

# Lutheran Church of Australia: Commission on Worship

## STATEMENT 2

### THE COLOURS AND SEASONS OF THE CHURCH YEAR

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*Adopted by the Commission on Worship, August 1988. The Department of Liturgics prepared this statement in response to questions about the colour for the Sundays after Epiphany and recent changes to the church year.*

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#### 1 How the use of colours developed

- Colour was used in worship already by God's people in Old Testament times. It not only added appropriate splendour and atmosphere, but it also had symbolic significance for worshippers. Thus white came to symbolise God's presence, purity, glory, and victory; black, darkness, death, anti-godliness, and the absence of light and life; and red, warmth, blood, or fire.
- Little is known about the use of colour in New Testament times and in the first thousand years of the church, but from about the twelfth century colours were related to seasonal feasts. The prescription of Pope Pius V of 1570 became the basis for the use of colour which continues, in the main, to this day, although there have been variations.
- Lutherans and Anglicans generally followed the 1570 reforms of Pius V. Reformed churches generally rejected the use of colour in their worship, although recently they have had a growing appreciation of colour.
- In Christian worship, green came to be associated with new life and life generally. Violet, from the royal purple of biblical times, symbolised wealth and royalty, and later also stood for sorrow and repentance because of its dark shade. Blue was often associated with eschatological hope. Gold, because of its richness and splendour, has been used to emphasise the majesty of God the king and conqueror. Various shades of a particular colour have been used at different times and in different places.
- Colour can be an important and powerful element in celebration, although it is not essential to Christian worship.

#### 2 The structure of the church year

- The church year, which celebrates Christ and his work and teaching, is the main factor determining the colours used in Christian worship.
- The central feast of the Christian year is **Easter**, celebrating the resurrection of our Lord, his victory over sin, death, and Satan. Each Sunday is a mini Easter.

The period of preparation for Easter is Lent, which begins on Ash Wednesday and lasts for 40 days (excluding the Sundays). Lent is a time of austerity and restraint (traditionally fasting, and also study and meditation in preparation for baptism). The colour of Lent is the sombre colour of violet, characteristic of a subdued time of preparation, in which repentance is prominent. Lent reaches its climax in Holy Week, when violet may be replaced by scarlet, to highlight our Lord's suffering.

The Easter triduum is a concentrated three-day celebration (Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Day) of Christ's redemptive mission: his atoning death and resurrection. Good Friday, as with other major festivals, has a 'vesper' service: Maundy Thursday, the evening when the Lord's supper was instituted. The colour for Maundy Thursday is white, in recognition that the 'feast of victory' is being celebrated. Good Friday has black for mourning. Alternatively, the sanctuary may be stripped bare of all paraments and appointments to highlight the death of Christ and as a contrast to the ornamentation of Easter. Holy Saturday, as a day of quiet reflection on death of Christ, retains the colour of Good Friday or else remains bare.

A dramatic contrast occurs on Easter Day, beginning with the Easter vigil. The colour is white or gold, for victory, glory, and majesty. As the mood is one of festivity, flowers, greenery, additional candles, and other decorations may be used.

The colour and festivity of Easter continue throughout a 50-day celebration (although the alternative colour of gold is more appropriate for Easter Day itself), including the festival of the Ascension, the coronation of Christ the King at the right hand of the Father. The Easter season closes on Pentecost Day, the celebration of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, who bears witness to and glorifies the crucified and risen Christ. Pentecost has the colour of red, symbolising the fire associated with the coming of the Holy Spirit.

- Parallel to Easter is the other major feast of the church year: **Christmas**, the celebration of our Lord's incarnation. Christmas is closely linked with Easter, which is the culmination of Christ's incarnation.

Advent is the time of preparation for Christmas. This four-Sunday season has the colour of violet (austerity, repentance, and also royalty), as it is a time of solemn, and yet joyful, expectation of Christ's coming. Blue, the colour of anticipation and hope (but not yet fulfilment), is an alternative.

The Christmas season begins with Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, and the Christmas celebrations continue until, and include, Epiphany (6 January). The colour for Christmas is white, because it is a special feast of our Lord, when we celebrate his purity as Son of God and Saviour and the glory of God in his incarnation. The colour continues throughout the season, except on the martyr days of St Stephen (26 December) and the Innocents (28 December) when these days do not fall on a Sunday.

The Epiphany (the manifestation of Christ to the gentiles) and the first Sunday after the Epiphany (the Baptism of our Lord) also have the colour white.

- A large portion of the church year is not directly attached to either Easter or Christmas. It is often referred to (somewhat inappropriately) as the **non-festive** part of the year, or, in some circles, as 'ordinary time'.

