



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

What is the "Exchange of Peace?"

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquires 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

First be reconciled to your brother or sister. . .

For some people, the moments in the liturgy following the prayers of the church are awkward ones. The presiding minister offers these words: "The peace of the Lord be with you always." The congregation responds "And also with you." The members of the congregation are then invited to "share the peace" with one another. What does this really mean?

Sharing God's peace is *not* simply offering a friendly hello to those sitting around you. Sharing God's peace is *not* a time for catching up on news with your neighbor or for reminding someone about an upcoming meeting. Sharing God's peace does *not* require each worshiper to offer a sign of God's peace to every other worshiper present. The "exchange of peace" (also commonly called "sharing the peace" or "passing the peace") is an act of reconciliation that serves as a transition point between the Word and Meal portions of the liturgy. As stated in *The Sunday Assembly*:

The exchange of peace is a ministry, an announcement of grace we make to each other, a summary of the gift given to us in the liturgy of the Word. This ministry we do to each other is far greater than a sociable handshake or a ritual of friendship or a moment of informality. Because of the presence of Jesus Christ, we give to each other what we are saying: Christ's own peace. Then, having been gathered by the Spirit around the Risen One present in the word, we turn to celebrate his meal (p. 173).

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, as recorded in Matthew's Gospel, lays a foundation for the practice of sharing God's peace. "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to you brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24).

Other sources from the early church confirm the practice of sharing the gift of peace. In the *Didache*, an early Christian writing nearly as old as many of the New Testament

writings, the Christian community is encouraged to "come together on the Lord's day, having first confessed your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure. Anyone who has a quarrel with his fellow should not gather with you until he has been reconciled, lest your sacrifice be profaned."

This passage from the *Didache* confirms that the pattern Jesus spoke about in the Sermon on the Mount became a regular weekly occurrence in the early Christians' practice of Holy Communion.

Over centuries, the exchange of peace sometimes came later in the service, after the Lord's Prayer and before the distribution of Communion. Some congregations still exchange the peace at this point, though the preferred placement in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* is following the intercessory prayers and before the setting of the table (quite likely the more ancient pattern).

That the sharing of the peace follows the prayers of the church is not accidental. Having been forged into a common people in Holy Baptism, the congregation prays for peace in the Church, peace in the world, and peace for all those in need. Then the congregation follows through with the people offering peace and reconciliation to one another. This is not human peace alone, but the peace which is possible only through Christ. Then, after the exchange of peace, we receive the gift of Christ's peace in our sharing Holy Communion.

Practice

How assemblies practice this exchange of peace will vary. In some assemblies, worshippers simply turn to those sitting nearby and offer a handshake with the words "peace be with you" or "the peace of Christ be with you." In other assemblies, worshippers move out of the pews/chairs, extending this sharing of peace for a good deal of time. The benefit of such sharing is that the time is given to celebrate this assembly, the primary symbol of Christ present among us. The drawback is that it can be seen as a time just to move about and greet friends; it loses the equality of simply greeting those around you (*The Sunday Assembly*, p. 174). Furthermore, the sharing of the peace can be lost and the time can be more about saying "good morning" or having other conversation. It is especially important that this practice invites hospitality to visitors; this is not a time to simply greet those we know. Since the peace is an outgrowth of our prayers for peace and the promise of Christ's peace for us always, it needs to be clear that we share this peace as a sign of our baptismal unity as children of God.

How is the peace actually exchanged? Some enact this exchange with a handshake. Others may use an embrace or a kiss. Another option, especially if there is concern about contagious disease such as a flu epidemic, is to "grasp both of the other person's lower arms, speaking the words with the other" (*The Sunday Assembly*, p. 174).

In whatever manner an assembly shares the peace, the pastor or other leaders are wise to consider the "what, whys and hows" of this exchange and to find opportunities for teaching the meanings of this practice in worship and its connection to our every day lives.

Christians are a people who seek reconciliation with one another. Making peace is a daily action in our lives. We do not need to wait to come to church on Sunday morning in order to make peace with our neighbors and our family members. Sharing God's peace is a daily opportunity.

RESOURCES

[Frequently Asked Questions:](#)

- ↻ What is the pattern for worship?

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

- 📖 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Leaders Desk Edition*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006.
- 📖 Brugh, Lorraine S. and Gordon W. Lathrop. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Sunday Assembly*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
- 📖 Van Loon, Ralph R. and S. Anita Stauffer. *Worship Wordbook*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995.

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