



Worship Led by a Modern Ensemble

Study guide

This guide was prepared for National Hymnal Week, September 2021. It is useful for any congregation considering the topic.

The online description includes these thoughts:

This material is for two different audiences: those who have never used a modern ensemble, and those who want to improve their current use. Participants in a discussion are invited to review several items before gathering to discuss goals and strategies. The first two are most important.

- Watch: [Worship Led by a Modern Ensemble](#) - a 33-minute video with live worship and interviews.
- Read: [Searching for Modern Music for the New Hymnal](#) - an excellent and thorough overview of how modern music was selected for inclusion in *Christian Worship*.
- Watch: An Introduction to Hymns (this video is pending, which will demonstrate more new hymns with ensemble, is pending and should be posted by mid-September)
- Read: [Worship the Lord 75. Voices Raised with Keys and Strings](#) - a brief article that offers perspectives and pointers from 2011 and 2015. Some of the issues raised are “solved” by the new hymnal suite of resources.
- Read: If some musicians want to grow in their understanding of worship principles (or if there are tensions about worship matters within the congregation), two series of articles may be helpful: [Confessional Perspectives on Worship](#) and [Worship Words to Wrestle With](#)
- For a deep dive: [Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts](#) (People’s Bible Teachings series), published by NPH.

It’s important to have clear goals in mind when expanding musical options for worship. Some questionable goals are:

- “Changing our musical style is the only way we have a chance of attracting new members.”
- “We won’t be able to keep our youth if we don’t change.”
- “One segment of the congregation dislikes organ music, another dislikes guitar. So the only option is to offer two very different approaches to worship.”

Far better to recognize that:

- God has granted us freedom in worship.
- A wide variety of instruments may be used in Lutheran worship without compromising the strengths of liturgical worship.
- It's better to use a widened musical palette "within Lutheran parameters" than to appear to imitate the style and approach of other theological traditions, especially those that elevate the emotional power of music above its teaching and proclamatory roles (cf Col 3:16).
- Using greater variety in worship is more a stewardship matter (using the gifts God has given) than a critical strategy for outreach or member retention.
- But it's also true that enriched worship variety will have a positive impact on outreach, nurture, member retention, discipleship, stewardship, and more.
- And it's worth evaluating if current musical practices are in some degree of a sameness rut.

Discussion options and guidance.

Do not feel that you must discuss every point; rather consider what points of discussion would best serve your congregation and those gathered for discussion. If time allows, discussion of all points will of course be beneficial.

Discussion Prompt	Guidance for Moderator/Facilitator
How would you describe the difference between a "modern ensemble" (also called a "liturgical ensemble") and a "praise band"?	<p>There are several differences:</p> <p>1) <i>repertoire</i> - elements of a Lutheran service (hymns, liturgy, psalm, etc.) vs popular contemporary Christian songs, which doesn't mean that some popular songs can't fit in Lutheran worship.</p> <p>2) <i>function</i> - churches using a praise band often view singing as primarily praise from us to God. Other elements like confession, lament, teaching are often not as prominent.</p> <p>3) <i>ambiance</i> - praise bands can dominate both visually and acoustically (too loud, especially with a drum set!). A modern ensemble strives to support and encourage singing without overpowering the assembly.</p>
What has been your experience with worship led by a modern ensemble (in other churches, in the past)?	This is an open question intended to understand what participants have experienced in the past. If your congregation already uses a modern ensemble, ask instead: What are the strengths and weaknesses of our current approach? What improvements could we make based on the ideas in the Trinitas video?

<p>The Trinitas ensemble leads worship in all weekend services, just as the organ does on other weekends. Why not divide up the congregation into “8:00 traditional, 10:30 ensemble”?</p>	<p>Aaron Christie (once pastor at Trinity, now worship professor at the seminary), from the video: “In this way we emphasize that worship isn’t about my preference versus your preference. It’s something that we do together as the body of Christ gathered in this place. Our goal is for our musical diversity to unite us in Christ, the head of his body, the Church. Our utilization of music from various styles, periods, genre, and levels of difficulty is a deliberate attempt to put the law of love into action in a large and diverse congregation. Throughout the centuries, the Holy Spirit has proven that he is no monotone! We are doing our best to use as many of his musical blessings as seems both wise and beneficial as a confessional Lutheran congregation in the 21st century.”</p> <p>How does the new hymnal support this approach?</p>
<p>Why is it better to plan worship that engages everyone instead of dividing the congregation by musical taste?</p>	<p>As with most issues in the church and outside the church, the presuppositions with which one starts often determine outcomes. A common presupposition seems to be that worship should be designed to appeal to a variety of market or cultural segments. Thus the cliché "one size doesn't fit all" almost becomes a maxim—a “screen” through which all talk of worship innovation or enrichment must be filtered.</p> <p>There certainly is a segmentation model for worship innovation, but there is also a unifying model. Before talking about different groups’ styles/preferences/needs, it's important to think through the segmenting/unifying issues.</p> <p>A biblical support for segmentation might be “all things to all men.” A support for unifying might be Romans 15:5-6, “live in harmony with one another . . . that together you may with one voice glorify God.” WITH ONE VOICE, not market-segmented voices of personal taste.</p> <p>Worship as a unifying experience is better than segmentation. It’s the time and event that most visibly and regularly shows the family of God (or body of Christ) in a given location.</p> <p>React to this: To me the idea of splitting a congregation into two factions (the contemporary group and the traditional group) is very American (I call it Whopper Worship; have it your way!) and very un-Christian. Instead of teaching that the Church is the body of Christ where all the members must work together in harmony, you’re encouraging the very thing that Paul discourages in 1 Corinthians 12:21,25: “The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' . . . There should be no division in the body, but . . . its parts should have equal concern for each other.”</p>
<p>Trinitas focuses on familiar hymns, liturgical songs, and psalms—certainly not to the exclusion of new songs. Why the focus on</p>	<p>This focus fits superbly with the goals of Lutheran worship. It allows worship to honor a valuable heritage while also sounding fresh. It isn’t necessary to abandon a heritage of hymns and liturgy simply to benefit from a “modern sound.”</p> <p>How does the new hymnal support this approach? The accompaniment</p>

