



Marking Life Together

A Guide for Congregational Rituals

Joanna Harader

After many months of limited in-person gatherings because of COVID, it feels particularly important to acknowledge life events in the context of our faith communities. Coming together as a faith community for worship helps us connect more deeply with God and with each other. Noting significant personal events—such as birth, death, marriage, and other life transitions—within the context of weekly worship reminds us that we remain connected with God and with each other beyond the specific time and place of our worship service.

The types of rituals presented here seem particularly important now for a few reasons:

- COVID has left many of us experiencing “disenfranchised grief.” This is grief that goes unrecognized or invalidated—by others and often even by ourselves. We may be grieving the death of someone we didn’t really know; maybe we feel guilty for being sad about missing a special event or vacation because that’s not a “real” loss; or we could even feel grief about transitions that are, on the whole, positive, but still involve loss. When we acknowledge such grief together in worship, it becomes recognized and validated; we are able to accept that we are grieving and find support in our faith and in our faith community.
- Many of us have felt painfully isolated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Bringing aspects of our outside-of-worship lives into the context of worship strengthens our connection to others and helps us feel less alone.

Wrapping a familiar rhythm and language around unique experiences can help us as we transition into a “new normal.” Bringing experiences from the unprecedented time into the familiarity of worship—surrounding these experiences with prayer and song and blessing—can help us gain our footing and move forward in faith on more steady ground.

These worship resources are designed to encourage and guide you in developing meaningful rituals to use with your



freedom007 / iStock / Getty Images Plus

congregation during this time of transition. For each category of ritual, you will find Scripture suggestions, a liturgical piece, and a few additional suggestions. The ritual can be adapted to fit your context and be used as one element of your regular weekly worship. Regardless of whether your community uses the specific words provided here, we hope this resource points you toward more meaningful worship in this transitional time.

- Ritual 1: Grieving Together: Remembering Deaths
- Ritual 2: Welcoming Together: Honoring Births
- Ritual 3: Beginning New Things: Marking School and Work Transitions
- Ritual 4: Honoring Partnerships: Celebrating Marriages
- Ritual 5: Lamenting Together: Naming Our Collective Losses
- Ritual 6: Celebrating Discipleship: Honoring Faith Commitments

Note: Prayers and litanies are written in the plural but can easily be changed to singular if only one person is being recognized. For responsive readings, the leader parts are printed in plain text and the congregational parts in bold. Bold italics are for all to read together.

Ritual 1

Grieving Together

When someone who is connected to us dies, it is important to bring that loss before God. We need time and space for our pain, our disbelief, and our grief. COVID made it difficult to safely have funerals and memorial services in the way we're accustomed to, and it disrupted our ability to travel to such events even when they did occur. Recognizing the death of community members as part of a weekly worship service can help individuals and the community process death in spiritually healthy ways. The worship suggestions below focus on recognizing the deaths of people within the church and acknowledging the ways those losses affect the church community. Such recognitions of death also provide an opportunity for us to bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus and claim our hope of abundant and eternal life with God.

Focus Scripture

1 Corinthians 12:14-27

Other suggested Scriptures

Genesis 49:29-33; Psalm 90:1-6, 14; John 11:17-36; Romans 8:38-39

Remembrance and prayer

We now name before God these people who are missing from this body:

(Speak the names of recently deceased community members. A candle may be lit for each).

We celebrate their gifts, all that made them unique and beloved.

(You may have a time of silence or offer brief remarks about each person being remembered.)

They were a part of our community—our body—and we feel the pain of losing them.

Let us pray together:

Holy One,

you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

you are our dwelling place in life,

and you remain the dwelling place of *(name those being honored)* in death.

We give thanks that you have gathered them to their people and to yourself.

We also grieve because they are no longer with us on this earth.

A part of our body has been cut off, and it hurts.

O God, see how we loved them!

Let us find comfort and hope in your promise of new life.

Let us rest in your steadfast love.

