



PLANNING VITAL WEEKLY WORSHIP

Vital: life-giving, essential, crucial. *Vital* and its synonyms describe the role of worship for Christians wherever we gather, and it happens best when we devote the time and energy to plan for it.

The worship of our Triune God *gives life* to all who participate in Spirit and truth. Worship is *essential* for a people whose first commandment is to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength... and your neighbor as yourself” (see Mark 12:28-30). And Christian worship is literally *crucial*, centered on and flowing from the cross.

A THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

Mandates to worship God abound in Scripture. The ancient *Shema* confesses that God is One, and Ten Commandments remind that this one is the only One we must worship (Deuteronomy 6:4, Exodus 20:2-6). The Psalms constantly exhort us to worship and praise, even up to seven times a day (Psalm 119:164). Paul reminds the Christians in Ephesus and the surrounding cities to worship God with all the resources they have or can create, with Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19). We know we are called to worship. Are we as clear that we are called to *plan* for worship?

Exodus 25–31 lays out in great detail how the people of Israel were to plan and prepare to worship their God. Exodus 25 lists the raw and finished materials required to

build and outfit the tabernacle. Chapter 28 describes the artistry required to make the vestments for the priests. In Chapter 31 we learn that God has poured the Holy Spirit upon the persons who would plan, lead, carry out, and continue all of these building, arts, and crafts projects (Exodus 31:3-5).

God’s people, then and now, are invited, expected, and gifted to plan, lead and continue to refresh the people, the spaces, and the things used in worship. Worship planning is a gift and ministry of the Holy Spirit that calls on *all* the gifts of *all* of God’s people so that in worship we may truly love God with *all* we have and *all* we are—body, mind, soul, and strength.

UNITED METHODIST WORSHIP BY THE *SLICE*

For United Methodist Christians, our vital worship may be summarized by the acronym *SLICE!* Vital worship that draws on the best of our tradition is **S**acramental, **L**iturgical, **I**ndigenous, **C**onected, and **E**mbodied.

Vital United Methodist Worship Is Sacramental

Our General Conference has called on all United Methodists “to move toward a richer sacramental life, including weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper at the services on the Lord’s Day,” (“[This Holy Mystery](#),” p. 19). But to say our worship is **S**acramental is to say more than that we

celebrate the sacraments. Instead, it properly identifies that for Methodists, sacraments are at the very center of our way of being church, both in worship and daily discipleship. It matters *that* we celebrate them, *how well* we celebrate them, and *how our lives are transformed by God's grace because* we celebrate them.

Many United Methodists are aware that John Wesley had always insisted that members of the Methodist societies participate in Holy Communion as often as possible. (See Wesley's sermon, "[The Duty of Constant Communion](#).") However, starting in 1775, many Anglican clergy from whom Methodists in America could receive Communion began to flee the American continent as a Revolution began. The ensuing clergy shortage meant many Methodists here were unable to receive this sacrament for months at a time. This "sacramental emergency" was a major reason John Wesley authorized the creation of the Methodist Episcopal Church in North America as a separate church. By having our own church with our own General Superintendents who could ordain elders who were authorized to preside at Communion, many more Methodists could participate in Holy Communion far more frequently. The sacrament of Holy Communion is a primary reason Methodists exist in the US as a *church* and not, as they had been, a *connexion of societies*.

For Methodists, sacraments are at the very center of our way of being church, both in worship and daily discipleship.

What fewer may realize is how vital the sacrament of baptism was to Methodism from the beginning. The Wesleys believed that attention to the ritual of baptism, while important, was not enough. To "pursue that holiness without which no one

shall see the Lord," (Hebrews 12:14) the vows of baptism must be practiced in actual life. The [General Rules](#) helped people in Methodist class meetings "watch over one another in love" to do just that. The practices listed under "Avoiding harm," "Doing good" and "Attending upon all the ordinances of God" correspond to the baptismal vows to renounce Satan, keep God's holy will, and embrace the faith and life of the church.

Likewise, United Methodists affirm we are to [live what we pray](#) at Holy Communion, and not merely pray it.

How does your congregation honor the central place of the sacraments in your worship? How do you help people live what they promise and pray?

Vital United Methodist Worship Is Liturgical

As you read or hear the term *liturgical*, you may be thinking "smells and bells," or choir processions, or robed clergy. The word "liturgical" has often been applied to the trappings of what is labeled by some as "traditional" worship, but that is not what the word actually means.

