

A photograph of a person from behind, wearing a dark t-shirt, with their arms raised in a gesture of prayer or worship. They are looking out over a dense urban skyline with various skyscrapers and buildings under a bright, slightly hazy sky. The overall mood is one of hope and spiritual connection.

Worship in the City

Prayers and Songs for Urban Settings

Nancy Elizabeth Hardy

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Foreword

When you live in the city, everywhere you look is a call to worship. And I don't mean from its churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, and yoga studios—though, thankfully, they add blessed leaven to the loaf of urban life. No, I'm referring to a different sense of worship, one rooted in the original meaning of that word, which is “to ascribe worth.”

To what will we ascribe worth today as we walk or wheel down any given city street? That ridiculously expensive pair of shoes? Yet another luxury condominium taking shape on the corner? The boisterous protest march making its way toward city hall? The price of a warm cup of coffee for a homeless teen? The five different languages heard on the bus? A conversation with a stranger asking directions? Everywhere you look is an invitation to ascriptions of worth. The city is full of worship, structuring the daily order of our service and servitude, a *de facto* spiritual formation program shaping who we are and to what (or to whom) we belong.

The city calls us to worship, but we have been hesitant to name the city in our worship. And in that hesitation, we run the risk of being formed by gospels other than the Gospel. In *Worship in the City: Prayers and Songs for Urban Settings*, Nancy Elizabeth Hardy draws us more deeply into an urban liturgical life, sensitively shaped by seasonal rhythms and poetically giving voice to the city's spectrum of celebration, lamentation, hope and healing, justice and service.

A gifted writer, liturgist, and educator, Hardy brings to the task much wisdom born of her experience as a mission educator, pastoral minister, worship leader, and musician, with a doctorate in liturgy and hymnology. As a recipient of The United Church of Canada's McGeachy Senior Scholarship, she was not content to undertake this award-winning project as a solitary exercise, but gathered a circle of wise colleagues to respond to, support, challenge, and critique her work—a practice that is also reflected in the results of the collection, drawing as it does upon the work and resources of contemporary hymn writers, liturgists, and scholars. To note that liturgy is “the work of the people” has become a bit of a cliché, but to actually practise the art of original liturgical creativity and curation as a collective practice is to craft liturgy *liturgically*.

But in the end, as much as I would commend to the reader both the *idea* of *Worship in the City* and the *process* of its creation, the *results* warrant your serious and enthusiastic consideration. Here one finds modelled what good liturgy and worship should be and do: it should be *contextual*, and it should be so in a manner that is *immersive*, all the while calling upon the best of liturgical tradition for deeper contemporary engagement.

In terms of *context*, for example, liturgical leaders and worshippers will certainly have heard of Bethlehem and Jerusalem, but how much have we considered what they might mean for our worship and work in the city? And what about Antioch, Babylon, Corinth, Ephesus, Nineveh, and other great archetypal cities in our story of faith?

As for *immersive* worship, the challenge is to consider the theological and liturgical implications of urban life as well as attend to the poetic, aesthetic, embodied, and incarnational experiences of inspiration in, with, and through the city—to be open to the ways in which the Holy Spirit is at work among us in all the blessings and challenges of the church’s metropolitan mission.

Therefore, readers would do well to carefully consider both Hardy’s accessible yet substantial Appendices on “Cities in the Bible” and “Theological Observations,” as well as her own use of metaphor and language in prayer, song, sermon, sacrament, liturgy, ritual, and symbol. If, as French philosopher Paul Ricoeur argued, “the symbol gives rise to thought,”¹ by which he meant that it opens up a world of new meaning, perhaps the city can give rise to new life for the Body of Christ—which is, of course, what it once did. Remember?

Nothing less is at stake.

William S. Kervin,
Professor of Liturgy and Public Worship
Emmanuel College, Toronto

1 Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan ©1967 HarperCollins Publishers.



Introduction

On most Thanksgiving Sundays, I go to church to sing and pray and thank God for life around and beyond me. I look at the symbols at the front of the sanctuary—sheaves of wheat stacked against the communion table, piles of gleaming red apples and orange pumpkins, gold and scarlet maple leaves adorning the choir loft and windowsills. Along with the congregation, I sing “We plow the fields and scatter the good seed on the ground” and “Come, ye thankful people, come.”

