

Trauma-Informed Worship

Cultivating Embodied Care in the United Church of Canada

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Why Worship Is Never Neutral

Lived experience, embodied theology, and the call to do no harm

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INTRODUCTION

Why Worship Is Never Neutral

A worship leader stands at the front of the sanctuary and invites the congregation to pray.

The words are familiar. The tone is warm. The intention is faithful.

And somewhere in the pews, a body tightens.

Not because the prayer is malicious.
Not because the leader intends harm.
But because worship is never neutral.

For some who gather on any given Sunday, sacred space has not always been safe space. The language of faith has been used to exclude, to shame, to control, or to silence. Invitations have felt like pressure. Confession has felt like accusation. Certain images of God have landed not as comfort, but as threat.

Many who come through our doors carry experiences of spiritual harm, communal harm, family rejection, racial trauma, abuse, or exclusion because of gender identity or sexual orientation. Some remain within the Church. Some stand at its edges. Some return cautiously after long absence.

As worship leaders in the United Church of Canada, we shape not only what is said, but how it is said. We shape tone, posture, pacing, imagery, invitation, silence. We shape the conditions under which people encounter the Holy.

If we believe in incarnation - that God meets humanity not in abstraction but in flesh and blood - then bodies matter. Our worship should reflect that same attentive care. The table at the heart of our worship reminds us that grace is offered in ordinary form - bread, cup, hands extended without force. And if bodies matter, then nervous systems matter. The way a word lands. The way a command is phrased. The way participation is invited. These are not small details. They are lived realities.

Trauma does not live only in memory. It lives in the body. It is carried in breath, muscle, reflex. A phrase like “submit,” “broken,” or “die to self” can activate old fear in ways unseen to the one who speaks it. An invitation forward can feel like exposure. A declaration about “family” can quietly exclude those whose families were never safe. A sermon illustration can reopen wounds without the preacher ever intending it.

This guide is not written to accuse. It is written to invite awareness.

Over recent decades, the United Church of Canada has named its history of harm toward Two Spirit and LGBTQIA+ communities and others who have been wounded in sacred spaces. Apology matters. But apology becomes meaningful only when it is embodied in practice.

Trust is rebuilt not by proclamation. It is built by the steady repetition of care.

Trauma-informed worship does not guarantee safety. No community can promise that every person will feel safe at every moment. Safety is experienced, not declared. However, we can practice the

kind of attentiveness, humility, and accountability that make spaces safer than they once were — and more reliable over time.

We can ask different questions as we craft worship.
We can shift from command to invitation.
From assumption to awareness.
From emotional intensity to spaciousness.
From theological certainty to pastoral sensitivity.

The goal of trauma-informed worship is not to eliminate challenge, lament, or depth. It is not to soften the Gospel into comfort alone. Rather, it is to ensure that our proclamation of good news does not unintentionally become another burden for those already carrying too much.

Because the Spirit moves most freely where bodies are not bracing.

This guide offers theological grounding, practical tools, and concrete examples to help worship leaders cultivate practices that prevent harm, begin to rebuild trust, and create conditions where the Holy can be encountered without coercion. It is written from within the Church, by one who loves it, and who believes that worship can be a site of repair rather than re-injury.

We begin with the recognition that worship shapes people. The question before us is not whether it will shape, but how.

PART I
When Worship Wounds
1. The Impact of Harm in Sacred Space

Worship is meant to draw people toward the Holy. Yet for some, the very practices designed to communicate grace have instead communicated exclusion, fear, or shame.

This is not always the result of malice. More often, harm emerges through habit - through inherited language, unexamined theology, or forms of leadership that assume a uniform experience in the room.

For those who have lived through conversion therapy rhetoric or teachings that framed their identity as disordered, a sermon on "dying to self" can land differently. For Indigenous communities shaped by the legacy of residential schools, hymns or prayers that conflate Christian faith with cultural dominance can reopen wounds. For survivors of abuse, language about submission, obedience, or unquestioned authority can activate fear long before a conscious thought forms. For those harmed by purity culture or shame-based theology, repeated emphasis on sinfulness without equal grounding in belovedness can erode rather than restore.

These responses are not signs of spiritual weakness. They are bodily memory.

2. Trauma and the Body: A Brief Pastoral Overview

Trauma does not live only in narrative. It lives in breath, in muscle tension, in the nervous system's reflexive assessment of safety or threat. When a body braces in worship, it is not resisting God. It is protecting itself.

Worship leaders often stand at the front with the best of intentions. We plan thoughtfully. We pray sincerely. We craft sermons and prayers in good faith. Yet intention does not determine impact. Leadership carries power, and power magnifies effect. A phrase spoken casually from the pulpit can reverberate differently in a body shaped by harm.

Understanding this does not require clinical expertise. It requires pastoral awareness.

When people feel pressured into participation - asked to close their eyes, to stand publicly, to come forward without warning, to confess in language that feels condemning - their nervous systems may move into fight, flight, freeze, or fawn responses. Some grow restless. Some shut down. Some comply outwardly while disconnecting inwardly. Some simply stop coming.

