

Module 5: Just Worship



Aims of this module

- To stimulate thought and discussion about justice as both the content of worship and its context.



Notes for group leaders

In this module the study material is interspersed with times for prayer and worship; suggested resources for all these can be found in the worship section at the end of the module. This structure is deliberate – if we believe that the whole of life is what we offer to God, then our prayers and affirmations belong in the midst of our other activities.

The practical session of worship planning will take up much of a single-evening session, but extra optional activities are included for use if there is more time.



Resources required

- Copies of the worship resources and handouts for everyone.
- Bibles, hymn-books and other worship material (to stimulate, not replace, creativity).
- A flipchart with extra, loose, sheets and marker pens.



Extras

There are two Extras available from www.justchurch.info to accompany this module:

- An **extended reflection activity** which you can add to the session if you have the time.
- A **resource list** with information about other worship and liturgy resources, including and in addition to those from the Iona Community.

Remember, you can run the module without using the Extras at all. Only use them if you want to explore the topic more deeply.

Introduction

The Bible has some stirring passages about justice – “rolling down like an everlasting stream”, for instance. But how much does it feature in our worship? How often is it the focus of our worship? And when that is the case, does the way we function in a church setting embody the concern for justice and inclusion that we preach?

But then, does real worship only happen in church?

These are some of the questions raised in this module. Many of the resources used in addressing them come from the Iona Community – a radical and ecumenical Christian community, with a dispersed membership held together by a Rule of Life and centred on the Abbey on the Scottish island of Iona. The prayers throughout this session come from the *Abbey Worship Book* of the Iona Community.

Although the approach and prayers used here draw heavily on the Iona Community’s resources, do replace them with prayers and hymns from your own tradition if that would be more appropriate.



Opening worship (5 minutes)

Say together the opening prayer from the worship resources for this module. Then read aloud this quotation from the introduction to the *Iona Abbey Worship Book*:

“Our whole life, we believe, is a search for wholeness. We desire to be fully human, with no division into the ‘sacred’ and the ‘secular’. We desire to be fully present to God, who is fully present to us, whether in our neighbour or in the political and social activity of the world around us, whether in the field of culture or of economics, and whether in prayer and praise together or in the very centre and soul of our being.”



Activity 1: Brainstorm (5 minutes)

Using a large piece of paper and marker, brainstorm your response to the question: “What is worship for?”



Activity 2: Worship and the world (15 minutes)

The Rule of the Iona Community (Handout 1) includes a commitment to action for justice and peace in society. Hand out copies of the Rule, and read out the start of the Justice and Peace Commitment:

“We believe:

- 1 That the Gospel commands us to seek peace founded on justice and that costly reconciliation is at the heart of the Gospel;
- 2 That work for justice, peace and an equitable society is a matter of extreme urgency.”

Reflection and discussion

Give time for members of the group to reflect on these two statements and then, preferably in pairs, to discuss which phrases spoke most strongly to them and record what issue in our world most urgently calls for action. (This is not a discussion about priorities, but a chance to listen to one another’s areas of engagement and commitment.)

Difficult questions

Consider what you sang last week and your own experience of worship as you respond to the following questions:

- Does the content and style of our regular worship reflect these concerns?
- Does the way we worship do justice to what we believe and say?
- To what extent is the world brought into our worship?
- Are there ways that our church structures (organisation) or architecture, or language, or traditional ways of doing things, exclude people?
- How much do we expect worship to be a “safe” space?
- Do we expect to be challenged, taken out of our ‘comfort zone’?

Discuss these, and record on the flipchart the answers of the group.

(You may also like to give out copies of Handout 2, the working principles of the Iona Community, to promote discussion. How is your worship rooted in the life of your community?)



Prayers of confession (5 minutes)

Say together the prayers of confession from the worship resources for this module.



Activity 3: Preparing for worship (10 minutes)

Give out copies of Handout 3, which lists some of the issues considered when planning worship for Iona Abbey. In small groups, discuss briefly which of the points from the handout help to give a distinct focus to issues of justice and peace.



Activity 4: Planning an act of worship (35 minutes)

- Divide into small groups – if possible with no more than five people per group – with each group choosing either one of the areas of concern mentioned on the flipchart or looking at how existing worship can be more effective.
- Each group should find a relevant Bible passage, choose at least two hymns, songs, chants or choruses, and discuss their effectiveness. (You might want to give people this list of Bible passages used frequently by those leading worship on justice and peace in Iona Abbey: Isaiah 2:1–5; Micah 6:1–3, 6–8; Luke 1:46–55; Luke 4:14–30; Matthew 5:1–12; Matthew 25:31–45; 2 Corinthians 6:4–10; James 2:14–17; Revelation 22:1–2.)
- Thought will need to be given to prayers and whether it would be appropriate to include a symbolic action.
- Consider what hymnbooks and other resources you have to hand.
- The worship material and handouts provided in this module may themselves be a resource.
- The worship material in other *Just Church* modules is another resource.
- One of the Extras for this module (see above) gives information about other worship and liturgy resources, including and in addition to those from the Iona Community.

