



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Worship Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

What is "postmodern" or "emerging" worship?

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.

The church is often the recipient of many different labels. The church's gatherings for worship also receive their fair share of labeling, even if they are misnomers or vaguely accurate. The last two decades have seen the rise of the term "postmodern" to describe the ministry and worship practices of some churches. What exactly does the term mean and where does it come from?

Philosophical background of postmodernism

The postmodern movement gained momentum in the late 20th century in the world of architecture, literature, critical thought, as well as other areas. The most influential postmodern philosophers include Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault (all 20th century French philosophers), and others. In general, postmodern thought is marked by a sense of skepticism and criticism toward modernist thought. Modernism can be understood as the philosophical, societal, and artistic movements created by the Western, industrialized world in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A critical view of modernist thought means different things in different artistic genres, but in general it can be understood as reaction to the rigidity and aesthetic restrictions of modernism. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodernism>, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/modernism>)

Premodern, modern, and postmodern

Postmodernity can also be understood in relation to the prior premodern and modern eras. Marva Dawn has simply noted the emphases of each era's understanding of God, authority, and truth. The *premodern* era (prior to the age of Enlightenment) exhibited a belief in the supernatural (god or gods). Authority rested with those who carried knowledge of the supernatural. Truth was seen as absolute. The *modern* era (post Enlightenment) exhibited a belief in the natural (what can be proved with science). Trust in authorities gave way to the autonomy of the individual. Truth became relative. The *postmodern* era (late 20th century) has brought deconstruction (a continual suspicion of beliefs previously held) and a decentering of authority (neither the self nor the society

holds influence). Any truth that claims to be absolute is rejected. (Marva Dawn, *A Royal "Waste" of Time*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999. p. 41-44). There are no clearly defined breaks between these eras and transitional periods can be seen as lasting decades.

Tenets of postmodern spirituality

The postmodern movement has also had an effect on the world of religion and spirituality. Postmodernism's influence on Christianity is often labeled the "emerging church movement." The emerging church is a purposely-elusive term as emerging churches often share a mindset rather than a core set of ministry practices. There are, however, some core tenets that connect together most proponents of a postmodern spirituality:

Narrative. Postmodern spirituality takes the perspective of the life of the world being part of a larger narrative. The deconstructive philosophies of the era have left people with a fractured and fragmented view of their lives and the world. Therefore preaching and teaching are often understood in terms of storytelling. The story being told is the overarching narrative of a faithful God who covenantally keeps promises (Dawn, p. 51).

Symbol. The importance of symbolic imagery has surpassed written text or spoken word. This is greatly influenced by our visual culture and the prominence of video screens. Symbols communicate a depth of meaning about core doctrines and beliefs. The power of symbol has most affected worship in postmodern contexts. There is a renewed appreciation of the assembled body of believers as the primary symbol of God's presence. The pulpit/ambo, table, and font are the secondary symbols within the assembly that speak to God's work throughout history and in the world today (Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002. p. 192).

Mystery. Alongside symbol, mystery is embraced within postmodern spirituality. The numinous aspects of the faith are not explained away with trite answers. There is encouragement to live in the tension of the already but not yet. Postmodernity's landscape is increasingly an enchanted world and in touch with the supernatural. "The postmodern world, with its emphasis on mystery and ambiguity, readily recognizes that our knowledge is not exhaustive. Certainty in spirituality is less important than the mystery of our union with Christ expressed in the worship of the church" (Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999. p. 134).

Indeed the church has much to offer the postmodern world through the renewing waters of the font, recreating gospel story, and welcoming table of presence.

Aspects of postmodern worship practices

In general, the postmodern worship practices of emerging churches are reactions against the pragmatic, baby boomer-oriented, seeker-sensitive movement. Instead of "services" of worship, emerging churches frame their assemblies as "gatherings" that are not afraid of a return to more liturgical forms. The gathering is highly experiential, focusing on the participation of those assembled, often through stations that guide people to interact with prayer, scripture, art, poetry, and other spiritual exercises. Therefore the space for worship is often quite different than traditional worship spaces. The seating is relationally oriented, with people facing each other, often using living room or coffee house type furniture. Lighting is dimmed and candles are used to promote the worshipers connection

to God. The actual building may not have originally been designed for corporate worship, including a home, warehouse, or some other modified space. Symbolic imagery, including stained glass and Orthodox iconography (possibly generated through video technology) help create a sense of ancient reverence (Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003. p. 185).

Music for postmodern worship is eclectic and contextual. Eucharistic spirituality is embodied in holistic celebrations around the table. Lay people are more prominently engaged in the leadership of the gathering. Scripture is given a degree of priority through the number of readings and their length. Preaching is often interactive and prompts the assembly into living in a missional paradigm in light of the gospel (Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, p. 202).

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions](#)

- ☞ How is worship traditional? How is worship contemporary?
- ☞ What is the role of silence in worship?
- ☞ How can lay people participate in worship leadership?
- ☞ How do we involve children and youth in worship?
- ☞ How do we use the body in worship?
- ☞ How does worship involve all our senses?
- ☞ Should we offer more than one worship service?

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

- 📄 *Principles for Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in English and Spanish)
- 📄 *Can We Talk? Engaging Worship and Culture*. ELCA, 2016.

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress](#)

- 📖 Rimbo, Robert. *Why Worship Matters*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004.
- 📖 Torvend, Samuel. *Flowing Water, Uncommon Birth: Christian Baptism in a Post-Christian Culture*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2011.

Other Resources

- 📖 Baker, Jonny, Doug Gay, with Jenny Brown. *Alternative Worship: Resources from and for the Emerging Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004.
- 📖 Benson, Bruce Ellis. *Liturgy as a Way of Life: Embodying the Arts in Christian Worship*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013.
- 📖 Gibbs, Eddie, and Ryan Bolger. *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.
- 📖 Lose, David. *Confessing Jesus Christ: Preaching in a Postmodern World*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

- 📖 Smith, James K.A. *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006.
- 📖 Tickle, Phyllis. *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008.
- 🎥 Vision Video. "The Changing Face of Worship - The Church In A Postmodern World" [DVD]
- 📖 Webber, Robert E. *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God's Narrative*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008.

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