

First Church 101: Worship Space & Hymnals

Narthex—The lobby area where most worshipers first walk inside on Sunday mornings and are welcomed by friendly greeters.

Sanctuary—The main worship space. Usually worshipers are welcomed into this space by ushers and offered a worship bulletin. Our Sanctuary (and the entire building that it's a part of) is sometimes called the Meetinghouse. This is because Congregational churches were often where the town or city had its meetings. Technically, the current space (3rd Meetinghouse, 1823-4) was built after Connecticut separated church and state (around 1819) so it may have never functioned as a Meetinghouse.

Chancel—The area where the communion table, lectern and deacon's benches are located. Technically, the pulpit/apse area is part of the chancel. Our chancel has smooth hardwood flooring, which is a little slippery at times, especially for brides and grooms about to share vows.

Pulpit (Apse)—The space under the semicircular ceiling is formally an apse, but because it includes the pulpit—the podium from which pastors tend to preach—we often call the whole space the pulpit.

Lectern—From Latin “to read,” it is where much of the liturgy (words of worship) is led from. It's also called the podium. (Liturgy is Latin for “People's work”.)

Pew—The seats where people sit in the main part of the Sanctuary (we don't call it by the technical term, “nave”). Pews are a second millennium development—in the first 1,200 years or so, generally everybody stood during worship—often separated by gender, in part because services usually weren't too long (probably under 40 minutes). Pews became especially popular in Protestant churches after the Reformation, when worship was extended to up to 3 hours on Sunday mornings, with a second helping in the afternoon. Pews became an important part of the budgetary practice in New England in the 19th century, when a local tax going to the Congregational church was eliminated, and churches began to “rent” pews each year. The closer to the front of the Sanctuary, the more expensive the pew rental. No wonder people still prefer sitting in the back of the church—it used to be less expensive! 😊 But in seriousness, the numbers on the aisle end of the pews were the numbers used to identify your rented pew. Then in around the turn of the 20th century, pledge campaigns mostly replaced pew rentals.

Communion Table—The table usually located on the chancel and used during communion. We don't call it an altar in part because of the theological idea that the only perfect sacrifice was of Jesus on the cross and that in some people's minds the sacrament of Holy Communion is a remembrance instead of the spiritual or real presence of Christ.

Baptismal Font—The furniture that houses the baptism bowl, used to hold water for baptisms. The font gets its name from “fountain,” but our font is a marble stand that hangs out on the river side of the church to the side of the chancel.

[What else might you want to know about worship and the worship spaces?](#)

The **Chapel** (in the Plymouth Building) can seat around 60 people (adults—we fit more kids in there for children’s worship); the Sanctuary can fit 450-600 adults, depending on personal space needs.

The tight squeeze in the Sanctuary pews is due in part to the need to fit as many people in as possible, and also probably because people were a little smaller when the Sanctuary was built in the 1820s.

The **simplicity** of the Sanctuary, Chapel, and church in general is a result of our iconoclastic Protestant heritage. **Iconoclasm** is the intense opposition to icons or anything that might vaguely resemble an idol. When Puritans left England in the early 1600s, it was in part because they gave up on getting the Church of England to be less what they considered Roman Catholic. They worried that the fancy crosses/crucifixes, the statues of saints, and pictures of Jesus, etc., were tempting Christians to worship things rather than God. This perspective probably wasn’t as intense after a while, but when most Congregational churches rebuilt their Meetinghouses in the 19th century, not only did they recommit to simplicity but it also was the trend to paint the churches white and have clear glass windows, which added to the simplicity feel. The exterior of the second Meetinghouse (from the 18th century) was likely painted a bright color, for instance.

The Sanctuary **Cross**—By the end of 1962, after the organ and its pipes were switched to the balcony, there was a blank space above the pulpit. So the church leaders decided that even with their iconoclastic roots, they could experiment with having a cross up there. The second cross that was tried out was built by Jim Merrill at his construction business, with the help of a Catholic and a Jewish co-worker. It was well received and has hung above the pulpit ever since.

The two hymnals we use are the Pilgrim Hymnal (red-covered) and New Century Hymnal (black).

