

THE LASTING EFFECTS OF COVID-19: HOW WORSHIP HAS CHANGED IN WELS

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic altered the way many churches conducted their ministries. In the wake of the pandemic, many of those churches developed a new normal. This paper seeks to analyze WELS' continued response to the pandemic five years later. Scripture and church history demonstrate how Christocentricity in any practice makes true, Christian worship. I will argue that, to the glory of God and by his grace, WELS has done a commendable job in adapting worship and ministry in the new normal by keeping Christ at the center of worship.

INTRODUCTION

On March 16, 2020, the White House released its groundbreaking plan in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The more specific health and safety guidelines were left up to the states. For all the differences in specific policies, most industries and organizations had to adapt to life in the pandemic. Naturally, churches also had to adapt. In these unprecedented and uncertain times, pastors and congregations sought to balance serving God and listening to the government, between serving their people and protecting public health and safety, a seemingly impossible task during the COVID pandemic. Every church did what they thought was right.

This paper is not about worship *during* COVID. Most churches were forced to and did change the way they worshipped for a time, in some cases, drastically. During the pandemic, each congregation had to balance local and federal government mandates, public opinion, size and expectations of their congregations, values in worship, worship practices, and many more.

After the safer-at-home orders were lifted, most congregations resumed in-person worship. In many cases, there were changes in worship. Many congregations implemented safety measures and guidelines to promote health and safety. This paper will analyze worship *after* COVID, specifically, how worship in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has changed. Many COVID-19 precautions have become a distant memory, but some remain. There are differences in most churches today compared to February 2020, before the pandemic. Many have said, “COVID changed everything.” Is that also true concerning the way WELS conducts worship? That is the question that prompted this paper.

This paper contends that now that the COVID-19 pandemic has passed, its influence on worship practices should likewise recede. Churches changed the way they worship to accommodate the pandemic and continued to adapt in the wake of it. Since worship requires Christ as its center and focus, worship practices born during COVID could have a detrimental effect on Christocentricity now that the pandemic is over. I will also argue that, by God's grace, generally speaking, WELS has done a commendable job recovering from COVID.

This paper will examine different principles and advice aimed at helping people restart life after COVID, returning to normal—or as close to it as possible. First, the Scriptures establish the principles for worship, Christian love, the power of the Word, and the stewardship of ministry. Then, we will examine Christocentric Lutheran worship principles to keep in mind, examining the goals and focus of worship. Next, scholars and studies give information and guidance from a secular psychological standpoint. All of those sources put us in the right frame of mind to examine how well WELS has responded to COVID by looking at what remains of the COVID changes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research conducted for the thesis is a combination of literature research, a survey, and interviews. The survey and the interviews collected data on WELS worship practice for this paper to evaluate. The rubric for what makes true, Christian worship was based on Scripture alone. Examining historical Lutheran worship practices, contemporary church bodies, and modern scholarship also offers helpful insights and applications.

Scripture does not prescribe the specific practices and rites associated with Christian worship. Martin Luther, the Formula of Concord, and Adolf Hoenecke's *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics* use Scripture to explain how Christian freedom is rightly practiced.

Peter Brunner's *Worship in the Name of Jesus* and Timothy Maschke's *Gathered Guests* show what historic Lutheran worship looks like in how it applies the biblical principles of Christocentric worship.

Wade Johnston's "Article X of the Formula of Concord and Lutheranism Today" and Jonathan Schroeder's "Worship & Outreach: A Lutheran Paradigm" are examples of WELS writers who apply Lutheran, biblical worship principles to WELS worship and practice. In 2021, WELS leadership introduced an updated hymnal to the synod that explained the importance and continued implementation of Christocentric worship.

Aan Komariah Badrudin's article, "Effect of Spiritual Intelligence on Spiritual Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic," demonstrated the spiritual health crisis initiated by the pandemic.

Two books, *Responding to the Uninvited Visitor: COVID-19 Pandemic and the Lessons It Has Taught Us* and *Church after the Corona Pandemic: Consequences for Worship and Theology*, provided non-Lutheran, but religious perspectives on how the pandemic has changed worship and spirituality in general. Different authors wrote each chapter in both books. Anane Denteh, Anquandah Arthur, Darko, Osafo-Adu and Wereko, and Onyinah were cited in the former, and Schiefelbein-Guerrero, Thompson, and Wengert in the latter.

Because of the abundance of published material, the ELCA's pandemic response was analyzed as a Lutheran, yet liberal, perspective on the same issue that WELS was dealing with.

ECLA pastors Burton Edwards, Scott, and Trapp offer a sample of the diverse experiences within the ELCA.

The survey and interviews were directed at WELS pastors across North America who led their congregations through the pandemic to the time of writing this paper. They provided their congregations' experiences navigating a new normal for worship post-COVID. Rev. Jonathan Hein, Director of WELS Congregational Services Commission on Congregational Counseling, was instrumental in advising congregations throughout the synod on this topic.

PRINCIPLES FROM SCRIPTURE

In order to assess how effectively WELS churches adjusted to worship after COVID, it is necessary first to establish the criteria and rubric to determine what makes constitutes acceptable worship practice.

Principles from Scripture are the highest authority, the *norma normans*, and, therefore, of higher importance than any other principles to keep in mind. While historical Lutheran worship principles and the advice of scholars and studies of the world are wise and valuable, none can trump what Scripture has to say. The New Testament has much more to say and much clearer instructions concerning the *what* of Christian worship rather than the *how*. The Bible was not written as a guidebook for worship coming out of a pandemic, so we should not expect there to be a passage to be the *sedes doctrinae* on this issue. Several truths need to be considered together.

The *What*: Christocentric

“Suddenly Jesus met them. ‘Greetings,’ he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him” (Matt 28:9 NIV). Addressing the *what* of worship, or, rather, the *who*, the risen Jesus accepts himself as the object of worship. “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise” (Rev 5:12). Our Savior is worthy of worship. “At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10–11). Not only is he worthy of worship, every creature, willing or unwilling, must acknowledge him for who he is. It is not that we worship now out of fear because we eventually will have to either way. This passage shows the complete victory and supremacy of Christ, the only proper object of worship. “Through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit” (Eph 2:18). Christ also is the mediator between God and man. Our triune God is the object of worship. God the Son is the focal point because he connects man to God.

With Christ as the clear focus of worship, the New Testament also shows the Christocentric nature of worship. “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col 3:16–17). The Apostle Paul gives clear, yet beautifully ambiguous instructions for Christian worship, in every aspect of life, as well as corporate worship; everything is in Jesus’ name. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). The early Christian church joined together around the apostles’

teaching, which is the gospel message of Jesus. Many more passages could be cited to emphasize that the triune God is the object of worship. Suffice it to say that Scripture leaves no room for deviation in this aspect of worship.

The *How*: Christian Freedom

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (Gal 5:1a). The way Christians worship is largely in the realm of Christian Freedom. God does not tell us much at all about how specifically he wants a worship service to work. Later in the chapter, Paul reminds the Christian that Christian freedom has a distinct purpose. “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh, rather, serve one another humbly in love” (Gal 5:13). The goal of Christian freedom is to serve others, not the self, in the whole Christian life and, naturally, also in Christian worship. WELS president, Mark Schroeder, echoed that Scriptural truth, “When something is determined to be an adiaphoron, that’s not where the discussion ends, that is when discussion among Christians begins.”¹ It can be a temptation to conclude that since something is free, we can do what we want. Paul, again, directs us away from such thinking. “‘I have the right to do anything,’ you say—but not everything is beneficial. ‘I have the right to do anything’—but not everything is constructive” (1 Cor 10:23). Freedom does not mean freedom to be spiritually reckless, using Christ to push an anti-Christian agenda. “Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak” (1 Cor 8:9). Essentially, a question we have to ask ourselves when acting in Christian freedom is, “Is this

1. Wade R. Johnston, “Article X of the Formula of Concord and Lutheranism Today.” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (March 2010), 92.

helpful?” Luther echoed this principle. “For even though from the viewpoint of faith, the external orders are free and can without scruples be changed by anyone at any time, yet from the viewpoint of love, you are not free to use this liberty but bound to consider the edification of the common people.”²

“Do everything in love” (1 Cor 16:14). In general encouragement to the Corinthians in the closing chapter of his first letter, Paul gives them this command to guide them in their lives of sanctification. This exhortation is so beautifully simple and vague, easily applied in the lives of anyone. When a Christian does anything, they first ask themselves the question, “Is this loving?”

“Everything must be done so that the church may be built up” (1 Cor 14:26). “Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Cor 14:40). In this chapter, Paul gives the most concrete principles to apply to post-COVID worship. Every congregation works differently depending on their specific situation. Yet, they all ought to apply these general worship principles. When a congregation does anything in worship, they first ask themselves, “Does this build others up? Is this fitting and orderly?”

In implementing new and different practices given the unique situation that the pandemic presented, a pastor and congregation would be wise to work together with one other and fellow believers. “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed” (Prov 15:22). One of the great blessings that the Lord gives us in fellowship is that we have the ability to work together and work through the same problems together. In the context of COVID, every congregation’s situation was different, but many faced many of the same problems. Therefore, when a pastor or congregation made a change and even kept one of those changes to the present,

2. *LW* 53:47.

some helpful questions to ask would be, “Are other people doing this? Are our people on the same page about this?”

These Scriptural principles guide wise lives of Christian freedom. It specifically puts good questions in our minds to consider concerning worship practices affected by COVID and in the wake of the pandemic. When analyzing the way Christians worship, it is essential to hold two biblical truths in tension. On the one hand, the Word is powerful all on its own. On the other hand, God has called us to be stewards of the means of grace. “Like all other messages, the message of salvation has a psychological dimension: It implants itself in the intellect and emotions by means of psychological stimuli; for example, logic, repetition, beauty, etc. Unlike all other messages, the message of salvation has a supernatural dimension: a power by which the Spirit moves minds and hearts to believe and live the gospel.”³ If ever one does not feel the tension, he must consider if he emphasizes one truth over and to the detriment of the other.

