

# **Philosophy of Worship at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church**

At the Holy Trinity Lutheran Church we value both “traditional” and “contemporary” forms of music in worship. Many people enjoy both the traditional and contemporary expressions of worship and vacillate between these styles of worship. We are committed to offering the highest quality worship in service to God and to His people in both forms of worship, now and in the future. This paper will seek to outline our philosophy, understanding and forms of worship offered at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church.

## **Philosophy of Worship**

The following ideas are central to our philosophy of worship at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church:

**1. Worship is first about God** - we gather in worship to bless God. More than 50 times the scripture writers command us to "bless the Lord" through worship. Part of the purpose of human existence is to worship and bless our Creator, who has first blessed us with the gift of life.

Nowhere does the Bible teach that one particular form of worship is more pleasing to God than another. Both contemporary and traditional forms of worship can be pleasing to God when they are offered with integrity, from the heart, and based on biblical teaching. From the drum beat of African worship, to Rap, to Country Western, can all be pleasing sounds to God (O.K., the last one is a stretch!). A danger in any form of worship occurs when worshipers merely go through the motions without engaging their hearts. Good worship renews the heart and mind and draws us to God (Ezekiel 36:26). Jesus taught that it is not the place of worship that is important (Jerusalem or elsewhere), but that we worship God “in Spirit and in truth” (John 4). On at least two occasions in scripture we learn that God is not pleased with the worship of the people because they "worship me with their lips but their hearts are far from me" (Mark 7:6; Isaiah 29:13).

The goal of worship at the Holy Trinity is to prepare worship that pleases God, is theologically accurate, biblical sound, moves beyond the superficial, speaks to the intellect, engages the heart, listens to the Spirit and draws us to Christ.

**2. Worship connects people with God.** Scripture says that God is present in a particular way when people gather together in worship (Matthew 18:19-20). As mortals, we have an inherent need to connect with God. In singing songs of praise, in lifting up our prayers, in acknowledging and reflecting upon our faith, in confessing our sin, in hearing the scriptures read, sung and preached, in remembering our baptism, in offering ourselves and our gifts, and in receiving the Eucharist, we connect with God in profound, mysterious and meaningful ways.

Different forms of worship, and different styles of music move people in different ways. Just as musical tastes vary from person to person, so too, worship styles will tend to vary. In the context of worship, it is often to our detriment when we limit our worship experience to those forms with which we are most comfortable. Sometimes a worship

style or form other than what we are most familiar with plays an important role in helping us connect with God on a new level.

Most recently, young people who grew up with 'contemporary worship' have discovered a depth of worship and meaning in such traditional forms as the creeds, sacraments and religious symbols. Others who cut their teeth on more classical forms and musical styles have experienced God in transforming ways through contemporary songs of praise and worship.

Worship is the primary vehicle for accomplishing the church's purpose and vision. Worship services are often the primary entry point for non-religious and nominally religious people to become acquainted with the church. It is here that our members and guests hear the Word of God preached, come to hear its message for their daily lives and find the power to pursue it. And it is here that people come to experience the fellowship and care that happens in Christian community. Throughout the ages, Christian worship has and will continue to hold the central place in the life of the church.

As such, worship is the single greatest opportunity we have to fulfill our purpose as a church. Our worship should do all that corporate worship can do to fulfill our mission to "invite people into a living relationship with Jesus Christ, equip them as mature disciples and send them into the world to love and serve and Jesus' Name."

### **Defining the Terms**

One of the most important questions we need to ask at this point is, "What is "traditional" worship and what is "contemporary" worship"? Different persons would define these terms in very different ways. Let's begin by looking at how these services are similar and how they are different at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church.

At Holy Trinity, the general order of worship, the use of music, prayers, Communion, the public reading of scripture and the sermon are the same in both our contemporary and traditional services. Less formal dress at our contemporary service is one difference. The style of dress of our attenders and vestments worn by the pastors may seem a small point, but it leaves a lasting first impression. Choir members in the traditional services wear choir robes, while in the contemporary services pastors wear the clergy collar. Worship leaders wear anything from casual to our "Sunday best." The difference in clothing is aimed at setting a slightly different tone for each service.

