

Leading Worship for all the senses – a Guide

Canon Donna Joy

The Selves We Offer in Worship Leadership

In this section, we take a gentle look at ourselves. It is we, with all our human glory and human frailty, that we bring to worship. In the arc of the story of the relationship between God and God's people, God called ordinary, flawed human beings to serve, just as they were.

In leading worship, we, too, are called to serve just as we are, in authenticity and truth. A worship leader is not a position of power – it is an opportunity to serve. We have no need to put on a mask or the persona of an “ideal worship leader”. We are *enough*, just as we are. To worship, we come, humbly, honestly and joyfully, knowing that no matter how hard we try, our worship can not be perfect. Mistakes are human and an opportunity for grace and to model a comfort with imperfection.

The Bodies We Feed in Worship

To worship, we bring not only our hearts and minds, but we also bring our bodies. We bring our whole selves, our authentic selves. The light, the images, the colours, the smells and sounds of liturgy can deepen our sense of the sacred as we encounter God. “Liturgical art in its various forms points to the sacred mystery coursing through all life. It does not explain so much as it opens a doorway of perception and a way of expressing the mystery that will always require more than words.”¹ Indeed, good and faithfully prepared liturgical art offers to nourish the whole of our being.

Sense of Sight in Worship

Those who are blessed with the gift of sight often discover that worship is enriched through intentionally chosen and strategically placed visuals throughout the liturgical space.

- **Sign Language**
Although, of course, this is not always possible, it is useful to keep this in mind as an option (depending on the particular needs within a congregation). It is a beautiful form of communication and makes the spoken word visually accessible to those who are deaf, and it offers an additional dimension of the spoken (or sung) word to everyone.
- **Visual Arts in Worship**
Throughout history, visual arts have been used in Christian tradition to convey doctrine, tell stories, and create an inviting and meaningful context for worship. However, with the invention of the printing press (among other events), the emphasis on God's Word in Scripture interpreted through words often displaced the use and value of visual expressions of the Divine. Increasingly, artists searched for creative spaces away from the Church, and some Church cultures became suspicious of artistic images. During the 20th century, however, the use of visual art in churches began to re-emerge.

¹ Ruth C. Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God: Vital Worship for the 21st Century* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 96

- **Colour**
Without filling the space with more words, colours identify the liturgical season and/or feast. (see attached ‘Liturgical Colours’)
- **Icons, Stained Glass Windows, Beautifully Designed Banners, etc.**
Attempting to explain complex doctrines, such as The Holy Trinity, exclusively with the use of words is challenging and often seemingly impossible.

The use of such artistic resources can open doors into deeper insights and understanding. Rublev’s icon - ‘Holy Trinity’ - is one example of how an artistic image reveals the depth and breadth of this Doctrine with greater efficacy than words.² Such an approach sparks conversations with congregants which reveal new insights that lead to ongoing and deeper searching. “Visual arts can express human agony and joy and witness to divine love and grace in ways that go beyond words.”³

- **Candles**
Candles are a useful visual aid that help highlight the numerous references to God’s gift of light in Scripture, culminating in Jesus, who is, for Christians, “...the light of the world.”⁴ The Paschal candle is, of course, the preeminent symbol of the light of Christ.

Participants may benefit from some brainstorming around specific times throughout the liturgical year when the use of light is particularly meaningful (e.g. Advent [wreath], Christmas, Easter, etc...)

- **Liturgical Dance**
Well-choreographed liturgical dance with competent dancers can be an effective way of communicating reflections on Scripture.
- **Flowers**
The beauty of fresh flowers can enhance liturgical seasons that emphasize hope, new life, growth, etc.

Sense of Smell in Worship

Smell is an often forgotten and yet surprisingly powerful sense, connecting us to memories buried deep within. It is important to offer a reminder that with a growing awareness of and sensitivity toward allergies, it is essential to consider the health needs of congregations and potential newcomers/guests when considering options that have a strong smell.

- **Incense**
Rooted in the earlier traditions of Judaism, incense has been used in worship by Christians since antiquity, as a symbol of the prayer of the faithful rising to heaven. Its use needs to be appropriate to each church community, as some people are allergic to incense.