A Biblical Truth: The Power of the Word

It cannot be overstated that the Word works because the Holy Spirit works through it. The Word is not effective because of our power or skill. “The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb 4:12). The Word has power by itself. We cannot add anything to its power. “As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return

3. Jonathan Bauer et al., *Christian Worship: Foundations* (Waukesha: Northwestern, 2023) 113.

to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isa 55:10–11). We cannot add anything to its efficacy. “We use this as a *sedes doctrinae* for the efficacy of the Word. ‘It will accomplish what I desire,’ God says. Not can. Certainly not might. It will. Every single time the Word of God is shared, it accomplishes God’s purpose.”⁴

In his grace, God chooses to use people to convey the means of grace. Yet, even as God uses people, Paul reminds us that God is powerfully and intimately at work using his powerful Word. “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow” (1 Cor 3:6). “The true power on which the effects of the divine Word actually depend is a supernatural power and nothing other than the power of God himself....God himself works in the Word of God (Ro 1:16). If the gospel is a power of God, then God himself does the work.”⁵

A Biblical Truth: Stewardship with the Means of Grace

God has given us the most powerful tool in his Word. God also has called us to treat his Word with respect. “It is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful” (1 Cor 4:2). Those to whom God gave the treasure that is his Word are called to be faithful. What we do matters. How we do them matters. “God does ask us to proclaim the gospel so that it can find its way to the intellect and the emotions. We do this by understanding and employing the psychological realities of communication—realities God himself created in the human creature—

4. Jonathan Hein, “Treasure in Jars of Clay: The Synergy Between the Instrumental and Ministerial Causes in God’s Plan of Salvation,” 5.

5. Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, trans. Joel Fredrich, Paul Prange, and Bill Tackmier, vol 4 (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1999), 16.

and then putting them to use with wisdom and faithfulness.”⁶ It does not add to God’s Word. Our practice is a delivery mechanism for the efficacious Word. By foolish or careless practice, we can get in the way of the Word and distract people from it. God keep us from this sin!

In 2 Timothy, Paul’s effective farewell to Timothy and the next generation of pastors, he repeatedly and fervently pleads this point. “The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Tim 2:2). Paul had faithfully preached and handled the Word. He highlighted the importance of handling the Word with care. Teachers of the Word are to be entrusted as reliable and qualified to handle it. “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Tim 2:15). What a great and simple encouragement for Timothy and all of God’s faithful people. Do your best! There is no room for laxity when handling his Word. “Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction” (2 Timothy 4:2). The sinful nature wants to hear what it wants to hear, not what God says. There will always be the temptation to apologize for God and divert away from his Word. God’s Word persistently warns us against such temptations.

God has chosen to bless his Church with the privilege to serve him in his kingdom. “The power and right of the ministry of the Word (Predigtamt) is to preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, forgive or retain sins, and practice discipline.”⁷

6. Bauer et al., *Foundations*, 33–34.

7. Hoenecke, *Dogmatics*, 4:207.

Holding Two Truths in Tension

“God the Holy Spirit does not effect conversion without means, but he uses the preaching and the hearing of God’s Word to accomplish it, as it is written (Rom. 1[:16*]), the gospel is a ‘power of God’ to save. [5] Likewise, faith comes from hearing God’s Word (Rom. 10[:17*])” (FC Ep II 5).⁸ The Formula of Concord demonstrates how to walk this tight rope by demonstrating how the Bible does the same thing, quoting consecutive verses from Paul. It is true that the gospel is the power of God! It is true that God deigns to work that power through the written and spoken word! We hold the truths in tension by respecting both of them. Applying this tension to worship practice is often easier said than done. We trust in God that he wills and works according to his good pleasure. We take seriously this privilege that God has given to his ministers and work to remove distractions from the gospel. “It is entirely impossible for a mere man to limit the power of God. Therefore, it is equally impossible for a mere man to limit the power of God’s Word. However, to the degree that we communicate poorly, we can prevent the Word from being received.”⁹ While holding seemingly contradictory truths in tension, it is important to let God be God and man be man. What is in God’s control, leave to him. What God has called man to do, do it faithfully. “The Word works; the minister works. God promises the former and commands the latter.”¹⁰ What a blessing it is that God, who needs no one, chooses to use us to deliver his saving message!

8. All Formula of Concord and Luther’s Large Catechism quotes are from Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

9. Hein, *Treasure in Jars of Clay*, 15.

10. Jonathan E. Schroeder, “Worship & Outreach: A Lutheran Paradigm” (paper presented for the Symposium of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, WI, 20 September 2010), 8.

LUTHERAN WORSHIP PRINCIPLES

In Christ, God grants people the blessed privilege of worshipping him. He does not give New Testament Christians strict rubrics concerning worship practices, as he did in the Old Testament. Therefore, a Christian assembly operates in the realm of Christian freedom when considering how to worship God.

The Lutheran Confessions

From its earliest years, Lutherans had to wrestle with adiaphora in worship. Coming out of Roman Catholicism, they had to analyze everything they did in worship. Anything that diverted attention away from Christ was thrown out. The Formula of Concord addressed whatever remained. “We unanimously believe, teach, and confess that ceremonies or ecclesiastical practices that are neither commanded nor forbidden in God’s Word, but have been established only for good order and decorum, are in and of themselves neither worship ordained by God nor a part of such worship” (FC Ep X 3). At face value, such ceremonies are truly in the realm of Christian freedom. In the context of the Adiaphoristic Controversy, the conversation was not in a vacuum, so extra consideration was necessary. The same applies today. In a vacuum, Christocentric practices and ceremonies are in the realm of Christian freedom. Like in the sixteenth century, this conversation is never in a vacuum. Each church must have the conversation for themselves.

Concerning practices in the realm of Christian freedom, churches also are free to alter them in good order. “We believe, teach, and confess that the community of God in every time and place has the right, power, and authority to change, reduce, or expand such practices

according to circumstances in an orderly and appropriate manner, without frivolity or offense, as seems most useful, beneficial, and best for good order, Christian discipline, evangelical decorum, and the building up of the church” (FC SD X 9). Christian freedom begins the conversation. The appropriate reason to change worship practices is to build up the church and clear the way for the gospel in its specific context. The Formula writers also emphasized the importance of not changing practice on a whim, but rather to act only after thorough consideration and discussion.

Luther’s Large Catechism expounds the ultimate role of the assembly of believers. “Everything in this Christian community is so ordered that everyone may daily obtain full forgiveness of sins through the Word and signs appointed to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live on earth. Although we have sin, the Holy Spirit sees to it that it does not harm us because we are a part of this Christian community. Here there is full forgiveness of sins” (LC II 55). Christocentric worship, naturally, revolves around the forgiveness of sins. Luther’s explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed reminds us of another helpful question to consider when dealing with matters of adiaphora. It is a question that is unique to Lutheranism. “How does this point to Christ and what he has done for me?” When a change in worship practice poses difficulty in answering that question, one must also consider whether it truly belongs in worship.

Practice Matters

Historically Lutheran Practice

The *point* of worship is the object of worship. But that does not make everything else superfluous. On the contrary, practice matters. The *way* we worship is important. “Whatever we do in worship expresses our faith so others may see.”¹¹ The details of worship are to revolve around the saving message of the gospel, pointing to it instead of distracting from it. The discussion concerning the logistics of worship should rightly evaluate the extent to which each detail and practice points to Christ or away from Christ. Everything that points away from Christ does not belong in Christian worship.

In the history of the Lutheran church, it has always been orthodox to care about worship practices and value their importance as serving the focal point. “To be Lutheran means to retain the mutual tension between worship life and doctrine. It means I will evaluate what I do in worship in light of what the Bible teaches. It also means that I will evaluate my worship practices to be sure they reflect what I wish to teach.”¹² The Lord has given the greatest treasure to us in the gospel. While not prescribing a particular form of worship, God has given his Church freedom to worship him. An admirable staple of the Lutheran church historically is that they take this privilege seriously, constantly analyzing ceremony.

11. Timothy Maschke, *Gathered Guests: A Guide to Worship in the Lutheran Church*, (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2003), 13.

12. Maschke, *Gathered Guests*, 25.

Luther on Christian Freedom

On the other side of the pendulum is turning worship adiaphora into a catalyst for division. Practice matters. But to view any right practice that does not corrupt the Christocentricity of worship as a point of division would be taking it too far. Fracturing churches over adiaphora is a real danger. Luther explains that phenomenon. “Both you and your preachers should diligently seek to promote unity and to hinder this work of the devil, because God appoints the devil to do this in order to give us occasion to prove our unity and in order to reveal those that have stood the test. For in spite of all our efforts, enough factions and disunity will remain.”¹³ The devil is at work to create corruption and division in the Church and among churches using any means possible. The Lord, in his infinite wisdom, even allows this as a test of faith, refining his Church through fire, reminding his people of what is truly important.

Because it is a blessing from the Lord, the devil does everything in his power to distort Christian freedom and introduce danger and conflict where God gives safety and peace. Abusing this freedom in worship as well as every aspect of life is a disgusting error. “When Christian liberty is abused, it is like a herd of swine being invited to the table of a prince. They understand not such an honor, but only ravage what is set before them, even soiling the prince.”¹⁴ In his picturesque way, Luther exposes the offensive nature of sin in the name of Christian freedom. It dishonors the very one who gave us this freedom.

Orthodox Lutheranism has always taken practice seriously, recognizing the dangers of both extremes. The goal is to navigate the middle road between neglecting the importance of

13. *LW* 53:49.

14. *LW* 40:310.

practice and overemphasizing its role. The Lutheran approaches the topic of worship practice humbly, seeking to serve God as they serve each other.

