

Austin College Worship: Rules and Guiding Principles

The following postings from the website "WorshipHelps" summarize the unique principles of worship life at Austin College.

SHARED LEADERSHIP

Worship at Austin College—a Presbyterian Church (USA)-related college in Sherman, Texas—includes the explicit assumption that all who attend are capable of participating in the leadership of worship. For this reason, after particular students and the College Chaplain plan a given service, a program is prepared that contains every word that anyone will say during the service (with the exception of the Proclamation of the Word and the Words of Institution). Worshipers always sit in a circle around the Communion Table. The portions spoken or sung by the congregation as a whole are printed in bold type. The portions to be read by an individual voice are printed in standard type. The single-voice sections are printed with a line skipped between each sentence or section. Whenever a line is skipped, the next person around the circle reads the next line. In this way, the leadership of the service moves around the circle.

No participant is required to do this. At the beginning of each service, this "Shared Leadership" model is explained and students who do not wish to read are encouraged to inform the persons on either side of them. Then they are simply skipped over as the leadership passes from participant.

This model has proven to be very engaging and liberating for 18-22 year olds who often have little or no experience participating in worship leadership. Over a span of weeks, these services develop a rhythm that is inclusive of all participants, regardless of their particular denominational backgrounds.

Although some students initially express impatience with what they perceive to be the lack of spontaneity in this model, most of them eventually come to appreciate the exposure to the language and rhythms of worship that such a model entails. The fact that the services are planned by students and the Chaplain together helps to ensure that the language employed is authentic and accessible for the whole worshipping community.

SPONTANEOUS WORSHIP SPACE

Our worship space is used for many other activities throughout the week. Chairs are stacked around the edge of the room and brought out and used by various groups. I have come to think of this multiple use of our worship space as an advantage for our worshipping community. Before each service, the Communion Table is placed in the room—not necessarily in the same place from week to week—and bread, wine, and

water are placed on the Table, but no other advanced preparations are made. As worshipers enter, they each take one chair, place in the worship space, and take their seat. Worshipers with physical limitations are given help, but their chairs are not brought into the circle until they are present. No chairs are set up in anticipation of the arrival of others. There are a few significant features of this arrangement:

- the worshipping community creates its own space;
- the circle of chairs is always exactly the right size;
- the room never looks exactly the same for any two services; and
- worshipers never walk into a room that has been prepared and arranged by someone else who has preconceived notions about how the space is “supposed” to look.

This seemingly insignificant feature of weekly worship has helped a group of 30-40 college students from a variety of Christian traditions take ownership of the weekly worship life of the particular community of which they are currently a part. Along with shared leadership, shared meals after worship, and regular reflection, this feature has helped a particular community of college students develop a unique and authentic worship life.

MULTILINGUAL LORD’S PRAYER

In order to illustrate and remember the difference between unity and uniformity, our worshipping community occasionally prays the Lord’s Prayer in the following way:

Persons who can recite the Lord’s Prayer in a language other than English are invited to do so.

Others are invited to recite the Lord’s Prayer as they learned it.

Participants unfamiliar with the Lord’s Prayer, or who desire to recite it in Spanish are invited to read one of the versions below:

***Our Father
Who art in heaven
Hallowed be Thy name
Thy Kingdom come.
Thy will be done.***

*Padre nuestro
que estás en los cielos,
santificado sea tu nombre.
Venga tu reino.
Hágase tu voluntad,*

On Earth as it is in heaven.

*como en el cielo,
así también en la tierra.*

Give us this day our daily bread

*El pan nuestro de
cada día, dánoslo hoy.*

***And forgive us our debts
As we forgive our debtors***

*Y perdónanos nuestras deudas,
como también nosotros perdonamos a
nuestros deudores.*

***And lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from evil;
For Thine is the kingdom,
And the power,
And the glory
Forever.
Amen.***

*Y no metas en tentación,
mas líbranos del mal;
porque tuyo es el reino,
y el poder,
y la gloria,
por todos los siglos.
Amén.*

When the Lord's Prayer is recited in this way, worshipers are able to recognize a rhythm and commonality to this most universal of Christian prayers that transcend the boundaries of language or particular translations of scripture.

FIRST PERSON PLURAL CHARGE AND BENEDICTION

The following can be read in unison or by a different worshiper for each line.

As people who have heard the Easter message
We will go out into the world in peace.
We will have courage.
We will hold on tight to all that is good.
We will return no one evil for evil.
We will support the weak.
We will strengthen the fainthearted.
We will honor all people.
We will love and serve the Lord.
We will share what we have.
We will speak the truth lovingly.
We will clean up our own messes.
We will use the brains God gave us.
We will act like gifted and beloved people.
Because we know that IS what we are.
And we will go with the full confidence
That the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ;
The love of God;
And the communion of the Holy Spirit
ARE with us all;
Today;
Tomorrow;
And forever.
Christ is risen!

**He is risen indeed!
Alleluia! Amen.**

“SPIN THE BOTTLE” KISS OF PEACE AND COMMUNION

While planning a worship service at Austin College in Sherman, Texas, one student said, “If we’re going to do the Kiss of Peace, can we play Spin the Bottle?” Although her comment was intended as a joke, she and the other students—with the encouragement of the college chaplain—developed a version of “Spin the Bottle” as an appropriate and authentic part of our Christian communion service.

