

WORSHIPPING TOGETHER

Notes on preparing an Ecumenical Service

I thank the Archdiocesan Ecumenical Commission most warmly for formulating these 'Notes on preparing an Ecumenical Service'. Christians come together to pray as a natural consequence of their faith. Much experience has been gathered as to the best ways of public prayer together. I am grateful for these notes which are a reflection on that experience and which I trust will be helpful.

+ VINCENT NICHOLS, Archbishop of Birmingham

In worship, we meet with Almighty God, both as individuals and a community. God, the Creator, our Saviour and the Giver of Life, enables us to offer prayers of praise, thanksgiving and petition in a spirit of adoration. Our worship deepens a communion with God and with one another, which leads us to be more effective partakers in Christ's Priesthood, which is also Prophetic, through proclamation, and Kingly, through service. Whenever we pray, we are renewed to 'Go in the peace of Christ, to love and serve the Lord'.

Why?

Local churches may wish to worship together for a variety of reasons, including:

- SEASONAL FEASTS common to us all; for example: Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, the Ascension;
- PATRONAL FEAST, FOUNDER'S DAY or CHURCH ANNIVERSARY celebrations which we may like to share in a fuller way than just by inviting guests from other Churches;
- Established Ecumenical Celebrations such as ONE WORLD WEEK, THE WOMEN'S WORLD DAY OF PRAYER, OCTAVE OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY, CHRISTIAN AID WEEK, CAFOD FAMILY FAST DAYS, NATIONAL and LOCAL CIVIC OCCASIONS.

How?

Involve Clergy and Laity of all the participating Churches in the preparation of a Service. They should consider the following:

- PURPOSE: the reason for the Service. What is its theme? Is it a celebration, a commemoration etc.?
- PLAN: date, venue, time of day, leader(s), speaker(s), musicians and other personnel well ahead. Avoid clashing with events in participating Churches.
- PREPARE: outline of Service. It may be more coherent if initially prepared by one person in consultation with the Churches' representatives.
- PUBLICISE: posters, Church notices (printed and verbal) and magazines, press release, local radio.
- PARTICIPATE: ensure that all the Churches have a role in the Service. The Congregation should have opportunities to participate. Various traditions, as reflecting the participants, may be included; not everyone can cope with a string of Choruses, Taize chants or a dominant Christian Rock band. Make sure everyone has an Order of Service; avoid printing every word to be used. Include responses to Intercessions and dialogues at beginning and end of Readings: they vary between Denominations. Include 'rubrics' as necessary. Use inclusive language as far as is possible.
- PROVIDE: suitable refreshments and the opportunity for conversation and social contact after the Service. The social aspect of religion should not be overlooked. If one of a series of Services in different Churches, make sure that refreshments are standardised to avoid vying with one another!

- PRAY: for guidance of the Holy Spirit and for a successful outcome. A Vigil of Prayer may be suitable when the Service is to be a really major event.

The Service could include the following elements, not necessarily in this order:

- CALL TO WORSHIP / INTROIT / SILENCE or MUSIC TO SETTLE.
- CONFESSION / REPENTANCE, with 'assurance of forgiveness'.
- PRAISE AND THANKSGIVING.
- SCRIPTURE PROCLAMATION: some Churches expect there to be a Gospel reading included. Which translation? Drama and Mime may be used.
- EXPOSITION: the Sermon or Breaking of the Word. Who will preach, lead a Meditation or a Dialogue?
- PRAYERS and INTERCESSION: formal, extempore and silent; the Lord's Prayer should be included, and be printed in the Order of Service – different versions are in use. Be sensitive to possible ignorance of misunderstandings: a word of explanation will be appreciated if prayers involving Mary and the Saints are used.
- RENEWAL / COMMITMENT / REDEDICATION: a pledge to action, either personal or communal.
- BLESSING and DISMISSAL.
- MUSIC: Instruments and Vocal. Hymns should be well known, or easily picked up. New words often fit a well-known tune (though what is "well-known" may differ from one congregation to another). A short rehearsal before the Service may be helpful. A Hymn new to everyone could be learned, including a piece written for the occasion. Check copyrights for printed items.

Surroundings:

Do not underestimate the strangeness for those coming into an unfamiliar church environment. There is the need to combine a warm welcome and a sense of being with the Lord. How are the Church's furnishings (assuming that a Church is being used) to be utilised, if at all?

- ALTAR / COMMUNION TABLE: as the Service will probably not be Eucharistic, it should be respected and not used as a convenient shelf.
- PULPIT / LECTERN: how can they be best used?
- SOUND SYSTEM: is it versatile and easy to use? Arrange for Readers etc. to practise.

Signs and Symbols, familiar or strange:

- SIGN OF PEACE: some people prefer a certain formality rather than a general safari, with exuberant hugs and kisses. Remember that it is a symbol!
- WATER: life giving, cleansing, refreshing, a reminder of our Baptism (though be aware that The Salvation Army and the Religious Society of Friends do not practise water baptism.)
- CANDLES: a symbol of prayer, the Light of Christ.
- INCENSE: a sense of the holy and of prayer.
- BLESSINGS / DEDICATIONS / SIGNS OF HEALING: touch may be appropriate.
- FOOD: bread and wine, or anything that could be confused with the Eucharist, is best avoided, or used with great care so as to avoid any possible ambiguity.
- PICTURES / VISUAL AIDS: explain existing Stained Glass Windows, Icons, Statues; use Pictures, Slides, etc..
- RESOURCES: each Church has its own gifts to offer and share; let them be used.

Personnel:

In a United Service, no one person should dominate the Service, though there should be someone who presides and leads it. Get names, titles, positions-held correct! Our equality in Christ is emphasised by the outward signs we use, for example:

- ROBES: agree beforehand what the Clergy, Choir etc. are to wear, and tell them in advance.
- PROCESSIONS: again, tell the participants in advance. Keep them simple, dignified and inclusive; Church members can be hurt if their Minister is in the pews, while others process. Make sure that route and choreography are clear and that there is adequate seating.

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