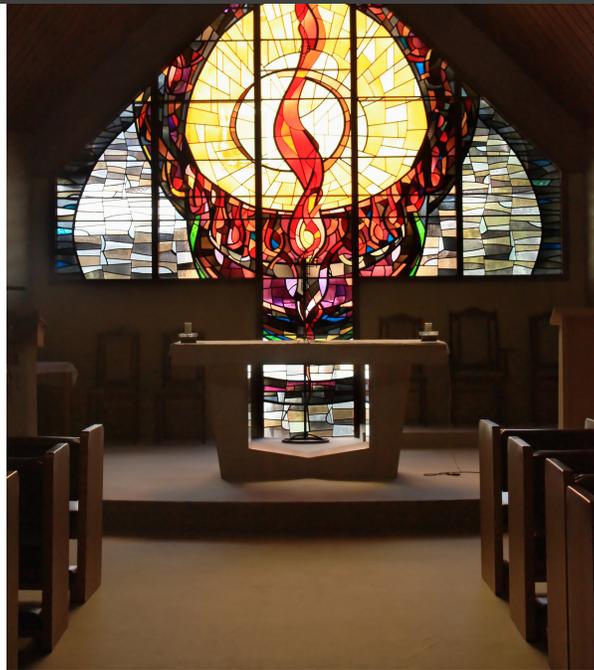


# Breaking Down Linguistic & Cultural Barriers Through the Holy Spirit

A Worship Resource for Pentecost



## Overview

Pentecost celebrates the day when the Holy Spirit fell upon a relatively homogenous group of disciples of Jesus in Jerusalem. As a result, the Spirit empowered the group with the gift to speak in tongues and communicate in different languages. Pentecost celebrates the Spirit breaking through borders of cultural and linguistic identity, thereby putting border crossing as the central point for the creation of the church. As a Christian, therefore, one cannot be a member of the church without being related to others who are of a different culture, national identity, or place of origin. This collection of worship resources can be used in your congregation on Pentecost Sunday (or any other time) to celebrate the fact that Pentecost is a culturally and nationally diverse moment in time that encourages all Christian churches to be a community of strangers called to become neighbors in the Risen Christ.

**Text: Acts 2: 1-18**

Additional Texts: I Corinthian 12: 3-13; John 7: 37-39; John 20:19-23

*(Note: Reading the same scripture in different languages is an idea to demonstrate the central theme of Pentecost. See biblehub.com for translations.)*

**Opening Prayer:** “The Justice Prayer”  
([U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops](#))

Come, O Holy Spirit!

Come, open us to the wonder, beauty, and dignity of the diversity found in each culture, in each face, and in each experience we have of the other among us.

Come, fill us with generosity as we are challenged to let go and allow others to share with us the goods and beauty of earth.

Come, heal the divisions that keep us from seeing the face of Christ in all men, women, and children.

Come, free us to stand with and for those who must leave their own lands in order to find work, security, and welcome in a new land, one that has enough to share.

Come, bring us understanding, inspiration, wisdom, and the courage needed to embrace change and stay on the journey.

Come, O Holy Spirit, show us the way.

**Scriptural Reflection:** The Power of Language  
By: Jennie Wilburn, NC Council of Churches

Today there are over 7,300 languages spoken in the world of which, after Mandarin, Spanish and English are the most widely spoken and used. One language can never express certain intricacies that another language can express, because language is an extension of the culture from which it derives. I was overwhelmingly surprised when, after feeling fairly confident with my Spanish and having traveled within Mexico & South America, I learned that in certain places Spanish isn't even spoken, but rather indigenous languages such as Nahuatl in Mexico and Quechua in Peru are predominant. Language is definitely complicated and is always changing and adapting itself to changes within society.

While fascinating and complicated, language can also be lethal: it has the power of life and death. Throughout history people have subjugated one another because of language. In the Old Testament the Gileadites slaughtered 42,000 Ephraimites when the latter were exposed as the “enemy” because they incorrectly pronounced a word (if in doubt about this, read Judges 12). Likewise, the orphan Moses learned Egyptian and its customs, while the Babylonian exiles Daniel and his three friends were not only “re-educated” in a new language and literature, but also given new names.

