

THE *heart* OF
MENNONITE
WORSHIP



FIVE VITAL RHYTHMS



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Enter the sanctuary of any congregation on Sunday morning and you'll see people at worship. We sing, we pray, we listen to the Word, and we break bread together. Worship, and especially singing together, is our common ground. It shapes our faith in profound ways.

This four-session study guide, *The Heart of Mennonite Worship: Five Vital Rhythms*, will help your congregation think more deeply about worship. Plus, by completing the accompanying song survey you are helping shape a future song collection for Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA.

THE HEART OF MENNONITE WORSHIP: FIVE VITAL RHYTHMS

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Introduction

Worship: Our Common Ground

What Christians have in common is our practice of gathering regularly for worship. Even though the exact ways we worship differ from one region or one cultural group to another, we share common understandings as followers of Jesus that shape our worship.

Singing together is one way in which we express a great variety in worship. Members of a growing Laotian immigrant community in Saskatchewan enjoy singing uplifting songs of praise in the Mennonite congregation where they've been warmly welcomed. In a rural Mennonite community in Ohio, worshippers take pleasure in hearty four-part a cappella singing. In a church in Indiana, a small instrumental music group of all ages meets before worship to rehearse music for the service. On any given Sunday they might play gospel music, bluegrass, jazz, songs from the global church, contemporary choruses, hymns, classical music, or new songs composed by members of the congregation.

Like the early Christians, all these worshippers are filled with the Spirit as they “sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among [themselves], singing and making melody to the Lord in [their] hearts” (Ephesians 5:19).

Worship, and especially singing together, is our common ground. Because it shapes our faith in such profound ways, it is good to occasionally reflect together on this practice of the church. Why do we worship? Does our worship honor Christ? How does our worship express our beliefs as Mennonites? What is the role of music in worship? How are we being changed as followers of Jesus in our weekly worship?

This study guide provides a starting place for such a conversation. Offering a suggested framework of five vital rhythms as the heart of Mennonite worship, this guide invites congregations across Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA into a conversation. Are these the same rhythms that pulse at the heart of your worship? Are other rhythms important to you? If so, what are they?

Enter the sanctuary of any church on Sunday morning and you'll see people worshipping by singing, praying, listening to the Word, and breaking bread together.

The Heart of Mennonite Worship: Five Vital Rhythms

1. Worship is our response to a loving God, known to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit).
2. Our worship is rooted in, and shaped by, Scripture.
3. Worship creates a new community, uniting believers as the body of Christ.
4. Worship forms us as followers of Jesus.
5. Worship and life are intimately connected.

How to use this guide

This four-session guide is designed for congregational study and discussion. Use each session individually or divide each into two sessions as shown below, depending on the needs of your congregation.

Each session opens with a brief overview and question to help focus the discussion. Leaders will want to draw on the worship resources, such as Scripture and music options, to help set the tone.

If your congregation decides to craft a sermon series around the heart-rhythms of Anabaptist-Mennonite worship, use the conversation starters for children during children's time in each worship service.

However your congregation uses this guide, make sure to allow time for thinking, responding, and reflecting during the sessions.

If using this guide for four sessions of fifty minutes each, allocate time like this:		If using this guide for eight sessions of thirty minutes each, allocate time like this:	
Gathering	5 minutes	Use the first half of the session in your first gathering.	
Entering	5 minutes	Gathering	5 minutes
Exploring	10 minutes	Entering	5 minutes
Conversing	25 minutes	Exploring	15 minutes
Sending	5 minutes	Sending	5 minutes
		Use the second half of the session in your next gathering.	
		Gathering/Entering	5 minutes
		Exploring (review)	5 minutes
		Conversing	15 minutes
		Sending	5 minutes

Provide feedback on music and worship

The goal of the study guide is to stimulate conversation across the entire Mennonite Church about worship, especially about the role of singing in worship. But the conversation cannot stop in your local congregation.

We ask that each congregation collect its insights and responses and send feedback to MennoMedia by May 31, 2012 (see survey information at the end of the study guide).

Your feedback will help guide the ongoing work of the Binational Worship Council, a joint committee overseeing the worship life of both Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA.

In particular, your feedback will provide valuable information as the council discerns next steps in developing a song collection for the Mennonite Church.

Why Do We Gather to Worship?

