



The three R's of the Offertory: Revive, Refresh, Renew

If you are a musician or worship planner looking for a way to breathe new life into the liturgy by the use of seasonal alternatives, look no further than the Offertory.

Here, near the beginning of the liturgy for the Eucharistic meal where the offering of money is brought forward by lay persons along with the gifts of bread and wine, the congregation may be invited to sing any number of wonderful options drawn from our great body of hymnody as a way to express communally our response to the gifts God gives to us. The money offers a powerful liturgical symbol for the reality that, as Luther put it, God “provides me richly and daily with all that I need to support this body and life, protects me from all danger, and guards me and preserves me from all evil.” The bread and wine are brought forward, audaciously, as gifts returned to God for God to take as God’s own body. In offering these gifts we also offer our lives and prayers back to God for God’s use.

But wait a minute, you say: There’s no mention made of the Offertory in any of the ten settings of Holy Communion in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006). Instead we find provision only for the Offering, accompanied in Settings Three through Ten by this rubric: “An offering is gathered, and the table is set. Assembly song or other music may accompany or follow the gathering of the offering. After the offering is gathered, the assembly stands. The gifts may be brought forward. An offering prayer may be said; the assembly responds ‘Amen.’” ELW Settings One and Two specify that the offering is to be gathered “for the mission of the church, including the care of those in need,” expands on the nature of the gifts brought forward (“Bread, wine, money and other gifts”) and provides three prayers “after the table is set,” including the prayer “Blessed are you...” (which served in LBW and WOV as an offertory prayer).

What has become of the Offertory in ELW? The Leaders Edition offers no explanation, and in the section “Offering” specifies only that “Gifts of money and other material

goods may gathered in a simple manner appropriate to the context. As the offering is being received, the Lord’s supper is set for the sacramental meal...” (p. 22). Nor is *The Sunday Assembly: Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Vol. 1* (Augsburg Fortress, 2008) helpful with this question; we are simply referred to “the old, communal offertories (#181-188)” as ways to “bring to expression the meaning of the collection and of the setting of the table: the goodness of God in creation; our thankful response to the unearned grace of God; our prayer that God will enable us to make that response in our daily life and work” (pp. 198-199).

The omission of the Offertory in ELW may be related to the planners’ determination to remove from Lutheran practice any hint of the Eucharist as a sacrificial act in which the gifts would be offered as atonements for sin. Indeed, for this reason Luther deemed the Roman Offertory an “abomination” which made everything “sound and smell of oblation.” Those so attuned might possibly detect allusions to sacrifice in the Offertory prayer well known to users of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) and *With One Voice* (1995) but missing from ELW: “Merciful Father, we offer with joy and thanksgiving what you have first given us—ourselves, our time, and our possessions, signs of your gracious love. Receive them for the sake of him who offered himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

For its part, *Lutheran Service Book* (2006) does provide for the Offertory in three of its five settings (I and II: “What shall I render to the Lord...”, and “Create in me” for III), but includes no option for a prayer following the Offertory.



Luther’s position notwithstanding, what are today’s worship planners to do, those who view the Offertory as an important component of the liturgy and can transcend the idea of the Eucharist as sacrificial?

As *The Sunday Assembly* suggests, you may recover the traditional options by inserting a version of “Let the Vineyards” or “Create in Me,” one of those “old, communal offertories” found in the service music section of ELW. But why not be more creative by inserting Offertory hymns which you would then vary seasonally? By adding this component to your liturgical worship you **revive** the concept of the Offertory with its ancient emphasis on responsibilities of the laity, as the hymn calls special attention to the procession of the gifts borne by lay persons; you **refresh** your worship by changing elements in a way that underscores themes of the liturgical season; and you **renew** the entire experience of worship for all present as they are drawn more deeply into the nature and

significance of the gifts brought forward and the impact this deeper understanding has on their own lives.

Here, then, is a brief list of possibilities for Offertory hymns drawn from ELW and LSB.² You may choose to use a hymn in this position for the entire liturgical season or, during Pentecost, perhaps four to six weeks at a time.³ Or, come up with your own suggestions and ask your congregation for feedback so that they become participants in your worship planning experience.

Advent

“Oh Lord, How Shall I Meet You,” ELW 241, verses 1 and 3 or LSB 334, verses 1 and 4

“Come Now, O Prince of Peace, ELW 247, at least two verses

“Arise, O Christian People,” LSB 354, verses 1 and 4

“Blessed Be the God of Israel,” ELW 250, verse 2

Christmas

“What Feast of Love,” ELW 487, verses 1 and 3

“Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence,” ELW 490 or LSB 621, both verses 1 and 2

Epiphany

“O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright,” ELW 208 or LSB 395, both verse 3

“As With Gladness Men of Old,” ELW 302 or LSB 397, both verse 3

“The First Noel,” ELW 300, verse 5

Lent

“On My Heart Imprint Your Image,” ELW 811

“Seed That in Earth is Dying,” ELW 330, verses 1 and 2

“When Twilight Comes,” ELW 566 (Maundy Thursday)

Easter

“Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands,” ELW 370, verse 5 or LSB 458, verse 7

“At the Lamb’s High Feast We Sing,” ELW 362 or LSB 633, both verses 2 and 4

“This Joyful Eastertide,” ELW 391 or LSB 482, first verse or all

“Now the Green Blade Rises,” ELW 379, verses 1 and 3

“The Trumpets Sound, the Angels Sing,” ELW 531

Pentecost

“We Place Upon Your Table, Lord,” ELW 467

“God, Whose Firm is All Creation,” ELW 734

“O Jesus, Joy of Loving Hearts,” ELW 658, verses 1 and 2

“Now the Silence,” ELW 460 or LSB 910

“In the Singing,” ELW 466, verse 1

“We Come to the Hungry Feast,” ELW 479

“Lord of All Good,” LSB 786

“Gracious God, You Send Great Blessings,” LSB 782, verses 1 and 3

(Endnotes)

- 1 The downsizing of the Offertory is not a new trend: Carlos Messerli, in the 1978 Schalk-Halter *Handbook of the Church Musician* (Concordia Publishing House), laments that “In modern Lutheran practice the concept of the Offertory has changed, and the once-practical and richly liturgical body has atrophied, assuming the nature of a mass ordinary.” Messerli suggests renewal through an “Offertory Psalm” with congregational participation which could relate to Scriptural themes for the day (p. 148-149).
- 2 Avoid for this purpose ELW 691, “Accept, O Lord, the Gifts We Bring” (clichéd folk tune, trite rhyme scheme and judgmental tone, “We do not worship as we ought/ but only as we’re able”), and “Take My Life and Let It Be” (“...That I May Be), LSB 783/784 and ELW 583/685, and especially “We Are an Offering,” ELW 692, all of which are devoid of Eucharistic theology and any suggestion of the gifts that God has given us.
- 3 Thanks to Lisa E. Dahill, Associate Professor of Worship at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, for many of these suggestions from ELW.



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