



A refresher for musicians who strive to plan and lead vital, vibrant Lutheran worship

Five Things About Worship

Prelude: A bit of background

The ground for all Christian worship is the good news: “Jesus is risen!” Why is this good, and why is it news?

It is good because the resurrection proclaims the beginning of the reign of God on Earth. With that event begins the process of salvation shared by all creation. Nothing will ever be the same.

And it is news, even today. Whereas most “news” fades quickly from our minds, “Jesus’ resurrection continues to be news because it is an event that is unique in the world’s history,” Walter Bouman and Sue Setzer write in *What Shall I Say? Discerning God’s Call to Ministry*. “Jesus alone has conquered death.”¹

Thus, Bouman and Setzer suggest, our witness as Christians begins not with the incarnation but with the resurrection. This is the heart of the first message proclaimed by Jesus’ disciples in Acts 2:32 “This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses!” Let that be our witness also as lay leaders serving the church. Liberated from the fear of death, that which enslaves and destroys, “we are free instead to offer ourselves for one another and for the world.”² This is where our joyful work begins.³

“And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.” (2 Cor. 5:15)

I. Worship takes place in community; therefore, we strive to encourage congregational song.

This may go without saying, but we all have encountered those who claim they can worship God perfectly well from their easy chair or in their backyard hammock. True, they may feel God’s presence there. But worship is so much more!

Robert Rimbo provides us with a ringing definition of worship: “Christian worship is the communal encounter with the grace of God incarnate in Jesus Christ,” he writes, “and it involves the encounter with those flesh-and-blood things that connect us to the flesh of Jesus and so engage us in that grace.”⁴

Our role in this encounter is to embrace the assembly’s song as the pre-eminent music of the church.⁵ It is therefore imperative that we focus our energies primarily on encouraging congregational song.

We often fall into the trap of spending the majority of our choir rehearsal time on anthem preparation, since this is the time in the service when we feel our choir is “on display.” But as Rimbo and others have pointed out, worship is not entertainment. Furthermore, the anthem is a dispensable, non-liturgical component of the service which often serves simply as background music while the offering is taken. How much truer to Rimbo’s definition of worship it would be if the choir’s primary role was to lead the assembly’s song in interesting and surprising ways! To this end you may:

- Compose special choral stanzas of hymns in settings that underscore the meaning of the verses, or—if the hymn is written in four-part harmony—simply assign one verse to the choir.
- Have the choir serve as cantor for the liturgy and lead the psalmody.
- Make sure your singers are fully involved in worship both musically and spiritually. If they sound *and* look as if they are finding the risen Christ in the midst of the assembly, this will help open minds and hearts of those in the pews to the same.

II. Worship is eschatological, pointing us toward the last things; therefore, we strive to proclaim these in our music.

Our calling as Christians is not simply to affirm that we are saved by grace through faith, but to proclaim the ongoing process of salvation into which all creation entered at the resurrection, and in which all of humanity shares,⁶ as we anticipate the consummation of the reign of God of which Jesus is “alpha and omega,” inaugurator and consummator.⁷

This is not a matter to be taken lightly. Consider the urgency of the eschatological perspective toward which the letter writer of Hebrews encourages his or her audience (Hebrews 12:18-24):

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. . . . But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

And does not our most familiar prayer contain one of the strongest eschatological statements we possess, in “your kingdom come, your will be done. . .”?

We probably don’t need to shake up our congregations as much as the writer to the Hebrews was trying to do. But we can make an effort to balance comfortable, familiar, assuring hymns with edgier ones which include an eschatological dimension.

Advent is a great time to strike out in this direction. For every chipper “Awake! Awake, and Greet the New Morn” we can include a deep, brooding “The King Shall Come When Morning Dawns” (LSB 348, ELW 260, CW 25). Then, take your hymn quest one level deeper: If you select “Creator of the Stars of Night,” if at all possible opt for the bracing John Mason Neale translation (LSB 351) which is much closer to the ecstatic prayer of the original Latin poem than the milder translation in ELW 245 adapted from the *Hymnal 1940*. ([Click here](#) for a stimulating foray into a literal translation of the original Latin and various alternatives.)

