing a hymn, pray, etc.) they can make as much of it as they like.

Using some of the congregation's cherished and familiar traditional liturgy can be a comfort, and continue to cue them that this is real worship. Print these in the bulletin and at beginning and end of your manuscript, as well. For video, you might speak the whole liturgy for them: "This is the Word of the Lord – thanks be to God." (I've found that "fill in the responsive silence" on video can be awkward – like Dora the Explorer or Mister Rogers, but you know what will work for your congregation).

RESPONSE

Remind people that they can continue to send in their tithes, through the mail, by sending a check through online banking. The Presbyterian Foundation can help you set up online giving. People can also give to additional charities during these days of great need. But there are many additional creative ways that you can prompt people to respond to the particular word for that service. Consider suggesting specific areas each week since this might not be a moment of expansive imagination and creativity for those who are bewildered. So, rather than, "find a way to serve others this week," say "...as worship concludes, or later this week, perhaps a number of us can check out our cupboards and put together some of the items the shelter has requested." Again, this is another point in which people can engage in worship in their home context.

Examples:

- Message on compassion: "Think of someone who is shut in or out of a nursing home or assisted living facility, and when the service is over call them and share words of peace."
- Message on forgiveness: "Many of us have people in our lives toward whom we've felt resentful, but we are ready to reach out. Writing and sending a brief note of blessing could be an act of peace. You could pause and write something like that now as an offering, or do so later this week."
- Message on service: "Take a moment to look at the list of our partner agencies in town, and the volunteer needs our deacons have identified. Pause to send them a message now offering to help with one of those opportunities, or identify a time this week to reach out with a note of appreciation and assurance of prayer."
- Message on world mission: "Pause now, or later this week, go to the blog for our partners in mission in Guatemala. Learn about what they are experiencing with this crisis"

(or other challenges), and send them an e-mail telling them that we prayed for them today.”

For Prayers of the People or Prayers of Intercession, providing some printed liturgy (such as from the *Book of Common Worship*) will help those who are not using the video and are uncomfortable composing prayers when they get to the “Prayers” in the bulletin. Households can read them aloud together, individuals can pray them on their own. One of the nice things about our traditional liturgy is that it reminds us of and moves us through areas of blessings and need that are at risk of being eclipsed by our anxious, narrowed awareness. “Praying with the newspaper” can be encouraged – but not to the point of being overwhelmed. And in regard to the pressing concern of the moment, - COVID-19 - some wonderful liturgy and poetry is starting to be posted on worship sites. Let us share these resources with one another as we come across them and create them.

For recorded worship, take care to not share personal information as you do not know who all may end up viewing your link. So what might have been in gathered worship “comfort and heal Sue and Ted who have been hospitalized” can instead be “heal all those who are sick at home and in the hospital.” In print and in the video, the time for the prayers of the people is a great moment to remind folks how/who to reach “the church” for the prayer list/chain, and to share other personal needs (E-mail? Social Media? Which? Phone? When? Who?)

Another engaging element that can be included in the prayer time is to have people stop and write a brief note to God – of thanks, of blessing for someone in need, of lament. If you are streaming live, you can provide background music this time and write your own note. Or have printed for them in the liturgy a relevant Psalm that you’ve selected, and invite them to (pause and) take some time to underline words that touch their hearts today. They can share those around the table, or jot them in their journal or on a slip of paper to tuck in their Bible. With more time they could paraphrase the Psalm into their current circumstances.

SENDING

How key is this phase in our world right now! While we need to protect our health and avoid transmitting illness, this is not a season of hunkering down and turning our all of our care inward. Our neighborhoods and world desperately need the hope and practical ministry of the church. And - it is an encouragement to have a mission in a time of anxiety – there is something we can do, something that God is calling us to do. It may be varied based on people’s circumstances. If individuals are homebound because of quarantine or risk factors, they can send notes of encouragement, send funds to agencies and small businesses at risk, help with any work that can be done online, make calls of encouragement to those in nursing homes, be the point person on a telephone tree, etc. Empower your members and charge them to find the ways that God is calling them to make the gospel known. Print in the bulletin, and speak for video, your charge and blessing.

For the blessing, video can seem surprisingly intimate - you looking directly into the camera has the effect of the worshiper feeling seen directly, and thoughtful words of blessing can be taken to

heart. This is another place in which you might want to weave in words they know “by heart,” especially if you have a traditional benediction in your services.

This is just one model. It can be adapted. And there are other approaches - for example, cluster people in small house churches that use material, perhaps by video conferencing, at available different times. There are great books of services for home worship, including elements that can be adapted from the *Book of Common Worship*. These are days in which you will experiment with very new forms and orders of worship (in addition to new forms of care and service). But initially there might be comfort, and a sense of a place from which to stand, by drawing upon and referencing familiar elements from your usual Lord’s Day observances.

God bless you as you shepherd God’s people through these days full of challenge and opportunity. In this Lenten season, I am sustained by the grace of a God who has in Christ become incarnate, inhabited our suffering, borne all our ills on the cross, and is risen and always with us, “even to the end of the age.”