

Bilingual Services | Servicios Bilingües

A MERGING OF CULTURES AND LANGUAGES

Lynette Poulton Kamakura, May, 2023

Church communities that regularly worship at separate services periodically come together in bilingual services. These special events can be celebratory occasions, combining the music and liturgies of various communities into a single, joyous whole. However, as those who have organized such celebrations can attest, these services can also be complicated, and can pose particular challenges to congregations. What follows are helpful hints for planning and celebrating bilingual services. Drawn from years as participant and preacher in bilingual contexts, they are shared in the hope that, as we expand our boundaries to include various languages in our worship, we will do so in a way that increases joy.

It's not one service in two languages, but two services merged into one

Each service within a congregation develops its own personality. When bringing together groups accustomed to worshipping in different languages, we are not simply translating the words of one service into another language. We are merging two ways of doing things. In doing so, it is important to honor and include aspects of each congregation's practices, to bring some of the familiar into this new worship experience. What to include depends very much on what is important to your congregations. From carrying a banner with the Virgin of Guadalupe to using familiar instruments, try to include the known in the midst of the new.

Start with Welcome

Greeters and ushers should be prepared to welcome attendees who speak both languages. This can be done with bilingual individuals, if a congregation is so blessed, or by having one or more speakers of each language available to answer basic questions. "The nursery is down the hall." "The seats in the front are reserved for the confirmands." Greeters don't have to be masters in both languages, but should be able to handle basic questions, to make all welcome.

The bulletin: in both languages, preferably side-by-side

Yes, it's more complicated. Yes, it's more paper. Yes, it's worth it to print everything in both languages. It is incredibly easy to get lost, even in a familiar service, when you only have one language in front of you and the person speaking is saying something else. Having a side-by-side version of the bulletin allows participants to follow along, regardless of the language the speaker uses, to explore the written text when the oral version is not accessible to them. Use bold for the text spoken by the congregation, so that they know when and in what language(s) they are invited to speak. We want participation by all, and should do what we can to make it easier.

Keep the music familiar

Bilingual services often contain beautiful arrangements of hymns in two languages, frequently alternating with each verse. After seeing congregants sit in silence, not knowing how to approach these unfamiliar tunes, I've learned that these bilingual pieces should be saved for the anthems, sung by people who have had an opportunity to practice.

For congregational singing, choose songs that are familiar, that participants know and will sing with enthusiasm. Sing the processional hymn in English, the recessional in Spanish (or vice versa). Sing the

Gloria in English, the Sanctus in French. Include familiar selections from both languages, encouraging congregants to sing out the ones they know, and to feel more comfortable joining in on the unfamiliar tunes as their tentative vocal offerings blend with the joyous sounds from those familiar with the songs.

Choose your instruments carefully, with an eye to inclusion. Bilingual services are the time to use familiar instruments. The goal is to encourage all to participate.

Merge, combine; limit repeats

One of the downsides of many bilingual services is that, in an effort to be inclusive, much is repeated in both languages, making the service very long. It is not necessary to have every word spoken in both languages, particularly if the order of service provides the text. Have the first reading in English only, and the second in Russian. The Psalm and Prayers of the People can be prayed by the congregation alternating languages by verse. If the Gospel text is relatively short, proclaim it in both languages. If it is longer, divide it in two, switching from one language to the other. Allow the language to flow back-and-forth during the Eucharistic prayer, creating a seamless whole. For familiar elements, such as the confession, the Lord's prayer, and the post-communion prayer, invite participants to say these simultaneously, in the language of their choosing.

Some items need to be in both languages, including the sermon and announcements. The person speaking should be comfortable with the language used. Preaching bilingual sermons is a topic for another article altogether, but a few hints follow. Check the length. A sermon in two languages takes longer than just doubling the length of one version. If using an interpreter, provide a copy of the sermon in advance. Even a fluent speaker may not be familiar with Biblical terms and may need to research them. Finally, make sure that the speaker(s) can be heard. It is common to speak at different sound and tone levels in different languages, so do sound checks in both languages.

Provide cues throughout the service

When we hold bilingual services, we need to remember that no matter what we do, congregants will be facing something different, not what they usually experience on a Sunday. So, it is incumbent upon us to give them cues on how to proceed, to encourage participation and inclusion. Remember, whatever you do will be new to someone!

Expect criticism and lean into joy

Whenever we do something different, someone will be uncomfortable—and will let you know. Someone won't like the music. Someone will find the service too long. Listen for lessons to be learned, but don't let the negatives stop you. Combining communities, opening our eyes to new and different ways of worshipping are hard work, but can bring increased understanding, new connections, and most of all, joy.

Lynette is a postulant for the vocational diaconate in the Diocese of Olympia. She's retired from the Foreign Service, where she lived and worshiped in Latin America, Africa, Europe and North America. She is currently assigned to St. Luke/San Lucas Episcopal Church in Vancouver, Washington, where she participates in Spanish, English and bilingual services.