Feedback

Each group should write up notes towards their act of worship on flipchart sheets which can be displayed. If there is time, a brief account of key elements could be given aloud by a member of the group. If others have been moved to write a prayer, or feel it would help to read out some key Bible verses, that would also be relevant. But the feedback as a whole should take no more than five minutes per group.

The leader could point out that all the work done so far deserves to be taken further, into an actual act of worship, and the whole group, or a few people, may want to discuss later how to make this happen.

Reflection and response

Have a period (up to five minutes) of shared silence, to reflect on the themes which the groups chose, and the ways that shared concern has started to become an offering to God. Spend time reading and thinking about what is written on the flipchart sheets.

Then read out these three quotations:

“People come to worship in Iona looking for peace and quiet, and go away looking for peace with justice.”
A volunteer with the Iona Community

“Worship should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”

“Spare me the sound of your songs;
I shall not listen to the strumming of your lutes.
Instead let justice flow on like a river
and righteousness like a never-failing torrent.”

Amos 5: 23, 24

Ask everyone: Do you feel the worship you have created reflects these statements?

Just Church: facilitator sheet



Action points (10 minutes)

Help the group to decide how they can put their learning into some sort of action. Ask: How can our church incorporate a concern for justice into our worship in an ongoing way? Which areas are we already doing well at, and which areas need improvement?

Be sure to make a note of any actions suggested, so that you can come back to them in the “Just Action” module at the end of the *Just Church* programme.



Closing worship (5 minutes)

Use the closing worship outline from the worship resources for this module.

You might also want to say the *Just Church* prayer (see the introduction) together to end the session.



The Rule

Our five-fold rule calls us to:

1. Daily prayer and Bible reading.
2. Sharing and accounting for the use of our money.
3. Planning and accounting for the use of our time.
4. Action for justice and peace in society.
5. Meeting with and accounting to each other.

The Justice and Peace Commitment

We believe:

1. that the Gospel commands us to seek peace founded on justice and that costly reconciliation is at the heart of the Gospel;
2. that work for justice, peace and an equitable society is a matter of extreme urgency;
3. that God has given us partnership as stewards of creation and that we have a responsibility to live in a right relationship with the whole of God's creation;
4. that, handled with integrity, creation can provide for the needs of all, but not for the greed which leads to injustice and inequality, and endangers life on earth;
5. that everyone should have the quality and dignity of a full life that requires adequate physical, social and political opportunity, without the oppression of poverty, injustice and fear;
6. that social and political action leading to justice for all people and encouraged by prayer and discussion, is a vital work of the Church at all levels;
7. that the use or threatened use of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction is theologically and morally indefensible and that opposition to their existence is an imperative of the Christian faith.

As Members and Family Groups we will:

8. engage in forms of political witness and action, prayerfully and thoughtfully, to promote just and peaceful social, political and economic structures;
9. work for a policy of renunciation by our own nations of all weapons of mass destruction and for the encouragement of other nations, individually or collectively, to do the same;
10. celebrate human diversity and actively work to combat discrimination on grounds of age, colour, disability, mental wellbeing, differing ability, gender, colour, race, ethnic and cultural background, sexual orientation or religion;
11. work for the establishment of the United Nations Organisation as the principal organ of international reconciliation and security, in place of military alliances;
12. support and promote research and education into non-violent ways of achieving justice, peace and a sustainable global society;
13. work for reconciliation within and among nations by international sharing and exchange of experience and people, with particular concern for politically and economically oppressed nations.



Handout 2: Working principles for worship

(A working paper produced by Iona Community Members to help with staff training on Iona)

a) Worship is rooted in the life of the Iona Community

The liturgies have grown out of almost 70 years of the Community's life on the island (and a whole lot of history before). Worship adapts and changes as it continues to reflect and inform the engaged spirituality of the Iona Community.

The morning worship is the office of the Iona Community, said by members where they are and by those people on Iona who join them in community through prayer. Through this prayer we pledge ourselves to support one another.

b) Worship is an honest offering to God

Worship should reflect what we believe, what we can say with conviction and what we are committed to exploring. And we strive to do this with clarity and without cliché.

