

# Worship in the UCC

DIVERSE IN PRACTICE, UNITED IN  
SCRIPTURE, SONG, AND SACRAMENTS

## prepare

### What's behind all this?

Worship is at the center of Christian life. At its most basic definition, worship is a time when we offer praise and thanksgiving to God.

In practice, in worship we often spend time in prayer, make confession and get real about our lives, ask for God's grace and are moved by it, and are challenged to live as people of God. Often, people sing songs or hymns, recite liturgy, read scripture, and celebrate the sacraments of baptism and communion. However, the worship practices throughout the United Church of Christ reflect great diversity. Each congregation chooses how it will worship, the order or structure of worship, the musical style, etc. Yet there are common threads that speak to the unity of the Church among its great diversity. Because worship is a central part of Christian practice and worship in a communal context is vital for spiritual formation and growth, it is important to explore worship within the UCC.

### Participants' Perspectives

- Worship often eludes easy definitions. Asking people to define what worship is or isn't may prove to be a challenge.
- Depending on your geography, people may not have had exposure to the wide variety of worship practices and styles within the UCC. They may be surprised to learn that there are churches whose worship is more pentecostal. Others are more high church with an organ, full liturgy, and incense on occasion. Some are contemporary with praise bands or filled with gospel music. Still others are quieter, focusing on contemplative prayer. Some are centered on a common meal they make together. The styles of worship in the UCC are as diverse as we are. Learning about the wide variety of styles can expand participants' understanding of what it is to be a part of the wider Church.
- The meaning behind sacraments can add to the understanding of their significance as well as influence their meaningfulness in worship. It is often assumed that congregations know what the sacraments mean, but that assumption may be incorrect. Use this time as a teaching opportunity for folks without presuming previous knowledge or exposure.

### As you prepare for this session

- Check the length of any videos
- Make a timeline for this session
- Choose your "engage" activity/activities
- Double-check the materials needed

### Where is this going?

Participants will explore how and why worship in the UCC is both diverse as well as unifying across the denomination. They also will look at the role of sacraments, the *Book of Worship*, and *The New Century Hymnal* as sources of unity and reflections of UCC identity, theology, and polity.

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# encounter

## Video

1. Warm Up  
Ask participants to define *worship*. Invite them to think about what is it that Christians are really doing when we worship. If conversation moves to connection with a particular day, time, place, or group of people, ask participants where else worship can happen. The possibilities and situations for worship to occur are limitless--from gathering in sanctuaries to singing songs hiking in the forest to sitting with others telling sacred stories around a campfire. What do all of these experiences of worship hold in common? How does that help shape how you define worship?
2. Watch  
“Worship in the UCC: Diverse in Practice, United in Scripture, Songs, and Sacrament”
3. Unpack
  - How is worship in the UCC reflective of our diversity?
  - How is the diversity of our worship practices reflective of our history, polity, and theology?
  - How is worship as practiced in the UCC also reflective of our commitment to being a united and uniting church?

### Materials:

-Ability to show video

# engage

Choose one or more activities to explore the session’s themes.

## Activity One: Explore the Diversity of UCC Worship

Several congregations record and broadcast some or all of their worship services. Watch all or part of worship in another congregation that varies from your own. Afterward, ask participants to compare and contrast that worship experience with their own and help them connect how the diversity in worship styles in the UCC reflect our polity that embraces congregational autonomy and discernment of how to best live into the Church they are called by God to be.

### Materials:

-Recording or bulletin of another church’s worship service

## Activity Two: Sacraments

It may look like just some water, or just a simple bit of bread and juice or wine, but in the UCC, what looks simple means much more. We celebrate two sacraments. One is Baptism. The other is Holy Communion, which is also known as the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist. Sacraments are our ritual acts in worship life that are outward

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and visible signs of an inward grace. In these acts we use water, bread, and juice or wine to make visible and to invite people to experience the grace, forgiveness, and presence of God.

The preamble of our Constitution simply states the UCC “recognizes” these two sacraments. Recognition, however, is not simply a casual acknowledgment. Recognition is a deep way of seeing and experiencing God and God’s action in these rites. Recognition recalls Jesus and his own baptism (Mark 1:9-11), his call to baptize others (Matthew 28:16-20), and the invitation to become one with Christ and one another in baptism (Romans 6:1-4). Recognition remembers Jesus’s meals with his followers and the Last Supper (Luke 22:7-20), discovers his continuing presence in the breaking of bread (Luke 24:30-31a), and anticipates a great banquet for all God’s people (Luke 14:15-24). Recognition is not only an individual act, but one we share with other Christians throughout the world.

