



Worship Formation & Liturgical Resources: Frequently Asked Questions

What is the role of music in the Lutheran liturgy?

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.

First, this question needs a disclaimer. Asking “What is the role of music in the liturgy?” can obscure something about worship one may have never considered: the liturgy itself is musical. The words and actions of the liturgy, even if no songs are sung, are, in a sense, musical. The pattern of gathering, word, meal and sending has within it highs and lows, silence and speech, movement and stillness (see also, [“What is the pattern of worship?”](#)).

More commonly, however, when we ask “what is the role of music in the liturgy” we are referring to music’s function; we are addressing how music works in the liturgy. We will consider this important question after briefly addressing why music is a part of worship at all.

Why music?

Music, especially singing, has been inextricably linked to our story as God’s people. All God’s people have sung throughout recorded history. The Israelites sang after their deliverance from Egypt. David sang in time of trouble and rejoicing. Mary and Simeon sang songs of thanksgiving. John, on the island of Patmos, heard the glorious songs of the angels in his vision. The psalms, the Bible’s hymnbook, testify to the link of story to song: “Your love, O Lord, forever will I sing; from age to age my mouth will proclaim your faithfulness.” (Psalm 89:1).

While Scripture and Christian history attest to the gifts of instruments and dancing, the human voice has been given central place in the Church’s music. *Principles for Worship*, an ELCA document on worship, guides the church in its use of music in the assembly and will be the basis for much of what follows here. Of the human voice, it states: “In the church, the primary musical instrument is the human voice, given by God to sing and proclaim the word of God” (Principle M-2). Consideration for the role of music in worship takes as its starting point the singing of the whole congregation.

Music as Gift

The question about music’s role can portray music exclusively as a kind of tool, suggesting that music exists only for the sake of something else. That is why the first role

of music is not really a “role” at all. Luther regarded music first and foremost as gift, one of the principles of music listed in *Principles for Worship*: “God creates music as part of the whole creation and gives it to humankind to develop and shape” (Principle M-1). We receive music as a gift of God.

Shaping the Gift

We know, however, that gifts once placed in human hands can be used in a variety of ways. We talk of the natural world as a gift but also how we steward creation, how we care for it. Similarly, how does the Church steward and shape the gift of music? Luther remarked that he wanted to “see all the arts, especially music, used in the service of [God] who gave and made them.¹” Music is never merely an ornament in worship, a kind of decoration. The gift of music is shaped carefully in the service of God.

What is music’s role in the service of God’s people, the liturgy? These key roles are listed below partnered with a principle from *Principles for Worship* or *The Use of the Means of Grace*.

Building community

Music is a communal and relational activity. The assembly is the primary musical ensemble, and its song is the core of all music in worship (Principle M-3).

“Build us up, Lord...form and shape your new creation” (ELW #670). When the church sings together, it remembers its common story and this story binds the baptized together as one people. When much of our society focuses on individual values and concerns, the church makes the claim that we are a community in Christ. Music shapes this community over time.

Such community is best served by music that encourages participation and uplifts the congregation’s voice. An application of the above principle states:

“Regardless of musical style or instrumentation, leadership confidently supports and enables the voice of the congregation. Likewise, the voice of a soloist, cantor, assisting minister, or presiding minister is most effective when it does not overwhelm or dominate the congregation’s voice” (*Principles for Worship*, Application M-2F).

The church benefits from many people using their diverse musical talents in service of the assembly’s common song.

Forming and Expressing Christian Identity

The assembly’s song contributes to the spiritual formation of the assembly itself and its individual members. Used carefully over time, the song forms communal and individual memory and serves to nurture the faith from one generation to another (Principles for Worship, Principle M-5).

We often use the phrase “you are what you eat.” We also are what we sing. For this reason, it is best to make careful choices about the tunes and texts an assembly will sing.

¹ Martin Luther, “Preface to the Wittenberg Hymnal,” in *Luther’s Works, Volume 53* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 316.

Proclaiming the Word

Music, the visual arts and the environment of our worship spaces embody the proclamation of the Word in Lutheran churches....Music is a servant of the Gospel. (Use of the Means of Grace, Principle 11, Application 11A).