Liturgy comes from a Greek word (*leitourgia*) which means the work (*ergon*) of the people (*laos*).

The work of the people. Not the work of the "folks up front" who "do" worship "for" us. Not the work of experts we hire to write, design, produce and deliver "the worship experience" each week. Liturgical worship is the work of the people, the whole gathered people, *prompted* but not dominated by the experts or the "folks up front."

How and how well does worship *invite*, *prompt*, and *engage all* the people who gather where you are?

Vital United Methodist Worship Is Indigenous

For the past quarter century, Protestants have waged a worship war about style. Some argue worship must be “traditional” if it is to communicate the gospel faithfully and express the unity of the whole church. Others say worship must be “contemporary” in its music, communication strategies, and technologies to be relevant to the people of today.

Faithfulness and relevance *both* matter. God has great interest in our faithfulness *and* that we communicate in relevant ways. But God doesn’t ask us for a style of worship. God asks us to offer *ourselves*—our best gifts— as we worship. That’s what *indigenous* means. Vital worship is about what *your particular* people, at *your particular* place in *your particular* time can offer best to God here and now.

How are you identifying and drawing on *all* the best gifts of *all* who worship our Triune God with you?

Vital United Methodist Worship Is Connected

“Religion” comes from the Latin *religio*, (*re-*, again plus *ligare*, to connect or link). Religion’s purpose is to “re-link” humans to each other, to God, and to the earth and all its creatures. Worship is a primary way nearly all religion “re-links” us.

United Methodists pray explicitly for such re-linking when we ask the Holy Spirit to “make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world” (*The United Methodist Hymnal*, p. 10) through the sharing of the body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion.

How and where in worship do you re-link with Christ, with each other, and with the rest of the world?

Vital United Methodist Worship Is Embodied

Methodists have been called many of names over the years. Some referred to us as “shouting Methodists.” Others accused us of being “enthusiasts.” In the 18th and early 19th century American Methodists were also called “kneeling Methodists.” Unlike nearly every other Protestant body on the continent, Methodists regularly knelt as part of their worship—whether on Sunday morning at the local Anglican parish or after 1784 in their own congregations, on Sunday night at their Society meeting, or on Thursday evening at their class meeting.

Methodists didn’t mind the names. They gladly worshiped with their whole selves—spirit, mind, *and* body.

Whoever sings and processes, kneels, bows, or dances prays thrice!

Advances in neuroscience in the past 20 years have confirmed that what we do with our bodies strongly impacts what we remember and how we live. The adage ascribed to St. Augustine, “Whoever sings prays twice,” turns out to be true. Singing engages our whole brain, including our visual, aural, and *motor* cortices. What is encoded in one helps reinforce the others. Increasing the involvement of the motor cortex enhances learning even more. We could say, “Whoever sings and processes, kneels, bows or dances prays thrice!”

This does not mean that everyone should be moving all the time during worship. Movement helps memory in two situations: when the movement is a *change* in body position or action and when a given movement *aligns* with the sights, sounds, words, and feelings of a given action. Kneeling aligns with acts of confession and submis-

sion to God. Dancing may align with praise or expressions of thanksgiving. The change from what may be random motion to an organized procession, for example, greatly enhances focus, memory, and the beginning of worship. Likewise, a change from an energetic praise song with clapping to a slower song sung with hands raised in prayer intensifies the focus on prayerful intercession and submission to God. Stillness fits with contemplative prayer.

How is worship embodied where you are?

PLANNING FOR VITAL WORSHIP

Vital worship in The United Methodist Church happens when all five of these elements come together in a big, sweet, juicy **SLICE!** Sacraments center us. The whole assembly is actively involved. The particular gifts of particular people are enlisted. We use our bodies in ritually and culturally rich ways. There are multiple means for people to connect with God, with each other, and with the whole world.

Worship involving all of that requires creative and thoughtful planning! Worship space needs to be arranged and outfitted to support what will happen in each service. It takes time to learn and keep discovering the many gifts of your worshiping community. It takes advance notice, sometimes weeks or months, for some of these gifts to be offered well in a given time of worship. A new piece of art, a poem, a new musical composition, a dance or a drama—all these take time to produce and more to rehearse. Moments of connection and how particular parts of worship may be best embodied take careful forethought as well.

This is no job for a soloist! It's a challenge two or three people, such as a pastor and a musician, each working in her own silo, can rarely meet. ***Planning for vital worship is a team sport!***

Starting a Worship Planning Team

A worship planning team brings together people in your congregation who are committed to Christ, to each other, and to ensuring that your worship is as full a **SLICE** week after week as it can possibly be. Its members may be visionaries, functionaries, networkers behind the scenes, and leaders in worship.