Summary

Session one invites us, as the gathered body of Christ, to recall meaningful worship experiences. Reflection question: Why do Christians gather to worship together?

FOR LEADERS

Preparation

- Prepare items needed.
- Choose a song for the sending time.

Items needed

- Worship table
- Symbols of worship such as a pulpit Bible, bulletin, hymnal, offering plate, guest-book, or other items familiar in your congregation
- Candle and matches
- Bible

Gathering: Breathing In

Place the symbols of worship on a worship table. Add a candle to the table and light it as you begin the session. Invite people to breathe in deeply and then exhale. Spend a moment in silence, becoming aware of God's presence within and all around.

Read, or invite someone ahead of time to read: John 4:23-24:

But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

Pray:

Holy God, we give you thanks and praise for our time together. We ask for new insights as we seek to better understand why we worship. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Entering

Karen and her young daughter enter the sanctuary of Bethel Mennonite Church. She remembers a year ago when they first came. Everything was unfamiliar, different from her previous worship experiences, and yet somehow fascinating—the words, the music, the prayers, the children's story, and the actions.

She soon recognized the earnest desire to meet God, the love people showed each other, and the difference worship made in people's everyday lives. Karen and her daughter were welcomed and embraced. Worship drew them closer to God and closer to these people. Now this community of faith is their worshipping community.

Recall a recent experience of worship that was especially meaningful to you. What stands out in your memory? Reflect on these memories. Give thanks for this experience.

Exploring

If you regularly leave your home to attend worship with a local congregation, you are a member of a distinct minority. Depending where you live in Canada and the United States, fewer than one or two out of every five people will join you in gathering to worship.

Though church attendance numbers were much higher in the past, today most of your neighbors will find a wide variety of other activities to occupy them on weekends instead of participating in worship.

While there are many reasons for this dramatic shift, you have demonstrated your commitment to an alternative way of life by making worship a priority. Why do you gather to worship? Does worship make a difference in your life? Do you miss worship when you can't attend? Why?

A simple way to think about worship is to compare it to breathing. Our bodies were made to breathe. When we regularly take deep breaths, inhaling and exhaling in rhythm, we thrive physically. Blood circulates, our body systems function almost without notice, we think clearly, and we carry out our daily tasks with ease and energy. If we stop breathing, we will die. Without the steady flow of air into our lungs, our physical bodies will not survive.

As spiritual beings, we also require spiritual sustenance. Created by God, we are made for companionship with our Creator. In worship and in our daily life, we are invited into intimate communion with the triune God, a circle of loving fellowship and unity. See John 10:30; 14:18-20; 16:12-15; 20:21-22 for further discussion of this theme.

While God delights in the good work we do in the world, God desires our love even more (Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Matthew 22:37-39). Worship is a time for showing our love for God, for being with God, and for breathing in the goodness, mercy, and beauty of God.

When we join the intergenerational community of faith in weekly worship, we are strengthened by the breath of God's Spirit and by the love and care of God's people.

When connected to God, we sense that our lives have purpose and meaning. Our souls thrive.

Though we can worship God alone—in our homes, in nature, or in lonely midnight hours—we cannot flourish as Christians without worshipping with other Christians. Our personal prayer is always linked to, and derived from, the ongoing practice of prayer of God's people.

The love and grace of God that we breathe in during worship changes us. As we praise and thank God, we become grateful disciples in daily life. As we bring our deepest desires and longings to God, we are formed as people who trust God with our everyday needs. As people who breathe in and out together in song we learn what it means to be a body, to depend upon each other's gifts, and to give and receive.

Worship is not something that ends when we take our last breath. Scripture suggests that worship is our eternal destiny. When all of God's purposes have been fulfilled and all things have been united in Christ, we will gather in God's presence to praise and glorify God forever (Revelation 5:11-14).

Worship is a time for showing our love for God, for being with God, and for breathing in the goodness, mercy, and beauty of God.

“Christian worship is corporate in its very essence: the fullness of the Spirit falls upon the gathered community; the fullness of the Word is heard here. In [worship], the broken bones of the body of Christ are reset and restored to health. [Though] worship happens in many settings—in the serenity of a lakeside at dawn, in the fervor of a peace rally, in the intensity of a concert performance—it is grounded in the weekly gathering of the church on the Lord's day.”