Lutheran Worship Principles: Contemporary Applications

Confessional Lutheranism continues in the precedent set by its ecclesiastical forefathers, holding onto Christocentric worship. “The focal point of God’s plan of salvation is the incarnation of the eternal Son of God in Jesus of Nazareth, His cross, and His resurrection.”¹⁵ Confessional Lutheran theologians echo the historically Lutheran, biblical principles on worship.

The logistics of worship practice largely fall in the realm of freedom. “Freedom in worship must be balanced by wisdom and love. Freedom that is not normed by love damages the body of Christ. Freedom that is not normed by wisdom fails in the stewardship of the means of grace.”¹⁶ Freedom is not a permission to be frivolous. Rather, Christian freedom searches the Scriptures to apply what God *has* told us to what God *has not* told us. Especially in worship, Christians ought to be careful with freedom, explicitly because the devil works to use freedom to divide Christians. Everything in the life of a Christian aims to put Christ at the center.

Therefore, whatever happens in worship, Christ ought to be the center. “Worship that is Lutheran features a predominance of the gospel, the Christocentric message of justification of the sinner by grace through faith, and the reliance on the means of grace to plant faith and build

15. Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1968), 35.

16. Schroeder, “Worship & Outreach,” 12.

faith.”¹⁷ The gospel, since it is the power of God that gives us salvation,¹⁸ is the heart of everything where we expect the Holy Spirit to work.

WELS Worship Principles

In worship, WELS applies those Lutheran, biblical principles, identifying the focal point of worship. “When believers gather for worship, they praise God and serve their neighbor by proclaiming the good news about Jesus Christ. That is the purpose of Christian worship.”¹⁹ In keeping with God’s will, as revealed in Scripture, WELS endeavors to make everything in worship about Christ in praise and proclamation.²⁰ “If we agree that public worship is meant to summarize the fundamental truths of the Scriptures, we must consider how our worship rite does that and how we use the rite to meet that observance.”²¹

WELS has recognized the importance of balancing the unchangeable power of the Word and the blessed responsibility in handling the means of grace. “If our proclamation of the gospel is an act of praise, we must consider how to proclaim the gospel with our best gifts and efforts. Giving our best has absolutely nothing to do with the power of the Word; the Spirit works where and when he will. Giving our best has everything to do with our stewardship of God’s gifts,

17. Schroeder, “Worship & Outreach,” 13–14.

18. Ro 1:16.

19. Bauer et al., *Foundations*, 35.

20. Ro 12:2.

21. Bauer et al., *Foundations*, 34.

however.”²² The Lord deserves our best, not to gain his favor, but because we have it in Christ. He has given his people gifts as he sees fit.

A part of worship is using those varied gifts to praise him. Applying that principle varies from congregation to congregation, as gifts vary. But the same principle applies. As time, personnel, and cultures change, so too do the applications of the principle of excellence. For that reason, in the constant pursuit of excellence to the glory of God, an assembly has the blessed privilege of continually reevaluating what they do in worship, ensuring that the main thing stays the main thing. “The goal of reviewing the objective of Christian worship is to encourage *intentional* worship. When pastors, musicians, planners, and worshippers are all on the same page, striving for a common experience, the gospel will have free course and be proclaimed to the joy and edifying of Christ’s holy people.”²³

In the newest hymnal WELS has published, the collators acknowledge the variety that exists in service to the one focal point of worship.

Cultures and customs change, but the next generation is going to inherit the sin of this generation, and the solution they will need tomorrow is the same one we need today. Early in the hymnal committee’s work, it was resolved that *this hymnal will confess Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, who comes to us in the means of grace*. Whether the things we sing and say are time-tested and approved or fresh and new, the central focus of this book is Jesus Christ: the forgiveness he purchased with his blood, the peace he gives us in Word and sacrament, and the praise he inspires from our lips and in our lives.²⁴

A hymnal guides worship in liturgy and hymns. The WELS hymnal committee expressed the marriage between the universal problem and need and an ever-changing culture. Regardless of

22. Bauer et al., *Foundations*, 33.

23. Bauer et al., *Foundations*, 12.

24. *Christian Worship: Hymnal*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2021), iv.

the changes or challenges arise in the world, Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior will never change. Therefore, that one truth which is the only unchangeable, firm foundation ought to be the center of worship, and everything in worship ought to revolve around that center.

APPLYING WORSHIP PRINCIPLES IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

From the only authoritative source, the Scriptures, and from the applicative wisdom, advice, and practices of the Confessions and Lutheran church fathers, we can now examine the specific situation and unique context that the COVID-19 pandemic brought. It cannot be overstated that every congregation's situation is unique. But, as this paper has already demonstrated, the same basic worship principles apply. "There must be a doctrine of the form of worship. The task of such a doctrine is not to fix the order of worship in detail; it is, rather, to establish the critical boundaries within which every concrete form must be contained, lest the purity of the gospel be impaired."²⁵

It is essential to remember that while the COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented in its scope, the topic of worship practices has been a longstanding concern. "Lutheran disputes over worship practices are not a new development. From the earliest days of the Evangelical Lutheran Church's presence in America, Lutherans have been debating various aspects and impacts of worship."²⁶ Keeping that in mind reveals the deeper layer of debate concerning the topic of post-COVID worship. After the safer-at-home guidelines, churches had to figure out what was going

25. Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, 217.

26. Johnston, "Article X of the Formula of Concord and Lutheranism Today," 80.

to be different in worship because of COVID-19 and the remaining guidelines and stigmas around it.

Even in the wake of an unprecedented pandemic, the Christocentricity must never change. “Everything that is inconsistent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit effective in it must be excluded from the form of worship.”²⁷ Since everything in worship ought to point to Christ, anything that points anywhere else ought to be thrown out. Of course, there is nothing wrong with looking out for people’s health. That is a good thing! But, if any COVID-19 precaution distracts from worship, shifting focus away from Christ, unintentionally causing people to think about precautions instead of worship, it is no different than any other distraction in worship. It does not belong.

To be sure, every situation is different. What is distracting in one congregation can also be inconspicuous in another, and in another, it can even enhance attention to Christ, the focus. What I am proposing here is simply that we ask ourselves questions, continuing to reevaluate the Christocentricity of everything we do in worship. All of the questions prompted by Scripture could be condensed into the one question: “Does this point to Christ, or distract from Christ?” This dichotomy is a good, biblical, Lutheran starting point when considering post-COVID worship.

ADVICE AND OBSERVATIONS OF OTHERS

Before analyzing WELS practice specifically, it is also necessary to examine, albeit critically, the advice and observations from church bodies outside of Confessional Lutheranism and even

27. Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, 223.

outside of the religious context. Examining secular scholarship and other religious organizations put into perspective what really matters to people and how their religion, heritage, and faith shape a person's worldview, which was challenged in the context of the pandemic.

Spiritual Health

Perhaps one of the hidden blessings of the COVID-19 pandemic has been a general increased awareness of the importance of spirituality. Unfortunately, many had to come to this awareness through hardship. "The COVID-19 pandemic and its management have negatively affected the emotional wellness of people around the world."²⁸ Businesses closing down, awareness of one's own mortality, divided and vocal opinions, and all the rest reasonably had adverse emotional effects. The medical community, partly enticed or accelerated by the pandemic, is coming to realize the spiritual aspect of man and the importance of growing and sustaining spiritual health. "Throughout decades, health has been analyzed based on specific dimensions (physical, mental and social health). After a while, researchers introduced spiritual health as another aspect of health concept and an important dimension of individual and group life."²⁹ The pandemic gave the Christian Church a unique opportunity. As people in general become more aware of their spiritual need, they start looking for satisfaction of that need. Christians had and have the blessed opportunity to find those searching and tell them about their Savior who already has already paid for their greatest need.

28. Joseph Osafo-Adu and Dacosta Wereko, "Psychological Reflections on the COVID-19 Pandemic," in *Responding to the Uninvited Visitor: COVID-19 and the Lessons It Has Taught Us*, ed. Opoku Onyinah and Alfred Koduah (Bamenda: Langaa Research & Pub. Common Initiative Group, 2024), 123.

29. Aan Komariah Badrudin et al., "Effect of Spiritual Intelligence on Spiritual Health during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *HTS Theological Studies* 77, no. 1 (2021), 3.

A Unique Opportunity

“Another revealing fact in the past was that Christian stood very strong in pandemic situations to the extent that the church continued to grow.”³⁰ Examining the history of the Christian Church reveals two essential truths: 1. The Church always seems to be on the brink of destruction. 2. The Lord always works through hardship to advance the gospel.³¹ Whether it be direct persecution against the Church or general unrest, disaster, or uncertainty that comes as a result of a fallen, sinful world, or any other evil, the Lord has proven himself faithful, that he is in control and that the Church endures. “An appropriate Christian response to a pandemic has the propensity to win more followers for Christ through the demonstration of Christian values and principles of caring for the needy and destitute.”³² When Christians live as Christians, in times of uncertainty, the world notices. Who will answer the call to help those in need or distress? The Church, historically, is a consistent answer.³³

This reality places a new framework on the pandemic, which is rightly, unanimously perceived as a negative thing. The Lord still works his miracle of faith through the means of grace, the preaching of the gospel. Christians had a unique opportunity during the pandemic to reach those suffering physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Christians still have a unique opportunity to evangelize those scarred by the pandemic, souls with a newfound yearning for the truth.

30. Vincent Anane Denteh, “Historical Christian Perspectives on Plagues and Pandemics,” in *Responding to the Uninvited Visitor: COVID-19 and the Lessons It Has Taught Us*, ed. Opoku Onyinah and Alfred Koduah (Bamenda: Langa Research & Pub. Common Initiative Group, 2024), 28.

31. cf. Judg 6, Ps 46, Isa 55:10–11, Hab 1–3, John 9:3, 19:30, Ro 8:28, 2 Cor 1:9, 12:9–10, Phil 1:12–14, etc.

32. Anane Denteh, “Historical Christian Perspectives,” 31.

33. even from its inception, cf. Acts 4:32–37, 6:1–7.

