

CHAPTER 68

A SERVICE OF THOUGHTFUL PRAYER FOR THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church

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INTRODUCTORY NOTES AS YOU PREPARE FOR THIS SOLEMN CELEBRATION

1. As you consider the ideas used in this liturgy, feel free to adapt them in light of your own situation and goals. This liturgy focuses on prayer, forms of worship, and quiet meditation.
2. This service will last approximately 60–90 minutes, depending on whether or not you celebrate Holy Communion.
3. This service requires a committed team that will pray it into reality. It requires a lot of preparatory work, but we promise you that you and your people will not soon forget it.
4. I chose to incorporate as many of the senses as possible in the service, and we encourage you to do so as a way of engaging the total person in the total service. There are things to hear (music, Scripture), to see (flags of the nations, the setting itself, candles, visuals), to smell (candles or possibly incense), to touch (the bulletin, the flags, or candles to carry), to taste (if you conclude with the service of Holy Communion).
5. In some churches the service of Holy Communion may be included, but this lengthens the liturgy. It was not incorporated into this liturgy.
6. For special introductory and concluding points in the service, I have chosen music from the Russian Orthodox heritage. There is a solemnity and power about it. But feel free in different geographic and cultural contexts to use other forms of music. Well-played drums are primal and can serve the same points of the liturgy well.
7. We provide the master order of service for those directing the program, and at the end you will find paragraphs to introduce the bulletin handout for all. This services uses the New Living Translation (2003).

GUIDELINES FOR THE COORDINATORS

1. Before people arrive, prepare the setting with lit candles in different sizes and colors, small candles for children and youth, larger ones for adults (representing the diversity

of the persecuted church). Red can refer to the persecuted and white to the martyrs of Revelation 6:11. Use flags from nations where Christians are persecuted today. The worship center lighting is dimmed.

2. As people enter they receive the handout, enter into the worship center, and sit in silence.
3. Images of the persecuted church around the world fade in and out on the screen.

AS THE LITURGY BEGINS

1. The lighting dims and an image of a cross comes on the screen.
2. This cues the sound person to begin playing the solemn music.
 - We begin the service with the music of the Russian bells from the “Sacred Treasures: Choral Masterworks from Russia.” Begin with “Russian Bells” [track 1, 22 seconds] and then play a good part of the “Song of the Cherubim” [track 4, 4:43 minutes].¹
 - After the song ends, pause for 10 seconds.
3. A cantor (a man with a strong voice, either with or without amplification), speaks from the back of the auditorium and calls out: “The earth is the Lord’s ... (pause)... let the whole earth keep silence before him.”
4. After 15–20 seconds of silence, the cantor speaks out, “The Word of God comes to us. Let us attend!”
5. Begin the reading of selected Scripture led by people who read well and have practiced the passages. These are the passages I chose, but you are free to utilize others that have the same content and power.

Note: the lights remain low; screen images resume.

READERS, CANTOR, AND CONGREGATIONAL READING SPEAK FORTH SCRIPTURES ON SUFFERING AND PERSECUTION

1. *Reader 1*: “And from the time John the Baptist began preaching and baptizing until now, the Kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and violent people attack it.” Matthew 11:12.
2. *Reader 2*: “Then Jesus said to the disciples, ‘If any of you wants to be my follower, you must put aside your selfish ambition, shoulder your cross, and follow me.’” Matthew 16:24–25.
3. *Congregation*: “When the world hates you, remember it hated me before it hated you. The world would love you if you belonged to it, but you don’t. I chose you to come out of the world, and so it hates you.” John 15:18–19.
4. *Reader 1*: “Then you will be arrested, persecuted, and killed. You will be hated all over the world because of your allegiance to me. And many will turn away from me and betray and hate each other. And many false prophets will appear and will lead many people astray. Sin will be rampant everywhere, and the love of many will grow cold. But those who endure to the end will be saved.” Matthew 24:9–13.

