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Discussion starters offered by the National Working Group on Doctrine

Worksheet 11: Worship

Blessed is the Holy Trinity of love, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, One God, mothering all creation and blessed is the reign of God, now and ever to the ages of ages. Amen.

(Call to worship 5, Uniting in Worship 2)

Word and sacrament: gracious divine self-revelation

In worship, we respond to God's invitation to us to be loved. But worship is not only our human response. The central things which give Christian worship its shape—word and sacrament—are *God's initiative* to care for us, to speak to us, to touch our lives.

The Uniting Church emerged from an ecumenical tradition which affirms that word and sacrament are means of divine self-giving, of God's own gracious self-revelation. When the church worships, it gathers in gratitude, resolve and commitment around these central things. Whatever else Christian worship may or may not involve, it involves word—in holy scripture; and sacrament—in holy baptism and holy communion.



Expression and impression

To a certain extent, worship is about *expression*. In order to respond to God, we express the realities of our lives and the range of our emotions. We express our sense of our felt-needs and our immersion in particular cultures, communities, events and moments of history. But because word and sacrament are divine initiatives, worship is also about *impression*. Word and sacrament impress things upon us, giving shape to our encounter with God. Word and sacrament invite us to find ourselves within strong and enduring narratives of God's ways with the world, they give us promises of God's presence, they yield practices that are given by Christ (think "do this", "go baptise".) They place us in a large company of others: we share these impressions with Christian people down the ages and around the world as we worship.

Note

This sheet is part of a series on theology in the 21st century. It is prepared for the National Assembly by the Working Group on Doctrine as a discussion starter for small groups, in congregations, faith communities or other settings. It may also be used for personal reflection. Low resolution copies of this sheet can be downloaded free of charge from the Doctrine website: www.assembly.uca.org.au/doctrine.

Patterns for worship

As part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, the Uniting Church holds that word and sacrament are means of God's self-giving and this is the key reason why it orders its worship in a particular way. The Service of the Lord's Day is always ordered into the ecumenical four-fold shape:

- The Gathering of the People of God;
- The Service of the Word;
- The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper;
- The Sending Forth of the People of God.

Questions

Recall a significant experience of worship. What made it so?

Comment on worship involving both expression and impression.

How is your congregation's worship both of and for the people?

Discuss the shape of worship and working flexibly within it.

“Liturgy”: “of” and “for” the people

The public worship of the church is often referred to as liturgy. “Liturgy” conflates two Greek words – “work” and “people.” It is most commonly rendered “work of the people,” leading to a stress that worship must involve the *participation* of the people: never “done to” a congregation by a leader, never done in a way that denies the gathered community’s identity as a “royal priesthood,” as Christian people are collectively called in scripture. Hence, *Uniting in Worship 2* emphasises that “the congregation is not an audience.” A gathering for Christian worship is meant to be a fully communal activity to which all may bring their varied and different gifts.

Liturgy can also be rendered “work for the people”, leading to a stress on worship as public service, done by the church on behalf of the world, always looking to the world of which it is a part, always carrying the needs of the wider world into itself, and never a private gathering, nor cliquey or self-obsessed, the “in-house” activity of an “in-crowd.” A gathering for Christian worship is meant to be robustly public – diverse, heterogeneous, open, mixed. It has a strong centre in word and sacrament, but very wide horizons.



Further Resources

- Assembly worship website: assembly.uca.org.au
- Songs that Unite website: www.songsthatunite.org.au
- Uniting Church in Australia, *Uniting in Worship 2* (Sydney, Uniting Church Press, 2005), CD- ROM 2010.
- Stephen Burns, *Pilgrim People: An Invitation to Worship in the Uniting Church* (Adelaide, MediaCom, 2012)
- Stephen Burns, *Worship and Ministry: Shaped Towards God* (Melbourne, Mosaic Press, 2012)
- Robert Gribben, *Uniting in Thanksgiving* (Uniting Academic Press, 2008)
- Kimberly Bracken Long, *The Worshiping Body: The Art of Leading Worship* (WJKP, 2009)
- Anita Monro and Stephen Burns, eds, *Christian Worship in Australia* (Strathfield, St Pauls Publications, 2009)
- Bryan Spinks, *The Worship Mall* (London, SPCK, 2010)



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Uniting in Worship

The verb “uniting” can be used in different ways, accenting different dimensions of the Uniting Church’s commitments.

On the one hand, “uniting” can be understood to refer to the *church’s ecumenical commitments*. The “uniting” in the “The Uniting Church” indicates that the UCA endeavours to shape patterns of worship, patterns of scripture reading (the lectionary), and patterns of words (sometimes called “the prayers we have in common”) with worshippers in many other Christian traditions. For this reason, these features give shape to *Uniting in Worship 2*.

On the other hand, “uniting” can be understood to refer to particular marks of *denominational distinctiveness*, which mark out space between the Uniting Church and other Christian traditions. Like its prior traditions, the Uniting Church treasures a balance of freedom and form in its liturgical life. Its liturgical directory *Uniting in Worship 2* (UiW2) is not imposed but nevertheless a “standard” and “norm” for worship (UiW2, pp. 8-9). It includes distinctive material for:

- voicing lament (UiW2, pp. 199-202),
- for use at the end of marriage (UiW2, pp. 546-557),
- Easter milk and honey for the newly initiated (UiW2, p. 649),
- as well as by shaping its prayer with many human languages (UiW2, pp. 334-44),
- expansive language (UiW2, pp. 10-11),
- and by taking liturgical forms common to many churches and giving them Australian and/or Uniting accents (e.g. UiW2, pp. 44-54, 317).

The dual sense of “uniting” helps both to express worship authentically in Australian contexts as well as holding the Uniting Church close to the wider church around the world.