Praise, Prayer, and Preaching in an African American Congregation

This pattern for worship is followed at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Illinois. The primarily African American congregation averages 7,500 combined in its three worship services each Sunday. Worship is the time and place when they recall again who they are and whose they are, to give thanks and to proclaim the good news of the gospel to all who have ears to hear. They describe themselves and their mission in the following statement:

Trinity United Church of Christ has been called by God to be a congregation that is not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ and that does not apologize for its African roots! As a congregation of baptized believers, we are called to be agents of liberation not only for the oppressed, but for all of God's family. We, as a church family, acknowledge, that we will, building on this affirmation of “who we are” and “whose we are,” call men, women, boys, and girls to the liberating love of Jesus Christ, inviting them to become a part of the church universal, responding to Jesus’ command that we go into all the world and make disciples!

Devotion

(Before the official start of the worship service, singing begins to gather, unify, and prepare the congregation to enter the spirit of prayer. With roots extending deep into the African Baptist tradition of a deacon’s prayer with scripture and song preceding the entrance of the pastor, members gather for devotions. Members of the Praise Team, a small group of skilled song leaders, are the primary leaders. The pastor is also present and can often be found at the piano.)

Choral Introit and Processional

Reception of New Members

(Before the evening service on the first Sunday of the month, there are baptisms, often as many as 80. Those baptized are then asked to line the aisles at the start of the service and members come to greet them.)

Opening Hymn

Call to Worship

(An associate pastor invites the community to enter God’s courts with joyous thanksgiving. On the first Sunday of the month, when communion is celebrated, the call takes the form of a communion prayer.)

The Prayer of Our Savior/The Lord’s Prayer

Hymn of Praise

Unison Scripture

(As the pastor leads, the entire community stands to recite the verses of the first scripture passage of the day together. The verses are printed in the bulletin.)

Scripture Reading

(While the congregation remains standing, the preacher of the day reads a second biblical selection.)
Invocation  
(An associate pastor calls upon the Holy Spirit to bless the community and give strength to the preacher. In the words heard in a recent service, “We call upon the God of Moses and of Miriam, of Harriet Tubman and of Martin Luther King, and give God glory.”)

Ministry of Music  
(A major selection prepared by the choir and the musicians to gather and lift up the praise of the community before God.)

Parish Concerns  
(The Pastor names important joys and concerns—items of both personal and social significance to the community. On one recent occasion, a petition was passed through the pews to be signed on the spot, which helped secure passage of a bill that allowed for state needle exchange programs in order to hinder the spread of HIV.)

Visitor Recognition

Passing of the Peace  
(This a major celebration when worshipers may greet one another. Often this lasts more than five minutes.)

The Pastor’s Word  
(The pastor recalls major items from above and names any news of illness or death that were reported to the church after the bulletin was prepared. There is also often an exhortation to faithful living.)

The Service of Holy Communion

Confession of Sins and Assurance of Pardon

Words of Institution

Distribution of Elements  
(Once a month, Holy Communion is shared. Individual servings are placed on the altar. A prayer of institution is shared by the pastors—lifting up the sacrifice and forgiveness that Christ offers. The deacons distribute the elements throughout the congregation.)

The Service of Giving, Offertory Sentences, Tithes and Offerings, and Offering for Special Mission Projects  
(In preparation for giving tithes and offerings, the pastor teaches the importance and the grace one may find in generous giving. Tithing is a minimal expectation for members.)

Altar Call  
(The pastor invites everyone to the altar to pray and many approach. After the prayers have ended, the pastor says, “Hug someone; it may be the only hug she or he gets this week.”)

Sermon

Hymn of Invitation

Benediction  
(The congregation both prays and sings the blessing.)

Right Hand of Christian Fellowship  
(Members linger to greet visitors and one another as the service ends.)