Here in North Carolina, we have a diversity of languages. According to the Carolina Population Center at UNC, nearly 11% of North Carolinians today speak a language other than English at home, representing over a million people. Over a half of these million people speak Spanish, and there are another almost twenty languages spoken by more than 5,000 people in the state. Moreover, this linguistic diversity also represents a large cultural diversity. The message of Pentecost is important in our state, which is currently being divided over issues such as in-state tuition for undocumented immigrant students and driver's licenses for immigrants. At Pentecost there is a power of communication through a language that unites us instead of separating us.

Language has proven divisive for Christians as well. Among the earliest followers of Jesus dissent emerged among Greek-speaking Jews who claimed that the Aramaic-speakers overlooked their widows in the distribution of food (Acts 6). A thousand years later dissent regarding Latin and Greek languages separated the Eastern and Western churches in the Schism of 1054. During the Protestant Reformation the Catholic Church banned translations of the Bible into the everyday vernacular of the common laity. Given the unstable dynamics of language, it's remarkable that God featured human language—one of humanity's most prominent and divisive characteristics—to symbolize God's kingdom. In the book of Acts, Luke describes the first Pentecost, which believers celebrate this Sunday, as they have for two millennia, as an example of the way that language does not divide, but rather brings people together.

Luke describes "God-fearing Jews from every nation of the world" as having converged upon Jerusalem for Pentecost; he specifies at least fifteen ethno-linguistic groups who were present. Luke describes a group of followers of Jesus who were "constantly in prayer" (Acts 1:14). Suddenly, the sounds of violent winds and the visions of tongues of fire fell upon them, and "all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them" (Acts 2:4). This moment was the birth of the Church, a new community of the Spirit that celebrates, incorporates, and then transcends barriers of race, social status, ethnicity, language, and gender. Diversity without division, and unity without uniformity, should characterize the Christian community.

Pentecost and the birth of the newly unified and diverse community brought about a new hope and initiated the ability to communicate in a new way with God through the Holy Spirit. Thus it reverses the curse of the tower of Babel. The story of Babel in Genesis 11 describes when human beings decided to build a tower that would reach to heaven. In this way they would have access to God whenever they wanted; in this way they thought they could manipulate God. But in the process of building the human bridge to heaven, they found that God intervened and confused their languages. They began to speak different languages; there was no more communication, no more understanding among them, and they could no longer work together. The result was the proliferation of languages and human misunderstanding.

Pentecost and the Tower of Babel are related in that they both revolve around language; however, Pentecost is not a repeat of Babel but rather a reversal. In the early part of the Bible language divided humanity, resulting in confusion and division. Pentecost, with its many languages, began to facilitate people being united through a common understanding. At Babel God drove people apart to prevent evil; at Pentecost God brought people together to establish righteousness. After the tower of Babel people could no longer work together to create a kingdom for themselves. At Pentecost people began to work together to establish God's kingdom on earth. After Babel the people spread out over the earth in hostility and alienation. After Pentecost the people spread throughout the world to serve God and to live in love and fellowship. Babel was God's judgment on the people who tried to unite against God. Pentecost was God's blessing in bringing people together: people from every race, nation, and language, to live as one under God. Pentecost is Babel reversed and undone.

The spoken tongues of Pentecost came to reveal to the Church that the good news of the gospel was not just for one group of people; it was not just for the Jews; it was for Mexicans, Europeans, Africans, etc. The gospel is for every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. While we come from distinct cultures and are divided into different church congregations, the birth of the Church on Pentecost demonstrates the core components of every church: diversity without division and unity without uniformity. We are called as Christians to maintain unity regardless of different languages or cultures, because we speak the universal language through the word of God.