<p>hymns, liturgical songs, and psalms?</p>	<p>edition for hymns includes many pianistic settings. Two settings of the main Sunday service can be accompanied by organ (and brass) or piano/guitar (and other instruments). The psalter includes similar musical variety. The Musician’s Resource provides all kinds of supportive options, including lead sheets, more pianistic arrangements, and instrumental music.</p>
<p>Some congregations or church bodies have experienced tensions over worship style, even to the point of strong polarization and hostility. “Worship wars” don’t serve anyone! How does the Trinitas approach contribute to congregational unity?</p>	<p>Jeremy Bakken, from the video: “We’ve found that once people experience this variety done with excellence, the vast majority really appreciate both approaches to worship music. And by utilizing this God-given variety, more people’s gifts are used in worship leadership, and the beauty of the diverse body of Christ is better understood and experienced.”</p>
<p>The Trinitas approach strives to unite people in worship rather than to divide them according to style preferences. But isn’t it true that growing churches offer a more contemporary worship style or at least more of this style than something labeled “traditional”?</p>	<p>No, it’s not true. Studies inside and outside WELS have shown that the key is worship excellence, not a particular musical style.</p> <p>Donn Dobberstein, WELS Director for Discipleship, from the video: “As a former mission pastor, I heartily endorse this approach to worship. I’m a member now at Trinity and I’ve seen how people appreciate our worship. I love how this approach to worship unites the congregation—young and old, different musical tastes—in worship that is for everyone. And I’m glad to know that the new WELS hymnal project will support this approach, which just makes so much good sense for Lutheran worship.”</p> <p>Eric Roecker, WELS Director for Evangelism, from the video: “Studies have shown that as far as new worshipers are concerned . . . that it’s not so much the style of worship that is used. But they do notice the quality.”</p>
<p>Pastor Christie (now professor at the seminary) states: “We don’t aim for a style typical of Christian radio. The goal isn’t to be contemporary in that way.” Why not?</p>	<p>Much of that music is soloistic performance rather than comfortable for congregational participation. Some popular songs are overly subjective or do not have theologically deep enough lyrics; they do not “teach/proclaim” God’s word in a manner consistent with Lutheran worship principles.</p> <p>Sheri Kern, from the video: This approach “allows a worshipful feel without becoming commercialized in a secular sense.”</p>
<p>Jeremy Bakken recommends a variety of hand percussion instead of a drum set. Why is this?</p>	<p>Bakken, from the video: “Most of these reasons are acoustic and aesthetic. Acoustically, a set can be difficult to balance with the rest of the ensemble. Its natural volume can overpower the rest of the ensemble, or it requires a higher balancing sound level from the rest of the ensemble that then drowns out the congregation overall. Aesthetically, a set requires significantly more space than small percussion. In Christian</p>

	<p>freedom, a drum set can be used. But in best practice and experience, hand percussion proves more practical and appropriate. If the use of a set is demanded, consider using an electronic kit for proper volume balance.”</p> <p>Regarding strong volume it’s valuable to remember that the goal of musicians is to enable congregational singing—not to overwhelm it. Just as a large pipe organ should not always play at full volume, so an ensemble should support and not dominate.</p>
<p>It’s great for a church like Trinity to be able to offer a rich worship variety. But what about smaller churches without so many musicians?</p>	<p>1) A full ensemble isn’t required to enrich worship in a smaller congregation. Simply using a piano plus one or two other instruments can bring welcome variety if a small electronic organ is the usual instrument. Try adding just a wind instrument and hand percussion to the piano.</p> <p>2) Even churches that have relied on recorded music (e.g., HymnSoft) can benefit from this approach. If the congregation can sing along to a recorded piano, then a variety of instrumentalists can also play along.</p> <p>Laura Pufahl, from the video: “. . . notice something about the music for each instrument. It’s not at all difficult, well within the capability of many high school musicians. So this is something that most congregations are capable of doing.”</p>
<p>Is Trinitas worship contemporary or blended? Are services at Trinity with an organ “traditional”?</p>	<p>Worship at Trinity—and Lutheran worship in general, when implemented well—is timeless. Bakken, from the video: “. . . we do not consider our worship to be traditional when it is with organ and contemporary or blended when it is with ensemble. We have intentionally avoided such terminology. Our worship is simply worship. It is liturgical in structure. It is accompanied by a rotating variety of instruments that everyone experiences equally regardless of which service they attend.”</p> <p>John Boggs, from the video (mission pastor in Florida): “Our congregation was going through a transitional period. We had two very distinct styles of worship: one that was very contemporary, one that was very traditional. We were looking for a change. We were looking for a timeless worship style, something that people on both ends of the spectrum and that people who had never worshiped in a Lutheran church before could say, ‘You know what? That was done well. That was praising God.’”</p>