

Living Lutheran: Worship 101

The "whats, hows and whys" of Lutheran worship

By Meghan Johnston Aelabouni

June 7, 2019

Any class or discussion on worship could begin with questions about what Lutheran worship is, how Lutherans worship and why do we do so.

Sometimes these questions arise from specific, concrete concerns: whether a hymn or praise song is a good choice for a congregation; whether to plan a foot-washing or a first communion; how material choices for worship—paper bulletins, plastic cups, gluten-free bread—reflect our faith.

Other times, we might find ourselves in a pew or at a campfire reciting the Lord's Prayer and suddenly wonder what this *is really about*. When we experience a worship style that is new to us, we may wonder how it *can be so different and still be the same thing*. Or we may seek to answer the nonreligious friend who inquires, "Why do Christians keep meeting together and doing the same things, over and over?" Or the child who simply asks, "Why are we going to church again?"

Since the earliest days of the church, Christians have identified worship as the heart of faith and sought to describe what lies at its heart. As early as A.D. 150, philosopher Justin Martyr identified at least four essential components of worship—*gathering, word, meal, sending*—that are still found today in Christian churches throughout the world.

Lutherans and other Christians have also long sought to balance Christian unity with human diversity in worship. The Augsburg Confession proposed that the "one holy, Christian church" is "the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached, and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel." As long as word and sacrament are in place, the confession stated, "it is not necessary for the true unity of the church that uniform ceremonies, instituted by human beings, be observed everywhere."

Still, we might wonder what *kinds* of gathering, word, meal or sending "count" as Lutheran worship. And then there's the question of how we can tell if the word and sacraments are being preached and administered "according to the gospel." The *whats, hows and whys* of Christian worship among Lutherans are as old as the roots of our faith, but these questions live anew in every gathering, word, meal and sending.

Gathering

Whether we meet in a sanctuary, a school gym, an outdoor chapel or a living room, "the core of worship is the people gathering together so that they can talk to God all together," said Christina Garrett Klein, a pastor of Edgebrook Lutheran Church, Chicago.

From planning worship for her congregation to serving as chair of her synod's liturgy team and as a member of the worship planning team for the ELCA Rostered Ministers Gathering, Klein has

found that the *gathering* of worship is key. Faith “can seem like an incredibly lonely journey,” she explained, but worship in the community of faith reminds us that “you have all these other people now; you’re not alone ... you get to see God shining through them.”

Kevin Strickland, ELCA executive for worship, noted the importance of paying attention to who does the gathering: not humans but the Spirit. “God still shows up, not just in worship but especially in worship, in the body that is Christ,” he said. “We come, mingled and broken; we come with bruises and burdens, and we also come with joys ... [and] the incarnation is continuing to happen in our midst.”

As the living body of Christ, the gathered community is always changing. Births and deaths, departures and arrivals, absences and presences of all kinds mean the group of people assembled together in worship is always different.

For Erik Christensen, pastor to the community and director of worship at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, the transitory nature of a seminary community drawn from across the ELCA and the world means “people know what they know and cherish it deeply,” but what is long cherished by one member may be brand-new to another. Part of the joy and challenge of planning worship is balancing this familiarity and newness, he said.

Another essential aspect of gathering is taking seriously the gifts of the people assembled. “Think of the hours choirs spend singing together, rehearsing ... the prayers and conversations,” Christensen said. Through participation and relationships, “the worship feels authentic, not [only] in terms of style but in reflecting a relational sensibility,” he added.

Klein agreed: “That is, in part, what makes us Lutheran—we try to incorporate the whole community.”

A Lutheran emphasis on the priesthood of all believers—the members of the body of Christ offering their diverse gifts in holy service—can be found in intergenerational approaches to worship that invite all to come as they are, such as congregations welcoming children to the worship space by providing child-friendly areas or activities.

Word

Prayers and Scripture readings, sermons and testimonies, and hymns and songs are each part of the word of worship. For Strickland, word is also a place of continued incarnation. “We hear sacred stories, not just for the sake of history but for the sake of giving us a place in these sacred stories today,” he said. “God—Immanuel—is still with us.”

Even though many of the words of worship are addressed to God, the goal is “not to remind God of something God may have forgotten,” Christensen said, but the opposite: to be reminded by God of the truth of the world and ourselves. The truth that sin causes us to forget, he said, is “that we’re good ... that we’re forgiven ... that we’re free ... that there’s enough—the things of abundant life.”

The words of worship may emphasize unity and continuity within the church in many times and places, like the use of the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer and the words spoken at baptism

and communion. Other words are highly dependent on context, including, first and foremost, the written and spoken languages used by worship leaders and participants. Pre-written or extemporaneous prayers, the lyrics of songs and hymns, and litanies for particular seasons or occasions may also be formed out of the lived experiences, perspectives and cultures of the people gathered.

In her ministry, Klein has found the Lutheran World Federation's "[Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture](#)" to be a vital resource for planning worship. Created by Lutherans from many different global contexts, the statement advocates for worship that is transcultural, contextual, countercultural and cross-cultural.