As we look at some of the differences between contemporary and traditional worship, we note that contemporary worship tends to be more spiritually intimate and emotive, focusing on one's personal relationship with God (more "I" than "we"). Songs are usually less communal in nature and emphasize our response to God more than God's initiation to us. Songs tend to be more expressive of personal feelings.

Contemporary worship tends to focus a bit more on the individual heart and concentrate more on the "Praise and Worship" aspect of scripture. The Bible is full of Praise and Worship", especially in the Psalms, but if "Praise and Worship" songs are used

exclusively, one can come to neglect the great works of God in the past, present and future.

Traditional worship tends to focus more on the mystery and holiness of God and what can be known about God. Songs tend to evoke a sense of connection with Christians through the ages and the full breadth of scripture. Some are as emotive and expressive as contemporary worship but tend to focus less on personal feelings and more on the grandeur, mystery and power of knowing God.

Traditional worship also tends to appeal more to the more cognitive, rational side of knowing God (four part harmony provided in the hymns); whereas contemporary worship appeals more to feeling and experiencing the presence of God. Hymns tend to be more communal in nature (the word “we” is more common than “I”) and emphasize God’s initiation to us and less of our response to God. We might say traditional worship focuses a bit more on the head than the heart.

One strength of contemporary worship is that often a person is moved to a sense of intimacy with God that is very powerful. One strength of traditional worship is that often one is moved to a sense of holy awe and the majesty of God. It is important to note that these strengths are *tendencies only and have many exceptions*. Both contemporary and traditional worship can easily crossover in their expressions and emphasis.

Both contemporary and traditional styles of worship are important. In fact, more than that, they complement one another. At Holy Trinity we believe that effective, wholistic worship includes elements and emphasis of both styles in worship.

### **Historical Perspective on Worship**

Distinctions between contemporary and traditional worship are often related to musical styles. Without realizing it, some Lutherans identify Lutheran worship with a specific kind of music. Although our church’s musical heritage is strong and should not be abandoned, we cannot define our worship by it. The musical settings or the hymns in the Lutheran Book of Worship are not, by themselves, Lutheran worship. In fact, if you do a count, they are a lot more Methodist. People like Charles Wesley and Isaac Watts were much more prolific hymn writers than Martin Luther. Luther’s greatest gift was probably systematic theology and biblical studies, not writing hymns.

If we study the **Protestant Reformation** that began in the year 1517, we learn that there was shift in music in worship that took place because of a man named Martin Luther. It was not his intent to reform the worship service, but his reforming of theology led to a reforming of music as well.

Realizing that the Reformation had unleashed an abundance and variety of new services, he finally penned his own general order of service—though with a word of caution to those who would read it centuries later:

In the first place, I would kindly and for God's sake request all those who see this order of service or desire to follow it: Do not make it a rigid law to bind or entangle anyone's conscience, but use it in Christian liberty as long, when, where and how you find it to be practical and useful. For this is being published not as though we meant to lord it over anyone else, or to legislate for him, but because of the widespread demand for German Masses and services and the general dissatisfaction and offense that has been caused by the great variety of new Masses, for everyone makes his own order of service (Luther's Works, 52, p. 61).

### **Luther's German Mass**

- a. German Psalm
- b. Kyrie Eleison (three times)
- c. Collect (chanted)
- d. Epistle (eighth tone)
- e. German hymn (Nun bitten wir" or any other)
- f. Gospel (fifth tone)
- g. Creed ("Wir glauben all")
- h. Sermon
- i. Lord's Prayer (public paraphrase)
- j. Words of Institution
- k. Distribution of bread
- l. German Sanctus ("Isaiah in a Vision Did Behold" or other)
- m. Distribution of wine
- n. Agnus Dei
- o. Collect
- p. Aaronic benediction

The brilliance of Luther shows that he was not afraid to reform the church, including the order and sequence of worship. But at the same time, he cautioned his current and especially his future followers not to make this or another order "a rigid law to bind or entangle anyone's conscience." The format and order of worship are always to be practical, useful and of course, biblical and pleasing to the God we know in Jesus.

