

# A GUIDE TO PLANNING A SERVICE OF LAMENT

## **A Service of Lament is a unique gathering:**

- (1) it is based on a specific reason for gathering
- (2) depending on the congregation's history of practicing lament, the service may need to include an educational element

## **Lament (a definition):**

- n. a passionate expression of sorrow or grief; a song, hymn or poem of mourning
- v. to express sorrow, mourning, or regret aloud; to regret strongly



## Prelude:

Examples: Chimes or an instrumental prelude

## Opening Word/Call to Worship:

Examples:

- A brief reading of Scripture
  - » Psalms 121,124
  - » Verses from the Pentateuch (i.e., Exodus 32:11-14, Numbers 11:11-15), verses from Lamentations (i.e., Lamentations 3)
  - » Verses from one of the Prophets such as Jeremiah (i.e., Jer 12:1-6, 20:7-13) or Joel
  - » Some Christian ministers use a brief responsive reading combining both OT and NT verses (i.e., Romans 12:15, 1 Cor 26-30, 2 Cor 1:4-5, 2 Cor 4:6-12, Rev 5:9-14) describing God's consoling character and promises of presence, counsel and healing in times of trouble.
- A brief statement about why the congregation is gathering
  - » "In light of..."
    - › Some ministers have read official criminal charges
    - › Some ministers have read a newspaper statement describing recent destruction
  - » "The [Congregation Name] gathers together to lament."

## Welcome:

Address those who have gathered and describe the practice of lament. You may consider stating what history the congregation has in holding services of this kind (never before? rarely? whenever a trauma or disaster event occurs?). If wholly unfamiliar, basic instruction can be educational and useful for congregants.

### **Here is one example of how to proceed:**

**Describe briefly what lament is** – what is the definition of lament

**Provide examples of it that can be found in Scripture and faithful leaders familiar to the congregation** (i.e., Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Moses, Job, Jeremiah, Amos, Jesus).

**Briefly describe how this service will go and what it is intended to do** – for example, to be a time of prayer and lament, following Scripture as a guide. You may state what Scripture texts have been chosen and why. Describe for the congregation how they can expect to pray (i.e., through responsive readings, singing, silent prayers, corporate prayers, and brief times of open prayer). Even if congregants are familiar with these practices, trauma tends to be disorienting and describing the activity that will go on through the service can help to reorient survivors.



**Briefly, state specifically what brings you to gather in lament.** (If you have already read charges or a description of destruction, now is a time when you can be more specific about how the congregation has been impacted, while still being brief.)

However you welcome the congregation, be sure to name the incident that occurred **factually**. Do not guess about events, share hypothetical speculations, or speak euphemisms. Simply state in a sentence or two the loss that occurred, or the facts of the incident that occurred, or the revelations that have brought you to gather now, and specifics about how the congregation was impacted emotionally, physically, psychologically, and/or spiritually. Though this news may be challenging for some congregants to hear, this practice grounds the service and reminds participants of the temporal and real reasons for gathering.

## Hymn/Song

### Prayers of Lament:

May include responsive Scripture readings, guided prayers, or Prayers of the People. Examples of texts to use may include Psalms of lament (i.e., Ps 5, Ps 13, Ps 35, Ps 42, Ps 137, etc.), Prophets (i.e., Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Job, Joel, etc.), Lamentations, etc.

If using Scripture, you may find it helpful to separate out stanzas, with a leader speaking first, then the congregation, and then the leader opening space for silent prayers.

**Another way to separate stanzas is with a common refrain sung by the congregation.**



## Hymn/Song

### Intercession of Healing:

Some ministers continue with opportunities for silent prayers, while others open this time for congregants to voice prayers as whispers or calling aloud or by turning to a neighbor and praying together quietly. However you lead prayers, here, the leader chooses a clear way to draw the prayers to a close.

### Water, Oil, Cloth or Candle:

At any place in the service a congregation may incorporate a ritual of water, oil, cloth, candle, or other symbol meaningful to the congregation. Examples: a baptismal font in the entryway of the sanctuary, where congregants may remind themselves of their baptism with a self-touch of water to the forehead or hand; a bowl of water may be at the front of the sanctuary, and congregants may be invited at this time in the service to walk forward to receive a reminder of their baptism or a blessing where a minister may dip their own hands in the water and then gently grasp congregants' hands while saying a prayer or blessing; a pastor may draw a mark on the back of the congregant's hand with oil; or congregants may be given small pieces of cloth when they arrive and a statement may be said at a point in the service about this being a symbol of "prayer cloth" or a "cloth of lament" with a reference to texts about sackcloth. They may be given instructions on how the cloth can be used for prayer throughout the long-term season of trauma healing. Congregants may be invited to light candles as a symbol of silent prayers.

### Closing Prayer:

Congregants are invited to say a closing prayer (i.e., the Lord's Prayer) according to their common worship tradition.

### Blessing:

Example: Numbers 6:24-26

**A statement may be made that ministers, trained lay leader, or any counselors who have been on hand through the journey of trauma healing will remain briefly for any who may wish to speak or pray further. This statement may also include instructions for when the congregation will meet again, in what ways they will meet again, and how congregants may seek out reliable persons to talk with or seek counsel as needed.**



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Institute for Collective Trauma and Growth  
P. O. Box 3498 Santa Barbara, CA 93130 • [ictg.org](http://ictg.org)