



## Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

### What are some considerations on art and environment for 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.*

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Let's face it. Items that are customarily used in worship environments can be pricey. Stained glass windows, pipe organs, silver chalices, and large leather-bound Bibles are not acquired at value prices from a huge discount store just down the street. In a desire to keep costs low, congregations have often tried to economize by buying less expensive substitutes for worship furnishings that seem expensive. So worshiping communities have considered electronic organs in place of pipes. Plastic flowers replace fresh cut bouquets. Or there's the matter of convenience. Disposable plastic communion cups seem to be a whole lot easier to deal with than having to wash several hundred glass cups every weekend.

While there are few absolute rules about determining the type and quality of materials used in worship, the decisions we make when purchasing and using certain items are not unrelated to our values. Nearly every decision may have aesthetic, theological, justice, and environmental consequences, as well as others. How each congregation may deal with these concerns will no doubt reflect its culture or community context. That said, let's consider a few basic general guidelines:

- Since materials and art in worship are nonverbal means through which the gospel can be communicated, selecting appropriate materials and art is not just a matter of taste, but also a matter of theology.
- While each congregation operates within a local environment, it is also a part of a larger entity that has centuries of tradition and practices.
- Most people will desire that worship materials serve and enrich, rather than obscure or trivialize the gathering of God's people around word and the sacraments.
- Congregations are best served by making careful and theologically informed judgments about environment and art, rather than making decisions based solely on convenience or economy.

Several statements in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's *Principles for Worship* relate to worship space. This document is intended to provide guidance to congregations in planning for and leading worship. One sentence from that document is helpful for our current consideration:

While definitions of beauty vary according to personal or cultural tastes, it is possible to identify some helpful criteria, such as balance and scale, color scheme, and quality materials honestly crafted. (Application S-20D)

That last phrase—quality materials honestly crafted—is especially apt, and should provide quite a bit of guidance in discerning which items are more or less appropriate for worship. Something made to imitate something else is not honestly crafted.

Plastic flowers are an obvious example. If a worshiping assembly cannot afford fresh cut flowers every week, other alternatives may be readily available, such as dried arrangements or plants that may be used for more than a single occasion. In fact there is no real reason why flowers need be present at all in a worship environment. There is nothing wrong with using fresh cut flowers or plants just for special festivals (like Christmas and Easter) and not providing them the remainder of the year, or only when they are available from members' gardens.

Electric candles, or liquid wax candles made to imitate genuine all-wax candles, provide us with other examples of materials that are less than honestly crafted. Why do we need candles in most worship spaces these days? With electricity serving most of our lighting needs, candles may be desirable more for their aesthetic value. Candles often surround the altar during a eucharistic liturgy, and in this context a candle's genuineness may relate to the real presence in the sacrament. The paschal (or Easter) candle is of special significance throughout the fifty days of Easter, and often stands in a prominent location near the baptismal font for the remainder of the year. A large candle that is visibly consumed through its use at baptisms and funerals will better depict the passage of time from one Easter vigil to the next, than will a candle that is not depleted. Similarly, four candles are often used on an Advent wreath to designate the passage of time during the weeks of Advent. One of the special characteristics about an Advent wreath is that each week's candle is progressively of a different length, something that is not conveyed if Advent candles are not entirely made of wax.

The case of plastic communion cups may be somewhat different. Cups are made out of many different materials. One is not necessarily more genuine than another. In this instance worship planners may have to weigh the value of convenience over against the value of using items that are more environmentally friendly. Other considerations here may be to think about what we would use in our homes for festive family meals (some may use good china and crystal, while others may use paper plates and plastic cups). Is there any parallel to the kinds of materials that we would then use for the Lord's supper? Yet a further consideration: does something that is disposable serve as a worthy container for the real presence of Christ?

Honesty of materials should not mean that we must always opt for expensive worship furnishings either. A glass cruet is no less honest than a silver flagon (pitcher) that contains the wine. Either could be possibilities for a worship assembly's use. And while a

glass cruet may initially be far less expensive than a silver flagon, it's not uncommon to see silver flagons that have been used by a congregation for generations. What costs less today may not be the best long-term investment. So there is no single solution to determining which materials will be perfect in all situations.

Finally, each congregation will need to determine which types of materials are appropriate for their own time and community context, being aware that people in other places and in other decades may decide things differently.

## RESOURCES

### [Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ↻ How do we make decisions about art and materials used in worship?
- ↻ How does worship involve all of our senses?
- ↻ Are flags appropriate in church?

### [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:](#)

- 📖 Stauffer, S. Anita. *Altar Guild and Sacristy Handbook.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000.
- 📖 VanLoon, Ralph R. and S. Anita Stauffer. *Worship Wordbook: A Practical Guide for Parish Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995.

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