

# Alive to God in Worship

## Possibilities of Worship in Congregations

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Information offered by the  
National Working Groups on Worship and Doctrine



THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA  
ASSEMBLY

[www.assembly.uca.org.au](http://www.assembly.uca.org.au)

## Introduction

In this pamphlet we offer some ideas for putting the principles of Christian worship, outlined in the Doc.byte on Worship and the paper “A Very Short Guide to the Service of the Lord’s Day,” into practice in a Uniting Church congregation. Because of the diversity of expressions of ‘congregation’ in the Uniting Church across the nation, these ideas are readily adaptable to fit a variety of contexts and are intended to stimulate your own creativity.



## Artful Worship

The basic elements for ordering Christian worship (the liturgy) are rooted in the Christian tradition and are wisdom's gifts from the past. How contemporary Christians use those elements is a creative process because the Church is not called to be a custodian of past artifacts keeping those elements as they always have been. It is called to be a community of craftspeople, curators of worship, using those elements to create worship for this generation.

The church's worship has to be incarnated into a particular time, place and culture having both universal and local elements. How we arrange or give expression to these various elements constitutes the artfulness of worship. That art is not a performance people sit and watch, but a drama in which the gathered community is the principal actor. Like an unfolding drama worship will have flow and movement.

When a service flows it gathers energy and builds as one part leads naturally to the next like a drama builds to its climax and its resolution. When a service of worship has movement it goes somewhere; it carries people through an experience that is shaped by order, flexibility and the Holy Spirit. Artful worship has an effect on people's hearts, minds and spirits. Annie Dillard wrote:

*'I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible, aware, of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blindly invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children, playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning.'*

[Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984) page 4]

**O sing to the Lord a new song  
for he has done marvelous things  
(Psalm 98:1)**

# 1. Artful worship begins with the congregation's worship leaders and teachers

The worship of a congregation is usually planned and executed by a variety of people who lead the community in performing its worship. They include Ministers of the Word, Deacons, Pastors, Lay preachers, Elders and various members rostered for duties.

Artful worship needs leaders who are willing to move beyond “our usual practice” to consider how to help the congregation experience the presence of God and enter into the dialogue with God that is central to contemporary worship. Where to start?

- Develop your liturgical knowledge and skills so you can weave together tradition and contemporary expression. If you are a Minister, work with your Elders and lay leaders.
- Read and consult the resources available from the UCA's websites & publications.
- Teach the congregation the meaning of each element of the service and how they may participate in it.
- Consider how to use fewer words and allow symbols, gestures and actions to speak.
- Be more aware of the theological truth that underpins elements in worship and find fresh ways of giving expression to how that truth impacts ordinary life. An example might be the Prayer of Confession and the Declaration of Forgiveness. Is it really true? Does Christ really pronounce us forgiven through a person's proclamation “Your sins are forgiven”? How and why it is true is rooted in the very nature of the gospel itself. So in what artful and heartfelt ways can we claim it true for ourselves apart from uttering a rather tired and formulaic “Thanks be to God.”

# 2. Artful worship embodies the hospitality of God

- Many congregations, even those who proclaim they are “a friendly church” are closed communities which are intimidating to a newcomer. Most ‘regulars’ are not aware of how difficult it is to become part of a church congregation. Church members will deny this which is part of the problem. While true hospitality comes from the heart and is an expression of a genuine care for the other person, communities have to learn how to be hospitable. It requires developing awareness and training the congregation without it ever becoming a technique for getting more people in the door. Hospitality cannot be faked without people becoming aware that it is.
- It is the people whose genuine warmth and acceptance (or lack of it) create the first impression of a congregation to a newcomer - e.g. what happens in the car park or foyer in unguarded moments.
- Hospitality is being sensitive to new people and allowing them to enter the community at their own pace and not overwhelming them.
- Following people up with a visit or telephone call can be a hospitable action if they are new or have shared a special need.
- See the book ‘Welcoming the Stranger’ by Patrick Keifert for more suggestions.

