



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

What can we do if we don't have an organist?

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.

After many years, the organist at your congregation retires. After an extensive search, a qualified person is not found to fill the position. In another congregation, the organist takes a much-needed vacation and a substitute is not available. These and many other scenarios are common and becoming increasingly more so as trained organists become more and more difficult to find. What do you do if you don't have an organist? Some common solutions are listed below.

Some common solutions: **Consider the following:**

Sing unaccompanied

We often assume that an instrument is necessary for singing but the church existed and congregational singing flourished for centuries before instruments entered the assembly. Children learn to sing well by rote and can be a model for us. A singer in your congregation (youth or adult) can serve as a song leader, teaching and leading hymns and songs.

Use piano or guitar.

The piano can be an excellent instrument for leading congregational singing, especially music in some popular, gospel, or global styles. In some situations, a quality piano can provide better leadership than a weak organ, especially in dry acoustics. Guitars add an appropriate timbre to certain styles of music but must be played with skill to be effective as the primary instrument for leading congregational song. By simplifying the harmony in the hymnal, many traditional hymns can be effectively led with guitar.

Because of the human way it creates sounds (air blowing through a tube), a good pipe organ, coupled with lively acoustics and confident leadership, is still the ideal instrument for leading traditional congregational song. Unfortunately, this

ideal combination is not always available. We do the best we can with available resources.

Don't sing.

It is possible to worship without music. As a regular practice, this would hardly seem natural for most Lutheran congregations. Perhaps a compromise -- spoken liturgy with a few familiar hymns -- would work. On occasion, a spoken service can be an effective alternative.

Use synthesizer.

Electronic instruments are adding an exciting array of sounds to our musical palette. Unless the instrument is of very high quality and amplified clearly throughout the room, however, it should be used primarily for solo lines and color, with an acoustic piano providing the foundation. Most important is that the electronic instrument is played by a human being in worship! See below.

Use sequenced or recorded accompaniments.

This is a dangerous solution! It seems so easy, economical, and likely to guarantee immediate success. However, we must always remember that the church is the baptized people of God gathered in community around Christ made present in the scriptures and a holy meal. We are human beings gathered in community. Electronic devices are not human and do not participate in community. They do not breathe as we humans do when we sing. They cannot respond to the emotions that humans feel at any given moment and compensate musically in an appropriate way.

It would be better to limit the congregational song to a small repertoire of well-known hymns, sung by live voices alone, than to allow mechanical devices to control our worship. See [“Can technology help lead congregational singing?”](#))

Assume that we'll never have organists or pianists again.

When one considers the state of music education in most American schools, it is easy to think this way. It is time for the church to take back its role in training musicians. Consider offering a scholarship to a member of your congregation for piano or organ lessons. In exchange for the lessons, that person could eventually play for your worship service. Explore your hidden resources: many people (both young and old) have already taken piano lessons and just need encouragement and an opportunity. A congregation should also take on the responsibility of funding participation in continuing education for those who are already trained.

Assume that small congregations can never pay for musical leadership.

Routinely, surveys and statistics show us that the quality of music is a major factor in congregational health and growth (in all its definitions). Many congregations are able to budget for musical leaders. For some congregations, realizing the value of excellent music and establishing new budget priorities for a congregation to be able to pay a musician is all it would take. However, small congregations may not have the financial resources to hire a trained musician. It may be time for congregations to get creative and share leadership. We have a good precedent in Lutheranism! J. S. Bach supervised the music of four congregations in Leipzig at the same time. In addition to providing music themselves, such persons could enable and encourage musicians from within each congregation in using their talents in worship.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- 🔗 [Can Technology Help Lead Congregational Singing?](#)

[Resources Available for Download on the ELCA Website:](#)

- 📖 [Worship Formation Resources](#): produced by the ELCA Worship Staff may help a congregation dig deeper into many aspects of worship including assembly song.

Other Resources

- 📖 [Leadership Program for Musicians](#) . Many synods offer this two-year certificate program for musicians and pastors who desire to strengthen their ability to lead music in worship. If your synod does not offer this program, contact the ELCA worship staff for information, 1-800-638-3522, ext. 2590 or via email at worship@elca.org.
- 📖 [Music That Makes Community](#). These events are three-day workshops sponsored by [All Saints Company](#). Music that Makes Community “renews ancient ways of singing together, sharing music as people did before music or words were written.” (*from the website*). For more information and video clips, visit the website.
- 📖 [Lutheran Summer Music](#) One way to ensure the health of music in a congregation is to encourage high school musicians. Lutheran Summer Music is a four-week residential training program for high school musicians that has had a positive impact on Lutheran worship for over thirty years.

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.