

WORSHIP SERVICES AND CELEBRATIONS

Honor the LORD for the glory of his name. Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness. - Psalm 29:2

When most people think of church, they think of the weekly worship service. It's where visitors visit, and it may be the only spiritual activity of the week, even for many Christians. That's why some pastors call the main worship service "the most important hour of the week."

For others, their first contact with church is being invited to a wedding, baptism or funeral. These celebrations help people recognize God in the most important events of their lives.

Worship Space

You can have church anywhere – in a house, under a tree, in a cathedral, wherever two or three are gathered together in Jesus' name (Matthew 18:20). But you do gather someplace. Whether you own your own building, rent space for a few hours a week, or just make do with what you can find, wherever your church gathers, there are some things you should think about.

Function

To the extent you can, **lay out your worship space based on how you're going to use it.** In some churches the sacraments are central, so an altar is the focal point. Others focus on the preached word, so a pulpit is front and center. Churches where musical worship is the priority provide plenty of room for musicians and singers.

What is important in your service? Where will you do it? How much room will it take? As you place chairs and furniture, make sure people can see and hear your speakers and musicians, leave room for singers and sacraments, and think about exit routes in case of fire or other emergency.

Flexibility

In one church I served, the sanctuary was up a flight of stairs from the building entrance. A few years before I came there, they spent a lot of money to install an elevator. They were very happy with it until they had their first funeral. No matter how they maneuvered, the elevator was just a bit too small to hold a coffin! Luckily, there's a back door with fewer stairs. They bring coffins in that way.

Winston Churchill said, "We shape our buildings, thereafter they shape us." One thing you can be sure of is that after you have your worship space set up something will happen that you didn't think about – like those coffins. **The more flexible your space is, the less you will have to shape your services to fit it.**

Symbols

Crosses, candles, a Communion table and other physical symbols can help set your worship space apart as a place dedicated to God. Colors often have symbolic meanings. If you come from a church that has a tradition of these symbols, make sure you know their history and why they are important, and use them to help teach your people. If you don't have such a tradition,

don't just dismiss the idea. **Symbols of various kinds can be powerful communicators** reminding us of God's presence and the basic truths of our faith. You don't have to adopt anyone else's symbols, though there are some that are pretty universal among Christians. But I encourage you to prayerfully study the role of symbols and how you might use them. If you don't, you may find that some to-you insignificant part of your service or decorations has taken on a symbolic meaning for your people. Heaven help you if you unwittingly change something that has become a symbol of someone's faith!

Decorations

Some churches decorate their worship spaces as opulently as they can, to demonstrate that God deserves the very best. Some decorate with banners and plaques as a way of communicating and reinforcing points of faith. Some don't decorate at all, not wanting to distract people from pure worship.

Most churches that use decorations put up special ones for Christmas and Easter, and sometimes for secular holidays as well. This can certainly enhance the spirit of the season. However, well-meaning volunteers can sometimes decorate with items that, unknown to them, come from a secular or even pagan background. They may carry a meaning inappropriate for church. It's a lot easier if you can catch these ahead of time, instead of having to ask someone to remove a decoration they may have put a lot of time into.

How you decorate your worship space says a lot about your theology and your spiritual priorities. Don't display something just because a church member donated it. The things people see as they worship help shape their experience of God. Consider them carefully.

Comfort

There's a saying, "The brain can absorb only as much as the seat can endure." The same is true of the spirit. If you don't normally sit in the congregation, try it out. How is the seating? How is the temperature? The airflow? Is the sun in anyone's eyes? You don't need to make things so comfortable that

people fall asleep, but **most people won't come back to a place where they aren't comfortable** – emotionally, relationally and physically.

Child care

Many congregations welcome babies and small children in the service. Others prefer to offer nursery care and Christian education (often called “Sunday School”) or “children’s church” during the worship time. Much of this depends on your culture, but here are a few things to consider.

Keeping children in the service allows them to experience worship with their family. Children should see their parents publicly worshiping God. And children pick up a lot, even when they don't seem to be listening. As a preacher, if I can keep the attention of the children then I know the adults will listen and understand.

On the other hand, crying babies and squirming toddlers can be a real distraction, especially for their mother. Church may be her only chance all week to focus on something adult for herself. She may decide that if she doesn't get anything out of it, why make the effort to go?

Taking children out of the service can be good for the children as well as the parents. It allows you to provide Bible lessons in a way appropriate for their age. If they enjoy it they'll ask their parents to bring them back, and they may invite their friends.

On the other hand, if children are not in the service that means the adults who are teaching or caring for them also have to miss the service. And it means the children have no model for adult worship. I once taught a week-day class of 13-15 year olds. One day I took them into the sanctuary to talk about symbols and sacraments. One girl, whose parents had brought her to church regularly for most of her life, said this was the first time she had ever seen any of these things. Her only experience of church was the children's program.

If children are not in the service with their parents, have a way to reach them if a problem arises. And if your church is large enough that you can't count on everyone knowing everyone else, it's important to have a way to

make sure children are picked up only by their parents or other authorized adults.