We offer ourselves in our grief and our longing,
we offer our church in our disruption and brokenness.

Receive what we offer,

and lead us by your grace.

Amen.

Extras

- Invite people to bring items or pictures that remind them of those who have died to place on the worship table. For online worship, share pictures of those being honored.
- Use Romans 8:38-39 as a benediction.
- Suggested resources from *Voices Together*: readings, #981, #983; hymn, #656.

Ritual 2

Welcoming Together

In his letter to the Romans, Paul encourages people in the church to “rejoice with those who rejoice” (Romans 12:15). The birth of a child within the church community is generally an occasion for great rejoicing, but COVID prevented us from meeting newborns in person and from supporting the new parents in the ways we would have liked. Yet even in the midst of a pandemic, it is important that we honor the births within our churches; that we rejoice with those who rejoice; and that we offer our blessing, prayers, and support for parents of young children.

A traditional child dedication is appropriate for a child of any age (prior to baptism), and many communities may prefer to wait to have such dedications until the church community is again gathering in person. The *Voices Together* hymnal (#969–#971) and worship leader edition (#278–#282) provide helpful resources for such a ritual. The ritual below is a less formal occasion to celebrate the birth of children and offer blessings for the children and their families. Because this is a celebration and blessing rather than a dedication, it is appropriate to include children who may not be a regular part of the congregation, such as grandchildren and nieces and nephews of church members.

Focus Scriptures

Mark 10:13-16; Psalm 36:5-9

Other suggested Scriptures

Isaiah 11:6-9; Hosea 11:3-4; Matthew 18:1-5

Litany of celebration and blessing

Today we celebrate the births of (*list names*).

Let us rejoice together!

We offer gratitude for the presence of these children in our world and in our lives.

Let us give thanks together!

We affirm the holy presence of God in the lives of these children.

Thanks be to God!

Like Jesus, we receive these children with open arms.

Like Jesus, we offer the children a blessing:

Dearest (*list names*):

As God's steadfast love surrounds you, may human love also fill your lives.

As you live within divine faithfulness, may you grow in life-giving faith.

As the Holy One shelters you under her wing, may you also know earthly safety and protection.

As God offers abundance, may you live with joy and delight.

We offer this blessing in the love of our divine Parent, the peace of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

We welcome you, and we love you. Amen.

Extras

- For in-person services, you can invite those children being celebrated and their families to the front. If you are also recognizing grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and so on, family members can come to the front with a picture of the child.
- For online services, consider displaying pictures of the children being celebrated.
- In celebrating births, it is important to also be aware of the pain many families carry related to infertility, miscarriage, or infant death. If you know of such situations within your community, it may be appropriate to reach out with pastoral care to those families before celebrating new births in worship.
- Hymn suggestions from *Voices Together*: #10, #80, #512.

Ritual 3

Beginning New Things

Many of us faced significant life transitions during the pandemic. Some of these transitions, such as graduations and planned retirements, were expected, but we weren't able to experience and celebrate them in the ways we might have hoped. Other transitions—particularly in terms of job status—happened unexpectedly because of COVID. It is important for us to honor all these transitions as a faith community, both for the sake of building relationships within the church and for the spiritual support of those experiencing the transition. The liturgy below is written with general language to cover a range of school and work transitions. If your worship observance focuses on a specific type of transition, you may choose to adjust the language to reflect that.

Focus Scripture

Isaiah 43:16-21

Other suggested Scriptures

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Matthew 9:16-17; Romans 12:1-2

Liturgy to honor those who have experienced school or work transitions

Congregational Litany

We know God makes a way,

but we often struggle to see it.

We know God provides a path,

but we often struggle to walk it.

So we celebrate the way that God has made for (*list names of people whose transitions you are honoring*).

We celebrate their faithfulness in walking God's path.

May they find water in the wilderness

and streams in the desert.

Prayer

God of constancy and change,

let (*list names*) know your deep presence with them in this time of transition.

