



Worship Themes and Sermon Series for Campus Ministry

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While this resource was written prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the questions, rituals and themes included here are easily adapted to your current ministry situation.

Many Ukirk collegiate ministries are also worshipping communities and whether that takes place weekly or monthly, the way you shape your worship life also shapes the way the community is bound together. This resource is designed to provide some reflections on worshipping as a campus ministry and to offer some ideas for how to create worship themes that fit a semester calendar.

Building Your Worship Life

“Liturgy” is literally the work of the people, so the worship and liturgy that you offer within a campus ministry should reflect the life of the community gathered. While campus ministries naturally serve undergraduate (and sometimes graduate) students, the culture, interests, passions, and talents of your particular ministry should be brought into consideration as you structure your worship.

Below are some questions to consider that may shape the way you think about the style and substance of your worship.

Where will you worship? How will the space itself set the tone for the kind of sacred encounter you want to offer students?

- Will you gather in pews? In the round? On couches? Over a meal?
- Can you set the lighting to create a contemporary or contemplative tone?
- How will people enter? What helps them know it’s a worship space? Space is often hard to come by on a college campus and so you may find that you must use lighting, cloth, candles, etc. to transform a sterile classroom or dorm common room into something sacred whenever you gather. Battery-powered lamps/lanterns and simple colored cloth can transform campus spaces into holy places.

What style of worship fits your community? Contemporary? Contemplative? Traditional? Blended?

- It is likely that students participating in the campus ministry will have experienced a variety of worship styles growing up, or perhaps this is their first exposure to worship. For first-year students who are longing for the familiar when they have moved away from home, worship style may be a way you can provide a sense of the familiar. Alternatively, you may choose to provide a particular style of worship to attend to the needs of the community. If so, explain to newcomers the different elements of worship and why you do what you do.

What are the essential elements of worship for your community?

The Reformed tradition emphasizes and structures worship around the proclamation of the Word. Consider what form of proclamation will best enable your students to hear the good news of Jesus Christ.

- Will you have a sermon? If so, who will preach?

- If you as campus minister will serve as the primary preacher, consider the ways your preaching style can meet the particularity of your community. I learned quickly that manuscript preaching was a non-starter for campus ministry, despite it being my preferred style.
- If you create space for students to preach, take time to equip them with resources in advance, but cherish the opportunity for students to offer personal testimony at a time when faith formation is central.
- You might also consider alternative forms of proclamation. Is there space for art, video, prayer stations, dialogue with a neighbor or as a whole community? Resources like The Work of the People (www.theworkofthepeople.com) offer great alternate voices via video. Art ministries like A Sanctified Art (www.sanctifiedart.org) have produced rich worship materials that work well in a series.
- What role will the sacraments play in your community?
 - Since campus ministries are often validated ministries, permission can be granted by the Presbytery, a governing board, or a sponsoring congregation for church-based ministries to celebrate communion. If you are not an ordained minister, communion can be a wonderful opportunity to invite pastors from supporting congregations to participate in the life of your community.

What opportunities are there for ritual that help bind the community together from week-to-week and year-to-year?

The campus ministry I led had a variety of worship practices that added continuity to our worship week-to-week and contributed to community formation, such as:

- Prayers of the People: This prayer was always offered popcorn style as joys and concerns. Individual students shared a joy or concern and concluded, “Lord in your mercy,” for a concern or “Lord in thanksgiving,” for a joy and the community responded, “Hear our prayer.” This simple prayer structure created space for some of the most vulnerable and genuine sharing.
- Theme song: The student leadership of the campus ministry helped to select one song that closed worship every week for an entire year. This helped promote congregational singing in a small-to-medium sized campus ministry. At our graduation celebration each spring, the seniors were asked to sing all four “theme songs” from their time as a send-off.
- Passing of the Peace: We ended worship with the passing of the peace so that students could interact, hug, and connect with one another more authentically. More on that here: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-we-hug_b_8742268
- Silence: Because we structured our worship in a contemplative style, I led guided silence or centering prayer for 3-5 minutes to open worship every week. It was a way to transition us from boisterous fellowship/dinner time to worship and to allow students to catch their breath. This requires some teaching for students to get comfortable with silence but proved one of the most important aspects of worship for stressed, over-committed college students.
- Music Style: As a small congregation worshipping with just piano accompaniment, music from Taizé and Iona with shorter, simpler, repetitive tunes helped encourage congregational singing and fit the contemplative tone of the service.

