



CELEBRATING PENTECOST

IDEAS FOR CREATIVE WORSHIP

Pentecost Sunday



The Background of Pentecost

Pentecost was the second of the three great feasts in Hebrew society it was originally referred to as the “Feast of Harvest” and later as the “Feast of Weeks.” The day was the culmination of a seven-week agricultural season that concluded with a one-day festival held on the first day after the seventh Sabbath after Passover. In its original setting (Num. 28:26), it was a sacrificial presentation of the first fruits of the harvest. In Jesus’ time, the holiday took on a more festive tone with a final communal meal to which the poor were invited.

Pentecost is often referred to as the forgotten holy day in the church’s liturgical calendar. Aside from preaching on the text (Acts 2:1–21) and singing songs emphasizing the theme of the Holy Spirit, many churches go along with “worship as usual.” Yet, the celebration of Pentecost is rich with creative possibilities to enhance the worship of your congregation. Consider all the aspects of the Pentecost story:

- Expectant disciples are caught up in a cacophonous whirlwind of flames;
- Filled with the Holy Spirit, they begin to praise God in a variety of languages;
- The crowd of Jewish foreigners assembled for the Feast of Weeks hears these Galileans speaking in their own tongues;
- Some in the amazed crowd have a skeptical answer to this language riddle—the disciples must be drunk;
- Peter, emboldened by the Holy Spirit, denies the charge and proclaims God’s act of salvation through Christ;
- At the end of Peter’s Pentecost sermon, three thousand people join the new religious movement.

If ever there is a day for Christian churches to shout “Alleluia, Amen!” this is it. Pentecost is, quite literally, the birthday of the Christian church. The following resources are offered as seeds—ideas to stimulate your thinking as you plan for your church’s Pentecost celebration. Use them or adapt them to your own particular liturgical setting.

The Color of Pentecost

Red is the traditional color for the day of Pentecost. It is derived from the fiery flames leaping above the heads of the startled disciples. Declare Pentecost Sunday “wear red to worship day.”

- Light red candles on the altar.
- Have the worship leaders wear red stoles created by children in the church school using colorful cutout felt symbols on a red background.

- Give the worshipers red ribbons, red balloons, or red carnations as they enter the sanctuary.
- Commission a craftsperson in your church to weave, embroider, or sew a red parament for the communion table.
- Roll a red carpet down the center aisle of the sanctuary to symbolize the “red carpet” reception for the Holy Spirit.
- If you utilize multimedia projection in your worship, create a presentation that emphasizes the color red in your visual aids.

The Symbols of Pentecost

The Pentecost story employs a number of imaginative metaphors to portray the message of God’s empowering presence:

- **Flames**—use candles, not only as a liturgical backdrop but also as a liturgical aid. Similar to the lighting of candles during Advent, twelve candles may be lit while announcing the names of the apostles (don’t forget Matthias!) or eight candles symbolizing the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22).
- **Wind**—place a variety of wind chimes around the sanctuary with fans blowing to bring out their musical qualities. “Wind, breath, and spirit” are all the same word in both Hebrew and Greek. Use deep-breathing meditation during the prayer of confession. Blow up balloons and release a spirited joyful noise during the offering.
- **Dove**—although the dove is not referenced in the Acts account, it is a frequently used symbol for the Holy Spirit confirming Jesus at his baptism. Hold an all-church workshop the week before Pentecost and create a mobile with hanging doves. Alternatively, use an Advent Jesse tree, but fill it with colorful paper doves.
- **Language**—have the scripture lesson read in a different language, better yet, in a variety of languages at one time. An easier possibility is to research how to say a particular phrase, such as “The Holy Spirit is poured out on us,” “God’s Spirit is alive,” or “We are one in the Spirit” in several languages. Have several people learn the phrases and recite them as the call to worship.
- **Birthing**—lead the children in singing a chorus of “Happy Birthday” to the church as part of the children’s message. Bake a large birthday cake and place it on the altar as a creative offering (and eat it after the service). Celebrate your congregation’s birthday by recounting the important dates in your church’s heritage. Invite a midwife to speak (in dialogue with the pastor?) about her role in assisting in childbirth.
- **Music**—the Bible doesn’t say that the disciples sang, but with the wind, the chattering in tongues and the murmuring of the crowd, it’s easy to imagine a musical orchestration unfolding. Sing familiar hymns of Pentecost (“Spirit of God, Descend upon My Heart,” TNCH 290; “Every Time I Feel the Spirit,” TNCH 282; “O God the Creator,” TNCH 291; “Sweet, Sweet Spirit,” TNCH 293). Invite members of your congregation to write new Pentecost lyrics to familiar hymn tunes, and sing them during the service and in the following weeks.

