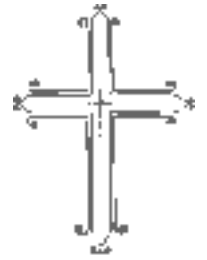


ENLIVENING THE EASTER VIGIL



IDEAS FOR WORSHIP PLANNERS

Holy Saturday and Easter

The Easter Vigil is one of the most ancient and revered celebrations of the church, so old that it is even described by Tertullian in the year 200 in Northern Africa. Easter Vigil marked the time when the catechumens—those who had studied and prepared through all of Lent—were baptized just before dawn and celebrated their first communion with the whole church. Imagine those early years, when large numbers of initiates of all ages took baptismal vows by candlelight in pre-Easter darkness and then joined the others at the table for their first-time communion. At the heart of this all-important service was the telling of the stories of salvation. Other traditions were added through the years to give us the order we have now: The Kindling of the New Fire, Stories, Baptisms, and Easter Communion. See the “Order for the Great Vigil of Easter,” found in the *Book of Worship: United Church of Christ*, pages 225–43, for a recent form of the vigil.

This guide is intended to present ideas that will help planners enrich an existing service, such as the one found in the *Book of Worship*, or to design one for the first time. Churches today are discovering Easter Vigil as an event of deep spiritual renewal for the longtime member and of great meaning for those joining the church. They also are learning how to bring stories alive in an age where drama and images are highly appreciated. Storytelling is at the center of the vigil. This is an excellent service to incorporate children, youth, and young adults in envisioning and presenting it. The storytelling portion, particularly, invites innovation. Imagine the story of the parting of the Red Sea accompanied by sound effects, or liturgical dance, or the story of dry bones with some real bones or even a skeleton—all in the tradition of how communities recite their stories.

Preparation

Since the vigil is filled with so much motion and so many dramatic elements, preparation will require advance planning and, at least, a rehearsal. Each part of the vigil has its own integrity, with its own interest and drama, yet there needs to be overall flow. Worshipers need to come with some idea of what the vigil is—its importance—anticipating some leisurely, entertaining storytelling, reflective moments around a fire, and good music. Easter Vigil is not a brief service, but nothing should have to be “cut” for lack of time. A common duration for the Easter Vigil is two hours. If it is at the pre-dawn into sunrise time, breakfast for all will be a welcome sight.

Time and Place

Select a time between sunset of Holy Saturday and sunrise of Easter Day. Most churches choose either late-night Saturday or pre-dawn Easter Day for the vigil. When it is done as a pre-dawn service, the hour can be set so that the baptisms or communion will (more or less) coincide with sunrise, and an Easter breakfast can be held after the service concludes. Consider also the space and flow of movement. The vigil might start outside, move to an open space for the stories around a baptismal font for baptisms, and then move to a table for communion. One church takes advantage of its courtyard for the baptisms.

The Mood of the Vigil

Although the vigil is an ancient tradition and is spoken of in the liturgy as a “solemn” time, it is important to remember that the Easter event is filled with joy. Although the vigil is not a frivolous event, the happy telling of stories with humor, the joy of sharing baptism and meal, the ringing of bells, and singing Easter songs should all be part of a festive celebration where smiles, hugs, and giggles are appropriate.

Culture and Tradition

The choice of music can help to blend varied cultures and traditions of the whole church. Here are some examples:

- By singing the “Easter Proclamation” (see musical setting included in this issue of *Worship Ways*), “Canticle of the Three” (TNCH 738), or the psalms, you may give them a feeling of mystery and connection with the ancient church.
- Incorporate an alleluia with drums and other percussion, sung over and over (Zimbabwe or Caribbean, TNCH 766 and 236; Himnario Unido 470).
- Consider hymns from a variety of traditions and tastes, for example, “I’ll Shout the Name of Christ Who Lives,” a Filipino hymn (TNCH 234).
- In the communion, use the Hispanic “Santo, Santo, Santo” (“Holy, Holy, Holy”), TNCH 793.
- The storytelling time can also incorporate cultural elements, for example, the story of creation might be done with African costumes and drumming. Each church will need to decide what it can incorporate and to consider a balance between familiar and new.
- Other ways of bringing diverse traditions to the celebration can include having food from the members’ varied kitchens at the Easter breakfast. You may also have someone bake the communion bread using a family recipe.

Planning Tools

The Planning Guide that follows lists the main elements of the vigil with ideas for planners.

- The United Church of Christ *Book of Worship* (beginning on page 225) contains the entire liturgy with ideas for using it, along with the readings. The readings can also be found in the *UCC Desk Calendar and Plan Book* and the *Revised Common Lectionary*. (Readings might vary somewhat.)
- The singing of the Easter Proclamation is a major part of the Easter Vigil, and it is much more effective when sung, rather than spoken. A new setting of the Easter Proclamation to a familiar tune is included in this guide.

