

Epiphany Blessing of Homes and Chalking the Door

In some parts of the world, particularly Great Britain, there is a custom of gathering in places of residence or work (generically called "homes") to ask God's blessing on those dwellings and upon all who live, work, and visit there. This article includes information on these gatherings, some suggestions for their use by United Methodist families, churches, and other "homes," and a sample liturgy that may be reproduced.

What Is a Chalking the Door Service?

This short liturgy is a way of marking our homes, usually at the front or main entrance, with sacred signs and symbols as we ask God's blessing upon those who live, work, or visit throughout the coming year. In Exodus, the Israelites marked their doors with blood so that the Lord would pass over their homes; but in this service, we mark our doors with chalk as a sign that we have invited God's presence and blessing into our homes.

Where May the Service Be Used?

Although the service is intended for use in private family dwellings, it is certainly appropriate when adapted for use in offices, apartments, college dormitories, choir rooms, Sunday school classrooms, churches, places of business, and — perhaps especially — in nursing homes, hospitals and hospital rooms, and extended-care facilities. This liturgy is also appropriate as a devotional at choir practice, at the January meeting of the church board of trustees, as a children's sermon, in visits to hospital and nursing home rooms, as well as in your own home.

When Should the Service Be Used?

Due to the linking of the liturgy to the visit of the three Magi, it is most appropriately used at the start of the season of Epiphany. But because the service is so flexible in where it may be used, it might be used any time during the seasons of Christmas and Epiphany — or as part of a celebration observing the changing of the secular calendar from one year (or millennium) to the next.

In Great Britain, the service commonly takes place on Twelfth-Night. We know that Christmas Day is December 25 and that there are twelve days of (or after) Christmas, variously observed as December 25 through January 5 or December 26 through January 6. The twelfth day of Christmas (Twelfth-Day), January 6, is also observed as Epiphany, commemorating the visiting of the Christ Child by the three Magi (Wise Men) with their gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. The season of Epiphany is also known as Twelfth-Tide; and the night before Twelfth-Day (Epiphany) is known as Twelfth-Night. On Twelfth-Night in Europe, many families gather in their homes to celebrate this feast with friends, food, singing, and gifts. It is at these Twelfth-Night celebrations that "Chalking the Door" is most often observed.

What Is the Significance of the Chalk and the Magi?

Chalk, a substance made of common elements of the earth, is used by teachers to instruct students and by children in their games and play. We use chalk in this service as an ordinary substance put to holy use. Further, chalk will not permanently mar the dwelling. As its image fades from view over time, those who participated in its original placement will remember it and the purpose for which it was intended. In doing so, they may rededicate themselves to that purpose. After a year passes and a new Epiphany arrives, they will have the opportunity once again to celebrate the themes of this season and once again to seek God's blessing on their homes and on those who come and go through the home.

Traditionally we remember the names of the Magi as Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar — although these names are not to be found in Scripture. During the chalking ceremony, the first letters of these three names — C, M, B — are inscribed on the door frame. Some suggest the C M B may also stand for "Christus Mansionem Benedicat," meaning "May Christ bless this dwelling."

These letters are inscribed between the numbers of the year of the ceremony. Thus, as people are given the opportunity to participate in the chalking of the door, they will inscribe one or more of the symbols: 20 C M B 11 to 20 C M B 12

The symbols are usually written on the upper horizontal piece of the door frame of the front entrance to a home or hospital room; but if younger children or people in wheelchairs participate, encourage them to place the symbols anywhere on the door frame they can comfortably reach.

How Is the Liturgy Organized?

There is great flexibility in organizing the liturgy, but simple is usually best. There may be corporate and individual prayers, Scripture readings, remembrances of the past, and anticipations of the future. It would certainly be appropriate to include the singing of hymns or familiar verses of hymns, including these from *The United Methodist Hymnal*:

217, "Away in a Manger" (stanza 3)

219, "What Child Is This" (stanza 3)

220, "Angels from the Realms of Glory" (stanza 3)

221, "In the Bleak Midwinter" (stanza 4)

222, "Niño Lindo"

223, "Break Forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light" (stanza 3)

244, " 'Twas in the Moon of Wintertime" (stanza 3)

245, "The First Noel"

254, "We Three Kings"

The liturgy that follows is rather simple. Sections marked C are to be spoken by the entire group of family, friends, worshippers, congregation — the "Community" — and those marked L are for a solo Leader, which may be one person or several in turn. You may use this service as presented, or augment it with your own prayers, Scriptures, and songs. If you reprint all or part of it, please include the source as The United Methodist Discipleship Ministries Worship website.

A Blessing of the Home

L: The Lord is with you;

C: And also with you.

All: Peace be to this house and to all who live, work, and visit here.

L: The three wise men came to Bethlehem in search of the Lord. They brought to him precious gifts: gold to honor the newborn king, incense to the true God in human form, and myrrh to anoint his body, which one day would die like our own.

L: Let us pray. O God, you once used a star to show to all the world that Jesus is your Son. May the light of that star that once guided wise men to honor his birth, now guide us to recognize him also, to know you by faith, and to see you in the epiphanies of the daily experiences of our lives.

L: Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord — Jesus born of Mary — shall be revealed.

C: And all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.

All: As the Wise Men once sought your brilliant light, O Lord, so may we week to live and work in your splendor.

L: O God of Light, bless this (our) house and this (our) family. May this be a place of peace and health. May each member of this family cultivate the gifts and graces you have bestowed, dedicating our talents and works for the good of all.

L: Make this house a shelter in the storm and a haven of rest for all in need of your warmth and care. And when we go out from this place, may we never lose sight of that Epiphany star.

C: As we go about our work, our study, our play, keep us in its light and in your love.

A Blessing of the Chalk for Marking the Door

L: Lord Jesus, through your Incarnation and birth in true human form, you have made all the earth holy. We now ask your blessing upon this simple gift of your creation — chalk. We use it as a tool to teach our children, and they use it as a tool in their play and games. Now, with your blessing, may it become a tool for us to mark the doors of our home with the symbols of your wise servants who, so long ago, came to worship and adore you in your first home.

People in turn mark the doorway with one or more of the symbols:

2011 C M B 2012

L: May we, in this house, and all who come to visit, to work, and to play, remember these things throughout the coming year. May all who come and go here find peace, comfort, joy, hope, love, and salvation, for Christ has come to dwell in this house and in these hearts.

All: May we be Christ's light in the world. Amen.