Invite participants to reflect on what the sacraments mean to them and the role they have in the worshipping life of your congregation by asking them the questions below.

### Baptism

- What does baptism mean to you? What does it signify to you?
- How does your congregation practice baptism? Does age play a role?
- How is it similar to or different from how the sacrament is practiced in other UCC congregations? Take a look at the liturgy written in the *Book of Worship* for baptism as a point of comparison.
- Have participants look at the liturgy or the words spoken during a baptism in your local church. What questions are asked and what promises are made at the time of a baptism? What is their significance? What commitments, if any, are being made? By whom?

### Communion

- What does communion mean to you? What does it signify to you?
- How does your congregation practice communion? Who can participate in communion? Does your congregation use white or dark bread? What does that signify or communicate about who Jesus was? Does your congregation use juice or wine? Why?
- How is the way your congregation practices communion similar or different from how the sacrament is practiced in other UCC congregations? Take a look at the liturgy written in the *Book of Worship* for communion as a point of comparison.
- Have participants look at the liturgy or the words spoken during communion in your local church. What is their significance? What commitments, if any, are being made? By whom?

### Materials:

- Book of Worship*
- Liturgy from a baptism
- Liturgy from communion

### Optional

- Copies of Louis Gunneman’s articles “Baptism: Sacrament of Christian Vocation” and “The Eucharist: Sacrament of Discipleship”

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### Going a Step Further

Louis Gunnemann has written helpful reflections on the theology of baptism and communion in the UCC titled “Baptism: Sacrament of Christian Vocation” and “The Eucharist: Sacrament of Discipleship.” Have participants read through and discuss these as a way of deepening their understanding of these two sacraments. These articles are available on [ucc.org](http://ucc.org) and in the resource folder for this lesson.

### Activity Three: The *Book of Worship*

As the beginning of the *Book of Worship* explains, it “is intended to be a resource for public worship of the United Church of Christ. It is offered to all who plan and lead that worship to the end that the spirit and form of worship in the church may be enhanced and the potential for the local church as the center for the Spirit’s life may be realized.” The *Book of Worship* attempts to reflect and express the diversity of the UCC while at the same time lifting up the common liturgical threads that weave the Church together, incorporating the past and looking to the future. Though not all congregations use the *Book of Worship*, and instead adopt more oral traditions, more extemporaneous traditions, or more free flowing traditions, patterns of worship often have commonalities. As the editors note, “Informed and imaginative use of this resource can open the rich liturgical history of the church and enhance the particular traditions of the local church. In doing this, it is hoped that the *Book of Worship* will be a means of praise and thanksgiving of the living God by God’s people in this time.”

Explore the *Book of Worship* and why it was created. Look at the “12 Principles Behind the *Book of Worship*” as well as the Introduction to the *Book of Worship*. Ask how the *Book of Worship* both reflects the UCC’s diversity and its desire for unity. Is it used in your congregation? How is it used or adapted?

Engage the texts of the *Book of Worship* by looking at familiar orders of worship and liturgies as well as some of the services that may be less familiar. Compare and contrast the more familiar services with how worship is practiced in your local congregations. How and why are they similar or different? In looking at services that are less familiar, what is their purpose? What are they trying to teach or allow people to experience? Could you imagine using one of these liturgies or adapting it for your own congregation? An example of a service you might examine would be “Order of Recognition at the End of Marriage.”

The needs of the Church have changed since 1986 when the *Book of Worship* was first published. As a reformed and reforming denomination, we are aware that liturgies must continue to be adapted. Look at the orders of worship that have been created to augment the *Book of Worship*. Ask participants to compare and contrast them with the older published services. What changes have been made? Why? How do the changes reflect the needs of the Church to have meaningful, relevant worship? How do the changes or new liturgies assist worshipping bodies to continue to offer praise and thanksgiving to God, who is still speaking to us today? An example of a service you might examine would be “Order for Marriage: An Inclusive Version.” This service is located in the resource folder.

