



Preparing Liturgy and Music for Synod Assemblies and Other Large Events

Preparing liturgy and music for large events, such as synod assemblies or conferences, can be exciting. However, such a task has unique challenges that are not always apparent to leaders who are used to working primarily in a congregation. Practical matters that may happen naturally in a setting where the same group gathers week after week cannot be taken for granted when a worshipping community is assembled one time for a specific event. While a desire for flexibility and allowing room for the Spirit to work is valuable, it is more necessary than ever in a large one-time event to be extremely well-prepared. When details and leaders are carefully prepared, spontaneity can happen naturally. Don't allow a desire for natural flexibility to turn into chaos or carelessness. That does not communicate what we believe about worship.

Following is a list of suggestions to think about when planning liturgy and music for a large gathering. The list is not exhaustive; neither is it necessarily pertinent to every situation. It is intended to stimulate your thinking about the unique (and not so unique) challenges you may encounter.

Scheduling & space

In any gathering of the Church, worship should hold a primary place in the agenda. Worship must never appear to be an afterthought.

- If at all possible, avoid the use of auditorium seating for worship. This simply reinforces the negative idea that worship is a spectator event. Seating on a gym floor would be preferable to an auditorium, because worship planners have control over the way the seating is arranged.
- Try to avoid sitting around tables for significant worship times. Sitting at a table with water glasses and business materials is often distracting and usually doesn't convey the spirit of worship.

- If at all possible, worship should be held in a separate space from the business of the gathering, allowing worship planners to create a “sacred space” for the time of the gathering.
- If only one space is available, plan the schedule carefully, so participants can vacate the room and return later in a spirit of worship. This transition can often be helped by careful and creative use of artwork, lighting, and music and the direction the assembly is facing in the room.
- Let worship be worship. Don’t overload the liturgies with other items of business.

Planning & preparing for worship

It is common for planners to put too much into a liturgy at a special gathering. Remember, in most cases, less is best. Make wise decisions about which liturgical texts, music, hymns, and ceremony to use. Challenge worshipers without confusing them. Nurture them without boring them. Balance new materials with enough of that which is familiar, so you don’t frustrate worshipers. If your desire is to showcase and demonstrate new materials, and you have more than you can do comfortably in the allotted worship times, then demonstrate the new materials in a workshop or some other time.

Those who are responsible for planning worship at synod assemblies and other events need to stay up-to-date about the status of new worship materials in this church. As this church grows increasingly more diverse, it may be necessary and valuable, in some synods, to consider offering bilingual/contextualized liturgies. Venturing into this territory is both exciting and challenging. Be sure to include members of the language- or ethnic-specific communities in the planning process. Don’t forget about those who communicate with American Sign Language.

It is especially important that new materials are led extremely well the first time. At an assembly or conference, you don’t have many weeks to make something work. Worshipers will judge something on their first use, so be certain that introductions and rhythms are clear so no one will be confused or frustrated. New spoken texts also need attention. Speak them aloud. Where are the challenging phrases and cadences? Worship leaders need to be prepared. Clear layout of worship folders can be very helpful. A choir can be very helpful with spoken texts, as well as leading music. Movement of all worship leaders also needs to be rehearsed. Worship leaders who are not confident or comfortable with their role will communicate that dis-ease to worshipers.

Build all rehearsals into the schedule. Assemblies and conferences are not a time to simply “throw it together.”

Worship planning teams vary greatly from synod to synod. No matter how it is organized, it should always include:

- One person who keeps an eye on the “big picture” and is, ultimately, in charge and can make necessary decisions, even as the liturgies unfold. This person should see that all necessary rehearsals are scheduled carefully. For example, don’t have a lector testing the microphone while the choir is rehearsing, and so forth
- A coordinator/host for all worship leaders who sees that vestments, microphones, leader materials, water (especially for a preacher), and so forth are prepared. This person may also be responsible for liturgical rehearsals (such as processions), or that task may be assigned to someone else.
- One coordinator for music and all musicians.
- Someone responsible for the space: artwork, vestments, paraments, plants, flowers, etc. This person may also, logically, serve as sacristan. (See next bullet.)
- A sacristan to coordinate a team of people who prepare and clean communion vessels, iron vestments, and so forth. (See previous bullet.)
- Someone to coordinate hospitality: distributing worship folders, receiving an offering, directing worshipers to communion, as needed. Again, less is best.
- Someone to operate and/or communicate with the operator of the sound system. Never assume, for example, that the “house tech” understands who the assisting minister is and when she speaks.

