



Worship Formation: Frequently Asked Questions

How do we lead worship with grace and confidence?

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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It's about *presence*. Presence means the space, both physical and psychic, you take up when you are in front of people. Many people are surprised, for example, at how short or small some famous people are when they see them in person for the first time in a casual setting where they aren't "on." This is an example of someone's psychic presence being bigger than the physical space she or he uses.

Most of us don't come by a public presence naturally, certainly not when we are absolutely terrified of being up in front of others. Add this to the pressure that liturgical leaders are slowly beginning to feel as we recognize the role we play in setting the mood of worship. We have a growing desire to be welcoming and real as we reach out to new folks.

Too often, however, when we try for casual, we get sloppy, and if we try for formal, we get rigid. Is it possible to find a graceful middle, where those leading liturgy are warm and together and authentic and skilled, all at the same time?

We can borrow from our cousins in the theater. The big difference between actors and liturgical leaders is that actors are playing someone else. Liturgical leaders are "playing" themselves. The big similarity is that we both are trying to lead a group of people into and through a story. Like our actor cousins, we are up front and our presence is critical to the success of the story's transmission.

Actors do some things that could benefit us as liturgical leaders. They have learned how to center themselves in the task at hand and to concentrate their energy. They believe in what they do so they look like they are present and engaged. How do they do this?

1. They learn their lines ahead of time. They don't try to do it cold. Once they've learned their lines, they are free to explore how those words might mean something slightly different at this performance than at the last. We can do this.

We don't have to memorize, but we should know what we are going to say and have thought deeply into those words so we can say them as if they were coming from our core. Liturgical leadership is more than simple memorizing. Internalizing would be the preferred term to memorizing, having what you need for leadership in your bones, so to speak.

2. They practice their blocking (stage movement) until it's a habit and they can then concentrate on something other than where they are supposed to be and when. We have the benefit of a liturgy that remains quite similar from week to week. We generally work in the same space. We should figure out what to do next time if we find ourselves awkwardly holding both the offering plate and the hymnal. This need not surprise us every week! We can set a bulletin inconspicuously where it can be a guide. We can mark our materials so we aren't frantically flipping pages when it's time to offer the preface or the prayers. We can make sure there is a glass of water in the pulpit if we tend to get dry.
3. Unlike actors, those leading worship often get to have "the script" in front of them: bulletin, hymnal, etc. Careful preparation of printed materials can improve a leader's presence and confidence. Take the time needed to create binders for the presider (see also, ["Who is a Presiding Minister?"](#)) and assisting minister(s) (see also, ["How can lay people participate in worship leadership?"](#)). Make sure the font is big enough and that page-turns are kept at a minimum. You may want to place copies of the hymns, lessons and all service music to keep juggling resources at a minimum. Such a binder is also a place to add any directions or notes for the worship leaders. It does take some time to create such a binder, but the time is well spent.
4. Actors have thought through the meaning of what they are saying and doing and they believe it. They understand the urgency of the message and the value of the things they are using. For example, the Bible we use in worship is not just any book. It has more value to us than the hymnal. We should hold it that way and not stash it carelessly on the side of the pulpit. The bread may be just a wafer, but it is also the body of Christ, given for you. It's precious, so we can give it as if this were true.
5. They recover from disasters, large and small. Sometimes actors forget their lines. Sometimes their props aren't where they expect them to be. Sometimes the electricity goes out. Sometimes a baby hollers. When actors have prepared well, they have more ability to go with the flow when things don't go as planned. If we have done our homework, we, too, can recover. We don't have to let a little chaos reorient the whole service. Solve the problem and go on. Let it go.
6. They give themselves a chance to succeed. Actors gather early for a show. They check to be sure their stuff is ready, and once they are dressed and ready, they wait in what's known as the green room for at least ten minutes before the show begins. They take the time to gather their wits/thoughts/energy about them and settle down enough to do the job they are about to do. We so often are racing until the last second, receiving prayer requests as we walk in the door, flying from study to nave without taking a breath. We need to give ourselves a chance to succeed, to gather ourselves before we begin. We can pray, alone or together with other liturgical leaders (include the acolytes!), asking for God's presence, take a

deep breath, and then enter the sanctuary all in one piece, ready to do the job we have to do.

No one will lead liturgy in exactly the same way, but all of us can be centered on the task and tuned in to those with whom we minister. All of us will be tired sometimes, but we can rally if we give ourselves time to prepare. We can ask the congregation to help us by writing down those prayer requests, to honor the few minutes we need before worship starts to pray, to worship with us, not just as an audience, but as partners.

RESOURCES

Frequently Asked Questions:

- ☞ Who is a Presiding Minister?
- ☞ How can lay people participate in worship leadership?
- ☞ How do we involve children and youth in worship?

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).
- 📖 Burke, Suzanne; Julie O'Brien; Melinda Quivik and Martin Seltz, eds., *Leading Worship Matters: A Sourcebook for Preparing Worship Leaders*. Augsburg Fortress, 2013.
- 📖 Hoyer, Christopher George. *Getting the Word Out: A Handbook for Readers*. Minneapolis. Augsburg Fortress, 2013.
- 📖 Isabelle, Calliste, *Embodying Confidence and Grace: A Handbook for Presiding Ministers*, Augsburg Fortress, 2019.
- 📖 Scharen, Christian. *Serving the Assembly's Worship: A Handbook for Assisting Ministers*. Minneapolis. Augsburg Fortress, 2013.

Other Resources

- 📖 Adams, William Seth. [*Shaped by Images: One Who Presides*](#). Church Publishing, 1995.
- 📖 Hovda, Robert W. [*Strong, Loving and Wise: Presiding in Liturgy*](#). Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1976.
- 📖 Huck, Gabe and Gerald T. Chinchar. [*Liturgy with Style and Grace*](#), revised ed. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998.
- 📖 Long, Kimberly Bracken. [*The Worshipping Body: The Art of Leading Worship*](#). Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009.

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