Worship Potential

“People may need to reconsider whether there is life after death or not. The church has the answer to this and needs to package it in the modern way to present it.”³⁴ Onyinah, a Ghanaian Pentecostal televangelist, expressed the unique opportunity for the Church in a modern context. During the COVID-19 shutdown, most churches had to do things they had never done before to continue to minister to their people. Churches all over the world had to get creative with the way they gathered for worship, celebrated the Sacrament, conducted charitable work in the community, and everything else. Any churches doing ministry on autopilot suddenly had to be intentional about their ministry even to remain viable.

The more severe lockdowns were never supposed to last forever. The question was never if the lockdowns would end, but when. “By defining the lockdown as a liminal phase, there is an acknowledgment that the previous status quo is no more and that a new life cycle will begin after the lockdown is lifted.”³⁵ Things would eventually go back to normal, or, more precisely, a new normal. Especially in this context, churches who had gotten innovative and advanced suddenly had the perceived option to revert to what they knew before the pandemic, as if it never happened, or they could build on these newfound ways to do ministry and the connections made through them. “Once the current pandemic has ended and restrictions on in-person gatherings are

34. Opoku Onyinah, “The Bible, Pandemics, and COVID-19,” in *Responding to the Uninvited Visitor: COVID-19 and the Lessons It Has Taught Us*, ed. Opoku Onyinah and Alfred Koduah (Bamenda: Langaa Research & Pub. Common Initiative Group, 2024), 50.

35. Hilton Scott, “Worship in a Post-Lockdown Context.” *HTS Theological Studies* 76, no. 1 (2020), 2.

rescinded, the desire to return to *normal* may cause some churches to regress to their institutional and architectural modes.”³⁶

“Liminality infers a time of reflection and/or revelation.”³⁷ In addition to the evangelism aspect, worship in general was, possibly for the first time in some time, reconsidered. Churches that paused worship during the pandemic especially had this opportunity to reflect. They had to get back into the practice of regular worship. Now, they could look at everything they do in worship through a new lens. Why do we do it that way? Could it be done a different way? COVID-19 gave congregations the opportunity to ask themselves those questions.

Adapting to Modern Times

“The drastic changes in worship due to the COVID-19 pandemic have no comparison in church history. Although the world has previously been plagued by pandemics, such as the Great Influenza epidemic of 1918, and congregations responded accordingly, the possibilities of alternate forms of gathering have and continue to make this pandemic unique.”³⁸ Like all other hardships in the history of the world, Christians had the chance to preach certainty amidst uncertainty. Unlike all other hardships in the history of the world, the internet exists now. The internet has been constantly improving by leaps and bounds since its genesis. In a way, people are more connected than ever. Practically anyone can relay anything to anyone. The pandemic,

36. Kyle K. Schiefelbein-Guerrero, “Worship in the Face of Corona: Ritual, Place, People, and Polymodality,” in *Church after the Corona Pandemic: Consequences for Worship and Theology*, ed. Kyle K. Schiefelbein-Guerrero (Cham: Springer, 2023), 15.

37. Scott, “Worship in a Post-Lockdown Context,” 3.

38. Schiefelbein-Guerrero, “Worship in the Face of Corona,” 3.

perhaps, had another underlying blessing: Christians were forced to explore the potential that modern technology provides for preaching the gospel.

However, a critical approach to traditional, historical, Christian worship can have negative consequences. “COVID-19 must compel Christian leaders to examine how we do church in our generation.”³⁹ It is true that churches must take time and culture into account when determining the *how* of worship. A rich heritage founded on biblical principles would greatly benefit a church in their reexamination. But what if a church does not have that strong foundation of Scripture as the sole authority and hundreds of years of spiritual forefathers building on that foundation? Where does that leave a church? What can they fall back on? Where will they end up? To be sure, a Christian congregation could very well build their house on the rock without a heritage like the Lutherans, but there is an added measure of difficulty.

“The Lord would like His people [to] see how we can connect the biblical way of doing church with modern technology without losing the worth.”⁴⁰ Now, Onyinah enters some uncertain ground. Can we say for sure that the Lord apparently sent COVID-19 to force his Church to adapt worship to modern technology? That certainly would be saying more than Scripture. When the foundation is away from Scripture, uncertainty follows.

“Culture of innovation, flexibility in managing church during changing times. This is manifested in the churches’ readiness to adopt alternative approaches of doing church.”⁴¹ Once again, it is an interesting and innovative thought. But notice the implications of such a statement.

39. Onyinah, “The Bible, Pandemics, and COVID-19,” 49.

40. Onyinah, “The Bible, Pandemics, and COVID-19,” 49.

41. Nicholas Darko, “The COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Implications for Church Administration,” in *Responding to the Uninvited Visitor: COVID-19 and the Lessons It Has Taught Us*, ed. Opoku Onyinah and Alfred Koduah (Bamenda: Langaa Research & Pub. Common Initiative Group, 2024), 299.

What an “alternative approach” to worship looks like for one person may look entirely different for another. Does it leave the door open for the conclusion that an “alternative approach” is one that shifts away from Christocentricity? To be fair, this is not intended to be a fustigation of African Pentecostals. This is simply a warning against possible dangerous consequences when worship, practices, and rites, no longer point primarily to Christ.

“Foremost, as we transition into a post-COVID-19 reality, it is imperative that the church continues to embrace digital channels, which proved invaluable for ministry throughout the pandemic, while also maintaining in-person gatherings.”⁴² Jonathan Trapp, an ELCA pastor at the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Atlanta, GA, expresses this opportunity with a levelheaded perspective. His logic is undeniable. The internet, social media, and streaming technology were invaluable for most churches to continue doing ministry through the lockdown stage of the pandemic. Going forward to a new normal, churches have an increased awareness of the benefits of having a digital presence.

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Before examining the problems and solutions that COVID-19 brought to WELS, we first turn to their distant cousins, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, to examine and evaluate some of their more distinct situations and reactions.

42. Justice Anquandah Arthur, “Visions of Church Life in the Post-COVID-19 Era: Analysis and Proposals,” in *Responding to the Uninvited Visitor: COVID-19 and the Lessons It Has Taught Us*, ed. Opoku Onyinah and Alfred Koduah (Bamenda: Langaa Research & Pub. Common Initiative Group, 2024), 343.

Virtual worship

“For congregations that continue to stream and offer the opportunity for asynchronous worship, it suggests that many people may want to engage in worship but want to do it on their terms, when and where it is convenient for them to participate in the worship service.”⁴³ Trapp, doing an in-depth survey of three ELCA congregations, noted this principle at work. Pastors absolutely have to meet people where they are at, spiritually. They cannot expect saint-sinners to be only saints. However, a pastor’s response to this problem is crucial. There are people who refuse to come to church and opt to worship through streaming. How does a spiritual shepherd combat that problem? An unwise approach would be to let it persist. The challenge for all pastors is how to lead people to Jesus as he gathers them on his terms, not their own. This topic will be further developed in the section examining the post-COVID worship practices of WELS.

“With the rise in online giving, what is the practical future of this elaborate rite? In effect, the offering has become a form of virtual participation in worship....Given this reality, the elaborate offering rites of the twentieth century have, to a certain degree, now become nearly an absurdity.”⁴⁴ This topic also will be revisited later. Is the offering part of worship? Absolutely! Whether given online or placed in a basket, it undoubtedly follows the biblical principles of offerings.⁴⁵ Does modern technology render the offering rite “elaborate,” “absurd,” or superfluous? Of course not! Herein lies a danger of neglecting the rich history and principles of Lutheran, even Christian worship. Presenting your gifts before the Lord is a way that the Lord

43. Jonathan Trapp, “Growth Opportunities: Worship, Membership, and Attendance in Three Lutheran Congregations before, during, and after the Covid-19 Pandemic.” *Liturgy* 40, no. 1 (2025), 22.

44. Taylor W. Burton Edwards, “Lasting Changes in Worship from the Pandemic: A Preliminary Analysis of the 2024 Hartford Institute for Religion Research Study ‘Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations.’” *Liturgy* 40, no. 1 (2025), 7.

45. Prov 3:9, 1 Cor 16:12, 2 Cor 9:7, among others.

gives us the blessed privilege of worshipping him. To view the offering rite as unnecessary would be to downplay the critical, Christocentric nature of the offering. It can shift the mindset of giving an offering from intentional to passive.

Virtual Communion

Virtual or online communion is a pandemic lockdown phenomenon. As congregations were not able to gather all together, they wrestled with the possibility of celebrating the Lord's Supper as they had already been doing Sunday worship. "Mainline U.S. denominations have debated the issue of offering Holy Communion via online worship."⁴⁶ This question was by no means unique to the ELCA. All Christian denominations sought to find the balance between Jesus' "Do this," and the government's "safer-at-home." The question, especially for those in favor of virtual communion, seemed to be, "*Can* we do this?" The question for all Christian churches on this topic, like so many, was, "*Should* we do this?"

The ELCA leadership seemed to answer those two questions, respectively, "Probably" and "Probably not." "While the ELCA did not authorize the practice of 'virtual communion,' they also did not explicitly prohibit it."⁴⁷ A seemingly intentionally ambiguous statement from their leadership results in varying practices across the synod. Some did. Some did not. Even in Trapp's survey of only three congregations, he found this variety. "Congregation C did report multiple instances of concern around communion practices with some congregants saying that communion should have been reinstated earlier while others believed there should have been a

46. Deanna A. Thompson, "Toward a More Accessible Body of Christ," in *Church after the Corona Pandemic: Consequences for Worship and Theology*, ed. Kyle K. Schiefelbein-Guerrero (Cham: Springer, 2023), 114.

47. Trapp, "Growth Opportunities," 19–20.

longer wait before reinstituting communion in any form. There was less pushback about the creation of an opportunity for online communion.”⁴⁸ Congregation C took the recommendation under advisement and decided to practice virtual communion anyway to fit their context as they saw it.