### 3. Artful worship is a creative act

- Change for change's sake is not a good thing. However, old practices can be refreshed. Consider fresh ways of doing familiar things - e.g. new ways of gathering the people, such as having breakfast together before worship; coffee and rolls before church or lunch after. Find ways of sharing what people are bringing to the gathering beforehand.
- Learn new hymns/songs for creating responses; meditative prayer; consider using music and song in places where you do not usually do it - e.g. in the Prayers of the People.
- Discover creative ways to read the Scriptures that honour the type of text it is - e.g. use a storytelling style for narratives; songs for the psalms; multiple voices; dramatization etc.
- Consider ways in which people may respond "from the heart" to particular elements of the service. An example is having a time of silence after the proclamation when people are given space to reflect on their experience of living their faith during the past week, or to sharing experiences of God's grace.



## 4. Artful worship is “the work of the people”

The importance of the “full, conscious and active participation of the people” is of the essence of the liturgy and imperative for true worship. Stephen Burns writes: “That means that it is the nature of the liturgy to be done by the people. It is not done to people. It is not done for people. It is not done in the presence of people. People do it and the plural is correct because it is as a Church assembled that people do liturgy.” [Pilgrim People; An Invitation to Worship in the United Church, pages 17-18]

- The word “conscious” in the description above means “intelligent and aware.” If people do not understand how worship works and what their role is, they cannot be part of a participating congregation. They will be mere spectators watching what others do. Therefore worship leaders need to find ways to teach and encourage people how to worship; what their role is as a member of a community engaged in a shared activity. That teaching needs to be engaging, permission giving and flexible. Nothing enlivens worship more than a congregation who knows and accepts their role and enters into it eagerly. (How the Holy Spirit must delight to work in such a congregation!)
- Children especially respond to active participation especially when they are shown how they can join in and make their contribution to the community’s activity. But they need to be shown and accompanied in their participation so they know what’s going on. (A mother in a coffee shop introduces her daughter to café culture. The child sat at the table with her babycino copying her mother.)
- Instruct people on how to be active listeners in their body posture and their expectations of worship. It is the people’s work in the liturgy (and a source of joy) to be engaged participants e.g. in active listening and singing and joining in the other responses.
- Encourage the congregation to say “Amen” after corporate prayer and make the other responses with heartfelt conviction - e.g. “Thanks be to God” after the Declaration of Forgiveness. It is amazing what a difference a simple thing like a congregational ‘Amen’ makes to the energy of a service.



- Give opportunity for people to share spontaneously in the service. e.g. in the Prayers of the People. Give time after the preaching for people to share their experience of living their faith through witness or service. Engage them in the preaching through dialogue. The preacher could make time for discussion of the sermon after the service.
- Train those who read the Scriptures and lead the Prayers of the People how to do it well as leaders of the congregation's work. Consider planning regular training for Readers, Pray-ers and other leaders so they can reflect on their practice and continue to learn.
- Consider making a space for people to ask questions, receive counsel and prayer after the sermon or the Lord's Supper. Invite people to go to a quiet place aside so Elders may offer prayers for help or healing. In some congregations, home groups discuss and apply the Word heard in the sermon, through provision of the preacher's text.

**I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters,  
by the mercies of God, to present your bodies  
as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God,  
which is your spiritual worship  
(Romans 12:1)**

## 5. Artful worship recognizes and enhances the gifts of all

Ministers of the Word, Deacons, Pastors and Lay preachers are encouraged to work with Elders and other members of the congregation in planning worship. These designated leaders do not “own” the worship; their role is to enable the worship of the gathered community and to preside at their celebration of worship and sacraments.