Because worship is not neutral, its impact accumulates over time. A single moment may be tolerable. Repeated activation teaches the body that sacred space is unpredictable or unsafe. Understanding this changes how we must think about leadership.

3. Intention and Impact

The United Church of Canada has, in recent decades, named its history of harm toward Two Spirit and LGBTQIA+ communities and others who have been marginalized or excluded. It has acknowledged the legacy of residential schools and its participation in structures of colonial harm. These acknowledgments matter. They represent steps toward accountability.

But accountability must be embodied.

If apology is spoken but worship remains unchanged, trust erodes. If welcome is declared but language continues to wound, the contradiction is felt most deeply by those already cautious.

To name that worship can wound is not to denounce the Church. It is to take responsibility for the influence and power worship carries. It is to recognize that sacred authority amplifies both grace and harm.

This recognition is the beginning of a different posture.

PART II
A Trauma-Informed Posture

Trauma-informed worship is not primarily a set of techniques. It is a posture.

Before it changes our words, it must reshape how we understand our authority in sacred space.

In Christian theology, incarnation is central. We proclaim that God meets humanity not in abstraction, but in flesh. If God honours embodiment, then worship must do the same. Bodies are not incidental to faith; they are the place where faith is experienced - and where faith can be harmed. Every person who enters worship carries a story in their body. Some stories are marked by joy. Some by grief. Some by harm endured in spaces very much like this one. To ignore that reality is not neutrality. It is a failure of care.

To lead worship is to exercise power. The pulpit, the microphone, the printed liturgy, the tone of voice - all shape the conditions under which people encounter God. Authority can steady, or it can overwhelm. It can create spaciousness, or it can constrict. It can echo past harm, or it can signal something different.

4. Holy Manners: Boundaries in Worship

If trauma-informed worship begins with posture, it is sustained through holy manners.

Holy manners are not simply politeness. They are spiritual discipline. They are the practice of exercising authority with humility and restraint. Boundaries in worship are not restrictions. They are expressions of care - the visible form stewardship takes in sacred space.

A trauma-informed posture asks more of us than sincerity. It asks disciplined awareness.

- How might this invitation land for someone who has previously experienced coercion?
- How might this image sound to someone whose body associates obedience with danger?
- How might this moment feel for someone who has been publicly shamed in church?

These questions are not concessions to fragility. They are expressions of pastoral responsibility.

A trauma-informed posture does not eliminate theological depth. It does not remove confession, lament, or challenge. Rather, it ensures that the proclamation of good news does not become another burden for those already carrying too much.

God does not coerce love. At the table, invitation replaces force. Worship should reflect the same.

From this posture flow the practices that follow.

From Posture to Practice

A trauma-informed posture is not abstract. It is visible.

It can be heard in the way instructions are phrased.
It can be felt in the pacing of silence.
It can be seen in how participation is invited – never compelled.
It can be sensed in whether authority feels steady or overwhelming.

Posture becomes practice through small, repeated choices.

The shift from command to invitation.
From assumption to curiosity.

From intensity to spaciousness.
From performance to presence.

These shifts do not dilute worship. They deepen it. They create conditions where people can remain present in their bodies rather than guarding against what might come next.

The following practices are not exhaustive, nor are they rigid rules. They are examples - illustrations of how a trauma-informed posture can shape the details of worship leadership. They are offered not as prescriptions, but as tools for reflection and adaptation.

Because trust is rebuilt in practice.

5. Language Matters: Words as Bodily Experience

The words we use in worship shape how authority is experienced. Imperative language can unintentionally recreate dynamics of intimidation for those whose faith was once enforced rather than freely embraced. A trauma-informed posture does not eliminate leadership; it exercises leadership with attentiveness to agency.

The shift is often small - but significant.
Instead of assuming compliance, we create space for consent.
Instead of directing bodies without explanation, we offer invitation.

Consider the following shifts:

- Instead of: "Close your eyes and bow your heads."
  Consider: "If it feels comfortable, close your eyes or soften your gaze."
- Instead of: "Stand as you are able."
  Consider: "You are welcome to stand or remain seated as is comfortable for you."
- Instead of: "Come forward now."
  Consider: "If you feel led, you are invited to come forward. You are equally welcome to remain where you are."
- Instead of: "We confess that we are unworthy sinners…"
  Consider: "We acknowledge the ways we fall short, trusting that we are met with mercy."

These are not cosmetic edits. They signal whether participation is expected or chosen.

6. Choice, Consent, and Agency in Worship

Shared worship is communal by nature. We stand together, sing together, pray together, respond together. Communal rhythm can be deeply healing. It can also, at times, override individual agency.

For those who have experienced spiritual control, public shaming, or forced religious environments, visibility in worship can carry risk. Even in congregations known for gentleness, moments of unexpected exposure can activate a nervous system that has learned to brace.