These are just a few of many opportunities for ritual that helped build the worship life of the ministry.

Choosing Scripture and Worship Themes

Campus ministries naturally bear a cyclical structure with kick-off weeks and send-offs/graduations that warrants special consideration. The question is what to do with the weeks in between. As wonderful as the Revised Common Lectionary is for congregations, it rarely fits the academic calendar in a way that is meaningful to students. Therefore, an alternate lectionary or sermon series structure may be more fruitful for campus ministries that worship regularly. The UWorship resource (available on <https://ukirk.org> in .pdf format) offers a four-year academic calendar lectionary that offers a balanced variety of Old Testament and New Testament readings and prevents the tendency to use the same limited biblical stories over and over.

Alternatively, you may find that sermon series or worship series better fit the flow of the program year. Below are a variety of sermon series that I used during my tenure as campus minister when we were becoming a worshipping community. The worship series vary in length in order to fit semesters that accommodated fall and spring breaks, special services, retreats, etc. The student leadership team selected the theme, often from a list of ideas that I presented, and the students weighed in on what was driving their choice for a theme. After the theme was chosen, I selected the topics & scriptural pairings and built worship around it. You are welcome to draw from or adapt any of these ideas or have students guide you in creating your own worship theme.

Semester Theme: Called by God

An exploration of a variety of call stories from scripture. Each week asked these questions:
 What does it mean to be called by God?
 What can we know about how these individuals were called by God?
 How might their call stories shape how God might be calling us today?

Biblical Character	Scripture
Moses and the Burning Bush	Exodus 3
Abraham’s Call	Genesis 12:1-9
The Good Samaritan	Luke 10:25-37/Micah 6:8
Jeremiah’s Call	Jeremiah 1:4-12
Elijah and the Still Small Voice	1 Kings 19:11-12
Jesus’ Baptism as a Point of Call	Mark 1:9-11
Mary and Martha	Luke 10:38-42
Jesus Calling Disciples on Road to Emmaus	Luke 24:13-35

Semester Theme: The Presbyterian Cross

We used the image of the PC(USA) cross to teach central elements of the Christian tradition. The bulletin cover for each week had an image of the Presbyterian cross with the internal image highlighted. Those images are available here: <https://oga.pcusa.org/section/stated-clerk/stated-clerk/seal/>

Image Focus	Scripture
The Cross	Philippians 2:5-11
Bible: Scripture’s Authority	John 1:1-14/Psalm 119:100-112
Flame: What is the Holy Spirit?	Acts 2:1-12
Table: Communion	Luke 22:14-21
Pulpit: Proclamation	Mark 1:14-15, 35-39
Fish: Responding to Hunger	Mark 6:34-44
Dove: Working Toward Peace	Isaiah 2:1-5/Isaiah 11:1-9
Triangle: What does it mean that God is triune?	Romans 5:1-5
The Cross	Colossians 1:11-20/Luke 23:33-43

Semester Theme: In Relationship with...

This was one of my student’s favorite themes because it was so directly connected to their lives. This theme focused on the importance of the ways we are in relationship with ourselves, God, and the world, using a different relationship focus each week. The week on love/dating/intimate relationships was the best attended week ever and became an annual repeat. The “sermon” was a time with two adult couples who were willing to openly and honestly answer any questions the students had (note: the questions were submitted anonymously on paper and pre-screened by the campus minister).

Relationship of Focus	Scripture
Friendship	Psalms 133/John 15:1-5, 12-17
Family	Matthew 12:46-50

Family of Faith	1 Corinthians 12:12-26
God	John 1:1-18
Self	Psalms 1/Matthew 26:36-46
Body	2 Samuel 6:12-23/John 12:1-8
School	Luke 2:41-52
Love/Dating/Intimate Relationships	1 John 4:16
City	Jeremiah 29:1-7
Creation	Psalms 104

Semester Theme: Identity

This theme focused on aspects of identity and led up to a spring break mission trip. I used Wayne Muller’s book *How Then, Shall We Live?* as a resource for the first three weeks. We also welcomed guests: a former PC(USA) mission co-worker in the Middle East for the weeks on being a global citizen, a PC(USA) army chaplain for the week on being an American, and a seminary admissions recruiter for the week on Vocation in and for the Church. This is a series where multiple voices are beneficial.

