

Lutheran Church of Australia: Commission on Worship

STATEMENT 1

THE ALTAR AND ITS DESIGN

Adopted by the Commission on Worship, July 1986. This statement was originally produced by the Department of Visual Arts in response to questions regarding the altar and Lutheran worship, particularly the suitability of free-standing altars.

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1 The altar is the physical focus for public worship, especially for the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

- It indicates the presence of the crucified and risen Lord with his people in worship.
- It symbolises both the sacrificial and sacramental elements of the eucharist.
- It symbolises the throne of God, recalling the ark of the covenant in the Old Testament, pointing to the enthronement of Christ at his ascension, and anticipating his final triumph.

2 The design, materials, and craftsmanship of the altar's construction can help to convey its special sacramental and sacrificial nature.

- Traditionally it has been made of wood or stone.
- It is preferable if it rests on the floor of the sanctuary rather than being fastened as a shelf on the rear wall.
- It is preferable if its base is elevated above the level of the nave floor.

3 The altar has traditionally been located near to, or against, the liturgically east wall for certain symbolic and practical reasons.

- The direction which the celebrant faces indicates which parts of the liturgy are sacramental and which parts are sacrificial.
- The location of the altar against the liturgically defined east wall orientates the congregation so that it moves from the darkness of this world, symbolised by the setting of the sun in the west, to the light of Christ's return, symbolised by the rising of the sun in the east.
- Its location also symbolises that Christ stands at the head of his people, gathered in worship, to lead them on their pilgrimage to heaven.

4 Freestanding altars which are lodged in the centre of the sanctuary have other advantages.

- The situation of the altar allows the celebrant to conduct the liturgy facing the congregation and the congregation to gather right around the altar to receive the body and blood of Christ.
- Since the altar is brought closer to the congregation, the enactment of the liturgy is opened up to the full view of the congregation.
- The location of the altar at the centre of the sanctuary emphasises the centrality of Christ's presence in the Lord's supper in Christian worship.
- Its location also symbolises that in worship Christ is in the midst of his people, who gather around him as his disciples and guests.

5 The use of freestanding altars requires certain practical constraints.

- The sanctuary needs to be large enough to allow free movement around the altar for the celebrants.
- The number of objects on the altar needs to be kept to a minimum. Things like flowers and extra candles can be placed elsewhere. Ideally, candles will be placed in separate floor-mounted holders, and the crucifix will, if possible, be on the rear wall of the sanctuary.
- Suitable paraments that complement the altar design need to be provided.

6 The relationship between the altar and the other elements of the sanctuary needs to reflect the basic principles of worship.

- This will often lead to a larger area set aside for the sanctuary than would otherwise be the case.