- Because worship is “the work of the people,” it is wise to look beyond the obvious people for those whose gifts may be unrecognized or under utilized. There is a rural congregation that uses a tuba in the small ensemble that leads the music.
- Recognize and develop people’s gifts and give them scope to express those gifts. Don’t just fill rosters with people who may be willing or even feel they have a “right”, but are not gifted or willing to be trained. To lead the congregation in its worship should be recognized as a ministry that calls for people’s best and be done in a manner that is worthy of the Christian message and respectful of the people who come to hear it.
- Seek out the artists in the congregation who can use fabric, flowers, symbols, art work, installations, the architecture, candles, light and darkness to create worshipful spaces appropriate to the season, occasion or theme of the service for the day.
- Be creative with the use of data projectors for showing YouTube and film clips, art work, cartoons. Always ensure the technology serves the liturgy and its purposes – i.e. allowing God’s Word to be heard and not just to impress people with the cleverness of the technology.

“I picture a congregation I know in which a woman confined to a motorized chair certainly pain and limitation in her life. But once, at the end of a particularly full communion. After the final blessing and hymn we happened to be in line to the rim of her Easter hat she said to me, “Didn’t we dance today?”

Don E. Saliers. *Worship Come to Its Senses* (Abingdon Press)



## 6. Artful worship structures are flexible

“Liturgy” does not mean rigidity or inflexibility; nor is it a set way of worshipping that has been the same for centuries and must not change. But worship needs a structure, an order that gives meaning and shape to the experience. The structure of worship is not a rigid framework but more like a human skeleton. Imagine a body without a skeleton, its supporting structure. A person would be a mess of flesh and sinew lying in a blob on the ground unable to move. But the human form is supported by a flexible, moveable skeleton which enables the body to move, dance and arrange itself in a multitude of ways to achieve its aims. So “the liturgy” supports the worship of God in ways that are flexible, while still maintaining the identity of “the body.”

- Use the flexibility of the liturgy to do things differently - e.g. during Lent, have the Prayer of Confession and Declaration of Forgiveness after the preaching.
- Introduce an Affirmation during the Easter season that expresses the Christian hope in God’s gift of resurrection life in the face of death-dealing events from the newspaper.
- Check out the resources section of this Pamphlet for other ways to be creative in worship. True artists are able to innovate because they know the history and principles of their art and how it works. Otherwise they are reduced to offering kitsch. It is the same with artful liturgists.
- Every innovation must serve the people’s worship of God and their ability to discern God’s Word or it is a mere novelty that will not sustain faith and has no lasting value.

...wheelchair is a regular participant in the Sunday morning gathering. There is festive liturgy in which children had a role, she came down the aisle to receive together as we walked out. With a broad smile and eyes sparkling beneath the

...s 1996, p 35)



## 7. Artful worship lets the symbols speak

UCA worship is often wordy with too much explanation and an expectation that people will “understand.” But worship must move our heart and soul as well as our mind. Worship is enhanced as an experience when we allow for silence and for symbols to speak. Look at the architecture and artifacts in your sanctuary. What do they say to the newcomer? Do they witness to what is important to this congregation? What is the focal point? Does the space speak of beauty, love, mystery, silence and care? Or does it speak of convention, tiredness, boredom or even neglect?

- The place of the baptismal font, the use of the Bible, the position of banners and the projection screen, art work, flowers and the way people inhabit the space all create a mood, an atmosphere that aids or hinders a sense of “this is a worshipful space.”
- Reflect on where the baptismal font is in the church. Is it behind the pulpit to be dragged out when there is a baptism? In certain seasons try putting it beside the table or lectern or even more challenging, in the front of the church (with water in it of course) so that people might touch it on their way in and be reminded of God’s promise to them in baptism and who they are in Christ!! Children especially love this opportunity - it’s tactile.
- Do the leaders of worship use their eyes and gestures to gather and bless the people or just say words? Think of each movement so that it speaks in a way that is congruent with the words being said. For example, stand before the congregation when proclaiming the Declaration of Forgiveness or blessing the people when sending them to mission. Make your movements during worship purposeful; minimize aimless moving about.
- Evaluate how the Lord’s Supper is conducted. Ensure there is reverence for the elements and the actions. Practice so your words and actions, eyes and bodily gestures invite people into the meaning of the sacrament. Teach and encourage people how to participate joyfully because they know how to move and participate meaningfully.