The main general emphasis on the Sundays in this period is the teaching of Christ and its effect on the Christian life. The period includes the Sundays after the Epiphany and the Sundays after Pentecost — but not the first after the Epiphany (the Baptism of our Lord), the last after the Epiphany (the Transfiguration of our Lord), and the first after Pentecost (the Holy Trinity). The Baptism and Transfiguration have the colour white, since they are festivals of our Lord; Trinity also has white for the purity, majesty, and splendour of God.

The colour for the ‘non-festive’ times is green. This is the colour for life, especially the Christian life and eternal life (evergreen, undying), and the colour for growth in faith and discipleship. Our new life, faith, and discipleship flow from the redemptive work of Christ and are nurtured by his word and sacraments.

- During the church year, other occasions are celebrated. Some of them refer to our Lord and his ministry: the Circumcision and Name of Jesus; the Presentation of our Lord; and the Annunciation of our Lord. The colour for these is white.

Other events celebrated are significant in the life of the church: the Conversion of St Paul; the Visitation of Mary, the Mother of our Lord; the Nativity of St John the Baptist; the Commemoration of the Augsburg Confession; and the Commemoration of the Reformation. These days have the colour white, except for the Reformation, which is red; the Augsburg Confession also has red as an alternative.

There are also various days remembering saints: St Andrew, Apostle; St Thomas, Apostle; St Stephen, Martyr; St John, Apostle and Evangelist; the Innocents, Martyrs; St Matthias, Apostle; St Mark, Evangelist; St Philip and St James, Apostles; St Peter and St Paul, Apostles; St Mary Magdalene; St James the Elder, Apostle; St Bartholomew, Apostle; St Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist; St Michael and All Angels; St Luke, Evangelist; St Simon and St Jude, Apostles; All Saints. The days of St John, St Mary Magdalene, St Michael and All Angels, and All Saints have the colour white, while other saints’ days (for apostles, evangelists, and martyrs) are red. This rule applies except when the saint’s day falls on a Sunday, which is the Lord’s Day, when the saint may be remembered but Christ always takes pre-eminence. Normally the Sunday or major festival with its prescribed colour takes precedence over a minor festival or occasion.

Some other special occasions often observed are: New Year’s Eve (white); Harvest Thanksgiving (green or colour of the season); Mission Day (white or red); Day of Repentance (violet); and Consecration or Anniversary of a Church (red). For other events (such as a confirmation) the colour of the season applies.

### 3 Recommendations for the LCA

#### SUNDAYS AND MAJOR FESTIVALS

OCCASION	COLOUR
1-4 Advent	violet or blue
Christmas Eve	white
Christmas Day	white
1 Christmas	white
Circumcision and Name of Jesus (1 Jan)	white
2 Christmas	white
Epiphany (6 Jan)	white
1 Epiphany (Baptism of our Lord)	white
2-8 Epiphany	green
Transfiguration (last Sunday after Epiphany)	white
Ash Wednesday	violet
1-5 Lent	violet
Palm Sunday (Sunday of the Passion)	violet
Mon, Tues, Wed in Holy Week	violet or scarlet
Maundy Thursday	white
Good Friday	black or bare
Holy Saturday	black or bare
Easter Eve	white
Easter Day	white or gold
2-6 Easter	white or gold
Ascension	white or gold
7 Easter	white or gold
Pentecost Eve	red
Pentecost Day	red
Trinity (1 Pentecost)	white
2-27 Pentecost	green
Last Sunday of Church Year (Day of the Fulfilment)	green

#### MINOR FESTIVALS AND OCCASIONS

OCCASION	DATE	COLOUR
St Andrew	30 November	red
St Thomas	21 December	red
St Stephen	26 December	red
St John	27 December	white
Innocents	28 December	red
New Year's Eve	31 December	white
Circumcision and Name of Jesus	1 January	white
Conversion of St Paul	25 January	white
Presentation of our Lord	2 February	white
St Matthias	24 February	red
Annunciation of our Lord	25 March	white
St Mark	25 April	red
St Philip & St James	1 May	red
Visitation of Mary	31 May	white
Nativity of St John the Baptist	24 June	white
Augsburg Confession	25 June	white or red
St Peter & St Paul	29 June	red
St Mary Magdalene	22 July	white
St James the Elder	25 July	red
St Bartholomew	24 August	red
St Matthew	21 September	red
St Michael & All Angels	29 September	white
St Luke	18 October	red
St Simon & St Jude	28 October	red
Reformation	31 October	red
All Saints	1 November	white

Harvest Thanksgiving	green or colour of season
Mission Day	white or red
Day of Repentance	violet
Consecration or Anniversary of a Church	red
Confirmation	colour of the day or season
Ordination	red or colour of the day or season

**Note:** *In some cases the above recommendations are different from those in Lutheran Hymnal. In particular, the Sundays after Epiphany (except the first and last) are now green, not white, and a few of the minor occasions have also been changed. In some cases alternative colours are now given (new optional colours are blue, scarlet and gold).*