It was not so much that Luther rejected pagentry and human traditions that are sometimes added to worship, nor was he in any way opposed to readings and singing in worship (sometimes called adiaphora). But if that which was sung, said or performed in worship was in conflict with God's justifying Word, then it must be removed or reformed. Luther rightly insisted that the Word must always be central to any form of Christian worship—that "Word" being the articulation of "justification by faith alone" in Jesus Christ, apart from works of the law.

To make a long story short, music in the emerging Lutheran churches came to be most clearly defined as music that **has its heart in the voice of the congregation**. In other words, Luther rightly insisted that good worship involved the **congregation in participation and singing as a means for proclaiming the Gospel**. No longer did the

congregation passively observe the liturgy (or a performance). They sang it themselves! And that change, though it was initiated by Luther, was not limited to Lutherans. Rather it became the norm in most all Protestant congregations—and is still the norm today—even in most Roman Catholic churches.

The participation of the congregation in worship, of course, is biblical. But we have Luther to thank for **recapturing** it for the whole church. At Holy Trinity, we usually have some “Special Music” in worship where we listen to a choir, band, soloist, duet or trio. But that is the exception to our worship experience. Luther believed that the people, ought to be the ones who do the work of worship. And in fact, that’s where we get the deeper meaning of that word LITURGY.

### **Liturgy**

The best way to understand a word is to study its components in the original languages, and how it is used in the Bible. In the Greek, the word **LITURGY** literally means “the work of the people”. The word Liturgy (transliterated into English: *leitourgia*) is a Greek composite word meaning originally “a public duty”. The two parts of the word are **leitōs** (from **leōs** = **laos** – which means people or public), and **ourgia** - **ergo** – which means to do or work. From this we have **Leitourgia**, “work of the people, or “a person who performs a public duty”, “a public servant”.

Liturgy means “the service, or the public service in the temple—coming to worship”. Sometimes it also refers to the public function of the pastor/priest, drawing its meaning from the ritual service the priest carried out in the temple (Joel 1:9; 2:17; Heb 6:8; Luke 1:23 etc.)

But that is not to say that liturgy has to be the music of Gregorian Chant (attributed to Gregory the Great from the 6th century), in order to be liturgy. It could just as easily be a responsive reading, chant, recitation of a Psalm, or a simple echo song we learn for the first time.

Over time, **early liturgies** of the church became more organized and developed more sophistication. Soon, some set patterns developed, and liturgies began to be written down and became more uniform. Most all of them were well composed, incorporated good music, and were drawn entirely from the Bible.

The “best” liturgies were picked up, commonly used and became the norm for most churches in the area. But this **uniformity in liturgy** was more out of convenience for birthing new missionary churches, and habit — than out of any mandate or requirement.

The point is, whatever music is used in worship or liturgy, it must:

- Honestly and boldly proclaim God’s Word, the whole counsel of God. (In fact, the first criterion for making selections should not be the musical style, but the **integrity of the words for its theological content**).
- Have primary expression in the voice of the congregation (stated above).

- Reflect the cultural makeup of the church and those we are trying to reach.

Now, there are two sides to that last point.

**A. Worship needs to be sensitive to GUESTS who worship with us for the first time.**

Time and again, Jesus elevates the importance of welcoming guests into our midst. Providing a warm welcome and good hospitality to strangers, outcasts, is paramount to biblical Christianity—including during worship

The Church is a trauma center for a hurting world. People sometimes say, “I don’t go to church, because there are so many hypocrites.” That may be true. But that’s exactly where they need to be. We are all hypocrites. It’s just that in church, we have admitted that we need to get help. We need a Savior. We need to hear the life-giving Word of God to begin our recovery.

**B. Worship is also a gathering of the Faithful**

Worship is also a gathering of the faithful, or those who live with the realization that they need the regular time of surrender, forgiveness and transformation. If we emphasize worship as the gathering of the faithful around Word and Sacrament (as we ought to) without concern for guests or hospitality, we may exclude the very ones we are called to welcome. We ignore an equal biblical mandate: that of evangelism and outreach.