“We will need to ask if the idea of church as assembly assists us to recognize mission, in fact, may well be to maintain strong and healthy communal symbols in the world. At its best, the way that the meeting for worship shares food and in the earth.”

Gordon Lathrop. Holy People, A Liturgical Ecclesiology (F

## 8. In artful worship music serves the liturgy

Music is often a contentious issue in a congregation re-evaluating their worship. Many people like to sing “old favourites” and have music with which they are familiar. It helps resolve some tension if everyone in the congregation knows the guiding principle for the choice of music is, “What music/hymn/song will serve the purpose of the liturgy here?” Other things to consider might be:

- Widen the group of those who choose the music. Help people to understand the role of the music in the flow of the liturgy and why particular music has been chosen. This can be done briefly and simply in the introduction to the piece in the service.
- Increase the congregation’s repertoire so that ‘new’ songs become familiar and include both older and new material in every service. It is best not to have an unfamiliar song either first or last. Rehearsal of unfamiliar songs before worship begins is helpful.
- Ensure the music helps the movement of the service rather than feeling like a ‘warm-up’, an interruption or entertainment: especially with Choral anthems and pre-service singing. (Pre-service singing is not for the purpose of “warming up the audience” as was once expressed to me). Review your service so music is integrated into the liturgy, helping it to flow.
- Consider whether the music is varied and meaningful in the service using the full range of the gifts of the people. Think about using a lead singer/cantor or having a small singing group. Young people with musical gifts can be taught to play in an ensemble with older people.
- Recognize that a piano instead of organ could be a more appropriate accompaniment for some songs. With occasional a’capella singing this adds variety to the music.
- Make sure musicians are honoured as worship leaders who help shape the service. Encourage them to suggest places where music and/or song might be used creatively.
- Check out the website of Lucy Graham for more ideas on how to invigorate music in worship. See [www.spiritedandsinging.blogspot.com.au](http://www.spiritedandsinging.blogspot.com.au) and [www.lectionarysong.blogspot.com.au](http://www.lectionarysong.blogspot.com.au) for more information.

perceive our mission and re-imagine our situation in the earth. Part of our symbols of the truth about God and to do so for the sake of the well-being of all stories and remembers the poor can be a helpful model for being together

## 9. In Artful worship the sacraments are allowed to exercise power

Because the sacraments are God's gift to the church, we are spiritually impoverished when we ignore them; just as our bodies are impoverished if we do not eat a balanced diet. Rediscover the power of the sacraments in the life of your congregation through more frequent use.

- Consider how you may celebrate the Lord's Supper more frequently. Possibilities are: more often on Sunday morning e.g. an early morning Eucharist; at times and in places other than church on Sunday; Give permission to create house churches gathering around the Lord's Supper which may be served at a dining table...
- Use the 'Service for Communion Beyond the Gathered Congregation' (UIW2 page 225ff) to serve those members who can no longer gather with their community.
- Rediscover baptism as an evangelical sacrament by having baptisms at Easter and Pentecost for new members who have not been baptized before. And prepare people for it through thorough preparation for discipleship. (See 'Paths to Discipleship' UIW2 page 17ff)
- As a congregation, reaffirm God's promises in baptism at regular times during the year - e.g. on the first Sunday after Epiphany (the baptism of Jesus); at Easter and Pentecost or other times in the Lectionary year when the Scripture readings deal with baptism. (See UIW2 page 88ff).
- When a member has a significant personal experience of faith or is going through testing times, 'The service of a Personal Reaffirmation of Baptism' (UIW2 page 99ff) or 'A Celebration of New Beginnings in Faith' (See UIW2 page 109ff) may be pastorally helpful.



## 10. In Artful worship, tradition and daily life come together

Faithful Christian worship embraces the issues and needs of contemporary life.

