
PUBLIC WORSHIP AND ITS ENVIRONMENT

Adopted by the Commission on Worship, August 1988. The Department of Visual Arts prepared this statement, which examines some of the links between Lutheran worship and the space in which the worship takes place, to be a brief guide for further discussions on questions of worship and its relationship with architecture, art, and crafts.

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1 A basic definition of worship

Worship is heaven on earth. In worship the Triune God is present with his people in a special and public way. He calls us into his presence, to receive his grace and share in his holiness through the work of the Holy Spirit in the means of grace.

We join with other believers, locally, and universally, and with the angels, in worshipping him.

2 The actions of worship

Worship can be seen as a series of actions:

God calls us to worship	- we come
God forgives	- we confess
God speaks	- we listen
God listens	- we pray
God gives his gifts to us	- we bring our gifts
God gives himself in the Lord's supper	- we give ourselves
God blesses us	- we praise him
God sends us into the world	- we go out.

3 Worship as rest

Worship can also be seen as rest: just being with God, quietly, without frenetic activity.

God created humankind not only to work with him in governing the earth, but also to be blessed and sanctified by sharing in his rest.

Jesus offers God's rest to us in worship, where we can cease from our labours, unburden ourselves, and let him do his work in us. We can therefore enjoy physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual rest in worship.

The arrangement of the worship environment should create a climate for meditation and facilitate this kind of rest.

This anticipates the final, joyful rest with God in heaven.

4 The spatial context of worship

Worship is always closely tied with spatial qualities as symbols of relationships. Holy places are common to all religions, and even though Jesus abolished the idea of specific sacred places, the symbolic significance of the worship space remains.

The means of grace are linked with material elements and spatial meanings which need emphasis in worship:

Baptism:	the entry into God's family
The word:	gathering around to listen
The Lord's supper:	coming into his presence to receive his body and blood

These three means of grace form the basis for the spatial layout of worship: ENTRY to a holy place, GATHERING AROUND to listen, pray, praise and offer gifts, and COMING FORWARD to receive the body and blood of our Lord.

5 What is essential for a place of worship?

In one sense, nothing spatial is essential ('wherever two or three are gathered together...') but in practical terms, many things are useful:

- an enclosure to define the sense of the place, somewhere different, where God meets his people in a special way
- a space which assists in the proclamation and hearing of the gospel
- a space which involves the congregation in the sacrament of baptism, and constantly reminds them of its importance
- a space which emphasises the centrality of the Lord's supper
- a space which encourages people to respond appropriately in prayer and praise
- a space which reflects the redemption and sanctification of the material world.

This does not rule out the possibility of the space being created temporarily by the use of special symbolic means, or being part of a flexible area. An analogy is the way a special space can be created for a birthday party in an ordinary living room.

6 The visual language of worship spaces

Visual language can make a unique contribution to worship by reaching each person at all stages of life and levels of being, and uniting all people by transcending barriers of language and culture.

The visual language of the worship environment should not only proclaim the presence of God, but also suggest our proper attitude and response to it.

The integrated use of space, light and colours, shape and line, material and texture can celebrate the glory and grace of God's presence and can give us a vision of our place in his scheme.

Visual symbolism is limited by culture and history, and so the symbols used by a congregation in worship need to have meaning in the culture of the congregation.

7 Useful spatial arrangements

The traditional design of churches has evolved because congregations have found some aspects which are useful in explaining and assisting in worship. For example:

- the altar, emphasising the centrality of the Lord's supper
- the sanctuary, emphasising the special place where the human horizontal meets the divine vertical
- the nave, where the people of God gather together
- the external appearance, which identifies the church in the community.

New churches are not obliged to uncritically follow historical concepts, but just as new liturgical forms derive from old, so new spatial forms acknowledge the past, even if only indirectly.

8 The cycles and rhythms of worship

The worship environment needs to reflect the ebb and flow of ordinary life with its cycles, seasons, and moods.

Some of its elements need to remain constant to relate the regular cycle of work and rest to the constancy and eternity of life with God.

Other elements need to be flexible enough to accommodate special occasions in the liturgical calendar and in the lives of people. The whole environment needs to be able to meet the need for various forms of individual and congregational worship.

The constancy and the changing aspects of the worship environment help to draw the whole of human existence into the life and worship of God.