Worship Services

Most churches have their main weekly worship service on Sunday morning, to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. Some denominations meet on Saturday morning, in recognition of the Sabbath. Some churches have added a Saturday evening service, for people who work on Sunday or just like to sleep late. And many churches meet Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings, and Wednesday evenings, and faithful members are expected to attend all three.

The Bible doesn't specify when or how often to gather for worship, though once a week seems like a minimum expectation. To keep things simple, I'm writing as if your main worship service is on Sunday morning. If it's at a different time, just make a mental substitution as you read.

People come to church from all different kinds of situations, backgrounds and expectations. They need to worship God and grow in their knowledge and faith and commitment. They need to receive prayer, share testimonies, be comforted and be challenged. They need to seek and receive forgiveness, offer themselves for service, connect with each other, and be equipped for the work of ministry. That's a tall order for an hour or so!

Your weekly services are the main time your people come together as the church. That means they should reflect the church's three purposes: to be a comfortable home for God to live among his people, to raise up God's adopted children to be like their big brother Jesus, and to invite everyone to join God's family through powerful demonstrations of love. In other words, you need to be sure your services include time for worship, for discipleship training, and for encouraging your people to carry God's presence beyond the walls of your meeting place.

How do you put all that together in one service a week, or even two or three? It would be a lot easier if the Bible told us exactly what God wants in a church service. Unfortunately, it doesn't tell us. But people will be glad to!

People who grew up liking church know how a service should be: exactly

like the services of their fond memories. People who had a bad experience likewise know what they want: anything different. Even people with no previous church experience will have opinions.

Many churches shape their services to please their members. Sometimes the people demand it; sometimes the pastor just likes to make people happy. But even if the members agree on the kind of service they like, it's usually not something outsiders want.

Other churches shape their services to attract non-Christians. The pastors have taught their people to sacrifice their own preferences, when necessary, in favor of reaching the lost. This is a huge improvement over, "It's my church, I want it my way." If the choice is between Christians being comfortable and non-Christians being saved, it's no contest. But it still misses the fundamental question, because the focus is still on people.

The first purpose of church is to be a home for our heavenly Father to dwell among his people. So the first question in designing a worship service is not, "What do I like?" or even, "What will attract unbelievers?" The first question must be, "What does God want?" **When we worship God the way he wants to be worshipped, he will take care of everything else.**

The closest thing to a Biblical description of Christian worship is 1 Corinthians, chapters 11-14. Paul sums it up in verse 26.

When you meet together, one will sing, another will teach, another will tell some special revelation God has given, one will speak in tongues, and another will interpret what is said. But everything that is done must strengthen all of you.

According to Paul, a worship service should not be a few people performing while everybody else watches. Everyone should have a part, as the Holy Spirit moves them. In the surrounding verses Paul tells how to do this in an orderly way. Beyond that, it seems that how we fashion our worship services is pretty much up to our own God-given creativity.

That said, there are some basic elements that should be considered in every church service.

Basic Elements

Service flow

I heard about a prayer meeting where one brother prayed, “Oh Lord, send us a spark. Just send us a spark of your Holy Spirit fire.” The next person passionately added, “Yes, and Lord, water that spark!” Too often, that’s exactly what happens.

1 Thessalonians 5:19 says, *Do not stifle the Holy Spirit*. I’ve been in services where the singing and praying have created a beautiful atmosphere of worship and God’s presence, and then it’s all disrupted because the next thing that happens is an announcement about needing helpers for the church dinner. Worship is a spiritual exercise, but it reaches our spirits through our minds and emotions. That works better when there’s a logical or emotional flow from one part of the service into the next. If there isn’t, we can pour water on the spark of Holy Spirit fire.

Liturgy

Liturgy is the order in which things happen in your service. Some churches carefully plan out the order of worship and write it down in a handout so everyone can follow along. Others feel that limits the spontaneity and creativity of the Holy Spirit. But even those churches often do essentially the same things in the same order every week. They have a liturgy; they just don’t write it down.

The Holy Spirit can inspire planning and writing on Wednesday just as much as he can inspire spontaneity and speaking on Sunday. One is not more spiritual than the other. Either can leave room for the Spirit to move, and either can become rigid and dry. Pray, try different things, and see how God leads you. Personally, I like to have something written, even if I’m the only one who sees it, just to make sure I don’t forget something important.

Spirit-led order

You may have gathered that I am fascinated by 1 Corinthians 14:26-33. These verses imply a potential for chaos. Verse 30 even gives instructions for interrupting the speaker! Yet Paul closes by saying, *God is not a God of disorder but of peace.*

For a mature congregation, maintaining this peaceful order should not be a problem. Unfortunately, visitors and new Christians will not always understand what is happening and how things are to be done. Most of us have experienced that awkward time when someone is giving a prayer request or a testimony of praise or even an announcement, and they just go on and on – maybe even saying inappropriate things. It's up to you as pastor to gracefully maintain order, and direct the service where the Spirit wants to take it.

