



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

How do we select hymns and songs for all seasons?

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.

Major hymnals like *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* are designed to have assembly song that can be sung throughout the church year, from Advent through the long season of Sundays after Pentecost. With so many hymns to choose from, it is no wonder that pastors, church musicians, and congregational worship committees regularly ask themselves, "What do we sing *this* week?"

In selecting assembly song for all seasons, it is important to keep three things in mind.

1. First, what is the theme of the day? Consider the season of the church year, and look at the week's appointed lessons and prayer of the day – these form the scaffold that supports the other more flexible texts of worship, like the hymns, the sermon, and the prayers of the people.
2. Second, what are the liturgical actions that are taking place on this day? Will there be a baptism? Holy Communion? The installation of parish council members? Farewell and Godspeed to some longtime members? Each of these will further shape the setting in which the hymns will be sung.
3. Third, and most particular, what is the function of each hymn within the service? Gathering and sending hymns do as their names suggest, gathering the community and sending it forth. The hymn of the day serves as the congregation's proclamation of the themes set forth in the lessons and sermon. Hymns during communion can unfold many of the meanings of communion as well as the day's themes. (*The Sunday Assembly* in the resource list below contains a helpful list of possible communion hymns). Different functions call for hymns that flow with the current of worship, not trying to swim against it. "Sent Forth By God's Blessing" (ELW #547) is a fine hymn, but it is hard to imagine using it as the assembly gathers for worship.

For other questions and dimensions related to selecting hymns, see [“How do we expand our congregation’s hymn repertoire?”](#) This question highlights other factors to consider when selecting assembly song such as familiarity, the ability of the musical leadership, and the balance of musical styles.

Hymnal Headings

In most hymnals, one obvious place to start looking for hymns is to look at the section headings that appear above each hymn. In the ELW, for example, the hymns are arranged in groups that start with the seasons of the church year, followed by other themes like Holy Baptism, Holy Communion, Gathering, etc. so research the section for the appropriate season (Epiphany, Lent, etc.), sacrament (Baptism, Communion), or theme (Trust and Guidance, Praise and Thanksgiving, etc.).

Take care, however, that hymnal headings do not become an unyielding law. Many hymns could be listed under multiple headings. For example, the Taizé chant, “*Ubi Caritas et amor*” (Where True Charity and Love Abide, ELW #642) would function very well during the foot washing on Maundy Thursday. In *With One Voice*, it was indeed listed under the Holy Week heading. Yet it could be used on many occasions throughout the church year when the theme is Christian community, hence its placement in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Let the headings be a guide, but don’t become too hemmed in by them.

Another example of a hymn with a flexible heading is “Joy to the World” (ELW #267). In *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, it is found under the Advent section: “let ev’ry heart prepare him room,” we sing. Yet most of us associate this hymn with Christmas. This brings up the question: “What about singing Christmas hymns during Advent?” Again, the answer to this not a law, but considering how well the hymn functions in worship set next to the scripture readings and actions of Advent worship. It will seem very odd to sing “Silent Night” on a bright Advent morning when the lessons of the day speak not of birth but of waiting. Yet the Advent implications of “Joy to the world” allow it to straddle Advent and Christmas.

There are times, however, when a hymn that may seem “out of season” works quite well. “Now the Green Blade Rises” (ELW #379) is typically sung as an Easter hymn, yet it fits very well on the Fifth Sunday in Lent in Year B. We could also return to the previous example, “Joy the World.” This hymn is Isaac Watt’s paraphrase of Psalm 98. There may be an occasion when it could be sung as the Psalm, especially in the Easter season.

Indexes and other hymn selection guides

Various indexes can be a helpful resource for selecting hymns. Many hymnals have indexes in the back, suggesting hymns by topic or by reference to a particular biblical passage. Paul Westermeyer’s *Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship* and Marilyn Stulken’s companions to *Lutheran Book of Worship* and *With One Voice* also have additional indexes that group hymns by their original languages and the year in which they were written. An additional helpful resource is *Indexes to Evangelical Lutheran Worship*; this suggests hymns for each Sunday and festival in the church year. Some hymnals also have a concordance volume that allows someone to search for hymns that use particular words (“peace” or “joy” for example). If you have an electronic version

of a hymnal, these usually come with search engines that serve the same purpose. An example of an online hymnal search engine is <http://www.hymnary.org>.

Sundays and Seasons, published by Augsburg Fortress, is available in print version as well as online at www.sundaysandseasons.com is another resource where weekly hymn selections are offered. Various Internet Web sites offer suggestions as well, as different people, congregations, and organizations publish musical suggestions that blend with the Revised Common Lectionary. Some of these Web sites envision quite elaborate worship, while others are more bare-bones in their vision. Some sites are subscription-only, while others are free.

Finally, do not neglect the "indexes" that lie between the ears of other people in your parish. While a single person – the church musician or pastor – is capable of selecting the hymns for worship, the result can be much richer when a group gathers for this purpose. The lessons are read by the group and the indexes studied, but the conversation between the people around the table can bring to mind other hymns that would be appropriate. This could be the parish worship committee, a subcommittee thereof, or an entirely separate group that gathers only to select hymns (see also, [“What is a Worship Committee?”](#)).

Remember that all of these conversations and planning take time. While you will at times ask, “what hymns do we sing this week,” you will have a better sense of hymns for the year when you plan weeks and months in advance. Advance planning will also allow all involved with music leadership to create and prepare for the weeks ahead.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ↪ How do we expand our congregation’s hymn repertoire?
- ↪ How do we introduce new music to our congregation?
- ↪ What is a Worship Committee?

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

- 📄 Collins, Dori Erwin and Scott C. Weidler, *Sound Decisions: Evaluating Contemporary Music for Lutheran Worship*, Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Division for Congregational Ministries

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 *Choosing Contemporary Music: Seasonal, Topical, Lectionary Indexes*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000.
- 📖 *Indexes to Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Minneapolis; Augsburg Fortress, 2007.
- 📖 *Musician’s Guide to Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007. This resource offers guides on leading assembly song and assistance in leading each hymn, song and piece of liturgical and service music in Evangelical Lutheran Worship.

- 📖 *Sundays and Seasons*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress. Print version published annually by church year.
- 💻 Also available as an online subscription at www.sundaysandseasons.com.
- 📖 Brugh, Lorraine S. and Gordon W. Lathrop. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Sunday Assembly*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
- 📖 Buckley Farlee, Robert. *Musicians in the Assembly*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001.
- 📖 Westermeyer, Paul. *Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2010.
- 📖 Stulken, Marilyn Kay. *With One Voice: A Reference Companion*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000.

Other Resources

- 💻 A Comprehensive Index of Hymns and Hymnals <http://www.hymnary.org>
- 📖 Stulken, Marilyn Kay. [*Hymnal Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship*](#). Augsburg Fortress, 1981

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