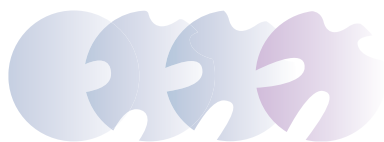


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Stop the clock: Thanksgiving Sunday

Thanksgiving Sunday is an opportunity to offer the congregational responses to God in worship and marks the close of the Giving in Grace programme. This paper offers some thinking about Thanksgiving Sunday



The church at Corinth had started and then stalled an offering for the impoverished church in Jerusalem. Paul challenged them, 'now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means' (2 Cor. 8:11). Thanksgiving Sunday serves both a practical and spiritual purpose within a Giving in Grace programme: it marks the end of the public aspect of Giving in Grace in the church (though not of personal follow-up) and offers the congregational responses in thanksgiving to God while also acknowledging gratefully the response of the congregation.

A whole service?

Although referred to as Thanksgiving Sunday, the act of thanksgiving does not necessarily require a whole service dedicated to this purpose. It should be a short but identifiable liturgical action within the Sunday or midweek service in which it takes place. Elaborate liturgy is not required but there should be a note of thanksgiving and celebration. A few words should be said by way of explanation. Then, using the traditional church offering plate, bring forward the response envelopes to be received with any customary words and actions. An appropriate hymn may be sung in conclusion.

A short Litany of Thanksgiving is available that can be used to accompany this act of thanksgiving. If so desired, a full service of Holy Communion and a Service of the Word are also available, which include the Litany of Thanksgiving. These resources can be found at the Thanksgiving Sunday tab.

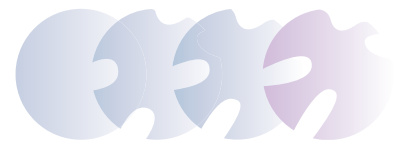
A closing date for responses

Practically speaking, Thanksgiving Sunday sets a final date for the return of the congregational response forms that accompanied the letter and brochure sent to each church member. A response is requested by a specific date to create a sense of urgency and immediacy. Without this, it is all too easy for personal attention to drift, for best intentions to be diverted.

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Giving and worship

Spiritually, returning and offering our response forms in the context of our Sunday worship (or at our main midweek gathering if more appropriate) makes crystal clear the intimate relationship between our giving response, our worship, our discipleship, our prayer life and the need to resource the ministry and mission of the church. This shared liturgical action serves as a sign and seal of the commitment of the individual. Thanksgiving is also appropriate as an acknowledgement of the response of the congregation to the invitation to 'excel in the grace of giving'.



As noted in Deuteronomy 26:1-11, the ancient Israelites would bring the first fruits of their fields to the priest at the place of worship. They would make their gift of first fruits in thanksgiving for all that they had received from God. The context is worship, the gratitude personal, the gift sustaining the priest at the sanctuary. And, in addition, the one who gives also retells the story of how God rescued his people Israel from slavery in Egypt and brought them to the promised land. Giving is more than the gift, it is an act of confessing all that God has done for us and entrusted to us.

The end of the programme

Finally, Thanksgiving Sunday marks the end of the public aspect of Giving in Grace. Again, there is a practical and spiritual side to this. Practically, this stewardship initiative must have an ending; we don't want it to feel as though it went on for ever. Spiritually, the end of the programme should be marked not by relief that the books will balance but by the joyful celebration of and gratitude for God's people who committed together to resource the ministry and mission of the church.

Personal follow-up

Thanksgiving Sunday is the closing date for returning response forms and the public side of the programme. However, it also marks the start of the personal follow-up activity of the planning group. The group will contact non responders and begin to respond to requests for additional information such as Gift Aid declarations or giving by standing order.

However, there is one important exception to this general rule. *Never wait until after the Thanksgiving Service to write a thank you letter to those who return their response forms.* Thank you letters should be sent out within one week of the receipt of the response form. For more on this, see under Preparing to Follow Up in the Programme section of the website.

Getting practical

The date for Thanksgiving Sunday should be part of the overall planning for Giving in Grace, not an afterthought. Normally it should be no more than two weeks after the last sermon of the preaching series. Thanksgiving Sunday should not be disconnected from the preaching series by too great a period of time. That said, there may be some special occasions when the Thanksgiving Service may actually mark the close of the preaching programme itself (see the section Thanksgiving and Festivals below). And, in practice, some churches will request the

return of congregational response forms earlier than Thanksgiving Sunday. Special arrangements may need to be made for the housebound.

- The date of Thanksgiving Sunday should be publicised as part of the Giving in Grace programme.
- The date of Thanksgiving Sunday should be clearly identified on the response forms as the date the response forms should be returned by, unless an earlier date is chosen.
- The clergy ask letter should also clearly identify the date of Thanksgiving Sunday and request the return of response forms before or at the Thanksgiving Service – or earlier if an earlier response date is decided upon.

Thanksgiving and festivals

When the timing is right, Thanksgiving Sunday may be helpfully linked to a significant festival in the life of the church. There is a good fit theologically with the rich stewardship themes

of the Harvest Festival. In addition, anniversaries or patronal festivals can be a very helpful context for Thanksgiving. Such occasions have a shared significance for the congregation and often a good proportion of the congregation will be in church. They are occasions for looking back with thanksgiving and also for looking to the future. Passion Sunday, Trinity Sunday and celebrating the last Sunday of Ordinary Time as a Feast of Dedication are also appropriate occasions for Thanksgiving.



Conclusion

Thanksgiving Sunday serves an important purpose in both closing the programme and connecting our giving response to the worship of the church and our gratitude to God. As such, it can seal the pledge of each individual giver and help them along their journey of generosity.