“Beyond following the guidance of medical professionals, there is no one ‘right answer’ to this problem, and we must be cautious not to project our anxieties upon others who may explore other solutions.”⁴⁹ Wengert, an ELCA pastor and professor emeritus at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, is quick to defend those who practice virtual communion against the criticism of others. Caution to criticize is a good principle. Yet notice the fallacies in his argument. First, there is the assumption that the guidance of medical professionals serves as the baseline, the foundation of right practice. While the guidance of professionals, mandates, and regulations did not specifically target practicing the Lord’s Supper, it jeopardizes Christocentricity to base one’s practice on the advice of experts rather than basing it on Christ and his Word.

Second, while there is no Bible verse that addresses practicing communion in a pandemic setting in the age of technology, lack of evidence is not evidence of lack. Christian freedom does not mean freedom to do whatever you want in the name of Christian freedom. It is essential to critically examine free practices as the Church is tasked with responsible stewardship in handling the means of grace. To teach and practice that the Lord’s Supper can be rightly and wisely celebrated by yourself after clicking a video of a minister saying the words of institution

48. Trapp, “Growth Opportunities,” 20.

49. Timothy J. Wengert, “Holy Communion Under Quarantine,” in *Church after the Corona Pandemic: Consequences for Worship and Theology*, ed. Kyle K. Schiefelbein-Guerrero (Cham: Springer, 2023), 125.

certainly creates doubt where Jesus never intended there to be doubt. It is true, “wherever two or three gather in [Jesus’] name, there [is he] with them” (Matt 18:20). Is that true when the second person is on a screen, possibly even thousands of miles away, possibly prerecorded and removed from the present time? Does attempting to pursue the answer to that question and establish practice on it test God’s grace and promises? I would argue that the answer is yes. Daring to stretch God’s promises of certainty and comfort regarding the locality of the Lord’s Supper undermines the Christocentricity of the communion rite.

To logically seal his argument, Wengert poses a question: “Why would anyone knowingly defy the laws of creation (including the laws for the spread of viruses) for the sake of some other worship practice?”⁵⁰ He insinuated that the Lord’s Supper is a dangerous practice. Did the Lord send COVID-19 to force the Church to neglect the Lord’s Supper? That would be inconsistent with his Word. When Jesus said, “Do this,” he did not attach any qualifiers or exceptions. Why would we expect our Lord to work against what he has already told us in his Word? Now, it would probably be too far to say with certainty that the Lord will immediately intervene to prevent disease transmission in the Lord’s Supper against the laws of nature that he created and sustains. But nothing in his Word reveals to us that his people ought to be afraid of the Sacrament.⁵¹ Therefore, to emphasize that practicing the Lord’s Supper during a public health crisis is irresponsible clearly takes the Christocentricity out of even the Lord’s Supper!

50. Wengert, “Holy Communion,” 126.

51. cf. Matthew 26:28, Luke 22:19, Acts 2:42, 1 Cor 10:17, 11:26, 12:13.

Similarities and General Observations

“The church will not return to its pre-pandemic life, and thus the changes wrought by the pandemic are now part of the church’s identity and life.”⁵² During the pandemic, churches made changes as they deemed necessary. In the wake of the pandemic, many churches have adopted a hybrid of pre-pandemic traditions and pandemic innovations. Whatever changes remain to this day are likely part of the new normal for those churches. As time goes on, then, it is likely to become more challenging to change the changes, as they now are becoming part of their tradition. That is not to say that anything that fits in that category is bad and needs to be abandoned. Rather, it means that pastors and congregations need to be aware of that probability. As they constantly reevaluate everything they do in worship, if changes need to be made, it is generally easier to make them now than later.

In general, there are similarities in the post-pandemic innovations between churches. Burton Edwards cited a survey of thousands of American churches and boiled down the similarities. “Three lasting changes in worship attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic: 1) the ongoing prevalence of hybrid worship, 2) an uptick in median worship attendance, and 3) a fundamental shift in how congregations present their gifts to their local churches.”⁵³ In general, the historical observation remains true. The Lord saw his church through the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite all of the risks the Christian Church faced, the two consistent outcomes have been increased church attendance and adaptations to serve God’s people more efficiently and extensively in the twenty-first century.

52. Kyle K. Schiefelbein-Guerrero, preface to *Church after the Corona Pandemic: Consequences for Worship and Theology*, ed. Kyle K. Schiefelbein-Guerrero (Cham: Springer, 2023), vi.

53. Burton Edwards, “Lasting Changes in Worship from the Pandemic,” 8.

WELS WORSHIP PRACTICE AFTER COVID-19

Now that we have covered biblical, Lutheran, and Christocentric worship principles and examined the COVID responses of modern scholarship and other church bodies, we are finally in a position to examine the WELS post-COVID worship practices. First, WELS leadership published a couple of resources containing instructions and encouragement for their churches as they returned from lockdown. Then, through a survey and interviews, I will present a random sample of how WELS churches responded to COVID-19 and have adapted their worship in the post-COVID world.

Encouragement from WELS Leadership

Rev. Jonathan Hein, coordinator of WELS Congregational Services and director of the WELS Commission on Congregational Counseling, led the project to provide WELS congregations and pastors with resources and guidance facing the potential challenges associated with restarting worship. “Most of your members have a personal list of what they think should be ‘the new normal’ when worship resumes, at least for a while. In addition to social distancing measures, WELS members have suggested masks required by all, including the pastor; no passing of the collection plate or pew register; no handshakes or hugs to greet fellow members; no common cup.”⁵⁴ In his position, Hein had the most extensive resources available for gathering data from WELS congregations and members. He reminded pastors that coming back to church, the

54. Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, *For Such a Time as This—COVID-19 Resources* (WELS Congregational Services, July 8, 2020), 4. <https://welscongregationalservices.net/covid-19-for-such-a-time-as-this/>.

opinions over what should be done would be all over the board. Then, he listed the common changes that he saw people thought ought to be made. His findings were correct, and those changes, especially as they remain today, will be developed in the survey section.

In addition to preparing pastors for the changes they would likely face, Hein also reminded and encouraged them to remember their role as pastors.

As you plan to reopen your church, remember, *nemo resideo*. Realize that your people are all over the board. Leave none of them behind. If it means you need to continue to offer online worship and private communion, please do so. If it means offering different levels of care in different services, make that effort. If it happens that the service you prefer (e.g., one where masks aren't required) is not offered at your preferred time, don't complain.⁵⁵

In unprecedented times, Hein reminded pastors that extraordinary measures may be required. Additional work would likely be necessary. Yet, for the pastor, this work need not be mundane or laborious. For a faithful pastor, this work continues his work of bringing Jesus to people, a blessed task. In his reminder, Hein shows a pastoral heart, not wanting to leave anyone behind, especially in a time when isolation had been on the rise. He mentioned that how that looks from ministry to ministry will vary, but the same biblical principle of love was at work.⁵⁶

In discussing virtual communion previously, I pointed out the danger of implying that the Lord's Supper is dangerous. It undermines Christocentricity. See how Hein uses that same logical principle of preserving public health without endangering the Christocentricity of worship.

The bottom line is that COVID-19 is quite dangerous, especially for the elderly and people with underlying health conditions, whether those conditions are diagnosed or not. That fact does not give the Christian any reason to be cavalier about the transmission of COVID-19. 'Eh, he got coronavirus and died, but he was really old anyway.' The Fifth

55. Jonathan Hein, *For Such a Time as This—Update: Resuming Worship in the Pandemic* (WELS Congregational Services, 2020), 2. <https://welscongregationalservices.net/covid-19-for-such-a-time-as-this/>.

56. 1 Cor 16:14.

Commandment compels the believer to help every neighbor, regardless of age or underlying health issues, with every physical need. If we can prevent the spread of COVID-19, particularly to those for whom it is most dangerous, Christian love compels us to attempt to do so.⁵⁷

In love, Christians have the freedom to serve others and care for their needs. He specifically seems to be referring to things already discussed like masks, the cessation of passing the offering plate physically and handshakes, and removing the common cup, opting instead for individual cups in celebrating the Lord's Supper. He demonstrates the delicate balance of practicing Christian freedom. In worship, circumstances may necessitate adjustments due to government mandates, guidelines, and shifting public health perceptions. But none of the changes are to distract from Christocentricity.

Leaders can and should think through the ramifications of what we now know to be fact about COVID-19: a) it is extremely dangerous for some individuals and can be fatal, and b) a major source of its spread is larger gatherings in an enclosed area with people engaging in high-exhalation activities. How do these facts intersect with Christian love as we plan to return to worship in this next phase of the pandemic? That will vary from congregation to congregation, based on membership base, options for distancing, and community trends.⁵⁸

In hindsight, WELS leadership, led by Hein, proved to be wise and practical. While not ambiguous, the advice was still general. He emphasized that specific practices and changes must be deliberated at a congregational level. As a good leader, Hein laid out the general facts of the real danger of COVID-19 and the known transmission of the disease. Then, he emphasized that Christian love was to be at the heart of these decisions. The conclusion was up to God's people as to how they could best show Christian love in their context. *Christian* love can only rightly flow from keeping Christ as the source, at the center, and as the focal point of such love. "As

57. Hein, *Resuming Worship in the Pandemic*, 5.

58. Hein, *Resuming Worship in the Pandemic*, 9.

church leaders consider how to best serve God's people, they will use their human reason to weigh known facts and enact reasonable precautions."⁵⁹ Reason as the servant of God's Word and not master over it uses Scripture to guide its decisions.

