



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

What is the pattern of 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

If, for some unexplainable reason, the words were to disappear from all the road signs in the United States, certain signs would still be able to communicate their meaning. Even without words, the triangle of a yield sign or the octagon of the stop sign would still get the desired results. The shape itself, especially when coupled with the traditional color, is capable of powerful communication.

Once, while serving as organist on a choir tour to Germany, our sponsor asked if I would go to a neighboring church and substitute for him as organist at a service of Holy Communion. Not knowing a word of German, I reluctantly agreed. Although I could not understand most of the words, the pattern, rhythms, and actions of worship spoke clearly to me, and I knew exactly when to play. Years later, I had a similar experience while substituting at a Roman Catholic congregation in Brooklyn, New York. I was to play for masses in English, Spanish, and French. I was able to do it with little problem because the structure of the liturgy itself bridged language, cultural, and denominational differences.

Another way to think about the pattern of worship is to compare it to grammar, the organization of language. Even if you do not know a particular language and the words themselves are unfamiliar, it is often possible to catch the gist of a conversation because of the way the words are used. The pattern of worship, with its basic texts and actions, is like grammar. It is a vehicle for conveying the content of worship. The "vocabulary" of specific music, ceremonies, and styles can differ vastly from place to place and time to time. The grammar—the historic pattern of worship—is the framework that holds all the variety together and helps bridge the communication gap from church to church, language to language, and culture to culture.

Pattern then and now

The earliest Christians were Jews who continued to hear God's Word and pray in the synagogue regularly. Although grounded in Jewish meal tradition, the "new" element of Christian worship was the meal that Christ instituted in the upper room. The Christians gathered secretly in one another's homes to share Christ's supper. As Christianity began

to develop an identity separate from Judaism, word and meal were joined into one celebration. Once Christianity was legalized and worship became more public, the assemblies grew larger. Naturally, ways of gathering the crowds and sending them forth into the world developed. The basic structure of worship—gathering, word, meal, and sending—has been in place since the early centuries of the church.

This pattern is a gift to the church, best to be understood as one flowing action rather than a “to-do” list. As described in *The Sunday Assembly*:

Still, this is not simply a list...but a *single* event, around a single gospel. The pattern is one of flowing, communal action. Yet it is also a way of talking about the centrality of those things that God has given in order to bring us to faith and form us for love toward neighbor (p. 49).

Christian worship practices evolve over generations, yet this basic pattern continues to serve the church’s mission.

The Use of the Means of Grace, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s set of priorities for the practices of word and sacrament, describes the essentials of this pattern:

The simple order of our liturgy of Holy Communion, represented in the worship books of our church is that which has been used by generations of Christians. We gather in song and prayer, confessing our need of God. We read the Scriptures and hear them preached. We profess our faith and prayer for the world, sealing our prayers with a sign of peace. We gather an offering for the poor and the mission of the Church. We set our table with bread and wine, give thanks and praise to God, proclaiming Jesus Christ, and eat and drink. We hear the blessing of God and are sent out in mission to the world (Principle 34, Application 34B).

Practice

Evangelical Lutheran Worship outlines this basic pattern of Gathering, Word, Meal and Sending (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, pp. 92-93; *Leaders Desk Edition*, pp. 164-165). Elements of this pattern will change during the church year and according to local contexts and customs. For guidance on worship planning using this pattern, check the Resources section at the bottom of the article for both print and online resources.

What is this pattern in detail?

Gathering: “The Holy Spirit calls us together as the people of God” (ELW p. 92) The gathering does just that: it gathers us in preparation for hearing God’s word and receiving God’s presence in Holy Communion. Elements of the gathering may include song, prayer, confession/baptismal remembrance. It may be very brief or extended depending on local practice, season of the church year or other factors.