- In planning worship, it is wise to be aware of the Church's way of marking time in the Calendar of the Church Year and by use of the Revised Common Lectionary. But the church also needs to recognize local, national and international days and events of significance. Therefore it is appropriate to depart from the lectionary on such occasions. Be especially alert to the issues that affect the people and communities in the district your congregation serves, and incorporate those issues into worship.
- Create space in worship for people to share their experiences with the congregation so that they may become the subject of prayers, healing actions or silence. It may be that the proclamation of the Word calls for an immediate response such as a vigil, prayer or action in the community.
- Use data projected images to help people engage national or international issues for prayer. The astute use of art work and the data projector can stimulate reflection and meditation in silence.
- Use the resources of all the cultures present in your congregation in the worship, including recognizing special days in other cultures. Design ways of allowing a variety of cultures to contribute regularly to the congregation's experience of God in worship. Read "Guidelines for Culturally Inclusive Worship" on the Assembly Worship website.
- Consider having a place after the Lord's Supper where people might go to ask for prayers for help or healing. This is a ministry Elders or pastoral carers could exercise. Because it requires skill and pastoral sensitivity, some prior training may be necessary.



## Questions

1. What are the major ways in which you are formed and nurtured in your Christian life?
2. What has the term “liturgy” meant to you in your experience of worship?
3. What are your expectations of worship in the Christian community?
4. Have you ever been taught how you can be engaged in “full, conscious and active participation” in the worship? Would you welcome an opportunity to learn?
5. Can you think of a time when a service of worship was artfully constructed so that both tradition and contemporary experience contributed to the worship event? What did you value particularly?
6. What three changes to your current pattern of worship would better enable you to be fed and encouraged in your experience of God’s grace and your discipleship of Jesus Christ?

## Resources

- Doc.byte 11: ‘Worship’ (available at [www.assembly.uca.org.au](http://www.assembly.uca.org.au))
- Paper: ‘A Very Short Guide to the Service of the Lord’s Day’ (available at [www.assembly.uca.org.au](http://www.assembly.uca.org.au) under worship resources)
- ‘Uniting in Worship 2’, valuable guidance is found in the Preface (page 7ff), ‘Ordered Liberty’ (pages 13-14) and the Notes before each service.
- ‘The Basis of Union’, paragraphs 3 and 4 (will repay careful study)
- Contemporary worship songs are available at [www.songsthatunite.org.au](http://www.songsthatunite.org.au)



## Further reading

### Uniting Church resources:

Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, *Uniting in Worship* (Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1988)

Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, *Uniting in Worship 2* (Adelaide: Mediacom Education Inc., 2005)

Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, *Ordered Liberty in Worship for Uniting in Worship 2* (available at <http://assembly.uca.org.au/theology/worship-resources-and-publications>)

Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, *Guidelines for Culturally Inclusive Worship* (available at <http://assembly.uca.org.au/theology/worship-resources-and-publications>)

### Other resources:

Robert Banks and Paul R Stevens, *Worship: The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997)

Stephen Burns, *Pilgrim People: An Invitation to Worship in the Uniting Church* (Adelaide: MediaCom, 2012)

Mary Gray-Reeves & Michael Perham, *The Hospitality of God: Emerging Worship for a Missional Church* (New York: Church Publishing Inc., 2011)

C. Michael Hawn, *Gather Into One* (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003)

C. Michael Hawn, *One Bread, One Body: Exploring Cultural Diversity in Worship* (Washington DC: Alban, 2003)

Laurence Hull Stooky, *Let the Whole Church Say Amen: A Guide for Those Who Pray in Public* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001)

Patrick Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992)

Gordon Lathrop, *The Four Gospels on Sunday* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012)

Mark Pierson, *The Art of Curating Worship: Reshaping the Role of Worship Leader* (Minneapolis: Sparkhouse Press, 2010)

Don Saliers, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994)

Don Saliers, *Music and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007)

William H. Willimon, *Pastor* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002)

N T Wright, *For All God's Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church* (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997)



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