For those who experience sensory sensitivity, anxiety, or heightened responses to noise, crowding, or unpredictability, certain moments in worship can create overwhelm. What feels joyful and spontaneous to some may feel disorienting or distressing to others.

Trauma-informed leadership does not eliminate shared practice. It preserves dignity within it.

Preserving agency means allowing participation to be chosen rather than assumed. It means reducing pressure in moments of visibility and being attentive to how public ritual is experienced by those who are cautious, grieving, newly returning - or navigating sensory or neurological differences.

Consider these practices:

- When inviting "joys and concerns," clarify that sharing aloud is optional and that silence is equally honoured.
- If inviting people to stand, kneel, or move, name alternatives explicitly: "You are welcome to remain seated."
- When planning peace-sharing or hand-holding, acknowledge that not everyone is comfortable with physical touch and offer space without explanation.
- During the Passing of the Peace, offer language that makes consent visible: "You may greet one another in whatever way feels comfortable - handshake, wave, nod, or simply remaining where you are."
- When introducing a responsive reading, avoid sudden spotlighting of individuals without prior conversation.
- Be mindful of volume shifts in music or microphones, and give brief cues before transitions when possible.
- When celebrating milestones (anniversaries, birthdays, confirmations), ensure that no one is required to come forward or be publicly recognized without consent.
- When designing communion practices, clearly explain movement patterns in advance so participants are not surprised or unsure of what is expected.

These shifts may seem small. They are not.

Agency restores dignity. Predictability reduces anxiety. Clarity signals care.

Communal worship becomes stronger - not weaker - when participation is invited rather than compelled.

7. Predictability and Transparency in Worship Design

Worship unfolds in patterns. For many, those patterns are comforting. Familiar liturgy, recognizable structure, repeated prayers - these rhythms can anchor and steady.

For others, especially those shaped by trauma or anxiety, unpredictability heightens vigilance. When a body does not know what is coming next, it prepares for threat.

A trauma-informed posture pays attention not only to what is said, but to how worship moves.

Predictability is not rigidity. It is clarity.

Transparency does not diminish mystery. It reduces unnecessary startle.

When worship leaders signal what will happen next, explain movement before it occurs, or gently frame transitions, they help bodies remain present rather than bracing.

This is particularly important in moments that involve:

- Changes in lighting or sound.
- Sudden shifts in volume or tone.
- Invitations to move physically.
- Unexpected silence.
- Emotionally intense liturgical moments.
- Graphic readings or difficult texts.

Consider how small cues can steady the room:

- "After the hymn, we will share communion. I will explain how we will move when the time comes."
- "The reading today contains difficult imagery. You are invited to listen in whatever way feels possible."
- "We will hold a brief silence. You may use this time for prayer, reflection, or simply to rest."
- "In a moment, we will sing a quieter refrain together."

Such framing does not over-explain. It orients.

Orientation restores a sense of agency. It communicates that nothing will be sprung upon the congregation without care.

Over time, predictable structure builds trust. People learn that worship in this place is steady. That they will not be surprised into vulnerability. That their bodies will not be asked to endure sudden intensity without warning.

Mystery remains. The Spirit still moves. But movement is not confused with unpredictability, and intensity is not mistaken for depth.

Transparency is not a loss of reverence. It is an expression of care.

8. Confession, Sin, and Shame

Confession is a longstanding and meaningful practice in Christian worship. It names truth. It creates space for accountability. It acknowledges that we fall short of the love to which we are called.

A trauma-informed posture does not eliminate confession. It reframes it within belovedness.

In many United Church contexts, the language of confession does not lean heavily on individual "sinner" rhetoric. Yet harm can still occur through tone and proportion. Corporate guilt language, repeated without grounding in grace, can weigh heavily on those already carrying shame. Moralizing phrasing can sound less like invitation and more like indictment.

For some, particularly those shaped by environments where faith was intertwined with criticism or conditional acceptance, confession can reactivate old patterns: "I am always failing. I am never enough."

When confession is not balanced by assurance - when being held in love is implied but not spoken - the body may hear only the accusation.

A trauma-informed approach to confession asks:

- Is belovedness named as clearly as brokenness?
- Is grace spoken as fully as responsibility?
- Is accountability framed as invitation into repair, rather than condemnation?

Consider the difference in tone:

- "We have failed again. We continue to fall short."
  compared with
  "We acknowledge where we have fallen short, trusting that God's mercy meets us still."
- "We confess our complicity in injustice."
  compared with
  "We confess the ways we are entangled in systems of injustice, and we commit to learning a more faithful way."

The distinction is subtle but significant.

Confession that is rooted in being named as beloved restores dignity. Confession that leans primarily on guilt can reinforce shame.

Shame says: *I am the problem.*
Conviction says: *I have participated in harm, and I can choose differently.*

Trauma-informed worship moves toward conviction without collapsing into shame.

The goal is not to protect worship from discomfort. It is to ensure that discomfort serves transformation rather than re-injury.

