

# THE CHURCH AT WORSHIP

## Disciples Thumbnail Sketches

## The Church at Worship

by Michael W. Mooty and  
Philip V. Miller

“We have no ritual, liturgy, nor manual,” wrote Alexander Campbell in 1830. Ever since, few have attempted to generalize about worship among congregations of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Yet many would like to know more about how we worship and why we worship as we do. This pamphlet will briefly describe and interpret our worship.

### Three Things That Happen

Whenever and wherever Christians gather, they worship. The ancient liturgy of the Roman Catholic mass, the apparent spontaneity of the pentecostal service, and the quiet reflection of the Quaker meeting are all forms of Christian worship. Nevertheless, in spite of the wide variety of ways in which Christians worship, most would agree upon at least three things that happen when we gather to worship.

1. *In worship, we remember our history.* Christians are linked to the past. Every time we worship, we build on a foundation that is four thousand years old.

The Bible contains written memories of this past. So the reading of scripture is a focal point of most services of Christian worship. When we hear the Scriptures read, we hear again the story of what God has done for the covenant people.

We hear about the special relationship that God established with Israel through the promise to Abraham. We recall how God, by means of the leader Moses, delivered the chosen people from bondage. We remember the favor the Lord showed upon the people of Israel, and we hear again the judgments of God spoken through the prophets. Above all, we remember how God acted uniquely and decisively in Jesus of Nazareth to establish a relationship with all of humankind. As we remember our history, we give thanks for God’s mercy and forgiving love, upon which our relationship with God is based.

2. *In worship, we experience God in the present moment.* Our word “worship” comes from the Old English “weorth-scipe,” which referred to the honor paid to royalty. This ancient meaning can be put into two modern words: “worth” and “shape.” When

Christians worship, we seek to be shaped by something of worth *into* something of worth.

As we praise God, pray for ourselves and others, confess our sin, seek forgiveness, and renew our commitment, we are shaped. We experience God's forgiveness for us and for all of creation. We sense healing in our own lives. We are reborn, made new, changed.

In worship we meet God in the present moment, and that encounter changes us. It changes how we see ourselves, how we see others, and how we see ourselves as part of God's creation.

3. *In worship, we anticipate God's future.* Jesus of Nazareth came to announce the kingdom of God. On the one hand, according to the writers of the New Testament, God's rule was a present reality; Jesus' work and words were the sure sign that the Kingdom was and is among us. On the other hand, that Kingdom is not yet complete. In most churches worshipers regularly pray, "Thy Kingdom come." We break the bread and drink the cup of the Lord's Supper to "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). We hope for the final triumph of life after death.

As we remember what God has done, as we experience God in the present moment, and as we hope for God's future, we are changed and renewed.

## Twin Focal Points

Walk into a congregation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), sit down, and look at your worship bulletin. You will see many items of worship similar to those practiced in other churches. Various prayers will be listed: An invocation seeking an awareness of God's presence, often followed by the Lord's Prayer, prayed together by the people; a pastoral prayer of greater length; prayers to dedicate the offering or bless the bread and cup of communion; and a benediction to send the people out with God's blessing.

In addition, music will play a large role. Three to five hymns may be sung in conjunction with various parts of the order of worship. Music, both instrumental and choral, may open and close the service and will respond to readings and prayers on behalf of the congregation. Sometimes you will notice other artistic means of expression—banners, slides, drama, or dance. Prayer, music, and visual arts are conspicuous and important.

But if you want to understand what happens when Disciples worship, look for twin focal points: The Word and the Lord's Supper.

1. *Proclaiming the word of God is one focal point of worship among Disciples.* Scripture is essential. On Sunday morning, expect to hear at least one passage

from the Bible read aloud as the lesson for the day. Many churches read the scriptures scheduled in the lectionary, an ecumenical calendar of readings from the Hebrew scriptures, the Gospels, and the epistles. Frequently scriptures are read as a call to worship, or as a sentence to invite people to offer their gifts, or to share in the Lord's Supper. Sometimes a scripture is read responsively by the congregation, or in unison from Bibles available in the pews or chairs.

