Keys to Planning Ash Wednesday Worship

A Unique Day

Is this day just one of the several midweek Lenten services or does it stand alone at the beginning of Lent? The intent of the Church Year and CW lectionary, of course, is that Ash Wednesday be a unique service – separate from the remaining midweek services. Thus the day has its own Proper, its own lessons. The "History of Our Lord's Suffering and Death" begins on the following Wednesday. See *Christian Worship: Occasional Services* (CWOS) for options that divide the History over five midweek services, excluding Ash Wednesday.

There are two options in CWOS. While the second option has been widely used in WELS worship, the first has the benefit of shorter readings when spread over five weeks instead of six (or more).
- "History according to the Synoptic Gospels"
- "History according to a Harmony of the Four Gospels"

Since the CW lectionary appoints the same Ash Wednesday lessons for each year of the three year series, any worship folder sample from the Connect site that uses the standard lessons will provide a good starting point for creating a customized local option.

Ash Wednesday Service Structure

If Ash Wednesday is unique among the midweek Lenten services, it benefits from a unique service structure. Two options are available in CWOS:

- Ash Wednesday: Imposition of Ashes. Portions can be used without the imposition of ashes.
- Corporate Confession and Absolution

Setting the Mood

The solemnity of Ash Wednesday invites a musical approach that reinforces a mood of quiet – even somber – reflection. Consider various ways to accomplish this:

No preservice music. To make this most effective, announce it on Transfiguration in print (and also perhaps verbally in that day's invitation to the season of Lent). Repeat the notice in the Ash Wednesday worship folder.

Time to prepare. If the parish offers a meal before worship, find a way to encourage people to move from the meal to the church <u>early enough</u> that they are not rushed (with little time to benefit from the silence). Encourage people to focus on preparing their hearts for worship rather than enjoying friendly

chatter right up to the worship welcome or opening hymn. Perhaps remind people at the end of the meal what to expect at the beginning of worship.

Subdued lighting as people gather for worship reinforces the mood of this evening. If choir, cantor, or soloist sings the long version of Psalm 51 (see CWOS) at the beginning of the service, the lighting may remain subdued until the Psalm ends.

Whether there is other preservice music or not, consider using an **<u>unaccompanied</u> solo wind or string instrument** (subtle, not loud; and well-played) as the only or final preservice music. The solo instrument plays the tune of the opening hymn (if one is used) or a hymn tune from later in the service (see comments on CW 534 below). The tempo may be deliberately slower than normal. A plaintive clarinet (in lower register), oboe, or soft trombone work especially well. This instrument can double the melody of a hymn during the service or assist with other service music.

The service at the 1999 national worship conference used Martin Luther's hymn, In the Midst of Earthly Life (CW 534). Note how powerfully the text connects with Ash Wednesday themes. In parishes that are unfamiliar with this hymn, a choir, small group, or soloist may sing this hymn. See the Connect site for a portion of this worship conference service.

Simple Resources from WELS Publications

Extra effort often goes into planning music for worship on the Sundays before and after Ash Wednesday: Transfiguration and Lent 1. Simple unison music is both a welcome <u>solution</u> for Ash Wednesday planning and appropriate in its <u>simplicity</u> for the somber nature of the day.

Christian Worship: Supplement (CWS) provides a setting of Psalm 51a with a refrain appropriate Ash Wednesday.

The Ash Wednesday rite in CWOS uses Psalm 51 to begin the service and Psalm 130 as the Psalm of the Day. See the Accompaniment Edition, pages 51-64, and the Electronic Edition. Some sample pages are posted at the Connect site. The musical arrangements for Psalms 51 and 130 are intentionally austere and somber, as is fitting for Ash Wednesday.

The "Notes for Pastor and Musician" in CWOS include these comments.

> Several psalm settings are included for the services of Ash Wednesday and Holy Week. Unlike the shorter CW psalms used on Sundays, these are longer psalm sections or even complete psalms. Their length reinforces the meditative character especially useful in the midweek services but less so in Sunday services. Some psalms are intended to be sung by a cantor or choir and not by the congregation.

> Some psalms or antiphons use traditional plainsong melodies: Psalms 51 and 88, the Good Friday: Service of Darkness *(Tenebrae)* antiphons, and a setting of the "Song of Mary" *(Magnificat).* While keyboard accompaniments are provided, these psalms and antiphons may be sung unaccompanied. The starting pitch may be adjusted to the range most comfortable for the singer(s). Notation indicates the pitch but not the exact rhythm. Singing should follow a natural

speech rhythm. The optional accompaniment, if used, should be quiet and flexible as it follows subtle rhythmic nuances from verse to verse.

Two settings of Psalm 51 are provided in CWOS electronic files since Psalm 51 is used also in the Good Friday: Service of Darkness *(Tenebrae)* service. Setting One uses a historic plainsong tone and is intended for a choir, cantor, or soloist and not for congregational singing. Sections of the psalm may be sung in alternation between high and low voices. These sections follow the structuring of verses in the NIV Bible: 1-2, 3-6, 7-9, 10-12, 13-17, and 18-19. A keyboard accompaniment is provided in the accompaniment edition, but the psalm may be sung unaccompanied. Another option is to ring bells on A and E at the verse and half verse, *ad libitum*, and remain silent for some groups of verses.

Psalm 51 Setting Two uses a triple psalm tone and is intended for a choir, cantor, or soloist and not for congregational singing.

Psalm 130 has two versions. The first one has a single psalm-tone setting for congregational singing. The second version has a double psalm-tone setting for choir, cantor, soloist, or congregation.

Verse of the Day: whenever a soloist or choir is participating in a service, consider having the specific Verse of the Day sung by this person or group. These short and generally simple settings provide musical variety between lessons that perfectly fits the theme of the service.
The following editions are available from NPH:

- Complete set: 280007
- Ash Wednesday through Ascension: 280004
- MIDI accompaniment files on CD: 341003

Search the NPH website on "verse of the day" for additional resources.

Additional resources for Ash Wednesday are available at the Connect site.