**Responsive Reading:** Petitions for Pentecost Sunday Celebrating our Immigrant Community  
([Archdiocese of Chicago](#))

For our world: May the Spirit renew the face of the earth, and lead us to build peace in war torn nations which cause people to flee as refugees in order to overcome the negation of life.  
**We pray to the Lord.**

For our Church: May our we, through our ministries, continue to proclaim the Gospel truth that sets us free so that we can overcome any cultural fears that may keep us from forming community. **We pray to the Lord.**

For a call to solidarity with the immigrant communities: May we continue to commit ourselves to promote the human rights of all, regardless of immigration status, and to advance fair legislation for asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants. **We pray to the Lord.**

For continued evangelization: May each of us continue to spread the holy fire of the Gospel through hospitality in our lives by opening our hearts and minds to all of our neighbors in need. **We pray to the Lord.**

In thanksgiving for the gifts of the Spirit: May we give thanks to the Lord for the gifts of the Spirit, and may those gifts bring unity in our diversity by forming us into the one body of Christ. **We pray to the Lord**

**Prayer of Confession & Words of Assurance**  
([General Board of Discipleship of the UMC](#))

**We confess we have fired our tongues to wound others. We divide ourselves and forget to live in the peace you promise us in Christ. Forgive us, we pray. Free us to praise you in our words and our deeds.**

Like the rush of a violent wind, the Holy Spirit filled the house, changing each language and making them one. With this same Holy Spirit, God will make us one.  
In the name of Jesus Christ, praise God! You are forgiven!

**In the name of Jesus Christ, praise God! You are forgiven!**

**Closing Prayer**

God of blessings and being,  
Pour out your Holy Spirit on us here today,  
Like you poured it out over your disciples on Pentecost,  
So that through our prayers and actions  
We may be witnesses to your presence within us.  
We want to be one, God  
So that the world may believe that we are yours. So that we may be a community  
without divisions as you would envision.  
Fill us now with your love.  
Fill us with a love for our neighbor and our neighbors all over the world.  
Amen.

**Additional Resources**

**Children's Message:**

Materials needed: A big box wrapped like a present with a bow that you can tie.

Ask children: What is this box? (a present); What am I doing with the box? (Wrapping up a present); When do we wrap presents? (Christmas, a birthday, etc.).

Next, ask children about the types of gifts that we receive from God (emphasize grace, love and love of neighbor). Ask if these gifts are wrapped (response should be no). But these gifts are still special. Next, ask what gifts we can share with each other that don't cost any money. Then talk about Pentecost and explain that on that day the Holy Spirit gave everyone special gifts. These gifts were all very different, but they all came from the same Spirit. So even though you might have one gift and someone else has something different, we all receive our gifts from the same Holy Spirit.

Close with prayer: God, thanks for giving us amazing gifts through the same Holy Spirit. Help us to use our gifts to serve you. Amen.

**Additional Prayers:**

See "[Prayers for Pentecost](#)" by the PCUSA:

**Suggested Hymns:**

- "Spirit Song," #393 UMH, #330 BH, #259 CH, #322 PH
- "Wind Who Makes All Winds Blow," #236 CH, #538 UMH, #131 PH
- "On Pentecost They Gathered," #272 NCH, #128 PH, #237 CH
- "Diverse in Culture, Nation, Race," #485 CH, #739 GC
- "In Christ There Is No East Or West,"



Artwork by Rev. Pam McMillan

**Hymnal Legend**

- ✚ AM- African Methodist Episcopal
- ✚ BH- Baptist Hymnal
- ✚ CH- Chalice Hymnal (Disciples of Christ)
- ✚ CM- Christian Methodist Episcopal
- ✚ GC- Gather Comprehensive
- ✚ LW- Lutheran Worship
- ✚ MW- Moravian Book of Worship
- ✚ NCH- New Century Hymnal (UCC)
- ✚ PH- Presbyterian Hymnal
- ✚ TH- The Hymnal 1982 (Episcopal)
- ✚ UMH- United Methodist Hymnal