If a pastor says, “The Lord be with you,” what does the congregation say? If we were raised in the church, particularly a church that uses traditions of historical Christian worship, we know to respond, “and also with you.” But if we were not raised in the church, we would not know what to say and might feel uncomfortable or less welcome when everyone else around you responds like clockwork, “and also with you.”

Such greetings are certainly biblical (they are plastered all over the New Testament). Paul begins practically every letter he writes with some similar sort of greeting. But if we want to be sensitive to new guests and want them to feel part of our fellowship, we might choose not to include such traditions in worship.

If we choose to use such biblical greetings, we ought to explain them from time to time. And we must teach them in love and not look down on anyone who does not know these responses or comes from a different tradition. But instead rejoice that this new guest has chosen to join in this celebrative time of worship with us.

Walking the fine line between the need for the faithful to gather, pray and study at a high level of Christian commitment and service, and the need to always welcome guests, seekers or beginning Christians is where tension arises. In other words, there is a need to gather, talk and grow at a high level of Christian maturity, while at the same time remaining accessible and even contagious to the most elementary level of inquiry into all things Christian. This is hard to do—be intimate and close—without being exclusive or “clicky”.

For those who regularly participate in worship, what is familiar and sacred to them, may be strange and unfamiliar to the unchurched. Good worship must graciously invite everyone into the liturgy and humbly offer assistance as needed.

On the other hand, concern for the guest and those just beginning to discover God's love, should not immediately drive us to abandon the long-standing biblical traditions of Christian worship. Our welcome must be to all.

### **Biblical Basis**

If we study Acts 10, we can apply one of Paul's points about different cultures to differences in worship. Recall Peter is a Jew, and as such, Jews did not eat any food that was considered unclean. In fact, they followed strict dietary laws.

One day, Peter has a vision where a sheet full of all kinds of animals is lowered before him, suspended by 4 corners. Peter hears a voice, "Get up Peter, kill and eat".

Not knowing where the voice comes from, Peter replies, "Surely not Lord! I would never kill and eat anything that is unclean and strictly forbidden in Jewish Law." Soon the voice responds, "Don't call anything unclean or impure that I have declared to be pure." Peter and this voice (presumably God's) basically have this argument and the voice says the same 3 times and then disappears.

Change did not come easy for Peter either.

Later in Acts this dream or trance is interpreted to mean that not only are the **Jews** loved by God, but so are the **Gentiles**. The coming of Jesus opens the door for all kinds of people and races to be welcomed into the Kingdom of God. The barriers that were clear and well defined between Jews and Gentiles and Samaritans and all their cultural differences, are to be no longer. Jesus, through his death on the cross has banished them forever.

This same thought applies when someone's style of worship or style of music is different from what we know or appreciate. The scriptures talk a lot about the importance of worship and that certain elements be present: forgiveness, hymns, spiritual songs, sermons, the Lord's supper, prayers and giving glory to God. But they don't say much on "HOW" we are to do that—except that it be done with decency and order and that we speak the language of the culture we are trying to reach (I Corinthians 14:40). Indeed, music in worship is our second language. It is that important in our world today.

Even if music is deemed more durable or better, we must not let music be a barrier to people hearing the gospel. Paul thought speaking in tongues was so personally edifying that he wanted everyone to be able to do so (I Cor. 14:5). But he also realized that this way of speaking was not better if no one could understand and that love was a far superior gift. Better to speak in an understandable language so all could participate. That way, all hearers gain access to the heavenly throne of grace. Good worship speaks the musical language of the heart.

## Strategy

When Holy Trinity Lutheran Church first began contemporary worship in the mid 1990's, our decision was driven by mission. We wanted to reach unchurched and nominally churched people who were not being reached by traditional expressions of worship. Holy Trinity is not only called to reach transplanted "Lutherans" who move into the area. God calls us to reach all people—but particularly, according to the Bible, those who are non-religious or nominally religious (Luke 5:31-32). The birth of contemporary expressions of worship at Holy Trinity was gradual, designed to meet the people at their level of seeking. When the first fully contemporary service was added, we intentional made it a new service at a new time. We recognized that many worshippers at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church and in the community had and continue to have a desire for good traditional worship.

