

# THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF WORSHIP PLANNING

## A Crash Course in Collected Wisdom from 100 Congregations

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### SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVES

**PROVERB 1: Broad (lay) participation in worship planning and leading can be fabulous, provided there is provision for training, learning, growth, and a shared commitment to the deep meaning and purpose of Christian worship. Worship planning requires more than good intentions.**

Goal: build learning into every process

#### Strategies

1. annual worship planners/leaders retreat
2. monthly worship committee discussions re article, book, video
3. weekly worship planning discussions re article, book, video  
(recommend James Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*, Intervarsity, 1997; articles from *Reformed Worship*)
4. common presentations in adult *and children's* education (we learn when we need to teach)
5. attend a worship conference with your whole worship committee—as many are this week

**PROVERB 2: Worship planners and leaders need more than skills and understanding of worship; they also need pastoral virtues.**

They are spiritual leaders, not just technicians. In the early church they would be office-bearers, when offices had more to do with worship leadership than attending meetings. We need to constantly call attention to this aspect of the job. Here is a list of virtues for the worship planners and leaders for starting a discussion in your church (have your committee work on editing and adding to this list, realizing that none of us has all these virtues). The goal here is to lift up these virtues and to aspire to embody them collectively.

- *compassion* for the congregation's needs, and concern about how those needs are addressed in worship
- *discernment* about who is gifted to lead worship, and in what way
- *cooperativeness* for working on a team of people who are involved in planning and leading worship
- *knowledge* of God's word, and which portions of God's word are especially important for a given congregation to hear (and when and why and how)
- *wisdom* to understand the psychological and theological issues that are involved when there is conflict about worship
- *patience* when the congregation is slow to participate fully in certain acts of worship
- *imagination* to generate ideas about which songs, scripts, prayers, and elements will engage a congregation with the power and meaning of a given scriptural theme
- *discipline* to avoid too much innovation. Planning worship is different from putting on an art fair or writing poetry. When we plan worship, we are planning something for a community's use. No community can sustain endless innovation. No community can truly pray with words that are entirely unfamiliar or are creative for their own sake.

**PROVERB 3: Begin worship planning with prayer, scripture reading, and reflection on the needs of the congregation, and rich will be your spiritual rewards.**

## WEEKLY PLANNING

**PROVERB 4: Worship planning should begin with a scripture text; therefore, worship planning begins with the preacher. But naming the text and theme are not enough. Neither is finding a hymn that refers to the text. Happy are they who involve all worship planners in textual study.**

We need to ask questions like: What action will sermon inspire? What act of confession is appropriate to the theme? How will we pray differently in light of this theme?

	<u>Sample 1</u>	<u>Sample 2</u>
Text	Genesis 1	John 15
Theme	The power and imagination of divine creation	Sending of the Spirit
Related Texts: Psalms	8	104
Related Texts: Texts from other testaments	Hebrews 1: 1-4, John 1:1-4	Ezekiel 36, 37
Other texts the sermon will refer to	Proverbs 8	Romans 8
<u>Particular Approaches to Aspects of Worship</u>		
Praise/Thanksgiving	God as creative, all-powerful	God as triune
Penitence	Confess our spoiling of the environment	Confess our presumption, our seeking to live on our own power
Intercession	Prayers for the restoration of all creation	Prayers for the sending of the Spirit
Dedication (action to which the sermon calls us)	Praise—a deep awareness of the immensity and pervasiveness of God’s created power	Discernment—learning ways of discerning the spirits of the age; refusal to limit our vision of what the Spirit might be doing
Lord’s Supper	Highlight notion that bread and wine are gifts of creation that bear spiritual blessing	Highlight notion that the Spirit is the main agent in our communion with Christ—not our own power of imagination or the strength of our own piety

**PROVERB 5: Worship planning meetings are only as good as the individual preparation that precedes them.**

Prepared people can brainstorm! To prepare, you need a good set of resources available in non-circulating section of your church library (order congregational song materials through the Hymn Society, 1-800-THE-HYMN). Once prepared, then brainstorm list of songs, visual aspects, etc., drawing a lot on your study of scripture.

