



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

What is an appropriate hymn tempo?

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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The matter of what is an appropriate hymn tempo is a topic on which most people have an opinion and few people agree. However, there are several very practical techniques a musician can use to determine the best hymn tempo for each situation. Below are factors to consider when deciding tempo.

Acoustics of the Worship Space

A room with dry acoustics and smaller rooms with low ceilings or carpeting often lends itself to a somewhat faster tempo. A larger, more reverberant space will often call for a somewhat slower tempo. The longer a room's reverberation, the more time it takes for a musical phrase to unfold, especially when a large group of people are singing. In addition to a slower tempo, such spaces call for more clarity and articulation by the music leaders.

Size and make-up of the assembly

While not always the case, it is more likely that a smaller assembly will be able to sing at a quicker tempo than a large assembly. For example, a group of ten people gathered in a small chapel and five hundred people in a cathedral may sing the same hymn at very different tempos. In addition, assemblies used to singing together will often sing more energetically than an assembly for a wedding that may not be used to singing together.

Instrument(s) used

Small organs or pianos with a few people singing may not create enough energy to sustain long phrases. A slightly faster tempo helps to compensate for these factors. When coordinating many instruments such as organ with brass or keyboard with guitars and percussion, a tempo must be one that allows the ensemble to lead and support the assembly's singing.

Time of Day

Time of day can influence hymn tempo. If it is early in the morning or a weekday evening after work, the congregation may be lethargic. A slower tempo with a lighter accompaniment might be needed to encourage singing. If it is a festival occasion, the

congregation might be overly energetic and need a strong, steady tactus (pulse) and moderate tempo to keep everyone together. Use your judgment to select the best tempo that will encourage and support congregational singing. Whatever the selected tempo, stick with it. The congregation needs to be able to rely on a strong, steady pulse.

Familiarity of the hymn

A newer hymn may require a slightly slower tempo than one that is very well known. However, be mindful of the style of the hymn. If a hymn is taken too slow or too fast, the assembly will not be introduced to the genuine character of the hymn/song.

Ability of the musician

Common sense dictates that a musician not lead a hymn at a tempo that will hinder the accuracy and effectiveness of the hymn. Pastors, musicians, and worship committees need to have a good sense of the musician's skill level. It is best to sing a few songs well than to introduce many that will be led and sung ineffectively.

A related topic: Tactus

A related topic to a hymn's tempo is its tactus or pulse. For example, when playing most northern European hymns, it is a common misinterpretation to automatically treat the quarter note as the tactus or primary pulse. More often than not, the tactus is the half note (or, perhaps, the dotted half note in a triple meter). Play the hymn with a half note pulse and see what a difference it makes. Hymns take on a new level of energy, becoming livelier, more forward moving, even easier to sing, without necessarily going faster.

It is vital for the congregation that the musical leader keeps a steady tempo throughout the hymn. When you come to the end of a stanza (except for the final one), don't slow down. Keep the tactus going internally. You may need to stretch the pulse a bit. In some cases you need to add a full pulse or two to what is on the printed page to make a logical transition into the next stanza. Always be sure to release the chord long enough to give the congregation time to breathe. The connection between stanzas should feel natural. Be consistent so that the congregation knows what to expect and can begin singing the next stanza together with confidence.

Hymn playing is an art, not a science. While certain tempos will be more or less successful at a given time and place, it is not possible to give a strict metronome marking for each hymn.¹ Taking into consideration the hymn's character, the congregation, the space and the musical leadership, musicians can choose a tempo that will, at its best, bring forth the voice of the assembly.

¹ *The Musician's Guide to Evangelical Lutheran Worship* does indicate a range of metronome markings for the service music, hymns and songs in ELW. These are helpful, provided they are always viewed as negotiable.

RESOURCES

Frequently Asked Questions:

- ☪ What is the role of the Choir in worship?
- ☪ How do we introduce new music to our congregation?
- ☪ How do we select hymns and songs for all seasons?

Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:

- 📄 *Worship Formation Study Modules*. ELCA Worship Staff. Sessions that may help a congregation dig deeper into many aspects of worship including assembly singing.

Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:

- 📖 *Musician's Guide to Evangelical Lutheran Worship¹*. 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.

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