# Surrounded by So Great a Cloud of Witnesses A Worship Service for Asian Heritage Month

*May, Asian Heritage Month, falls in the liturgical seasons of Easter and Pentecost, as well as the season of spring, times when we communicate the meaning of new life and new beginnings. Thus, this liturgy, celebrating Asian heritage, awakens multiple senses (sound, sight, smell, touch, and movement).*

*To celebrate Asian heritage means to celebrate plurality and diversity of life and in life, while seeking harmony. In this liturgy, sound and silence are in harmony, word and action are integrated, while reverence and joy are balanced.*

*We also sing hymns that come from Asia. You are encouraged to sing them in the original languages. Invite folks who grew up with an Asian language for this service and let them teach you to pronounce these words and sing these songs.*

*We lift up the meaning of worship as sacrificial, i.e., making the holy out of the ordinary using fire, earth, air, and water. In Asian traditions, these four basic elements of nature are the most sacred things of life. Please review the instructions under THANKSGIVING to prepare an activity where these elements are used in the context of the Offertory and honouring of ancestors.*

*This service can be used on Mother’s Day, as a part of honouring elders (including mothers). Since it lifts up the work of the Spirit, it could also be used on Pentecost or Trinity Sunday. The scripture passage is chosen to highlight the ancestors, a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us all.*

## GATHERING

**Lighting the Christ Candle**

Let us light the Christ candle that reminds us of God’s presence among us.

**Acknowledging the Territory**

*Use the acknowledgement of territory your congregation has developed, or consider developing one. To learn more, search “acknowledging the territory” at* [*www.united-church.ca*](http://www.united-church.ca)*.*

**Greetings**

I greet you in the name of the triune God: Source of Love, Love Incarnated, Love’s Power.

**Amen.**

**Opening Prayer with the Sound of the Gong** (3 times)

We are many, we are one,

born in this land, or far from afar;

**young in age, or full of years,**

**steeped in joy or deep in tears.** *(Gong sound with silence in between prayer)*

Come meet Christ in one another,

let each gift be shared and honoured:

**language, culture, home, diaspora—**

**each so rich, enriching others.** *(Gong sound with silence in between prayer)*

Let’s be many, let’s be one;

gathered here, or scattered hence:

**heav’n and earth and humanity**

**celebrating diversity**. *(Gong sound with silence in between prayer)*

*—“We Are Many, We Are One,” by the Rev. Amy Lee and the Rev. Dr. Wenh-In Ng,   
originally composed for the Sounding the Bamboo gathering; used with permission*

**Opening Hymn**

“God, Be Praised at Early Morn (Qing-chen zao qi zan-mei Shen)” (VU 414)

**Prayer of Confession**

Jesus said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

**But we turn away, rejecting the gifts of the Spirit.**

**Silence**

*(You might also play traditional Asian music during this time, invite a traditional Asian instrumentalist, or play musical selections by Asian Canadian artists.)*

**Hymn**

“Jaya Ho” (VU 252)

**Words of Assurance**

**As the sun melts the ice in spring,**

**as blossoms burst forth on dry branches—**

**so God’s warmth heals and transforms**

**the deadness and brokenness within us.**

**In Christ we are a forgiven people!**

**Thanks be to God!**

*—Jane Doull (CGP, p. 197); used with permission*

## WORD

**Prayer for Illumination**

Eternal God,  
may we encounter your Word in scripture,  
come to know your Word in our hearts,  
and live out your Word in our lives.

**Scripture Readings:**

Psalm 141 (VU 863)

Hebrews 11:29—12:2

**Proclamation and Meditation (Sermon Ideas)**

*(*Note: *you can also use these thoughts as the basis for a Bible study; search “Scripture and Incense” on* [*www.united-church.ca*](http://www.united-church.ca)*.)*

Asia is the birthplace of major religions. Asia is the most religiously pluralistic place in the world. While Canada celebrates and even boasts about being multicultural, you might well be surprised how diverse many places in Asia are. Because of this diversity and plurality, it is impossible to see Asia in one way. Cultural customs and religious traditions are so mixed that it is difficult to separate one from another. Hybrid identities and practices are alive and well in Asia and among Asian Canadians.

If we reflect on Christian traditions and practices, they are not much different as far as cultural adaptation and hybrid practices are concerned. For example, the Advent wreath came from a pagan tradition in northern Europe. It became Christianized in the Reformation era of the 16th century by German Protestants. Easter gets its name from the pagan god of spring. It has even been suggested that the story of the Sermon on the Mount is modelled on a Buddhist teaching and that Paul’s words about love in 1 Corinthians 13 draw from knowledge of Asian sacrificial practices of self-immolation. *(You could think of other examples.)*

With this kind of cultural hybrid practice and ritual in mind, let us regard the practice of burning incense. Incense burning belongs to the rites of many religions including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism. Indigenous spirituality honours smudging as a way of cleansing and blessing. In Christianity, especially in Orthodox, Catholic, and Anglican traditions, it is common to use incense in worship.