Good symbols, good hymns with sturdy tunes and words that ring with praise to our generous creator. But somehow I am left dissatisfied. You see, my church stands in the downtown core of a large city. I’ve never seen anyone plowing and scattering the good seeds on the ground, and in the northern Ontario mining city where I grew up, sheaves of wheat were few and far between. So the worship in which I’ve just participated seems disconnected from where I live.

I am a churchgoer—regular Sunday attendance has been important to me all my life, whether as a pew sitter, a member of the choir, or a worship leader. Worship can open me to God’s mystery and connect me to the Holy; it can gather me and others together as a community of faith, reminding us that we are a forgetful and forgiven people, loved in spite of who we are and what we have done. Worship celebrates and invites us into the continuing drama of God’s story and helps us to pray for

ourselves, our neighbours, and our world. And it encourages us to work for God’s mission of love, peace, and justice.

It’s important that in worship, the words we say and sing are relevant to our context. We come to worship as real people with real joys and sorrows. We long to feel that we belong, that the place we call home matters, and that we are valued and cherished where we live. And for many of us who call ourselves Canadian, the city is where we live.

Canada is one of the most urban countries in the world, with about 80 percent of the population living in cities¹ and the share of Canada’s population in rural areas declining. Studies have shown that many young people (20- to 29-year-olds) move from the country to the city because of schooling and employment opportunities, while many older adults (over 70 years of age) move to be closer to specialized health care centres in urban areas.² This “out-migration” is also felt in rural churches. In The United Church of Canada, my home church, there are more churches in the country than in the city, but rural churches tend to be smaller; there are greater numbers of church members who work and worship in cities.

And yet, our public worship does not reflect that reality. If we look closely at the hymns we sing and the prayers we utter, we will find that most of the images and references are rural and idyllic. There is little that celebrates the city. Even more than that, there is a suspicion that country is good and city is bad.

Cities form an essential part of the story of God’s people. The Bible begins in a garden and ends in a city, Jerusalem, restored and redeemed, a place of peace and justice for all of God’s creatures. Much of Jesus’ ministry was carried out in towns and cities, and the apostle Paul’s evangelical outreach was to new Christians in the cities of the eastern Mediterranean region.

If we are city dwellers and are called to “seek the welfare of the city” (Jeremiah 29:7), we are called to live as neighbours and friends in the multicultural, multi-faith environment that characterizes many of our metropolises today. And as city dwellers, we are also called to worship in a way that reflects the place where we live.

1 See www.data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS.

2 One such study: Clemenson, Heather A., and J. Roger Pitblado, *Recent Trends in Rural-Urban Migration*, report of the 12th International Metropolis Conference, 8–12 October 2007, Melbourne, Australia.

This book of prayers and songs is not written to belittle singing and praying about the beauty of the earth or the wonder of seeing golden fields of wheat under a prairie sky. Rather, its purpose is to explore the joys as well as the challenges of city living. *Worship in the City* contains prayers and hymns that celebrate, lament, and find hope in an urban environment that many of us value for ourselves and our families. It is offered for both public worship and private devotion.

Some introductory remarks to each section frame the context in which we worship, and at the end of the book, you will find biblical and theological reflections. I have written most of the prayers; prayers from other authors are identified. I am grateful for their contributions as well as those of the hymn writers whose creative work it is my privilege to share with you.

My hope is that this book will help you find your place as a person of faith who lives and worships in the city.

Nancy E. Hardy



Times
and Seasons

Times and Seasons

Worship in the city can be both enlivening and energizing, reminding us that we can be at home with God in high-rises and office buildings as well as in parks and by lakes. It can also remind us that Jesus meets us in the mix of restless crowds on city streets; and that the creative energy of the Spirit is evident not only in encounters among people, but also in the arts and arenas where they dream and play.

In many churches today, worship finds its place within the context of seasons, both liturgical and natural. The liturgical seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost are set against the background of cities. In Advent and Christmas, we remember that Mary and Joseph went from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the city of David, not a large place, but an important one, and that Luke's gospel begins with the announcement of the birth of John in "a Judean town in the hill country" (Luke 1:39). Lent is about Jesus' ministry and his journey to Jerusalem, culminating in his crucifixion and resurrection outside the city walls. At Pentecost, the apostles experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem; they had returned there following the resurrection.

