

Worship Leadership Guide

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The Purpose of Worship

When the people of God gather to worship, they proclaim their unity in Christ, and their ultimate loyalty to their Maker. They make themselves available to the graces of the Word, of prayer, and of the sacraments, to God's own presence within and among them. This central act of worship nourishes our identity in Christ, and strengthens us through the Holy Spirit for service in the world. It is "truly good, right, and a joyful thing" that we should gather to give thanks, to align ourselves with God's purposes, and to be encouraged to live out God's self-giving love. This is the purpose of the church: to gather, transform, and send the people in the name of Christ.

The Purpose of Worship Leaders

Those who serve as leaders in worship serve this purpose. We may enjoy singing, we may like ritual, we may be good at speaking in public, we may appreciate the camaraderie of belonging to a group, but participation in worship leadership is not primarily about these kinds of enjoyment. The central purpose of our work on Sunday is to build up the Body of Christ. The spiritual benefits of leadership, for those who are so called, can include a heightened awareness of the liturgy and connection to the congregation.

The "Work of the People"

Every person who enters the door at a worship service is a participant. There are no spectators at the Holy Eucharist. Whether silently praying or actively listening, whether singing or responding to the call to prayer, kneeling at the altar or exchanging the peace, our worship is the common "work of the people", or "Liturgy".

Leaders of liturgy need to understand that their participation, though important, is no more important than that of each person in the pew. For this reason, many people participate in worship leadership. On any given Sunday at St. Stephen, fifteen lay persons, plus clergy, musicians and choir are scheduled to offer leadership. The great variety of leaders (children, teens, men and women, elders) together with the breadth of participation models the inclusiveness and shared work of the people of God.

Leadership and Ministry

All this worship leadership, while a form of ministry, is not THE ministry. The ministry of the Body of Christ is nothing short of the reconciliation of the world to God. While Sunday worship may equip us for this work, six sevenths of ministry takes place Monday through Saturday, in our homes, our stewardship, our work places, and our volunteering, in our relationships with neighbors and strangers, and our work for peace and justice.

The Role of Baptism and Confirmation

For this reason, most leaders of worship are expected to be baptized, and many to be confirmed. A deep respect and understanding of the centrality of our baptismal vows informs our leadership. Confirmation, as an adult affirmation of these vows, and as an expression of relationship with the Episcopal Church, is required of Chalice Bearers, Eucharistic Visitors, and Vergers.

People of Prayer

As leaders of worship, we model life in Christ for one another, and we draw on the wisdom that comes from regular practice of prayer and study. It is expected that anyone serving as a reader or a server at the altar be a person of prayer, engaging the scriptures and attending to their personal relationship with God daily.

Sharing our Gifts and Common Prayer

There is no real contradiction between being oneself and being a worship leader. There is, however, a need for self-control, and a sense of proportion. Our goal is to point to Christ, hence many leaders of worship wear ritual garments which emphasize their role in the liturgy, and downplay individuality. Movements during worship should be purposeful, and not distract others from the primary focus of the moment. Readers, while bringing a good grasp of context to their reading, do not need to be overly dramatic.

The value of common prayer lies to some degree in its predictability, so that changes to what has been carefully chosen for the service should not be made individually or spontaneously. Common prayer requires a kind of humility on behalf of the larger work of the group. We are not aiming for lock-step rigid behavior, but at the same time our liturgical actions should conform to a basic standard so that they do not distract others from worship. In leadership we are not so much expressing ourselves as we are stewarding God-given gifts and abilities (as readers, as ushers, etc.) on behalf of the Body of Christ.