### Materials:

- Book of Worship*
- Copies of “12 Principles Behind the *Book of Worship*” and the Introduction to the *Book of Worship*
- Liturgies from the *Book of Worship*

### Sidebar:

Notice this resource is called the *Book of Worship* not *The Book of Worship*. This small difference indicates it is one resource for the Church, not the single authoritative text.

### Take it further:

Have your group plan a worship service together.

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### Activity Four: Exploring *The New Century Hymnal*

In 1995, the UCC published *The New Century Hymnal*—the first hymnal released by a Christian church that honors in equal measure both male and female images of God. As a church of firsts, the UCC was proud of the work it had done, but the publication was not without a bit of controversy. Hymnody is spiritually formative and transformative, and so it is no wonder that people had strong reactions both in support or excitement and with reservation or dislike.

However you or your church may feel about the NCH, it is an important part of our history, speaks to a common theology, holds opportunities for a distinctively UCC flavor of spiritual formation, speaks to issues of justice, and helps sculpt our hymnody to reflect the idea that though our faith is 2000 years old our thinking is not. Examining the process of its creation gives participants a distinctive window into our polity and examining the hymns with a thoughtful, reflective perspective shines new light on its place in our theology and tradition.

#### Towards Understanding its History and Process

- As a group, read through the “Introduction to the New Century Hymnal.” Help participants understand the process that birthed this effort as well as the process of hymn selection. Ask them how these decisions reflect the polity and theology of the UCC. Ask them to reflect on the criteria the committee used.

#### Additions and Exclusions

- Ask participants to compare the NCH to other hymnals your church uses, such as *The Pilgrim Hymnal*, published in 1931, 1935, and 1958, or *The Hymnal of the United Church of Christ*, published in 1974. What hymns were added to the NCH that do not appear in your other hymnals? What hymns were left out? Why do you suppose these decisions were made?
- Example: “Bring Many Names,” NCH 11, was added as a hymn that spoke to the diverse images that could be used for God. Having diverse imagery invites people to see many different facets and traits of the Divine.

#### Analyzing the Changes in Wording

- Ask participants to compare the wording of hymns in NCH to other hymnals your church uses, such as *The Pilgrim Hymnal*, published in 1931, 1935 and 1958, or *The Hymnal of the United Church of Christ*, published in 1974. Several hymns were edited for language, content, and theology. Examples to compare include
- “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”
  - Pilgrim #363, Hymnal of the UCC #263, NCH #439
  - Shift away from battle, weaponry, and darkness language

#### Materials:

- Copies of the “Introduction to the New Century Hymnal”
- Multiple *New Century Hymnals*
- A *UCC Book of Worship* (multiple if possible)
- Older hymnals of the UCC, such as *The Pilgrim Hymnal* and *The Hymnal of the United Church of Christ*
- Copies of publically available services

#### Sing! Prayer and Praise

In 2009, the UCC published the *Sing! Prayer and Praise* song book for use in all settings of a congregations life. It is an ecumenical resource of praise and worship music that captures a wide variety of musical traditions.

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- “In Christ There Is No East or West”
  - Pilgrim #414, Hymnal of the UCC #164, NCH #394
  - Change of racialized language
- “The Church’s One Foundation”
  - Pilgrim #260, Hymnal of the UCC #152, NCH #386
  - Change of gendered language
- “We Gather Together”
  - Pilgrim #21, Hymnal of the UCC # 4, NCH #421
  - Change of gendered language
- “Guide My Feet”
  - NCH #497
  - Newly included. Reflects greater diversity in origins and sources of hymns. However, note the additional verse in the footnote. What critique could be offered for the decision to place it only in the footnote?
- “Somebody’s Knockin’ at Your Door”
  - Hymnal of the UCC #248
  - Note the use of the descriptions of the tune and genre. Compare it the tune and genre for “Guide My Feet” (NCH #497). How does this change reflect UCC’s commitment to justice and being a multicultural and multiethnic Church?

## wrap-up

### Regroup

Gather to share and reflect on what you’ve discovered and learned today.

Questions for conversation:

- What was one new learning for you today?
- What do you want to think about more?
- What will you do in response?

### Closing

Close time together by having each participant share one thing they are grateful for from their time together.

### Sending

Offer a prayer of thanksgiving for worship communities that seek to be places of praise and thanksgiving. Offer a blessing for your local congregation and its people.