



Resourcing Worship:

This week's written service is the written version of a service that is being delivered across the circuit this quarter by Marc, Cath and Susan. The service is designed to help us discover more about what it is to think theologically, to think about our worship services, and to consider what is involved in helping services to happen.

Call to worship:

Come, Lord, and be one with us.
We invite you to open our hearts to receive your love.
Come now, Lord, and pour your love into our lives once again.
Come, Lord, and be one with us.
We invite you to open our eyes to see your glory.
Come now, Lord, for we are waiting to see your face.
Come, Lord, and be one with us.
We invite you to open our minds to understand your grace.
Come now, Lord, for we want to experience all the blessings you want to give us.
Come, Lord, and be one with us.
Come now, Lord. We are waiting and watching and listening.
We are ready to encounter your glory and seek your will for our lives.
Come, Lord, and keep us alert to your calling.
Come now, Lord. We are ready to honour you with our very being.
Amen

([https://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/2020-03/Candidates Sunday - Prayer.pdf](https://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/2020-03/Candidates%20Sunday%20Prayer.pdf))

Let us Pray:

May the glory of the Lord fill his temple as we wonder in this space,
may the glory of the Lord touch his people as we rest here by his grace.
Weak though we are, you lift us from sin,
where our hearts wait you long to come in,
so Lord we pray let your healing begin — send us your Spirit today!
May the glory of the Lord fill his temple, and may we meet him face to face. (STF 31, amended)

The first hymn in our service is an invitation for us to know God, to recall why it is we worship.

1. All people that on earth do dwell,
sing to the Lord with cheerful voice:
him serve with mirth,
his praise forth tell;
come ye before him and rejoice.

3. O enter then his gates with praise;
approach with joy his courts unto;
praise, laud, and bless
his name always,
for it is seemly so to do.

2. The Lord, ye know, is God indeed;
without our aid he did us make:
we are his folk, he doth us feed;
and for his sheep he doth us take.

4. For why, the Lord our God is good;
his mercy is for ever sure;
his truth at all times firmly stood,
and shall from age to age endure.

5. To Father, Son and Holy Ghost,
the God whom heaven and earth adore,
from earth and from the angel host
be praise and glory evermore.
(William Kethe, STF 1)

We all have different preferences in worship styles, content and delivery (and if we're being honest, deliverer!). But when you think of a church service, what springs to mind? I wonder what the "Order of Service" looks like when you imagine a typical service? What elements **have** to be there for it to be a service from your perspective: Prayers? Lord's Prayer? Hymns? Reading? Sermon (not too long!)? Anything else?

Is there anything you'd miss if it wasn't there? Or are there any bits that haven't been in services you've engaged with recently that you wish were there more often: A Psalm? The Creeds? Communion? Silence? Something else?

Whatever our services look like, be it on a Sunday morning, evening, or another point in the week, or even on a screen or printed for us to journey through from our favourite armchair, there is often a lot of preparation that has gone into making it happen.

Let's consider a typical Sunday morning service in the first instance. How do we get to the point of a service taking place? What has to happen for a service to be what it is?

The preparation for a service doesn't start at 10.30am on the day. Before that the building was opened and set up. Before that the organist or musicians were practising their hymns. Before that the Local Preacher or Minister was writing their sermon and order of service. Before that the Steward contacted them and checked things out. Before that Cath put the plan together. Before that availability was sought. Before that the training happened... A service is the culmination of years of personal investment and of weeks of planning and preparation, as much as it is in the moment about seeking to be faithful and attentive to the prompting of the Spirit.

We've already mentioned some people, but I wonder how many different people and roles you think are involved in making a service happen? Before you read on, pause and think...

What follows is not an exhaustive list, nor is it in any particular order, but for an on-site service to happen I think we need a good number of the following:

Plan Maker, Presbyter/Deacon/Local Preacher, Worship Leader, Stewards, Bible Reader, Musician(s), Tech Support, Key holder, Rota writers, Tea and coffee makers, Cleaners... The list could be quite extensive!

