

The Directory for Worship from the *Book of Order*

A Leader Reader by David Gambrell

What is the Directory for Worship?

The PC(USA) Constitution consists of two parts that are usually found in two separate books: the *Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order*. The *Book of Order* is organized in four sections: Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, the Form of Government, the Directory for Worship, and the Rules of Discipline.

The Directory for Worship provides a theological understanding of worship that is founded on Scripture and rooted in the history and tradition of the church. In contrast to a prayer book or service book, our Directory for Worship provides no liturgical texts, such as prayers or responsive readings. Rather, it seeks to articulate the principles and practices underlying faithful worship in the Reformed tradition. The Directory for Worship allows for a certain degree of freedom within form—not prescribing fixed prayers but offering broader guidelines. Worship leaders are wise to use the Directory for Worship and the *Book of Common Worship* together, like a compass and a map; the former points to general principles and primary things, while the latter offers specific directions for particular services.

Where Does the Directory for Worship Come From?

The origins of the current Directory for Worship may be found in England in the mid-seventeenth century. From 1643 to 1649 a group of 150 church leaders met

Prayer

Dear God,
Be the underpinning to us
When we do not know the road,
Be at our side
And help us to rest in the assurance that you
Will never leave us nor forsake us
Even when we walk through
the valley of the shadow of death.
Be our destination
So that we know the road has an ending
And the ending is assured
Because you are the end as the beginning.
Amen.

more than a thousand times at Westminster Abbey to develop a set of standards for the governance, faith, liturgy, and life of the Church of England. These “Westminster Standards” included a Form of Government, a Directory for Public Worship, a Confession of Faith, a Larger Catechism, and a Shorter Catechism. (The latter three remain a part of the PC(USA)’s *Book of Confessions*.) The 1645 Westminster Directory for Public Worship was, in large measure, an attempt to address abuses of the *Book of Common Prayer*, which was perceived to promote superstition, idolatry, and laziness in prayer.

Although the Westminster Standards failed to take root in the Church of England, they were embraced

by the Kirk of Scotland and imported to North America by Independent Puritan and Scotch-Irish Presbyterian settlers. The Westminster Directory for Public Worship (in a revised form) was formally approved by the first Presbyterian General Assembly in the United States of America in 1788. It remained in effect—with minor modifications—until 1961, when the UPCUSA (the former northern branch of the denomination) produced a new directory for worship; two years later, the PCUS (southern branch) published its own new directory. These two directories for worship were combined at the reunion of the northern and southern churches and the formation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1983. Subsequently, a more thorough process of revision produced the Directory for Worship in its current form, presented to the 200th General Assembly in 1988 and approved by the presbyteries in 1989.

What Does the Directory for Worship Teach?

The seven chapters of the current Directory for Worship provide a great wealth of insight into Presbyterian worship. Some of the theological hallmarks of the Directory for Worship include:

- An emphasis on the rhythm of God’s initiative and our response (W-1.1000). This is the heartbeat of Christian life and liturgy: God’s gracious action and our grateful response.

What Happens When We Confess Our Sins?

Presbyterians realize the importance of confessing our sins and asking God’s forgiveness.

Our services of worship include a confession of sin in which we acknowledge our sin individually and corporately. In our corporate confession, we confess not only our own sins but also the sins of humanity of which we are a part. We recognize our solidarity as part of the human family and realize sinful actions affect not only the sinner but others as well.

—Donald K. McKim, *More Presbyterian Questions, More Presbyterian Answers* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2011), 32.

- A theology of time, space, and matter as created by God, hallowed by Jesus Christ, and set apart in particular ways for Christian worship (W-1.3000).
- An understanding of prayer as primary participation in public worship (W-2.1000). Prayer can take many forms, including speech, song, silence, and action.
- A dynamic relationship between form and freedom, all subject to the authority of Scripture in the Holy Spirit (W-3.1000).
- An affirmation of the centrality of the Word in the ordering of Reformed worship (W-3.3000). The Directory for Worship offers a five-fold order of worship: (1) Gathering around the Word, (2) Proclaiming the Word, (3) Responding to the Word, (4) The Sealing of the Word in Sacraments, and (5) Bearing and Following the Word into the World.

How Should We Use the Directory for Worship?

Well-known preaching professor Tom Long once compared the Directory for Worship to a kitchen fire extinguisher: it tends to sit on a shelf unnoticed until controversy is sparked, or someone needs to put out a fire. How might we better employ the Directory for Worship as “a tool for teaching and guiding worship”? Here are a few suggestions:

- Engage in a long-term study of the Directory for Worship with your session or worship committee; you might plan to spend seven months exploring the seven chapters.
- Read chapter one, “The Dynamics of Christian Worship,” aloud at a staff meeting or session retreat.
- Study the sections on Baptism (W-2.3000) or the Lord’s Supper (W-2.4000) to deepen your understanding of the sacraments.
- Reflect on the Service for the Lord’s Day in your congregation in light of chapter three, “The Ordering of Christian Worship.”
- Examine your personal life of prayer and spiritual discipline in light of chapter five, “Worship and Personal Discipleship.”
- Think about your congregation’s activity in Christian nurturing and pastoral care in light of chapter six, “Worship and Ministry within the Community of Faith.”

- Consider your congregation's activity in mission and outreach in light of chapter seven, "Worship and the Ministry of the Church in the World."
- Recent changes to the PC(USA) *Book of Order* (in the Form of Government) present a timely opportunity to engage the Directory for Worship in fresh ways, as we seek to understand its implications for Christian life and liturgy in the twenty-first century. May our worship

continue to be "reformed and always being reformed" by the Word and Spirit of God, all to God's glory.

About the Writer

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