So who's on the team? One or more artists with a good eye for designing worship space to support what happens in it; your music leader and at least one principal musician; a choreographer or a dramatist (if you have one); representatives from groups that help in worship (usher, acolyte, altar guild member, Communion steward); people who design and run technologies (sound, web, projection, etc.); the pastor or pastors responsible for the services you are planning; the best networker you have (someone who knows people); and one or more people whose experience you trust to put the brakes on poor ideas and give the go ahead for better ones. The optimal size for this group is 7-12. The larger and more diverse your team, the more you may find valuable to specify in writing who you need and who does what.

You'll be working closely with each other in ways that demand your best creativity, passion, and theological awareness. Before you begin, take care to develop

- a personal sense of each other as Christians and teammates
- a common understanding of what worship is (and is not!) in The United Methodist Church and in your congregation
- a working plan including meeting times and who does what, and
- a covenant for how you'll support and hold each other accountable for your work together.

Taking time to form your team matters. Don't skip this step! If you did, be sure to schedule opportunities to “catch up.”

How the Team Works

In most places, the pastor will be the team leader. As team leader, the pastor's role is to convene the meetings, to watch over all team members in love, and to guide the team to plan worship with a full **SLICE**.

How do worship planning teams plan? Some pastors and teams prefer to plan everything as a team, including themes for services and/or series. They may read Scripture together, such as the Revised Common Lectionary readings, and arrive together at a theme or “anchor image,” as Marcia McFee calls it, that then guides their more detailed planning. Others prefer that the pastor provide the theme or anchor image and that the team focus primarily on “fleshing it out.” The “right way” to do this is the way *you* discover works best for your pastor and team.

How often your team meets and the length of meetings depend on the availability of your team members and how many services you can plan in a given period of time. Some planning teams meet weekly or every other week for an hour. Others schedule meetings for one full evening every month. Still others gather quarterly in a weekend or overnight retreat setting. If you're just getting started, you may want to meet more frequently at first to help you get used to your work and each other and to find your “groove.” After that, you might meet less often.

Whenever you meet, always honor your team members' time. Start and end when you said you would. Make your time count by doing there only what you *need* to do face to face. Take full advantage of free electronic and online communications, such as email, Facebook groups, Skype, or online project management tools like

[PBWiki](#) to keep up with each other and your work between meetings.

Here is a meeting pattern your team may find helpful to use or adapt:

- Evening Prayer
- Touch Base and Brief Sharing—1-2 sentences per person about where they've seen God at work this week
- Look Far Ahead: Possibilities and visions for six months out
- Explore Texts/Image for service/ services to be planned in this meeting (typically 6-12 weeks out)
- Develop the plan
- Check in on status of plans for upcoming services (1-4 weeks out)
- Evaluate the planning process for the previous service/s (how the *plan* worked)
- Sending forth

EVALUATING WORSHIP

As heirs of John Wesley, United Methodists continually strive after perfection in love in this life. Ultimately, the grace of God and the power of the Spirit lead us there. Evaluation is one way we cooperate. Evaluation involves assessing what **we** have done and identifying what it takes for **us** to take **our** next steps with equal or greater faithfulness.

Make time in every meeting of your worship planning team to evaluate the **planning** for a given service or set of services. Did the things you had planned to happen, happen? Did they happen as you had envisioned them? If you were depending on several different people or groups, did they all come through? What worked? Why? What didn't work as you had anticipated? Why? What are you learning to make your **planning** more effective next time?

Your mission as a planning team is *primarily* planning. What **you** do as a team is to plan and seek to execute your plans. Evaluating your **planning** every time keeps you on task and focused on continuous innovation and improvement.

Evaluation is helpful only to the degree that you, as worship planners, can do something about what you measure.

About once per quarter (if you meet weekly or monthly; twice per year if you meet quarterly) set aside an additional 30 minutes to an hour to evaluate **the vitality and integrity of worship**.

Worship is often evaluated using ill-fitting tools. Surveys that ask people what they prefer or find “most meaningful” prioritize our own experiences above our duty to offer ourselves fully to God. Trying to draw inferences about vitality from attendance patterns is statistically suspect since too many factors beyond planning and implementation tend to influence the data. And ultimately, evaluation is only helpful to the degree that you, as worship planners, can do something about what you measure and discover.