Some are unsung heroes, whilst others get more attention than they warrant!

From time to time we have to "make do" with roles not being filled. We need to work out how to help services still to take place when those things don't happen. Perhaps that means a different person stepping in to read the bible passage, meeting in another building if we don't have access, singing along to pre-recorded music instead of having on-site musicians, having a Local Arrangement instead of a Local Preacher or a Minister...

But the key people we've not mentioned, and the reason we do what we do, is the congregation. The Purpose of worship is for us to encounter something of God, be that on our own or corporately. It is about creating the space for us to be intentional about meeting with God, learning about God, experiencing something of the Love of God.

When do you remember a service helping you to do that?

Our first reading, Ephesians 3:14-21 speaks of what it is we seek to do when we gather in worship:

God's love, God's power—in us

Because of this, I am kneeling down before the father, the one who gives the name of “family” to every family that there is, in heaven and on earth. My prayer is this: that he will lay out all the riches of his glory to give you strength and power, through his spirit, in your inner being; that the Messiah may make his home in your hearts, through faith; that love may be your root, your firm foundation; and that you may be strong enough (with all God's holy ones) to grasp the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the Messiah's love—though actually it's so deep that nobody can really know it! So may God fill you with all his fullness.

So: to the one who is capable of doing far, far more than we can ask or imagine, granted the power which is working in us— to him be glory, in the church, and in Messiah Jesus, to all generations, and to the ages of ages! Amen!

In the next part of our service we're going to journey into how we equip ourselves to think theologically (that just means “seek God”) in the things we read and hear in the Bible and in our services (including our prayers, songs and sermons). This hymn by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend can be used as a prayer to prepare our hearts and minds to be transformed by what we encounter in worship:

Speak, O Lord, as we come to you
to receive the food of your holy word.
Take your truth, plant it deep in us;
shape and fashion us in your likeness,
that the light of Christ might be seen today
in our acts of love and our deeds of faith.
Speak, O Lord, and fulfil in us
all your purposes, for your glory.

Teach us, Lord, full obedience,
holy reverence, true humility.
Test our thoughts and our attitudes
in the radiance of your purity.
Cause our faith to rise, cause our eyes to see
your majestic love and authority.
Words of power that can never fail;
let their truth prevail over unbelief.