—John Rempel, “An Anabaptist Perspective on Music in Worship,” in *Music in Worship: A Mennonite Perspective*, ed. Bernie Neufeld (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press and Newton, KS: Faith & Life Press, 1998).

Conversing

Worship—an alternative act

By regularly attending worship today in the U.S. and Canada you are unique. Many other activities compete for our time. You demonstrate your commitment to an alternative way of life when you make worship a priority.

- What do you tell your neighbors (or your children or your friends) about why you make worship a priority?
- What do you understand by the statement that we are created for worship?
- How does the very act of worshipping together change us?

Worship—breathing in, breathing out

Throughout human history, worship has been as natural for most people as the act of breathing. For believers, worship is the lifeblood that sustains us and invites us into companionship with our Creator.

- Consider several recent worship services in which you have participated. In what ways were you drawn into the presence of God? What enables you to worship God?
- What happens to your spirit as you worship? How do you breathe in the love of God?
- How do you feel as you leave worship? What lingers with you when you return home?

Worship—both personal and communal

In worship we join our personal lives and faith with the broader body of Christ. We are changed as individuals and as communities to become living signs of God's love and grace in the world.

- What elements of the worship service speak most directly to you (sermon, prayer, children's time, singing, etc.)? Are these elements the same for the people around you?
- What images of God have been especially significant in worship for you? For your congregation?

CONVERSATION STARTERS FOR CHILDREN

- People go to church to worship God, who loves us. What do you enjoy about going to church? Is there anything you don't enjoy about going to church?
- In church people of all ages worship God together. Name some of the children and adults who are your friends at church.

Sending: Breathing Out*Singing (choose one):*

HWB 407	We are people of God's peace, v.1
HWB 16	God is here among us, v.1
SJ 9	Come, now is the time to worship
SJ 46	O breathe on me, O breath of God
CCLI 3266032	Here I am to worship
CCLI 2296522	The heart of worship

Blessing:

Go in peace, worshipping God as you go. Now to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. —Ephesians 3:20-21

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SESSION TWO

What Makes Worship Mennonite?

Summary

Session two offers five vital rhythms at the heart of Mennonite worship. Reflection question: What rhythms of worship are important to your congregation?

FOR LEADERS

Preparation

- Prepare items needed.
- Choose a song for the sending time.

Items needed

- Worship table
- Symbols of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition such as a basin and towel, communion goblet, or baptismal pitcher
- Candle and matches
- Bible

Gathering: Breathing In

Place the symbols of worship on a worship table. Add a candle to the table and light it as you begin the session. Invite people to breathe in deeply and then exhale. Spend a moment in silence, becoming aware of God's presence within and all around.

Read, or invite someone ahead of time to read, Psalm 92:1-4:

It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night, to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre. For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy.

Pray:

God, you are steadfast and faithful. Draw us toward your love during this time of study and always. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Entering

John grew up at Peace Mennonite Church. As an adult, he has lived in many different locations around the world—sometimes in places without a Mennonite Church. He appreciates the gift of worshipping with Christians of many backgrounds and denominations. He feels part of the worldwide body of Christ. Yet when he can, John always seeks to worship in a Mennonite congregation. Even though he finds wonderful diversity in these congregations, he also finds a common thread of shared values and understandings. He can't quite put his finger on it, but he calls the Mennonite Church his "worship home."

You have chosen to worship in a Mennonite congregation. What are three words or phrases that describe what draws you to Anabaptist-Mennonite worship?

Exploring

It is not easy to define or even characterize Anabaptist-Mennonite worship these days. A century ago it was possible to attend worship in most Mennonite Church congregations on a Sunday morning and know what to expect. Now we have become much more diverse in our worship practices.

The diversity in Mennonite worship practices is not surprising. People from other faith traditions have joined Mennonite congregations. And like other denominations, Mennonites have been influenced by emerging Christian movements—new spiritual, evangelical, and missional streams. Perhaps most significantly, the shift from pastor-led worship to lay-led worship in the past few decades has brought even more variety and creativity to our worship.

Mennonite worship covers a wide spectrum, from charismatic to traditional, from "seeker-friendly" to more liturgical services.

We share many of our understandings about worship with the whole Christian church. So what characterizes an Anabaptist experience of worship? How would you describe the character of Mennonite worship?

Mennonites, like all Christians, have a faith that is not generic. We practice our faith within a particular tradition. This tradition is rich, dynamic, and continues to shape our spiritual practices. In turn, our practices, including worship, shape our understandings of God and the Christian life.