It is an offering to God, and the place where we challenge each other with the Word of God, not our own political principles.

c) Worship is biblically rooted

The Bible has always been central to Christian worship. At the Abbey it is our great privilege to present its truths in a diversity of ways, not simply through preaching.

d) Worship is creative, challenging and consoling

Iona Abbey is a place where worship is created with imagination, experience and intellect at play. And yet structure and pattern and tradition also hold us and nurture us in the task to find new ways of touching the hearts of all.

We use contemporary resources, including our own rich musical and liturgical materials, and believe in encouraging leadership amongst all who work at our centres.

e) Worship includes all

In striving to help everyone feel included at worship we welcome and give an introduction every time, remembering that each act of worship is public worship and not just for guests and staff members.

We hope to ensure that what is happening in the liturgy is clearly seen and heard, although the building has its constraints!

The Iona Community has an inclusive language policy and recognising that language can be an inhibitor for many people, we seek to use material that engages our bodies and emotions through movement and the senses of sight, smell, taste and touch as well as hearing.

We aim to avoid an over-reliance on the written word.



Every week in the Abbey on Iona there are two or three services a day. A significant number of these focus on Justice and Peace issues. In the high season, the three months when there are most day visitors, there will be a brief “J&P” service early in the afternoon each day. From March to the end of October, every Monday the evening service takes up a theme related to justice. The themes listed at any time by this group will give an idea of the range of topics that might be tackled by the staff members of the Community.

The *Abbey Worship Book* offers some forms of words – responses, affirmations of faith – but the group responsible for that service need to start with their theme and with an appropriate Bible passage which will help to explore what could otherwise remain a secular concern. The preparation will include:

- What people themselves bring to worship and what helps people as they arrive at church to feel welcomed and accepted.
- Looking at insights from scripture, from other writers (e.g. poets) and maybe oral tradition (e.g. stories, proverbs from other parts of the world).
- Comparing the cultural setting of the biblical passage and the cultural setting of your community and/or your area of concern.
- Considering where what we bring to the worship is reflected in scripture.
- The importance of the words of hymns as you consider what speaks to you.
- The group will look at other ways besides singing of enabling the congregation to participate, for instance a symbolic or practical action where they may be invited to get up and move about the church. Actions range from lighting a candle to exchanging shoes, from bringing a “nuclear submarine” into the service and then “decommissioning” it to signing a petition, from building a cairn with stones to sharing the peace.
- The place of stories, confession, affirmation and intercession.
- How issues of justice can become rooted in weekly worship.



Opening worship

O God, who called all life into being,

The Earth sea and sky are yours.

Your presence is all around us,

Every atom is full of your energy.

Your Spirit enlivens all who walk the earth,

With her we yearn for justice to be done,

For creation to be freed from bondage,

For the hungry to be fed,

For captives to be released,

For your kingdom of peace to come on Earth.

Prayers of confession

Holy God, Maker of all

Have mercy on us.

Jesus Christ, Servant of the poor

Have mercy on us.

Holy Spirit, Breath of life

Have mercy on us.

Let us in silence confess our faults

and admit our frailty.

Silence

Before God, with the people of God,

I confess to my brokenness:

to the ways I wound my life,

the lives of others,

and the life of the world.

May God forgive you, Christ renew you

and the Spirit enable you to grow in love.

Amen

Before God, with the people of God,

We confess to our brokenness;

To the ways we wound our lives,

The lives of others,

And the life of the world.

May God forgive you, Christ renew you,

And the Spirit enable you to grow in love.

Amen



Closing worship

Affirmation of faith

Let us affirm our faith.

**We believe that God is present
In the darkness before dawn;
In the waiting and uncertainty
Where fear and courage join hands,
Conflict and caring link arms,
And the sun rises over barbed wire.**

**We believe in a with-us God
Who sits down in our midst
To share our humanity.**

We affirm a faith

**That takes us beyond the safe place:
Into action, into vulnerability
And into the streets.**

**We commit ourselves to work for change
And put ourselves on the line;
To bear responsibility, take risks,
Live powerfully and face humiliation;
To stand with those on the edge;
To choose life**

**And be used by the spirit
For god's new community of hope.**

Amen

Song

The group could sing at this point, one of the hymns, songs, chants or choruses identified earlier.

Closing responses

A blessing on you who are poor,
Yours is the kingdom of God.

A blessing on you who mourn,
You shall be comforted.

A blessing on you who hunger for justice,
You shall be satisfied

A blessing on you who make peace,
You shall be called children of God.

A blessing on you who are persecuted
for the cause of right,
Yours is the kingdom of Heaven.

Amen