² <https://catholic-link.org/andrei-rublevs-icon-of-the-holy-trinity-explained/>

³ Ibid., 90

⁴ John 8:12

- Oil
Oils used in worship (e.g. baptismal and healing anointing) do have a subtle aroma.
- Candles
Candles used in worship also have a slight smell, especially if they are wax candles. Scented candles are generally discouraged and not chosen for worship.
- Flowers
The scent of fresh flowers can enhance liturgical seasons that emphasize hope, new life and growth.

Sense of Sound in Worship

“Faith comes by what is heard...”⁵

- Speech
Our sense of hearing is involved in worship when we listen to the Word along with words spoken and sung. Congregations must be diligent in making sure that natural acoustics are preserved as far as is possible and sound systems remain in good working order. Readers should prepare ahead of time for unusual pronunciations and read at a good pace. See the attached document for more guidance.

In addition to the predictable forms of sound (prayers, readings, sermon, song, etc.) a carefully chosen sonnet or poem can be extremely effective in offering deep reflection on the liturgical occasion.⁶

- Music
“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.”⁷

In ‘Singing: A Mennonite Voice’, the point is made that singing together both shapes and reflects the life we share together in worship, ministry, and mission.⁸ In other words, the harmonious sound of our voices blending together, ideally, shapes and reflects the harmonious way in which we share ministry together. Through music and the gift of song, we offer prayer, praise, and lament; we reflect on who God is and who we are as God’s people.

Within the context of this introductory glimpse into the place of music in worship, Paul Westermeyer’s ‘The Heart of the Matter’ could be a helpful resource. In this tiny volume, the author offers great wisdom as he identifies church music as: (1) Praise, (2) Prayer, (3) Proclamation, (4) Story, and (5) Gift of God.⁹

- Silence

⁵ Romans 10:17

⁶ A particularly helpful resource is Malcolm Guite, *Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year* (Canterbury Press Norwich, 2012)

⁷ Colossians 3:16

⁸ Marlene Kropf & Kenneth Natziger, *Singing: A Mennonite Voice* (Herald Press, June 1, 2001)

⁹ Paul Westermeyer, *The Heart of the Matter: Church Music as Praise, Prayer, Proclamation, Story, and Gift* (GIA Publications, 2001)

There is, "...a time to be silent and a time to speak..."¹⁰; "Be still, and know that I am God."¹¹

A strategic, intentional use of silence can serve as an effective balance to what can sometimes feel like an inundation of sounds. Taking a breath at the asterisk break in reading the psalms responsorially can often make the psalms feel more prayerful.

Sense of Touch in Worship

Since touch is such an intimate sense, worship planners and leaders need to be aware of and sensitive to the various comfort levels represented throughout the congregation. While many (especially the lonely) look forward to an appropriate hug or handshake at the service because they lack contact with other human beings, others prefer not to be touched at all.

It is interesting that, with COVID, as the privilege of touching one another (through a hug or a hand shake) has been significantly compromised, a great many people have quickly found alternative, creative ways to touch (fist or elbow bumps, for example). When we are baptized, the touch of water with the word claims us as God's child. When we receive communion, the bread is placed in our hand (and pre-COVID) the wine is brought to our lips. Through the sense of touch, God is brought near. The Word dwells among us. Touch can be, for some, the way in which we share the peace of God.

Sense of Taste in Worship

"Taste and see that the Lord is good."¹²

This, of course, is primarily associated with the Eucharist.

Discernment of Gifts for Ministry

This session offers a golden opportunity for worship leaders to reflect on potential (artistic) parishioners who may feel called to enhance worship through the sharing of their gifts, talents, passions, and expertise. A coordinator of liturgical art could potentially offer leadership in this discernment and coordinate the efforts of those who feel so called. It is important to emphasize that true discernment is essential, along with clear criteria pertaining to artistic contributions. Ruth Duck's 'Criteria for Good Liturgical Art' is a helpful resource.¹³ (Please note, posted on the Diocesan Web Site: 'Criteria for Good Liturgical Art'.) Which artistic liturgical expressions are possible within the context of any particular congregation will be determined by the discerned talent within the faith community.

Indeed, "Liturgical art in its various forms points to the sacred mystery coursing through all life. It does not explain so much as it opens a doorway of perception and a way of expressing the mystery that will always require more than words."¹⁴

¹⁰ Ecclesiastes: 3:7

¹¹ Psalm 46:10

¹² Psalm 34:8

¹³ Ibid., 95

¹⁴ Ruth C. Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God: Vital Worship for the 21st Century* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 96