This session offers five vital rhythms to describe how Anabaptist-Mennonites understand being faithful in worship. We invite you to discuss and reflect on these rhythms in light of your own experiences and understandings.

The heart of Mennonite worship: five vital rhythms

1. *Worship is our response to a loving God, known to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit).* God relates to us as the Creator who made us, as Christ Jesus who saves us and demonstrates the way to a life that honors God, and as Holy Spirit, present with us in daily life.
2. *Our worship is rooted in, and shaped by, Scripture.* Our Scriptures help us understand who we are as people created and called by God. Scripture tells the story of God's people in times past, and that story continues in the life of God's people even now. Central to understanding Scripture is the story of Jesus Christ, who shapes our life as the body of Christ. In this way, the Bible is indeed the church's book and belongs in worship amidst the gathered community.
3. *Worship creates a new community, uniting believers as the body of Christ.* We gather together to worship not because of shared interests or because of family and friendship connections. We gather—as people young and old—because it is Christ who brings us together.

While we may enjoy the fellowship, or we may experience personal worship in other settings, our congregational worship is grounded in gathering together as the body of Christ.

4. *Worship forms us as followers of Jesus.* Worship shapes our spiritual being (our desires and affections), our knowing (our thinking and believing about God and the Christian faith), and our doing (our actions, character, and values) as followers of Jesus. In the practice of worship, the lives and beliefs of followers of Jesus are continually being formed and transformed, even as our lives and beliefs continually form and transform our worship.
5. *Worship and life are intimately connected.* As we worship, we see God's vision for the world more clearly, and we long to participate in it. The story of Jesus Christ points us toward those at the margins, to broken people and a broken world longing for healing and reconciliation. This makes worship missional. Even as the community gathers to worship, the Spirit sends us out to connect with the world.

Conversing

Choosing to worship with a congregation

Congregations attract members for many reasons. Some cite a congregation's children's program or its music while others cite the strong preaching or the friendships that are formed. Life changes also affect how and why we are drawn to congregational life.

- Name two reasons you choose to worship with your particular congregation.
- The study guide states that in worship the church gathers “not because of shared interests or because of family and friendship connections. We gather—as people young and old—because it is Christ who brings us together.” Discuss this statement as it applies to your congregation.

The rhythms of worship

Anabaptist-Mennonite worship is diverse today—and no two congregations look alike. But at its core our worship draws us to a God who loves us. Our worship is shaped by Scripture, is formational, and continues its expression in daily Christian living.

- What are the Anabaptist-Mennonite rhythms of your congregation? How do they compare with the five rhythms described in the study guide? How might the rhythms of your congregation be different?
- To what extent do Anabaptist-Mennonites share these worship rhythms with other Christians? How might they be different from other denominations?

Shaping and reshaping worship

Our personal faith is always being shaped and guided by the leading of the Spirit. In the same way, Anabaptist-Mennonite worship also continues to be shaped and guided. Our tradition does not stay the same, but is dynamic and moving.

- Talk about some fruitful changes you have seen in Anabaptist-Mennonite worship in recent years.
- Name some elements of Anabaptist-Mennonite worship that you do not want to lose. Why are these elements so significant to your faith?

CONVERSATION STARTERS FOR CHILDREN

- In church we hear Bible stories about Jesus and God and God's great love for us. What is one of your favorite Bible stories?
- Worship is what happens when people get together at church to honor God. We do this by sharing stories about God and God's way, singing songs, listening to sermons, giving God our money, shaking hands with friends, and more. What is your favorite part of worship?

FOR LEADERS

Sending: Breathing Out

Singing (choose one):

SJ 16	Praise with joy the world's Creator, v. 1
HWB 36	God of our strength, v. 1
SS 54	What does the Lord require of you?
SS 55	Love the Lord your God, v. 1
CCLI 3350395	In Christ alone

Blessing:

As you go, walk in the rhythm of God's love. And may your hearts be encouraged and united in love, so that you may have all the riches of assured understanding of the mystery of God, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Amen. —Adapted from Colossians 2:2-3

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SESSION THREE

How Does Worship Shape Us for Life?

Summary

Session three looks at how worship makes a difference in our lives. Reflection question: How are we formed and transformed through worship?