The Themes of Pentecost

- **Mission**—Have your congregation prepare for Pentecost by using the fifty days after Easter as an opportunity for mission education by reading daily from the UCC Calendar of Prayer; or use the seven-week period as an intentional opportunity for hands-on involvement in a local mission. Encourage the members to share their experiences in worship on Pentecost Sunday as a lay-led sermon.
- **Planting seeds**—create your own harvest festival by planting an indoor or outdoor community garden (flowers or vegetables) on Easter and then celebrate the fruits of your labor on Pentecost at a luncheon after worship. Alternatively, bring the flowers to shut-ins and share with them the Pentecost prayer in this resource.
- **Celebrate 50!**—Recognize those persons in your congregation over the age of 50, conferring simple gifts symbolizing the heritage of our faith—stoles, certificates, and so on. Have the children of the church school make the presentation to affirm the whole ministry of your congregation.
- **Confirmation**—this is a perfect day to receive new members into the church, particularly a young confirmation class. Use any of the ideas suggested here to involve them as leaders in worship.
- **Unity through diversity**—Have the entire congregation read the scripture lesson as a round, different pew sections beginning with a staggered start. At the end, have everyone unite in the phrase “we are one in the spirit,” leading into the hymn of the same name.

Prayer at Pentecost

One: Creator God, who came to us as Jesus the Christ and who fills us with the Holy Spirit, breathe in us anew this day.

People: *(singing the following adaptation to “Spirit of the Living God,” TNCH 283)*
Spirit of the Living God, breathe afresh on us, Spirit of the Living God, breathe afresh on us. Melt us, mold us, fill us, use us. Spirit of the Living God, breathe afresh on us.

One: Living God, as we celebrate the birthing of the church on this Pentecost Sunday, we remember the faithful ministry of our forebears who toiled to establish our congregation as a beacon of hope in this community. Breathe your Spirit in us as we seek to keep their legacy of faith alive in this new day and age.

People: *(singing)*
Spirit of the Living God, breathe afresh on us, Spirit of the Living God, breathe afresh on us. Melt us, mold us, fill us, use us. Spirit of the Living God, breathe afresh on us.

One: Loving God, as we rededicate our commitment to minister in the name of Christ, we give thanks for your life-sustaining presence that renews our calling to be the hands and feet of mission. Breathe your Spirit in us as we strive to bring the gospel alive in this new day and age.

People: *(singing)*
Spirit of the Living God, breathe afresh on us, Spirit of the Living God, breathe afresh on us. Melt us, mold us, fill us, use us. Spirit of the Living God, breathe afresh on us.

One: Gracious God, empower us as a congregation to speak boldly and to act courageously on the journey of ministry that lies before us, affirming our heritage and proclaiming our hope. Breathe your Spirit in us as we strive to bring the gospel alive in this new day and age.

People: *(singing)*
Spirit of the Living God, breathe afresh on us, Spirit of the Living God, breathe afresh on us. Melt us, mold us, fill us, use us. Spirit of the Living God, breathe afresh on us.

TNCH refers to hymns and liturgy from *The New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1995).



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