¹ Album available at http://www.amazon.com/Sacred-Treasures-Choral-Masterworks-Russia/dp/B000000X8J/ref=sr_1_1?s=music&ie=UTF8&qid=1314904455&sr=1-1.

5. *Cantor*: From the back of the auditorium; pauses for 15–20 seconds after the Matthew 24 passage, then cries out in a loud voice: “This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints.” Revelation 14:12.
6. *Reader 2*: “For we are not fighting against people made of flesh and blood, but against the evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against those mighty powers of darkness who rule this world, and against wicked spirits in the heavenly realms.” Ephesians 6:12.
7. *Congregation*: “Dear friends, don’t be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. Instead, be very glad—because these trials will make you partners with Christ in his suffering.” 1 Peter 4:12–14.
8. *Cantor*: From the back of the auditorium; pauses for 15–20 seconds after the I Peter 4 passage, then cries out in a loud voice: “This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints.”
9. *Reader 1*: “Remember how you remained faithful even though it meant terrible suffering. Sometimes you were exposed to public ridicule and were beaten, and sometimes you helped others who were suffering the same things. You suffered along with those who were thrown into jail. When all you owned was taken from you, you accepted it with joy. You knew you had better things waiting for you in eternity.” Hebrews 10:32–34.
10. *Reader 2*: “And when the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of all who had been martyred for the word of God and for being faithful in their witness. They called loudly to the Lord and said, ‘O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge the people who belong to this world for what they have done to us? When will you avenge our blood against these people?’ Then a white robe was given to each of them. And they were told to rest a little longer until the full number of their brothers and sisters—their fellow servants of Jesus—had been martyred.” Revelation 6:9–11.
11. *Cantor*: From the back of the auditorium; pauses for 15–20 seconds after the Revelation 6 passage, then cries out in a loud voice: “This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints.”
12. *Congregation*: “Then I heard a loud voice shouting across the heavens, ‘It has happened at last—the salvation and power and Kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ! For the Accuser has been thrown down to earth—the one who accused our brothers and sisters before our God day and night. And they have defeated him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of their testimony. And they were not afraid to die. Rejoice, O heavens! And you who live in the heavens, rejoice!’” Revelation 12:10–12a.
13. *Reader 1*: “I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, ‘Look, the home of God is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will remove all their sorrows, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. For the old world and its evils are gone forever.’” Revelation 21:3–4.

14. *Cantor*: From the back of the auditorium; again pauses for 15–20 seconds after the Revelation 21 passage, then cries out in a loud voice: “This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints.”

Transition: A period of 15–20 seconds of silence follows the conclusion of the Scripture readings.

1. Now a segment of appropriate worship takes place, with historical and contemporary music selections that focus on the suffering church, about 15–20 minutes. God draws near as we worship. Lighting changes, but stays low.
2. The focus now moves to narrative, prayer, and intercession. Lights are dimmed again.
 - Ask someone to speak who has experienced persecution for his or her faith, preferably from another cultural or geographical context (6–8 minutes max).
 - Be sure to have the speaker write out what is to be said. This controls both the time and story, and allows the leaders to work with the speaker in an appropriate way.
3. The prayers of the people begin. This may require some explanation by the leader. The lights are still dim, and no images are on screen at present. Invest at least 20 minutes in prayer. Print out the prayer requests.
 - You can have prayer stations for people to gather around flags of nations where believers experience severe persecution.
 - You can have people go to other flags or other candle clusters (red and white, small candles for children and youth; larger ones for adults).
 - You can have selected people pray through a litany of requests that are current from the world of the persecuted church.

Note: At this point the service of Holy Communion may take place, if you wish. This depends on the amount of time allotted for the service and its place in the flow of worship at your church. Remember that the prime focus of this liturgy is prayer and quiet meditation.

