



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

Can technology help lead assembly song?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquires on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

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Imagine the following situations ...

- St. Luke Lutheran Church has been looking for the better part of a year for a keyboard musician to lead congregational singing. They have placed an advertisement in the local paper, in a newsletter for organists in the area, and also in a national placement service for parish musicians. They have called area universities, seminaries and music schools only to find very few people with the skills to lead music in worship. What can they do to see that the tradition of fine music continues in their parish?
- Hope Lutheran Church is a new mission congregation and knows that one way to build a strong community is through vibrant music. Like all mission congregations, their funds are limited. The question of what musical instrument will lead congregational singing was raised at a recent meeting. What should they do?
- Jerusalem Lutheran Church is hoping to introduce a diversity of musical styles for use in their liturgies. They have a fine organ, which is played by an excellent organist. Yet when approached to consider a wider diversity of styles, the organist seems reluctant to use any instrument other than the organ or play music in more popular stylistic idioms. How can they deal with the situation?

For all three of these congregations, the latest computer technology could offer an answer. It is now possible for instruments to be programmed and played by digital sequencers without human manipulation. Digital hymnals can play all the hymns or songs in a printed hymnal over an audio system. St. Luke's church, for example, could have their organ hooked up to a digital interface and eliminate the need for an organist. Hope Church could decide to buy a sequenced synthesizer to lead its worship and even save the money that would have been used to pay a musician. Jerusalem Church could keep their fine organist on the organ bench and simply push a button on a sequenced synthesizer when the congregation wants music in an alternative style.

The apparently simple answers above, however, avoid some basic truths about music, worship, and Christian community in general:

- Christian liturgy is dependent on the participation of *people*. Technology that displaces people alters the image of the worshiping body of Christ. *Principles for Worship*, a guide on music among other facets of worship, notes:
The living voice of the gospel is proclaimed with integrity through music that is live: that is, music led by people present in the assembly, music that uplifts the primacy of the assembly's voice, and music that avoids the use of technology to replace human leadership and participation (Application M-12D).
- Replacing people with machines is perhaps a cultural trend but one that the church ought to question. In the end, using machines instead of humans minimizes the value placed on all creative artistry and excellence.
- Leaders of the assembly's singing must pay attention to communal breathing, local acoustical conditions, and the context for the singing. Machines cannot be sensitive to these variables.
- Music in worship does not need to be led by an organ. For centuries, congregations sang sturdy hymns without the aid of any instruments. Keep in mind, though, that this happened long before carpet and pew cushions were added to worship spaces. Also, from *Principles for Worship*:
Assemblies make the best use of the musical instruments available to them. Depending upon the context, the worship space, and the styles of music, instruments including organs, pianos, keyboards, drums, guitars, and many others can be used effectively to lead congregational song (Application M-12C).

If the church allows technological answers to these situations, what is to stop a congregation from playing an audio or videotape of a sermon when a preacher is not available? Technology can serve the liturgy only when it allows the community, complete with its called and prepared leadership, to be physically present with one another. The Christian assembly is a fundamental expression of our faith.

Other answers to these situations might be more difficult but ultimately more sensitive to the nature of Christian worship and its music:

- St. Luke Church might ask a member or several members to lead congregational song without accompaniment. However, they would want to make sure that their worship space would acoustically support unaccompanied singing. For more on training for such leadership, see [Music that Makes Community](#) in resources.
- St. Luke Church might prepare for the future by offering a piano or organ scholarship to someone from the congregation. In exchange for the lessons, the student would play for worship.

- Johann Sebastian Bach supervised the music of four congregations in Leipzig at one time. Two- (or three- or four-) point positions for musicians might be the way of the future in the same way that pastors serve multi-point parishes, especially in rural areas. A congregation might consider scheduling Sunday worship so a musician could be shared with a nearby congregation. Such shared leaders might focus on training and enabling local talent, rather than providing all the leadership themselves.
- Rather than purchasing an electronic instrument, Hope Church might consider a used pipe organ or a fine grand piano. These traditional instruments are durable and can be seen as an investment in the future. Although electronic gadgets tend to come and go, pipe organs and pianos can last hundreds of years.
- Hope Church might discover that all they can afford is an electronic keyboard or synthesizer. The finest of these instruments are suitable for worship, especially when carefully amplified. However, Hope Church will want to be sure that someone plays the synthesizer in worship and does not simply push a "play" button.
- Jerusalem Church might offer its organist time and money to attend a worship and music conference in order to prepare to use a variety of musical styles. Attending the conferences of the [Association of Lutheran Church Musicians \(ALCM\)](#) and the music clinics sponsored by [Augsburg Fortress](#), publishers, would be good places to start.

Using synthesizers in worship is not the issue. Electronic instruments have brought us a great diversity of sounds. The principle, however, remains: technology that eliminates human participation and leadership in worship ought to be discouraged. We can welcome innovation, creative sounds, and artistic expressions but only when they serve the assembly and assist in the proclamation of the gospel.


RESOURCES

[Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:](#)



- 📄 *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997. (Available in English and Spanish)
- 📄 *Principles for Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in English and Spanish)

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 *Musicians Guide to Evangelical Lutheran Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007. This resource offers guides on leading assembly song and assistance in leading each hymn, song and piece of liturgical and service music in Evangelical Lutheran Worship.

 *A Field Guide to Contemporary Music*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2011.
This resource offers helpful information and suggestions for use of technology in worship, particularly focusing on sound technology in worship.

Other Resources

-  Music that Makes Community: www.musicthatmakescommunity.org
-  Association of Lutheran Church Musicians: www.alcm.org

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