



Visual Arts & Drama in Worship

Fact Sheet 8, The Elements of Worship Series



COMMISSION
ON WORSHIP
Lutheran Church of Australia

Humans are visual creatures. What we see and touch has a major impact on mood and understanding. The visual arts can help proclaim God's Word, help us to understand what we hear, and create an environment which helps us receive and respond to everything God is doing in worship.

There are many visual elements in worship:

- **Architecture and layout** – it is good for a worship space to have:
 - A way to define the space, as a special place, where God meets his people in worship. This could be as elaborate as a fully decorated church building, or as simple as a circle of stones or chairs around a central cross.
 - Layout, furniture and equipment which assists in the proclamation and hearing of the gospel – can the pastor be seen and heard? Is there some means of sharing the words for the readings and liturgy? Is there a cross to remind the people of Jesus' saving work for us?
 - a space which reminds the congregation of the sacrament of baptism. Is there a font and visual elements linking us to our baptism?
 - a space which emphasises how central Communion is– is there an altar area, where the communion elements can be seen and accessed?
 - a space which encourages people to respond appropriately in prayer and praise.
 - This does not rule out the possibility of the space being created temporarily 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 or outdoors.
- **Paraments, banners and vestments** - the use of banners, altar cloths, and dressings for the lectern and pulpit beautify the space and make it easier for people to connect to the season of the church year, to the means of grace and to what God is doing through his word and his people in the body of Christ. The colours change according to the season or Sunday of the year. The pastor's stole (the strip of coloured cloth worn around his neck) changes in the same way. A great deal of care goes into the design and creation of these vestments (special clothes), and they often include symbols and colours.
- **Paintings, drawing, photography and other fine arts** can add to the worship environment. Images from a range of time periods and cultures can draw people of different ages and backgrounds into the worship space.
- **Flowers, candles and other temporary installations** - Floral artists make use of symbols, liturgical colours and other items which connect to the readings or the central message of the worship service. At particular times of the church year, traditional displays such as Advent wreaths or Jesse trees may be used to help mark the development of the season or emphasise its significance. At All Saints, a sandbox of candles may be set up so that those mourning the death of a loved one can light a candle. While many of these displays help us to connect to believers through the ages, there are other displays which may be unique to a particular time or place.
- **Performance art /drama** can range from the simple dramatization of the Bible readings using different people to read the narration and the main characters' speech, through to skits and even

plays on special occasions such as Easter and Christmas. Liturgical dance may also be used. As with all the arts, the emphasis should be on enhancing the Word and what God is doing in the service, rather than individual performance.

- **Visual presentation media and digital art** - In addition to their functionality, these media provide an opportunity for visual enhancement of the worship service. Directional and coloured lighting can make a big impact. Colours, images and even animations can add to or detract from the sacred space and the proclamation of the Word. These forms should work with and complement the other visual arts and the elements of worship.

Almost all of these forms of visual art make good use of two elements – colour and symbol.

Colours and the Liturgical Calendar

Each season of the Church calendar is associated with specific colours:

- **White**, the colour of perfection, purity and holiness, is used for Christmas, Easter Sunday, and the Sundays immediately after these festivals, as well as Transfiguration and Epiphany which focus on Christ. White is also the colour for Trinity Sunday and for Maundy Thursday in recognition that the "feast of victory" [communion] is being celebrated.
- **Gold**, the colour of victory, glory, and majesty, may be used instead of white during the Easter and the post-Easter season.
- **Violet** is the colour of royalty, but it also symbolises penitence. It may be used during both Advent and Lent. Both periods have a penitential aspect while looking forward to festivals of our king. If the same paraments are used for both seasons, then extra care should be taken with the symbols used so they are appropriate for both.
- **Green** is the colour of life and growth. It is used for those times of the year which focus on growth in faith and discipleship such as the Sundays after Pentecost and Epiphany.
- **Red** is the colour of blood and fire and is used on days which mark great events in the work and ministry of the Christian Church such as Pentecost, many saints' days, and Reformation Sunday.
- **Black** is the colour of mourning. It is only used on Good Friday and Easter Saturday. It is the opposite to white and symbolises the death of Christ.
- **Blue** is the colour of anticipation and hope. It may be used instead of violet in Advent, in anticipation of Christ's coming, but it is not used in Lent.

Symbols

- Symbols help people identify and remember key messages or ideas. The cross is the most obvious symbol of the Christian faith, but there are many more, often associated with the sacraments and with the seasons of the church year.
- Baptism is often associated with a dove descending (reminding us of the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus when he was baptised), and also with a scallop shell, often with three drops of water, symbolising the Triune God into which we are baptized. Symbols of communion include the chalice, bread, and the lamb of God. An open Bible is a symbol of the Word.
- Some symbols like the Luther Rose, the Anchor, Chi-Ro, Alpha and Omega and even the Fish may need some explanation for newcomers.
- 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. That said, teaching children and others in the congregation about the meaning of symbols and pointing them out in worship can be a great way to pass on the faith and help people remember the gospel.

Each congregation is a community of believers in a particular time and place. Different symbols and visual elements will speak differently to different groups. Our church buildings and worship spaces may look quite different from each other. Whatever the style of your congregation, think about how the visual elements you use help teach, encourage and inspire people in their walk with God.