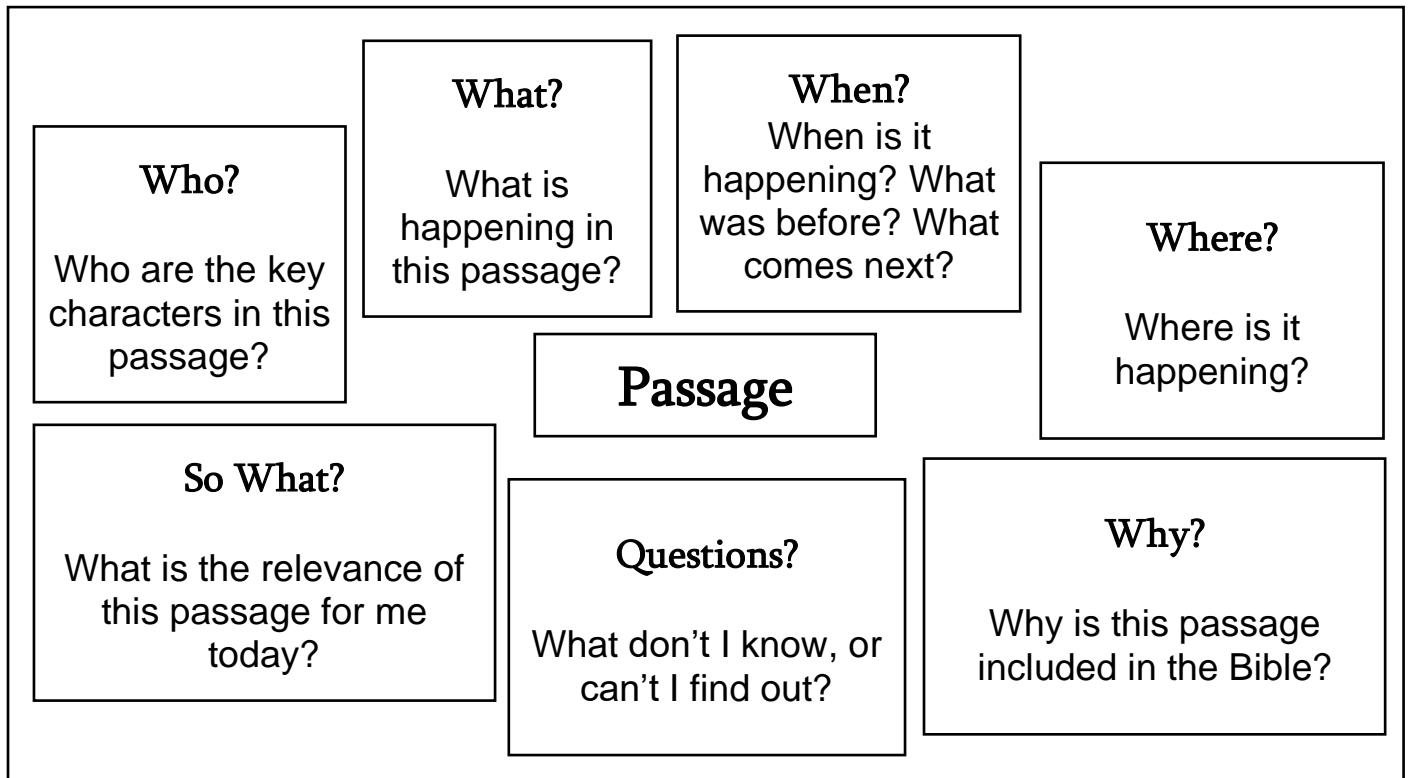
Speak, O Lord, and renew our minds;
help us grasp the heights of your plans for us.
Truths unchanged from the dawn of time
that will echo down through eternity.
And by grace we'll stand on your promises,
and by faith we'll walk as you walk with us.
Speak, O Lord, till your Church is built
and the earth is filled with your glory.
(Keith Getty and Stuart Townend - STF 161)

“Thinking Theologically” is something that those who spend time planning and preaching have been trained to do. But it's not just their job. Each of us need to be aware of what we are reading in our Bibles, singing in our hymns, praying in our prayers, and what we hear being preached from our pulpit, and know how to healthily critique what we are engaging with. It is also a good thing to help us consider the faith we share.

Whilst it has the potential to be a daunting thing (particularly because of the language that's often used), it's actually a really natural thing to do. Parts of it take some research, but other parts involve us actively listening with our minds and hearts, and not just passively listening with our ears, and noticing what it makes us think and feel.

Much of thinking theologically simply involves asking and answering questions.

The following is the starting point of at least one of the local preachers in the circuit when they come to preach, but is a really good way of beginning to go deeper with any passage any time we open our bibles. A big fancy word for what we're doing is "Exegesis". We're going to give it a go together as we consider our next reading.



Have these questions in mind as you read our next passage - **Acts 8:26-40** - which appears to be about a man who has questions about what he's reading:

Philip and the Ethiopian

26 An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip. "Get up and go south," he said. "Go to the desert road that runs down from Jerusalem to Gaza."

27 So he got up and went. Lo and behold, there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace (the queen of Ethiopia), who was in charge of her whole treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and was on his way back home. He was sitting in his chariot and reading the prophet Isaiah.

29 "Go up and join his chariot," said the spirit to Philip. 30 So Philip ran up, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah.

