

How to put a service together

1 Structure

The first thing to do is to read the authorized introduction to A Service of the Word [here](#). From this you will see that there are three main sections, like three tubs into which you are going to put the different items in the service; Preparation, The Liturgy of the Word, Prayers. Into these tubs you put the ingredients, the different items in the service. Add to these a beginning and an ending and you have the main outline.

There are four different kinds of ingredients and it is important that there is a balance in the way these are used:

Word | Prayer | Praise | Action

It is a bit like preparing a meal with three courses, plus an appetizer at the beginning and coffee at the end. Each course has a number of different ingredients, which can be used more than once in different combinations in different courses. It is worth noting that for the principal service on a Sunday certain ingredients, which are otherwise optional, are required: an authorized confession and absolution, an authorized creed or affirmation of faith, and a sermon.

The basic structure for A Service of the Word is set out [here](#) and for A Service of the Word with Holy Communion [here](#). For more background on the structure see [here](#). It is important to have a clear structure such as that in A Service of the Word, even though the detail may vary from week to week. The emphasis on different parts of the structure may be varied according to the theme.

2 Theme and direction

The Introduction to A Service of the Word says:

Leading people in worship is leading people into mystery, into the unknown and yet the familiar. This spiritual activity is much more than getting the words or the sections in the right order. The primary object in the careful planning and leading of the service is the spiritual direction which enables the whole congregation to come into the presence of God to give him glory.

Care should be taken to ensure that there is some overall direction, some sense of cohesion, of going somewhere, some development in the congregation's relationship to God, reflected in the service structure. Sometimes this is provided by a clear theme. The theme may be determined by the occasion or season, such as Mothering Sunday or Christmas, or by some local event, such as a patronal festival or jazz festival.

The theme will also be regularly determined by the Bible readings. Sometimes no clear overall theme will emerge, and the Bible reading, prayers and praise will be left, like coloured glass in a kaleidoscope, to cast light on one another and to provide, in the interplay of patterns, different

pictures for different people in the congregation. The important thing is to recognize which of these routes is being followed. Ask the question, either on your own or in a planning group, 'What do we expect to happen to people in this service? What will be the outcomes in terms of Christian growth, education, deepening appreciation of God, experience of him in worship and praise, and in obedience to his word?' And that outcome, and the development through the service, will be partly determined by giving some attention to the emotional flow of the service. Does it start quietly and build up, start on a 'high' and become reflective, or have a climax in the middle?

3 The Word

The Introduction says this is 'the heart of the service', and this is the best place to begin to look at the ingredients which will sometimes determine the theme for the service.

- * What are the Bible readings? The authorized Lectionary will be the natural starting point, and must be followed in the periods around Christmas and Easter. This helps to keep the whole church together on the same track as we tell the stories of Jesus' birth, death and resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit. At other times other routes may be followed, such as those in Resource Section C ([here](#)) or a specially designed local teaching scheme.
- * If occasion demands, there need only be one reading, except that if the service is Holy Communion, there should be two readings, one of which should be from the Gospels.
- * How are other readings going to be presented? See [here](#) for examples.
- * What psalms, Scripture, songs or canticles are to be used? Begin to think about music resources and preparation. See [here](#) (Psalms) and [here](#) (Music).
- * Begin to plan the sermon. If the preacher is not part of the planning group, it is important to know the main drift of the sermon so that other items in the service support rather than conflict with this part of the Word. Does it need one 'slot' or more? Note 7 to A Service of the Word ([here](#)) gives a new interpretation to the word 'sermon' which 'includes less formal exposition, the use of drama, interviews, discussion, audio-visuals and the insertion of hymns or other sections of the service between parts of the sermon'.

4 Prayer

Look at the Prayer section of the service, and also the Preparation section, as both penitence and the collect may be included in the prayers.

Note 4 ([here](#)) reminds us about the need for silence. What form should the prayers take?

- * An outline form filled in by the minister
- * An outline form with extempore prayer or biddings from the congregation, or from a group
- * A litany or responsive intercession
- * A series of set prayers

It is best not to mix the forms too much, though a set prayer may be a good way to end or sum up one of the other forms. The Lord's Prayer and a collect should be used at every Sunday service.

5 Praise

Praise may be said or sung. Select hymns, songs or items from the Praise section of *New Patterns* or elsewhere. See [here](#) for further ideas. A set of versicles and responses (see [here](#) for examples) may be used in the Preparation or elsewhere.

6 Action

This is not the same kind of thing as the other three ingredients; rather, it describes the way in which something is done. For example, dramatic action might interpret the Word, or a procession or dance might help to express praise. So something might be done with music, or followed by silence, or accompanied by visuals, gestures or symbols. There might be a movement by the congregation, such as standing or joining hands, movement with an object, e.g. a candle or Bible, a change in lighting or visual presentation. See [here](#) for further examination of this.