Time

How long should a worship service last? There are a lot of strongly held opinions around that simple question. I visited a church attended by thousands where services were strictly held under an hour, and an even larger church where they routinely went three hours or more. Much depends on the expectations of the people, which are usually based on what they were used to in the church where they grew up.

If you minister in a place where people expect a church service to last a certain length of time, it's probably best to go along, unless you strongly feel that God is leading you to do something different. For some reason this can be one of the hardest traditions to break.

Whatever you decide, unless something extraordinary happens it's good to be consistent. People want to be able to plan the rest of their day. If they invite a guest, they want to be able to tell them what to expect. Even Spirit-led spontaneity usually happens within a broadly predictable time frame.

Music

Music has been a part of worship since the beginning. Jubal, *the first of all who play the harp and flute*, was in the eighth generation from Adam (Genesis 4:21). King David, a musician himself, appointed singers to serve at the temple day and night (1 Chronicles 9:33). King Jehoshaphat even sent the choir in front of his army as they went to battle, which says a lot about the role of music in spiritual warfare (2 Chronicles 20:21-22). Paul describes music as an integral part of New Testament worship (1 Corinthians 14:26).

Some churches talk as if worship is defined by music: “First we worship, then we hear a sermon.” Music is important, but it’s not the only way to worship. Giving tithes and offerings is clearly worship. Prayers, statements of faith, the sermon, even announcements should be done in a way that helps people experience and respond to God’s presence – in other words, as worship.

As a preacher who is also a musician, I’ve become painfully aware that some people endure the music to hear the sermon, while others put up with the sermon for the sake of the music. This is not just true of people in the congregation. I’ve seen song leaders leave the room once the sermon started, and I’ve known pastors who thought the purpose of music was to get people on their feet for a minute so they could stay awake during the sermon. Wherever you fit in that spectrum, remember that probably half of your people are on the other side. Plan your services accordingly.

What is the purpose of music in a worship service, anyway? Actually, there are many purposes. Paul refers to *psalms and hymns and spiritual songs* (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16). Apparently, even in the first days of the church there were different kinds of music for different purposes.

Music can turn our thoughts from the world. It can create an atmosphere for worship. It can be calming and soothing, or stirring and inspiring. On a very functional level, musical interludes can help the service flow by smoothing transitions.

Some songs target the mind, with lyrics that teach Bible truths in a way that sticks in the memory. Others target the spirit; simple words and tunes

repeated over and over allow people to focus on God instead of the words and notes.

Because the role of music in worship is so varied, and because people have such different ideas about it, tensions are bound to arise. In fact, some pastors jokingly refer to their music team as “the war department.”

Here are four common areas of potential conflict.

1) There can be a tension between *Make a joyful noise* (Psalm 100:1 ESV) and *Play skillfully* (Psalm 33:3).

Some people don’t sing during the congregational singing. Usually it’s because somebody told them, perhaps decades ago, that they don’t have a good voice, or they can’t carry a tune in a bucket. Often these people wish they could join in with the congregation, but they’re afraid they’ll distract people or mess up the sound. *Make a joyful noise* (Psalm 100:1 ESV) is the verse for these folks. Anybody can make a noise, right? So encourage them to sing, at least quietly. Remind them that nobody is listening to them. The ones who sing are listening to the music, and the other non-singers are too concerned about their own sound.

On the other hand, the verse for your music leaders is, *Play skillfully* (Psalm 33:3). Musical talent, whether vocal or instrumental, is like any other natural ability. It needs to be developed. Teach your musicians that studying and practicing is an offering to God.

How skillful should someone be before you ask them to sing or play in church? Different pastors answer that in different ways.

I’ve been in churches that were known for excellent music. The leaders required auditions for new members, and only those who met high standards were accepted. If your music program is one of the reasons visitors come back to your church, this approach makes sense.

I’ve also been in churches where the congregation gracefully endured musical presentations that fit more into the “joyful noise” category. These churches put relationships first. They continued to let Aunt Edna sing solos, even though her voice lost its charm years ago, because everybody loved Aunt Edna and they didn’t want to hurt her feelings.

It’s up to you to prayerfully decide which approach you will take. Your

vision and mission statements should be helpful with this kind of decision.

2) There can be a tension between *Ask for the old, godly way* (Jeremiah 6:16) and *Sing to the Lord a new song* (Psalm 149:1).

Most Christian movements have their own musical heritage. If you are part of a traditional denomination, you may have a stockpile of hymns hundreds of years old. New churches use newer music. But time keeps marching on. In America, much of the music called “Christian contemporary” dates from the 1980s and before. What was once new has become “the good old songs.”

One common traditional American order of worship is sometimes called a “hymn sandwich:” one hymn at the beginning, one hymn just before the sermon, and one hymn at the end, with everything else sandwiched between them. The person who selects the hymns usually tries to tie them in with the theme of the sermon, so the people are singing words that reinforce the teaching. If you are part of a denomination with a distinctive doctrinal heritage, singing the old hymns can be a great way to keep that heritage alive.