III. Worship is ecumenical, embracing the entire Christian church; we strive to encourage diversity in our leadership.

Newer musical resources have brought a great body of ecumenical music into our midst, and with that an invitation to continue to develop our sensitivity to appropriate accompaniment styles. The fragrant strains of “Golden Breaks the Dawn” (ELW 852) need little more than open fifths, finger cymbals and perhaps a flute to flower. Bracing Latin rhythms in “United at the Table” and the alternative tune in ELW 489 for “Soul, Adorn Yourself with Gladness” (Vengo a ti, Jesús amado) frequently enliven our preparation for communion.

And we grasp the essential unaccompanied four-part nature of African hymns such as “Gracious Spirit, Heed Our Pleading” (ELW 401) and “Amen, We Praise Your Name” (ELW 846) just as fully as we do that of our beloved *a cappella* rendition of “Beautiful Savior.”

But what about those who lead worship? Do we detect there that same representation of the entire Christian body? Do we fall back on the same few folks every week to serve as cantors, readers or assisting ministers, or do we work to train up new ones who are thereby drawn more deeply into the life of our congregation? And what about children and youth, who are always so willing and eager to serve – what roles can we find for them? Here is a [story](#) about how one congregation used a “cantor school” to train its youth to lead the liturgical parts of a worship service.

IV. Worship is liturgical; we strive to offer a life-giving encounter through the liturgy.

*Rooted, reformed, and renewed in the history and experience of the Church, Lutherans-together with much of Christianity-share a concern for ordered worship. It is a Lutheran conviction that the needs of the people at prayer are most effectively met by forms and practices which draw on the collective experience of the whole Church. Lutheran worship is characterized neither by eccentricity nor faddishness, but values stability and continuity with the whole Church. Thus, historic patterns, the Church year, appointed readings and psalms, and a central core of hymnody have a prominent place in Lutheran worship.*⁸

Most of us already know this well. But do we live out this belief in our worship life? If you detect your congregation coasting along in its singing of the liturgy without much expression, what can you do to liven things up so that even non-musicians will notice?

Investigate alternate harmonizations such as those by David Cherwien (*Alternatives Within*, for LBW/LW Settings I and II, published by Augsburg but now out of print; or Michael Burkhardt, *Alternative Organ Accompaniments: Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Holy Communion Settings One–Four*).

Devise your own alternative settings, complete with dynamic and expressive markings. After all, there’s no reason that liturgical singing can’t be as dynamic and expressive as the finest anthem or hymn arrangement.

Pay particular attention to tempo. Work to discern what the true nature of each liturgical movement is—march, dance, song, prayer—and adjust your tempos accordingly. Errant tempi are much more damaging to the music’s communicative powers than wrong notes!

V. Worship is formative; we strive to be Christ to all in our midst.

We know that worship forms us in our Christian lives. Each time we gather we strengthen our communal bonds. We open our hearts, minds and lives to God's love through word, meal and song. We are transformed in ways far beyond our understanding by the power of the words we sing and by the simple gifts of bread and wine. We arrive hungry, we leave fed, nourished and closer to God (to borrow from Jaroslav Vajda), our faith increased so we may better serve a world in need.

However, those in ministry positions have a greater charge. For each of us, the way we approach our vocation has a huge impact on our congregation above and beyond the musical notes themselves. We are not only leading people in worship, we are modeling for them the faithful Christian life. Are we always arriving late and cobbling things together at the last minute, or do we plan ahead and prepare carefully? Do we get by on the bare minimum, or do we exercise our creativity liberally even though this means more hours on the job? Do we grumble about the workload, the pay, the meetings, the nosy people who keep telling us how we should do our job, or is our true love for our ministry apparent? And finally, the hardest question: If we don't love it, why are we doing it?

(Endnotes)

- 1 Published by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1995, 9.
- 2 Bouman and Setzer, 13.
- 3 For questions and answers concerning Lutheran worship see these pages on the denominational web sites of [ELCA](#), [LCMS](#), and [WELS](#).
- 4 Robert A. Rimbo, *Why Worship Matters*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004 (part of Augsburg's "Worship Matters" series), 12.
- 5 For a fuller articulation of this, see [ALCM's Statement on Worship and Music](#).
- 6 Bouman and Setzer, 10.
- 7 Walter Bouman, *Jesus is Risen: Theology for the Church*. Unpublished manuscript, 147.
- 8 [ALCM's Statement on Worship and Music](#).



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