In a denomination deeply committed to justice and public accountability, confession is often linked to our collective participation in harm. This work is faithful and necessary – at the same time, it must always be held within the assurance that we are called to justice not because we are defined by failure, but because we are beloved and capable of change.

Being named as beloved must be spoken as clearly as brokenness - not as sentiment, but as theological truth.

9. Preaching with Trauma Awareness

Preaching carries particular weight. It is often the most extended moment of uninterrupted authority in worship. The tone, imagery, and theological framing of a sermon can either steady a congregation - or unsettle it in ways the preacher may not intend.

A trauma-informed approach to preaching does not dilute the Gospel. It deepens attentiveness to how it is heard.

Theologizing Suffering
One of the most common places harm emerges is in the interpretation of suffering. In many congregations, there is a deep desire to affirm that pain is not meaningless. Yet when suffering is framed too quickly as purposeful, divinely orchestrated, or "happening for a reason," those who have endured trauma may hear their harm justified or minimized.
Phrases like "everything happens for a reason" are often spoken with the intent to comfort. For someone carrying unresolved trauma, they can land as dismissal.

Suffering is part of the human story. The cross remains central to Christian faith. Care must be taken not to rush toward explanation at the expense of lament. Not every wound needs to be interpreted in order to be held.

A trauma-informed preacher allows space for mystery and protest. They resist the impulse to assign meaning too quickly. They name injustice without spiritualizing it. They honour resilience without suggesting that harm was necessary for growth.

Ask:

- Am I offering explanation before allowing grief?
- Am I implying that God authored this pain?
- Does this sermon make room for anger, doubt, or unresolved sorrow?

Preaching that permits lament alongside hope creates room for those still living inside unanswered questions.

Identifying the "Crowd" and the "Pharisees"
Biblical narratives often invite listeners to locate themselves within the story. This can be both powerful and dangerous.

When congregations are repeatedly encouraged to see themselves as "the crowd that shouted," "the doubters," or "the Pharisees," sermons can unintentionally reinforce shame. In Holy Week especially, over-identification with betrayal or cruelty can weigh heavily.

A trauma-informed approach allows complexity.

Instead of collapsing identity into guilt, preaching can acknowledge that we are capable of harm and capable of courage. That we are shaped by systems and still responsible for choice. That we are both loved and accountable.

Metaphors That Marginalize
Language shapes imagination.

Metaphors drawn from blindness, slavery, or disability have long been used in Christian preaching. While often unexamined, such imagery can unintentionally marginalize those whose lived realities are being used symbolically.

Describing ignorance as "blindness," sin as "crippling," or salvation as "freedom from slavery" without context may reinforce harmful associations or perpetuate ableist assumptions.

Trauma-informed preaching asks:

- Does this metaphor rely on someone else's lived oppression as illustration?
- Is there another image that communicates the same theological truth without collateral harm?

This is not about policing language. It is about expanding imagination.

Emotional Intensity Without Grounding

Preaching can stir deep emotion. Tears, conviction, urgency - these are not inherently harmful. But emotional intensity without grounding can destabilize those who already live close to overwhelm.

Heightened tone, rapid pacing, repeated rhetorical escalation, or unresolved endings can leave bodies activated without containment.

Grounding can be as simple as:

- Naming hope as clearly as challenge.
- Offering assurance after difficult texts.
- Returning to being held in love before concluding.
- Allowing silence without pressure.

Intensity is not the enemy. Uncontained intensity can be.

Preaching shapes theological imagination over time. A trauma-informed preacher does not preach from fear of harm. Rather, they preach from an awareness that words land in bodies as well as minds.

The question is not whether to speak truth. It is how to speak it in ways that do not deepen wounds already carried into the room.

10. Emotional Tone and Liturgical Intensity

Worship is not meant to be emotionally neutral. Joy, lament, longing, gratitude, protest - these are faithful responses to God and to the world. Emotion is not the problem.

Uncontained intensity can be.

In seasons such as Lent and Holy Week, during public tragedy, or in moments of communal grief, worship can carry heightened emotional charge. Graphic readings, stark imagery, urgent rhetoric, or prolonged somber tone may stir deep response. For some, this is meaningful. For others, especially those living with trauma or ongoing anxiety, it can feel overwhelming.

A trauma-informed posture does not avoid difficult texts or honest grief. It asks how they are held.

Lent, Holy Week and Difficult Texts

Passion narratives contain violence. Prophetic texts carry sharp critique. Lament psalms name despair. These scriptures are part of our story.

Holy Week - and especially Good Friday - invites the Church to linger at the cross. Yet the manner of that lingering matters.

Prolonged or vivid description of physical suffering can activate those with histories of violence. Repeated emphasis on betrayal, humiliation, or abandonment can deepen existing wounds. When preaching dwells extensively in brutality without pastoral framing, some congregants may leave not reflective but reactivated.

A trauma-informed approach does not soften the cross. It resists sensationalizing it.