More modern orders of worship usually start with a solid block of congregational singing (usually called the “worship time”) that can extend for half the service. There may be little or no music the rest of the time. The songs are usually selected more for their effect in helping people enter into worship than for the content of the lyrics. A common pattern is to start with fast songs to get people engaged, sing one or two medium songs for transition, and end with slow songs, which are often seen as “more worshipful,” to help people feel God’s presence and express their love. Many churches find this spiritually effective. Others consider it nothing more than psychological manipulation.

I’ve been blessed to serve some churches where people wrote their own songs. I love to encourage people to explore their gifts in this way. It can be a powerful affirmation of your teaching to hear it reflected in the lyrics of a new song.

Again, your vision and mission statements should help as you prayerfully discern the role and kind of music God wants your particular church to use.

3) There can be a tension between worship and performance.

Some think the only way to worship through music is to sing. But many

people find music performed by a soloist or group to be just as worshipful. Even background or transitional music should contribute to worship.

I used a word here that has a bad connotation in some churches. “Performance” can be a handy way to refer to any music not sung by the entire congregation. But it can also refer to an attitude where performers draw attention to themselves and the music, rather than using the music to draw attention to God.

Obviously the second meaning has no place in a church service. Musicians who are used to performing in the secular world, where a charismatic stage persona and an attention-grabbing musical style are positive things, may not immediately understand this, and their performances can indeed distract from worship. But I’ve known some churches that went so far to avoid a performance mentality that they didn’t allow talented instrumentalists to play solos. Personally, I think that’s a mistake. All kinds of talents and abilities should be dedicated to God and used at their highest level for his glory. What matters is that the musician - or preacher or anyone else – be focused on honoring God more than impressing people.

I don’t like to limit the kinds of music that can be used for solos or special pieces, as long as they are worshipful. But songs meant for the congregation to sing are different. The goal is for the people to express their worship in song. Make it as easy as possible for them. Simple words, easy tunes, singable ranges and, most of all, well-loved songs encourage people to release their inhibitions and sing their praises. In congregational worship, the musicians are there to help the people sing.

Your worship leaders should be your lead worshipers, leading the congregation into worship by their own example of worship. This raises a question: should unbelievers or new believers be allowed to join the worship team? Some churches see the music program as an evangelistic draw to musical unbelievers looking for a place to sing or play. Others feel that anyone who is placed before the congregation will be seen as a representative of the church and its beliefs and values, and therefore only mature Christian believers are appropriate. Either way can work. My own feeling is that anyone seen as a leader in the worship service should meet the standards of your other church

leaders. If your worship team includes a group where individuals aren't highlighted, that may be a good place to get unbelievers involved.

4) There can be a tension between religious style and popular style.

I grew up at a time when the stereotypical church musical instrument was the pipe organ. A few progressive churches were beginning to experiment with electric guitars and drums in hopes of reaching young people. For many others, this was total heresy. Numerous sermons proclaimed, "Rock and roll is of the devil!" It's kind of interesting to remember that Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, set many of his hymns to the tunes of popular drinking songs. And the organ itself was resisted by some when it was first introduced into churches – although pastors liked it because they only had to deal with one musician instead of a whole orchestra! (See "war department" above.)

In many places, some kinds of music are traditionally considered "religious," and others are not. In religious settings, religious people often want to hear religious music. People who didn't grow up in church usually prefer popular styles.

Despite the protestations of those pastors of my youth, no instruments or types of music are inherently more spiritual than others. Paul's words about food apply equally to music: *Since everything God created is good, we should not reject any of it but receive it with thanks. For we know it is made acceptable by the word of God and prayer* (1 Timothy 4:4-5). To my mind, saying Christian music should not use certain rhythms, because those rhythms have been used in nightclub music, is like saying Christian churches should not be made of bricks, because nightclubs have been made of bricks. Of course, in any culture there may be certain musical forms that have become associated with images and habits of worldliness, non-Christian religions, or even the occult. If something you do musically is likely to produce ungodly thoughts and ideas in anyone, it's probably best not to do it.

Offerings and announcements

Many churches act as if offerings and announcements are unspiritual interruptions, the unseemly business side of the institution disturbing the real purpose of the gathering.

I have to say I've struggled with that some myself, especially with regard to announcements. But the fact is, you have to have some way to let people know what is going on. And your church needs some amount of money to carry out its mission. The weekly worship service is the logical place to take care of these needs.

But I think it's a mistake to think that offerings and announcements can't be worshipful. Throughout time and around the world perhaps the one common theme in all religious observances is people making offerings, whether it's money or animal sacrifices. In fact, I would go so far as to say the essence of worship is offering ourselves to God. Insofar as our financial gifts represent that, the giving of tithes and offerings may be the most worshipful thing we do. And since announcements often involve ways for people to offer God their time and service, they are a legitimate part of worship.

