



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How do we worship and pray with other Christians and Non-Christians?

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.

This question involves two separate issues. The ELCA's statement, [*The Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*](#), clearly notes the different situations:

"Ecumenism has as its focus and goal clarity of understanding among Christians and a greater realization of unity among Christ's people. As such it is closely related to the mission of the Gospel to all the world. It should not be confused with the important but distinct responsibility for the Church to enter into conversations and reach greater understanding with people of other faiths" (*Ecumenical Vision*, p. 8). With this distinction in mind, first the question of worship and prayer with other Christians will be considered, then the latter issue, relations with non-Christians.

The commitment to Christian unity is a part of the ELCA's identity, as outlined in chapter 4 of its constitution (see [ELCA Office of the Secretary: Model Constitution for Congregations](#)). The ELCA's ecumenical vision offers helpful criteria for making judgments on whether and when participation in worship and prayer with other Christians is appropriate: "The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) seeks in its faith and life "to manifest the unity given to the people of God by living together in the love of Christ and by joining with other Christians in prayer and action to express and preserve the unity which the Spirit gives" (ELCA Constitution 4.02.f.).

In its ecumenical efforts, the ELCA "commits itself to share with others in the worship of the Triune God, [and] to the task of proclaiming the Gospel to all" (*Ecumenical Vision*, p. 6). These criteria may be applied to three common situations of ecumenical worship: 1) a wedding between two people from different Christian traditions; 2) community-wide, ecumenical services such as an Easter sunrise service or Thanksgiving Day service; and 3) prayers at civic ceremonies, such as Memorial Day, Independence Day, or Martin Luther King Day celebrations. It is important to note here that the ELCA also has recommended practices guidelines for celebrations of Holy Communion with our [Full Communion Partners](#).

In the first instance, a wedding certainly offers an opportunity for proclaiming the Gospel both to the wedding couple and to all who gather to witness and celebrate with them. There is no question that such opportunities are consistent with the ELCA's commitment to Christian unity. The same can be said for the community services sponsored by local ecumenical associations made up of Christian congregations. In this instance, these services are a witness to the whole community of the unity shared among Christians, while at the same time they are an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel to those gathered for the service.

The third example, prayers at civic ceremonies, moves into a gray area in many instances as some of these ceremonies may have different emphasis or agendas. From the United States' beginnings as a nation, American civil religion was based on the presumption that this country was a "Christian" nation. While such a presumption might have been acceptable by some in an earlier age, it is no longer valid nor appropriate today. Therefore, Christian clergy involved in such events ought to make clear that they do not represent the nation nor do they pray as representatives of the nation. In such situations, it is best to articulate a narrow, confessional stand, and make it clear that, as a member of the clergy of the ELCA, one can offer prayers on behalf of the nation and the world in the name of Jesus Christ.

The second issue, worship and prayer with non-Christians, moves beyond the constituting identity of the ELCA but is very much a matter of concern in the religious pluralism of the present day and in the wake of events since September 11, 2001. A study guide published by the National Council of Churches based on their 1999 statement of interfaith relations, [*Interfaith Relations and the Church*](#), can offer some guidance in these matters. Representatives of the ELCA participated in the preparation of this statement and voted for its adoption by the NCCC. This document notes an underlying tension within Scripture. On the one side, scripture speaks of the uniqueness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ (John 14:6, Acts 4:12, Colossians 1:19-20, 1 Corinthians 15:22); and on the other side, scripture also speaks of natural or general revelation (Romans 1:20) and asserts that "the Spirit blows where it chooses" (John 3:8). Taken together, Scripture invites Christians to be open to people of other religious traditions while at the same time witnessing through their lives of the liberating power of salvation through Christ. The NCCC policy document counsels Christians to respect the identity of others and to "accept their right to determine and define their own identity." With this in mind, Christians eager to express the unity of all humanity affirmed by the Christian scriptures through prayer and worship should not force their agenda on those unwilling to take this step.

The desire for interfaith prayer or worship is likely to occur in these settings: 1) a wedding of people from two different religious traditions; 2) interfaith dialogue groups; 3) social justice gatherings, 4) prayer events in times of national crisis. In the first instance, if the wedding takes place in a Christian church, the ceremony should be an expression of the Christian tradition and an opportunity for the proclamation of the Gospel. The inclusion of a blessing of the couple by non-Christian clergy in this instance is a possibility. The decision to include such a blessing would be a matter of local concern, informed by ELCA statements and policy. If the wedding takes place in a non-religious setting, the shared participation by representatives from two faith traditions is more feasible. Under these circumstances, the role of the clergy in the marriage rite as

agents of the state, which regulates laws on marriage, is more obvious than in a wedding that takes place in the church, where the pastor's call to proclaim the Gospel is more evident. Wherever the marriage rite is held, syncretism needs to be avoided. This could result in a rite that is neither Christian nor that of the other religious tradition. In the second and third settings named above, interfaith dialogue groups and social justice gatherings, often the desire is to start and/or end the gathering with prayer. The cautions noted above must be kept in mind. At the same time, the [ELCA Guidelines for Lutheran-Jewish Relations](#) offers this suggestion: "On some occasions, when persons of several faiths offer prayer, it may be possible by way of introduction to note that each will pray in language fully reflecting each tradition."

When Lutherans are guests of other traditions, particularly in inter-religious settings, it is important that sensitive attention be given to the religious practices of their hosts. In all settings will want to understand the expectations of their practice and at what level they are welcome to participate.

RESOURCES

Frequently Asked Questions:

- ↪ What does Full Communion mean for Lutheran worship?

Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:

- 📄 [The Vision of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.](#)
- 📄 [ELCA Office of the Secretary: Model Constitution for Congregations](#)
- 📄 [ELCA: Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations.](#) This unit's website includes pages on current ELCA ecumenical and inter-religious dialogues, including many resources with study materials and historic documents.
- 📄 [Called to Common Mission](#)
- 📄 [ELCA Guidelines for Lutheran-Jewish Relations](#)
- 📄 [ELCA Full Communion Partners](#)

Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:

- 📖 *Revised Common Lectionary Prayers: Proposed by the Consultation on Common Texts.* Developed by the [Consultation on Common Texts](#).

Other Resources

- 📖 [A Christian Celebration of Marriage: An Ecumenical Liturgy.](#) Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995.
- 📄 [Interfaith Relations and the Churches: A Policy Statement of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.](#) National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Adopted by the NCCC General Assembly on November 10, 1999.
- 📄 [National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A Study Guides](#)

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