May they find joy in the new things that are springing forth.

May they walk faithfully the paths you set before them.

May we all learn from their faithfulness and support their journey.

We are the people you have formed for yourself,

and we declare your praise!

Amen

Extras

- Invite people who have had significant school or work transitions to share briefly with the congregation. They can explain what their transition has been, and perhaps share what they most appreciated about their previous situation and what they most hope for in this new stage of life.
- You might choose to give a small gift to those being recognized. Perhaps a book that can encourage them in this new phase of life.
- Suggested resources from *Voices Together*: readings #985H, #884; hymns: #377, #419, #816, #507.

Ritual 4

Honoring Partnerships

People planning to get married during COVID have faced difficult decisions about when and how to have their weddings. Many chose to postpone their weddings, or to have very small—or even virtual—ceremonies. If anyone in your congregation got married during the peak of COVID, it is likely that many in the church who would like to have attended the wedding were not able to do so; and the couple was likely not able to feel the support of the full community at their wedding. Even without the cautions surrounding COVID, geography, timing, and venue limitations often mean that many within the church community are unable to attend a wedding of fellow church members. It can be a gift for both the newly married couple and the congregation to recognize, honor, and bless the marriage during a weekly worship service.

Focus Scriptures

Luke 24:13-16, 28-33; Philippians 2:1-4

Other suggested Scriptures

Song of Solomon 8:6-7; 1 Corinthians 13 (*Voices Together* 1045)

Biblical reflection on Luke 24:13-16, 28-33

While we cannot know for sure, many scholars believe it likely that the two travelers on the road to Emmaus were a married couple. The two are on a journey together, engaged in intimate conversation, and it seems that they share a home. Whatever the relationship between these two travelers, this story gives us insight into the ways a marriage (or other intimate relationship) can strengthen faith and how a couple can be supported by the broader faith community.

The two companions process their faith—their grief, their hopes, their understanding and confusion—with each other. They are, quite literally, on a faith journey together. In partnership, they extend hospitality to Jesus, and it is in the intimate setting of a family meal that they recognize the risen Christ. Note, then, that their immediate reaction to learning of the resurrection is to travel all the way back to Jerusalem to share their intimate revelation with the broader faith community. As a couple, they seek the company and support of other believers as they process their experience with Jesus.

Congregational blessing and commitment (with Philippians 2:1-4)

(Speak names of the two people who are recently married),

we, your church community, celebrate your marriage and offer you encouragement in Christ.

**We pray you will find consolation from love,
sharing in the Spirit,**

compassion and sympathy with and for each other.

We seek to be a good example for you of a healthy, God-honoring, Christ-centered community.

Being of the same mind.

Having the same love.

May we do nothing from selfish ambition, but live together in humility.

May we look not to our own interests, but to the interests of each other.

As God has brought us all together as a church community,

so God has brought the two of you together as a married couple,

a broad community and a small one, both formed to help us grow in faith and share God's love.

We pray God's blessings for you, and we offer, as well, the blessing of this church.

We pledge our love and support to you on your faith journey as a married couple.

Extras

- Invite the couple to share photos of or briefly tell about their wedding.
- If one or both of the recently married people have children, consider including them in the ritual as well. The final words of the litany could be changed from *married couple* to *family*.
- Suggested hymns from *Voices Together*: #749, #524.

Ritual 5

Lamenting Together

Our culture is not well versed in lament. When tragedy strikes, when grief comes, we want to move toward problem-solving or denial. But Scripture offers us many examples of God's people coming together in lament—in deep grief, and even in anger toward God. Offering an opportunity for lament in the context of worship gives people permission to acknowledge the full range of their feelings and encourages them to bring their full selves before God. Lament is a reminder that God is big enough to hold all our feelings.

During this time, there are some laments that all communities share: the loss of lives to COVID, the experiences we were not able to have, the disruption of our congregational worship and other church activities. Your specific community might also have particular losses to lament: a negative shift in the political climate, businesses that have closed, jobs that have been lost, families that have moved away, beloved traditions that were interrupted. Being honest together with God about our grief can help us grow closer to God and to each other.