The Pilgrim Hymnal (PH) is the “traditional” hymnal in that it was published in different editions by the Congregational tradition over the years. We use the 1958 edition, which was the last one published by the Congregational Christian church before most of those churches joined the UCC. The old school language is what attracts many to it and confuses others when using it. The Christmas hymns are pretty much universally preferred in our congregation, but the Pilgrim also lacks many favorite hymns. Among other things, the PH has a good selection of Lent and Thanksgiving hymns.

The New Century Hymnal (NCH) was published in 1995 by the UCC as a bold and perhaps in some cases overly ambitious attempt to update hymns in UCC churches. It is preferred by people who want more modern language and some newer hymns to sing, and is less popular with traditionalists, especially those who grew up with the Pilgrim Hymnal or who adopted the PH as their hymnal of choice. The NCH has a wider selection of hymns for seasons and celebrations that were not as significant in Congregational churches in 1958 (including Lent). In particular the New Century Hymnal has a significant selection of African-American spirituals as well as hymns from non-Caucasian cultures. The lyrics of old standards such as Christmas hymns were frequently and significantly changed, taking out for instance almost all male language for God.

In addition to hymnals, there should also be a Bible available in each pew. Often, the dark blue pew Bibles are located in a little clear plastic shelf attached to the bottom of the pew in front of you.

First Church 101: The Christian Year

Churches that embrace a strong sense of ancient tradition usually organize their worship around the Christian year (aka “liturgical calendar”). Major seasons (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost/Ordinary Time) have distinct themes that when repeated annually, can deepen one’s faith (although you can also make the case that every day should possess the wonder of Christmas or the joy of Easter, right?).

Here are most of the major Seasons/Holidays:

Advent—The season of four Sundays leading up to Christmas. Advent is the beginning of the church year in part because it re-starts the Christian story with the preparation for Jesus’ birth. It also brings to mind the faith of many Christians that Jesus will come again (in history? When we die?) to judge/save. We usually say a confession prayer and receive the assurance of forgiveness each Sunday in Advent—the term for this is “penitential season”. You can think of it as a way of spiritually cleansing ourselves in preparation for Jesus’ coming/coming again, or to steal the lyrics from “Joy to the World,” if we’re supposed to prepare room for Jesus in our hearts, it’s time to do some spiritual cleaning! Each liturgical season has a color: Advent’s color used to be purple, like Advent, but somebody (could it be the people who make liturgical tapestries) decided to offer dark blue as another color for Advent.

Christmas—Both the day of December 25th and the season of twelve days starting on Dec. 25th (thus “The Twelve Days of Christmas”). Pastors like to point out that those twelve days—okay, plus Christmas Eve—are the only time it makes sense to sing Christmas hymns in worship, but there’s the Christmas pageant and other reasons to make exceptions. Liturgical color: White.

Epiphany—So named because the magi, whose story commences the season, are the first non-Jews to “figure out”/have an epiphany that Jesus is the Messiah/Christ (“Messiah” is a Hebrew word meaning “anointed one.” Christ is the Greek word also meaning “anointed one”). The magi were definitely not kings—more like astronomer-scientists—and there were almost surely more than three of them, but there’s the hymn (“We three kings...”) and the tradition that says, if there are three gifts (gold, frankincense and myrrh) then why not three people? Epiphany is also part of Ordinary Time, which is a nice way of saying “nothing huge going on in the liturgical calendar right now”. Liturgical color: Green.

Lent—The season of forty days, beginning with Ash Wednesday, leading up to Easter. Lent really means “Spring.” Another penitential season with confession prayers each Sunday. If you do the math, there are 46 days starting on Ash Wednesday and ending with Holy Saturday (the day before Easter). How do we get to forty days? The Sundays don’t count because they’re little Easters. Why forty days at all? It’s supposed to be a time when we, like Jesus in the wilderness/desert, remember that what we really need in life is God’s sustaining love and presence, and not the other stuff (meat, chocolate and coffee, if Lenten sacrifices are any clue!). Liturgical color: Purple (for passion and royalty).

Within Lent, here are the four major ‘days’:

Ash Wednesday—When we set out on our journey of forty days and remember our mortality—thus the ashes and the minister saying, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Some people associate Ash Wednesday with Roman Catholicism, but it’s become more a part of Protestant faith in the last few decades.