We also recognized that many of the non-religious in this community had some church exposure when they were growing up. Most would not have worshiped in a church that offered contemporary expressions of worship, but more likely their church experience was in a mainline Protestant or Roman Catholic Church.

Our aim was to offer first time attenders a choice, traditional or more contemporary expressions of worship. For the veteran churchgoer or longtime member, church would not be church without hymns, liturgy, vestments, a traditional choir and organ. We also recognized that for others, the very same things that would attract a longtime churchgoer, might hinder first-time worshippers or seem too "churchy"—especially if they carried negative baggage from a previous church experience

God is honored by both traditional and contemporary expressions of worship. We choose to offer choices in the styles of worship because it best accomplishes our purpose and vision. This decision has played a critical role in the growth and mission of the Holy Trinity.

For many churches worship is an either/or proposition. Worship is either contemporary or traditional. This dichotomy is unfortunate and keeps people from experiencing a richer, diverse worship experience. Increasingly, more churches are introducing an alternate style of worship that compliments what they currently offer. Contemporary worship churches are offering traditional expressions of worship and traditional worship churches are offering contemporary expressions of worship

At Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, we steer clear of the "either/or" approach to worship style and embrace the "both/and." In the spirit of Luther, we embrace constant reformation, always favoring styles and expressions of our faith that speak the language of the people. We constantly reform to make the **form** of the message culturally relevant, while keeping its **content** true to the Word.

## **Vision**

Our vision in worship is simple. We offer high quality worship in both traditional and contemporary expressions. This includes worship that is biblically grounded, theologically sound, is Spirit led, conducted in decency and order, relevant, blesses God, moves people, and is capable of fulfilling the church's mission.

Someone has said, “Worship is like an onion”. You worship or peel away a layer—and there it is for you to do again—another layer, another opportunity to worship. And sometimes it makes you cry.

Worship at Holy Trinity is unique. In many churches offering contemporary worship today, some of the great worship traditions of the church are being lost or forgotten—the prayers, liturgies, use of the Psalms, the symbols, hymns and creeds. At Holy Trinity, we intentionally have several “cross-over Sundays” where stereotypical elements of both traditional and contemporary expressions are shared at all services on the weekend.

Good worship remembers, teaches and integrates some traditional elements in our contemporary worship to foster an experience that is rich, meaningful and which allows different forms of worship to be appreciated by lovers of contemporary music. This might include the addition of historic prayers, occasional litanies, creeds, and other elements of worship which, when properly interpreted and introduced, add a new and profound dimension to the worship experience in our contemporary services.

On the flip side, we look for new expressions within traditional worship that speak to a new generation (for example, incorporating songs that are both emotive and theologically substantive).

In both forms of worship, we will continue to offer the highest quality music, with an emphasis on member participation. As it pertains to traditional worship, we recognize that a large number of churches that offer more traditional forms of worship are unwilling to embrace new and contemporary expressions of worship. We believe this is a tragic mistake. All of our traditional forms of worship were considered "contemporary" in their day. If our worship is to remain capable of speaking to our children and their children's generations it must be willing to embrace change and reform. But we must always accompany change with education and lots of love. Change for the sake of change is shallow and blows like a reed in the wind. Change to accomplish a specific purpose or mission is to be obedient to the Great Commission given by Jesus (Matthew 28:16-20).

Services at Holy Trinity will offer both congregational and choral forms of music to speak to the head and to the heart in such a way that lives are transformed by the power of God through music and worship.

## **Conclusion**

At Holy Trinity, we are a Lutheran congregation that honors and cherishes a heritage that has been passed down to us. Worship tradition should always be adapted to specific contexts, local circumstances, and unique times in history. Much of the worship forms

and texts we use today have been evolving for centuries and are passed on to us. The best of them survive for centuries—like Handel’s Messiah.

Traditions are a vital link to the church of all ages and we risk impoverishing worship when we too quickly abandon them. Language changes. Musical styles evolve. Our commitment to Word and Sacrament, and congregational song in worship do not.