Consider:

- Is every descriptive detail necessary to the theological point?
- Is violence being proclaimed, or unintentionally re-enacted?
- Is suffering being interpreted too quickly?
- Is there pastoral framing before and grounding after difficult readings?

Even a brief orienting sentence - "This text contains imagery that may be difficult; receive it in whatever way feels possible" - can create space without diminishing reverence.

Honouring Good Friday does not require recreating trauma. The depth of the cross is not measured by how vividly suffering is described, but by how faithfully love is proclaimed within it.

Justice and Grief Without Overwhelm

The United Church has a strong commitment to justice. Sermons and liturgies rightly name injustice, climate crisis, war, systemic harm. Yet sustained exposure to crisis language can lead to exhaustion or despair if not balanced with agency and hope.

A trauma-informed approach:

- Names injustice clearly.
- Avoids apocalyptic escalation.
- Offers pathways for response.
- Reaffirms that individuals are not solely responsible for solving systemic brokenness.

Urgency needs to be paired with steadiness.

Containment and Closing

When worship engages strong emotion, how it ends matters.

Does the service close in unresolved intensity?
Is there grounding before dismissal?
Are people sent out supported - or stirred without anchor?

Containment may look like:

- A spoken assurance of God's abiding presence.
- A hymn that restores breath.
- A benediction that names belovedness.
- A moment of silence that settles rather than heightens.

Intensity can awaken. Containment protects.

The goal is not to dampen emotion. It is to ensure that worship does not leave bodies activated without care.

PART III
Rebuilding Trust Through Practice

Trust is not restored by statement alone. It is restored by pattern.

Congregations may declare themselves welcoming, affirming, inclusive, or accountable. These commitments matter. They signal intention. However, for those who have experienced harm, trust is not built on intention. It is built on consistency.

The work of trauma-informed worship does not end with careful language or thoughtful liturgical design. Over time, people will look for alignment between what is proclaimed and what is practiced. They will watch how leaders respond when harm is named. They will notice whether correction is welcomed or resisted. They will observe whether inclusion is embodied beyond the pulpit.

Trust deepens when values become visible.

11. Leadership and Accountability

Rebuilding trust begins with leadership.

Worship leaders, clergy, lay leaders, and those who shape congregational tone set the conditions under which accountability becomes visible. The way leaders respond to missteps communicates as much as the liturgy itself.

A trauma-informed approach to trust asks:

- Do leaders model the use of correct names and pronouns consistently?
- When harm occurs, is it acknowledged clearly rather than minimized?
- When harm is named, is it received calmly and without defensiveness?
- Is learning ongoing, or treated as complete?

In congregations that have completed the Affirming process and received designation through Affirm United / S'affirmer Ensemble, inclusion must be more than confirmed in principle. It must be embodied in language, correction, policy, and everyday interaction.

Trust is rebuilt when people see that harm is not ignored and repair is practiced without humiliation.

It deepens when leaders intervene gently but firmly.

It grows when those who make mistakes are guided toward change rather than shielded from discomfort.

Congregations also share responsibility. Culture is shaped collectively. Members who hear misgendering, dismissive comments, or careless language have the opportunity to model repair:

- "They use they/them pronouns."
- "Let's make sure we get that right."
- "Thank you for the correction."

Small moments accumulate.
Trust erodes through repetition. It is rebuilt the same way.

Trust deepens when stated values and lived practice align.

A congregation may proclaim welcome, inclusion, justice, or reconciliation. Over time, members will quietly ask: Is this visible in how we speak? In how we correct? In how we listen?

Trauma-informed worship leadership understands that credibility is cumulative. It is formed not in grand gestures, but in the steady alignment of word and action.

12. Transparency and Repair

Even attentive communities will make mistakes. Trauma-informed leadership does not pretend otherwise.

When harm occurs - through misgendering, exclusionary language, careless metaphor, or overlooked accessibility needs - the question is not whether error happened. The question is how it is handled.

Repair may look like:

- A simple, immediate correction without defensiveness.
- A brief acknowledgment if harm occurred publicly.
- A willingness to listen rather than explain.
- A commitment to adjust future practice.

Silence in the face of harm communicates more loudly than intention ever could.

Transparency does not weaken authority. It strengthens trust.

13. Structures That Support Accountability

Trust is not only interpersonal; it is structural.

Congregations rebuilding trust might consider:

- Including pronouns consistently in worship leadership introductions, printed materials, email signatures, and other forms of public communication.
- Offering clear statements about how feedback can be shared.
- Ensuring worship planning teams reflect the diversity they proclaim.
- Periodically reviewing liturgical language through an equity lens.
- Creating rhythms of education that are ongoing rather than one-time events.

These practices move accountability from aspiration to embodiment. Rebuilding trust is slow work. It cannot be hurried. It is not restored by one inclusive sermon or a single revised prayer. It grows when people experience steadiness over time. Trust is rebuilt when people learn that this community will notice harm, name it, and adjust.

PART IV
Toward Expansive Worship
14. Expansiveness as Culture
When bodies are not bracing, something changes.