The Survey

To gather information to assess, I sent a Google Form survey to seventy-eight WELS pastors who, at the time of the survey, were currently serving the same congregation they were during the pandemic, prior to March 2020. The reason for those qualifiers is twofold. First, pastors who know from experience how worship was conducted at their church were in a position to provide the most accurate feedback in the before-and-after comparison. Second, when a new pastor comes, things tend to change. Therefore, identifying the impetus for a change in practice is likely to have much to do with the fact that there is a different worship leader. The selection of pastors was random and unrelated to the location of their ministries. For that reason, though relatively small, the respondents give an accurate representation of WELS congregations. The surveyed congregations range from typically blue political areas to typically red, from urban to rural Wisconsin, from Florida to New England, from Arizona even to Canada. The survey respondents are anonymous so as to objectively view how each congregation has changed without exposing individual pastors or congregations.

Forty-three pastors responded to the survey. The survey asked participants to select from a list the worship practices that changed after the COVID pandemic and are still practiced today. Then, they were invited to comment on their responses. The survey allowed these pastors to

59. Hein, *Resuming Worship in the Pandemic*, 9.

examine what “COVID changes” remain in their parish and consider to what extent they have become the new normal. The response charts are in the Appendix. For the purposes of this paper, I will consider the most notable survey results.

Technology

64.3 percent of respondents started livestreaming or recording their sermons or services during the pandemic and continue to do so today. The majority of WELS congregations surveyed were compelled to establish an online presence due to the pandemic. The observation considered earlier was evident also in WELS, that COVID-19 prompted churches to develop and update the technology used in worship and evangelism.

0 percent of respondents created a church website, but 16.7 percent renovated their current website. For this sample, every church was tech-savvy enough to have a website. However, for some, the pandemic provided the opportunity to update their website, giving it a more modern look.

33.3 percent of respondents increased their budget for technology for streaming equipment. A third of these congregations recognized the opportunity that new and improved technology provided their ministries. Reflecting that importance, they opted to use more of their time and resources to produce quality online content.

38.1 percent of respondents created an online giving platform, which does not count churches that already had an online giving option prior to the pandemic. An analysis of the concept of online giving in general will be considered again in the Interviews section. Again, along with many churches around the world, many WELS churches decided they had to be

innovative to facilitate the various ways people support the ministry of the church through their offerings.

The Service Proper

33.3 percent of respondents selected “none of these.” By God’s grace, COVID changes have by and large ceased in a third of these congregations. Of the 9.5 percent of respondents who responded “other,” it pertained to the use of screens or adding outdoor worship, nothing that changed the rites of worship itself. Nearly half, then, have no trace of the pandemic left.

54.8 percent of respondents changed the offering rite and stopped passing the plate. By a large margin, this was the most common COVID change that remains in WELS churches. Since this will not be taken up later, I will comment on it now. Burton Edwards pointed out that many people prefer to give online and incorrectly assumed that the offering rite is unnecessary. On the face of it, whether or not to pass a plate to collect the offering is a matter of Christian freedom, but it is not superfluous. Setting aside time to gather an offering and present it before the Lord, accompanied by prayers to use the money to further the gospel, is biblical and has thousands of years of Christian tradition behind it. By no means am I condemning any church who has taken the offering out. I am simply pointing out the added danger in doing so. In an email interview, Hein expressed a similar sentiment. “I get that there isn't a ton of reason to pass the plate. However, that was how I learned what stewardship was as a child. I saw my dad put his envelope in every week. I was taught to take a portion of my allowance and offer it back to God. So, I put

my quarter in each week. How is that pedagogy replaced?’’⁶⁰ His concern mirrors mine, that there is nothing wrong with omitting the offering rite as long as the biblical teaching of stewardship, this important blessing that Christ gives his Church, is taught elsewhere. The offering rite during the service is a clear and obvious example of that pedagogy, giving the congregation an opportunity to see the body of Christ present their offerings together while also giving parents an opportunity to teach stewardship to their children. There are also other means and modes of instruction on stewardship. As long as pastors and parents are doing something to teach stewardship, then this change becomes a non-issue as Christ remains at the center of such teaching and practice. Additionally, whether or not it is addressed in the service itself does not alter the fact that online giving is still an act of worship.

Lord’s Supper

37.5 percent of respondents selected “none of these.” Another blessing is that for more than a third of these congregations, their communion practices have returned to pre-COVID practice. As referenced earlier, the challenges of practicing the Lord’s Supper during the pandemic raised many questions regarding the *how* of the Sacrament. This noticeable portion of congregations continues none of their pandemic Lord’s Supper practices.

Although the majority of respondents changed some things within the rite of Holy Communion, those modifications did nothing to undermine the Christocentricity of the Sacrament. 27.5 percent of respondents added an application of hand sanitizer before handling

60. Jonathan Hein (Director of WELS Congregational Services Commission on Congregational Counseling), interviewed by the author, 24 September 2025.

the elements. Although this change was implemented because of the COVID-19 pandemic, is COVID-19 still the reason for this washing of hands? It could be. Does it distract from the Christocentricity of the Sacrament? It could. It depends. There is also a practical aspect to this change, which came out in interviews. “Our councilmen have rubber gloves on when they distribute the bread. And maybe that’s why, because they’re touching the bread.”⁶¹ “It’s probably something that should have been done years ago. Clean your hands before touching food.”⁶² Since such a change does not necessarily undermine Christocentricity, it cannot plenary be criticized.

17.5 percent of respondents opted to remove the common cup, offering only individual cups. This change in practice is related to the previous one, an increased awareness of germs and cleanliness when celebrating the Lord’s Supper.

As far as the validity of the sacrament even without a common cup, there is no question. Although the tradition of offering individual cups along with the common cup is only a little more than a century old, it retains the Christocentricity of the Sacrament and creates no uncertainty. The second earthly element in the Supper is not a cup, but the contents of the cup. “Then he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you’” (Matt 26:27). You cannot drink a cup. You can drink the contents of the cup. The cup, then, is a metonymy for the fruit of the vine in the cup. Therefore, removing the common cup does not invalidate the Sacrament since the second, necessary earthly element is distributed in smaller, individual cups. “I think COVID made us acutely aware of the transmission of

61. Joel Jenswold (Pastor at Lord of Love Lutheran Church in Deforest, WI), interviewed by the author, 26 September 2025.

62. Duane Rodewald (Pastor at Abiding Peace in Simpsonville, SC), interviewed by the author, 30 September 2025.

germs. So, people would rather just use an individual cup. I don't know if we can turn that around. Nor do I know if it would even be worth trying. I'm not sure the symbolism of the one cup is *that* important. What is important, obviously, is what one receives from that cup!”⁶³

The heightened awareness of public health demonstrated in the Lord's Supper because of the pandemic presents, challenges and potential distractions that churches need to be aware of. Hein noted the symbolism of the one cup is lost. Another is that we certainly do not want people to be afraid to take the Sacrament out of fear for their health, as if the Lord's Supper is dangerous if even to the slightest degree. Each congregation needs to continually evaluate and reevaluate this practice, aware of these cautions.

12.5 percent of respondents switched to continuous distribution. A subunit of those who switched to continuous distribution also continuously commune family units. While related, the two may need to be considered separately. Whether a congregation gathers a number together to kneel in reception or continuously is in the realm of Christian freedom, and the principles of freedom apply. Although in these churches continuous distribution was implemented for health reasons, in response to the pandemic, there are other godly reasons to continue that practice. Continuous distribution may, just for example, be beneficial to carefully manage the duration of the Sacrament rite.⁶⁴ In that case, the logic and reasoning to retain such a rite would be time-sensitivity. Communion in family groups, on the other hand, makes sense in the context of an ongoing pandemic. Now that the pandemic is over, is there a reason to commune in family groups? Does it deemphasize the family of believers in favor of the family of blood? Does it

63. Hein, interview.

64. Ask the young mother juggling two small children if she would rather have the same blessed rite of Lord's Supper take twenty minutes or five minutes!

draw unnecessary attention to the woman communing by herself because her husband will not come to church with her? I do not mean to say that any church who practices communion in family groups should change, but should ask themselves, “Why do we do that?”

0 percent of respondents practice virtual communion. To say for certain that since no pastors in this survey practice virtual communion means that zero WELS churches practice virtual communion may be saying too much. Certainly, though, this discussion and its insipient confusion of God’s promises are not typically occurring among WELS congregations. That is a blessing and reflects respect for Jesus’ words and striving for faithfulness to them.

Interviews

I interviewed eight of the pastors who responded to the survey to gain a deeper insight into their answers, experiences, and real perspectives on the post-COVID worship issue. The variety of geography and local politics offers an interesting potential for diverse experiences. The following are the similar themes that emerged from the interviews.

Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing: Gathering Around the Means of Grace

In the midst of a political climate that could be the most divisive in American history, it seemed almost impossible to escape it. “Coming back, the hardest thing was there was no middle ground

[politically].”⁶⁵ The WELS pastors in this interview expressed their congregations’ intentional actions to remove politics from their worship. Pastors from politically left and right areas expressed the same attitude. “Going back to Jesus and his disciples, he had the far left and the far right among his disciples. “There were some pretty strong opinions, ‘You need to do this.’ We said, ‘No, let’s keep the focus on Jesus, let’s keep the focus on Christ.’”⁶⁶ “We value gathering together in person around the means of grace.”⁶⁷ “We were very careful to make worship the focus of worship.”⁶⁸ “We value gathering together in person around the means of grace.”⁶⁹ Keeping the main thing the main thing, keeping Christ at the center of everything in worship is the only way to divorce worship from politics. Worship is not about what we want. It is about what Christ gives us. Christ gives us the blessed privilege of worshipping him, of gathering around the means of grace, the gospel in Word and Sacrament.

Bickelhaupt points out that Jesus already established the precedent that he reigns over political division. “He had the tax collector, and he had the zealot. This isn’t about politics. We made it about the means of grace.”⁷⁰ Christocentric worship leads to an ever-increasing appreciation for the means of grace. Jenswold saw that work out in his congregation. “Our leadership said we have a renewed appreciation for the Lord’s Supper. We were a congregation

65. Jonathan Bilitz (Pastor at Wisconsin Lutheran Chapel in Madison, WI), interviewed by the author, 26 September 2025.

66. Joel Sauer (Pastor at St. Peter’s Lutheran Church in Sturgeon Bay, WI), interviewed by the author, 30 September 2025.