FOR LEADERS

Preparation

- Prepare items needed.
- Choose a song for the sending time.

Items needed

- Worship table
- Congregational photos such as a photo directory and photos of church activities
- Candle and matches
- Bible

Gathering: Breathing In

Place the symbols of worship on a worship table. Add a candle to the table and light it as you begin the session. Invite people to breathe in deeply and then exhale. Spend a moment in silence, becoming aware of God's presence within and all around.

Read, or invite someone ahead of time to read, Romans 12:1-2:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Pray:

Spirit of God, we pray for your grace and blessing during our time together. Change our hearts and our minds so that we can grow closer to you. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Entering

Tia attended her first youth convention this summer. It was an amazing week in which she was especially moved by the worship. Tia was drawn to the inviting visuals, powerful preaching, good music, and rituals of healing that spoke directly to her and motivated her to go out and serve the world. After the last worship service she told her youth sponsor, "I'll never be the same."

People come to worship for many reasons—to meet friends, to offer praise and thanksgiving to God, to cope when going through hard times, and to be encouraged in their walk with Jesus. Worship makes a difference in their lives. How does worship make a difference in your life?

Exploring

Worship is what empowers followers of Jesus to live faithfully in the world. In worship our minds take in wisdom, our hearts are moved, and our whole beings are called to live out the gospel.

When Mennonites worship together, we are formed as the people of God and transformed to live as committed disciples (Ephesians 4:13, 15). We do not leave a worship service exactly the same as when we entered. The prayers, preaching, and music all have the power to change us.

*Being formed is a continuous and ongoing activity.
Being transformed is when we experience a moment
in which things fit together in a new way.*

This transformation happens because of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Not even the preacher or the worship leader knows exactly how the congregation will be moved. The Holy Spirit guides us and is always changing us by leading us into new ways of thinking and behaving (John 14:26; 16:13; 1 Corinthians 2:14).

Mennonites believe that worship and life are intimately connected. We cannot separate what happens in one area of life from what happens in another. The welcoming hospitality we offer in worship or the prayerful attention we give to God's voice carry over to all of life. This means that worshipping God together changes our character, our worldview, our ethics, and our behaviors because worship affects our lives.

Think of it this way: you go to the park one afternoon with a child to let the child burn off some energy. As you walk, both of you start noticing the changing color of the leaves, squirrels scampering up trees, and neighbors mowing grass. Together you slow down and fully take in the surrounding neighborhood. The experience may still be about letting the child run and play, but along the way your own outlook and experience are shaped as well. The same thing happens in worship: we show up to honor God, but honoring God changes us and shapes how we live.

*We show up to honor God, but honoring God
changes us and shapes how we live.*

The actions in which we typically engage in Anabaptist-Mennonite worship form and transform our lives in many ways.

- When we gather we come together as a community and are reminded of our connectedness to each other and our reliance on Christ, who unites us.
- In acts of praising and adoring we acknowledge that we are deeply and gratefully dependent upon God, who created us.
- In confessing and reconciling we bring to worship our own messy lives, confessing our sin and brokenness and receiving God's forgiveness, healing, and grace. We receive assurance that we are God's beloved children. We are invited to extend forgiveness and reconciliation to a broken world.
- As we hear God's Word proclaimed, we are reminded of God's gracious acts and God's desire to create new life.

- When we affirm our faith we renew our commitment to, and trust in, God. We receive baptism and the Lord's Supper as signs that we follow the way of Christ.
- In offering tithes and offerings to God, we give generously in response to God's love for us. We also offer and receive hospitality when we welcome newcomers, give and receive the peace of Christ, and fellowship with each other.
- We are called not just to pray for our own needs but also for the needs of others. When we pray we release our joys and concerns into God's hands, trusting that God cares and is at work in our lives and in our world.
- In worship we give witness to the transformation God has brought about in our lives. This practice continues in daily life as the church engages in acts of peacemaking, service, and sharing the good news of God's reconciliation.
- As worship ends, we are sent into the world, knowing that God is working in our lives and in the world to bring healing and hope.

Conversing

Separating life and faith

At one time or another we may have thought we could keep our faith separate from other parts of our lives. This week's discussion shows us that such separation is impossible. Worship and life are always intimately connected.

- How might you have tried to keep your faith and life separate from one another? Why? How did that work?
- How has worship changed you?
- In what ways has Anabaptist-Mennonite worship shaped your life differently than if you were part of another faith tradition?