Breath deepens.
Attention steadies.
Participation becomes chosen rather than compelled.
Silence becomes spacious rather than tense.

Trauma-informed worship is not only about acting to prevent harm. It is about cultivating conditions where the Spirit can move freely.

Expansive worship does not mean louder, larger, or more dramatic. It means wider.

Wider in imagination.
Wider in language.
Wider in who is assumed to belong.
Wider in how God is named.

When worship is attentive to embodiment, confession is held within the grounding of God's love. Lament is given time. Justice is named without despair. Joy is expressed without coercion.

In such spaces:

- People can remain present to difficult texts without dissociating.
- Grief can be spoken without being hurried.
- Difference is not treated as disruption.
- Harm is named without humiliation.
- Mystery is held without unpredictability.

Expansive worship is steady.

It trusts that the Gospel does not need urgency to be powerful. It trusts that invitation is stronger than pressure. It trusts that dignity and depth are not opposites.

For individuals in congregations shaped by histories of harm - whether through exclusion, misgendering, colonial theology, or silence in the face of injustice - expansiveness signals something new. Not perfection. Not certainty. But care.

Over time, expansiveness becomes culture.

People begin to expect:

- That their names will be spoken correctly.
- That their questions will not be shamed.
- That difficult seasons will be handled with grounding.

- That justice will be pursued without moral exhaustion.
- That belovedness will be named clearly and often.

This is not fragile worship. It is resilient worship.

It is worship that understands authority as stewardship.
Worship that holds authority as stewardship.
Worship that practices apology.
Worship that honours embodiment as sacred.

Like a table set without pressure, worship becomes a place people approach rather than endure.

The Spirit moves freely where there is room to breathe.

CONCLUSION

Practicing Care

Worship has the ability to shape people.

It shapes how God is imagined.
How community is experienced.
How belonging is felt - or withheld.

Because worship is never neutral, leadership in worship carries particular responsibility. The words chosen, the tone adopted, the invitations extended, the silences held - these are not small matters. They accumulate.

A trauma-informed approach does not require perfection. It requires attentiveness.

It asks leaders to consider how authority is exercised, how participation is invited, how confession is framed, how difficult texts are held, and how accountability is practiced in community. It asks congregations to align their stated commitments with embodied action.

This work is not about eliminating discomfort or avoiding challenge. The Gospel will always confront, unsettle, and transform. But confrontation is not the same as coercion and transformation is different from re-injury.

Authority in the Church mirrors the authority of Christ — exercised not through force, but through invitation.

When worship is practiced with care:

- Belovedness is named as clearly as brokenness.
- Justice is pursued without collapsing into shame.
- Lament is allowed to breathe.
- Joy is expressed without coercion.
- Harm is named without humiliation.

Trust is rebuilt slowly, through consistency.

No congregation can guarantee that every person will always feel safe. Safety is experienced, not declared. Yet communities can practice the kind of humility, transparency, and steadiness that make safety more possible.

Trauma-informed worship is not a program to implement. It is a posture to cultivate.

It is the steady work of ensuring that sacred space does not deepen wounds already carried through the door.

And when bodies are not bracing, there is room for something holy to unfold - grace taking flesh again in ordinary time.

APPENDIX A
Trauma-Informed Worship Planning Self-Audit
This self-audit is a tool for reflection, not a test to pass. No service will answer "yes" to every question. The goal is attentiveness over time.

Individuals and / or worship planners may use this guide in different ways - as a regular companion in worship preparation, as a seasonal check-in before more intense liturgical periods, or whenever there is a need to pause and reflect. It is intended to support steady growth, not to create pressure in the moment.

1. Language and Invitation
Does our language invite participation rather than assume compliance?
Have we avoided unnecessary commands ("close your eyes," "stand now")?
Is belovedness named as clearly as brokenness?
Are metaphors examined for unintended marginalization?
Are pronouns and names used accurately and consistently in spoken and printed materials?

2. Participation and Agency
Are all public invitations (standing, sharing, coming forward) clearly optional?
Have we provided alternatives for physical touch during peace-sharing?
Are people ever singled out publicly without prior consent?
Are communion practices explained in advance?
Is silence framed as invitation rather than expectation?

3. Predictability and Transparency
Have we oriented the congregation to major shifts in tone or movement?
Are difficult texts or graphic readings framed pastorally?
Have we minimized unnecessary surprise?
Are transitions clear and steady?
Does the service end with grounding rather than unresolved intensity?

4. Confession and Justice
Is confession balanced with explicit assurance?
Is corporate responsibility framed without collapsing into shame?

Are we resisting the urge to assign meaning too quickly to suffering?
Is justice language paired with agency and hope rather than despair?

5. Preaching Awareness

Does the sermon avoid romanticizing suffering?
Are biblical characters handled without reinforcing shame?
Have metaphors been examined for unintended harm?
Is emotional intensity grounded before conclusion?
Is being held in love named before dismissal?