Almost every congregation of the Disciples of Christ issues an invitation to discipleship each Sunday morning. This call to confess one's faith in Christ or to transfer membership into the congregation is usually extended after the sermon and provides an opportunity to respond to the Word by coming to stand in front of the people while a hymn is sung.

Time between the scripture readings and the invitation to discipleship is allowed for a sermon. This spoken message takes up as much as one third the time spent in corporate worship. Content and style vary almost as widely as the personalities of preachers in different congregations. But Disciples have a strong tradition of biblical preaching, and many see the sermon as a response to the proclamation of the Word that has been read from the Scriptures. Because the invitation to discipleship usually follows the sermon, preachers often seek a response of faith and commitment even when most of the listeners are already Christians and members of the church.

2. *The other focal point of worship among Disciples is the Lord's Supper.* Christian Churches observe the Lord's Supper every Sunday morning. Here are some features you will notice:

Frequently a communion hymn is sung to prepare for the Lord's Supper. A statement, spoken or printed in the worship bulletin, invites all followers of Christ to participate. At some point the words which Jesus spoke at his last supper are spoken by an elder or by the minister.

Men and women, serving as lay elders and usually assisted by the minister, preside over this act of worship and stand at the Lord's Table. They offer one or two prayers to give thanks for the bread and cup and to ask God's blessing on the act of communion. The elders face a group of lay deacons (men, women, and/or youth), to whom they distribute trays that contain the bread (usually in the form of small unleavened wafers) and the cups (individual glasses of unfermented grape juice).

As the deacons pass these trays among the congregation, worshipers take a piece of the bread and a cup and pass the tray to their neighbors. Eating and drinking may take place individually or in unison, or

the bread may be eaten individually while everyone waits to take the cup together.

Historically, Disciples have understood the Lord's Supper as an ordinance—an order or commandment from Jesus to his followers. Traditionally, Disciples have looked upon the bread and cup as symbols and have called them “elements” and “emblems,” which *remind* Christians of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As they have gathered around the table remembering Jesus, worshipers have experienced his living presence in their midst. In dialogue with Christians of other traditions, more Disciples are now appreciating the sacramental significance of the Lord's Supper, and are discovering additional ways in which Christ is present among those who partake.

What about the offering? Every Sunday morning the church collects the offerings and contributions of the people. This collection is often preceded by either a scriptural sentence or a statement related to the mission of the church. It is accompanied by music, usually instrumental. Often the congregation stands to sing the doxology as the offering is brought to the Lord's table, where a prayer of dedication is given. Although the place of the offering varies from one congregation to another, more and more churches are seeing its relationship to the Lord's Supper, so that the offering becomes more than a necessary duty or a convenient way to raise funds. How does taking up the offering relate to the worship of God? The giving of a person's tangible possessions is an act of preparation for communion.

Worship planners and leaders are challenged by the double focus of such a service. Congregations follow no uniform order of worship. In many churches the Lord's Supper precedes the sermon, while in others the Lord's Supper follows the service of the Word. The best way to bring these two important acts into harmony is to understand the entire worship service as a proclamation of the word of God. The verbal dimension—Scriptures, sermon, and invitation to discipleship—*tells* forth the word of God. The sensual dimension—the offering and Lord's Supper—*shows* forth the word of God.

### Three Distinct Practices

Obviously, what Disciples do when we gather to worship does not differ greatly from what is done by other Christians. Three practices are particularly noteworthy, however. These three involve the way in which the Lord's Supper is celebrated in all Disciples congregations.

First, we observe the Lord's Supper *weekly* as one of the twin focal points of our worship. We understand this to have been the practice of the early church.

Second, we invite *all* persons who follow Christ to participate in the Lord's Supper. The church erects no artificial barriers to sharing the loaf and cup.

