



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How and when might congregations conduct surveys about worship styles and practices?

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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Whenever congregational leaders contemplate a change in worship practices, frequently the idea of conducting a survey of the members is suggested. What style of music do people prefer? What worship times are most convenient? Should we have weekly communion or not? These topics, as well as many others, can be among the survey questions considered regarding a congregation's worship practices.

While surveys may be helpful, if not carefully used they may actually thwart the decision-making capabilities of leaders that the congregation has already chosen. Most decisions involving congregational worship practices are made by committees or staff people. Such persons have often had years of experience in leading and preparing for corporate worship, and in most cases they need to be trusted to plan for worship that is not only appealing to many people, but that is also faithful to Christian tradition, and that can broaden the experiences of a particular congregation.

That said, there may indeed be occasions for conducting surveys of a congregation's worship preferences. One basic caveat regarding surveys: Do not survey a congregation about something for which the outcome has already been determined. For example, imagine that a worship committee has already decided that it wants to increase the number of services that are offered each week. If it is going to go through with this decision regardless of the results from a survey (even if a survey indicates that a majority of members are not interested in having additional services), then nothing will have been gained by conducting a survey. In fact such a decision of the committee may end up being a great sore point.

When Surveys Might be Useful

Surveys are often best used among current members to determine preferences that have relatively low stakes. Let's think about that sentence a little more. Oftentimes the reason stated for a survey is to determine how to increase worship attendance. But unless one takes a random sampling of unchurched people in the community, or even of inactive members of the congregation, quite likely the target group is not going to be reached by a

survey. Obviously if a survey is to be completed some Sunday at worship, then it will not be an indicator for the preferences of those who do not worship. Even when a survey is mailed out to a large number of people, specifically to include those who do not worship regularly, the percentage of returns is often too low to be helpful.

Keeping surveys confined to low stake issues will help avoid major theological battles or other heated debates. A survey that is narrowly conducted around worship times may be an example of a fairly low stake issue. Asking people to decide between 9:00am and 10:00am, or 5:00pm and 6:00pm services is probably going to be fairly non-controversial. Just be aware that if you conduct a poll during a 9:00am service, you may be excluding most people who wish that they could come to worship at 10:00am! Keep in mind also that the longer a survey, the more likely it is that it will not be completed.

An Alternative to Surveys

People are often hesitant to make a decision in favor of something that they have not experienced before. It's called having a fear of the unknown. Yet oftentimes when people have had the opportunity to experience something new (and especially when there has been adequate preparation and gentle encouragement), they may actually discover that they like the new practice. Having a trial period of a few weeks or months may help worshipers to get the feel for a new practice in a way that may be less threatening, especially if the old pattern can always return.

New musical settings of the liturgy are often introduced with the idea that they will be used for a specific season, perhaps for Lent or during the summer (see also, [“How do we introduce new music to our congregation?”](#)). By the end of an entire season there should be enough comments and sustained experience for worship planners to determine whether or not the musical setting could be used again.

Patterns of more frequent communion may be introduced in a trial period pattern as well. If a congregation regularly communes twice a month, perhaps the entirety of an Easter season (seven weeks) it can offer communion weekly (see also, [“Why and how do we move to weekly communion?”](#)) Following such a trial period worship planners can determine whether the congregation would be more favorable towards making a permanent change, or if there are concerns that would need to be addressed before such a change was possible.

Trial periods (perhaps even accompanied with an evaluation form or survey tool concluding them) offer plenty of opportunities for worshipers to air their views, but they also allow for worship planners and congregation councils to make informed decisions that consider a number of factors, including congregational opinion.

Regular reflection about worship by staff, worship teams or worship committees can also be a helpful alternative (see also, [“What is a Worship Committee?”](#)). Staff and worship committees often spend a great deal of time planning for worship that will happen but less time on worship that has already taken place. Guides for such reflection can be found in the book *Encountering the Holy* in Resources below.

RESOURCES

Frequently Asked Questions:

- ☪ How do we introduce new music to our congregation?
- ☪ Why and how do we move to weekly communion?
- ☪ What is a Worship Committee?
- ☪ How is worship tradition? How contemporary?
- ☪ Should we offer more than one service?

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)

Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:

- 📖 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).

Other Resources

- 📖 Day Miller, Barbara. [*Encounters with the Holy: A Conversational Model for Worship Planning*](#). Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2010. A sample Worship Survey and models for group worship reflection can be found in Appendices A and E.

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