DRAWING TO A CLOSE

1. The leader invites people to return to their seats and together they pray the following two prayers.
 - All together, slowly and solemnly, from the *Book of Common Prayer*:
“Almighty God who created us in your own image: Grant us grace fearlessly to contend against evil and to make no peace with oppression; and, that we may reverently use our freedom, help us to employ it in the maintenance of justice in our communities and among the nations, to the glory of your holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.”
 - All together, the Celtic prayer as we bless those for whom we have prayed:
May God the Father surround them with his angels of light.
May the Son surround them with his blood outpoured.
May the Spirit surround them with his fire of power
To save, to keep, to heal, to protect.

Each day, each night, each light, each dark, until their journey's end.

Amen.

2. The leader brings the service to a close with final comments, letting people know how the service will end, asking them to stay to pray and meditate or leave in silence. You may want to have informative material on the persecuted church on tables in the foyer or back of the worship center.
 - Then the leader asks for complete silence. Wait for 30 seconds. The lights are very dim; one strong image on screen.
3. The cantor then cries out from the back: "Blessed be God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and blessed be his Kingdom, both now and ever, and unto the ages of ages. Amen!"
4. Pause, then the final selection from CD "Sacred Treasures" [track 12]. At end of selection, stop play. Then begin the CD at the beginning with lowered volume and leave playing.
5. People leave in silence or remain to pray quietly as the CD plays softly.
6. Final image of Celtic cross on screen, candles are burning, lights are low.

PROGRAM HANDOUT NOTES

A time of quiet reading and prayer for the persecuted church

Welcome! Thank you for coming and joining with believers in scores of nations to pray for our suffering and persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ in other parts of the world. While it is good to gather information, set an agenda of needs, and then proceed to pray through the list as we often do in corporate prayer, we will be approaching our prayer time together a bit differently. The tone of this evening will be more focused on quiet listening to God, on worshipping him, and then responding to his Spirit's leading as we enter into intercession for those who suffer for his name's sake. Too often we rush into God's presence out of our scattered and fragmented lives and plunge into prayer where we do most of the talking and very little listening.

To that end we will use various means to aid us in quieting our hearts and coming into a place of attentive listening, humbly asking for a deeper identification with those who suffer and how best to pray for them. The visual images on the screen will bring to mind the suffering church and Christ's words in Luke 9:23,24 and 14:27, that we, too, must share in his cross. The candles, large and small, red and white, represent adults and children, martyrs and suffering ones from around the world. They also serve to remind us of "the prayers of the saints that rise up like incense before the throne of God" (Rev 5:8). The choral music written by Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky for church services in their native Russia not only calls us into a place of peace and quiet, but also reminds us of the glory that awaits us and the honor that will be given to those who suffer for Christ. We hear in this music hymns of praise to God as well as prayers for his mercy upon all Christians everywhere.

Ask God to attune your heart to the reading of his Word, to the time of worship, and finally to the time of prayer. Thank him that Christ who is seated at the right hand of the throne of

God ever intercedes for his own (Rom 8:34). And thank him for his Holy Spirit who dwells within each one of us and who, in and through us, “prays for the saints in accordance with God’s will” (Rom 8:26,27).

After we have worshiped and prayed, we will conclude the service as we began, in silence. Some of you may want to linger to pray quietly and continue in a posture of worship. When you leave, please do so in complete silence and wait to enter into conversation until you are outside the worship center. Thank you for being with us this evening.

As you carry in your heart the persecuted and suffering ones, may the blessing of God be upon you “each day, each night, each step of the journey thou goest.”

Program handout can include the Scripture readings and liturgy.

Final notes: I am grateful for the leadership of Cedar Springs Presbyterian Church, Knoxville, TN, USA, who allowed me to introduce and use this liturgy for the November 2003 International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church.

For further resources, go to www.IDOP.org. See also appendix C in this book, which lists a wealth of Internet sources as you select prayer requests.

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And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

Revelation 21:3–4