67. Brett Naumann (Pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church in Kiel, WI), interviewed by the author, 7 October 2025.

68. Bilitz, interview.

69. Naumann, interview.

70. Jay Bickelhaupt (Pastor at Apostles Lutheran Church in Billings, MT and Faith Lutheran Church in Melstone, MT), interviewed by the author, 9 October 2025.

that did communion two times a month. Our elders sent in a proposal that we do communion every single service, and our congregation voted to do that.”⁷¹ Is there a better example of the hidden blessings amidst a devastating pandemic? A temporary challenge in the ability to celebrate the Lord’s Supper created a renewed zeal and appreciation for it. Bilitz marveled at the Holy Spirit’s work through the means of grace even and especially in a time characterized by uncertainty. “I get a front row seat to the work of the Holy Spirit.”⁷²

The case study of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the many blessings and the necessity of Christocentric worship. When the focus of worship is on Christ, the times and challenges of the world may change, but he will never change. Christocentric worship provides constant stability in an unstable world. This is, without a doubt, the most encouraging finding from my research. It is such a blessing to see Christ guide and bless his people as they look to him for help. Thanks be to God!

A Blessing of Christocentricity: A Christian Worldview

Another blessing of Christocentric worship is that Christ transforms thinking, creating a new, Christian worldview.⁷³ “People with a naturalistic worldview have a tendency to value safety and security. If I lose my life, if I lose my health, I’ve lost everything. Whereas someone with a Christian worldview has the approach that says I understand that heaven is ultimately my

71. Jenswold, interview.

72. Bilitz, interview.

73. Ro 12:2.

home.”⁷⁴ When addressing the post-COVID worship issue, Christ reminds Christians of their end, their home. Heaven awaits his children on the other side of death. As anti-natural and anti-biological as such thinking may seem, Christ transforms our worldview so that we know that even if we face death, death is the doorway to glory. Of course, it does not mean that Christians live lazy, ascetical lives in the desert waiting for death. Christians live in the world but are not of the world.⁷⁵ Through the work of the Holy Spirit, the Christian seeks to serve God and his neighbor in whatever way he can, not fearing for his own life, but living in the values of his heavenly goal.⁷⁶ “We tried to go back to the way Luther looked at the plagues. You don’t fear it. You trust in God. You do the work of the kingdom.”⁷⁷

This Christian worldview was reflected in the immediate wake of the COVID-19 lockdowns. Churches were no longer discouraged from gathering for in-person worship. “The people wanted to get back.”⁷⁸ “That was our goal. Let’s get back to as normal as we can be.”⁷⁹ “We just tried to get back to normal as soon as possible.”⁸⁰ “For the most part, people were super fired up to get back.”⁸¹ Christians value gathering as the body of Christ to worship Christ. Although there were various worship opportunities throughout the pandemic, God’s people, in

74. Naumann, interview.

75. John 17:15–17.

76. Matt 6:20 and Ro 14:8.

77. Gary Kluball (Pastor at King of Kings Lutheran Church in Clifton Park, NY), interviewed by the author, 3 October 2025.

78. Sauer, interview.

79. Kluball, interview.

80. Naumann, interview.

81. Rodewald, interview.

general, yearned to get back to the house of the Lord. “There is a cherishing of the family of believers.”⁸²

To see the Christian worldview shape people’s actions and attitudes is a miracle of God. What a great blessing to see in WELS, judging by this handful of case studies, that the Christocentricity of worship was so important to them. Thanks be to God!

A Blessing of Christocentricity: Unity

The forces of evil seek to undermine and corrupt every blessing that the Lord has given. Christ brings unity.⁸³ The evil of the world brings chaos. The devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh tried to use the pandemic to draw people away from Christ, as they do with everything. “The devil is going to use anything that he can to divide us.”⁸⁴ “Can [Christian freedom] be abused? Sure. The sinful nature can find ten different ways to abuse something.”⁸⁵

Some of these pastors expressed the blessing of unity that comes with Christocentricity. When leading their congregations coming out of the COVID-19 lockdowns, WELS pastors recognized the importance of Christocentricity, that it alone can unite when everything else divides. “We’re going to be united by our faith in Jesus.”⁸⁶ “I never wanted to frame things in the way the groups that were getting all political about it were speaking about it.”⁸⁷ “I don’t like to

82. Rodewald, interview.

83. cf. John 17:11,22.

84. Bilitz, interview.

85. Jenswold, interview.

86. Bilitz, interview.

87. Kluball, interview.

do things that divide. I'd rather do things that unite."⁸⁸ Christ prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that his people would be united in him. Far be it from us to divide ourselves from others or even among ourselves over anything other than Christ and his Word, like politics. "I'm not going to be divisive when we're supposed to be unified in worship."⁸⁹

It is not an abdication of responsibility to simply not take a public, political stance on any issue as a congregation. Rather, to be apolitical as a church reflects that the church is essentially and primarily Christocentric, not secular-centered, in the world but not of the world. A miracle of the Holy Spirit is that people with diverse political opinions can all be united under Christ.

Thanks be to God!

A Blessing of Christocentricity: Humble Leadership

Christocentric people with Christocentric leadership have a blessed relationship. When Christian people recognize that their leaders point to Christ and seek to lead their congregation focusing on Christ, their relationship is Christocentric.⁹⁰ "The people trusted the leadership."⁹¹ "Our leadership team thought that we should err on the side of caution and still offer worship as long as we can."⁹² "We were very thorough. We wanted to be very transparent with the changes."⁹³

88. Naumann, interview.

89. Bilitz, interview.

90. cf. Prov 4:23, Col 3:23–24 1 Tim 6:2, Titus 1:6–9, 1 Peter 5:2.

91. Sauer, interview.

92. Rodewald, interview.

93. Sauer, interview.

“We always said ‘we’re going to try this.’ We never said, ‘this is the right thing.’”⁹⁴ The mutual respect between the congregations and their leaders was crucial when instituting new, sudden changes to worship. Neither the congregations nor their leaders gave the impression that they knew what was best. Rather, they struggled together under the cross. “It gets people involved in the decision-making.”⁹⁵ Humble leadership in the Christian Church seeks to shift focus away from themselves and lead people to Christ. As he has promised, the Holy Spirit works as the Church recognizes both the stewardship of the means of grace and the unalterable power of the Spirit through the means of grace. “There’s not a silver bullet. If people ask, ‘how’d you do it?’ It wasn’t because of me, it was in spite of me.”⁹⁶ It is a blessed mystery that the Lord lets us be his mouthpieces, the instruments through whom the Spirit is unleashed.⁹⁷ Thanks be to God!

Lasting Effects in WELS

Through the survey and interviews, among the varied experiences, two consistent changes and developments emerged across the synod that seem to be part of the new normal for WELS worship. In the wake of COVID-19, WELS churches, in general, have increased their use of modern technology, specifically, by posting services on the internet and have facilitated online giving options.

94. Caleb Schultz (Pastor at Cross of Life Lutheran Church in Mississauga, ON), interviewed by the author, 6 November 2025.

95. Schultz, interview.

96. Bilitz, interview.

97. cf. 1 Cor 2:4, Eph 6:17.

Online Worship

All the pastors I interviewed discussed how their congregations adapted and readapted posting their services or sermons online. Viewing worship online made this pandemic vastly different than every other pandemic or plague in the history of the world. “Navigating COVID would’ve been a whole lot harder if it happened twenty years earlier, when we didn’t have all of these tools.”⁹⁸ The internet and rapid advances in online interconnectivity offered opportunities for churches to get creative to continue keeping the body of Christ connected. “What are these tools good for and how can they be used well?”⁹⁹ Pastor Schultz succinctly highlighted the two key factors to consider in the use of technology. Many churches were forced to consider and explore how modern technology could be used. “During COVID, obviously, pretty much every congregation in the world had to have some kind of presence on the internet.”¹⁰⁰ The other important factor not to be overlooked is considering how modern technology could be used *well*. “You need to have something out there that looks good.”¹⁰¹ This comes back again to anthropology—people like looking at things that look nice. Two church websites and broadcasts can present the same, beautiful, powerful gospel presented, but people generally prefer the neat, crisp, organized site than the blurry, muffled, chaotic one. “We’re constantly evaluating the quality [of our online presence].”¹⁰²

98. Kluball, interview.

99. Schultz, interview.

100. Jenswold, interview.

101. Jenswold, interview.

102. Bickelhaupt, interview.

Another aspect of online worship that these pastors brought out was how to pastor people who worship online. The consensus opinion among them was that they were glad the services were online as an option especially for those sick or homebound, and also useful for those unable to attend worship because they are away from home. However, they were concerned about the spiritual well-being of those who habitually chose to view church online rather than attend in-person. “I’m glad you can make use of this, but this is just watching.”¹⁰³ “We now have intentionally chosen to simply record it, then post it the next day. And the reason behind that is we wanted to make sure people knew it’s not the same thing.”¹⁰⁴ Pastor Jenswold highlighted the Sacrament as a significant benefit of being physically present in church. “There’s good, and there’s better. It’s good that you hear God’s Word on a Sunday morning, better if you could come and also receive the Lord’s Supper.”¹⁰⁵ These pastors were balancing the blessing that such people want to watch church with the challenge of separation from the body of Christ. Pastor Sauer highlighted the blessing of those who *do* come to church. “The blessing is you had people who were committed.”¹⁰⁶ Technology is always a blessing and a curse, online worship included. Now that these tools are available, there is a temptation for people to become lax in their spiritual welfare, regarding worship with their congregation as unnecessary or superfluous. The fact, then, that people still show up highlights the Spirit-worked new man at work.¹⁰⁷ God’s people still see the importance of coming to church! Thanks be to God!

