

Mission to North America
Advice on Native American/First Nations Worship and Cultural Practices
(Approved by the MNA Committee March 5, 2009)

The goal of every ministry in the PCA is to bear witness to the atoning work of Christ and to call all men and women everywhere to repent and receive the salvation that is freely offered in Christ in the Gospel. We labor toward this end, trusting for a fruitful ministry by God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit, with the assurance that God will call those whom He chooses to Himself – working despite and even through our fallen human endeavors. We are called to labor with humility brought by the recognition that God will advance His Kingdom, and that it is by His grace alone that we are privileged to be a part of that process.

As people come to Christ in any cultural context, there are challenges in determining what practices of their indigenous culture are appropriate for Christians. These challenges are heightened particularly for practices that are deeply engrained in the culture but currently have (or at one time had) specific religious significance.

PCA people working among the Native people groups of North America face these challenges as they see people come to Christ. What will be the life style of the Native Christian, especially in worship practices? What practices may be carried over because they are primarily cultural and lacking in specific religious significance? Among those practices that have explicit religious significance, must these all be left behind at conversion, or can certain practices be carried over or even given Christian meaning?

On the one hand, the complexity of these issues should not be underestimated. The Native cultures intertwine Native religion and everyday life in a very complex way. Thus, it is easy either to choose the one extreme of giving everything in the Native culture a new Christian meaning, or to choose the other extreme of rejecting all Native practices completely. The result of the latter is that the Native Christian is called upon to adopt the dominant culture of the PCA, or the dominant culture of the church or presbytery who sponsors a particular ministry in a particular Native community.

A further dimension of the complexity is that the Native communities vary widely in their specific religious and cultural practices. There are some broad general themes that are common among the various tribes. However, the variations are great, even to the extreme that there are practices which look identical to the outside observer but have different meaning for each tribe.

On the other hand, while the complexity is great, it also should not be overestimated. Other examples of similar cultural and religious association exist in North America: the Latter Day Saints, Haitian voodoo, immigrants from Latin American Roman Catholic traditions – each of these inseparably intertwine religion and culture and therefore pose similar challenges for Christian converts from these cultures.

Even in the dominant culture of the PCA, there is wide latitude on religious and cultural practices. Observance of Halloween and Christmas are obvious examples. Some PCA churches condemn everything associated with Halloween; others have used the jack-o'-lantern as a Christian object lesson in the context of a church gathering; still others have a Reformation party for children as an alternative to Halloween parties.

Some churches want no observation of the cultural trappings of Christmas; some want Christmas trees and gift giving to be confined to families only and kept out of the church building and gatherings; others have Christmas trees in the church narthex. Thus, the complexities of addressing Native issues should not be viewed as a unique problem. Also, the Halloween and Christmas practices indicate that the PCA allows significant latitude on these issues.

Beyond the MNA core program staff who work with churches and presbyteries across the PCA, Mission to North America does not call missionaries or other personnel to serve in the Native communities. Since the PCA has an established presence all across North America, MNA believes that the responsibility for development and oversight of the Native ministries, including calling and oversight of personnel, rests with the PCA presbyteries and churches. Therefore, MNA's role in addressing these cultural and religious issues is purely advisory and carries no authority. This position paper is offered in that spirit.

In the year 2000, MNA developed a position paper on worship to provide guidance to church planters (copy attached below). This paper was developed out of a similar need, that is, in response to concerns that secular cultural practices were influencing the worship practices of church planters to a degree that was beyond biblical limits.

The attached paper drew from the Scriptures and the PCA subordinate standards to provide guidance on these issues. This paper is approved and commended by the MNA Committee. MNA believes it provides sufficient and helpful guidance for addressing any cultural context in North America.

Presbyteries and sessions of the PCA have the authority determine what the actual practices under their purview will be. Specifically, denominational committees and agencies do not have that authority. MNA commends this paper to presbyteries and sessions as a guide in developing appropriate practices in each ministry context. We recognize that some would like to develop more detailed application that applies to all Native ministries. In response, MNA reaffirms a commitment to the historic practice of the PCA that presbyteries and church sessions address these issues in their final practical application, according to the Scriptures and the guidelines of the subordinate standards.

MNA believes it will be helpful for those who lead Native ministries to exchange information on the practical outworking on cultural and religious practices for their specific situations. Such communications must be informational only and therefore not directive. This exchange should be offered in mutual respect and with the recognition

that the practical applications will vary in each situation, trusting that each presbytery and session is guided by God's Spirit.

MNA Position Paper
Church Planters: Principles and Practices of Worship

Dear Fellow Worshipper:

In October 2000, Mission to North America presented to the Committee the following document "Guidelines for MNA Sponsored Church Planters: Principles and Practices of Worship." This paper was developed to serve as a resource for the church planters, as they prepare to begin worship services.

God's Word presents worship as our primary activity in heaven. During this life, we are privileged to participate in worship as a foretaste of what is to come. Despite this centrality in God's plan, worship is a source of controversy, not only in the PCA, but also across many denominations today. The following principles and Q&A are presented to assist MNA church planters in their leading worship that will glorify God, according to His Word. I pray that the guidelines presented here will be helpful.

