



## Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

### Are flags appropriate in church?

*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.*

One of the most frequently asked questions directed to the worship staff of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and its predecessor church bodies has been whether it is appropriate for congregations to place flags in the worship space. The recurring issue is not flags themselves, but the national flag of the United States of America.

Flags are not a required element in a Christian worship space and the decision about whether or not to place them in a worship space is a local decision. While it is a local decision we offer the following issues and recommendations for congregations to consider when discerning this question.

#### **A National Symbol**

The American flag is a powerful symbol of this nation. It carries enormous emotional meaning, especially for veterans and for families that have sacrificed loved ones in wars and armed conflicts under that symbol. For others, the flag carries great political significance as a symbol of what they consider amiss with our nation. Anyone who doubts the power of the flag as a symbol might consider the public scandal caused in Chicago when a student artist at the internationally known Art Institute of Chicago chose to display the American flag on the floor of an art gallery. Public demonstrations followed the opening of the exhibit. The use and display of the flag remains a sensitive issue.

Some Christian churches are identified with nations or states (the Church of England is Anglican; the Church of Norway, Lutheran; the Church of Sweden, Lutheran; and so forth.). Sometimes these churches display flags as a part of their national identification. In the United States, of course, we have no state church. Yet here, too, many Christian congregations have traditionally included an American flag among the items used to furnish their worship space or displayed elsewhere in their building. In many congregations, it has been customary for the American flag to stand to one side of the

altar and the often called Christian flag to stand on the other<sup>1</sup>. Flags in Lutheran churches most likely became more prominent during times when immigrants felt the need to show unwavering loyalty to their new country, especially when many of these immigrants still worshiped in their mother tongue. As noted in *Principles for Worship*:

The use of flags in our churches received impetus in the early twentieth century when Christians in America wanted to stress their loyalty to this country. A sense of patriotism sometimes leads to the desire to display and honor flags in public places (S-16G).

For example, German Lutherans struggled to honor both their heritage and the new country in which they lived, worked and worshiped. For historical background on this situation, see this article in Resources.

### **Christian Symbols**

In Christian worship, we also have powerful visual symbols that carry deep meaning: bread and wine, water, the Bible and most importantly, the assembly itself. What is the power of such symbols? In the words of *Principles for Worship*, they “support the proclamation of the word of God” (Principle S-16). The symbols that are central for Christians focus on what is distinctive in Christian identity: being baptized into Christ, being formed by the Word, being fed at Christ’s table. Such symbols draw us to Christ and enrich our worship as a community and as individuals.

The distinction that can be made between the powerful symbolism of the flag and the powerful Christian symbols is that the Christian symbols are transcultural; they are not national symbols. Christians from around the globe can be drawn to Christ in the presence of such symbols. As Saint Paul says: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:27-28). The most appropriate visual symbols displayed in worship spaces convey this unity in Christ.

### **Church and Nation**

As Christians, however, we live as both baptized people of God and citizens of a nation. Living as both members of the Church and citizens of a country has its challenges. Martin Luther in his commentary on the first commandment noted that, “We are to fear, love, and trust God above all things.<sup>2</sup>” Honoring the flag of our country certainly has its place, yet in worship, we are focused on the eternal presence of Christ that extends beyond tribe and nation.

Sometimes “a sense of patriotism leads to the desire to display and honor flags in public spaces” (Principles for Worship, S-16G). Yet *Principles for Worship* notes that the flag in a worship space can be a source of conflict:

Flags signal national loyalties and may become divisive, implying that a particular national identity is synonymous with the Christian way. Flags, while appropriate

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<sup>1</sup> The flag often identified as the Christian flag seems originally to have been an emblem associated with the international Sunday school movement. It is not identified with any particular church body.

<sup>2</sup> Luther, Martin. “The Small Catechism” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, © 2000, Fortress Press (p. 359). This is reprinted in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, pg. 1160.

in other parts of the church complex and as part of certain national occasions, have no permanent place in the primary worship center (*Principles for Worship*, Application S-16H).

There are ways to honorably display a flag in the church building while still respecting the primary worship space and its Christian symbols. A responsible alternative to putting the flag in the worship space would be to display it prominently in another suitable place. Placing flags in the fellowship or community hall, the gymnasium, or other large meeting room used by civic groups such as scouting organizations or for civic functions such as voting, allows the flag to carry out its symbolic function for the nation without competing with the central symbols of the Christian faith. Congregations that have war memorial chapels, plaques, or books of remembrance and the like and which desire to display the American flag might want to consider placing the flag near those places in their building rather than in the worship space.

Whenever the American flag is displayed publicly, it is very important to take care to follow the rules of protocol that have been established by civic agencies governing that display. It is possible to give great-unintended offense if these rules are not followed. A local veterans group or military post usually can supply these rules on request. These protocols apply wherever the flag is displayed, indoors or outdoors. Proper placement, lighting, care, all need to be considered carefully.

## RESOURCES

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

- ☞ *Principles for Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in English and Spanish)
- ☞ American Lutheran on the Home Front During World War I. *Journal of Lutheran Ethics*. February 2005.

### Other Resources

- ☞ [Should Churches Display the American Flag?](#) *Christianity Today*, July-August, 2012.

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