



# Worship the Lord

Sharing worship ideas with WELS pastors

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While some worship innovations seem driven by baby boomer sensibilities, some younger people do not prefer those approaches. Reverent and relevant worship can connect across generational lines, reflecting biblical emphasis on worship as a uniting rather than a dividing factor. "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rm 15:5-6).

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Bryan Gerlach

## Planning Reverent Relevant Ritual

By James Schulz

Imagine these two scenarios:

- 1) It's Christmas. A nativity set is placed on the floor before the altar. Someone dressed as Santa Claus comes down the aisle shouting "Ho-ho-ho-sanna!" and kneels before the baby Jesus. Professionally recorded Christian contemporary music accompanies the drama designed with the unchurched visitor in mind.
- 2) It's Epiphany. A nativity set is placed on the floor in front of the altar. Youth catechumens walk down the aisle with a large candle, and a small treasure chest, vase, and a censor of burning incense to symbolize the gold, frankincense, and myrrh of the Wise Men. They place these items before the nativity set while the congregation sings a simple Taizé style refrain accompanied by congregation members playing guitar, flute, and piano.



Separated by about a decade (with a few details changed for illustrative purposes), both of those scenarios took place at the church I currently serve. By many accounts the first came off as a professionally produced skit. The second came off as reverent, relevant worship.

I do not plan worship to come off like the first scenario, but I do strive for worship that is refreshing in its creativity and edifying in its substance. To do that, I've settled on answering "yes" to these questions:

### Is Jesus here in what we are doing?

St. Paul summarized it in a sentence: "We preach Christ crucified." Elements of worship ought to create a mindset and atmosphere that reinforces this. Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sin is why we gather. Santa Claus has too much secular distraction attached to him to effectively keep the worship focus on Christ. A large white candle echoes biblical references to Christ, the "light of the world." The Augsburg Confession states, "The chief purpose of ceremonies is to teach the people what they need to know about Christ (AC 24, 3)."

### Are believers doing something together?

Worship is designed for believers. They are the body of Christ giving thanks for what Christ did with his body while here on earth. Worship is best when worshipers are unified by ritual action. A skit with Santa

and canned music may be entertaining or even thought-provoking, but it doesn't enable worshipers to worship together through their active participation.

By contrast note how believers do something together when children carry in a candle along with "gold, frankincense, and myrrh" and the congregation sings a song accompanied by live musicians. Such worship helps everyone to identify with the Wise Men who worshiped the Christ Child as Savior. Such worship involves everyone in proclaiming the gospel together.

### Is the ritual worth a thousand words?

Just as there is good art and bad art, so there is good ritual and bad ritual. The "simpler the better" is a good way to think about how to worship through ritual action. I have found that stationary artwork (i.e. a painting or sculpture) and simple ritual actions work well to communicate many facets of theology. Processing in and out of a service with a carving of Christ on a cross speaks about our faith to more people more often than showing a video of "The Passion of the Christ" on a single Sunday.

### Does it have a feel of informal formality?

The expression "informal formality" helped me realize that good ritual reflects the nature of God as both immanent (God with us, Immanuel) and transcendent (Isaiah's throneroom experience). The divine service is serious

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business, but it's also okay to relax. The key is to know when to be serious and when to be relaxed. Liturgy is not a straightjacket of versicles and responses mindlessly spoken from an authorized hymnal. So to exchange the peace at the greeting or to make announcements before the blessing reflects an atmosphere of relaxed relevance. On the other hand, a brief period of silence before the prayers or the lessons or after the sermon helps us remember that we truly are in God's presence. (Try a 20-second period of silence after the sermon some time to let the sermon sink in.) The ebb and flow of the service works best when it reflects an informal formality (or formal informality), when it demonstrates an immanent/transcendent dynamic. For more on this point, see:  
[www.wels.net/s3/uploaded/6952/art-27.rtf](http://www.wels.net/s3/uploaded/6952/art-27.rtf)

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#### More examples

**Processionals:** When we looked for ways to involve children more in our services, we agreed that allowing the children to carry in a processional cross, the pulpit Bible, and a banner at the beginning and end of a service would be beneficial. Parents appreciate that their children participate in such a significant way.