A special thank you to Drs. Bryan Chapell, President, Covenant Theological Seminary; John Frame, Professor of Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, Florida; Joseph "Skip" Ryan, Senior Pastor, Park Cities Presbyterian Church, Dallas, Texas; L. Roy Taylor, Stated Clerk, Presbyterian Church in America, and Mr. Wade Williams, Director of Worship, ChristChurch, Atlanta, Georgia for their assistance in preparing this document.

Sincerely in Christ,



James C. Bland, III
MNA Coordinator

Guidelines for MNA Sponsored Church Planters: Principles and Practices of Worship

October 2000

Principles and Practices of Worship for MNA Sponsored Church Plants

I. Key Principles of Public Worship Practices for MNA Church Planters

A. "Since the Holy Scriptures are the only infallible rule of faith and practice, the principles of public worship must be derived from the Bible, and from no other source." (BCO III. 47-1).

B. "A service of public worship is not merely a gathering of God's children with each other, but before all else, a meeting of the triune God with His chosen people." (BCO III. 47-2).

C. "The end of public worship is the glory of God. His people should engage in all its several parts with an eye single to His glory. Public worship has as its aim the building of Christ's church by the perfecting of the saints and the addition to its membership such as are being saved – all to the glory of God." (BCO III. 47-3).

D. "The Lord Jesus Christ has prescribed no fixed forms for public worship but, in the interest of life and power in worship, has given His Church a large measure of liberty in this matter. It may not be forgotten, however, that there is true liberty only where the rules of God's Word are observed and the Spirit of the Lord is, that all things may be done decently and in order, and that God's people should serve Him with reverence and in the beauty of holiness. From its beginning to its end a service of public worship should be characterized by that simplicity which is an evidence of sincerity and by that beauty and dignity which are a manifestation of holiness." (BCO III. 47-6).

E. "It behooves God's people not only to come into His presence with a deep sense of awe at the thought of His perfect holiness and their own exceeding sinfulness, but also to enter His gates with thanksgiving and into His courts with praise for the great salvation, which He has so graciously wrought for them through His only begotten Son and applied to them by the Holy Spirit." (BCO III. 47-8).

F. "The Bible teaches that the following are proper elements of worship service: reading the Holy Scripture, singing of psalms and hymns, the offering of prayer, the preaching of the Word, the presentation of offerings, confessing the faith and observing the Sacraments; and on special occasions taking oaths." (BCO III. 47-9). Exercise of every one of the elements in this list is not intended to be compulsory in every service nor is this list intended to be an exhaustive summary of all that the Bible teaches is appropriate for public worship. (cf. differing lists in WLC # 108 and WCF 21.5).

II. Key Questions and Answers Regarding Public Worship Practices for MNA Church Planters, Based upon the Key Principles

A. What is the end and chief priority of worship?

Worship's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him (e.g., Deut. 12:12; Psalm 150:2; and I.C. above).

Worship is not just one activity among others, but is the very heart of the believer's existence and of the body life of the church. Worship is the purpose for which God has saved us from sin (John 4:23; I Peter 2:9). Because the praises of God in Christ will fill the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 5:12-13), our present earthly worship is to be reverently joyful, hearty and exuberant, as well as humbly astonished and contrite in

anticipation of that heavenly worship which we will enjoy forever. Worship is not only a duty, but it is also the highest and most joyful activity of our redeemed humanity.

In worship, we humble ourselves before God and serve Him, honoring Him as Lord and Savior. This is true both in the “narrow sense” of worship, in which we set aside certain times to meet with God (Heb. 10:25), and in the “broad sense” in which all of life is a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1-2). Worship is therefore primarily “vertical” in focus: God-centered and Christ-centered, in and through the Holy Spirit. However, there is also a “horizontal” aspect of worship, for glorifying God summons us in worship to edify one another (I Cor. 14:26).

-- From *Proposed Statement of Identity for the PCA (1994)*

B. Are there any other ends and/or priorities for worship?

While the chief end of public worship is to glorify God and to enjoy Him, the worship of God should also consider as secondary and tertiary priorities, respectively, the perfecting of the saints and the addition to its membership of such as are being saved – all to the glory of God. Thus, while edification and evangelism cannot become the primary goals of biblical worship they cannot be excluded from our consideration of the purposes that should be served by worship (see I.C. above).

Neither the horizontal or vertical concerns of Scripture can rightly be ignored in biblical worship. In addition to the primary purpose of glorifying God, biblical worship also considers the good of God’s people and, thus, requires aspects that promote their love (1 Cor. 14:1), encouragement (1 Cor. 14:3), instruction (1 Cor. 14:3-6), mutual edification (1 Cor. 14:12; 26-28), thanksgiving (1 Cor. 14:16); witness to unbelievers (1 Cor. 14:16,23), and conviction of sin (1 Cor. 14:24-25).