- Congregational Songs and Hymns
- Scripture Texts
- Images and Colors
- Occasions for Prayer
- Participants
- Other Musical Contributions (choral, music team, vocal or instrumental solo, etc.)

Recommended Resources: Prayer Patterns, Visual Aspects

*Book of Common Worship.* Westminster/John Knox Press.

*Book of Common Order.* Church of Scotland.

*New Handbook for the Christian Year.* Abingdon.

H.O. Old, *Leading in Prayer.* Eerdmans.

C. Welton Gaddy. *Symphony for the Senses.*

*So You've Been Asked to Series.* CRC Publications. (4-5 of them)

*A Child Shall Lead: Children in Worship.* Choristers Guild. Includes prayers for children.

Elizabeth J. Sandell, *Including Children in Worship: A Planning Guide for Congregations.* Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991.

Robert Webber. *Planning Blended Worship: The Creative Mixture of Old and New.* Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1998.

Recommended Resources: Congregational Song

*Psalter Hymnal.* CRC Publications.

*Sing! A New Creation.* CRC Publications, forthcoming.

*Renew! Accompaniment Edition.* Hope Publishing.

*Book of Praise.* Presbyterian Church of Canada.

*Presbyterian Hymnal.* Westminster/John Knox Press.

*Songs for Life.* CRC Publications (children's hymnal).

Hymn Society Book Service (1-800-The-Hymn).

**PROVERB 6. Worship planning—in ANY style!—requires a solid, balanced template or default pattern.**

Without it, congregations are subject to the whims of a single leader, to endless innovation, and to a likely imbalance of worship actions. Let spontaneity and improvisation arise out of form and discipline—just like in good jazz music. A good template: a) Features a balance of worship actions (praise, penitence, dedication, prayer, scripture, etc., b) features a pattern that alternates between God’s words to us and our words to God (and helps us experience each for what it really is—not just as another nice song), and c) may exist in greater detail than appears in a printed bulletin.

Major “movements” in worship	<u>Worship Bulletin: Congregation A</u>	<u>Worship Bulletin Template: Congregation B (minimalist bulletin—but still with all the actions in column A)</u>
Gathering	<u>Praise</u> ↓ Call to Worship (scripture) ↑ Acts of Praise ↓ Greeting (scripture)  <u>Confession</u> ↓ Call to Confession (scripture) ↑ Prayer of Confession ↓ Assurance of Pardon (scripture) ⇌ Passing of the Peace ↑ Response of Thanksgiving	Call to Worship and Songs of Praise  Confession of Sin, Declaration of God’s Grace, Exuberant Thanksgiving
Proclamation	↑ Prayer for Illumination ↓ Old Testament Reading ↓ Psalm ↓ New Testament Reading ↓ Sermon	Scripture Reading and Sermon
Response to the Word	↑ Song or Hymn of Response ↑ Creed and/or Testimonials ↑ Prayers of Intercession/Pastoral Prayer ↑ Offering ↑ Offertory Prayer	Responses in Prayer, Testimony, Offering
Lord’s Supper	↓ Invitation to the Table (scripture) ↑ Great Prayer of Thanksgiving ↓ Words of Institution (scripture) ↑ Prayer of Consecration ↓ Communion ↑ Thanksgiving	Lord’s Supper
Sending	↑ Song or Hymn of Dedication ↓ Call to Service (scripture) ↓ Blessing/Benediction (scripture)	Call to Service in God’s World and Blessing

**PROVERB 7: In all aspects of worship, make sure there is a balance of familiar things and things that will stretch the congregation.**

An entire service of unfamiliar music will not enable the congregation to participate. An entire service of overly familiar or often-used examples can lead worship to become cliché. It's too easy then to have worshipers go on automatic pilot. Balance is the key!

