



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How can I create simple liturgical music (for free)?

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.

Liturgical music is intimately connected to the proclamation of God's Word and the celebration of the sacraments. It supports the appointed scripture readings, and allows the entire congregation to participate. Creative simplicity often accomplishes this far better than anything too complex. Two moments in the service of Holy Communion that lend themselves to this are the singing of the psalm, that responds to the Old Testament reading, and the gospel acclamation, which announces the reading of the gospel. Simple step-by-step directions are given here to begin an exploration of creating authentic and original liturgical music for your choir, vocal ensemble, soloist and congregation. These processes may be done alone by a director or can become a group educational activity. Creating psalm antiphons (refrains) is especially effective with children.

CREATING PSALM ANTIPHONS

The psalms are the earliest hymns of the church. This vast treasury of devotional material is intended to be sung. (see also, ["Why do we sing the Psalms?"](#)) Creating a simple antiphon, or refrain, allows the congregation to participate easily.

1. Read the appointed text for a particular day.
Example: Consider Psalm 104 for Pentecost.
2. Select a key verse or phrase (from within the psalm or another seasonal text) to serve as the antiphon (or use the antiphon suggested in the lectionary). *Verse 30 has a direct mention of "Spirit:" "You send forth your Spirit, and they are created; and so you renew the face of the earth."*
3. Read the text over and over to discover the natural rhythm. Edit or paraphrase the text, as needed. It is possible to put the rhythm into music notation. This is not necessary, however. You can keep the rhythm in your head.

To create a more singable text, the verse might be edited as follows. One possible rhythm may be:

Send forth your Spi - rit, O Lord,
and re - new the face of the earth.

4. Look for important words as well as natural high or low points. *Key words seems to be "Spirit," "Lord," and "renew."* Based on our rhythm above, "Lord" and "renew" already have received longer notes. Let "Spirit" receive the highest note. Perhaps, it may look like this.

Send forth your Spi - rit, O Lord,
and re - new the face of the earth.

5. Translate the shape into pitches, using the natural rhythm discovered earlier. *Be daring! Start some experimental singing, going up and down with your line. It may sound crazy at first, but soon you'll discover a pleasant and simple melody.*
6. If possible, transcribe your melody and rhythm into musical notation. *Again, this is not necessary. You can sing the melody to a congregation once and ask them to repeat it. They will learn it by ear. When written out, the finished melody appears like this:*

Send forth your Spi - rit, O Lord,
and re - new the face of the earth.

7. You now have a refrain to the psalm. Verses could be sung by a soloist using a simple *ELW* psalm tone. Or create your own. If you are writing out the music notation, you will sometimes need to transpose a tone, depending on the key of your antiphon.

CREATING GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

(Alleluia & Verse)

In the service of Holy Communion, the rubric just before the gospel says: "The proper verse may be sung." Unfortunately, congregations with no choir (or choirs with little time or budget) often use only the default version, often "Lord, to whom shall we go...." An excellent compromise is to keep the appointed verse in place sung by a soloist (or choir), and to use a simple, familiar alleluia sung by the congregation.

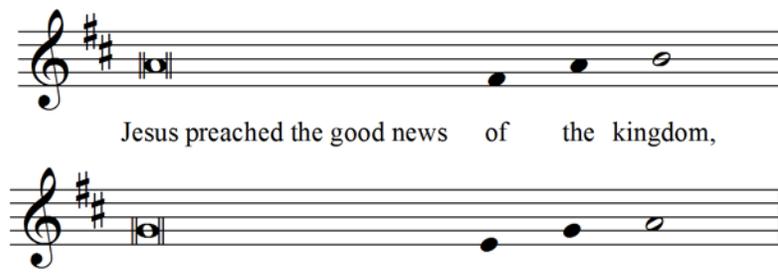
1. Read the appointed texts for the day.
2. Select a key verse or phrase from within the texts, usually the gospel, to serve as the announcement of the Gospel. Or simply use the verse suggested in the lectionary (see the Resources below to find these).
3. Select an alleluia refrain from a hymn or song or create your own. Start with something familiar. This method can work with any style! Some possibilities are:
Chant Alleluia – ELW 168 *The Strife Is O'er* – ELW 366
Caribbean Alleluia – ELW 172 *O Sons and Daughters* – ELW 386-387
Celtic Alleluia – ELW 174 *For All the Saints* – ELW 422
Good Christian Friends – ELW 288 *Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones* – ELW 424
4. Select a psalm tone that will work with the refrain (ELW pew edition, pages 337-338). The verse can be sung to the tone. A tone may need to be transposed to the same key as the refrain.
5. Put the pieces all together. *The whole thing would work like this for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany (Year A):*

- A cantor (soloist) or choir sings the refrain:



Al - le - lu - ia. Al - le - lu - ia. Al - le - lu - ia.

- The congregation repeats the refrain.
- The cantor sings the verse to *ELW* psalm tone 1:



Jesus preached the good news of the kingdom,
and cured every sickness among the people.

- The congregation repeats the alleluia refrain.

6. The process can be expanded to make use of more verses and many more alleluias, especially during Easter!

Both of these ideas can be used with or without keyboard or guitar accompaniment. Depending on the season or day, rhythmic instruments, bells, or melodic instruments could be added. There are many excellent published musical settings of psalms and gospel acclamations that include the congregation. If resources are tight, however, the ideas suggested here can be a life saver. Even if resources are plentiful, creating homegrown liturgical music for a specific community can create a powerful sense of ownership, especially when created by a group of members.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ☞ Why do we sing the Psalms?

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Leaders Desk Edition*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006. This volume lists the appointed Psalm for each Sunday and festival with the suggested refrain as well as the Gospel Acclamation. See pp.60-137.
- 📖 *Indexes to Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007. A single volume reference that integrates the indexes for the ELCA worship resources and the Revised Common Lectionary. Provides a Prayer of the Day, Gospel Acclamation and hymn selections for each Sunday in cycles A, B, and C. Also contains a comprehensive scriptural index of hymns.
- 📖 *Sundays and Seasons*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress. Print version published annually by church year.
 - 📖 Also available as an online subscription at www.sundaysandseasons.com.

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.