



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How is worship traditional? How is worship contemporary?

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.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

Searching for a New Tone

Much changes. Much remains the same. Both of these statements describe Christian worship at any time in its two thousand year history. The worshippers change; this is obvious. Beyond this, musical expression, artwork, language, dress, and theology will change. On the other hand, much remains the same. Translations change, yet we still read from the Bible. Instrumentation may change, but we still sing together as God's people. Made in the image of God, we continue to create works of art that enrich worship. We are joined to Christ's body in the waters of Baptism; we receive his body and blood in Holy Communion. We pray. We are sent forth in mission. In worship at all times and in all places, the one unifying constant is the presence of Jesus Christ in word and sacrament.

Much debate and conflict has affected the church when it comes to what changes in worship and what stays the same. This has been true especially in the so-called "worship wars." The two camps have been given the unfortunate labels "traditional" and "contemporary." On the positive side, such "wars" have happened because the church, as a whole, genuinely cares about its worship. We often disagree most fiercely over things that matter the most to us.

Such labels, however, have also led Lutherans and other Christians to define worship in narrow categories, fostering an either/or approach to worship rather than realizing that worship is both traditional and contemporary. We miss the forest for looking at the trees. Let us consider the various dimensions of the traditional/contemporary divide in a new tone, noting where a both/and approach might replace or soften an either/or position.

Musical Style

More often than not, the single dimension of worship that designates one service as "traditional" and another as "contemporary" is its music. Again, it is good that we care about music, for it forms and expresses our faith in profound ways. Yet music – that art often credited as a "common language" – can needlessly segregate a worshipping community.

Music is often used as a marketing tool (see below under Cultural influences). Congregations choose a kind of music in order to attract a certain group of people. Style, not the music's text or quality, often determines what is accepted at any one service. Since organs are often associated with the past, they are not allowed in "contemporary worship." Since drums are considered "contemporary," they are barred from traditional worship. Yet drums have been used in worship since ancient times and organs are built and installed yet today.

A word about the word "contemporary" as applied to music. This is an instance where language fails us. There are many hymns recently written or being composed that would not be considered "contemporary" because in worship, the word usually refers to musical style instead of its time of composition. Oftentimes an assembly will sing a song from the 1980s in worship (more than 30 years ago!) and call it "contemporary."

Some assemblies will continue to worship with predominately one style at one service and another style at another service. Sometimes the arrangement is very practical in nature; it might be easier to ask musical leaders to participate in one service on a weekend rather than two or more. Yet one must always consider how the entire assembly is exploring the richness of multiple musical expressions.

- Music from all styles can be welcome in worship. What is central is that the musical style serves the gospel. It is not the music, finally, that is central; the music points to the assembly gathered around Word, Bath and Table.
- The voice of the assembly is the primary instrument in worship. Both organs and praise bands can obscure this; both can support and uplift it.
- Encourage participation rather than performance. Musical Leadership serves the assembly when it strives for participation by the whole assembly.
- Involve all ages in all kinds of music. Refrain from making assumptions about musical preference based upon age.

Hospitality and Evangelism

One of the issues surrounding this debate is a genuine concern that all are welcomed to worship. Some congregations fear that if worship looks and sounds different from the surrounding culture, it will not be hospitable to "seekers," another unfortunate label in this discussion as we are all, at one time or another, seekers of something.

The concerns, of course, are justified. Sometimes assemblies have "always done it that way" and haven't given careful thought to how their worship appears to someone visiting for the first time. Congregations can be closed. Yet true hospitality goes beyond worship style. People – worship leaders and the gathered assembly – determine how welcoming an assembly is.

Something new can be inviting even in its strangeness. If a congregation enacts the "traditional" action of a gospel procession in a way that causes a visitor to pause and wonder, in ways that make the reading of the gospel come alive, something "traditional" can feel new. Likewise, if a congregation uses a trap set well to accompany a style of music that thrives on a rhythmic accompaniment, the congregation is being welcoming of diverse styles. Again, being welcoming needs a broader, more inclusive tone.

Related to the concern of hospitality is evangelism. We call ourselves the “Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.” Worship relates to evangelism in that it has at its center the proclamation of Jesus Christ. Again, sharing the good news goes beyond style. As stated in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s set of priorities for the practices of word and sacrament, *The Use of the Means of Grace*:

The means of grace lead the church to mission. In every celebration of the means of grace, God acts to show forth both the need of the world and the truth of the gospel. In every gathering of Christians around the proclaimed Word and holy sacraments, God acts to empower the Church for mission (Principle 51).

Beyond musical style or other stylistic concerns is the concern that the church is “empowered for mission.” And this mission grows out of the celebration of word and sacrament.

Increasingly adults seeking a church home will be not be baptized or will be unfamiliar with the basics of the Christian faith, its worship and its mission. Here the church has the opportunity to focus not on attracting new members, but on making disciples. (See: *Go Make Disciples* in Resources). Like understanding worship style in a more nuanced way, the idea of making disciples rather than simply attracting members will mean change—a change to something both traditional (intentional instruction was essential for baptism in the early Church) and contemporary (congregations are rediscovering this practice).