"Do you understand what you're reading?" he asked.

31 "How can I," he replied, "unless someone gives me some help?"

So he invited Philip to get up and sit beside him. 32 The biblical passage he was reading was this one:

He was led like a sheep to the slaughter and as a lamb is silent before its shearers, so he does not open his mouth.

33 In his humiliation, judgment was taken away from him. Who can explain his generation? For his life was taken away from the earth.

34 "Tell me," said the eunuch to Philip, "who is the prophet talking about? Himself or someone else?"

35 Then Philip took a deep breath and, starting from this biblical passage, told him the good news about Jesus.

36 As they were going along the road, they came to some water. "Look!" said the eunuch. "Here is some water! What's to stop me being baptised?"

38 So he gave orders for the chariot to stop, and both of them went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch together, and he baptised him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away, and the eunuch didn't see him anymore, but went on his way rejoicing.

40 Philip, however, turned up at Azotus. He went through all the towns, announcing the good news, until he came to Caesarea.

I wonder what answers you found to our questions? I wonder whether you needed to go away and look for help in answering some of them? There are lots of websites and books we can go to in order to help us find answers that relate to context and culture, to how passages relate to the parts of the Bible (like where the Isaiah passage is and who the prophet was talking about), and there are lots of questions that might, as yet, be relatively unanswered! Maybe you even noticed that there is no verse 37 in this translation of the Bible!? (That's because verse 37 was a later addition and not in the original manuscripts).

A slightly different set of questions for engaging with the Bible, prayers and songs, as well as understanding sermons and messages are these:

What am I reading/listening to? Who wrote it? Who did they write it for? What is being said? How am I understanding it? How much of what I understand comes from who I am and my experiences? How might other people understand the same material?

These can be quite eye-opening questions to ask and may take a while to appreciate fully. But they are the questions that Ministers and local preaching, Worship Leaders, and prayer and hymn writers should be asking all the time as they prepare their services.

Let's spend some time in prayer, praying for ourselves and our world.

Loving God, we recognise what you have taught us about your goodness and compassion through your word, your creation, your son and the communion of saints through the ages. We praise you for the revelations given to those who seek to encounter you, for those who meet you in worship and the transformation that brings to individuals, communities and the world at large.

May we recognise where we are meeting you in worship each and every day, and allow ourselves to be transformed as we rest in your love, claim your peace, know your joy and rely on your hope by the presence of your Spirit working in us.

Meet us in our personal moments of need, anxiety, fear and pain.

Loving Jesus, we celebrate and adore you for your work with people, for the modelling of the gracious and compassionate nature of God towards all people. You saw, and see, the needs of all those who suffer. You weep with those who weep. You embrace the orphan and the outcast. You bring the transforming love of God into the lives of all.

May we recognise the opportunities we have to bring that same love to those we meet. May others who also have opportunities to shape the lives of the poor, suffering, lonely or oppressed also be conduits of your love.

Meet our communities in our collective moments of need, anxiety, fear and pain.

Loving Spirit, we honour the groans of your heart for all of creation, your passion for the world and all who dwell in it to reach their full potential. You open our eyes to the way things could and should be. You stir our hearts against sin and injustice. You invite and empower us to be part of the solution when so often we are part of the problem.

May we recognise your call and know your heart. May we be part of your Kingdom come on earth. Meet us in this your world in its moments of need, anxiety, fear and pain.

And as Jesus taught his disciples, in a prayer that has meant different things to different people through the years:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come; thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive them that trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever.
AMEN

—
Psalm 23 is all about being a sheep who allows itself to be led. It reminds us to trust in the leading of God, that God will lead us in paths and ways that are good for us. As we follow God, as we discern the ways in which we are led by those who lead our worship and the scriptures as we interpret them, the paths will always lead to life. We won't be found lacking when we hear God's voice and discover their heart correctly.