6. Accountability and Culture

Are leaders modeling correct names and pronouns?
Is there a clear path for feedback?
When harm occurs, is it acknowledged without defensiveness?
Does the worship planning team reflect diverse voices?
Are inclusion commitments embodied beyond signage?

Final Reflection

Before finalizing the service, ask:

- Where might someone's body brace in this liturgy?
- Where have we intentionally created space for breath?
- Does this service reflect the Church we say we are becoming?

APPENDIX B

Sample Trauma-Informed Prayers

1. Words of Welcome (Trauma-Informed & Expansive)

Welcome.

Whoever you are,
wherever you find yourself in faith or doubt,
whatever you carry into this space—
you are received here.

If you are returning after absence,
you are welcome.
If you are cautious,
you are welcome.
If you are weary, grieving, questioning,
or quietly hopeful,
you are welcome.

Participate as you feel able.
Rest when you need to.
Take what nourishes.
Let go of what does not.

May this hour hold room for breath**.**

2. Call to Worship (Invitational)
One: We gather in the presence of the Holy -
not because we are required, but because we are invited.
All: We come as we are, beloved and unfinished.
One: In joy and in sorrow, in certainty and in doubt,
All: God meets us in our embodied lives.
One: Here, no one is asked to pretend.
All: Here, we seek truth with gentleness.
One: Let us worship the One who does not force love.
All: Let us worship in freedom and in grace.

3. Opening Prayer: A Prayer of Orientation
Holy One,
You know what we carry into this space.

Some of us arrive open.
Some cautious.
Some weary.
Some unsure if we belong.

Meet us gently.

Steady what trembles.
Soften what tightens.
Make room for breath.

In this hour, may nothing be required of us
that Your love has not already given.
Amen.

4. Prayer of Confession (Rooted in Belovedness)
Gracious God,
We come as we are - beloved and imperfect.

We acknowledge the ways we fall short:
the harm we have caused,
the courage we have withheld,
the love we have limited.

We name these honestly,
not to diminish ourselves,
but to grow.

Hold us in mercy as we learn a more faithful way.
Restore in us the confidence of Your love,
that we may act with greater courage. Amen.

5. Assurance of Grace
Hear this good news:

Before we spoke a word of confession,
we were already held in grace.

God's mercy is not reluctant.
God's love is not conditional.
We are forgiven, restored, and invited forward -
not in shame,
but in belovedness.

Thanks be to God.

6. Prayer Before a Difficult Reading (e.g., Good Friday)
God of compassion,
The story we are about to hear is heavy.

For some, it may stir grief or memory.
For others, it may feel familiar.

Hold us as we listen.
Let us receive only what leads toward truth and love.
Shield what overwhelms.
Anchor what unsettles.

Be near to us in this telling.
Amen.

7. Prayer After Public Tragedy
God of grief and steadiness,
We gather in a world that feels fragile.
There are losses we cannot explain.
Violence we cannot justify.
Questions without answers.

We do not rush to meaning.

We sit with sorrow.
We name injustice.
We lean toward one another.

Hold those most affected.
Strengthen our resolve toward repair.
And keep our hearts tender.
Amen.

8. Communion Invitation (Agency-Centered)
This table is Christ's, not ours.

All are welcome to come -
and all are welcome to remain seated.
If you wish to receive, you may come forward as directed.
If you prefer to stay where you are, grace meets you there.

Nothing you do or do not do
can separate you from the love offered here.

Come, as you are able.

9. Prayer for Justice (Without Moral Exhaustion)
God of justice and mercy,

You call us toward a world more whole
than the one we see.

We confess that we are entangled
in systems that harm.
We acknowledge that we benefit
from what we did not build
and struggle to undo.

Yet we are not defined by failure.

Root our justice in belovedness.
Let our action grow from love rather than shame.

Give us courage that is steady,
compassion that does not burn out,
and hope that does not deny reality.

Keep us faithful in small, persistent ways.
And remind us that the work is Yours as well as ours.
Amen.

10. Benediction (Grounding & Breath)
As you leave this place,
may you go at a pace that is steady.

May your breath be unhurried.
May your body feel respected.
May your spirit know itself held.

The Holy goes with you -
not to press,

but to accompany.

Go in peace.

APPENDIX C

Language Reframing Guide

A Practical Reference for Worship Planning

The following examples are not rigid substitutions. They illustrate small shifts that signal invitation, dignity, and attentiveness.

1. Invitations & Participation

Instead of:

- "Close your eyes and bow your heads."

Consider:

- "If it feels comfortable, you may wish to close your eyes or soften your gaze."

Instead of:

- "Stand as you are able."

Consider:

- "You are welcome to stand or remain seated as is comfortable for you."

Instead of:

- "Come forward now."

Consider:

- "If you feel led, you are invited to come forward. You are equally welcome to remain where you are."

2. Confession & Accountability

Instead of:

- "We have failed again."

Consider:

- "We acknowledge the ways we have fallen short."