Some churches make a point of saying that first-time visitors are not expected to donate to the church. Some don't take offerings as part of the service at all; these churches usually have a box of some kind at the back of the church, and people are expected to drop their tithes in as they enter or leave. These practices are largely in reaction to polls that say that, in America at least, many people feel churches are always asking for money. However, I don't believe that's the best solution.

I once visited a very large church where, when the time for giving offerings was announced, the people responded with cheers and applause. They had been taught that the offering was an opportunity to express to God their love and faith. They also took literally Malachi 3:10,

“Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in my Temple. If you do,” says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies, “I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you

won't have enough room to take it in! Try it! Put me to the test!"

They were cheering for the opportunity to receive a blessing.

You don't have to get your people to stand up and cheer for the offering, but don't treat it as if you're embarrassed about it. Consider introducing it with a brief Bible passage or teaching on God's promises and faithfulness. Teach your people the joy of trusting God with their finances.

Now for announcements. How do you let your people know about upcoming events and opportunities? Many churches print them in papers handed out at the weekly service. Others project them on screens. Either way, people have to read them – and many of them won't.

If you really want the congregation to know about something, somebody has to stand up and say it in church.

I'm not sure there's a perfect way to make announcements during a church service, but decades of wrestling with this problem have given me some insights.

- **Don't place announcements where they will shift focus away from God** and what he is doing in the service. Most churches find the beginning of the service best, although people who come in late may not hear the announcements.
- **Don't announce things about individuals** without getting their permission first.
- **Don't let announcements get repetitive** from week to week. If you do, people will start to ignore them.
- **Don't announce things that only pertain to a limited group**, unless you are hoping to attract new people.
- **Don't just read the written announcements.** If you do, the people will stop listening.
- **Don't use guilt** to get people to attend an event. If something isn't meeting the needs of enough people to make it stand on its own merits, perhaps you shouldn't be doing it.
- **Don't use shorthand** and insider language: "Faithbuilders will meet in

the Grace room this week at the regular time, newcomers welcome.” If I’m a newcomer, I have no idea what that means.

- **Don’t let announcement time get too long.** TV commercials and radio news headlines convey a lot of information in 30 seconds or less. Learn from them.
- **Make announcements interesting.** Use visual aids, testimonies, and photos or videos if you can. But watch out, these can eat up a lot of time.
- If you have written announcements, **highlight only the most important or time sensitive** during the service, and encourage people to read the rest.
- **Use different people to give announcements.** If speakers are excited, the people will be, too. But be sure they’re prepared and practiced, and don’t try to say too much.

The Christian life is not just believing doctrine and feeling spiritual. It’s a faith that needs to be put into action. Announcements are where you give your people opportunities to do that. Give them the thought they deserve.

Special days

Special days can keep your weekly services from falling into a routine. Some special days are celebrated throughout Christianity, like Christmas and Easter. Others are national or cultural. And every church comes up with special days of its own.

Some pastors feel like too much attention to special days interferes with their freedom to choose what to preach and how to design worship services. Others find that special days inspire their creativity. Remember, no matter how you feel about special days, there will be those in your congregation who feel the opposite. You need to minister to them, too.

The ancient church created a calendar of seasons and holy days that repeated each year. Starting four weeks before Christmas, it sets times to focus on preparing for Jesus’ coming, the incarnation of Christ, the inclusion of the Gentiles, self-examination and repentance, the sacrifice of Jesus, his

resurrection, the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the ministry of the church in the world. Some ancient denominations still follow the Julian calendar for their religious holidays and therefore celebrate holy days on different dates than most, but the essence of the celebrations is the same.

The events highlighted in the church year don't always fall on Sundays. Special services to recognize these days can be very powerful. In particular, if your main weekly services are in the morning, an evening service breaks people out of their routine and can make them more spiritually open. Evening services also allow much creative use of lighting, whether from candles, spotlights, or other sources.

These are the most common special services. I list them mainly to be helpful to those who are not familiar with them, and to spark your creative thinking. Observe them or not, as you feel led.

- **The four Sundays before Christmas** – Also known as Advent. Many churches use a setting of five candles, usually four in a circle surrounding a larger one in the center. On the fourth Sunday before Christmas they light one candle. Each week they light an additional candle. On Christmas Eve they light the center candle, representing the light of Christ come into the world.
- **Christmas Eve** – In America this is the most attended service in most churches. Many churches begin it at 11:00pm, so by the time the service is over, it's technically Christmas morning. A popular tradition for many is to distribute candles to everyone who attends. Then, usually at the end of the service, all the lights are turned off and the flame from the Christ Candle is spread from person to person until the room is ablaze with candle light. You won't have to preach it for your people to see the powerful symbolism.
- **Christmas Day** – Most churches have services on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. Few have both, but that is more for practical issues than liturgical or theological reasons.
- **Watch Night** – The night before New Year's Day. While the world is celebrating in its worldly ways, a night of prayer for the coming year can

be especially meaningful.

