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■ ENTERING THE DIALOGUE: A PROCEDURE FOR SELF-STUDY OF CONGREGATIONAL WORSHIP

Adapted from the CCAR study *Lay Involvement in the Development of Liturgy*

INTRODUCTION

Jewish worship is a carefully choreographed, multilayered dialogue between prayer leaders and the congregation; between individual worshipers and their communities; between each individual and God; and between the individual worshiper and herself or himself. This self-study is also a series of dialogues. Through the use of participant observers, individual and group reflection and honest discussion, this self-study process will offer your congregation the opportunity to examine its communal worship. This study method is applicable to both Shabbat evening and Shabbat morning worship.

For this process to have a positive, long-term impact, it must be seen as one piece of a larger communal engagement with worship. The clergy, Worship/Ritual Committee and congregation as a whole should all be actively studying about, reflecting on and experimenting with the congregation's worship. The findings of this self-study should be brought back to the Worship/Ritual Committee for review so that it can generate an action plan. To be successful, this self-study also requires that both clergy and congregants enter this process willingly and openly and that they conduct their discussions with honesty, sensitivity and respect.

WHAT IS A SELF-STUDY?

A self-study is a conversation among a group of congregants about their individual and collective worship experiences. Group members decide how the conversation should proceed and how to present it in a final report. The self-study allows the group to determine what it wants worship to achieve and to discover whether that is indeed happening.

The self-study is designed only for looking at the worship experience of congregants. It is not an appropriate instrument for judging any other aspects of congregational life. It is highly inappropriate to use it as a vehicle for evaluating a rabbi or cantor. But the self-study can be a starting point for discussions within the congregation aimed at making the worship experience more inviting for everyone.

METHOD

A worship self-study team of eight to twelve people representative of a congregation's membership will

- Attend other congregations' Shabbat services for two consecutive weeks
- Worship with their own congregation at Shabbat services for three consecutive weeks
- Keep "worship diaries" about their experiences
- Meet two to three times to discuss their experiences
- Write a report

SELECTION OF THE WORSHIP SELF-STUDY TEAM

The rabbi, cantor and president of the congregation will collaborate in selecting the self-study team, organizing its meetings and ensuring the completion of the report. Members of the self-study team should represent the diversity of the adult membership of the congregation with regard to age, gender, length of membership, attendance at weekly Shabbat services (regular, infrequent or very seldom) and Hebrew literacy. Be sure to consider including one or more Jews-by-choice, members of the Worship/Ritual Committee and board members. Team members should be people who are comfortable talking to one another and with writing. Beginning with a team of twelve is desirable, since several people may need to withdraw before the study has been completed. A team of eight to twelve members will result in a balanced and lively discussion.

ORIENTATION

One of your congregation's clergy should conduct the orientation for members of the team. During the orientation,

- Distribute a copy of *Entering the Dialogue: A Procedure for Self-Study of Congregational Worship*, five copies of the Worship Diary Form (page 82) and a copy of the Themes for Discussion (page 84) to each team member.
- Read and discuss the Themes for Discussion.
- Review the process for completing the Worship Diary Form and identify the person to whom team members are to give their diary each week.
- Determine which neighboring congregations team members will visit, and set the dates for those visits.
- Set the dates for the three consecutive Shabbat services that the team members will attend at your synagogue.
- Set the dates for the two or three discussion meetings that will be held following the series of worship services.

It is important that as many of the team members as possible see the project through to its completion. Otherwise, the variety of congregant experiences will not be registered.

USE OF THE WORSHIP DIARY FORM

Immediately after each service, either at the synagogue or at home, each team member should complete a Worship Diary Form. You may want to bring the team together after the first worship service for a half hour in a small, comfortable room, where members can begin writing their individual diary.

1. The Worship Diary Forms are to be collected each week for copying.
2. After the group members have attended all the services, copies of all the diaries should be made for each team member, collated by service dates and distributed to all the team members before the first discussion meeting.
3. It is important that the diaries be handled confidentially and be copied without the attribution of authorship.

DISCUSSION MEETINGS

Instruct all the team members to review the Worship Diary Forms prior to the first discussion meeting. Each of the two or three meetings should last for no more than ninety minutes. The president or another designated person should facilitate all the discussion meetings.

The clergy may be tempted to use these discussions to enhance congregants' understanding of the liturgy, but this is not the purpose of these meetings. It is also important for all team members to remember that the discussions are as much about listening as speaking.

RECORDERS

The team will appoint two recorders to take notes during the meetings. Each recorder should write down the important observations, explanations or suggestions that were made during the discussions. The recorders should make certain that the group has finished discussing a topic before proceeding to a different one (for example, the recorders might ask, "Have we finished talking about music?"). Minutes from the first and second meetings should be distributed prior to the second and third meetings, respectively, so that team members can read them and make additional comments or corrections.

CONDUCTING THE DISCUSSIONS

The discussion leader (the president or another chosen team leader) may begin by introducing a topic from the Themes for Discussion and asking what team members have learned about this topic from reading the diaries. Team members are likely to respond by indicating which comments the diaries have in common. The leader may then direct the discussion to the dissimilarities in the diaries regarding this topic, both from week to week and from diarist to diarist.

The Themes for Discussion need not be addressed in order, nor do the diaries need to be constantly consulted. The discussion leader should, however, make sure that each person has an opportunity to speak about every topic.