At the gathering rite of the Thanksgiving Eve service, worshipers come forward to the altar while singing a simple, memorable refrain and place canned goods, frozen turkeys, and other Thanksgiving Day meal items in front of the altar. After the service the teen group delivers the food to the needy.

**Ash Wednesday ashes:** Instead of (or in addition to) imposing ashes on the forehead, we place a burlap banner on a stand in the chancel. After a confession of sins, each worshiper is invited to come forward to impose on the banner a smudge of ashes in the sign of the cross—a reminder of our mortality and need for forgiveness. The banner remains in the church throughout Lent to reinforce these important themes.

**Holy Communion practices:** Holy Communion strengthens and unites us in our faith. We used to dismiss worshipers before Communion assuming that visitors were turned off by our close communion practice. The unfortunate byproduct of this practice was that few members stayed to receive the sacrament. It created a division. In order to accommodate over 75 communicants each Sunday in an hour-long service, assisting ministers help distribute the elements. People are open to “continuous distribution” as a symbol of the worshipers’ unity. We have found that unchurched visitors are respectful of our communion practice. It does not hinder our growth.

There are many ways to incorporate reverent relevant ritual into the divine service. It's not a matter of being contemporary or traditional in approach. It is about doing worship well by answering “yes” to the questions above.



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The Confessions speak about the beneficial uses of ceremonies. In *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Martin Chemnitz elaborates on the expression “evangelical decorum” (FC SD X, 9): “We understand not theatrical pomp or courtly splendor but such decorum as shows by means of external rites the honor in which we hold the Word, the sacraments, and the remaining churchly functions, and by which others are invited to reverence.” (CPH, p269). Note the emphasis on avoiding pomp and splendor even though worship then and for the next two centuries (wherever Lutheran orthodoxy was strong) used a much higher degree of ceremony than we are accustomed to today.

“Trying to recast our worship to be more like the pop culture twenty-somethings are trying to escape for a time is not, in my opinion, serving them well. Christians may respectfully disagree on what works best to express the transcendence of divine worship without offending the sensibilities or binding the consciences of the worshipers. But respecting and rejoicing in God’s presence during worship is something that will resonate with every age group.” Daniel Leyrer, “Reaching Out to Twenty-Somethings,” *WLQ*, Winter 2004.

Colleen Carroll, a journalist, met with over 500 young people to examine their attraction to Christianity. Many of these people, ages 18-35, were from secular or dechurched homes. Carroll states: “A surprise was how many I found attracted to more traditional or liturgical worship—often the ones who weren’t raised with it. I found a surprising number of young evangelicals seeking liturgical worship.” For more on this point, see “Comfortable or Compelling,” Fall 2003 *Lutheran Leader*. The article is at [wels.net/worship](http://wels.net/worship) under Articles.

“Every pastor is either a witting or unwitting ritualist. . . . While the Lutheran Church has traditionally been a liturgical church, it exists in a culture where liturgical worship, with its emphasis on corporate and supernatural activity, has become alien . . . to many people. So unless the pastor understands the role of ritual in worship, and creates some appreciation for it by his leadership, both he and his congregation will suffer confusion. They will be caught between the devil of trendy, liturgical innovation, and the deep blue sea of obstinate, liturgical traditionalism. [We] need to perform our rituals wittingly, without becoming either reactionary ritualists, insensitive to the needs of people, or individualistic antiritualists who damage our congregations.” John Kleinig, “Witting or Unwitting Ritualists,” *Lutheran Theological Journal* (Australia), v22, 1988, pp13-22. See also *For the Life of the World*, June 1998. Available at [lifeoftheworld.com](http://lifeoftheworld.com).

“There is no such thing as a ‘dead ritual;’ only the people who perform them are dead.” *Forward in Christ*, May 2001, “Interactive Bible Study.”