**How to conduct a foot-washing service**

Foot-washing is a special, optional feature of the Maundy Thursday service. It exists in all the major churches, though many lay people aren’t aware of that. It is practiced, though infrequently, in eastern Orthodox churches, Anglican churches, Roman Catholic churches, and all major Protestant denominations.

**Adapting the Order of Worship**

In John’s gospel, Jesus washed His disciples’ feet during the Last Supper, but before the part that has become our Communion service. So foot-washing is appropriate for the Maundy Thursday service. Use your normal order of worship with Communion at the end. Insert the foot-washing immediately before Communion. If you have the [Tenebrae](http://www.kencollins.com/instructions/how-05.htm) after Communion, you will have a liturgical re-enactment of all the events surrounding the Last Supper.

Following the custom of the time, Jesus and the disciples would have had their feet washed by a servant when they entered the Upper Room, so it wasn’t necessary to wash them again for the purpose of comfort or cleanliness. Jesus’ foot-washing was not to clean their feet but to make a point about humble service. At the Last Supper, Jesus washed the disciples’ feet, but the disciples did not wash each other’s feet nor did anyone wash Jesus’ feet. So I think it makes the best biblical and liturgical sense if the pastor washes the feet of four or five representative members of the congregation and no one washes the pastor’s feet.

Incidentally, the garment Jesus took off to wash their feet and put back on afterwards was a himation, a rectangular piece of cloth that was worn something like an Indian sari.

[*The Book of Occasional Services 1994*](http://www.kencollins.com/explanations/why-04.htm#worship), on page 93, contains a brief address that Episcopalians can use to begin the Foot-Washing Portion of the Service.

**Advance Preparation**

**For the people whose feet are being washed:**

* **Instruct them to come to the service with clean feet in clean footgear.** When Jesus did the foot-washing, the disciples feet were already clean, because a servant would have washed them when they arrived. Therefore, there is no soap and no scrubbing. If the climate is warm enough in your area that people might hit on the idea of wearing open sandals, you might want to discourage them from doing it. Although it is very biblical to wear open sandals, it isn’t very edifying for the person doing the foot-washing.
* **Remind the women not to wear stockings or panty hose!** Now I know this sounds obvious, but getting dressed is something we all do by rote without thinking. Women need to make a special effort to dress in such a way that they can easily bare their feet.

**For the pastor who is washing the feet:**

* **You need a bowl, a pitcher, and a towel for each person doing the foot-washing.**The bowl should be fairly large. Both the bowl and the pitcher should be unbreakable or expendable. The towel can be a plain bath towel in a drab color. A festive towel covered with cartoon characters probably won’t achieve the effect you want.
* **You can purchase the appropriate equipment from a religious supply house.**Foot-washing services aren’t very common, so you will probably have to order from the catalog or over the Internet. One good supplier is [Cokesbury](http://www.cokesbury.com/).
* **Check to see if you need any additional equipment.**If the foot-washer is an older person, they may need a stool to sit on and an assistant to move it from person to person.

Some churches have a tradition of a foot-washing service in which everyone washes everyone else’s feet. I don’t think that is as effective, because it takes too long, and at the Last Supper, the disciples did not wash each other’s feet and no one washed Jesus’ feet. However, if you do it that way, you have these additional considerations:

* **Think about separating the men and the women.** It used to be the custom to put men and women in separate rooms, and it still might be a good idea. If there are people in your congregation for whom feet are erotically stimulating, this isn’t the way you want to find out who they are.
* **Choose the room.** Quite often the foot-washing is done in a separate room from the rest of the worship service for logistical reasons. Remember that water will be spilled on the floor. There should be enough room that everyone can remain seated while the foot-washer moves around. The foot-washer also needs enough room to to bow down, squat, sit on their haunches, stand up, and move to the next person.

**Conducting the Service**

**Before the Foot-Washing**

* Fill the pitcher with warm water and place it, along with the bowl and a towel, at the front of the church.
* Set up chairs at the front of the church for the people whose feet are going to be washed.
* Have a normal worship service, up to the point where Communion begins.

**The Foot-Washing**

* The people whose feet are going to be washed come forward and seat themselves.
* Someone reads John 13:1-11. They could offer a prayer or a short address, such as the one on page 93 of [*The Book of Occasional Services 1994*](http://www.kencollins.com/explanations/why-04.htm#worship).
* Each person removes the footgear from one foot. It doesn’t matter which foot.
  + The foot-washer places the bowl under the person’s bare foot, pours water on the foot, and dries it with the towel.
  + The person replaces their footgear as the foot-washer moves to the next person.
* The foot-washing continues until everyone’s feet have been washed.
* Someone reads John 13:12-17.

**After the Foot-Washing**

The Maundy Thursday service resumes with Communion, followed, if you like, with the [Tenebrae](http://www.kencollins.com/instructions/how-05.htm).

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