



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How can lay people participate in worship leadership?

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.

Some worshipping communities print a bulletin that lists those involved in worship leadership. It is not uncommon to find this listing: “Ministers: The baptized people of God.” When we gather for worship, we are all ministers, assembled to pray, sing, praise, celebrate communion and be sent forth in mission.

In *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Sunday Assembly*, a companion volume to *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, the authors base this shared leadership on Paul’s description of the church in First Corinthians: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ” (1 Cor.12: 12).

The ministries of the baptized are many and include: readers, ministers of communion, prayer leaders, cantor and other musicians, ushers, greeters and more. All of these individual ministries contribute to the health of the one body. “Each kind of minister has particular functions which are needed for the whole...no leader leads with their own authority; rather each leader uses the skills they have for the good of the assembly” (*The Sunday Assembly*, 75).

The history of the lay leadership in worship is a diverse one, but the vision expressed in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* and its constellation of resources recovers the idea imagined in the very early church and in the New Testament: “a presiding minister in the midst of an active assembly, with many other lay ministers assisting in the assembly in its worship” (*The Sunday Assembly*, 80).

Who is an assisting minister?

Although many people assist in worship leadership in a variety of ways, some might be trained to serve as an assisting minister. The rubrics (directions in *red italics*) in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* give directions for the presiding minister and assisting minister. The assisting minister can help the presiding minister throughout the liturgy by setting the table for communion, holding books, turning pages, and so forth.

These tasks vary from place to place, depending on architecture and the size of the assembly, as well as the style and extent of ceremony. (see below, Lay leadership in the service of Holy Communion).

An assisting minister will be someone who is “mature in their faith, comfortable in front of a group, able to read well and be heard clearly, and carry themselves with dignity and a calm presence” (*Assisting Ministers and Readers*, p.6). Youth may also serve in this role if they demonstrate these gifts.

Lay leadership in the service of Holy Communion

Gathering

During the gathering, lay ministers such as greeters and ushers are often the first to greet worshippers. They have an important role, being the ones to provide hospitality and welcome. Musicians will normally have a role in the gathering, perhaps by setting the tone with a prelude and often by leading gathering hymns/songs. If sung as part of the gathering, an assisting minister leads portions of the Kyrie and/or Canticle of Praise. If the person serving as Assisting Minister is not comfortable singing, these sung portions might be sung by a cantor or choir. Assemblies that utilize processions will provide other opportunities for lay leadership including a crucifier, torchbearers, and book bearer. The visual arts or dance can also have a role in processions. For more on the Gathering, see ELW Leaders Desk Edition, pp 17-19 and/or *The Sunday Assembly*, Chapter 6.

Word

Lay ministers have the important role of reading Scripture. One or more people may serve in this way, including children who are well trained and comfortable with such a task. The psalm may be lead by a group of lay ministers such as the choir or by a cantor. The assembly proclaims the word in the Hymn of the Day. The Assisting Minister leads the prayers of intercession. These prayers of the people are preferably composed for a particular faith community. With guidance from the pastor or others trained for this ministry, intercessions may be composed by the assisting minister or by others who have a gift for writing prayers but prefer not to serve in an “up-front” leadership role.

Meal

Lay ministers typically assist with the collection of monetary gifts and presenting them along with the communion elements (bread and wine). The Assisting Minister can set the table for communion. Additional lay ministers assist with the distribution of communion and the clean-up following worship (Altar Guild).

Sending

As part of the sending, the Assisting minister says in these or similar words: “Go in peace. Serve the Lord,” to which the assembly responds, “Thanks be to God.” Lay people have the last words of worship, emphasizing that the mission of the church is the responsibility of all the baptized.

Music and Musicians

Music is integral to Lutheran worship and finds expression throughout the liturgy. One way to involve lay leaders is to have those with musical gifts serve as vocalists and instrumentalists. As with other leadership, musical leaders strive to empower the voice of the assembly and their common worship. For more on music in worship, see [“What is the role of music in Lutheran liturgy?”](#) and [“What is the role of the choir in worship?”](#).

“Behind the Scenes” lay ministries

Many lay leaders in worship contribute in vital ways that often go unnoticed. This includes care and cleaning of the grounds and building, hosts of fellowship hours, altar guild, seamstresses and those who care for vestments (see also, [“What are vestments and paraments and Why are they used?”](#)), artists, worship planners, bread bakers, nursery attendants and more. It is important that these ministries are supported and recognized for their role in the assembly’s worship.

Training and Preparation

Lay leaders will be more ready and willing to serve if they are carefully trained. This training led by a pastor, church musician or other church leader will address the many practical questions: What am I to do? How? When do I do them? Congregations are wise to hold regular training sessions for the various lay ministries. In addition, adequate preparation before a worship service will make everyone more at ease and confident (see also, [“How do we lead worship with grace and confidence?”](#)). Even the most experienced veteran leader can benefit from regular refresher sessions, both for themselves and as mentors to people leading in a new role for the first time.

Beyond the practical “what, where and how” questions, be sure that training sessions or other parish education includes the “whys:” “Why do we have assisting ministers,” for example. Regular teaching and recognition of lay ministries reminds the assembly that worship belongs to them, the people of God.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ↪ Who is a Presiding Minister?
- ↪ How do we lead with grace and confidence?
- ↪ How can we involve children and youth in worship?
- ↪ What is the role of music in Lutheran liturgy?
- ↪ What is the role of the choir in worship?
- ↪ What are vestments and paraments and Why are they used?

[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.
- 📖 Burke, Suzanne and Martin Seltz, eds., *Worship Matters: An Introduction to Worship* (Leader edition and Participant edition). Augsburg Fortress, 2012.
- 📖 Burke, Suzanne; Julie O'Brien; Melinda Quivik and Martin Seltz, eds., *Leading Worship Matters: A Sourcebook for Preparing Worship Leaders*. Augsburg Fortress, 2013.
- 📖 Hoyer, Christopher George. *Getting the Word Out: A Handbook for Readers*. Minneapolis. Augsburg Fortress, 2013.
- 📖 Scharen, Christian. *Serving the Assembly's Worship: A Handbook for Assisting Ministers*. Minneapolis. Augsburg Fortress, 2013.

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