C. What are the qualities of public worship that meet these ends and priorities?

God-centered (I.C. above)

Biblically based (I.A. above)

Historically informed but not governed (I.A., I.D. above)

Participatory (I.B., I.C., I.D., I.F. above)

Culturally sensitive (I.C., I.D., see also BCO Chapters 50, 51, 53)

D. How are we to determine our worship practices according to the primary and subordinate ends of worship?

We may not determine our worship practices apart from a commitment to the exegesis of Scripture which determines the rules that govern the bounds of our worship practices (I.A. above), nor apart from the exegesis of our culture which determine how we shall exercise the liberty that Scripture grants within these bounds on such matters as style of music, the times of worship, liturgical style, etc. (I.D. above).

We should exercise our biblical liberties that enable God's people to worship Him "according to the necessities and capacities of the hearers" (WLC #159) and in accord with the wisdom of the historic church because it is necessary for us to be instructed by the wisdom of the people of God in past ages as well as by the influences of our culture that affect meaningful and understandable worship. Even as our preaching is to be in the vernacular terms of our people (since WLC 156 states that the reading of the Word is to be in the "vulgar languages" – i.e., vernacular – it inevitably follows that preaching also is to be in the vernacular), it is, our worship should be accessible to the people to whom God calls us to minister without yielding to improper cultural influences. The prudential judgment required for weighing such matters is given to the leadership of individual churches who are urged to weigh biblical mandates over personal or societal preferences. Knowing that we will be judged by our extremes, the law of love requires that churches not take advantage of their liberties in worship to the detriment of the glory of God or the good of His people (both those present and those being called to Him)

E. What degree of variation should there be in our various churches' worship practices?

We should not embrace worship or liturgical practices that exclude our praise of God, confession of our sinfulness, our dependence on His grace, and instruction in righteousness motivated by love and gratitude (I.A., I.C., I.E., I.F. above).

We should embrace the diversity of proper expressions of biblical worship that indicate God is moving among every tribe and nation, language and people, and that indicate we are sensitive to the varying aspects of this mission that God gives to individual churches in the way that they exercise their worship liberties (I.D., I.E. above).

We have no right to impose a preferred style of worship on other bodies of believers. We are responsible to challenge all members of the body of Christ to honor His priorities and glory in worship (I.D. above).

The following pages from, *Authentic Worship in a Changing Culture*, © 1997, CRC Publications, are included to provide a helpful discussion of some of the historic distinctives of worship in the reformed tradition. Used by permission.

Reformed Worship

Finally, we address the question of Reformed worship. Is there such a thing as Reformed worship? Or is there only Christian worship? What are the "non-negotiables" of Reformed worship that synod mandated its committee to identify? What is the Reformed character of worship?

Our committee seriously wrestled with these important questions. We concluded that it was not particularly helpful to talk about the non-negotiables of Reformed worship as though Reformed worship were something totally distinct from (and superior to)

Christian worship and something that we must feverishly defend and protect lest it be forever lost. Rather, we concluded that it was more helpful and honest to talk about Christian worship and then to acknowledge that, like every other worship tradition, the Reformed worship tradition has both received gifts from and given gifts to Christian worship and that what it has given has arisen from what it first received. In that spirit we note some of the gifts to Christian worship that the Reformed tradition has made over the centuries and encourage the continued cultivation of these gifts. Most of these gifts noted below have already been explored in our preceding theological reflection.

With gratitude to God we note the following eight gifts as some of the particular gifts that the Reformed tradition has made to Christian worship:

“ A redemptive-historical perspective on worship (a) that takes seriously the rich communion of relationships in worship - from the relationships within the holy Trinity, to the relationships between God and His people, to the relationships among God’s people (here and now and throughout history – from Abraham to the saints around the throne) and (b) that takes seriously the intimate connection between service and love of God and service and love of neighbor and the need for integrity of these two. Also implicit in this rich redemptive-historical perspective is an understanding of the relationship of church and kingdom that keeps Christian worship always directed out beyond itself into service in every dimension of life in God’s world

“ A fully trinitarian emphasis in worship that seeks balanced attention to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

“ An understanding that preaching is proclamation of the Word of God that results in a Spirit-charged encounter with God, not mere lecture or instruction. In this connection, it is significant that in Reformed worship the Holy Spirit is traditionally invoked not only in the context of the sacraments but also in the context of the reading and preaching of the Word (the prayer for illumination)

“ An emphasis upon doctrinal preaching (most clearly exemplified by catechism preaching).

“ Calvin’s sacramental theology that emphasizes the real presence of Christ in the sacraments (over against a view of the sacraments as mere symbols).

“ A particular emphasis upon the acts of worship that arise out of a view of worship as true encounter with God. These include the salutation, the declaration of pardon, the prayer for illumination, and the benediction.

“ A conviction that congregational singing is at the heart of worship music, integrated into every part of worship, and a corresponding caution that congregational singing should not be minimized and/or swallowed up by other forms of worship music.

“ A strong appreciation of the Old Testament in general and of psalm singing in particular as part of public worship. (Much of the Reformed emphasis upon the psalms and the Old Testament is related to the redemptive-historical theology set forth above.)

Although churches in the Reformed tradition may not be the only churches that have appreciated these elements of worship, we see these as eight gifts that Reformed worship has given to worship in the Christian church. We also see them as gifts that we should continue to emphasize and cultivate in the Christian Reformed Church.

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