

The Lord promises: 'Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them' (Matthew 18:28). On account of this promise, small groups of Christians meeting in worship can be confident that they receive the fullness of the Lord's gracious presence among them, as they hear the gospel and receive the sacraments. In fact, worship with small numbers can provide a richness that is not possible in a larger gathering, especially as it opens the possibility for greater flexibility and interaction in the sermon and the prayers. Nevertheless, special considerations must be made for worship where numbers are small, and these guidelines should be kept in mind when preparing to lead or participate in such services.

Simplicity

In worship with small numbers, the general rule is to keep things simple. In larger groups people can be 'carried' through times of distraction or inattention; they can also be encouraged to sing or respond with greater strength. When numbers are small, people's singing, responses, and attention or lack of attention are more exposed. Simplifying the liturgy according to the guidelines of the church, keeping the sermon shorter, and the careful selection and adaptation of the songs or hymns chosen, can all be helpful for this reason.

Preaching

In delivering a sermon to a larger number of people, it is usually necessary to adopt a more formal and less personal style of speaking than is used in everyday conversation. In worship with small numbers, it can be more suitable to use a more flexible and even interactive delivery of the sermon. Some possibilities are:

- Inviting discussion of the Bible readings for the day as part of the address.
- Using the time set aside for the sermon to have a Bible study on passages or themes not necessarily related to the readings for the day.
- Adopting a dialogue style – introducing non-rhetorical questions as part of the sermon, and inviting discussion on points that are raised in the sermon.

Liturgical Space

Some of the issues to consider for smaller congregations with respect to liturgical space are:

- The distance from the worship leader and the congregation
- The distance of the congregation members from each other
- The distance between the congregation and the lectern/pulpit or the altar

It is important to arrange the liturgical space so that people are able to sing easily together, to hear the sermon without difficulty and, if it is a service with holy communion, to be close to the altar. According to the nature of the liturgical space, the seating may have to be rearranged or a moveable lectern/reading stand used.

Since smaller numbers often meet in halls, homes, or even outdoors, special care needs to be taken in creating worship spaces where a clear focus on the reading of the Scriptures and the celebration of the Lord's supper is maintained. A clearly discernable place from where the Scriptures will be read and from where the Lord's supper will be celebrated can be created by setting aside the furniture that will be used and by using candles, a cross, cloth covers, and other suitable symbols.

Singing

Some of the issues small congregations may need to consider with respect to singing are:

- A lack of strong singers to give a good lead
- A lack of musicians to accompany the singing
- A lack of appropriate instrumentation for leading a small group in song

It is important to ensure that the volume of the music is appropriate to the size of the congregation, and that the hymns or songs that are chosen should be well known to the members of the congregation. If the hymns or songs are long, some verses may need to be omitted, unless there are strong singers who are willing to give a strong lead. Even if strong singers are present, it can be difficult for smaller congregations to sing songs or hymns that are too high (eg. more than a tone above 'C'). If there is no musician, and if there are no confident singers, it may be necessary to use spoken orders only, or to include only very well known and short hymns or songs. Recorded music or midi files can be used to accompany singing, if there is a technically competent person ready to operate the necessary equipment.

The Liturgy

Given the greater flexibility in preaching and prayer, worship in small numbers can, in fact, be a more communal experience for those involved. Nevertheless, some of the issues to consider with respect to the setting of the liturgy in such circumstances are:

- A possible lack of confidence if the setting is sung
- A lack of someone confident to lead worship

In worship with small numbers, it is best to use spoken forms of the liturgy, or to use settings of the *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, *Sanctus*, and *Agnus Dei* that are very well known to, and easily sung by, the congregation. It is generally preferable to keep the setting as simple as possible. In lay-led services, if there is no one person confident to lead the liturgy, it may be necessary to divide the different roles among the people present, so that one leads the prayers, one reads the sermon, one reads the Bible passages, etc.

Prayer

In worship with small numbers, different possibilities present themselves for prayer:

- The leader may, either before the service or at the time of prayer, ask those present for any prayer needs to be included in the general intercessions
- The members of the congregation may offer their own intercessions as part of the prayer, in which case prayers are best kept short with the use of a simple

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Adopted by CoW
27 August 2009
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pattern for prayer, such as thanksgiving with petition, eg. “We thank you...
Please...”

- Periods of silence may be more easily included as part of the time for prayer

With the promise, ‘Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them’, we can prepare worship for small congregations, open to all the opportunities they have to offer.