The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want;
he makes me lie in pastures green,
he leads me by the still, still waters,
his goodness restores my soul.

He guides my ways in righteousness,
and he anoints my head with oil;
and my cup -- it overflows with joy,
I feast on his pure delights.

Chorus

Chorus:

And I will trust in you alone,
and I will trust in you alone,
for your endless mercy follows me,
your goodness will lead me home.

And though I walk the darkest path —
I will not fear the evil one,
for you are with me,
and your rod and staff
are the comfort I need to know.

Chorus

(Stuart Townend - STF 481)

This has perhaps been a different service, and more about equipping ourselves with the tools to engage with scripture and future services rather than having a specific three-point sermon with a direct application. But there is still a desire to see some application.

At the very least we hope that we've shared some helpful tools to enable you to take your discipleship journey a little deeper as together we seek to learn more about God through scripture and in our worship.

But on an even more practical level we hope it's given us all an opportunity to consider the way we worship in church and what is involved in making it happen. To that end, what follows are observations, not excuses.

As a circuit we have begun to identify some of our limitations in personnel resources not only in maintaining what we do currently, but also limiting what we might dream of doing moving forwards.

We want to encourage churches across the circuit to think about worship, particularly thinking about our times of corporate worship, and consider why we do what we do, how we might resource the services we know and love, but more than that how we might together dream bigger and release some of the potential waiting to be discovered in each of us as we together take responsibility for helping one another to encounter God.

This needs to be a time where we think creatively and missionally, and not just about how we maintain the comfortable things of the past, from a place of excitement and not just necessity.

As our first reading from Ephesians said we, together, are part of a new family, called to worship together, that we might share that love wider and to draw all people into this family. As family we share in the joys, but also in the responsibilities of all that being in this family entails, bringing our gifts and strengths (and sometimes just rolling up our sleeves to muck in with the grunt work) to see this family being a functional safe place and home filled with love.

What follows is just one way we can see that might help us to journey onwards. There will be other things too. Whilst we find ourselves responding to circumstances, that doesn't have to be a negative thing. It could just be the impetus we need to facilitate a deepening of discipleship for ourselves and our community.

We, as a circuit, do not have as many ministers as we would like. The Circuit Leadership Team will continue to do what they can about that, but much of that is out of their hands...

We also do not have as many preachers with as much capacity as we need to comfortably fill the plan... Maybe you have wondered if that might be something you could do? Speak to a minister in the circuit, or the next local preacher you see to begin a conversation about exploring a possible calling!

Because of the increasingly limited availability of ministers and preachers there are an increased number of shared services and local arrangements. Local arrangements are the responsibility of the stewards in the church, and there are a whole host of brilliant and creative ways in which they are resourced across the circuit. You'll have seen better than some of us as preachers (because we're often busy preaching elsewhere!) what sort of possibilities there are. Sometimes these have been led by worship leaders who are trained to create and curate spaces and times of worship and are equipped and recognised to do everything that a service regularly entails except for delivering a sermon of their own. Perhaps that something that you would enjoy exploring... maybe you like tying things you've found together around a theme, or writing prayers or poems of reflection to help people worship God. Maybe you are called to be a worship leader? Speak to a minister in the circuit, or the next local preacher you see to begin a conversation about exploring a possible calling!

Often others who find themselves responsible for preparing Local Arrangements don't have any formal training, but draw on skills from other parts of life, or find themselves well and truly out of their comfort zones! We want to thank all those people who step into that space to serve our churches.

Whoever it is that is preparing these services, the preparation can be a lot of work, finding the resources, drawing them together, getting people involved in different areas, etc. We are aware that there isn't (currently) any training or resource designed to help those who aren't worship leaders, and that is something we want to help resource.