- **Ash Wednesday** – The first day of Lent, which is the season of reflection and repentance leading to Easter. The tradition is to mark the foreheads of believers with ashes mixed with water, to symbolize repentance. Often the ashes come from burning left over palms from the previous year’s Palm Sunday (see below). A more recent trend has been to distribute notepaper to the congregation, inviting them to list the sins and sorrows they wish to be rid of. A small fire is lit in a safe container, with a fire extinguisher nearby. People drop their papers into the fire before receiving the ashes.
- **Palm Sunday** – The Sunday before Easter, celebrating Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1-11). Many churches distribute bits of palm fronds to the people.
- **Holy Thursday** – The Thursday before Easter. Also called Maundy Thursday (a Latin name of uncertain derivation), it commemorates Jesus’ last supper with his disciples before his betrayal and arrest. Celebrations almost always feature the Lord’s Supper. Many churches include some form of foot washing ceremony (John 13). The service often ends by removing any joyous decorations or symbols from the sanctuary, and draping a black cloth over the cross.
- **Good Friday** – The day of Jesus’ crucifixion. There are three different traditional ways of honoring the sacrifice of Jesus on this day. 1) Many churches have services remembering “The Seven Last Words of Jesus” – the seven things Jesus said as he hung on the cross, as found in the four gospels. Often this service starts at noon, the traditional time of the crucifixion, and goes until three o’clock, when Jesus died (Matthew 27:45-50). This is a great opportunity for neighboring churches to join together, with different pastors preaching on the different “last words.” 2) A traditional evening Good Friday service is *Tenebrae*, or the service of darkness. The room is lit only by candles, often fourteen. The Scripture accounts of the betrayal and death of Jesus are divided into a series of readings equal to the number of candles. After each reading one candle is extinguished, until at the end the room is in darkness.

Traditionally at this point a large noise signifies the stone being dropped into place to seal Jesus' tomb. People leave in silence. 3) Some ancient denominations celebrate "the stations of the cross," retracing Jesus' path from his condemnation before Pilate to his crucifixion. While some of the events are apocryphal, there can be surprising emotional and spiritual power in physically walking from point to point, periodically stopping to remember and pray.

- **Easter** – Many churches have a special early morning service, usually outdoors in a place where the sunrise can be seen. The service begins in the dark. Pastors try to time it so the sun rises over the horizon as the good news of the resurrection is being proclaimed.
- **Pentecost** - The seventh Sunday (50 days) after Easter. Pentecost celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit onto Jesus' followers as described in Acts 2. Many churches use red decorations and members dress in red to symbolize the fire of the Holy Spirit. As Pentecost is also called the birthday of the church, some churches incorporate aspects of their culture's traditional birthday celebrations into the church service.

Liturgical churches use different colors to symbolize the different church seasons. These can be valuable teaching tools for those who are visually oriented.

Whether you decide to embrace the church year, borrow part of it, or ignore it completely, be sure your decision is prayerful and informed. Know what you are following or giving up, and why.

Secular and patriotic holidays are also important to your congregation. In most cases they are spiritually neutral; they may not help your people's faith, but they probably won't hurt. And they can be an opportunity. A special service tied into the theme of the holiday might attract people who normally wouldn't attend church. For instance, in America the second Sunday in May is Mother's Day. On that day we often see people who don't normally attend church. They came to honor their mothers.

On the other hand, don't let a holiday overshadow the purpose of your service. Celebrating and honoring our mothers is a good thing, but in some

churches it almost seems like mothers become “god for a day.” Pray for the right balance.

The third kind of special days are those you create yourself. Sometimes these give certain groups a special role in the service, such as Children’s Sunday. Sometimes they emphasize certain aspects of Christian life, such as World Communion Sunday or Bible Sunday. Sometimes they spotlight certain programs or needs of the church, such as Missions Sunday, Stewardship Sunday, or the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. Sometimes they are designed to honor groups that provide service to the community, such as Teachers Sunday or Firefighters Sunday. All these offer special opportunities for your people to invite their friends and neighbors who don’t normally attend. And they are a great time for your sermon to show how the gospel speaks to everyday life.

Visitors

The first time someone visits your worship service you have four goals: make them feel welcome, make them feel comfortable, make them feel you care about them, and make them glad they came. If you can accomplish these four things the first time they visit, the odds are good that they’ll come back.

Make them feel welcome

A welcome feeling should start the moment they see the place you meet. Is it inviting? Is it obvious where to go and what to do? If you have a parking lot, is there special parking set aside for visitors, near the door?

Every visitor should be greeted by a friendly, smiling person the moment they come in, if not outside. If the visitor is not dressed appropriately or starts to sit in the wrong place, this is NOT the time to mention it.

If the visitor is there at the invitation of one of your people, they probably already feel welcome. That’s a great head start.

Make them feel comfortable

How much of what happens in your service is only known to people who have been there a while? People won't feel comfortable if they don't know what to do or can't follow what's happening. If you sing songs or use a prayer that "everyone knows," print or project the words anyway. Visitors will feel lost without it, and even your regulars may appreciate the reminder.

Unfortunately, not everyone has the same comfort level or expectations. Some people come to a new church hoping no one will notice them. They feel uncomfortable if they are singled out. Others feel the opposite. If they aren't greeted by several different people they'll say your church is unfriendly. Train your people to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit as they greet people.