Both liturgical and natural seasons are occasions for celebration and lament in the city. Summer is a season when warm weather heralds outdoor cafés and street festivals; it is also a time when smog and humidity seem more pronounced and heat waves make life even more difficult for the poor and homeless people in our midst. In the winter, the pleasures of outdoor skating rinks and the slap of hockey sticks mingle with slushy streets and salt-stained boots, and cold-weather alerts bring to our attention the frail and the elderly who fear the icy streets and the men, women, and children who suffer without warm clothes and shelter.

As we have seen in "Planning for Worship in the City" (page 9), the seasons, whether liturgical or natural, give us plenty of scope for symbols, words, and music in worship relevant to the place where we live. Our church year begins with Advent, the four weeks before Christmas, when the natural and liturgical seasons collide more than at any other time of the year. The shopping malls blare "buy, buy, buy," while the church urges "wait, wait, wait." The brisk wind and the snow

in the air remind us that we have only four weeks to write cards, finish shopping, and get that baking into our freezers. The church reminds us in song and scripture that getting ready means something different.

The season of Advent, which has traditionally been about waiting for the Second Coming of Christ, has become a time of preparing for Emmanuel, God come to earth in Jesus, a little child born in a manger. It is a period of mixed messages—family gatherings juxtaposed with the loneliness of those who have no family; bountiful banquets for poor people who have to rely on food banks at other times of the year; wonder and awe mixed with fatigue and excitement.

“Keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come” (Mark 13:33). Even with all the differences between the sacred and secular, we are reminded that Something or Someone is coming—to enrich our lives and to transform our worship.

The prayers and songs that follow begin with Advent and then travel through the liturgical and natural seasons of the year.

Prayers

Mysterious and Holy One,
Advent has slipped in,
and the streets are dusted
with the first snows of the season.

We rush in from crowded malls and over-played Christmas carols
hoping to hear your voice and feel your heartbeat
as we wait for the coming of Christ into the world.

We teeter between excitement and anxiety,
forgetting that it's not up to us
to hasten your Advent:

Your Love will be born again
as it is every year and all year round.



God of expectation and anticipation,
help us to hear your voice
in the poetry of scripture,
the wonder of children,
the wisdom of elders.

As we walk in the quiet of silent nights
and the noise of frantic days
counting down to Christmas
and the coming of Christ into our lives,
help us to cherish this Advent, this waiting time.



God of all our days and ways,
be with us in the traffic jams and the shopping jams,
the family times and the lonely times,
the carol singing and the organ playing,
the pageants, the dinners, the gift wrapping,
the food banks, the thrift shops, the out-of-the-cold programs.
Help us to see the face of Christ in all we meet.
Help us be like Christ in who we are and what we do.

Chosen to reflect the urban context, *Worship in the City's* rich collection of prayers and songs shows that in its diversity and creativity, the city can offer an environment that is good for the soul.

In *Worship in the City*, Nancy Hardy brings together a rare combination of musical attunement, theological reflection, and a commitment to live where she is. Her care for the city and her search for faith in the midst of the city are remarkable and inspiring. We do not all have to go back to the land; we can go forward into the city—singing as we go! I imagine this book will become a major resource for worshipping communities in the urban context.

Mary Jo Leddy, writer, activist, and Lecturer in Religion and Society,
Regis College, University of Toronto

Nancy Hardy creates beautiful prayers and liturgies. This extraordinary collection beckons us deeper into seasons of Spirit and life in the city, from raucous traffic jams to peaceful parks. We have been longing for symbol, song, and story grounded in the places most of us call home. Our wait is over.

Mardi Tindal, former Moderator of The United Church of Canada
and Facilitator with the Center for Courage & Renewal

Nancy Elizabeth Hardy has had many lifetimes within The United Church of Canada—as diaconal minister, mission study editor, and an ordained minister. In retirement, Hardy earned a Th.D., focusing on congregational song and the mission of the church, and in 2013 was awarded a McGeachy Scholarship that led to her work on *Worship in the City*. She lives in Toronto, a city she loves and chose for her retirement living.

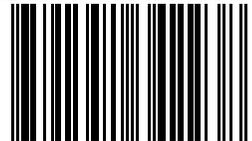


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