

# Worship the Lord

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## Worship and Outreach

### *In Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin*

By Jonathan Bauer

“I suppose you’re doing \_\_\_\_\_ worship.”

In the summer of 2013, a group of about 25 Christians met in a renovated storefront space in a strip mall in Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin, for the very first time. They called themselves “Good News Lutheran Church.” Most of them had previously been members at the WELS church in nearby Verona. For the first year that they gathered on Sunday, the pastor from Verona, Nathan Strutz, would also lead the service in Mt. Horeb. Eventually I was called to serve as the first full time pastor of Good News and arrived in Mt. Horeb in the summer of 2014.

Not long after I arrived in Mt. Horeb, a man I had met and crossed paths with a few times found out that I was the pastor at that new church that was meeting in the strip mall. After a few polite questions about how things were going at our church, he commented, “I would imagine you’re doing \_\_\_\_\_ worship over there, huh?”

The specific adjective he used in front of “worship” doesn’t matter a great deal. Much more important were the logical dots he was connecting in his mind. We were a new, i.e. small, church. We wanted to, i.e. needed to, get bigger. We wanted to reach the individuals and families in our community who weren’t currently attending one of the six churches that already existed in our town. Therefore, it stood to reason that \_\_\_\_\_ worship would be the key to reaching them.

Again, the specific adjective he used is beside the point. In the nine years that have followed since hearing that comment, I’ve talked to many unchurched people in our community. I’ve had

those unchurched people ask a variety of questions about our church. Those questions have ranged from the deep and theological to the superficial and mundane. Sometimes I’m amazed by things that are on people’s minds as they contemplate going to church. It’s often things you would never think of as being important.

I’d be lying if I said that no one has ever asked about our style of worship. But I’m confident I could count on one hand the number of times that specific question has been asked. When it has been, it usually involved someone who had recently moved to town, who had previously had an active relationship with a church in their previous community, and who was looking for a church in our town that was similar.

However, that’s a rare profile in Mt. Horeb. The much more common profile goes something like this: A person had some sort of religious upbringing as a child, likely Mainline Protestant or Roman Catholic. When they graduated high school and moved

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away from home, they lost their connection to a church. At the same time, they were likely attending a large, public university where they were exposed to strong influences of secularism. When they entered the workforce, they lived in a fairly urban setting, likely Madison. At some point they met someone and got married. Eventually they had kids. When those kids approached school age, they started looking for a smaller, quieter community with good schools to buy their first home in and continue to raise their family.

So by the time they settle in Mt. Horeb, it has likely been well over a decade since they had an active relationship with a church. The weight of parental responsibility may mean that they are open to the idea of going back. But because of everything they've seen, heard, and experienced in the meantime, they also need to sort through with their adult minds some of the things they had been taught and believed when they were children.

*What caused them to drift away—and what will convince them to come back—has very little to do with any particular style of worship.*

In other words, what caused them to drift away from church in the first place—and what will convince them to come back to church—has very little to do with any particular style of worship. You can fill in the blank however you want. Traditional worship. Contemporary worship. Formal worship. Casual worship. Structured worship. Spontaneous worship. Praise band worship. Polka band worship (yes, we have that in Wisconsin). It wouldn't really make a difference. I would say, if anything, people seem to desire something that feels at least somewhat familiar to what they experienced when they were young.

## If not, then...?

So if worship style doesn't seem to play a huge role in helping us reach people and grow as a church, what does?



*Worship in the strip mall*

A bit more about our community...

The most recent demographic information for our community indicated that the average household income was north of \$80,000/year. Your typical home prices range from \$250,000-\$400,000. Both the unemployment rate and the poverty levels are below 2%. More than 80% of households in Mt. Horeb have both a mom and a dad who tuck the kids in at night. In other words, life in Mt. Horeb seems to be pretty good, at least outwardly.

But even before the pandemic, mental health struggles among young people were a major focus of attention within the community, and for good reason. A string of suicides and attempted suicides among students suggest that all is not as well as the demographics seem to indicate.

Young people aren't the only ones who seem to have something missing in their lives. Adults may not be losing sleep over where they stand with God or where they are going to spend their eternity. But they do seem to be obsessed with demonstrating that they are worthy of the approval of their peers. There always seems to be some new moral/political cause that people want everyone to know where they stand on.

So if people in this upper middle class, suburban, family-oriented community are going to consider giving church a shot, it's not likely because they feel as though they have the "Jesus thing" all figured out but are looking for help in making some incremental improvements on the more incidental aspects of life. Instead, it's because they have the incidentals (job, education, career, etc.) pretty well figured out, but have been living with the results of the "Jesus thing" being entirely absent.

*Lutheran worship has a weekly structure and an annual rhythm whose entire goal is to point people to Jesus.*

As I get to know them and have conversations with them, it would seem completely unnatural to try to convince them to come based on any one facet or characteristic of our worship style. But it's entirely natural to assure them that the approval, identity, peace, and hope that seems to be missing in their lives can all be found in Jesus. It's entirely natural to talk about how Lutheran worship has a weekly structure and an annual rhythm whose entire goal is to point people to Jesus. It's made me grateful to know that is one thing we can offer our community as well as any church in the world. When we were a new church of fewer than 30 people, there wasn't a ton we could do in worship. We could, however, deliver Christ and all of the blessings he brings with him.

A bit more about our community...