Psalm 141, which we read, names “incense” as prayer. Judaism has a long tradition of incense use, going back to the tabernacle in the wilderness (Exodus 30:8, 34). Incense, according to Jewish faith tradition, is a symbol of prayer. Burning invokes the Spirit. The smoke in the air symbolizes and connects the dead and the living. While there are many and different reasons why and how incense is used as prayer in worship, burning incense can be considered as an intercessory way to honour ancestors, saints, and the dead.

In fact, that is what many Asians do. It is unfortunate that European/American missionaries (mostly Protestant Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist) came to Asia and taught Asians not to burn incense because it was deemed superstitious. Many Asians who are Christian find themselves conflicted by this teaching; most gave up their ancestral tradition and wisdom, while some resisted this exclusive and chauvinistic view.

Some of those who did not give up burning incense continued it as a way of honouring ancestors. Remembering those who went before us is to recognize that our life is not ours alone. While we cannot see those who have gone before, we know that we are connected with them. It also means that once we leave this earth, we are not cut off from our children either, because we will watch over them when we join our ancestors, a cloud of witnesses.

That is what the homilist in Hebrews is talking about. Scholars agree that the letter to the Hebrews reads like a homily, the message of a pastor who deeply cares for a group of people under their care who have been suffering as Jewish Christians. As a minority, they faced isolation, discrimination, even persecution. That is why the homilist makes a call to persevere (10:19–39). Some of those who heard this homily, the message of hope and comfort, knew that they might die soon without seeing the coming of Jesus, a new world. That is why the homily talks about faith as the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things “not seen.” (11:1). In this context, the passage we read in chapter 11 makes a list of faithful ancestors who have gone before. Here Jesus is confessed as the perfecter of faith. In this community, Jesus was made perfect, not because he was sinless, but because he suffered and endured, just like us, fully human. In this way he became a source of eternal salvation (5:9). It was his humanity that led to divine salvation. This is a powerfully paradoxical theological and Christological teaching of the letter to the Hebrews.

As many Asian Canadian Christians honour their ancestors, they can identify with the community of faith spoken of in Hebrews, because they were also minorities who suffered from discrimination, being different and looking different since they came to Canada. They could see, touch, and feel the pain and the struggle of this community as they also see, touch, and feel the pain of their own immigrant experiences of isolation, discrimination, and sacrifice. Then they know that they are not alone. Through the act of burning incense, they see, touch, and feel the love and the care of their ancestors. Like the people of Israel remember their Passover story, the story of Joshua and Rahab, and many more brave and painful stories of their ancestors, we in The United Church of Canada remember many of our own ancestors in faith who faced hardships and overcame them.

Indeed, here we are “surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses” (12:1). Our journey ahead is set with joy. As we remember them, we embody their tears in pouring water, and burn paper with their names on it. This embodied act is a commitment. This is an affirmation of ancient practices that finds liturgical meaning today for our generation.

Newness does not come from nothing. As we celebrate Easter (or Pentecost), new life is inseparably connected with the old and the past. As a new leaf is only alive and well as long as it is connected with the old root and branches, let us honour our ancestors of faith and our own ancestors of our family and our church. As we do, let us also rediscover traditions that have been misunderstood (like incense burning), and resurrect them in ways that help us worship more fully with our senses. Anointing with oil is another ancient tradition that has been rarely practised in Protestant churches.

Christian faith is never abstract, remaining in the head. It has to be incarnated, lived out in body as practice and a way of life. Our sisters, brothers, and cousins who are of Asian descent have much to teach about this. Let us continue to gather as church and seek out ways of wisdom!

## THANKSGIVING

**Offertory**

“Come, O Come, Let Us Praise” (MV 56)

“You Are My Father” (MV 105)

“Lord, Your Hands Have Formed” (MV 181)

“Para, Para, Pitter Pat” (VU 309)

*During the offering time, people are invited to write down the names of their families and friends that they want to remember and honour. The baskets are passed around to collect the papers with names. The baskets will come forward with the offering, as well as a container of earth, a jug of water, and an empty bowl. At least four people are needed to carry offering plates, baskets, and water. Symbolically pour the water and burn the papers, returning the ash to the earth.*

**Act of Honouring Ancestors**

With the Christ candle that is burning, as a symbol of God’s ever-presence, we now burn the papers with names written on them, as we lift up their names to God. Let us pray by singing as we honour them, while watching smoke from the burned paper become ash and return to the earth.

**Sung Response**

“When a Grain of Wheat” (MV 125)

**Prayer of Commitment** (together)

**Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,**

**strengthen us to run with perseverance the race that is set before us,**

**looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.**

**By your Spirit make us one with Christ,**

**one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world,**

**until Christ comes in final victory, and we feast at his heavenly banquet.**

**Through your Son, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit in your holy church,**

**all honour and glory is yours, everlasting God, now and forever.**

## SENDING FORTH

**Commissioning Hymn**

“With the Wings of Our Mind (Ttugoun Maum)” (VU 698)

**Benediction**

As a cloud of witnesses are watching over us,

**let us receive the blessing from God, our ancestors and from one another.**

Let us hold the brave justice flag wave high above.

**Let the fountain of love spring forth with joy.**

As we go out into the world, may the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ   
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be always with you.

**Amen, and thanks be to God.**

*—The Rev. Dr. HyeRan Kim-Cragg   
is Lydia Gruchy professor of practical theology   
at St. Andrew’s College, Saskatoon*