After the Invitation to the Lord’s Table, Eucharistic Prayer, and Words of Institution, a worshiper who was chosen before the service began, took an empty water bottle and spun it on the floor of the Chapel. When it came to a stop, the first worshiper and the worshiper toward whom the bottle was pointing met in the middle of the Chapel, exchanged the Mar Thoma Kiss of Peace, and then went to the communion table and served the Eucharist to each other.

Then the next worshiper spun the bottle and met the person toward whom it pointed in the middle of the Chapel. They exchanged the Mar Thoma Kiss of Peace and went to the Table and served the Sacrament to each other.

We learned about the “Mar Thoma” Kiss of Peace from an Austin College student who was part of the Mar Thoma Church of India. We have begun to use it often in our worship because it is an appropriate and non-threatening way for worshipers to touch each other.

To exchange the Mar Thoma Kiss of Peace, two worshipers face each other, extend their hands forward, and then touch hands so that the right hand of each worshiper is between the palms of the two hands of the other. One worshiper then says, “The peace of Christ be with you,” and the other responds, “And also with you.”

Students find this to be an enriching part of worship because—with a little assisted reflection—they realize that they might be paired with a close friend or they might be paired with a fellow worshiper whom they had not even known before the service began. In either case, worshipers are reminded that our lives as Christians—as the Body of Christ in the world—might involve both those to whom we are closest and others who we may not know at all.

AN EXPERIMENT IN “CROSS-CULTURAL” WORSHIP

Paul’s sermon in Athens (Acts 17:22-31) is substantially different from any of his other sermons. While his other sermons are identifiably Pharisaical and present the gospel in a way that would be accessible to a predominantly Jewish audience, the Athenian sermon employs patterns and concepts which were common to first century Athens. It is a significant and noteworthy accomplishment on Paul’s part and it may be taken as a

mandate to subsequent Christians always to be prepared to articulate the gospel message using new and distinct cultural patterns. While the content of the Gospel is always consistent, the form in which the good news of Jesus Christ is presented should always be flexible. What follows are excerpts from a somewhat playful worship service that was designed to illustrate to a worshiping community the issues and possibilities involved in attempting to articulate a Christian worship service in a particular context.

CALL TO WORSHIP (Deut. 10:17-19)

The Lord our God is God of gods;
the source of all that's right

Creating, loving, awesome God
of everlasting might

Our God is never partial,
never takes a bribe,

God treats us all with justice—
everyone in every tribe.

For orphans and for widows,
and for those who aren't from here

Those no one else looks out for:
God keeps them safe from fear

God says, "Here's instruction
for rightly loving me:

Always love the strangers—
that's what you used to be."

SCRIPTURE LESSON AND PROCLAMATION—

Luke 10:30-37 and Horton Hears a Who (Theodore Geisel, 1934)

INVITATION TO THE LORD'S TABLE

Friends, this is a joyful feast,
God's kin will come from west and east
To gather in this sacred place
And meet with Jesus face to face
Come one, come all, and don't be scared
For you a meal has been prepared
Around this holy table here
To share with Christians far and near.

GREAT PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

I pray the Lord will be with you

We pray “The Lord be with you,” too.

Lift up your hearts, oh lift them high!

“We lift them up,” is our reply.

To God give all your thanks and praise

It’s right to do that every day

God, you’re holy and adored

And blest is Jesus Christ our Lord.

You showed yourself in flesh and light

And saved us from our mortal plight

When Jesus Christ was first baptized

Your presence there was recognized

He walked and spoke and saved and blessed

The lonely, poor, sick, or oppressed

In him we see your grace and power

Even in our darkest hour

Christ died but rose by Holy Spirit

And that’s good news for all who hear it.

For by your grace we’ve all been lifted

We’ve all been made belov’d and gifted

To live and work with all the saints

And share Christ’s love without constraint

That love we know will never end

We give you thanks, O God, AMEN!

WORDS OF INSTITUTION

The night Jesus Christ was betrayed to the feds

Our Savior stood up after supper and said,

“This here is my body—right here in this bread.

And this cup holds my blood which for you will be shed.

When you eat this bread and drink juice or Chablis

I want you to act in remembrance of me.

For in this holy meal, good *madames* and *monsieurs*,

My body and life will become part of yours.”

SHARING OF THE ELEMENTS

“The Body of Christ, which was broken for you.

The Blood of our Lord, which was shed for you, too.”

LORD’S PRAYER (Unison)

Our Father who in heaven art

Respected be your name

Thy kingdom come; thy will be done

In Heav’n and Earth the same

Our daily bread, please, to us give

**Forgive our sins as we forgive
Don't lead us where we might be tempted
But make all evil things preempted
Yours is the kingdom, pow'r, and glory
And that will always be the story.**

CHARGE AND BENEDICTION

Now go be courageous and peaceful and good
Act beloved and gifted like you know you should
And always remember the point of it all
A person's a person no matter how small.