



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How is oil 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.

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

Background

The use of oil (chrism) is mentioned extensively throughout Scripture. The NRSV Exhaustive Concordance has 224 listings for oil and 170 for anointing. Priests, kings and queens were anointed with oil. Oil was offered as a sacrifice. Oil was used as an agent of healing. The references include such interesting phrases as "the oil of gladness."

How might oil be used in worship today? *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* and its companion volumes make provision for the use of anointing with oil as part of Holy Baptism and Healing (p. 231; p.277). During the baptismal rite, oil may be used as the sign of the cross is made on the forehead of the newly baptized as the presiding minister says, "N., child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever." As stated in the ELCA's statement on sacramental practice, *The Use of the Mean of Grace* under the heading "Other signs proclaim the meanings of Baptism:"

The laying on of hands and prayer for the Holy Spirit's gifts, the signing of the cross, and the anointing with oil help to appropriate the breadth of meanings in Baptism...The use of oil is a sign of anointing with the Spirit and of union with Jesus Christ, the anointed one of God (*UMG*, 28 and 28A).

In the service of Healing, oil may be used during the laying on of hands with one of the responses being: "Receive this oil as a sign of forgiveness and healing in Jesus Christ." A scriptural basis for this anointing during healing can be found in James 5:13-16. For other occasions such as in retreat or with small groups, a Service of Healing is provided in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Occasional Services for the Assembly*.

Some communities have also used oil as part of the sending rite. The assembly comes forward and hands are anointed for service in the world. This use of oil links baptism with Christian vocation.

Practice

The actual act of anointing can be done in several ways. Some may use a small oil stock containing a piece of cotton soaked with the oil. When using an oil stock the presiding

minister dips the thumb on the cotton and then traces the sign of the cross on the forehead of the one being anointed. Another possibility is for the presiding minister to take a glass vessel (similar to a small pitcher) and pour a small amount of the oil into the palm of the hand. Oil may also be placed in a small glass bowl near the font, with the presider dipping the thumb in the oil. The minister then anoints the forehead with oil, often tracing the sign of the cross with the thumb. Yet another possibility is to pour the oil from a glass vessel over the head of the person and spread it with the hand and conclude by making the sign of the cross. This was the method likely used in the early church. With whatever method of anointing, it is best to set out towels for wiping hands following the anointing(s). Of course, pastoral sensitivity will help determine how the anointing is done. These uses of oil lift up the biblical images of anointing with the Spirit, union with Christ, and healing.

Simple olive oil, often mixed with a hint perfume, traditionally balsam, is used. This adds the gentle scent of spices in the air, but “those who prepare the oil should be sensitive to the possibility of allergic reaction” (*The Christian Life*, p. 74). This use of oil adds several dimensions of sensory involvement in the liturgy.



Appropriate containers for holding the oil are available from most church supply stores so congregations can receive and carry home the oil to be used throughout the coming year.

Although there is no rite provided by the ELCA, in some synods it is becoming common for the oil used in these rites to be blessed in service of Holy Communion for rostered leaders (Pastors, Diaconal Ministers, Associates in Ministry). This service, also called a Chrism Mass, is held during Holy Week and presided over by a synodical bishop. At this unique liturgy, the blessing of oil is coupled with a renewal of vows for rostered leaders. The traditional day for this service is Maundy Thursday (when some traditions believe the first ordinations took place). In some places (especially in geographically large synods), bishops make provision for several chrism masses throughout the synod to enable all rostered leaders to participate. Worship is more than words (See also: [“How do we use the body in worship?”](#)). It is the action of an assembly gathered together to offer prayer and thanksgiving and to receive from God the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. Signs and earthly elements, such as oil, can help communicate in a powerful way the reality of our participation in God’s unending life, and our participation in the healing of the world accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ↻ How do we use the body 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)
- 🎥 *These Things Matter: Word, Baptism, Communion.* Division for Congregational Ministries, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. 1999. Video on sacramental practices.

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 Bushkofsky, Dennis and Craig Satterlee. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Christian Life, Baptism and Life Passages.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008. See especially pp. 74-75.
- 📖 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Occasional Services for the Assembly.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009.
- 📖 Stauffer, S. Anita. *Altar Guild and Sacristy Handbook.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000.

Other Resources

- 📖 Dudley, Martin, and Geoffrey Rowell, eds. [The Oil of Gladness: Anointing in the Christian Tradition.](#) London: SPCK and Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993.
- 📖 Fink, Peter E., S.J., ed. [Anointing of the Sick. Alternative Futures for Worship,](#) vol. 7. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1987.

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