



## Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

### What is the role of silence 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.*

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#### **Background**

Silence is a gift that can enrich the life of a worshipping community. The rests in music are as important as the notes, and they must be counted and honored in the same way that sounds are made. In a similar fashion, silence deepens the experience of the words, music, and actions of worship.

Silence is a vital element in worship, but one often omitted or difficult to incorporate well. Until a congregation gets comfortable with silence, members of the assembly will be fidgeting or looking around, wondering if the pastor or musician forgot what is coming next in the liturgy.

In our busy and noise-filled world it is often very difficult for us to be still and savor silence. When we are alone many of us are connected to some kind of screen or sound; we need something to fill up space and time. Because we are so uneasy with silence in our daily lives, this may be an even greater reason that we should include it in worship. Silence teaches us that prayer is not only a conversation involving words, but is also a stance of openness and listening for the voice of God. When worship becomes over saturated with words and music without any silence, we can forget God comes to us in silence and stillness. “Be still and know... (Psalm 46:10).

In *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship*, a co-author reminds us of the needful pairing of praise and silence. Many of us are familiar with the joyous words sung in “This is the Feast.” “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen (Revelation 7:12). Yet just a few verses after this cascade of praise-filled words, we encounter this: “When the Lamb opened the seventh seal there was silence in heaven for about half an hour” (Rev. 8:1). Full-throated praise and silence: both respond to God’s presence and both are needed in our worship. (p. 62)

## **Practice**

After recognizing that the gift of silence would enrich your worship, you may wonder how best to introduce it or increase its use. Consider the following:

**Notice where silence is suggested.** *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* specifically mentions silence at three points during the service of Holy Communion: as part of the confession, after the sermon and before the prayer of the day. Begin by noticing what silence, if any, is kept at these times. Can it be more generous?

**Nurture worship leadership that welcomes silence.** Sometimes simple pauses and a non-hurried presence by the presiding minister, assisting minister, musicians and readers can do much to create a non-hurried, non-anxious climate that doesn't fear a few moments of quiet. Breathing space is good for the leader and assembly alike. For example: After the reader announces: "A reading from\_\_\_\_," there can be a slight pause as we prepare to listen to God's word. When a musician prepares to lead a hymn, she/he takes just a moment to breathe and prepare. Such pauses need not be long, but they do contribute to a less-hurried atmosphere in worship.

## **Recognize potential for silence in the pattern of worship:**

- *Gathering:* The gathering often sets the tone for what follows. Some assemblies set aside intentional time for silence. These times can be marked by using a meditation bowl, chimes or even handbells (children can do this!). The sound can be a positive reminder at both the beginning and conclusion of a period of silence.
- *Word:* Rather than moving directly from scripture reading to psalm and gospel acclamation, allow another ten or so seconds for the Word to sink in. This spaciousness will also allow the service to feel less hurried.
- *Meal:* In addition to vibrant assembly song during the communion, a period of silence may also be welcomed. However, since other action is going on with people walking, receiving communion, etc, people may be too distracted by what is going on around them. If desired, it may be best to have a moment of silence once the communion servers have returned to their places.
- *Sending:* While the sending rite is brief and least conducive to periods of silence, some people linger in the pews for personal prayer time following worship. If that is a custom in your congregation, those leaving need to be sensitive to those who remain for silent prayer. At certain times in the church year, Maundy Thursday, for example, the whole assembly is asked to leave in silence.

**Expect that silence can be a challenge.** Begin with small steps. Even one extra minute of silence can feel like a big change if the assembly is used to worship moving very fast with little time for reflection. Set small goals and notice how a little silence makes a difference.

**Use what you already have.** It is tempting to think of silence as one more thing to fit into a worship service. Instead of this approach, consider how silence can be present in times already given. Remember that certain elements in a service of Holy Communion are optional (note the pattern for worship in ELW, p. 92-93 and the "may" rubrics

throughout). Be creative in how some elements are used (or omitted) in order to allow more silence.

**Teach graciously.** Do not use scolding to compel silence. Realize that bulletin and newsletter articles will not be enough; writing “silence” in the bulletin will often be overlooked. Modeling and experience are essential here. In addition, consider times outside of worship— committee meetings, staff meetings, or music rehearsals—where a moment of silence can set the tone for the gathering.

**Encourage silence outside of worship.** Once an assembly discovers the gift of a few moments of silence in worship, they can be encouraged to practice silent prayer in their lives each day. Again, such times do not need to be added to an already full day. Rather, we can notice periods throughout the day— driving to work, making a pot of coffee, doing the dishes—where silence, rather than background noise, can accompany the action.

It may seem like nothing is happening during silence, yet it is in the silent, dark earth where seeds sprout. Surely God is present and at work in our moments of silence.

## RESOURCES

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

- ↻ What is the pattern for 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)
- 📄 *Worship Formation Study Modules.* ELCA Worship Staff. Sessions that may help a congregation dig deeper into many aspects of worship.

### [Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 Brugh, Lorraine S. and Gordon W. Lathrop. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Sunday Assembly.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
- 📖 Burke, Suzanne and Martin Seltz, eds. *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2012. See especially Chapter 4: Responding to God in Prayer and Praise (pp. 60-72).
- 📖 Hoyer, Christopher George. *Getting the Word Out: A Handbook for Readers.* Minneapolis. Augsburg Fortress, 2013.

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