Local circumstances may necessitate additional people for particular tasks. Make sure you have enough people to get the job done well, but don’t have so many people that the planning and carrying out of worship becomes unwieldy.

Creating a worship space

Many events take place in less than ideal liturgical spaces. Whether in a college chapel, convention center, or hotel ballroom, the challenges are often great.

Little can be said here about using an existing chapel or other worship space, since they are all unique. The advantage is that the furnishings and instruments are already in place. The challenge is that some of these spaces were designed in a previous era of liturgical renewal, when open space with room for movement and a clear visual focus on the Word, Baptism, and Meal were not high priorities. The only advice in using such space is not to run on auto-pilot. Worship planners working in an

unfamiliar space often don't think ahead about practical matters that may require a different way of thinking than when functioning in their regular worship space.

Actually, ballrooms are, in some ways, better than many chapels. You have flexibility in a ballroom setting. Don't set it up as if you don't. Simply putting a platform at one end of a long room with all the liturgical furnishings on it with straight rows upon rows of chairs only recreates the inflexible spaces many of us use week after week, with all their challenges. Instead, imagine the assembly gathered around the altar. Imagine a spatial difference between Word and Meal, while still maintaining the importance of each. In some spaces, the possibilities are endless. In others, they are minimal. Use the space you have creatively, carefully, and simply, with a clear visual focus on the means of grace: Baptism, Word, and Meal.

If your synod has worship furnishings that travel, you're always guaranteed that you'll have what you need. The challenge is purchasing or creating them, storing them, and transporting them. If you do not have dedicated furniture for use at assemblies and other events not held in a church building, you need to be creative and careful with what is available at the hotel or convention center.

Altar/Communion Table

Traditionally, altars are approximately 40 inches high. Most banquet tables are about 30 inches high. Using a banquet table, at the regular height, often results in uncomfortable awkwardness for the presiding minister and the assembly. Various methods of getting the table up to a better height can be used. Cinder blocks may work, but are heavy to haul around. Pieces of PVC pipe (cut to the appropriate height) can work with certain designs of table legs. Rarely will a ballroom staff be prepared to make something like this happen on the spot. You need to figure this out in advance. While on a preparatory site visit, it is a good idea to take a picture of the table legs so something can be constructed in advance. Whatever you do, be sure that ministers are alerted not to lean against the altar: Beneath that altar fabric is not the permanent hunk of stone or wood they may be used to.

Baptismal font

Including a baptismal font in an assembly or conference worship space is often neglected, because an actual baptism would rarely be celebrated at such an event. However, current liturgical practice in our church calls for regular (Martin Luther would say "daily") thanksgiving for our baptism. It is, therefore, a powerful sign for all we do as the church, to be centered in and gathered around the font of grace.

However, this can be the trickiest piece of liturgical furniture to create, especially if you take seriously our theology of baptism that would demand a large amount of water. In a small space, large clear plastic salad bowls on a fabric-covered table can be dressed up with plants and a large candle. However, in most ballrooms that would hardly make a significant visual statement. Inflatable wading pools or a liner for an outdoor fountain (borrowed from a local nursery) may be good places to start. Temporary “walls” of bricks or stone, along with plants and flowers, may dress it up a bit.

Ambo/Pulpit/Reading Desk

Most convention centers have a “podium” or “lectern” of some sort that can be used for the proclamation of the Word. Think about our theology of the Word. Does a music stand visually convey the importance that our theology demands? See what’s available and make it work. Hotels and convention centers often have their name and logo emblazoned across the front. Judicious use of fabric can cover that up and add another splash of the liturgical color in the space. The design of these furnishings varies greatly. Be prepared with pins, duct tape, needle and thread, or whatever else may help you create a customized parament on the spot.