Make them feel you care about them

When you greet visitors, don't stop with a simple hello. Teach your people to introduce themselves, ask questions, and follow up with conversation.

Find a non-intrusive way to gather names and contact information from your visitors, but don't be pushy if they are hesitant. If you do get contact information, be sure to use it within the next day or two to let them know you are glad they visited. Offer to answer questions or be of service. Be sure to invite them back.

The point is to make them feel like you care about them as people, not just numbers to build up your church or potential givers to support your budget.

Make them glad they came

Most regular church-goers have no idea how hard it is for someone to visit a church the first time. Add that to the many other things they could be doing on Sunday morning, and their visit represents quite a commitment. Make sure that when they get back home they'll feel glad they came.

How do you do that? It depends on two factors: your service and your people. If your service left them feeling encouraged or inspired, or that they

learned something relevant to their lives, they will probably come back. If your people left them feeling that your church might be a place where they could make friends, or find support, they will probably come back. If both happened, you will almost certainly see them again.

Sacraments or Ordinances

An important part of many worship services is celebration of The Lord's Supper, also called Holy Communion or the Eucharist. Depending on your traditions and facilities, you may also have the privilege of celebrating baptisms as part of a church service.

Sincere, knowledgeable, Bible-believing Christians see these things in a variety of ways. I have no intention of trying to push a particular theology. If you are part of a denomination or tradition, please follow those teachings and practices. If you are on your own in this regard, study the Bible and ask God to guide you. I just want to give a broad overview, and raise some practical considerations in the context of a worship service.

First the question of terms: some traditions refer to Baptism and Holy Communion as ordinances. Other traditions call them sacraments. Generally speaking, "ordinance" emphasizes actions by which people symbolize their commitment to God, while "sacrament" emphasizes God's response of grace and blessing.

Some ancient churches add five additional sacraments: confirmation into the faith (for those who were baptized as infants), confession of sins, marriage, ordination, prayer for the sick, and prayer for the dying. Most churches practice these without considering them sacraments or ordinances.

Baptism

Broadly speaking, where baptism is seen as a sacrament, people of any age can be baptized. Those churches believe you're never too young to receive God's grace. They see baptism as a New Testament parallel to circumcision, a sign that the parents are members of the family of God, and they want

their child included. They point to passages such as Acts 16:15, which refer to entire households being baptized. Churches that see baptism as an ordinance symbolizing a personal commitment to Christ quite logically withhold baptism until people have reached an age where they can reasonably make such a commitment.

Churches that don't baptize babies usually have some way for parents to publicly dedicate their child to Christ. Churches that do baptize babies usually provide an opportunity for them to later make a public confirmation of their commitment to Jesus. Either way the end result is the same: through either baptism or dedication, babies of believers are recognized as part of the church family; through either baptism or confirmation, people old enough to make a commitment to Jesus have an opportunity to publicly do so.

Some churches teach that baptism requires total immersion under water. You can do this in church if you have the facilities – an inflatable swimming pool works fine. Otherwise any large enough body of water will do. Other churches pour water over the head and catch it in a basin, or sprinkle water on the head. Churches that baptize babies generally use one of the latter methods. Both date back to the early centuries of the church, if not to its very conception. In fact, some scholars argue that there was not a large enough body of water in Jerusalem to immerse the 3,000 new believers who were baptized on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41), and therefore infer that it must have been done by sprinkling or pouring. This is another of the many places good Bible-believing Christians understand things differently.

However you do it, when you baptize a person, they are joining the family of God. And the family should know they are being joined! Therefore, **baptisms should be celebrations**, open at least to other church members, if not the public. In fact, an important part of the ceremony should be a promise from your people to help their new brother or sister grow and mature in the Lord. Baptism is not a graduation, it's a beginning.

One practical point: if you are baptizing someone by immersion, be aware of what they (and you) are wearing. Some clothes that are entirely appropriate when dry may become embarrassingly inappropriate when wet.

Whatever your theological views on baptism, it is an important spiritual

step. Most pastors teach a class or do individual pre-baptism counseling beforehand, to be sure people understand the commitment they are making.

The Lord's Supper

As with baptism, different churches have different understandings and practices of the Lord's Supper. If you are part of a tradition, follow those teachings. If not, find out what you can about the various views and practices, and ask God how he wants you to do it. Here are some of the options.

Some churches celebrate the Lord's Supper every time they gather. Others may celebrate it only a few times a year. Generally, those that celebrate more often see it as a means of grace that should not be neglected. Others feel that frequent celebration causes people to take it for granted, to the point that it may no longer be meaningful for them.

Some churches allow anyone to participate, some restrict participation to all baptized Christians, some to members of their own church or denomination, and some are even more restrictive. In some traditions anyone may preside at the celebration, while others restrict that privilege to ordained clergy.