Being formed and transformed

In worship and in life God forms and transforms us. The act of forming is continuous and ongoing. God is always at work forming us as Christians. Transforming happens in those sudden moments that catch us off guard, when things fit together in a new way.

- Share a personal story about how worship in your congregation has affected your life. How is your understanding of your Christian life different as a result?
- How does your congregation form the faith of children, youth, and adults through worship? How does the weekly worship service call people to live?
- Describe a time in a worship service that was transforming. What caught you off guard or fit together in a new way in that worship service? Why was that service so powerful?

Other ways of worshipping

This session lists some typical actions that take place in Anabaptist-Mennonite worship. But this is only a partial list of how a congregation and its members are engaged in worship.

- How do the typical actions of worship in your congregation compare with the list in this study guide? What might be different?
- How have these actions changed over the years? Are there actions your congregation no longer includes? What new actions might be included? How have these changes affected the formation and transformation of worshippers in your congregation?

CONVERSATION STARTERS FOR CHILDREN

- One thing that happens in worship is prayer. We pray out loud to God. We also pray silently. We say thank-you to God for good things in our lives and ask for God's help in times of trouble. When you talk to God, what do you say? What do you like to talk to God about?
- Tell about something special that happened in your church's worship.

FOR LEADERS

Sending: Breathing Out

Singing (choose one):

HWB 26	Holy Spirit, come with power, v.3
HWB 487	Teach me, O Lord, vv.1-2
SJ 28	We worship God the Rock
SJ 35	O Breath of Life
CCLI 4705176	From the inside out
CCLI 2296522	The heart of worship

Blessing:

Carry your worship with you into the world. And may your love for God and one another abound more and more, both in understanding and in wealth of experience, so that you may learn to value the things that really matter, up to the very day of Christ. Amen. —Adapted from Philippians 1: 9-10

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SESSION FOUR

Why Do We Gather Songs for Worship?

Summary

Session four invites us to consider congregational song collections—whether a hymnal, a binder, computer files, or another form. Reflection question: What songs are important to your congregation?

FOR LEADERS

Preparation

- Prepare items needed.
- Choose a song for the sending time.

Items needed

- Worship table
- Song collections used in your congregation, such as songbooks, music sheets, and hymnals
- Candle and matches
- Bible

Gathering: Breathing In

Place song collections used in your church on a worship table. Add a candle to the table and light it as you begin the session. Invite people to breathe in deeply and then exhale. Spend a moment in silence, becoming aware of God's presence within and all around.

Read, or invite someone ahead of time to read: Ephesians 5:18b-20:

Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Pray:

Creator God, your songs fill our land with hope and peace. We seek your presence as we consider the gifts of singing and music in worship. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Entering

Oscar, age 76, and Maria, age 12, sit beside each other at church one Sunday. Each is lost in his or her own thoughts until the last song of the service. Oscar is transported back to his childhood when Grandma used to sing this song. Maria is caught up in the beautiful melody. They both realize they know all the words by heart. They put down their books and glance toward each other. They grin, smile, and then sing with gusto this shared song of the heart.

Music has the ability to go straight to the core of our being, to our hearts. What is a congregational song you remember hearing or singing when you were a child? What new song has become an important song, a heart song, for you? What songs do you hope the next generation will still know and love?

Exploring

A collection of songs is important to the worshipping community. Next to the Bible, a good collection of songs and hymns may be one of the most valuable treasures for the Christian worshipper.

In some congregations this collection takes the form of a published book, while in others it is a compiled folder of favorite music, and in still others it is simply a computer file or an oral list of songs.

Throughout the generations, singing has become like a sacrament for Mennonites: the songbook has become a book of prayer, and our song collections an entrance into an experience with God.

Whether in the form of a book or projected onto screens, a collection of songs and hymns is one way a church worships. Congregational singing allows some of our best and most meaningful expressions of worship. Colossians 3:16 encourages us to “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.”

Children, like adults, love to sing. Singing includes children in the church’s expression of its faith and provides them with a vocabulary for faith and belief that they will understand at deeper levels as they mature.

As with most practices, songs and hymns come and go. We will always need new songs and new styles of music. Sometimes congregations are introduced to new songs that quickly become favorites, but then over time are forgotten. Yet when they were sung, they served an important role. Other songs become favorites and remain part of a congregation’s song collection for decades.

