

Worship at Thanksgiving!

Thanksgiving is a wonderful time of the year and a great opportunity for creative and unique worship experiences. When I think of Thanksgiving, two issues always come to mind for me.

1. It's a shame if such grateful and joyful generosity and worship occur only on this one Sabbath of the year.
2. Our Thanksgiving should be thanksgiving to God for who He is, not just for the things He gives us.

The theme of thanksgiving and gratitude are too great to be captured in one service on one Sabbath in the year. Further if the hungry and the homeless need food at Thanksgiving, do they not need it year round and especially during the winter months? Therefore, I would urge a series of Sabbath worship services on the theme of Thanksgiving that would promote individual service and ministry all year.

Besides, focusing only on what God has done for us tends toward self-centeredness; individuals then feel resentful if they have suffered loss rather than abundance.

The following are a series of ideas that could work together in one service or separately:

1. Create a four-week worship series focusing on the attributes of God, culminating with the Thanksgiving Service. Each week of the series, the worship theme focuses on a different aspect of God, such as:
 - a. Compassionate and Gracious,
 - b. Slow to Anger,
 - c. Abounding in Love and Faithfulness,
 - d. Forgiving

Celebrate whatever aspect of the Creator through the scripture passage, the music and prayers, as well as with displays and decorations. A Family Friendly Church would invite various families to do various parts of the service. The displays might also be done by children or by the entire family.

Family Friendly Idea: The church purchases a large picture puzzle, one each for the four aspects of God that the church will feature for worship. Give each of four families one of the puzzles to put together as a family, then lacquer and display them at the church. The families can write a short explanation of how they think the picture relates to the aspect of God. Choose the puzzles to fit the worship themes, as follows:

- a. Compassionate and Gracious—a nativity scene

- b. Slow to Anger—a fall scene
- c. Abounding in Love and Faithfulness—a snow scene
- d. Forgiving—heaven or angels or family scene

Thanksgiving banners: Get your church to think about creating Thanksgiving banners, if you not already have them. Banners can be a joint effort of several families or of a Sabbath School class. You need an artist to take the lead. Cut letters and simple symbols from brightly colored cloth. Glue or appliqué them to a long, narrow background piece. Fake suede or satin or a heavy nylon can be effective. If your Thanksgiving becomes a four-week series, hang a new banner each week. Base your banner on the Scripture passages being used each week. Thanksgiving captions, matching the attributes of God might be:

- a. Compassionate and Gracious—“You are gracious and compassionate”
- b. Slow to Anger and abounding in love—“You are slow to anger, abounding in love”
- c. Abounding in Faithfulness—“Great is Thy Faithfulness”
- d. Forgiving—“You are a forgiving God” Neh. 9:17

Feature the above four messages each on a banner in fall colors. Leave them hanging through November.

2. Community Thanksgiving. Celebrate at any time Thanksgiving for different groups of people in the community. One Sabbath invite teachers from your community and give thanks for them and honor them. On another Sabbath bring in police officers and fire fighters, then healthcare professionals, postal service workers or perhaps shop owners, political leaders and even clergy. People will come to your church to receive an award and to be honored. Present personalized plaques to these guests at your worship service. If they are able, invite them to share a reading or a prayer. Imagine a newspaper headline that reads, “Seventh-day Adventist Church of Small-town honors local citizens!”

Such a service in a small church would make the community aware of your existence, lift the morale of your church members and bring out the best in terms of the worship service. This would be a wonderful motivation to brighten the appearance of the church building and to prepare the most delicious foods. In all likelihood such an occasion would improve the demeanor of the members, not to mention the impact of a positive focused sermon. Have the children from the Sabbath School departments also prepare and present special gifts, cards, posters that they made to these honored guests.

This would be a good time to display the children’s art, portrayals of these valuable community leaders and also their depictions of God and His attributes.

3. **Adopt a Family.** Encourage your church members to adopt a family or individual that is in need and urge them to do the best they can to not only deliver food for thanksgiving, but to get to know the family and assist in small ways on an on-going basis. Some members may be able to offer names of likely families to adopt, but usually they would rely on the church to provide that information. Network with your local social services department or Adventist Community Services center, or both, to gather names.

4. **Thanksgiving Festival.** The week before Thanksgiving have a harvest festival when people bring bags of groceries for needy families. Announce well ahead that families should bring sacks of groceries on that Sabbath. The day before decorate the area in front of the pulpit with baskets of fall produce: pumpkins, apples, potatoes, leafy greens. Also place baskets for gifts of money and signs drawing attention to the money baskets. Families who forgot the groceries will then have a face-saving alternative.

At the festival the congregation keeps their bags with them until after the hymns, and prayers. The organizers then explain what will happen and organize the flow of traffic before calling for families to walk forward bringing their grocery bags.

Up front the Pathfinders receive the bags and unpack them. Gradually they will build a mass of food out on display and a pile of folded sacks (to be used again later).

While the whole congregation is bringing their gifts, the organ plays softly. People usually don't mind the wait as there is continual movement to watch, along with the growing accumulation of food.

When the last bag has been received, the Pathfinders sit on the front rows. The festival organizer or the pastor introduces an invited guest from the community, such as the director of social services for the county who has previously been asked to make a speech. Usually this person will be lavish with praise for the spirit of the festival and thanksgiving for the difference this will make in the community.

The pastor gives a short homily on Thanksgiving and sharing as a ministry, reminding everyone that this celebration is really for the goodness of God. Or you might plan a pulpit exchange (see below).

After the benediction invite families to stay and help bag up the groceries and deliver them to the community. This delays the start of Sabbath lunch but it is well worth it. Children enjoy this experience.

Quickly explain the they will walk down the right aisle of the church, pick up a grocery bag and as they work their way across in front of the pulpit area pack the bag with items for a Thanksgiving meal. They will provide some potatoes, stuffing, relish, vegetables, desert, etc. They then take the bag to a designated area and return to repeat the process.

As the number of bagged groceries grows instruct drivers to come get delivery instructions. Give them names and addresses of 2-3 people who live

reasonably close to each other. The organizer will inform the driver of how many bags to deliver at each address, based on the size of the families.

Also tell people what to say, such as: Happy Thanksgiving. I am from Your-town Seventh-day Adventist church. And we just wanted you to know we care. Have a happy Thanksgiving Day!

Family Friendly Gesture: Give each family a frozen turkey. You may need to explain to members that there is no point giving people types and brands of food that they do not already know and appreciate.

Pulpit Exchange. A festival provides a great opportunity for a pulpit exchange. The homily could be given by the local Presbyterian pastor. Let him know what is likely to happen in the festival. He might even bring his children's choir for special music. This would be especially appreciated in a small church with few children. When other people share their perspectives of Thanksgiving, it usually makes us all more grateful. Thus the idea of gratitude and thanksgiving will go out beyond the walls of our own community.

Community Thanksgiving Service. For an even greater impact, have your church host a Community Thanksgiving Service the Wednesday evening before Thanksgiving. Invite clergy and members from various congregations to participate. Make this a joyous affirmation of diversity. Such services can be among the most moving and Spirit-filled gatherings you will ever attend.