Instead of:

- "We are unworthy sinners."

Consider:

- "We come as beloved people who continue to learn."

Instead of:

- "We confess our complicity."

Consider:

- "We recognize how we are entangled in systems that cause harm."

3. Justice Language

Instead of:

- "We must fix this broken world."

Consider:

- "We are invited to participate in God's ongoing work of repair."

Instead of:
- "We are guilty of injustice."

Consider:
- "We acknowledge our participation in injustice and seek a more faithful path."

Instead of:
- "Everything happens for a reason."

Consider:
- "Not all suffering can be explained. God meets us within it."

4. Difficult Texts (Holy Week, Lament)

Instead of:
- Launching directly into graphic reading.

Consider:
- "The reading today contains imagery that may be difficult. Receive what is life-giving and allow the rest to rest."

Instead of:
- "Jesus had to suffer."

Consider:
- "The cross reveals the depth of human violence and the persistence of divine love."

5. Inclusion & Belonging

Instead of:
- "Brothers and sisters."

Consider:
- "Friends," "Beloved community," or "Siblings in Christ."

Instead of:
Assuming pronouns.

Consider:
- Modeling pronoun sharing in introductions and printed materials.

Instead of:
- "All are welcome here." (without embodiment)

Consider:
- Naming how welcome is practiced: "We commit to respecting names, pronouns, and lived experience."

6. Expansive Language for God

Language for God shapes who feels reflected in the Holy.

Traditional names such as "Father," "Lord," or "King" are part of Christian history. A trauma-informed and inclusive posture does not require abandoning these images. It asks that they not be the only ones.

When God is consistently named in exclusively masculine or hierarchical terms, some may struggle to locate themselves within the story of divine likeness.
Consider widening rather than replacing.
Instead of:

- Using only "Father" throughout a service.

Consider:

- Pairing with additional images: "Creator," "Mothering God," "Holy One," "Source of Life," "Spirit of Love."

Instead of:

- "Lord of Hosts."

Consider:

- "God of compassion," "God of justice," "God who accompanies."

Instead of:

- Referring to humanity as "His children."

Consider:

- "God's beloved," "Children of God," or "Beloved community."

Instead of:

- Defaulting to masculine pronouns for God.

Consider:

- Varying pronouns, or using names rather than pronouns in repeated references.

Expansive language does not dilute tradition. It reflects the breadth of scriptural imagery—shepherd, mother hen, rock, fire, wind, wisdom, refuge.

Widening our language for God widens the doorway of belonging.

7. Benedictions & Sending
Instead of:

- "Go out and change the world."

Consider:

- "Go in steadiness and courage, trusting that your faithful presence matters."

Instead of:

- Ending in urgency alone.

Consider:

- Pairing urgency with grounding: "Go in hope and in peace."

APPENDIX D

Brief Resource List

The following resources may support deeper learning for worship leaders and congregations seeking to cultivate trauma-informed and accountable worship practices.

Trauma & Embodiment

- *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk

A foundational exploration of how trauma lives in the body and shapes response.

- *Trauma Stewardship* by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky

Especially helpful for leaders engaged in sustained justice and pastoral work.

- *My Grandmother's Hands* by Resmaa Menakem

An accessible introduction to embodied trauma, particularly in the context of racialized harm.

Queer Theology & Inclusive Faith

- *Transforming* by Austen Hartke

A thoughtful and accessible exploration of scripture and gender identity, grounded in Christian theology.

- *Radical Love* by Patrick S. Cheng

A clear introduction to queer theology and its implications for Christian life and practice.

United Church Context & Accountability

- United Church of Canada – https://united-church.ca

Apologies, commitments to justice, and denominational policy documents relevant to inclusive and accountable worship.

- Affirm United / S'affirmer Ensemble – https://affirmunited.ause.ca

Resources for Affirming congregations and education on inclusive practice.

- National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation – https://nctr.ca

Materials related to the legacy of residential schools and ongoing reconciliation.

Preaching & Worship

- Liturgical resources from *Gathering* (United Church lectionary resource), especially those addressing justice, lament, and inclusion.
- Trauma-informed ministry training materials available through theological colleges and continuing education programs.

About the Cover Art

The cover image depicts a simple table - bread, cup, and wood held in quiet light. There is no ornament. No dramatic glow. No elevated platform. Only the ordinary elements of Christian worship rendered with texture and restraint. This simplicity is intentional. Trauma-informed worship is not about spectacle. It is about stewardship - how authority is held, how presence is practiced, how care is expressed through ordinary gestures repeated over time. The rough wood suggests use. The bread is not stylized. The cup is unadorned. The light illuminates without overpowering. Care in worship is rarely dramatic. It is practiced steadily - in tone, in language, in pacing, in accountability. The table remains central in Christian worship not because it is ornate, but because it gathers. It nourishes. It levels hierarchy. It reminds us that authority in the Church is exercised in service rather than control. This image invites us back to that steady simplicity - where authority is practiced as service and care is made visible over time.