

Philosophy of Worship at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church

At the Holy Trinity Lutheran Church we are committed to offering the highest quality worship in service to God and to His people. We value both “traditional” and “contemporary” forms of worship and music. This paper outlines 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.**
2. **Worship connects people with God.**

More than 50 times the scripture writers command us to “bless the Lord” through worship. One central purpose of human existence is to worship and bless our Creator, who has first blessed us with the gift of life. But nowhere does the Bible teach that a particular form of worship is more pleasing to God than another when they are offered with integrity, from the heart, and based on biblical teaching.

Varied styles of worship appeal to people in different ways. Sometimes a worship style other than what we are most familiar with plays an important role in helping us connect with God in a new way. Good worship renews the heart and mind and draws us to God (Ezekiel 36:26). Biblical worship is always first directed to God, while at the same time intentionally welcomes unbelievers. Jesus taught that it is not the place of worship that is important, but that we worship God “in Spirit and in truth” (John 4; Mark 7:6; Isaiah 29:13).

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

The scripture says that God is present when people gather together in worship (Matthew 18:19-20). In song, prayer, reflection, confession, scripture, baptism, offering and receiving the Eucharist, we have an inherent need to connect with God in profound, mysterious and meaningful ways. Worship services are often the primary entry point for non or nominally religious people to become acquainted with the church. It is here that people come to experience the fellowship and care that happens in Christian community.

As such, worship may be the single greatest opportunity we have to fulfill our purpose as a church, and at Holy Trinity are called to do all that we 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; Traditional and Contemporary

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.

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 may be more expressive of personal feelings, less communal in nature, and emphasize our response to God more than God’s response to us. Contemporary worship tends to focus a bit more on the individual heart and concentrate more on the “Praise and Worship” aspect of scripture. While the Bible is full of “Praise and Worship”, especially in the Psalms,

exclusive or overuse of “Praise and Worship” can 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. Songs may 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 may evoke less of a personal feeling and draw us more to the grandeur, mystery and power of knowing God.

Traditional worship also tends to appeal more to the cognitive, rational side of knowing God whereas contemporary worship appeals more to feeling and experiencing the presence of God. Hymns tend to be more communal in nature and emphasize God’s initiation to us and less of our response to God. One strength of contemporary worship is that often a person is moved to a sense of intimacy with God. One strength of traditional worship is that often a person is moved to a sense of holy awe and majesty of God. It is important to note that these strengths are tendencies only and have many exceptions. Both styles of worship are important and in fact, complement one another. At Holy Trinity we believe that effective, holistic worship will include elements and strengths of both styles in worship.

Historical Perspective on Worship

Distinctions between contemporary and traditional worship are often related to musical styles. Without realizing it, many Lutherans identify Lutheran worship with a specific kind of music. Although our church’s musical heritage is strong and should not be abandoned, we do not define our worship by it. The musical settings or the hymns in the Lutheran Book of Worship are not by themselves the definition of Lutheran worship.

If we study the **Protestant Reformation** that more or less began in the year 1517, we learn that music in worship shifted largely 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 (See Addendum). 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.

In short, music in the emerging Lutheran churches became most clearly defined as music that has its heart in the voice of the congregation. 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.

In Greek, the word **LITURGY** literally means “the work of the people”. Over time, early liturgies of the church became more organized and developed more sophistication. Soon, they developed set patterns, were written down and became more uniform, 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:

- 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.
- Honestly and boldly proclaim God’s Word – the whole counsel of God.

The first criterion for selection should be the **integrity of the words for its theological content**.

Sensitivity

At Holy Trinity, worship is geared to be sensitive to GUESTS who worship with us for the first time. Jesus repeatedly elevates the importance of welcoming guests into the family of Christ. Providing a warm welcome and good hospitality is paramount to biblical Christianity – including during worship.

In reality, 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 there.” That may be true. We are all hypocrites. But then, isn’t the church exactly where we need to be? In church we admit that we need to get help. We need a Savior. We need to hear the life-giving Word of God to begin our recovery.

Gathering in Faith

Worship is a gathering of the faithful – or those who live with the realization that they need the regular time of surrender and forgiveness that worship offers. If we emphasize worship as the gathering of the faithful around Word and Sacrament without concern for guests or hospitality, we may exclude the very ones we are called to welcome. We may ignore an equal biblical mandate – that of evangelism and outreach. There is a need to gather, talk and grow at a high level of Christian maturity while at the same time remaining accessible and contagious to the most elementary inquiry into Christianity. This is hard to do. But good worship must graciously invite everyone into the liturgy and humbly offer assistance as needed.

Persons not raised in the church might feel uncomfortable or less welcome, or not know what to say when it seems everyone around you knows how to respond to unfamiliar greetings. If we want to be sensitive to new guests and warmly welcome them into our fellowship, we might choose not to include some traditions in every worship gathering. When we do include traditions less familiar to those unchurched, we take the time to explain them. We teach them in the most loving way possible and do not look down on anyone who is not familiar or may come from a different tradition. Instead, we rejoice that this new guest has chosen to join us in this time of worship. We also recognize that concern for those just beginning to discover God’s love, should not drive us to abandon the important biblical traditions of Christian worship.

Strategy and Vision

When Holy Trinity Lutheran Church first began contemporary worship in the early 1990’s, our decision was largely driven by mission. We recognized that we are not only called to welcome other Lutherans – but that God calls us to reach *all* people – particularly those who are non or nominally religious (Luke 5:31-32). We wanted to reach people who might not be fulfilled by traditional expressions of worship. The birth of contemporary expressions of worship at Holy Trinity was gradual, designed to meet the people at their level of seeking. Equally, we recognize that many worshippers at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church and in the community continue to have a desire for traditional worship.

At Holy Trinity, in the spirit of Martin Luther, we embrace constant reformation, favoring the styles and expression of our faith that speak the language of the people we seek to reach. We always seek to make the form of the message culturally relevant, while keeping its content true to the Word.

Our vision for worship includes remembering, teaching and integrating some of these traditional elements in our contemporary worship to foster a worship experience that is rich and meaningful. We also look for new expressions of worship so that this service can also speak to a new generation. We will continue to offer the highest quality music, with an emphasis on participation. We will continue to embrace change and a new reformation, accompanied by education and lots of love. To change for a specific purpose or mission is to be obedient to the Great Commission given by Jesus (Matthew 28:16-20).

Conclusion

Luther's theology of worship is very ecumenical in that he had one main idea driving it: In worship 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 can go forth, forgiven and refreshed, to serve our neighbor.

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 substance, or our understanding of worship tradition in a rapidly changing culture. Some churches have retained the model of their ancestors (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.

Holy Trinity is a Lutheran congregation that honors and cherishes a heritage that has been passed down to us. Rather than pursuing an “either/or” approach to church music and worship, we commit to a “both/and” approach. We offer outstanding traditional **and** contemporary worship, realizing that worship forms have been evolving for centuries, and that traditions link us to the church of all ages. It is not necessary that we all love the same style of music or worship, but we do need to respect different styles – especially when differing forms help us proclaim the Gospel and boldly celebrate the sacraments. We pray that in so doing, our guests will be so captivated by the sincerity and intensity with which we witness, that they will want to return and become a part of the Lord’s fellowship we celebrate at Holy Trinity.

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

Addendum:

Realizing that the Reformation had unleashed an abundance and variety of new services, Luther 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” (LW, 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.