



Just Worship Extras 1: Extended reflection



Being fully present to God

Either read the stories below aloud, or give out copies and allow members of the group time to read them silently and reflect on them. Then ask everyone to choose one and talk to one person nearby, sharing in turn how it has spoken to you particularly – and why.

Alternatively the stories could be copied onto card, cut up and “dealt” face down, so that people do not know what they are going to pick and read.

Stories

1. The worship leaders were gathered for a training session on working with children. At the door of the church the trainer said “On your knees!” They dropped down, prepared to pray. “This is what the church looks like to a five-year-old,” said the trainer, “What looks different? What can’t you see? Who can’t see you? Go in there – on your knees.”
2. Sheila worked for London Transport. She did her demanding job cheerfully – enjoying each day’s variety of human contact. But on Sunday she arrived at church with her arm in a sling, her face bruised and swollen. A drunk on the late-night bus had decided to beat her up because she was black. As her friends exclaimed angrily, she led the way into church, laughing and saying “Alleluia anyway”.
3. Inez is the leader of the worship team, meeting one winter evening to plan for the coming Sunday. She can’t afford to heat her council flat, but when she sees her guests are keeping their coats on, she lights the oven and leaves the door open to warm them up. Mugs of tea on the kitchen table, alongside Bibles, hymnbooks and the daily paper, mean that the worship they plan is rooted in the reality of their daily lives.
4. There was once a big anti-war demonstration in the London, at points marred by violence. A group of Christians, after careful planning, “occupied” a church which was also the US Naval Chapel, to hold a vigil for a just end to the war and a “pray-in”. They continued quietly when the police, who had prevented anyone from entering or leaving the church, came in and stood all around them. The churchwarden tiptoed from pew to pew, saying to those near enough to hear, “I love this place. I’ve worshipped here for many years. Please don’t do anything to damage or dishonour it.” Then the Rector arrived. He strode to the pulpit, and addressed all present, “Who gave you permission to hold this ridiculous gathering? How dare you pray in my church?”
5. It took some time to discover that Glen couldn’t read. He accepted the hymnbook at the church door. He turned the pages of the pew Bible. He accepted the notice sheet as he went out. He looked intelligent. He was intelligent. But he couldn’t read. He couldn’t join in the opening responses. When the minister and other preachers realised that not only Glen, but probably other members of the congregation, were being overwhelmed by the written word, they realised they would have to do things differently. But where would they start?



Just Church: Extras

6. In the township of Guguletu in South Africa, during the apartheid regime, a congregation of several hundred gathered in a concrete barn of a church. It was Easter Sunday, and many had risen before dawn to keep vigil in the huge cemetery of the township, but now they were listening to a sermon about resurrection – which named the political realities of their country, drew on the scholarship and of the preacher, and expressed a faith they all shared. The people responded with loud Amens, with ululation, and with powerful singing, to which the whole congregation moved as one, embodying resurrection hope.
7. Danny, a 14-year-old boy, died in an accident in one of the housing schemes of Glasgow, a place where drugs, crime and the breakdown of community blighted many other lives. Friends from his church had a bench made, to commemorate him – and gave it to the MacLeod Centre, where he and his family had found a safe place to stay, a respite for his mum, a really good holiday for Danny. To dedicate the bench, his mother and brother came up on a day-trip with these friends. Standing round it, in the sunshine, they read a psalm, followed by simple heart-felt prayers. Then they sat in a row on the bench and lit their cigarettes.
8. We tore up a Bible. It was an old one, and had already lost its cover. We tore out pages, and took them to a church conference on China. A little way into a conventional act of worship, people came in and loudly declared the church closed, telling the congregation to disperse, because this was an illegal gathering. As they filed out, shocked and confused, their Bibles were taken away and they were given the odd torn-out pages. In this way they remembered what Christians in China had experienced during the Cultural Revolution.
9. What a strange place for a communion service: the gates of Faslane. It was raining. Under the barbed wire folk were huddled in their waterproofs or under umbrellas or bin-bags. It wasn't possible to tell clergy from laypeople, one denomination from another, saint from sinner. The bread and cup were passed from hand to hand – free for all to take. Broken bread and bitter wine reminded us of all the wrong in a world in which many go hungry while nuclear weapons are stockpiled. And we remembered how much God loves this world, remembered Jesus sharing our lives and our death – and giving us hope. What better place for communion than the gates of Faslane?
10. When the congregation entered the church, they were asked to take off their shoes. In the course of the service, they reflected on the different and often difficult lives of other people. They were reminded of the Native American saying that “you will only understand me when you have walked a mile in my moccasins.” They were invited to pick up a pair of shoes and pray for the person who might own them (some put the shoes on, too). The service ended cheerfully with shoes being reclaimed and new conversations starting.
11. For the first time our local Churches Together was chaired by a laywoman. All went well until the annual service. The priest of the church where it was held was embarrassed. “The clergy will be robing and processing,” he said, “but perhaps you'd like to give out the hymnbooks?” “Of course,” she said – for it was a much more interesting job, and she was able to welcome everyone to worship.
12. Several times we have built a barrier of some kind across a church building. A memorable service about the Separation Barrier between Israel and the Palestinian Territories divided one part of the congregation from another, creating strong feelings of anger, powerlessness and pain, while we listened to biblical readings, statistics and songs – and were moved to prayer.



13. I remember another service where the congregation were involved in erecting a wall of cardboard boxes, on which different things that divide people were written – RACISM, WAR, BAD HOUSING. It was so high we couldn't see over it. But those who had planned the worship thought that it would be enough at the end to say that "with God's help we will one day break down all these barriers". That wasn't enough for the congregation. They weren't going to leave worship with that wall still in place. And they didn't need the permission of a liturgy. First one person, then more, went forward and started to demolish it. People power!
14. When the volunteers with Habitat for Humanity and the local people who needed a home had finished building each house, there was a ceremony to hand over the key. Simple prayers, and much singing, and a crowd of people in working clothes dancing under a roof where there was none before.