Palm/Passion Sunday—A week before Easter, we remember the “triumphal entry” of Jesus and his followers into the big capital city of Jerusalem, which depending on who you talk to either was solemnly or mockingly referring to traditions of kings entering a conquered city. Regardless, in one or two versions of the story, people lay down branches/palms in the path of Jesus and the donkey (all four mention coats or cloaks, but who wants to celebrate “Cloak Sunday”?). The holiday has an ironic dimension to it: many of the people who cheer for Jesus could have been the same people who later in the week turn against him. It has become more popular to celebrate the day as Passion Sunday, partly so that the people who don’t go to Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services know what Jesus goes through between the palm parade and Easter.

Maundy Thursday—On this evening we remember the Last Supper that Jesus had with his disciples (the twelve plus some others—yes, Mary Magdalene was probably there) plus the betrayal by Judas Iscariot and the desertion by the rest of the disciples. It’s the beginning of what is referred to as Jesus’ “Passion” (the term speaks to his suffering and to the passion with which Jesus maintains his allegiance to God and his mission to Good News even in the face of those who reject him). Maundy is a Latin term for “command”: Jesus commands his disciples that evening both to remember him by reenacting the meal, and to love each other as he loved them. Color: White (for the sacrament of communion).

Good Friday—When the rest of the Passion story unfolds (trial, denial by Peter, sentencing to death, crucifixion, death, hasty burial). Why is it called “Good”? There’s different theories: Good is an alternative for God. It’s good because Jesus dies for us. It’s good in that it leads to Easter. But the color associated with the day is black.

Easter—Both the holiday and the season of seven weeks starting on Easter Sunday. “Early on the first day of the week...” starts the story of the empty tomb: at least one Mary (Magdalene) was there, maybe two or three. Depending on which Gospel you’re reading, angels may show up, there’s an earthquake, Peter and another disciple take a look in the tomb, and Jesus does or does not show up at the tomb (when he doesn’t show up, an angel tells the followers where to find Jesus). In John and Luke, Jesus appears that day to at least some of the disciples (sorry, Thomas...). This day is interpreted by many Christians to be the central moment in Christian history because it points to the power of God to resurrect Jesus and to the hope that we all will share in “Resurrection Life” with Jesus and God. The actual name Easter and the bunny story are residual from ancient Middle Eastern traditions (the bunny is a bird whose wings freeze in winter and who is saved by the god Oster by turning it into a rabbit—but it can still lay eggs in the spring!). Eggs, however, also work as symbols of new life, of empty-tombness; real ones can be hard-boiled and colored to symbolize vitality; and plastic ones can store candy!

What determines the date of Easter, you ask? The Western Churches (Protestant and Catholic) agree that Easter shall be celebrated on the Sunday after the first full moon after the Spring Equinox, with the

Spring Equinox being the fixed date of March 21st. This means that Easter can be as early as March 22nd and as late as April 25th (neither of those will happen in our lifetimes). Liturgical color: White!

Pentecost—After seven weeks of Easter, we arrive at the holiday among the three major ones (Christmas and Easter being the other two) that is least appreciated in the US. This is partly because it often falls in the inconvenient period around Memorial Day or when school's about to end. It also just didn't get as many traditions attached to it over the years. And it is often associated these days with the Pentecostal tradition, which is unfamiliar and almost foreign to many of the more staid folk in the pews. Pentecost was a Jewish holiday of giving thanks for the beginning of the harvest season. But then the story goes in Acts chapter 2 that the disciples, while hiding from the authorities, were accosted by this new thing called the Holy Spirit, which burned like fire with tongues on the end and inspired them to speak in the languages of Jews from around the world who had traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish Pentecost. Our Sunday School way of describing Pentecost is that it's "the Birthday of the Church"! Pretty good interpretation, really. The disciples are inspired to "go public" with their Good News about Jesus and his Way, despite the risks. They go from disciples (followers) to apostles (people sent out to lead). Liturgical color: Red (you get bonus points from pastors if you wear red to worship that Sunday).

Ordinary Time (The Season After Pentecost) (liturgical color: green)—This is the long period of summer and fall when Jesus didn't do anything that we stop the presses for (although we don't really know when Jesus was born—December 25th was simply a convenient time to replace a pagan holiday). We use green for this time to symbolize natural and also spiritual growth. The last Sunday before Advent re-starts the Christian year is Christ the King/Reign of Christ Sunday, when we look to predictions of Jesus coming back. This is what might be called the Möbius strip moment of the Christian calendar, when the end of the story points back to the beginning of the story (the second coming pointing to the first coming of Jesus).