Paraments

Synods that have dedicated worship furnishings (altar, ambo, and font) designed for traveling can also create paraments that actually fit the furnishings; so you’re always guaranteed that you’ll have what you need. Even if you’re vesting hotel furniture, however, you can keep a stock of fabric that will help create a worshipful space.

The basic item needed is a large piece of white fabric (something that looks better than a bed sheet or a hotel tablecloth) that will cover a standard banquet table (8', adjustable for 6' tables) from floor to floor all around (be sure to account for the extra height described above). Again, pins and duct tape can come in very handy when hiking things up in the back, around corners, and so forth. Other colors can be hung over the white in creative, yet tasteful, ways. Remember, less is best! Having another large piece of white that serves the same purpose over a makeshift ambo is also be a good idea.

You don’t need paraments and vestments in a full array of liturgical colors. Assemblies and other events rarely happen during Advent or Lent. Most synod assemblies fall within the fifty days of Easter (white), on or near Pentecost (red), or during the time after Pentecost (green). Even if a liturgy is not directly on Pentecost, red is commonly used at liturgies “of the Church,” such as the opening of an assembly, ordinations, and so forth. Having a red set and either white or green

(depending on when your assembly usually occurs) is often adequate. It is possible to have a festive fabric that includes all the colors or none of the colors and could, therefore, work for any or all liturgies. Again, local sensibilities may determine whether this is an acceptable idea or not.

Vestments

Vestments are the one thing that usually can't be created for the one time event. You simply need to bring them in. Ideally, from an aesthetic perspective, you would have matching albs for all worship leaders. This is not realistic for most synods, so borrowing from one congregation is the next best option. Again from an aesthetic perspective, having everyone bringing their own vestment is the least preferred option. However, the local priority may be more on participation rather than visual aesthetics, which may make this a good idea. Make appropriate decisions and then enact them with intentionality and care.

If we truly value the Word and sacraments around which Lutheran worship is shaped, showing appropriate care and dignity is not asking too much. Always have irons and a steamer on hand. Nothing says carelessness more than wrinkled vestments or paraments.

Cross

In a Christian assembly, it is a good idea to always have a cross visible. It is the most tangible and familiar sign of our faith. Whether it is sitting up front, hanging above the altar table, carried in procession, or projected on a screen or wall, be sure that it is of appropriate size for the room.

Candles

Candles have a time-honored use in our churches and can be helpful in creating a sacred space. For some devotional liturgies, especially in the evening, many candles throughout a space can be very effective. However, for most gatherings, especially for Holy Communion, candles are best used to mark those primary focal points of Word, Meal, and Baptism.

If worship is in the same space as business, consider keeping a candle lighted by the font throughout the entire assembly, thereby centering the business of the assembly in our baptismal mission as a Church.

Be aware that the use of candles in public spaces may not be approved by local fire code. Convention Centers and hotels often have differing regulations they must follow. Be certain to obtain the appropriate permits, as required. In most places

candles will be allowed when used carefully for worship. Just in case, have glass “globes” available and be sure they will fit on your candles or followers. Very often, that makes the difference for the Fire Marshall.

Communion vessels

Some synods have adequate numbers of matching communion vessels. Others simply borrow from congregations. The distinct priorities described above (under *Vestments*) may also be true here. Make a decision and enact it intentionally. The tradition for churchwide assembly is to have communion vessels (paten, chalice, flagon, and anointing bowl) created specifically for each assembly . They are then available for purchase by synods, congregations, or individuals. This may not be realistic for a synod assembly, but it is worth considering.

Plants and flowers

Potted green plants and/or potted or cut flowers can do wonders to help transform a ballroom into a room for sacred use. They can also be costly. However, just as is true in a congregation, there may be individual donors who would love to provide flowers for a synod assembly worship space. Be sure that they are of an appropriate size for the room. Potted greens can sometimes be borrowed from a local nursery at no cost or can be rented. When possible, request plants in various heights (from about human height down to very small) so they can be arranged attractively in key places in the worship space. They can come in very handy to cover up the “rough edges” of taped-up parament hems and so forth. Whatever you do, be sure that the plants help attract the worshiper to the central focal points of worship. Again, less can be best.