One thing we have done for the last 4 and a half years as a circuit is to create weekly written services which contain everything that a regular worship gathering might contain - reflections, sermons, songs, prayers, blessings. These services are written by our ministers or local preachers. These have, on occasion, been used by Stewards as the basis for a Local Arrangement. That's a good thing. The resource is there and ready to go... there are 3 years' worth of backdated seasonal services on the NNE website! There is plenty of material to tap into and we're committed to continuing to write these moving forwards thanks to the generosity of our staff and local preachers in sharing their skills and work.

We want to try and encourage this a little bit more with the provision of a "Readers' Ministry".

We're exploring what it would look like for us as a circuit to train people up to use these services in their churches on a week when there is due to be a local arrangement. The idea would be that

someone with a “Readers’ Ministry” would be able to pick up one of these “ready-made” services and deliver it to the congregation. The songs would be ready picked (chosen specifically to fit the theme and rhythm of the service), prayers sourced or written (to fit the theme and rhythm of the service), and a sermon from a recognised preacher that would be intended to be read word-for-word for the benefit of the congregation to encounter God.

Done well, this wouldn’t just be about picking up the printed service on a Sunday morning and reading it blind but would instead involve sitting with the service over a few days to consider what it is that you would be sharing with the congregation, considering the tone and inflection needed to convey the message well. It would involve a degree of “Thinking Theologically” as we have explored earlier in this service.

Training for this would include the practicalities of using a microphone well and projecting voices, speaking slowly and clearly without sounding like reading, but would also include a further dive into thinking theologically about what is being read, considering the heart behind what the preacher is trying to convey in their written service.

Some of you might be used to public speaking and may feel like this could be something you could do given the resources available. Some of you might see it as a gateway to one of the other roles we’ve thought about: If you have ever engaged with one of our written services and found yourself wanting to rewrite the prayers, or would naturally think of other resources you’d have used to compliment the theme, maybe your calling could be developed into that of a worship leader? If you find yourself going deeper with your theology and understanding of the bible and wanted to communicate that in your own words, perhaps we develop that even further into being a local preacher?

We come to this point out of circumstance, but again this is an opportunity for growth through circumstance. It is when we are honest about our needs as a family that often people find themselves stepping up and stepping out into ways that lead us to growth and change and the fulfilment of potential. The reality is that this is one way of the circuit being able to resource gaps in the plan that are unavoidable, and this too won’t be for everyone... But this could be an accessible role that could be played by some people in our congregations who want to see our capacity for services in our own churches continue, yet don’t feel called to lead worship or preach. Or it could be the taster needed for someone who is feeling the beginnings of a more formal calling. This could be a really important way for those people themselves to encounter God in deeper ways, whilst also being used by God to help others encounter God in worship too.

I wonder how that includes you?

Our closing hymn is one that is often chosen alongside passages and reflection relating to calling. What would it look like for us to stand and say, “Here I am, Lord”?

1. I, the Lord of sea and sky,

I have heard my people cry.

All who dwell in dark and sin
my hand will save.

I, who made the stars of night,

I will make their darkness bright.

Who will bear my light to them?

Whom shall I send?

Chorus:

Here I am, Lord.

Is it I, Lord?

I have heard you calling in the night.

I will go, Lord,

if you lead me.

I will hold your people in my heart.

2. I, the Lord of snow and rain,
I have borne my people's pain;
I have wept for love of them.
They turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone,
give them hearts for love alone.
I will speak my word to them.
Whom shall I send?
Chorus

3. I, the Lord of wind and flame,
I will tend the poor and lame.
I will set a feast for them.
My hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide
till their hearts are satisfied.
I will give my life to them.
Whom shall I send?
Chorus

Daniel L. Schutte - STF 663

A final blessing:

May our lives of worship, as individuals and as congregations, in daily living and in our services,
be blessed with encounters with God;
May we find ourselves inspired to create and curate those spaces for others to encounter God with
us;
May we deepen our discipleship as we seek to learn more of the God who loves us;
And may we be empowered to help others encounter that same God and same love.
AMEN