The most beloved songs and hymns of the church are those that stand the test of time for their musical expressiveness, theology, and relevance to the Christian life. Such music becomes deeply established in the heart and soul of a faith community and may span generations and centuries.

A song collection helps us to encounter God. It reminds us of our conversion. It calls us to deeper commitment to Jesus. The songs we sing dramatize our own trials and struggles and make us aware of God’s amazing and lavish grace.

A good collection of songs and hymns allows us to express a range of emotions—from praise and wonder to lament and grief. Songs help us express our deepest longings and our highest joys. They root us in tradition and give us common language that allows us to express an understanding of our relationships with God, the world, and each other.

A song collection is years in the making, taking the best music and poetry and harmonizing them with Anabaptist-Mennonite theology. It is a rich reminder of where we have come from and who we are today. Over time, song collections in the church become much-loved, well-sung and passed on from one generation to the next. Even as new collections are embraced by the faith community, rediscovered “heart songs” of the past may become part of the new collection.

The songbook has become a book of prayer, and our song collections an entrance into an experience with God.

“In a course on theology and beauty, I ask my students why music has been such a persistent feature of Christian worship across history and cultures. In essay after essay, they tell me that this is because music moves us emotionally. Of course this is true. Music engages our emotions and in this way enriches our worship.”

—Steven R. Guthrie, “United We Sing,” *Christian Century* (January 11, 2011): 27.

Conversing

Finding your song

Different songs fit different moods. The songs we sing individually might not be the songs we sing to our children at night or the songs we sing in the church choir. And while some songs come and go, others become attached to our hearts.

- Name five “heart songs” of your congregation—songs that have become beloved by the congregation. Why have these songs become attached to the heart of your church? Are they intergenerational? Are they often sung at special times?
- What happens to you when your congregation sings? How is your experience of God affected by singing? Your sense of connections to your sisters and brothers in the faith community? Your desire to love and serve God in the world?

Many types of songs bring honor to God

Singing together as a body of believers helps us to encounter the living God. The tunes we sing are sometimes slow and sometimes upbeat. Whatever their musical style or tone, the words we sing shape what we believe about God and how we act on our faith.

- What percentage of songs sung in your services are hymns? Contemporary Christian music? Other types of music? Who chooses the music for your church and how?
- What can people who prefer different types of music learn from each other’s preferences? Discuss opportunities for sharing all kinds of music together.

There is a song for every season

Ecclesiastes 3:1 says, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” Just as there is a season for everything, we need a song for every season. We need songs for weddings and funerals, songs for baby dedications and ordinations, songs for ordinary times of gathering and sending.

- Reflect on what is happening in your congregation and/or community. Name some particular current concerns or issues. What songs and hymns address these needs?
- Which congregational or life situations have no corresponding song?
- How would your worship be different if there was no congregational singing?

CONVERSATION STARTERS FOR CHILDREN

- Worship is filled with music. Sometimes it’s fast and sometimes it’s slow. Sometimes people play instruments and sometimes we use our voices to sing praise to God. Do you sit down or stand to sing at church? What instruments do you hear? How do you know when to start to sing?
- What songs do you especially like to sing at church? What about your parents or grandparents? Which songs are their favorites?
- Is there a song you like to remember or sing because it helps you feel close to God?

Sending: Breathing Out

Singing (choose one):

HWB 121	Holy God, we praise thy name, vv. 1, 3
HWB 580	My life flows on, v. 1
SJ 1	We sing to you, O God
SJ 18	Over my head
SS 124	My soul cries out
CCLI 1406918	Shout to the Lord
CCLI 117947	Lord I lift your name on high

Blessing:

We thank you, God, for being with us. Give us a song of love for our world, our community, and for each other. Encourage us as we seek to live in harmony and peace. Amen.

Bibliography

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Survey

Songs used in Mennonite Worship

Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA

Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA, together with MennoMedia, are beginning to explore and discern the kinds of worship resources that will be needed for our churches in the next ten to fifteen years. In particular, we are interested in how music is used during worship services.

Please take a moment to respond to an online survey at www.mpn.net/worship. Complete the survey monthly from September 2011 through April 2012, listing the songs that your congregation sings each week. Submit your complete answers online by May 31, 2012.

Thank you in advance for your valuable assistance in shaping the worship life of our churches!