Word: “God speaks to us in scripture reading, preaching, and song” (ELW p. 92) The corporate hearing of God’s word has its roots in Jewish tradition. From the earliest times, reading -- singing -- reading -- singing created a natural rhythm of proclamation and response. The rhythm provides quiet time for worshipers to listen attentively and active time to respond, reflect, and prepare for what is coming -- preaching on the proclaimed texts. In a world of short attention spans, it is a pattern worth keeping. Within the liturgy of the Word, the traditional order

has been Old Testament reading, psalm, New Testament reading, gospel acclamation, Holy Gospel, and sermon.

The experience of hearing God's word is followed by a series of responses from the assembly. While many Christians share this general pattern of worship, Lutherans in particular treasure an element of this pattern called the Hymn of the Day. More than a hymn based on the sermon, this hymn or song brings together the themes expressed in the biblical texts and the season of the church year. By singing together, the assembly adds its voice to the proclamation of God's word.

The service of the word concludes (sometimes) with the reciting of the creed and most always with the prayers of the people. The exchange of peace bridges the word portion of this pattern with the meal portion.

Meal: "God feeds us with the presence of Jesus Christ" (ELW p. 93)

The pattern surrounding the meal finds its prototype in the scriptural accounts of the institution of Christ's supper: Jesus "took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it." The table setting, great thanksgiving, breaking of bread, and communion is how Christ's command to "do this in remembrance of me" is lived out today, as it has been for centuries.

For more on celebrating communion weekly, see ["Why and how do we move to weekly communion?"](#)

Sending: "God blesses us and sends us in mission to the world" (ELW p. 93)

The objective of the sending is to empower the assembly to take God's message into the world. This is typically the briefest portion of the service, often consisting of a blessing, sending, song and communion. Sending communion to the absent may also be included (see also, ["How can we provide for communion of the ill, homebound, and imprisoned?"](#)). Once strengthened by the meal, it is time for God's people to be sent into the mission field: "Go in peace. Serve the Lord."

It cannot be overstated that this pattern will vary from place to place. While congregations may sing some of the same songs or hymns (notably the Kyrie, Cantic of Praise, Holy, holy, holy, and Lamb of God) there is room in this pattern for freedom and flexibility. Note the use of "may" and "in these or similar words" in many of the rubrics (directions in *red italics*) in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. When preparing worship, we often consider a liturgy that includes all the options as the norm and feel as if we're leaving something out when we plan a briefer service. It is more helpful to begin planning with the core elements and add to it as appropriate for a particular occasion. In *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, the core elements are listed in bold type (See ELW pp. 92-93).

Within such variance, however, assemblies need to remember the value of repetition in worship, especially for children and visitors. Changing every element of the pattern every week will not encourage vibrant participation. The repetition of common texts and actions is an important element of worship. It is through constant retelling that the stories of our faith become ingrained in us and that we become a part of the stories. This is especially true for children who can from the youngest age heartily join in shouting

"Amen," "And also with you," or "Thanks be to God!" Repetition of corporate text, tunes and actions allows all of God's people to participate actively in worship. Newcomers to the assembly can be readily caught up in the rhythm of it all without knowing every word, as long as the leaders and assembly do their part with confidence. The spirit of those assembled will be so infectious to visitors that they will want to return and learn to do their part.

Lutherans share this pattern of worship with many other Christians, as it has come to us from the earliest gatherings of the Church. This is particularly true of those churches in "full communion" (see also, ["What does 'Full Communion' mean for Lutheran worship?"](#)) with the ELCA.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ↪ What are the Biblical Roots of Worship?
- ↪ Why and how do we move to weekly communion?
- ↪ What does "full communion" mean for Lutheran worship?
- ↪ What is the role of music in Lutheran worship?
- ↪ What is the Exchange of Peace?
- ↪ How can we provide for communion of the ill, homebound and imprisoned?

[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:](#)

- 📖 Brugh, Lorraine S. and Gordon W. Lathrop. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Sunday Assembly.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008. See especially Chapter 3, The Pattern for Worship (pp. 37-54).
- 📖 Lathrop, Gordon. *Central Things: Worship in Word and Sacrament.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005.
- 📖 Burke, Suzanne and Martin Seltz, eds., *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2012. (Leader edition and Participant edition also available separately).

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