Third, *lay* elders and deacons prepare, celebrate, and serve the Lord's Supper. Although the clergy may participate in this act of worship, the presence of an ordained minister is not imperative.

What happens when Christians gather to worship has been one of the central questions which has emerged from our conversations with other churches. This is as it should be, because worship is the very heart of our life together as the people of God.

### Baptism

Whether or not it occurs during the Sunday morning worship service, or at some other time, baptism calls a congregation together. Parallel to the Lord's Supper in its importance, baptism is an event where God's presence and action command the attention of the congregation. When someone who has professed faith in Christ is immersed in water in front of the church, we see the visible sign of what happens inwardly when one dies to sin, is raised to new life in Christ, and becomes a member of the body of Christ—the church.

### Special Occasions

In addition to the Sunday morning service, many other occasions call Christians to worship. Devotional services in fellowship meetings, church business sessions, and prayer groups are a part of the worship life in many congregations. Many churches participate in an international chain of prayer by holding a twenty-four hour prayer vigil each year. Private devotional life on the part of church members undergirds the corporate worship activity of a congregation.

Events in the life of God's people are occasions for worship: ordaining a man or woman to the ministry, installing church officers, dedicating buildings, and celebrating anniversaries. And events in the lives of individual Christians, such as weddings and funerals, provide settings to support one another in love and to renew our understanding of life.

Customarily, cultural and secular concerns, such as Mother's Day and Labor Day, have influenced worship services. The Week of Compassion and other emphases of the mission of the church determine the direction of worship on certain Sundays. Occasions

such as World Communion Sunday or the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity evoke ecumenically shared concerns in worship.

## The Church Year

Recently, Disciple congregations have been learning to use time as a tool to communicate the saving activity of God, the story of Jesus Christ, and the Christian mission. Therefore, many have begun using the seasons and days of the liturgical calendar:

- ADVENT—when we, like God’s people long ago, anticipate the coming of Christ, both in history and in the future.
- CHRISTMAS—not merely the day, but the season, when we celebrate the word made flesh in Jesus.
- EPIPHANY—when, looking at the life of Jesus, we see the nature and will of God revealed to all people.
- LENT—when we examine ourselves and seek to change in response to the suffering and death of Jesus.
- EASTER—not just one, but fifty days, when we rejoice in the victory of Christ over the powers of sin and death.
- PENTECOST—our celebration of the birthday of the church, and the season when we strive to continue the mission of witness and service inaugurated by the Holy Spirit.

As we repeat this cycle each year, including its particular themes and scripture lessons, we gain a clearer understanding of who we are as Christians. And as Disciples, we broaden our common ground with Christians of other traditions as we seek to grow toward unity with them in our one Lord.

## Worship at the Center

The church does more than worship. We teach, we witness, and we care for one another. Is worship then just one among several activities? Or is worship at the heart of all of our ministries?

Teaching in the church is an interpretation of worship. The care we show for one another receives its significance in worship. Our witness to the world receives its direction for worship, so strategizing for evangelism begins in worship. Regular worship sustains our mission; without worship we forget the source of our call to mission, and we lose courage and motivation. At the table of the Lord we become the ones who show forth the Lord’s death in the world until he comes.

Other titles in the Disciples Thumbnail Sketches series which you may want to order are:

- |         |   |
|---------|---|
| 93A1843 | Baptism   |
| 93A1844 | Characteristic Beliefs of the Christian Church  |
| 93A1846 | The Lord’s Supper   |
| 93A1847 | The Meaning of Church Membership (available online only at <a href="http://www.cbp21.com">www.cbp21.com</a> ) |
| 93A1848 | Our Church  |
| 93A1849 | Our History   |

Published by  
**Christian Board of Publication**  
St. Louis, Missouri  
for  
**Disciples Home Missions**  
Indianapolis, Indiana  
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

93A1845

Permission granted to photocopy for church use only.  
Photocopy for resale of any kind is not permitted.