



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How do we use the body 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.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

The Body in Worship

One biblical phrase used to describe a gathering of Christians is “the body of Christ.” We are the body of Christ in the world. Our faith is a bodily one. We believe in the mystery of God becoming flesh, born of a woman and put to rest in a tomb. We believe in a God whose face we see in Jesus: healing, touching, raising to life. We receive Jesus in word but also in sacraments that depend on the material world. Since we are made in the image of God, we are “temples of the Holy Spirit”(1 Cor. 3:16). Our bodies are known and loved by God.

Worship, then, involves all parts of ourselves: mind, heart, voice, hands, feet. Under this question we will consider the body and movement. In a related question, we will consider how all of our senses are involved in worship (See also, [“How does worship involve all our senses?”](#)). In both entries, you will find many links to other Frequently Asked Questions that treat a subheading more fully.

Posture

Sitting

Bodily posture can affect how we receive and speak the words and actions of worship. The most common postures in Lutheran worship are standing and sitting. We typically sit for the more auditory portions of worship: the lessons and sermon. We sit as preparation for what is to come: as we await the beginning of worship, before and after we receive communion.

Standing

If we are at a gathering in someone’s home and a guest arrives, it is often common courtesy to stand and greet the newcomer out of a sign of respect. Our standing in worship can be similar, especially as we stand to hear the Gospel, a sign of Jesus the Word among us. Standing is also practical because it enables corporate action such as praying together. Standing is the best posture for singing because it allows us to breathe properly and sing confidently. Long periods of standing, however, may be

difficult for some members. Assemblies need to be hospitable, perhaps using wording such as “stand as you are able” in a printed bulletin.

Kneeling

Many Lutherans kneel as a sign of humility upon entering sacred space to prepare for worship, when confessing sin or offering intercessory prayer, and when receiving Holy Communion. Many Christians follow St. Augustine’s suggestion to refrain from kneeling during the fifty joyous days of Easter, standing for all prayer, acts of confession, and to receive communion.

Prayer postures

Although many assemblies stand for intercessory prayer (and prayer at other times during worship), the question becomes: what do I do with my hands? Some fold their hands during prayer, some leave them at their sides. Others hold a hymnal, others fold them but leave the palms up, making a kind of cradle. Yet others are rediscovering the ancient prayer posture known as “*orans*,” holding both hands outstretched, palms up. This posture is often used by the presider or assisting minister, but the assembly may use it as well.



Gesture

Worship includes many gestures. Many of these are performed by a worship leader, such as raising hands in blessing or breaking bread at communion. Gestures may also be a meaningful, non-verbal dimension of worship. Consider the following:

Making the Sign of the Cross: (See [“Why do Lutherans make the sign of the cross?”](#))

Bowing

"All the nations you have made shall come and bow down before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name" (Psalm 86:9). These words from the psalmist have inspired a simple gesture among worshipers that has remained a part of worship through the Christian era. In many cultures, bowing is an expression of humility, respect and reverence. Christians often physically show this reverence for God by bowing toward the altar upon entering and exiting the worship space, toward the cross as it passes in procession, whenever the name of Jesus is spoken, and at the words, "Glory to the Father . . ." Bowing (or even kneeling) during the Nicene Creed at the words "For us and for our salvation...he became incarnate..." is a way of expressing the humility Christ endured by becoming human for our sake. As our earthly liturgy is symbolically and musically joined with the heavenly liturgy at the words "Holy, holy, holy . . . hosanna in the highest," a profound bow is appropriate. Christians also acknowledge that their very presence as the gathered people of God is a sign of Christ’s presence; we recognize Christ in the presence of one another. For this reason, some congregations have the tradition of the presiding minister bowing to the assembly and the assembly bowing in return.

Extending hands in greeting

Another very simple gesture would be for the assembly to gesture in response to the presider. For example, when the presider holds his or her hands outstretched and says “The Lord be with you,” or “The peace of the Lord be with you,” the

assembly's hands may also be extended as we respond, "and also with you." By pairing this simple gesture with the words, we emphasize the partnership between leader and assembly.

The exchange of peace: See ["What is the Exchange of Peace?"](#)

Movement

Processions

We often use the term "journey" to describe the Christian faith; Christ journeys with us, leading us, accompanying us, following us. One way to enact the pilgrim character of our faith in worship is through processions. Some assemblies process with the cross at the gathering and sending each week; others process only occasionally. Another appropriate time for a procession is at the reading of the gospel, thus symbolizing the word proclaimed among us. Communion ministers process when they bring the collection, bread and wine to the table.

Processions will vary by season. An extravagant procession might be held on Easter Sunday and on the Sunday of the Passion; less involved processions may be held during Lent.

In addition to serving a practical purpose— getting the worship leaders into their places— the participation of acolytes, choirs and others encourages active participation in worship.

Dance

In the book of Exodus, we read of the prophet Miriam who, at the defeat of Pharaoh's army, takes a tambourine in her hand. Then "all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing" (Exodus 15:20) In moments of great joy, we dance. Yet for Lutherans in North America, dance may be the least prevalent movement in worship.

In North American culture, dance is often equated with performance. We go to see others dance, but we don't do it ourselves. This is not always the case, however. Dancing and parties go hand in hand. We dance at weddings; some go to dancing events regularly.

Some cultures- such as many traditional cultures in Africa- could not imagine music without dancing; Therefore any worship that included music would necessarily include dancing.¹

Some congregations have begun to experience dancing through liturgical dance. Such dance serves the action of worship and is usually performed by trained dancers. The dance may accompany an action such as a procession or it may interpret a scripture reading. It may accompany prayer. Other assemblies have begun experimenting with dance that is more communal.

¹ In *This is Your Brain on Music* by musician and neuroscientist Daniel J. Levitin reminds us that "The Sesotho verb for singing (ho bina), as in many of the world's languages, also means to dance; there is no distinction, since it is assumed that singing involves bodily movement (*Levitin*, p.7) Full citation: *This is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession*. New York: Penguin Group, 2006.

Clapping

Assemblies that are not yet comfortable with dancing to music may find clapping to be an entry point for involving movement in worship. When we think of clapping, we may think of clapping for a performance. This is applause. (See, [“Is applause appropriate in worship?”](#)). Clapping is not done for someone, but out of a sense of joy and often as an accompaniment to singing.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ☪ How do we involve children and youth in worship?
- ☪ How does worship involve all our senses?
- ☪ Is applause appropriate in worship?
- ☪ What is the Exchange of Peace?
- ☪ Why do Lutherans make the sign of the cross?

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

- 📄 *Principles for Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002. (Available in English and Spanish)

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 Burke, Suzanne and Martin Seltz, eds. *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2012.
- 📖 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.
- 📖 Scharen, Christian. *Serving the Assembly's Worship: A Handbook for Assisting Ministers*. Minneapolis. Augsburg Fortress, 2013.
- 📖 Dahill, Lisa. *Truly Present: Practicing Prayer in the Liturgy*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005.

Other Resources

- 📖 Long, Kimberly Bracken. [*The Worshipping Body: The Art of Leading Worship*](#). Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009.
- 📄 [“Well-Tempered Worship”](#) by Robert Glick.

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