To conclude the discussions, the team should try coming to a consensus on the following questions:

1. Which elements of your congregation's worship were satisfying for most of the self-study team members?
2. Which elements of your congregation's worship were the least satisfying for most of the self-study team members?
3. Which elements of the neighboring congregations' worship would you be interested in adding to your worship?
4. What recommendations do you want to make to your Worship/Ritual Committee about changes to your congregational worship?

The answers to these questions will result in an analysis of what makes a worship experience effective and will reflect the variety of experiences the team members had while attending the series of services, as well as their differences of opinion and their most deeply felt spiritual issues. When considering these issues, the team members should try to imagine a worship experience that would be meaningful for the entire congregation and to offer concrete suggestions for achieving that goal.

FINAL REPORT

The worship self-study team may write its report collectively, using the recorders' notes, or assign the writing of the report to one or two people. If one or two team members write the report, it should be reviewed by the whole group. The report should summarize the team's observations on each of the Themes for Discussion. It should also accurately reflect the team members' feelings about their worship experiences. Finally, the report should conclude with the team's consensus regarding the worship needs of the congregants, an appraisal of the synagogue's congregational worship and suggestions for change. The report should be submitted to the clergy, the president of the congregation and the chair of the Worship/Ritual Committee. It should be the starting point for a continuing discussion between the congregation and the professional staff on how the worship needs of the congregants can best be met.

6. The Sanctuary: Did you feel that you were too close or too far away from the other congregants or the bimah? At different times in the service, where did you look? When did you close your eyes?

7. Rhythm: How would you describe the rhythm of the service? Did it suit your mood?

8. The Torah Study: How did you respond to the Torah reading and/or sermon? Did you find a connection between those messages and your life?

9. Your Life: Try to remember all the times in the service when you were thinking about the events that happened to you during the week. While thinking about those events, did you reach any new understandings?

10. The Community: Did you feel close to the other congregants?

11. God: Did you feel God's Presence during the service?

12. What did you feel at the end of the service?

THEMES FOR DISCUSSION

These themes were drawn in part from Lawrence A. Hoffman's *The Art of Public Prayer: Not for Clergy Only* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths Publishing), 1999.

PRAYER

Prayer is the principal activity of the worship service. Through prayer we attempt to fulfill our spiritual needs, feel the existence of a community and experience God's Presence. Prayer that does all these things may be hard to achieve. Think about your praying during this worship service. Were there some prayers or moments during the service that you felt or thought were extraordinary?

THE PRAYER BOOK

The prayer book is the script that enables the congregation to pray together. Repeating the same prayers each Friday night helps create an orderly pattern from the random flow of personal and world events. It is the comfort of this pattern in the service that sustains us each week. Think about the words you spoke, whether in Hebrew or in English (consider transliteration, translation, poetry, language referring to God, the order of the prayers, etc.). Did something about the text enhance or hinder your experience?

THE MUSIC

Music supports our efforts to pray with rhythms that are predictable and melodies that express our emotions. Music gives a sense of structure to the service and helps us understand how we should feel at different points. By conveying this message to everyone at once, music helps us become a community that virtually "feels together." Did a piece of music particularly touch or move you? Were there times when you felt that the music was shaping your emotions?

MOVEMENT

There is movement during the service, even though most people never leave the space around their seat. We alternate between standing and sitting, although the traditions of Reform Jewish worship place less importance on moving the body during services than other Jewish traditions do. Movement, like music, supports prayer. How we move helps us to express how we feel. Sitting and concentrating, standing and swaying, and respectfully bowing toward the ark may incorporate our bodies into the worship process. Did movement come easily to you, or were you struggling to make it express your feelings? How did the movement of others (either those around you or on the bimah) affect your movement and feelings?

THE SANCTUARY

Prayer takes place in a sanctuary in which the positions of the worshipers are fixed. Did you feel that you were too close or too far away from the other congregants or the bimah? At different times in the service, where did you look? When did you close your eyes? What parts of the sanctuary do you usually look at when you pray? Would you want to change some aspect of the sanctuary layout?

RHYTHM

The rhythm of the worship service changes with the mood of its different parts. No two services have exactly the same rhythm. Sometimes recent events in the community, the presence of families marking special occasions or an impending holiday will influence the rhythm of the service. How would you describe the rhythm of the service? Did it suit your mood?

THE TORAH STUDY

Torah reading can be a significant part of the worship service. A commentary on the Torah portion or a sermon by the rabbi is usual. This part of the service is addressed to us as individuals and as a community. It gives us an opportunity for intellectual reflection. How did you respond to the Torah reading and/or sermon? Did you find a connection between those messages and your life?

YOUR LIFE

When we pray, we may discover an order to our lives that we were not aware of when we began to worship. What were you thinking about during the silent meditation? Try to remember all the times in the service when you were thinking about the events that happened to you during the week. While thinking about those events, did you reach any new understandings? Were there points in the service when you were reminded of other times in your life when you felt especially spiritual?

THE COMMUNITY

We worship as a congregation. The ritual of saying prayers together—experiencing the rhythm and music together, moving together in a shared space, sharing the same emotions—is different from solitary prayer. You may know very little about the lives of the other congregants, their families, their work, their joys and their sorrows. Still, by the end of the service, you will have shared an extraordinary experience together. Did you feel close to the other congregants?

GOD

It may be difficult to discuss the Presence of God in our worship and to identify the ways in which we envision God. Although we cannot precisely capture in language our experience of the Divine when worship is effective, God is present for the worshiper. Did you feel God's Presence during the service? Is God ever present for you?