**PROVERB 8: Start and end strong.**

Every service will probably have some unfamiliar things in it. But those can be disconcerting if they are placed at the beginning or end of the service. A sturdy congregational song to start and end the service is the first step toward encouraging greater participation.

**PROVERB 9: Leading prayer is a discipline that requires more than our own personal experience.**

Use externally generated prayers to help expand the range, imagery, and focus of the prayers you speak. Try, for example, designing a pastoral prayer as a paraphrase of Psalm 23. Use *Book of Common Worship* prayers as a template. These are valuable even if you pray extemporaneously.

**PROVERB 10: The one who attends to transitions shall be blessed.**

\*Work on your spoken transitions. Worship leaders are the main guides that lead the congregation on their journey through the service. The words that lead from one part of the service to the next are key tools that help in this task. To be honest, many worship leaders don't spend much time at all considering the words they will use. Some refuse to because they react against anything too planned or canned. Some have simply never thought about doing it.

But the words we speak have the power to inspire or frustrate. They can make a visitor feel welcome or unwelcome. They can lead the congregation to focus on the purpose of worship, or get everyone bogged down in mechanics. Many times, when we don't think about the words we say, we end up communicating some inaccurate, dangerous, or hurtful messages. The following are actual lines spoken by worship leaders.

- "Men and women sing the first line together. Men sing the second with the children. Women sing the first and the third. Then everyone finishes it up."
- "Well I guess that now we have to have the confession of sin."
- "Well, I didn't really prepare for this next part of the service."
- "We really haven't had time to rehearse this, but oh well."
- "Ok? Let's see what is next. Well, next we will say the creed."
- "Isn't this more fun than in a traditional worship service?"
- "Wasn't that song great? I'll bet they don't sing that way at the church across the street!"
- "Well, our secretary messed up again, and the song number in the bulletin for this part of the service is wrong."

Often, without intending it, worship leaders say something very different than what they mean. They are utterly confusing. They suggest that worship is routine. They mock another church. They signal that worship is not all that important. They blame someone else for a mistake. None of these comments focuses on the meaning or purpose of what is happening. They are barriers rather than enablers of worship.

To avoid transitions like these, ask the following questions: Are my instructions about the mechanics as concise and clear as possible? Does the transition link two acts of worship, showing how they are related? Does the transition avoid being pedantic or preachy? Is the tone of the transition warm and inviting or cold and inhospitable? Are there especially poignant lines in a song or hymn that you could highlight in your introduction?

Consider these examples:

- “Some of us gather for worship this morning with great joy. Some of us gather with tears. Our opening song is based on a Psalm that expresses both joy and honest pain.”
- “Next, we state precisely what we believe, using the words of the Apostles’ Creed. These words are printed in your worship folder. If you are visiting with us today, we would be happy to explain the joy we have because of these statements. Simply ask one of the greeters at the door at the end of the service.”
- “The sermon ended with a call to confession. Our song of response enables us to just that.”

Consider writing out your transitions ahead of time—even if you don’t refer to your notes in the service. Even if you speak extemporaneously, you’ll do better if you’ve worked out a written version ahead of time. Then after the service, go back and listen to a recording of what you said. Work together with other worship leaders in your congregation to think about ways to improve the hospitality in your spoken transitions.

## CONSIDERING THE BIG PICTURE

**PROVERB 11. Music gets too much attention in most congregations** (ouch—painful for a musician to admit).

We need to attend more to how scripture is read, how thoughtfully we prepare for prayer, how hospitably we celebrate the sacraments. Put music in its place—a significant, but not all-encompassing place.