Focus Scriptures

Jeremiah 9:17-22; Luke 19:41-44

Other Scriptures

Joel 1:2-4, 12-14; Psalm 60:1-5

Litany of lament

(You may add more specific losses to the litany as desired.)

As Jesus wept over the city, as the women of Zion wailed, so we, too, raise our voices in lament.

Holy God, hear our cry.

For the deaths caused by COVID-19 and for those who suffer from the disease even now,

holy God, hear our cry.

For all that has been lost within our community,

holy God, hear our cry.

For all that we, as a church, have been unable to do as we sought to keep each other safe,

holy God, hear our cry.

For the ways the pandemic has divided people and created antagonism within families and communities,

holy God, hear our cry.

We bring our full selves to you, O God, trusting in your eternal compassion and mercy.

We bring our pain, our grief, our confusion, our regret, and even our anger.

We offer all this to you in sighs and wailing, in dirges and tears.

Hear us, O God, and restore us.

Extras

- Create a ritual that allows people to name individual laments and then bring them to the group. For example, you could have people write their laments on pieces of paper and place them on the front table, or have people hold some item such as a stone or a ribbon as they think about the grief they have experienced, and then bring those items together.
- Learn the sign language for “Christ, have mercy” (see *Voices Together* 615).
- Suggested resources from *Voices Together*: reading: #894; hymns: #610, #613, #643.

Ritual 6

Celebrating Discipleship

Our faith is shaped in community and we make our faith commitments within communities of support and accountability. Congregations have found varied and creative ways to maintain community during the physical separation of COVID, and people within our churches may have experienced significant spiritual growth and even made faith commitments during this time.

Some people may have received baptism during these past months, when many church participants were unable to attend the ceremony. Others may have decided to be baptized and are waiting for their community to regather in person before they make that commitment public. With the emotional intensity of this experience, it is likely that many people have considered their faith in new ways and may have made significant life decisions based on their renewed sense of God's call. They may have decided to take on a new role at church, to give more time to local services or denominational ministries, or even to pursue a ministry career.

As we regather in person, it is important to acknowledge and celebrate these commitments. In such celebration, we are all invited to renew our commitment to Christ and to Christ's church.

For those who wish to express their commitment through baptism, you can find baptism resources in *Voices Together*, #446–#451 and #930–#935, as well as the *Voices Together* worship leader edition, #203–#220. The liturgy below is intended to celebrate baptisms or other faith commitments made during the time of COVID separation.

Focus Scriptures

Acts 2:37-42; 2 Corinthians 5:17-20 (*Voices Together* 785); Romans 1:8-12

Other Scriptures

Psalms 37:3-6; Acts 16:13-15

Liturgy

Invite those who have made faith commitments to briefly share those commitments with the congregation. The congregation can celebrate and affirm those commitments with the following litany.

(Names of those who have shared), it is our honor to receive the commitments you have shared.

We celebrate the new creations you are becoming in Christ Jesus!

We hold your stories tenderly and walk with you on your continuing journey.

We thank God through Jesus Christ for you, that we can be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.

Through your faith, our faith grows. Through our faith, may you find strength to honor the commitments you have made as you, also, continue to grow.

Let us devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

We all commit to be church together: to follow the way of Jesus, to form holy community, to share in joy, to live in prayer.

Thanks be to God for the gift of the church.

Extras

- Share the stories of people's faith commitments in your church newsletter in the weeks leading up to or after the worship celebration.
- Pair those who are making new commitments with a mentor who can encourage them in their faith.
- Suggested resources from *Voices Together*: reading: #922; hymns: #443, #545, #549, #553, #579.



Rev. Joanna Harader serves as pastor of Peace Mennonite Church in Lawrence, Kansas. She posts worship resources and other writings on her blog, SpaciousFaith.com.