For as long as I've been in Mt. Horeb, the contentious political issues that tend to trend on Twitter and soak up the airtime on cable news seem to keep popping up at the local level as well. Everything from climate change to immigration to school bathroom

policies to pandemic policies to race relations has been a source of debate in our community. In a small town, the sides get drawn up pretty quickly. It's often challenging to avoid getting caught on one side of the debate or the other. Everyone seems to want to weigh in, including Christians and Christian churches.

As a result, people often make assumptions about the political party or platform each church supports, including ours. While doing some canvassing one time, I ended up knocking on the door of our local representative in the Wisconsin State Assembly. We had a very nice conversation overall. But at one point she made the interesting observation that she assumed I wouldn't be the biggest fan of hers as a politician because I was a religious person.

Living in such a politically charged climate has made it entirely natural to emphasize with people the difference between the church's mission of winning souls for Christ's kingdom and winning political battles. It's been eye-opening—and door-opening—to share with people that the main message of our church is not a political position. In the past three years especially, I've found it natural and beneficial to be able to say (repeatedly): I'm not here to change your views about politics, and I'm not here to change your views about public health. When politics seems to dominate the conversation 24/7, it's a relief for people to know that there's at least 1 of the 168 hours of a week where the topic of conversation is something else (and far more important).

One last thing about our community...

Our community is situated in a county that was by far the most restrictive in our state and among the most restrictive areas in the country. Public schools in our county kept their doors closed for nearly a full year after the pandemic hit, much to the dismay of many parents. During that same time, online learning gave parents a fuller and sometimes surprising glimpse of what their children had been getting taught when they sent them off to school each day. Many companies kept their doors closed and their workers at home. Many churches didn't have in person services indoors for well over a year. In other words, it's an area where people seemed ready to go "all in" on all things online. As a result, it's an area where many people have seen firsthand the detrimental results of doing so.

*The good news is delivered by fully embodied persons to other fully embodied persons in fully embodied ways.*

As a result, it's been very natural to share with people how the good news at the heart of our weekly services is not just content we want them to passively or even virtually consume. Instead, it's a message that is delivered by fully embodied persons to other fully embodied persons in fully embodied ways. It's offered a natural talking point for why we opened our doors as soon as we could in 2020 rather than keeping them closed. It's been natural



*Worship in the bank basement*

to share how we hope that our services are places where the whole family shares and receives the gospel together, where we want parents to hear what we are teaching their kids about Jesus, and in fact where we want parents to be the ones telling them about Jesus through their active participation in the service.

Like just about every other church in the world, we started live streaming our services during the pandemic. We're still doing that, but we try to communicate in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways that, even though we're happy people can be "flies on the wall" watching from their home, we'd really love it if they were with us in the room.

*Emphasize the difference between the church's mission of winning souls for Christ's kingdom and winning political battles.*

## How we fill in the blank

So while there doesn't seem to be a pressing need to focus on the specific style of our services, there have been plenty of opportunities to share with people the substance of our services. They are Christ-centered and gospel-focused. They aim to effect change in the heart rather than in the ballot box. They engage the whole person, not just the mind. They are communal rather than individual.

None of that probably comes as a surprise. None of that is probably any different from the way any of our churches would describe their services. Maybe you're wondering about the specifics.

I'm not sure how I'd fill in the blank with the word that best describes our style of worship. I've had people describe it as much more modern/contemporary than the traditional style they grew up with. I've had people describe it as much more traditional/structured than the casual style they experienced somewhere else.



*Worship in the new church*

I don't think I've made many decisions about worship in an attempt to have any of those adjectives fit our style of worship. Perhaps the ways in which our worship might be the most different from what you'd experience in your typical WELS church could be described with words like "simple" and "stable." In a church where most people don't have much of a WELS background and where all kinds of families with young children are learning to worship together, I've found that simple and stable are huge blessings. We do quite a few things seasonally. We use orders of service seasonally. We often use seasonal opening or closing hymns. We'll use the same psalm refrain seasonally while speaking responsively the verses of the Psalm of the Day in between. Overall, our repertoire of core hymns is quite small (~125). The different settings of the service that we use is even smaller (two with seasonal variety, especially during the festival half of the Church Year). Simplicity and stability continue to pay dividends. It's a great joy to see new worshipers get familiar with our service quickly. It's a great joy to hear children who can't read yet belting out the simple melodies and texts they hear week after week.

*Simple and stable are huge blessings.*

Other than that, it's pretty standard fare—prepared and delivered as well as we possibly can. Yes, it's printed in the service folder so that people can follow along easily. But when we first started, it was pretty much what you'd find in the red hymnal. Now it's pretty much what you find in the blue hymnal.

However you might describe our worship, it served us well while we were a group of 30 gathering in a strip mall. It had evolved and expanded a bit by the time we were a group of 80 gathering in our second temporary location: the basement of a multi-tenant office building. And during all that time while we gathered in those temporary spaces with cobbled together chancel furnishings and audio equipment and hand-me-down paraments and banners, it was also preparing us for services in a space that's actually designed for the very things we've been doing all along.

Whether in a strip mall, a bank building basement, or a newly constructed sanctuary, whether the specific style of worship was everyone's favorite never seemed to matter a great deal. What mattered is that they knew it. What mattered is that they could do it. What mattered is that their kids had something they knew and could do as well. And at the end of the day, they decided to come (and decided to stay) for much different reasons.

(For additional photos of the new church, see 119a. Supplemental Photos at [worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/worship-the-lord-worship-and-outreach](http://worship.welsrc.net/download-worship/worship-the-lord-worship-and-outreach).)