Artwork

Likewise, artwork can either inspire or detract. Any art used in a worship space needs to be created carefully within an understanding of the actions of the liturgy. Artwork should draw the worshipers to the place of baptismal renewal, the place of God’s Word, and the place of the Lord’s Supper. Artwork scattered around the perimeter of the room may be helpful in creating a sacred space, but must also visually lead to the central things.

Projected images on screens are, increasingly, being used as a vehicle for art. The advantage of a digital file on a computer is that it requires much less space for storage than a large tapestry or painting. Also, projected images can be changed through an assembly or even through one liturgy. To use projected images with integrity requires state-of-the-art equipment that is often very expensive, depending

on what's available at a particular site. A less expensive option is the use of a "gobo," which is basically a stencil of a simple image put over a spotlight. Check with your lighting technician about this possibility.

Whatever artwork is used, don't clutter the worshipers with too many images. Make sure that all art helps them focus on the central things of worship. Don't forget that some images are the work of artists and may be copyrighted. Be a good model and obtain proper permissions.

If screens are being used to project texts of hymns and songs, be certain that:

- appropriate copyrights have been obtained;
- materials are also available in print for those who can't see the screens;
- music is provided for those who do read music; and
- the person responsible for changing the text has rehearsed with musicians and understands that the text must appear before worshipers are expected to sing.

Printed materials

The actual printed worship folder can function in numerous ways:

- As a work of art showing the care and attention paid to beauty.
Consider using local artists, especially children, for cover designs.
- As a functional piece of information to guide worshipers through the liturgy.
- As an educational piece.
Brief descriptors and carefully worded rubrics can help teach and explain about portions of the liturgy itself. For example: "The assembly stands to welcome the gospel." Again, less is best.

Be a good model to your congregations and be certain that all necessary copyrights are obtained and credited properly.

It would be a hospitable thing to prepare a number of worship folders in large print. In some synods, it may be necessary to prepare translations of worship materials for any worshipers whose primary language is not English.

Prepare a binder of materials for the worship leaders in large print on non-glossy paper, carefully marked with information about who says what and from where, as well as critical posture or gesture instructions. Keep it simple. Large paragraphs of directions are not helpful while leading worship. Those kinds of details should be learned and internalized by an assisting minister and/or "master of ceremonies" and rehearsed in advance.

Sound systems & lighting

Assembly worship is often held in hotel ballrooms and other spaces not designed for worship. This means that worship leaders are often dealing with sound systems and acoustics that are not familiar to them.

- In a dry acoustic, assembly singing can be enhanced if the congregation itself is amplified and the sound fed back to them.
- Be certain that the organ and each individual instrument is adequately amplified. This can be a challenge because you never have the congregation assembled when you test the volume. Remember the instruments are there to lead the assembly. It must be loud enough to encourage confident singing, but not so loud that it obliterates the assembly.
- Sound systems and lighting must be turned on for rehearsals. Arrange for this, in advance, with the technicians.
- Every worship leader with a spoken or sung part, even the bishop, needs to test the microphone in advance. Don't do this at the same time that you are trying to gather an assembly in a worshipful atmosphere.
- Remember that, in a worship service, the gathered people of God are the primary "actors" and, therefore, need to be lighted fully, especially when they are expected to read anything in print. Some extra lighting to highlight the focal points of Word, Meal, and Baptism may be desired as long as it doesn't overshadow the primacy of the assembly.

Music and musicians

At big events, choirs and instrumentalists are often gathered from various congregations for a particular liturgy. These musicians usually have limited rehearsal time. A few pointers:

- The Holy Spirit does work through advance planning.
- As mentioned above (see *Planning & preparing for worship*), people tend to critique things, especially music, after the first hearing. In an assembly setting, you do not have many weeks to make something work. Musicians must anticipate all challenges, especially moving from introductions into singing and between stanzas. This is when confusion often occurs.
- There is usually little time for nuance or musical subtlety at such a gathering. Plan interesting but straightforward music.

