

“Importing” Taizé

Or, “So you want to start a Taizé prayer service.”

Why do you want to use the Taizé chants?

This is the critical issue. If you are starting a Taizé prayer service as a “church growth” strategy, then please don’t continue reading. It won’t work. If you are starting a Taizé prayer service as just another option in a longer spiritual menu, please stop reading. It won’t last. If, however, you are looking to start a Taizé prayer service out of a deep longing for the world to be reconciled to God, please continue. If you yourself long to have your own heart reconciled to God, please continue. As Jason Brian Santos writes in *A Community called Taizé*,¹ “When our churches become communities of reconciliation, the chants can be seen as an expression of that calling.”

Growing a community of reconciliation based in the Taizé chants takes time. Nine years after Brother Roger moved to Taizé, there were only a dozen brothers. Please keep that in mind as you explore the following suggestions in creating such a community. The items in this list are compiled from the book *A Community called Taizé* by Jason Brian Santos, the Taizé songbook, and from the experience of pilgrims in New England who have traveled to Taizé. Also, this list is meant to be *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*. This is not a “plug and play” endeavor but rather is a journey that will take prayer, discernment, and to emphasize, a deep longing to see the world reconciled to God. With all of that in mind, here are some things to consider when starting a Taizé prayer service.

Starting Out

- Become familiar with the Taizé community. Learn all you can about the brothers of Taizé, their purpose, their vision, the rhythm of life in Taizé and so on. To offer a Taizé prayer service that is truly expression of the founding community, it’s important to “get” Taizé. If at all possible, take a Taizé pilgrimage yourself, or attend one of the Taizé meetings in the U.S. (the next one is May 26 - 29, 2017 in St. Louis, MO). Failing those two options, invite someone who has been on a pilgrimage to meet with you so you can learn first hand their experience.
- Have an informative meeting where you share about the Taizé community, its history, the way the prayers have developed and what makes the Taizé community unique. As Santos writes, this will give your prayer gathering some context.
- Contact some of the other Christian communities/denominations in your community and share your vision of starting a Taizé prayer service. Ask them if they’d be interested in praying together using the Taizé chants.
- Determine how often you will meet. Around the country, there are some that weekly, but monthly is more common. However, monthly gatherings rarely create a sense of community. Living as a sign of reconciliation means at least a weekly prayer meeting. If you live in an urban setting, or in a town with a college or seminary, you might be able to meet daily. Part of the reason the prayers are so influential in Taizé is because the brothers’ lives are centered around them. They gather three times a day to pray. Ultimately, you will need to find a rhythm that works for your context and still allows you to live as a community of reconciliation.

¹ *A Community Called Taizé* by Jason Brian Santos, 2008, InterVarsity Press

The Space

- Try to meet in a church, doing what is necessary to make it feel welcoming.
- Taizé operates on two principles: simplicity and beauty. There are no pews or chairs in Taizé. There is no clutter. Having a space where people can sit on the floor is best though it may be necessary to offer a few chairs for those where getting down on the floor is a significant challenge. If it's a tile or cement floor, you may consider small rugs. Make some prayer stools (or better yet, invite people together for a day to make the prayer stools together!)
- Having said that, make the space you have work. If an open space isn't possible, offer at least some area where it's possible for some people to kneel or sit on the floor.
- Lighting should be subdued, and it's preferable that all people are facing the same direction as a way of expressing that our prayer is directed not to one another but to Christ.

Structure

- The prayer can begin with one or two songs. Then one person or two people alternately can read or sing verses from a psalm. Everyone can respond by singing an acclamation such as an alleluia after each verse.
- After the psalm, the Bible text chosen as a reading should not be too long and should be one that can be understood without any explanation. Before or after the reading, a song celebrating the light of Christ can be sung. A song after the reading can help to let the Word of God sink in and lead into a time of silence.
- If the people present are not used to such a time of silence (10 - 12 minutes), it can be announced at the end of the preceding song. A single long period of silence is better than several brief moments.
- Silence can be followed by a prayer of intercession. One or two persons take turns reading the petitions prepared in advance, with a chant such as Kyrie eleison sung at the beginning and after each petition. After the prayer of intercession, the Our Father can be said or sung.
- To finish, there can be a short concluding prayer followed by several songs.
- *One additional note:* The brothers have prayer service three times a day. Every morning the service includes Holy Communion. You might consider how to incorporate this into your own rhythm of services.

Music/Singing

- The songs are simple, and sung many times over. This allows for a simple reality to be grasped quickly and allow it to sink into one's whole being. Though simple, they require preparation. If unfamiliar with Taizé chants, download some songs. One common mistake is to play the songs very slowly. While some are written with slower tempos, many are bright and upbeat.
- Having leaders is helpful, but the leaders/musicians are not to be the focal point. If possible, place your musicians off to the side or even behind the gathering. For a small group, you can use a tuning fork to get the starting note. Musicians should practice!

- Songs in different languages are appropriate for large international gatherings. In a neighborhood prayer it can be disconcerting to use foreign languages with out a particular reason, so it is better to choose songs in English or the local language.
- It's good to remember that the chants are prayers. Singing these chants over and over allow the prayers to move deep into one's being. Don't be afraid to repeat a song 8, 9, or even 10 times.
- In Taizé, the evening service "officially" ends after about 35 - 40 minutes. However, many people will stay in the sanctuary singing for another one or two hours, even longer! The musician will stay and lead those songs for a while, but then he will leave. The singing continues! You might consider supporting that experience by having a CD (or digital download) of Taizé songs ready to play to allow people to stay in the space once the official prayer service has concluded.

One final thought: This comes directly from Jason Santos' book and his conversations with the brothers. He writes:

When advertising, promoting or simply telling others about your prayer service, please do not use the phrase "Taizé Prayer Service," or "Taizé-Style Prayer Service." The brothers much prefer that those who use their chants promote their gatherings simply as prayer services or prayer gatherings "with Taizé chants" or "with Taizé prayers." In this way, the emphasis of your gatherings will be on a life of contextualized prayer that just happens to use the chants of Taizé, rather than on the name of the community as a means to draw people in.