



Worship

“What is worship and why does it matter?” Worship begins with the simple act of gathering. Woody Allen said, “Showing up is 80 percent of life.” Yet worship doesn’t start with showing up. The pattern for worship in Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW) gets the direction straight and ups the number: “The Holy Spirit calls us together as the people of God.” Not 80 percent but 100 percent of the time. That is how Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession defines church: God calling us together around word and sacraments. God shows up all the time. Because of what God does, we are church.

The Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), helps center this church’s mission in what it means to gather as a church together around word and sacraments: “When we gather for worship we hear God’s word of promise. We confess our helplessness and receive forgiveness. We pray and we welcome new brothers and sisters through baptism, promising to support them in their walk in faith. We are fed with the bread of life and receive our Lord poured out for us. And then we are sent back into the world. Worship is essential for the church’s life and service.” Worship is at the heart of what we do. There we find the crucified Christ in risen form.

ELCA worshippers gather in celebration of the means of grace every week in more than 9,300 congregations and with more than 41 languages represented. Some assemblies gather around word and sacrament in ornate sanctuaries and a history of 200 plus years of ministry. Other assemblies gather in storefronts, bars and coffee shops to proclaim Christ crucified and risen. Still others gather at the border to welcome refugees, provide ministry to the imprisoned and offer reconciliation with welcome to those who define themselves as unchurched or de-churched.

We are a church that worships with a wide variety of music, cultural practices and understandings of what “traditional” and “contemporary” looks like. In worship we are church: gathered by God, every time. In worship we are Lutheran: hearing and proclaiming the story of salvation, law and gospel, the cross that raises us to life. We are together for it all, yet as we move toward and around the table, that togetherness becomes even more deep and wide, seen and unseen.

Knowing that worship is a never-ending cycle, continuously repeated, the ELCA’s worship staff has been busy since the 2013 Churchwide Assembly.

Major work for 2013-2016

- Designed and directed the Rev. Elizabeth A. Eaton’s installation as presiding bishop.
- The Rev. Kevin L. Strickland was called as director for worship in July 2014 and then became the assistant to the presiding bishop and executive for worship when the responsibilities for worship moved back into the Office of the Presiding Bishop. Strickland succeeded the Rev. Peter J.L. Perella, who died in 2014. We give thanks for Pastor Perella’s legacy and the ministry he provided in this call to and with the whole church.
- In 2014-2015 the worship staffed “Table and Font: Who is Welcome at the Table?” a churchwide conversation regarding sacramental practices around this church.
- In July 2015 staff hosted the third Worship Jubilee in partnership with the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians. Around 830 people gathered in Atlanta under the theme “Called to be a Living Voice.” As a result of a planned daylong conversation at the Jubilee, staff has hosted several consultations to examine the ongoing renewal of worship in the ELCA.
- In 2015 and 2016 worship staff, along with Augsburg Fortress, has worked to publish *In These or Similar Words* (a resource for crafting contextual language for worship), musical recordings of ELW liturgies in Spanish, easy-to-follow recordings for musicians who don’t read music and a Braille edition of ELW.
- The executive for worship visited each of the ELCA seminaries and provided leadership for the worship life of those communities.
- Much of 2016 has been spent preparing for the 2016 Churchwide Assembly while caring for the day-to-day needs of the worship life of this church.

Major directions for 2016-2019

- The Church Council, through recommendations from the Ministering to and with Same-Gender Couples and their Families working group, has tasked the worship staff to create supplemental resources to the service of marriage and prayer resources. The new resources are for congregations who choose not to hold same-gender marriage services but would like to pray for the couples getting married. These supplemental resources will be in an online form on the ELCA and ELCA publishing house websites.
- In October-November 2016 staff will host three events to highlight the 10th anniversary of ELW: “Strong Center — Open Door.” This is an opportunity for lay and rostered people to learn more about the ELW and the supplemental resources that have been published during these 10 years. For more information see ELCA.org/worship.
- Throughout 2017-2018 worship staff will host “Worship at the Center” events across the ELCA for lay and rostered people. These events will vary in themes, but all the topics will be centered on worship: the why, what and how.

Conclusion

The prayer for after worship in ELW says: “Grant, O Lord Jesus, that the ears which have heard the voice of your songs may be closed to the voice of dispute; that the eyes which have seen your great love may also behold your blessed hope; that the tongues which have sung your praise may speak the truth in love; that the feet which have walked in your courts may walk in the region of light; and that the bodies which have received your living body be restored in newness of life. Glory to you for your inexpressible gift; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.”

May it be so!

The Rev. Kevin L. Strickland, *assistant to the presiding bishop and executive for worship*