



Worship & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How do we make decisions about art and materials used in 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.

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Worship involves all of our senses (see also, [“How does worship involve our senses?”](#)). One of these is the sense of sight. When we take the time to carefully look at our worship space, what do we see?

Art in worship includes more than stained glass windows or paintings. It includes elements that adorn the worship environment and materials crafted for liturgical purposes such as communion ware, candles, flowers, furnishings, paraments, and more. (see also, [“What are vestments and paraments and why are they used?”](#))

Congregations will regularly need to make decisions about the artistic materials used in worship (see below for two sample case-studies). These decisions are not easy. There is no rulebook of “musts” and “shoulds” on this matter. There are, however, matters of importance and values that need careful consideration.

The ELCA’s document *Principles for Worship* includes a segment “Worship Space and the Christian Assembly.” Consider the following statements from this document as they pertain to artistic materials in worship:

Furniture made of sturdy and beautiful wood, stone or wood sculptures, fabric hangings made of natural fibers, living water and plants, natural light, a loaf of bread, wine, fragrant oil, candles of wax, and the beauty of human forms lead people to an experience of wonder and inspiration that in turn opens them to the mystery of God (Application S-20B)

While definitions of beauty vary according to personal or cultural tastes, it is possible to identify some helpful criteria, such as balance and scale, color scheme, and quality materials honestly crafted (Application S-20D).

The term “inspiration” is often associated with creative endeavors. For people of faith, the word testifies to the creative work of the Holy Spirit. We are inspired, the spirit works within and among us. Through works of art, we are lifted out of ourselves, drawn to the beauty and mystery of God. We are also made more fully ourselves, continually being reformed by the in-spiration, the breath of the God within us.

Beyond their calling our attention to wonder and beauty, the arts “embody the proclamation of the Word” (*The Use of the Means of Grace*, Principle 11). Music is a gift of God shaped in stewarded for the proclamation of the Gospel (see also, [“What is the role of music in Lutheran liturgy?”](#)). Likewise, the visual arts are integral, not merely decorative, to Christian Worship.

When we make decisions about what materials and art are used in our worship, many values intersect to guide our choices. These include:

Theology

Materials and art in worship are nonverbal means through which the gospel can be communicated. Therefore, choices about art are not only a matter of taste (“I like this; I don’t like that”) but of theology. What might this suggest about who God is? How does this serve the gospel? What values do we communicate by using such art/materials?

Economics

Some materials used in worship can be very expensive; others may be made rather inexpensively. How much something costs will certainly be a factor in making decisions, keeping in mind that expensive or cheaper is not always better. For example, a glass cruet is no less honest than a silver flagon (pitcher) that contains the wine. Either could be possibilities for a worship assembly’s use. And while a glass cruet may initially be far less expensive than a silver flagon, it’s not uncommon to see silver flagons that have been used by a congregation for generations. What costs less today may not be the best long-term investment. So there is no single solution to determining which materials will be perfect in all situations. Convenience is also a value closely linked with economics and justice (see below).

Justice

This value involves questions of authenticity and fairness. Does the art used reflect the values of your local context while at the same time being part of a larger tradition? Are the materials used honestly crafted or are they imitations of something else? What materials are used? Where are they from? Were the workers that created them treated justly and fairly? If you use art or material from another culture, do you do so carefully and appropriately? Some congregations have begun the tradition of using [palms](#) for Palm Sunday that are acquired more fairly. This issue is also an ecological matter (see below).

Stewardship of Creation

Many artistic expressions use natural materials. Choices related to worship space/environment impact the environment outside the church’s walls. The issue of whether or not to use disposable communion cups is one that is made with an eye to the environment as well as theological concerns.

Aesthetics

Most people will desire that worship materials serve and enrich, rather than obscure or trivialize the gathering of God's people around word and the sacraments. As mentioned above, definitions of beauty will vary, but one can ask if the art is in balance with the surrounding worship environment, whether the materials are of good quality, whether they have been crafted honestly and well. Art in the assembly calls our attention to the gospel; it does not call attention only to itself.

All of these values come into play when a congregation is making a decision about art and environment, though all values may not impact each and every situation. Congregations are best served by making careful and theologically informed judgments about environment and art, rather than making off-the-cuff decisions.

Let us consider how these values might intersect in scenario that might face a congregation's worship committee or staff.