Lutherans like to quote Martin Luther's high praise of music: "next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise" (Preface to Georg Rhau's *Symphonie Lucandae*, Luther's Works 53:321-323). Luther understood music to be a gift of God that had the power to proclaim God's word. The church continues to hold Luther's understanding yet today.

Since proclamation of the Word is one of the primary roles of music in the liturgy, decisions about music will involve much more than personal taste or musical style. Music that serves the word shows forth Christ rather than draws attention to itself.

Surrounding the Sacraments

As part of God's creation renewed in Christ, the people of God sing around the elements, words and actions that bear God's grace (Principles for Worship, Principle M-8).

Christian liturgy is more than words. (see also, ["How do we use the body in worship?"](#) and ["How does worship involve our senses?"](#)). When we gather as God's people, we celebrate God coming among us in the flesh, in word paired with the earthly materials water, wine and bread. Music surrounds these events, interpreting them in text and tune. Communion hymns, for example, need to take into consideration that people will be moving about as they sing. Hymns with easily memorized refrains can be especially fitting. See *The Sunday Assembly* in Resources for more on hymns during communion.

Music serves God's Mission

Through music, the Holy Spirit empowers the assembly to participate in God's mission to the World. (Principle M-17)

As the liturgy sends us forth to be God's people in the World, music can direct us in ways of justice and mercy toward our neighbor. How will what we sing shape us in how we live? How is the music ministry of your congregation connected to the community? Does singing songs of other cultures bring awareness to the breadth and diversity of God's people?

Since music is integral to the liturgy, worship leaders have the amazing and difficult task of choosing what to sing and play, when to sing, how to lead various songs, etc. Since music is not a mere ornament but shapes the faith of the assembly, it calls for wise stewardship.

While it is certainly not a complete list, below are some questions to guide you as you grow in understanding music's role in your congregation Sunday after Sunday. By including these as questions, it is hoped that you will continually reflect upon the musical health of your assembly, noting where it is thriving and how it can be improved.

Music in Liturgy Checklist: Practical Questions about music's role in your assembly

- ✓ Is the assembly's voice primary? In other words, are people singing?
- ✓ Do choirs and other musical ensembles support or overshadow the assembly's voice?
- ✓ Does technology enliven or overshadow the assembly's voice?
- ✓ Are musical leaders sensitive to how music functions in the liturgy?
- ✓ Are congregations lovingly encouraged to participate musically?
- ✓ Do hymns and songs relate to the scripture readings?
- ✓ Do hymns and songs function well according to their place in the service: gathering, word, meal or sending?
- ✓ Does the music of the liturgy proclaim the gospel?
- ✓ How is community formed by what is sung?
- ✓ How diverse is the assembly's song?
- ✓ Do you sing across space and time?

RESOURCES

Frequently Asked Questions:

- ☪ What is the pattern of worship?
- ☪ How do we use the body in worship?
- ☪ How does worship involve our senses?
- ☪ What is the role of the choir in 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)

Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:

- 📖 *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.
- 📖 Bosch, Paul, Marianne Sawicki, and Paul Westermeyer. *What is "contemporary" worship?* Open Questions in *Worship*, vol. 2, ed. Gordon Lathrop. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995.
- 📖 Boesenecker, Andy and Jim Graeser. *A Field Guide to Contemporary Music: How to begin and lead band-based worship.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2011.
- 📖 Brugh, Lorraine S. and Gordon W. Lathrop. *Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship: The Sunday Assembly.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
- 📖 Farlee, Robert Buckley. *Musicians in the Assembly.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001.

- 📖 Mummert, Mark. “Musical Power: Broken to the Center” in *Centripetal Worship: The Evangelical Heart of Lutheran Worship*, edited by Timothy J. Wengert. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007.
- 📖 Westermeyer, Paul. *The Church Musician*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997.
- 📖 Westermeyer, Paul. *Te Deum: The Church and Music*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998.

Other Resources

- 📖 Schalk, Carl. [*Luther on Music: Paradigms of Praise*](#). St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1988.

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