

## Newsletter Reflections for February

The General Assembly, the highest governing unit within PC(USA), met for its biannual meeting this past summer. It considers various matters of our life together and looks at what are called overtures from various Presbyteries. These are basically propositions on a wide ranging spectrum of issues—internal and global which are of concern for the community. This past meeting a report was brought before the General Assembly with suggestions for changes in *The Directory for Worship* section of the *Book of Order*. Any changes in the *Book of Order* are sent back for ratification by individual Presbyteries. Some suggested changes are on the docket for our January Presbytery meeting. As I was reviewing the proposed amendments, I began thinking about worship and the ways in which we order our worship. There are two resources for this: *The Book of Order* and the *Book of Common Worship*. The Directory for Worship begins with a preface that states: “This Directory for Worship reflects the conviction that the life of the Church is one, and that its worship, witness, and service are inseparable.” The Directory for Worship is not a service book with fixed orders of worship, a collection of prayers and rituals, or a program guide. So what is it? What does it do? As part of the constitution of the church the Directory for Worship has the authority of church law. It provides the theology that undergirds worship and includes appropriate directions for worship. It sets forth the standards and the norms for the ordering of worship. It does not have fixed orders of worship or liturgical texts. It begins by defining Christian worship this way: “Christian worship joyfully ascribes all praise and honor, glory and power to the triune God. In worship the people of God acknowledge God present in the world and in their lives. As they respond to God’s claim and redemptive action in Jesus Christ, believers are transformed and renewed. In worship the faithful offer themselves to God and are equipped for God’s service in the world.” Without prescribing any specific order for worship, the directory describes the elements which are needed accomplish this purpose--faithful worship: prayer and praise including music; reading and proclamation of the Word; the receiving of the Word enacted through Sacrament and the sending to follow the Word as it moves in the world. There are many details within the directory which define respectful approaches to the elements of worship and the use of symbols within the service as reminders that the service is to be the acknowledgement of God’s presence and glory, not a place for individual recognition or performance. The directory is also very concerned that the worship service is one for the community of believers, one which welcomes all. The other book I referenced (*The Book of Common Worship*) does contain suggested prayers as well as a suggested order of service. In the preface to the 1993 edition of this resource the opening statement is: “Worship is at the very heart of the church’s life. All that the church is and does is rooted in its worship. The community of faith, gathered in response to God’s call, is formed in its worship. Worship is the principal influence that shapes our faith, and is the most visible way we express the faith.” Thus *The Book of Common Worship* is the church’s service book, providing orders and texts for worship. It is in harmony with the directory and is approved for voluntary use as its contents are underpinned by the theological understanding of the Reformed faith tradition. Each Sunday you receive a bulletin

which contains an order of worship—an outline of how the worship service will proceed. The first movement is to acknowledge and praise God. The next is to attend to announcements of interest to the congregation. After that we acknowledge the purpose of our gathering—we are answering God’s call to worship. This again usually contains a word of praise. We then move to a hymn which musically offers praise or thanksgiving. All of these elements form our gathering as a worshipping community. Gathered as we are in God’s presence we must also acknowledge our status as sinners. The prayer of Confession, the Assurance of Pardon and our response to knowing God’s love and mercy are included to prepare us for the hearing of the Word read and proclaimed. This is the central portion of our worship as we open ourselves to the movement of the Holy Spirit and God’s message for us. After the proclamation, the remaining portions of the service represent our response to the Lord’s presence. We affirm our faith, offer prayers of intercession and thanksgiving, as well as offer and dedicate resources and ourselves to God’s service. As we prepare to leave we again sing a hymn recognizing God’s place in our lives and call upon our lives as we are sent into the world as bearers of the good news carrying the blessing of God with us. Within our worship service, the pattern seeks to fulfill the stated purpose: to set aside this time to joyfully acknowledge God’s presence and purpose in our lives and the world.

Pastor Libby