Tradition and Traditional

It is helpful to make a distinction between the words “tradition” and “traditional.” All worship remains the same in some ways. In the ways that we value anything handed down to us (the Bible included), we value tradition. This is true outside of worship among our families and in civic life. There is a reason we keep Great Grandma’s recipe for pumpkin pie and honor veterans at Memorial Day observances. If we do not honor what has been passed down, we live without respect for what has come before us. We believe in the “communion of saints;” we believe that God’s people at all times and places have value.

This is not the same as liking the traditional because “that is the way it has always been done.” That is idolatry, making a God of our own customs or preferences. This often happens regarding music in worship. We are bound by human designed laws about what music is worthy or unworthy. Whether “traditional” or “contemporary,” we can become focused on the music alone and neglect the role of music in serving the gospel. Worship honors what has been handed down, not for its own sake, but for the sake of the gospel. The received pattern of worship (see [“What is the pattern of worship?”](#)) a tradition, but it is not a museum piece to be preserved. It is a pattern that evolves and adapts to a host of situations, times and places. For the biblical roots to this pattern see [“What are the biblical roots of worship?”](#). Both the pattern and its roots connect to mission. *The Use of the Means of Grace* is helpful here, noting that such a statement addresses the health of our worship as it relates to mission.

Yet even the Church itself is threatened should it fail to claim the great treasures of the Gospel. Either careless practice or rigid uniformity may distort the power of the gift. This statement is one way in which we, in the Church, can give counsel to one another, supporting and sustaining one another in our common mission (Principle 2, Background 2B).

As the Church seeks to be the body of Christ in the world, we best honor tradition and ask what needs changed for sake of the Gospel in our particular contexts here and now.

Worship and Culture

As Christians, we do not worship in a vacuum. We are shaped before birth and until death by forces and factors outside of ourselves and beyond our own families. The question about worship being traditional and contemporary depends closely upon this cultural reality. How much does worship resemble the surrounding culture? How much does it distinguish itself apart from that culture? (for more on this question, see *Flowing Water, Uncommon Birth* and the *Nairobi Statement* in Resources).

Consider the following issues related to culture's impact on worship:

- Marketing. We are part of an economic system that depends upon buying and selling and using marketing to influence such decisions. Do we use marketing in our worship? To what degree and to what end?
- Instant Gratification. In our technological age, we can have many things at the click of a button. What does this mean for worship?
- Surround Sound. We live surrounded by sounds of all kinds and at all times. There is very little space for quiet unless we are intentional about setting such time apart. Is worship expected to be this "surround sound" as well? Can room be made for silence? (see also, ["What is the Role of silence in worship?"](#) and ["How does worship involve all our senses?"](#))
- Performance Culture. In much of our lives, especially in the arts, we watch or listen to others perform rather than engage in the art-making itself. Related to marketing above, the arts become something we consume rather than create. How does this influence our worship, especially in its music and arts ministries?

Those who care for, plan and lead the church's worship will continually ask how we embrace, adapt or reject these and other aspects of our culture just as Jesus often questioned, challenged or embraced cultural practices in his lifetime.

Navigating a Both/And Approach

What a both/and approach will mean for one worshipping community will not be identical to another. Part of being "contemporary" in worship is knowing your context and honoring particular people and places. Diverse styles of music, for example, can draw us into God's presence, proclaim the Word, surround the sacraments and equip us for mission. In all of our planning, it is essential to notice what choices have been made and for what reasons. Knowing the "whys" behind our decisions will ground worship leaders more intentionally in their role and help them empower the assembly.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ☞ What is the pattern of worship?
- ☞ What are the biblical roots of worship?
- ☞ How do we introduce new music to our congregation?
- ☞ What is the role of music in worship?

- ☺ Can technology help lead congregational singing?
- ☺ What is the role of silence in worship?
- ☺ How does worship involve all our senses?

[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)
- ☞ Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture.
- ☞ Collins, Dori Erwin and Scott C. Weidler, *Sound Decisions: Evaluating Contemporary Music for Lutheran Worship*, Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Division for Congregational Ministries.
- ☎ Open Questions in Worship Series. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress
 - Vol. 1: *What are the essentials of Christian worship?*
 - Vol. 2: *What is 'contemporary' worship?*
 - Vol. 3: *How does worship evangelize?*

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- ☞ *Go Make Disciples: An Invitation to Baptismal Living.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2012.
- ☞ Boesenecker, Andrew, *A Field Guide to Contemporary Worship: How to Begin and Lead Band-Based Worship*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2011.
- ☞ Brugh, Lorraine S. and Gordon W. Lathrop. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Sunday Assembly.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
- ☞ Burke, Suzanne and Martin Seltz, eds., *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship* Augsburg Fortress, 2012. (Leader edition and Participant edition also available separately).
- ☞ Rimbo, Robert. *Why Worship Matters.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004.
- ☞ Torvend, Samuel. *Flowing Water, Uncommon Birth.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2011.
- ☞ Wengert, Timothy J., *Centripetal Worship: The Evangelical Heart of Lutheran Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007.

Other Resources

- ☞ Brown, Frank Burch. [*Inclusive Yet Discerning: Navigating Worship Artfully.*](#) Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009.)
- ☞ Long, Thomas G. [*Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship.*](#) The Alban Institute, 2001.

Revised January 2013

Copyright © 2013 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. www.elca.org/worshipfaq.

This document may be reproduced for use in your congregation as long as the copyright notice appears on each copy.