The action may be the climax towards which the service moves, or an action that begins the worship and sets the theme for it.

7 Beginning and ending

These are dealt with in the paragraphs headed 'Preparation' and 'Conclusion' in the authorized Introduction to A Service of the Word ([here](#)), together with Notes 1, 2 and 9 ([here](#)).

- * Decide how the service is to begin and end: each should be clear.
- * Decide what is to go into 'The Preparation', and what other material you want to add. Prayers of Penitence, with an authorized form of confession and absolution (see Resource Section B, [here](#) and *Common Worship*, pages 122-137), may come here or in 'Prayers'. The collect may also come later in that section.

- * Decide whether and where to add a creed or affirmation of faith (see Resource Section E, [here](#)), notices, collection, invitations or biddings, explanation, silence. See [here](#) for some ideas about inserting things like this into services.
- * Decide how these ingredients relate to the aim and structure of the rest of the service. For example, prayers of penitence might be part of the preparation at the beginning, to clear away any barrier to hearing God, or they could be the climax towards which the service moves (as in an Ash Wednesday service). The full structure might then look like one of the following samples.

Example 1: A block structure

Items you must include

Additional items

for a Principal Service on Sunday

(though individual items and order will vary)

you may want to add

Preparation

Greeting

1

Scripture sentence

2

Hymn

3

Opening prayer

4

Invitation

*Confession

5

*Forgiveness

6

Word

7

Introduction

Old Testament

8

Psalm or paraphrase

9

New Testament

10

11

Song or hymn

Talk

12

*Creed

13

14

Hymn

Prayer

*Collect

15

Form of intercession

16

Praise

17

Versicles and responses

18

Hymn

Action

19

All stand while the candle is carried out

Blessing or ending

20

**Authorized texts must be used*

Example 2: A conversation structure

Word | Prayer | Praise | Action may come many times within the same service. Imagine a conversation between God and the congregation. The **Word** items present what God is saying, and the other three items may be used as the response or reply to God. The service may be built from a series of **Presentation** and **Response** units, like building blocks. This example is from Morning Prayer in *The Book of Common Prayer*:

Presentation

Response

God Speaks

We Speak

Word

Scripture Sentence

Praise

Hymn of adoration

Word

Invitation

Prayer

Confession

Prayer

Declaration of forgiveness

Praise

Open our lips...

Glory be...

Canticle

Word

Psalm

Old Testament

Praise

Canticle

Word

New Testament

Praise

Canticle

Creed

Lord’s Prayer

Collect

Word

Sermon

Themes

A theme may determine the pattern of the worship. The traditional Morning and Evening Prayer pattern allows the word and praise to throw light on each other. A thematic approach very often means that the worship leader decides the way the word is to be heard, and the response that needs to be made. Care must be taken to make sure that the whole service does not become a sermon. This tends to happen when explanations and exhortations introduce every item.

Some examples of a thematic approach

- * Maundy Thursday foot-washing
- * Baptism service: see [here](#)

Guidelines

When you have completed the service outline, consider this checklist. Parts of this are amplified in the descriptive commentary sections that follow.

- * Is there a balance between word, prayer, praise and action? For instance the Word section may be top heavy with long readings and long introductions, or too many short readings.
- * Is the worship directed to God, addressing him rather than the people?
- * Is the structure and direction of the service clear enough for people to know where it is going? Does the service have an overall coherence, or is it just one item after another?
- * When is the climax to the service? If there is more than one, is that deliberate? Is the emotional or spiritual climax the same as the climactic moment in terms of music or words or congregational action? There is no 'right' answer, but it helps if service planners are aware of these ways in which the service develops.
- * What space is there for reflection or silence in the service?
- * How much of the service might be classed as 'entertainment'? Is this justified? Is there a balance between receiving (listening, watching,

contemplating) and responding? Check on posture: is there too much sitting down or standing up at one time? Or, conversely, are people bobbing up and down too much? Is there enough action?

* Is the music used in such a way as to further and develop the main thrust of the service? Is there too much musical praise, with too many choir items, or too long a section of choruses from the music group, or hymns too close to one another?

* Does the form of service enable the gifts of a variety of people in the church to be used in both planning and taking part?

* Compare this service with other services in the month. An occasional completely new form of worship may stimulate people to discover new dimensions to their ordinary worship, but a new pattern each week may be confusing and unsettling, particularly to children. If people are familiar with both structure and content of the service, they feel more secure and can take part more easily. For an all-age service, for instance, it may be better to have a standard structure, with 'windows' or 'slots' which can be changed from week to week.

* Especially if you are planning 'family worship', check that the contents do not exclude some in the congregation, e.g. children, single people, the bereaved, members of broken families. It is hurtful and not constructive to require a mixed congregation simply to join in prayers thanking God for our homes and families and all the happiness that parents and children share.

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