We need not apologize for our traditions. Rather, we should celebrate the liturgy (which means “a public service or ministry” or “the work of the people”) with life, color and action. There is nothing wrong with calling the “narthex” the lobby to avoid excluding those who don’t know church language. There is also nothing wrong with teaching unchurched people about the language and components of long-standing traditional worship. The long-standing traditions of Jewish culture demonstrate how powerful and effective it is to pass on customs when they are understood and imparted to the next generation.

Whatever our course, we are called on to proclaim the Gospel and boldly celebrate the sacraments. When guests visit our congregations, they should be so captivated by what we do and by the sincerity and intensity with which we do it, that they will want to return.

The church exists for those who have not yet walked in the door. Our challenge is to discover a variety of ways to welcome the seeker without abandoning the substance or understanding of our worship tradition in a rapidly changing culture.

Perhaps unthinkingly, some churches have retained the model of our forefathers (one style of worship and music) without realizing that the genius of that design was based on commonalities and homogeneity all too common in that day—that are no longer with us.

Our consumer society is used to a variety which caters to individual tastes. Churches are finding that providing two or more kinds of worship experiences greatly expands their ability to connect with a culture rich in diversity and taste.

Today we live in the 31 flavors of Baskin-Robbins ice cream. Pop choices are no longer just Coke or Pepsi. Sprite, Sierra Mist, Vanilla Coke, Cherry Coke, Barq’s Root Beer and many more are offered as choices. Cereal choices are not longer limited to just Cheerios, but Honey Nut, Apple Cinnamon, Multi-Grain, or Frosted or a new one coming out this week. A Pickup Truck used to mean one thing. Today we have Extended Cab, Clubcab, Short box, Flairside, Long box and new styles yet to be released from tomorrow’s computers.

If dentists and doctors and retail stores know how to use music to soothe and sell, why should the church be any less savvy? When a McDonald’s Restaurant in New Jersey plays jingles different than the ones in the Midwest, should that surprise us? What else would we expect than a black beat and black lingo?

Businesses are only trying to reach and speak to their culture. In the same way, if we want our kids and grandkids to grow up to know Jesus and love him the same way we do, we need to speak their language and put the Gospel in an intelligible voice—whatever that language may be.

We live in a consumer-driven society that is enamored with choices. That's not all bad. We shouldn't be consumer driven, but we should be culturally aware. If Luther hadn't used the new invention of the movable type like he did, less people would have heard the gospel.

Jesus told a parable that we should be shrewd with the gifts and resources entrusted to us. "For the people of this world are more shrewd in their dealings than people of the light (Matt 16). We are to be wise as serpents and gentle as doves (Matt 10:6).

The Apostle Paul goes way out on a limb to be all things to all people—all for the sake of the gospel. "I make myself a slave to everyone to win as many as possible .... I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some" (I Cor. 9:19, 22). We get the sense that Paul would do almost anything to convince us of God's love. He would dress up as a clown, juggle, stand on his head, buy you lunch, pick you up to go to church or a small group—whatever it takes to get you to hear and receive the gospel.

Luther's theology of worship is very ecumenical in that he had one main idea driving it: In the worship service, in hymns, prayers, readings, preaching, it should be made clear that everything comes from God, and nothing comes from us except confession, thanksgiving and praise. In the service of worship, God greets us by name, forgives our sins and fills us with good things so that we go forth, forgiven and refreshed to serve our neighbor.

We need to respect different styles, but it is not necessary that we all love the same style of music or worship. That is what Luther taught and that is what the Augsburg confession clearly states in Article 7:

*The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. And to the true unity of the Church **it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments.** Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. As Paul says: One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, etc. (Eph. 4:5-6).*

We believe God has great plans for our music and worship ministries at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church. Rather than pursuing an "either/or" approach to church worship and music we are committed to a "both/and" approach. We are committed to offering outstanding traditional and contemporary worship.

As we move into our expanded building this year, God has great things in store for His church. God has blessed us with additional space for new groups to sprout up and support Christian worship. Our aim is to capitalize on this opportunity and to offer worship that blesses God, connects people to God, and helps us effectively carry out our mission.

**Worship Task Force, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church  
Pastor Steve Trewartha, January, 2005**