The Easter Vigil at Home

Some persons or families might not be able to attend Easter Vigil or would like ideas for celebrating Easter at home. Participants at home could be given the stories from the vigil to read (for those who live alone) or to tell as a family. They could have their own Paschal (Christ) Candle and light it at the time of the vigil and throughout the Easter season.¹ They could be given a little prayer for Easter and a prayer for lighting the candle. The prayers could be composed based on the prayers found in the vigil from the *Book of Worship*. Here is an example:

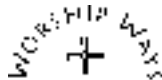
(For lighting the candle for the first time:)

Eternal God, giver of light and life, bless this new flame, that by its radiance and warmth I (we) may respond to your love and grace, and be set free from all that separates me (us) from you and from each other; through Jesus Christ, the Sun of Righteousness. Amen

(For lighting the candle at an Easter meal:)

O Christ, the light of the world, be present at this meal and let this candle be a reminder of the light of your salvation that shines in our hearts this day and through our whole life. Amen

¹The book *Celebrating at Home: Prayers and Liturgies for Families* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1998) by Deborah Alberswerth Payden and Laura Loving has many other ideas for home celebrations for seasons of the church year.



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PLANNING GUIDE FOR EASTER VIGIL

PART OF THE SERVICE	WHAT HAPPENS	PLANNING	SUGGESTIONS, CONSIDERATIONS
Kindling of the Fire	People gather outside the church to light the new fire.	What will hold the fire? Who will prepare and light it? Who will be the leader(s)?	(Note: Consult the United Church of Christ <i>Book of Worship</i> , pages 228–43, for details.) A metal pot, urn, or even a barbecue grill might work. Consider any safety requirements. Some people might feel comfortable seated inside until the next part of the service.
The Paschal Candle	The candle representing Christ as the light of the world is brought into the church. Other candles and worshippers' candles are lit.	If the church does not already use a Paschal candle, a tall candle will be needed.	This could be the time to initiate the use of a Paschal candle, if the church does not already have one. It burns from Easter through the season of Pentecost, and is present at baptisms and funerals.
The Easter Proclamation	The ancient hymn is usually sung by one person standing by the Paschal candle.	The singing of the proclamation should be practiced far enough in advance to be rendered clearly and effectively. Who will sing it? The version included in this guide might be done by more than one singer.	The people should need only the responses beginning "God be with you . . . to give God thanks and praise," which could be printed for them to sing. A piece for printing in the bulletin is included.
The Service of the Word (Telling the Stories)	Stories from the Old Testament are told in dramatic ways: 1. The Story of Creation 2. Abraham's and Sarah's Faithfulness 3. Israel's Deliverance at the Red Sea 4. Salvation Offered Freely to All (Other lessons to consider: Noah and the Flood, Ezekiel and the Dry Bones, Jonah 3:1–10, Isaiah 54:5–14, Isaiah 4:2–6, and Daniel 3:1–29, which can be sung.)	Preparation: How will each story be told? How could they be dramatized? Each reading is paired with a psalm. Who could sing the psalms? Could one or more of the psalms be an anthem or song?	Assign stories to groups for presentation in visual and dramatic ways. This is an excellent opportunity to involve people of diverse ages, and especially youth and children. Costumes, props, and sound effects are all appropriate (imagine the fun that could be had with the "dry bones" story).
Act of Praise and Readings from the New Testament	The addition of more light and the singing of a joyful hymn herald the reading of the Epistle (Romans 6:3–11) and the gospel (Matthew's, Mark's, or Luke's Resurrection story, depending on year A, B, or C). Bells can be rung.	The song of joy should be festive, and bells are a wonderful addition. If the church has a bell, have it rung for this song. Worshipers can be invited to bring small bells to ring at this time and during other congregational hymns.	The celebration should increase in a festive mood throughout. Little sleigh bells and other percussion instruments could be provided, and young children might get help from adults about when—and when not—to play them.
Service of Water (Baptism) and Blessing of the People	This is a time to baptize new members and for the already baptized to affirm their baptism.	Plan ahead to have confirmands, new members, and those desiring infants to be baptized take advantage of this special service. Water can be used in a very visible way, and, for the vigil, perhaps a large basin might be used. Bowls and branches for sprinkling will be needed.	Even if there are no people to be baptized, still use this special time to renew baptismal vows. The rite of sprinkling (aspersion) with branches—evergreen boughs work very well—is an ancient custom. If done dramatically and joyfully, it should be one of the high points of the vigil.
Holy Communion	The vigil now flows from the baptisms directly to communion.	To move easily from Baptism to Communion, the suggestion in the <i>Book of Worship</i> , page 243, could be used, with a song or hymn following the passing of the peace. During the singing, the bread and wine can be brought in, and all is ready for the communion.	If paraments and other items have been taken out on Maundy Thursday, this is a good time to bring them back to their usual places during the singing of the offertory. For the Easter Vigil, it might be refreshing to use the offertory time with its original, early-church intent as a time of bringing in the elements for the communion meal. If there is too much happening to collect the money offerings, perhaps the envelopes could be placed in a plate as people leave the worship space after the service.