A Theology of Service

Jesus was forever talking about the first being last and the last first. His point was that those who lead must serve, and those who serve actually lead. We do not lead for the purpose of gaining power over others, nor attention for ourselves, but we lead to make God's love known. This means that leaders must bring a spirit of gentleness, hospitality, and flexibility to all that they do. It's not our work to correct, judge, or manage others in worship. When in a position to give guidance, only do so with restraint, courtesy, and attention to the feelings of others. People's hearts are especially vulnerable in church settings. It is always better to err on the side of kindness over correctness. Never embarrass other leaders. There are very few errors that cannot be corrected later in a private conversation, or through future training. A culture of grace and acceptance is integral to joyful worship.

Perfection Is Not a Worthy Goal

In the end, it is our intention to seek God and love our neighbor that makes worship genuine and beautiful. "Perfect" liturgy is not only an unrealistic goal, it is an unworthy goal. The cry of a baby, the wavering voice of a cherished elder, the wiggles of a brand new acolyte are not distractions from true worship. They are invitations to enjoy the richness of Christ's diverse body. Our liturgical missteps do less damage to the worship than great anxiety about perfection and performance do. Liturgy is a song that is meant to be

sung, not a performance to be admired. We engage liturgy when we enjoy one another as we are, while serving one another according to our ability in the name of Christ. A sense of humor is a handy thing in worship. It is a good spiritual practice to give wholehearted attention to one's work. It is equally important not to take oneself too seriously. While we work as a team toward unity, we rejoice in knowing the simple truth that Christ is with us whenever two or three are gathered in His name.

Roles in Worship Leadership

Presiders at Worship: Bishops, Priests, Deacons and Laity

The Presider's role is to oversee the whole worship event. The presider supports the whole body in worship, and therefore has authority to delegate responsibilities to the various worship leaders and to direct the congregation.

- Bishops represent the unity of the Church across time and space. In a very concrete way, they represent our connection to the diocese. Therefore they preside at Eucharist and Confirmation.
- Priests are charged with equipping the saints for ministry, and providing pastoral care and spiritual guidance to a congregation, and hence they preside at Eucharist and Baptism when the Bishop is not present.
- Deacons are to bring the concerns of the world to the church and the church to the world. They are to gather and encourage God's people in their ministries of service to the marginalized. When a deacon is present, their roles include proclaiming the Gospel, setting the table, and dismissing the congregation.
- Lay people as well as clergy may preside at prayer services, such as the Daily Office and Compline.

Leaders in the Eucharist

Vergers

A verger assists clergy in overseeing the order of the liturgy, allowing clergy to focus on their preaching, pastoral, and other personal responsibilities of presiding . A verger's duties include making sure worship leaders are present, assisting the procession, overseeing acolytes, and helping at the table when no deacon is present.

Ushers

Ushers assist the congregation by providing bulletins, assisting those with physical needs to their seats, collecting and presenting the financial offering, counting the assembly, and other duties as assigned.

Greeters

Greeters keep an eye out for new people to make sure they are welcomed, provided with information about the Church, and have information they may need to participate in the service. They also assist ushers in welcoming folks to church.

Acolytes

Acolytes lead the procession, bearing crosses, candles, banners, and sometimes the Gospel book. They also assist in setting the table, collecting the offering, and other duties as assigned.

Altar Guild

The Altar Guild cares for worship environment, including flowers, linens, candles, paraments, and vestments.

Readers

Readers read the lessons from the Hebrew scriptures and the Epistle, and the Prayers of the People, and may also lead the Psalm.

Chalice Bearers

Chalice Bearers represent the laity at the altar, and offer the wine to communicants. In absence of a deacon or verger, they should also be prepared to coach the acolytes, carry the Gospel Book, help set and clear the Table, and prepare the kits for lay Eucharistic visitors.

Community of Hope

The Community of Hope provides pastoral care by praying for individuals in the narthex during communion.

Eucharistic Visitors

Eucharistic Visitors share the Eucharist with those who are hospitalized or homebound.

Preacher's Guild

Clergy and licensed lay preachers proclaim the Word of God at what is commonly known as the sermon, or the homily.

Music

Music leadership is vital and takes many forms: choir, bell choir, children's choir, guest soloists, piano and organ.