Here are three sets of questions that directly relate to the vitality of worship, that are less subject to influences beyond your control, and that you can act on as worship planners. Distribute them ahead of time to all team members along with copies of the worship programs from the two or three specific services you agree to evaluate. Encouraging your team members to answer these questions before you meet will make your conversation richer and your conclusions better informed.

Set 1: **SLICE**

- **Sacramental:** How do these services keep or deepen a sacramental center not only in ritual but in the lives of your worshipers?
- **Liturgical:** How and how well do these services reflect worship as the work of the people?
- **Indigenous:** How well have these worship services drawn on the gifts of your particular worshipers?
- **Connected:** Where in these services have you created opportunities for worshipers to connect with God, with each other, and with the world and all its creatures?
- **Embodied:** How have these services invited people to use their whole selves— spirit, mind and body?

Set 2: **Energy and Flow**

- Draw an “energy chart” for each service. Where does energy build? Where is it released? Where does energy flat-line? Where is energy being drained, leaving an “energy vacuum?”
- Look carefully at the transitions in each service. Where does one action flow seamlessly into the next? What made that flow seamless? Where does one action move awkwardly into the next? What might have contributed to this awkwardness?

Set 3: **Passion**

- Review “[The Dynamics and Passions of Passionate Worship](#).”
- Identify how and where the services you are reviewing express each of the six passions listed (Trust, Anger, Ecstasy, Fear, Desire, Hope). How well were they expressed and in what ways might they be expressed better?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND PRACTICAL HELPS

Use these questions and activities to guide your worship planning team a leadership team toward vital weekly worship where you are.

A Biblical Foundation

1. Read Exodus 25-31 as a small group Bible study. Make a list of all of the arts, crafts, and other skills required and provided for the building of the Tabernacle and used by the people as they worship. As you reflect on these two lists together, ask yourselves:
 - ✿ Which of these or other arts, crafts, and skills are in our congregation?
 - ✿ Which of these are we offering in worship as fully as we can? How will we invite people to offer more of their gifts in worship?

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2. Using the **SLICE!** model described above, walk through a recent worship program and ask yourselves how each element is present in the service you are reviewing together.
 - ✿ How can you build on your strengths to go deeper or add an element that may be missing or under-represented?

The Worship Planning Team

3. Look at the suggested list of participants in a worship planning team (p. 4).
 - ✿ Which of these persons or roles participate in your current team?
 - ✿ Whom might you invite to provide more of these perspectives in your planning?
 - ✿ If you don't yet have a team, which of these will you invite to join a team *first*?
4. Examine the various media that can be employed for the benefit of the team and its work.
 - ✿ How well is your team taking advantage of electronic and online communications between meetings and for meetings to maximize the value of the time you spend face to face?

Evaluating Worship

5. There are two layers of evaluation: for the planning and for the worship experience.
 - ✿ How do you evaluate worship *planning* now? How might you improve it?
 - ✿ How do you evaluate *worship* now? How might you use or adapt the questions above to improve your current process?

RESOURCES

The General Board of Discipleship website has hundreds of articles, presentations, helps, and free music downloads—all constantly updated—to strengthen worship planning, preaching, and music in your congregation or worshiping community. <http://www.umcworship.org>

Three great books for worship planners:

Encounters with the Holy by Barbara Day Miller (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2010, ISBN 978-1-56699-398-2). [Order Here](#)

The Work of the People: What We Do in Worship and Why, by Marlea Gilbert, Christopher Grundy, Eric T. Myers, Stephanie Perdew (Alban Institute, 2007, ISBN 978-1-56699-337-1). [Order Here](#)

The Worship Workshop: Creative Ways to Design Worship Together by Marcia McFee. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002. ISBN 9-780-687-046348). [Order Here](#)

On-line Resources

The UMC Worship Facebook Group— a place to ask questions, share resources, and learn from leaders and peers across the UMC connection about all matters relating to worship planning. If you have a Facebook account, search for "UMC Worship" and ask to join.

The UMC Worship blog— <http://umcworship.blogspot.com> - A source for deeper discussion about worship and up to the minute resources for worship in The United Methodist Church. If you are interested in contributing to the blog as an author, contact worship@gbod.org.

The Worship Design Studio— <http://www.marciamcfee.com> An annual subscription gives you access to creative worship design ideas compiled by Dr. Marcia McFee and a wide range of artists, musicians, and liturgical theologians in The United Methodist Church and beyond

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