



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Worship Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How do we make worship "contextual"?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries 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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If you were to visit a church in North America today, chances are you would be faced with a choice: contemporary or traditional. Occasionally there might be a third option of “blended.” There might also be additional styles of worship offered (emerging, recovery, Taizé, liturgical, etc.). Faced with these choices, those assembled are practically begged to answer the questions, “What is my preference?” “What do I like?” and “What works for me?”

These choices for worship have come to be expected in many churches. Is there anything wrong with them? Perhaps they are a cultural phenomenon in a society bent on individualization (a symptom of the Burger King ethos where you can “have it your way”). Perhaps they are the church’s most missional effort to reach as many people possible with the gospel of Jesus. However, a church that encourages self-preferential behavior seems to run against the path of discipleship that teaches, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3). What style would worship take if those assembled regarded others as better than themselves?

Reframing the style question

When a new church is birthed or when an existing church launches a new opportunity to assemble for worship, do they ask, “Are we going to be traditional, contemporary, or blended?” Do they look at what the largest church in town does and duplicate it? Is there another way to discern what style of worship a church should employ? Maybe a church has decided that offering multiple styles of worship has become divisive and done more harm than good. Perhaps their question is, “How do we move past traditional and contemporary?”

“Traditional,” “contemporary,” and “emerging” are merely labels. There are instances when our labels are not necessarily helpful or accurate. (see also, “[How is worship traditional? How is worship contemporary?](#)”) Regardless of their benefit or precision, these styles for worship have developed and the labels have become affixed to the

church's conscience. In order to move past these labels, a better question may be needed: "How do we figure out what our local worship should sound like?"

Nairobi statement

“Jesus whom we worship was born into a specific culture of the world. In the mystery of his incarnation are the model and the mandate for the contextualization of Christian worship. God can be and is encountered in the local cultures of our world. A given culture's values and patterns, insofar as they are consonant with the values of the Gospel, can be used to express the meaning and purpose of Christian worship. Contextualization is a necessary task for the Church's mission in the world, so that the Gospel can be ever more deeply rooted in diverse local cultures.” ([Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture](#), 3.1)

The Nairobi Statement reasons that worship, as it dynamically relates to the given culture in which it is enacted, is contextual. Worship cannot be disconnected from the time and place in which it is enacted. Many of the factors pertaining to how worship is offered are determined by its particular context. “We call on all churches to give serious attention to exploring the local or contextual elements of liturgy, language, posture and gesture, hymnody and other music and musical instruments, and art and architecture for Christian worship.” (Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture, 6.1) Faithful worship does not ignore the people or culture in which it is located.

Suggestions for making worship contextual

To return to our reframing question: “What should our local expression of worship sound like?” Contextual worship makes use of the music, language, and artistic forms of the local culture the church is planted in. This means that Lutheran worship in downtown New Orleans will potentially be radically different than Lutheran worship in rural Montana. Regardless of how radically different they appear in form and content, they both remain faithful enactments of Lutheran worship. The willingness to connect to the surrounding culture and become contextual make their worship faithfully Lutheran, not their predilection for Baroque-era European music. Contextual worship requires rooting into the neighborhood. There are no short cuts to contextual worship; real, relational, outwardly focused ministry is the only way to discern context. Contextual worship does not imply a disregard for global music or the historical practices of the church.¹

The sounds of a worshiping assembly should be reflective of the culture that it is planted in. The musical gifts that are present within a local church should be used to make worship contextual. The Holy Spirit, equipping her for ministry, gives these gifts to the local church. Many churches have a preconceived idea that worship should sound a certain way, requiring particular instruments for worship to sound that way. Instead of hiring a drummer or hiring an organist because of the perception of what worship should sound like, worship should sound like what you are.

The sounds of contextual worship, produced by the people that God has gifted to a church, should be current and modern, as well as reach back into the history of our faith.

¹ For further analysis of how to enact faithful, Lutheran worship that is also transcultural, counter-cultural, and cross-cultural, see the complete Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture.

RESOURCES

Frequently Asked Questions

- ↪ How do we make decisions about art and materials used in worship?
- ↪ Should we offer more than one worship service?
- ↪ What can we do if we don't have an organist?
- ↪ How do we expand our congregation's hymn repertoire?
- ↪ How do we introduce new music to our congregation?
- ↪ How is worship traditional? How is worship contemporary?

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)
- 📖 Lutheran World Federation. *NAIROBI STATEMENT ON WORSHIP AND CULTURE: Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities*. 1996.
- 📖 *Can We Talk? Engaging Worship and Culture*. ELCA, 2016.

Other Resources

- 📖 Wilkey, Glauca Vasconcelos, ed. *Worship and Culture: Foreign Country or Homeland?* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014.
- 📖 Witvliet, John. "An Open and Discerning Approach to Culture." Calvin Worship Institute. <http://vimeo.com/32210532>

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