



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How does worship involve all our senses?

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.

Through our bodily senses, we become aware of who we are in relationship to the world around us. These senses work in relationship, deepening our connections with God, one another and the earth.

Worship involves more than “the head.” Just as Jesus’s ministry involved the body and its many senses, incorporating our senses engages the body of Christ more fully in worship. We not only hear, we sing. We not only look, we taste. Just as we are one body in Christ but many members (1 Cor. 12), we worship as one body but with many senses.

Sense of Sight in Worship

For those of us gifted with the sense of sight, many visuals can enrich our worship.

- *Color*
Colors decorate the worship space and also tell us, without words, the season of the church year (see also, [“What is the meaning and use of liturgical colors?”](#)).
- *Art and Environment*
The art that adorns a worship space and the design of the environment itself communicate at a level that may not be readily apparent. Yet in the words of *Principles for Worship*, “Worship and worship space are linked in a vital relationship” and “The place of worship expresses the church’s faith and serves God’s mission” (Principle S-1, S-2). This document continues to explore many dimensions of worship space. For more about environment and worship, see also [“How do we make decisions about art and materials used in worship?”](#).
- *Candles*
The references to light in scripture are abundant; from creation to new creation, we rejoice in the gift of light. For Christians, Jesus is the light of the world. The Paschal candle is “the preeminent symbol of the light of Christ” but other candles adorn the worship space, usually to draw attention to the focal points of table and ambo or lectern/pulpit. (see also [“How do we use a Paschal Candle?”](#))

Candles may also be used at specific times during the church year. The Easter Vigil begins with the lighting of a fire, the lighting of the Paschal Candle and the spreading of the light to handheld candles. Many assemblies use candlelight at Christmas Eve or at other nighttime services. The use of the Advent wreath is yet another symbol of light in our worship (see also, [“What is the Advent Wreath and how is it used in worship?”](#)).

Candles may also be used as part of prayer practices such as *Holden Prayer Around the Cross*.

Candles may also awaken the sense of smell. See below.

Sense of Smell in Worship

In worship, our most under-used sense is smell. Yet we know that smell is a very powerful sense, often linking us to memories long forgotten.

- *Incense*
Incense, mentioned often in scripture, has long been used to enrich worship. (see also, [“Why and how do we use incense in worship?”](#)).
- *Oil*
There is the subtle aroma of fragrant oil used in baptismal and healing anointing (see also, [“How is oil used in worship?”](#)).
- *Candles*
Candles used in worship do have a slight smell, but scented candles are generally not chosen for worship.
- *Flowers*
Some assemblies have the tradition of using flowers to adorn the worship space. This is especially true during the Easter Season when the smell of spring flowers fills the air. Care should be taken that such use does not overwhelm the worshiper’s sense of sight or smell. *Principles for Worship* notes:
The essential elements of the liturgical spaces—flowing water, bread, wine, and proclaimed word—become easier for the assembly to experience when care and restraint are exercised in the furnishing and decorating of the liturgical centers, so that the nonessentials do not overshadow the central elements. The duplication of symbols often leads to their diminution (Principle S-18; Application S-18B).

Out of respect for those with allergies, some congregations may consider plastic or silk flowers in worship. Such a decision calls into question whether works of art that are imitations serve worship well. For more, see [“How do we make decisions about art and materials used in worship?”](#).

Sense of Sound in Worship

- *Speech*
“Faith comes by what is heard...”(Romans 10:17). Our sense of hearing is involved in worship when we listen to the readings of scripture, the sermon, the prayers, and more. Congregations need to be aware of how well leaders can be

heard in the assembly. Are sound systems adequate? Is the sound balanced? What provisions are made for the hearing impaired? Consider this guidance from *Principles for Worship*:

Sound reinforcement, when necessary, is held in careful balance with natural acoustics. The effective use of media and technology often calls for particular skills and training. (Application S-15A).

And

Media and technology can also assist in overcoming physical limitations, aid sight for the visually impaired, and augment sound for the hearing impaired, facilitating everyone's full participation (Application S-15B).

A related issue is what actual words are spoken (and sung) in worship, both by the leaders and the assembly. For more on this topic, see ["How is language used in worship?"](#).

- *Music*
"O Come, let us sing to the Lord" (Psalm 95:1). The gift of music enriches worship in many ways. It serves the word and it surrounds the sacraments. Through music we offer praise and prayer and we tell who God is and who we are as God's people through the gift of song. The voice of the assembly as it sings together is key in a Lutheran understanding of music in worship. Many of the ELCA's Frequently Asked Questions address the topic of music in worship. See especially ["What is the role of music in the Lutheran liturgy?"](#), *Principles for Worship* and *Music and the Christian Assembly*, listed in Resources below.
- *Silence*
"There is a time to keep silence and a time to speak" (Ecc. 3:7) Often times worship can become oversaturated with words both sung and spoken. We may forget to leave room for being quiet and still before God's presence. A careful use of silence balances the presence of music and speech in worship (see also, ["What is the Role of Silence in Worship?"](#)).

Sense of Touch and Taste

"Taste and see that the Lord is good." (Psalm 34:8). In worship, we use our sense of taste in the receiving of communion as well as our sense of sight. We also use our sense of touch. With these and our other senses, our faith is embodied and tangible. When we share the peace with those around us, we receive the peace of Christ through another's hand or embrace (see also, ["What is the Exchange of Peace?"](#)). When we are baptized, the touch of water with the word claims us as God's child. When we receive communion, the bread is placed in our hand and the wine is brought to our lips. Through the sense of touch, God is brought near. The Word dwells among us.

Because the use of touch is such an intimate sense, worship planners need to be aware that comfort levels will vary. Not all will feel comfortable sharing the peace, especially if others move around the worship space shaking hands. Some are shy; others may need to be healed from hurtful experiences with physical touch. Having an awareness of this diversity may not change how certain practices are carried out in your congregation, but it may simply leave room for those who come from a different place. This awareness is

part of living in the tension of understanding God as both imminent (close and accessible) and transcendent (mysterious and beyond our grasp).

For more on the Lutheran understanding of the sacraments, see [“What is a sacrament for Lutherans?”](#).

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ☞ How can we involve children in worship?
- ☞ How can our worship services be more welcoming to people with disabilities?
- ☞ How do we make decisions about art and materials used in worship?
- ☞ How do we use a Paschal Candle?
- ☞ How do we make decisions about art and materials used in worship?
- ☞ How is oil used in worship?
- ☞ How is the body used in worship?
- ☞ How is language used in worship?
- ☞ What is a sacrament for Lutherans?
- ☞ What is the Advent Wreath and how is it used in worship?
- ☞ What is the Exchange of Peace?
- ☞ What is the meaning and use of liturgical colors?
- ☞ What is the role of music in the Lutheran liturgy?
- ☞ Why and how do we use incense in worship?

[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)

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 Burke, Suzanne and Martin Seltz, eds., *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2012. (Leader edition and Participant edition also available separately).
- 📖 Briehl, Susan and Tom Witt. *Holden Prayer Around the Cross: Handbook to the Liturgy*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009.
- 📖 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.

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.