- There is a natural tendency to try to use worship at an assembly as an opportunity to introduce all kinds of new music. Be careful to strive for a healthy balance. See the comments under *Planning & preparing for worship*.
- Be certain to get music, rehearsal tapes, and detailed information to singers well in advance of the event. A large event is not the time to be sight-reading together.
- Plan communion music and procedures so there is not a huge time of silence while the assembly waits for the choir to commune. There is often some confusion at the beginning of communion as the stations get formed. It is helpful to keep attention off this by having the congregation singing right away.
- Agree in advance, if communion is finished before the music planned, if you will complete the music or not.
- Mark as many details as possible (breathing, dynamics, etc.) in advance to save time in rehearsal. Do not make these decisions during a rehearsal, wasting valuable time.
- In advance, give complete and accurate information about when and where the rehearsal/liturgy is, where to park, where to put coats, where/when to get meals.
- Who will watch over purses, etc., during the liturgy?
- Where will instrumentalists put their cases?
- Be clear about vestments or expected dress for choir members. Are they to bring their own? Will they be provided? Will they wear street clothes?
- Do they need to provide their own folder for the music? Music stands? Pencils? Or will these items be provided?
- Plan your rehearsals carefully so you don't waste valuable time. Every detail (music and logistics) must be agreed upon before the rehearsal. There can be no making things up as you go along. In such a gathering, more needs to be pre-determined than is usual for most weekly gatherings.

Logistics

- Agendas frequently change throughout an assembly. There should be someone responsible for communicating between the plenary hall and worship leaders if the agenda changes. Predetermine who will make decisions about altering worship time (usually in consultation with the bishop) as needed, and make simple, yet precise, announcements about such changes to worship leaders, musicians, and the participants.

- It is helpful if there is one person in charge of the planning process and “on duty” during the liturgy. (S)he should be cooperative and collaborative, keeping an eye on the “big picture,” and able to anticipate all potential challenges and offer clear and quick solutions, in advance and during the liturgy. This is especially true if flexibility and spontaneity is encouraged.
- Liturgical and musical leaders must plan every detail carefully in advance. Don’t assume anything. The places that are often tricky to coordinate are the beginning, ending, and transitions, such as entrance processions, the exchange of peace and the offering, communion, and the sending procession.
- When worshipers arrive, they should be invited into a spirit of prayer. Don’t be rehearsing musicians or other worship leaders as people are arriving.
- Keep processions and other ceremony bold, yet simple.
- Depending on the architecture and/or arrangement of the room, it is a good idea to have one communion station for approximately every 125 people.
- Try to devise a plan for communion distribution that minimizes how long it takes to get the assembly actually communing. One idea is to have communion ministers also function as offertory presenters who hold the bread or wine, while surrounding the altar, throughout the communion liturgy. They are then able to move immediately to their communion stations. For those who believe strongly that all the bread and all the wine should be on the altar, this is clearly not an adequate approach. However, this idea may help you begin to imagine an efficient, yet reverent, way to manage communion distribution.
- Increasingly, in ELCA settings, communion ministers are themselves receiving communion after having served the assembly. This practice stems from a contemporary understanding of hospitality where the host serves the guests first. Those who look to historic practices for their precedent may clearly disagree with this. However, it is a good topic to discuss and determine a workable practice for your context.
- Don’t forget to plan for the musicians to receive communion. It is often helpful, especially for a large choir, for the musicians to have their own station with ministers who have been briefed on how and when to commune the choir, such as waiting during an initial anthem before communing the choir, and so forth.
- Communion ministers who have completed serving their station earlier than others often add more confusion and alter the planned timing when they try “help out” by assisting another station or section of chairs, unless directed to do so by the person looking out the for the “big picture.”

Don't make any assumptions. Musicians can't assume liturgical leaders have planned for the choir's participation. Liturgical leaders can't assume that the choir director knows when and where the choir should go and how the music intersects with other liturgical actions, such as processions, and so forth. Again, it is very helpful if there is, ultimately, one person who understands the big picture and is in charge.