As for the elements, some churches use leavened bread, some unleavened. Some churches use wine, others unfermented grape juice. "Ordinance" churches tend to see these as representing the body and blood of Jesus. "Sacrament" churches tend to see them as actually being or becoming the body and blood of Jesus, at least in a spiritual sense.

In some churches the people come forward to receive the elements. In others the elements are passed among the people where they sit. In some traditions everyone drinks from the same large cup, in others they dip their bread in the large cup (an ancient practice called "intinction"), and still others use small individual cups.

I'd like to suggest a few practical tips that apply to every celebration of Holy Communion, no matter how it is understood or carried out:

- Prayerfully **consider the spiritual flow** of your service as you decide when in the order of worship you will celebrate the Lord's Supper.

- Be sure to **include some explanation** of what Holy Communion is and why you celebrate it.
- Be sure you **tell everyone what they are expected to do**: when and where to move, when to eat or drink, etc. If you don't, visitors will feel lost. Even regular attenders appreciate being reminded.
- **Be aware of hindrances** to participation. No one who has a desire to receive, and who is eligible according to your tradition or understanding, should be prevented because of a physical barrier or disability.
- Be sure you **allow enough time**. Don't rush people; give them time for a spiritual experience.

A last point: I believe many people overlook the healing power of receiving the Lord's Supper. Jesus said of the bread, *This is my body, which is broken for you* (1 Corinthians 11:24). Isaiah 53:5 says, *With his wounds we are healed* (ESV). The wounds by which we are healed were received in the broken body of Christ, which is the bread of Communion. Whether you understand this as a symbol that builds faith for healing, or as a tangible impartation of grace, the connection to healing is something that should be lifted up.

Weddings and Funerals

Weddings and funerals are the most important events in many families. They are also one of the main church activities likely to have non-believers in attendance. Train yourself to think of these celebrations, not only through the eyes of the participants, but also the guests or mourners.

In particular, prayerfully look for a way to **include a simple but clear gospel message**. A Christian marriage is a celebration of two redeemed, transformed people who want to spend their lives following Jesus together. A Christian funeral is a celebration of the fact that for those who have put their faith in Jesus, death is not an end; it's a door to a whole new wonderful life, and God is with us on both sides of the door. These truths bring hope and joy that should be proclaimed.

As for the details, follow your own customs and traditions as far as they

are compatible with Christian belief. If you are ministering in a place where the traditions come from a different religion, prayerfully decide whether it is best to modify them just enough to make them acceptable to Christians, or whether it is better to change them completely to mark the fact that this is a distinctively Christian service. Talk to other Christian ministers in the area. If you can all have a unified approach, that gives the best witness.

Some pastors only perform weddings or funerals for people who are part of their own church. Some will not marry people who have been divorced, or who live together before marriage. Other pastors see weddings and funerals as opportunities to reach exactly those people with the good news of Jesus.

Again, if you are part of a denomination that has strict rules about such things, follow those rules. Otherwise, ask God to show you what he wants you to do. Personally, I do not consider a divorce that happened before a person became a Christian, or a divorce on biblical grounds (the spouse committed adultery), to exclude a person from marrying again. The same goes for an innocent person who was divorced against their will.

For me, most of the work of a wedding happens before the ceremony. I require several sessions of pre-wedding counseling. I focus on practical tips on how to have a good marriage, using Bible verses wherever possible. If I don't already know the couple are good Christians, I present a clear gospel message and invitation to faith. Most couples appreciate the time and personal attention.

As for the wedding itself, perhaps the biggest issue is getting people, including the bride and groom, to look past the bustle and excitement. Find ways to keep the focus on the meaning of marriage and the necessity of keeping Jesus central.

Speaking of bustle and excitement, consider asking one of your church folks to serve as wedding coordinator. It can save you a lot of time and busy-work. In churches where I did a lot of weddings, I even had the coordinator handle the rehearsals. After all, I already knew my part!

In many ways funerals are similar to weddings. Again, people can get so caught up in what needs to be done that they don't stop to really experience their feelings. If the primary mourner is the kind of person who always takes

care of things, encourage them to let others take care of them for a change.

Funerals provide a unique opportunity for talking about eternity, and this life as our only chance to prepare for it. Pray about how God wants you to grasp this opportunity. But please don't tell people that their loved one is going to hell, even if you know they weren't a Christian. I have never known anyone to be drawn to the Lord by such a message, but I have known several who were driven away by it. Besides, you don't know whether, in God's grace, the deceased may have come to the Lord with their dying breath.

Most people, pastors included, tend to be attentive to the mourner for about six weeks. Then they move on. Plan some kind of long-term follow-up. In particular, a recognition of the one-year anniversary of the death can mean a lot.

Points to Remember

- The first consideration is not what you like or what will attract people, but what God wants.
- The Bible gives great latitude in how we design our worship spaces and services; give prayerful thought to every aspect of them.
- Some people endure the music to hear the sermon, others endure the sermon to hear the music.
- Every part of the service can and should be done worshipfully.
- Make visitors feel welcome, comfortable and important.
- Don't overlook the evangelistic potential of weddings and funerals.