

Suggestions for Observing Veterans' Day (November 11) in Worship

by Dean McIntyre, Dan Benedict, and Taylor Burton-Edwards

In most years and most times, Veterans' Day passes in our churches with little or no mention. Historically and traditionally, Veterans' Day has been more a civic than a sacred observance. As with New Years Day, Mother's Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, and others, Veterans' Day is not a part of the liturgical calendar — although sometimes local congregations will observe these days in some manner in Sunday congregational worship.

History

World War I ended on November 11, 1918, with the signing of the Armistice by the Allies and Germany. In the first Armistice Day proclamation in 1919, President Woodrow Wilson called for the nation to remember those who had died in their country's service and to make the day an opportunity for America to "show her sympathy with peace and justice in the councils of the nation."

In 1927 Congress called for the display of the U.S. flag on government buildings, and in 1938 Congress called for the observance of Armistice Day in churches and schools — again dedicating the day to the cause of world peace.

Note the order here: the nation was telling the churches to celebrate this day. This was not an initiative arising from the churches, but from Congress. The timing was significant. The strong stirrings of World War II had already begun in earnest in Europe. The United States was still reeling from the effects of World War I and the Great Depression, and the political climate overall was against any sort of engagement in wars.

Of course, within just three years, the United States became involved in the War "over there" in Europe and "way out there" in the Pacific.

Since the end of World War II, observances of Armistice Day have been held all over the nation, but especially in our national cemeteries and monuments and at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Washington, D.C. The president and many state governors have issued proclamations. Countless communities, veterans groups, and civic clubs and organizations have held local observances. Armistice Day became Veterans' Day by an act of Congress in 1954, changing its purpose and scope. President Eisenhower called on the nation to remember the sacrifices of those who fought in all our nation's wars, to celebrate the contributions of all veterans of military service, and to rededicate ourselves to the task of promoting an enduring peace. It is Eisenhower's call that remains the three-fold purpose of Veterans' Day: remembering those who fought and died, celebrating all veterans, and promoting an enduring peace.

Some Suggested Guidelines for Observing Veterans' Day in United Methodist Worship

1. If churches are going to honor and give thanks for veterans, their observances should be in a context of prayer. In keeping with the guidance of our *Book of Worship*, #422, churches should not turn the entire service into a rehearsal of our national concerns. When we assemble for worship, it is as citizens of God's

0. kingdom in Jesus Christ, not as citizens ultimately subject to any nation. In worship, we celebrate the good news of God's grace and love manifest in Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace, Lord and Savior of the world, in whom all the creation is redeemed and is to be restored for the glory of God.
2. Where possible, since this is a celebration for the whole nation, and not for particular religious groups, special services relating to Veterans' Day should be interfaith in nature, as far as that is possible. Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, and people of other religions have served in this nation's armed forces. We dare not convey that the mission of the U.S. military is also the mission of the church.
3. Prayers in such an interfaith service of worship should be inclusive, reflecting men and women, varied races and faith traditions. There are prayers in *The Book of Worship* and in the *Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church* that could be used or adapted.
4. In keeping with the traditions of our nation since the early days of observing Armistice Day and Veterans' Day, services are best held in a civic space or in a place in the cemetery where veterans are buried.
5. How prominent should observance of Veterans' Day (or any other national or civic observance) be in Lord's Day worship? As a national and civic observance how does the Christian assembly keep a proper balance of attention to the worship of God and the national and civic agenda? Perhaps it would be more appropriate for the observance to remain primarily the domain of government and civic groups, with clergy and people participating in whatever capacity fits the situation.

Resources in *The Book Of Worship* that May Be Used or Adapted

- Number 428, Prayer for Peace with Justice Sunday (may use musical response, number 195, *The Book of Worship*)
- Number 440, A Prayer for Memorial Day
- Number 495, "A Litany for the Church and for the World"
- Number 511, "Prayer for Gods Reign"
- Number 513, "Prayer for Justice"
- Numbers 515-516, two "Prayers for the Nation"
- Number 517, "A Prayer in a Time of National Crisis"
- Number 520, "Prayer for Peace"
- Number 526, "Prayer for the World and Its Peoples"
- Number 542, "Prayer for Those In Military Service"

Resources in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (UMH) and *The Faith We Sing* (TFWS) that May Be Used or Adapted

- "For Our Country," UMH 429 (prayer)
- "For the Healing of the Nations," UMH 428
- "Let There Be Peace on Earth," UMH 431
- "O God of Every Nation," UMH 435
- "This Is My Song," UMH 437
- "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," UMH 717
- "God, How Can We Forgive," TFWS 2169
- "God Made from One Blood," TFWS 2170
- "Wounded World that Cries for Healing," TFWS 2177
- "When God Restored Our Common Life," TFWS 2182
- "For One Great Peace," TFWS 2185
- "Unsettled World," TFWS 2183
- "Eternal Father, Strong to Save," TFWS 2191
- "Goodness Is Stronger than Evil," TFWS 2219

- "Come Now, O Prince of Peace," TFWS 2232
- See hymns listed under "Peace" on UMH, page 949

Suggested Scripture Readings

- Deuteronomy 10:12-13, 17-21: What does God require of a nation?
- Psalm 2: Warning to rulers of the earth.
- Psalm 72: A prayer for justice and righteousness.
- Amos 5:11-15: Establish justice.
- Galatians 5:13-26: The proper use of freedom.
- John 8:31-36: True freedom.

Hymn

Remembrance (Hymn for Veterans Day)

A Litany from *The Book of Worship for United States Forces (1974), no. 625*

(One-time permission to print and use this litany in congregational worship has been granted by The Armed Forces Chaplains' Board, Washington, D.C.)

Leader: Let us give thanks to God for the land of our birth with all its chartered liberties. For all the wonder of our country's story:

People: We give you thanks, O God.

Leader: For leaders in nation and state, and for those who in days past and in these present times have labored for the commonwealth:

People: We give you thanks, O God.

Leader: For those who in all times and places have been true and brave, and in the worlds common ways have lived upright lives and ministered to their fellows:

People: We give you thanks, O God.

Leader: For those who served their country in its hour of need, and especially for those who gave even their lives in that service:

People: We give you thanks, O God.

Leader: O almighty God and most merciful Father, as we remember these your servants, remembering with gratitude their courage and strength, we hold before you those who mourn them. Look upon your bereaved servants with your mercy. As this day brings them memories of those they have lost awhile, may it also bring your consolation and the assurance that their loved ones are alive now and forever in your living presence.

<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/suggestions-for-observing-veterans-day-november-11-in-worship>