Transcultural (or universal) elements include a focus on the cross and the resurrection of Christ in worship. The incarnation of Christ points the way to the *contextual* life of worship in different communities. Yet worship does not merely reflect culture; it also acts *counterculturally* by naming the power of God's grace and abundance to transform a world beset by sin and injustice.

Finally, the Nairobi statement encourages Christian worship to reflect the whole body of Christ around the world by engaging in ecumenical and *cross-cultural* sharing of elements of worship, such as hymns and art. Faithful multicultural worship, Klein added, starts with having "voices at the table" that reflect cultural diversity, rooted in real relationships within and beyond the worshipping community.

Then there is that question about what makes worship Lutheran. The word "grace" will likely appear in Lutheran worship, as will phrases central to Lutheran theology, such as "justification by grace through faith" or "law and gospel," which help shape our worship.

Yet Lutheran worship is also defined in part by the recognition that it is Christian first and Lutheran second—a reality underscored by the ELCA's full-communion partnerships and pulpit-sharing agreements with other churches. The "holy catholic church" that Lutherans confess in the words of the Apostles' Creed is larger than any one denominational tradition; therefore, in a sense, "it's Lutheran because it's not [only] 'Lutheran,'" Christensen said.

Meal

The stuff of the earth, Jesus' command to "do this in remembrance of me" ([Luke 22:19](#)) and the community eating and drinking together—this is communion, the meal of worship. Yet the simple recipe has countless variations (wafers or loaves, wine or juice, a common cup or individual glasses, kneeling at the rail or walking to stations) and the diversity of the people who preside at the table or serve and receive the meal.

Wherever communion takes place, every table is part of the same table at which Jesus first said, "My body, given for you ... my blood, shed for you."

There are many *whys* behind communion and baptism being the two sacraments celebrated in Lutheran worship. Tradition, practicality and context may all help determine how the sacraments are carried out. Yet the *what* of the sacraments—their meaning and their central place in worship—is also worth examining.

Lutherans refer to the sacraments as “means of grace”—ways in which God in Jesus Christ is present through the Spirit in the materials, words and human actions that offer us God’s grace. As we “taste and see” or “come to the water,” communion and baptism connect us not only to God, Klein said, but also to the community, to the body of Christ, who share in these sacraments.

Martin Luther emphasized that daily individual remembrances of baptism could be done while washing hands or bathing, but Klein argued that it’s also important to experience the sacraments as something “different from what I control”—like the surprise of drops hitting your skin as the water from the font is flung out over the congregation during a communal remembrance of baptism.

The sacraments also carry this sense of community and connection out into the world. Christensen noted: “If these are the ritual acts we participate in week after week, they remind us of the reality of God’s good creation and our place in it.

“The church has an immigration policy, and it’s called baptism. In a world deeply divided over national identity, baptism says everyone is welcome. It preserves the integrity of our identities and unites us.”

Similarly, the abundance and sharing of communion, in which everyone is fed and there is enough for everyone, challenges “a manufactured scarcity in which we work and overwork,” he said. If baptism is the church’s immigration policy, “communion is our economic policy.”

Sending

The Greek word for church used in the New Testament is *ekklesia*, which Strickland noted literally means “called out.” In worship, “we’re called in so that we can be the called-out ones,” he said. “We are gathered to praise and to lament, to be incredibly vulnerable and then to be fed, to be filled, so that we can literally be for our neighbor’s need.”

A Lutheran understanding of vocation finds a holy calling in every aspect of our daily lives into which we are *sent* by and from our worship: jobs, relationships, citizenship, service. So, Strickland said, the role of sending in worship is not to emphasize a strict dichotomy between church and world, inside and outside, or “us and them.”

Sending leads again to gathering; the incarnation of Christmas leads to the resurrection of Easter, and then to Christmas again. So, too, worship not only gathers us into relationship but also sends us into “transformative relationships” with our neighbors that can lead to “a transformed life [and] a transformed world,” Christensen said. It is not only that “when we worship, we’re thinking about justice,” he added, but that “when we think about justice, we’re also thinking about worship: What is the public dimension of worship? How is all worship a public event? How is the reign of God modeled and embodied in worship ... [and] ritual combined with direct action and advocacy?”

As communities of faith worship through *gathering, word, meal* and *sending*, Strickland emphasized that “worship can be incredibly distinctly Lutheran while being culturally,

contextually appropriate and using the gifts of the people in your space. How we pray, how we sing, how we preach ... [Christian unity] doesn't mean it all has to look the same."

Worship ultimately means more than we can describe or explain in words, Christensen said, adding, "We discover what the liturgy means by *doing* liturgy."

The one who gathers us, speaks to us the living word, washes and feeds us in grace, and sends us into the world is the living Jesus Christ. No wonder, then, that worship, as diverse as the body of Christ itself, comes alive in embodied practice.

Visit elca.org/worship for resources, stories and news from ELCA Worship