**PROVERB 12. Music is soul food. God’s people need a balanced diet. Spiritually speaking, we are what we sing. Most congregations really know only 200 songs or hymns. Be fussy about what makes it into your diet.**

### Song Diet Evaluation Sheet

Theme	Newly Written	Long-Loved	More Contemplative	More Exuberant	Simple, Accessible	Complex, Challenging
Praise (25)						
Penitence (10)						
Word of God (6)						
Dedication/Offering (10)						
Baptism (6)						
Lord’s Supper (6)						
Blessing/Dismissal (6)						
Advent/Christmas/ Epiphany (20)						
Lent(10)						
Holy Week (8)						
Easter (6)						

Ascension (5)						
Pentecost/Holy Spirit (6)						
Morning and Evening (4)						
Special Occasions (4)						
Creation/Providence (10)						
Redemption/Salvation (10)						
Church/Mission (10)						
Forgiveness/Healing (10)						
Prayer (10)						
Home and Family (10)						
Society/Justice (10)						
New Creation/Hope (10)						

- ◆ Suppose there are 20,000 songs available. You are then identifying the top 1% of extant resources. We have the luxury of being very, very picky.
- ◆ Suppose that 3/4 of all congregation songs/hymns/canticles sung should be from your list of 200. That is, most of what you do can be familiar, but some will be new and challenging.
- ◆ Suppose that no more than 10 of these 200 might change in a given year, and that at least 5 should change. Our core repertoire should constantly grow, but not too fast.
- ◆ Make sure that there are at least a dozen songs on the list that could be sung at a funeral, or at a time of congregational crisis.

**PROVERB 13: Promote overall congregational health with good models for organizing people and communication. Don't neglect tasks of supervision and evaluation—which should primarily function to encourage and support the weekly planners and leaders.**

FUNCTIONS:	Worship Leadership	Nuts and Bolts of Weekly Worship Planning (selecting participants, choosing music, preparing prayers, order of service, etc.)	Specific Supervision of Worship	Ultimate Supervision of Worship (decisions about number and identity of each service, overall philosophy, etc.)
Example 1	Pastor, Organist	Pastor	Worship Committee	Council/Session/Board—only talk about worship when it's a problem
Example 2	Worship Teams + preacher (5 teams on a rotating basis)	Worship Teams (same team who leads, plans the service)	None—has been disbanded	Council: Little—only talk about worship when it's a problem
Examples generated in this session . . .				

**PROVERB 14. Worship planners are stewards of gifts given to members of the congregation**

Generate lists of spiritually gifted leaders. Chart their involvement. Look for people, especially young people, who could be encouraged to develop those gifts.

People/Gifts Inventory (sample)

Name	Phone	Particular gifts (prayer, scripture reading, drama, musical instrument, etc).	Services in which they participated this year	Notes, Comments
Jorge Maldez				
Mary Smith				
Antonio Langham				
Okke Van Spee				

**PROVERB 15. Worship requires thoughtful spiritually-informed evaluation—not surveys of popular opinions and tastes.**

Questions for Council, Worship Committee Discussions

Note focus not on mechanics of worship, but on larger issues. These larger issues will generate discussions of mechanics and techniques, but then they will be tied to a larger purpose.

1. Which services, acts of worship have been particularly spiritually nourishing?
2. How have we done in really living into scripture in recent services?
3. How have we done in praying—honestly, redemptively, expansively?
4. How have we done in extending hospitality in our worship?

**THE LAST PROVERB: The nuts and bolts are a means to an end, not an end in themselves.**

Hone the ability to work hard, and then to set aside worry, to engage in worship, to enjoy and glorify God:

“We have stuck to founding, building singing, ringing, to vestments, incense burning, and to all the additional preparations for divine worship up to the point that we consider this preparation the real, main divine worship and do not know how to speak of any other. And we are acting as wisely as the man who wants to build a house and spends all his goods on the scaffolding and never, as long as he lives, gets far enough along to lay one stone of his house.”

—Martin Luther (E. Plass, *What Luther Says*, Concordia, 1959, vol. 1, p. 302).

“We have stuck to Powerpoint, sound systems, children’s messages, drama skits, and seekerfriendliness up to the point that we consider this all the real divine worship, and we do not know how to speak of any other. We are acting as wisely as the one who wants to surf the internet, but spends all available resources on a big monitor, and so has none left over for internet service, and thus never has the chance to actually get online.”

—anonymous, 2001