Identity/Relationship	Scripture
Who am I?	Psalm 8/ Matthew 3:13-17
What do I love?	Luke 12:29-34/1 John 4: 16b-21
What is my gift to the world?	Jeremiah 1:4-10/Ephesians 4:7-16
Being a Global Citizen	Isaiah 65:17-25
Being an American	John 15:9-17
Vocation in and for the Church	Ephesians 4:1-7/1 Corinthians 12:1-12
Mission Trip Commissioning	John 17:20-26/Philippians 4:10-20

Semester Theme: The Lord’s Prayer

This semester focused on each petition in the Lord’s prayer. We used different versions of the Lord’s prayer, including asking students to write their own paraphrase, in worship each week as a way to experience the prayer afresh each time we said it together. Will Willimon’s *Lord, Teach Us*, N.T. Wright’s *The Lord’s Prayer*, and William Barclay’s *The Lord’s Prayer* were helpful preparatory resources.

Petition	Scripture
What is Prayer? The Lord’s Prayer	Matthew 6:5-13
Our Father, who art in heaven	John 14:1-14
Hallowed be thy name	Exodus 3:1-15
Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven	John 19:1-21/1 Corinthians 3
Give us this day our daily bread	Exodus 16/John 6:30-35
Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors	Genesis 33/Matthew 18:21-22
Lead us not into temptation	Matthew 4:1-11
But deliver us from evil	Mark 15:16-40
For thine is the kingdom, power, and glory	Ephesians 3:14-21
Amen	Revelation 22/Matthew 28:18-20

Semester Theme: Getting to Know Jesus

Many students “think” they know who Jesus is but haven’t delved into scripture enough to really unpack the multi-faceted aspects of the second person of the Trinity. This series sought to help open students’ understanding of who Jesus is/was historically and theologically and tackles some central faith questions about Jesus as personal Lord and Savior. There is nothing holy about this list except that it attended to some of the key questions I heard repeatedly from students at the time; other aspects of Jesus’ identity could be added in depending on your context.

The first week of the series I used a collection of artist renderings of Jesus (mostly found via internet search, but I would be happy to share the file of images) and invited students to choose the image that they most and least identified with so that we could identify our biases about Jesus as we began.

Jesus...	Scripture
The Many Faces of Jesus	Mark 8:27-30
Jesus: Healer/Miracle Worker	Mark 5:21-43
Jesus, the Preacher	Isaiah 61:1-14, Luke 17:20-21
Jesus, our Savior	John 3:16-17
Jesus is Lord	Luke 19:28-40/2 Corinthians 4:5-12
Jesus the Activist	Isaiah 58:1-12/Matthew 25:31-40
Jesus: Friend of the Poor & Marginalized	Matthew 9:9-13/Luke 14:15-24
Jesus: Crucified	Matthew 27:32-44/1 Corinthians 1:18-31
Jesus: The Resurrected One	John 21:1-14
Jesus: The Body of Christ	1 Corinthians 12:12-26
Jesus for You/Christ Calling	Colossians 1:15-20; 3:12-17

Semester Theme: Water

This semester theme was selected by students after a student in the ministry was baptized and prompted us to unpack imagery for water in scripture. As with other theme ideas, this list is not exhaustive and could be added to or amended to suit your ministry's interests.

Aspect of Water	Scripture
Water: Beginning and End	Genesis 1:1-13, Psalm 104, Rev 22:1-5
God's Claim through the Waters	Luke 3:21-22, Isaiah 43
Fear, Trust, and Water	Matthew 14:22-33, Psalm 46
Thirst	Exodus 17:1-7, Isaiah 55:1-5, 10-11
Waters that Destroy: Noah and the Flood	Genesis 6:9-22, 7:24, 8:14-19
Water for Others: Sharing God's Claim	Acts 8:26-40, Matthew 28:18-20
Waters that Sustain: Living Water	John 4, Psalm 23
God's Power Over Water/Storms	Psalm 65, Mark 4:35-41
Resurrection: Water and New Life	John 21:1-14, Psalm 42

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