Sample Scenario:

For years, Advent Lutheran Church had been using wax candles for their Advent wreath. These Advent candles were handmade by a member of the congregation, but that member has since deceased. Because they were handmade, the wreath was very specific to that person's creativity. Some would like to see similar handmade candles be used. Others in the congregation see this as an opportunity to try something new. Some members of the congregation have mentioned the expense of using wax candles each year and have asked to use oil-filled candles instead. Others are concerned about safety and have asked that electric candles be considered.

What values are at play here?

Economics: Will oil candles be cheaper? The initial cost is more expensive, but over time, it may be a cost savings. It does cost money to buy the oil to refill the candles, yet probably less than purchasing new candles each year. Plus, it is fairly easy to purchase the oil. If the congregation uses wax candles elsewhere in the worship space, however, the question may arise as to why a different decision is made for the advent wreath. Since the candles were handmade by a member, would it be possible to find another person in the community to provide these? Or to teach other members of the congregation how make candles?

Justice: The congregation has had a very particular, local tradition of these unique handmade candles. Some are concerned about what a new kind of candle says of the past. What would the member who made candles all those years think of using oil-filled or electric candles? What about asking another person to make handmade candles? Does this value creativity in the congregation in a new way? Others would like to begin a tradition that is more similar to other advent wreaths they have seen at other churches; local tradition is not as important to them.

Aesthetics: If oil or electric candles are used, the look of the Advent wreath will be very similar at the start of Advent. It will continue to look the same throughout the Advent season, requiring very little maintenance, whereas the wax candles will be different sizes (the last lit being the tallest). As with wax candles, the light will grow as another candle is lit each week of Advent. Some would like to

purchase a very beautiful brass holder to hold the new oil-filled candles. They would like to purchase this in memory of a loved one.

Stewardship of Creation: The previous member who made candles did so in an environmentally friendly manner. How would using oil-filled or electric candles impact the environment?

Theology: The congregation needs to consider how the Advent wreath communicates nonverbally. If Advent is about waiting for Christ, it is very significant that some candles are taller than others. When time passes, wax candles melt. Using wax candles communicates this fact of time. Is this a question of honesty? Does using oil candles that do not melt communicate falsely about our human condition, about time passing and yet the light still shining?

Safety: The question of safety was not a value mentioned above, but when discussing candles, that will surely come up. Again, the safety value will need to be in conversation with the theology and aesthetic value. In the case of electric candles, they are clearly imitating something else and may not have been honestly made. The concern for safety makes sense if the candles are going to be hand-held. An Advent wreath, however, is stationary. Like candles on the altar, they can be lit safely and monitored carefully. If for the sake of safety we eliminate burning any candles in worship, what would this mean theologically? This is especially pertinent since fire and light are such prominent symbols in our faith.

Many values interweave as congregations makes decisions regarding artistic and other matters. There is no Lutheran rulebook on materials and art, but there are serious, gospel-friendly questions that congregations need to answer. What follows is a sample list of such questions.

Materials and Art Checklist

- Are the materials used (candles, flowers, paraments, banners, communion vessels, vestments...) truly worthy of the gospel they serve? Worthiness is not so much a matter of expense, but of quality and authenticity.
- Are the materials used beautiful by community standards? Do they express a noble simplicity or simple elegance?
- Do the materials serve the liturgy and appropriately express the liturgical season and specific celebration?
- Are the materials "from the people" -- reflective and expressive of the congregation's ethnic cultures, art, and sensibilities?
- Do the materials represent the best the community has to offer, reflecting the gifts and giftedness of the worshipping community?
- Are the materials authentic and real, representing the best of God's good creation?
- Are the materials friendly to the environment? Do they reflect good stewardship of God's good earth?
- Are the materials lovingly made or chosen specifically for your parish needs, rather than purchased from a store or catalog?

As in all matters of worship practice, the pastor, informed by church tradition and denominational recommendations, has the responsibility to teach about such practices in the congregation. As the theologian in residence, the pastor is called upon to use his or her best discernment and to give theologically informed guidance to parish altar guilds and worship committees as decisions are made about the materials and arts used in worship. Decisions made should be faithful to the gospel and responsive to local needs.

RESOURCES

Frequently Asked Questions:

- ☪ How does worship involve our senses?
- ☪ What are vestments and paraments and why are they used?
- ☪ “What is the role of music in Lutheran liturgy?”

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)

Other Resources

- ☪ Eco-Palm: <http://lwr.org/site/c.dmJXKiOYJgI6G/b.7522021/k.C95C/EcoPalms.htm>

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