103. Schultz, interview.

104. Naumann, interview.

105. Jenswold, interview.

106. Sauer, interview.

107. cf. 1 Cor 12:27, Phil 2:13, Col 1:29, 1 Thess 2:13, 2 Thess 2:13–17, 2 Tim 3:14–17, Heb 10:19–25.

Online Giving

The other common aspect of worship that technology has changed is the offering and the offering rite. Especially during the safer-at-home period of the pandemic, significant challenges arose for churches in continuing to pay their bills when people were unable to come and give their offerings. One way that many congregations solved this issue was by offering online giving. People could now give to the church without handing in a check via QR Code, a third-party online platform, or even direct deposit. Some churches already had an online giving option. Others refined or promoted their method of online giving. Others did not have it at all until the COVID-19 pandemic. “We didn’t have online giving before. We should’ve.”¹⁰⁸ Pastor Sauer’s church did not adopt this useful application of modern technology to worship until the pandemic made it a necessity. Several survey respondents noted that this change was quite popular. Their people liked to give using modern technology. “About two-thirds of our members give online. So, rather than passing a plate and having people be a little embarrassed if I don’t put anything in the plate when it comes passed me on Sunday morning, we just have an offering box in the back.”¹⁰⁹ Pastor Bilitz exhibited his pastoral and pragmatic heart, considering the awkward situation that online giving can introduce. If a person gives their offering online and the offering plate is passed to them, they do not have anything to put into it, which looks like they had nothing to give the Lord this week, when in fact, this would not be the case. “We, like all congregations, had to develop our way of doing that.”¹¹⁰ Pastor Jenswold noted that every congregation had to navigate this situation in their own context.

108. Sauer, interview.

109. Bilitz, interview.

110. Jenswold, interview.

Modern technology has changed, or rather, updated ways in which people can give their offering to their God. The biblical principle of giving an offering is not compromised. It is not even in question. The method of giving and collecting the offering is free. While Scripture has a great deal to say about stewardship and the giving of offerings, there is no prescribed rite to follow. In freedom, the offering rite *could* be done away with, as it has in some WELS churches. But whether the offering rite *should* disappear is a different question. As discussed earlier, as long as the teaching of Christian stewardship is supplemented elsewhere, it is truly free. As also discussed earlier, the presence of the offering is entirely fitting in worship, as it is a part of worship, practicing both personal and congregational stewardship. This discussion evokes praise to God that the Holy Spirit's continued work in people, compelling them to present their offerings to him. It is a blessing that modern technology facilitates different ways to do that. Thanks be to God!

CONCLUSION

What makes worship Christian is Christocentricity. Everything in Christian worship ought to revolve around Christ and have Christ as the focal point. Scripture repeatedly points to Christ our Savior as the object of right worship. The Apostle Paul, in his letters, chastises Christian churches that distracted worship away from Christ. The Lutheran church historically has demonstrated ways to do worship that exalt Christ alone. Confessional Lutheranism today picks up on those biblical truths and lessons and examples from its heritage to point to Christ in a modern context. WELS values Christocentricity and, for that reason, has done a commendable job coming back from COVID-19. Although the membership numbers in WELS are comparable before the pandemic to today, a commendatory job is not based on numbers; it is based on

Christ. It is not based on how many are worshipping, but whom we worship. Since Christ never changes, the focus of Christocentric worship never changes, despite constant changes in the world. May God continue to bless his people and bless WELS as they worship him.

Because of the valued Christocentricity of WELS worship, the lasting changes are relatively minor compared to the discussions and crises in the rest of the religious world. While WELS worship has undergone some changes, the focal point has never changed. Thanks be to God! As for the changes that have been made, I have encouragement to offer. To declare any particular change examined in WELS worship as inherently toxic would be to say too much.

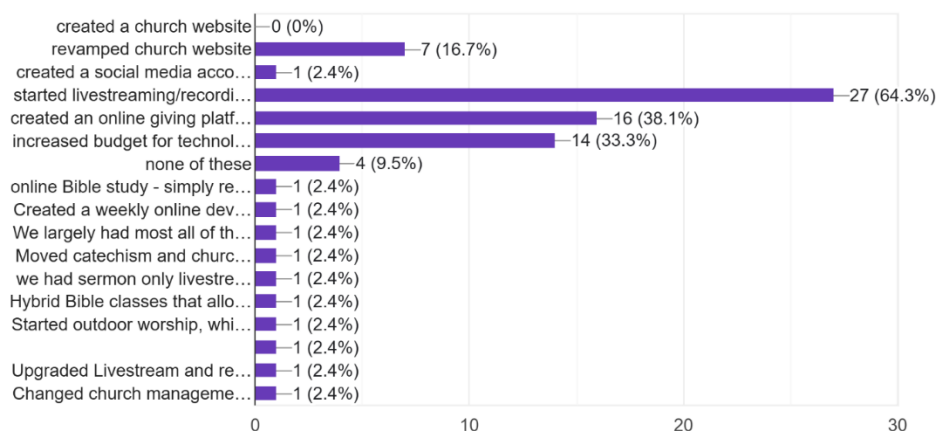
Each congregation must constantly evaluate and reevaluate what they do in worship and ask, “Why do we do that? Why do we do it that way?” If that answer is, “because we did that during the pandemic and never went back,” it may be necessary to change it. In the context of an ongoing pandemic, such changes may have been necessary or wise. Now that we are not in a pandemic, such changes may be confusing, at best. Such changes could even distract from Christocentricity. Could visible precautions and pumps of hand sanitizer in preparing and distributing the Lord’s Supper give people the impression that taking the meal could be dangerous, potentially detrimental to their health? Could the convenience of online or direct deposit offerings make this aspect of worship passive rather than intentional? The longer the practice, which was intended to be temporary, persists, the more likely it is to become part of a new normal. As the pandemic has passed, so too should its presence in worship.

APPENDIX. RESPONSE CHARTS

Question 1¹¹¹:

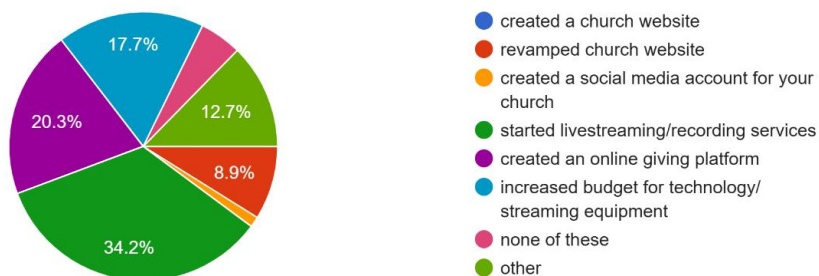
Technology - What changes happened in your church because of covid?

42 responses



Technology - What changes happened in your church because of covid?

79 responses

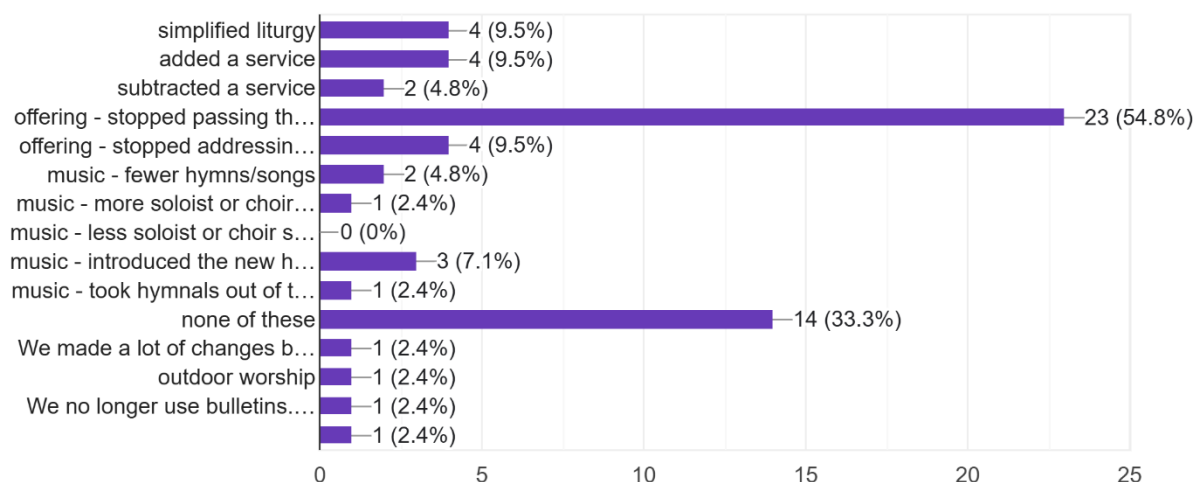


111. The percentages on the bar graphs reflect how many pastors selected that option of all respondents. The percentages on the pie charts reflect how many times this choice was selected divided by total possibilities selected.

Question 2¹¹²:

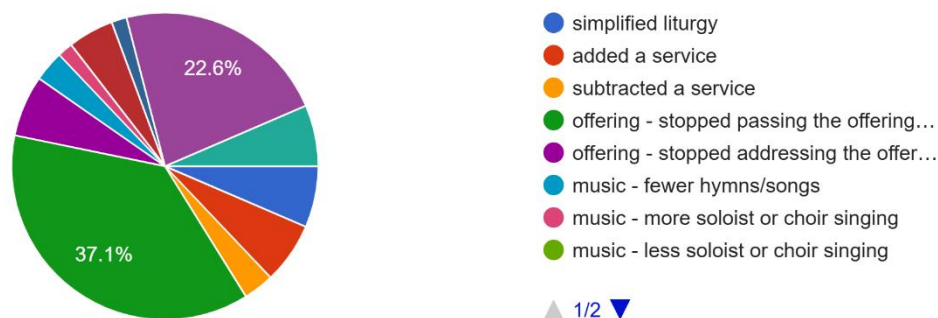
The Service - What changes made because of covid continue in your church?

42 responses



The Service - What changes made because of covid continue in your church?

62 responses

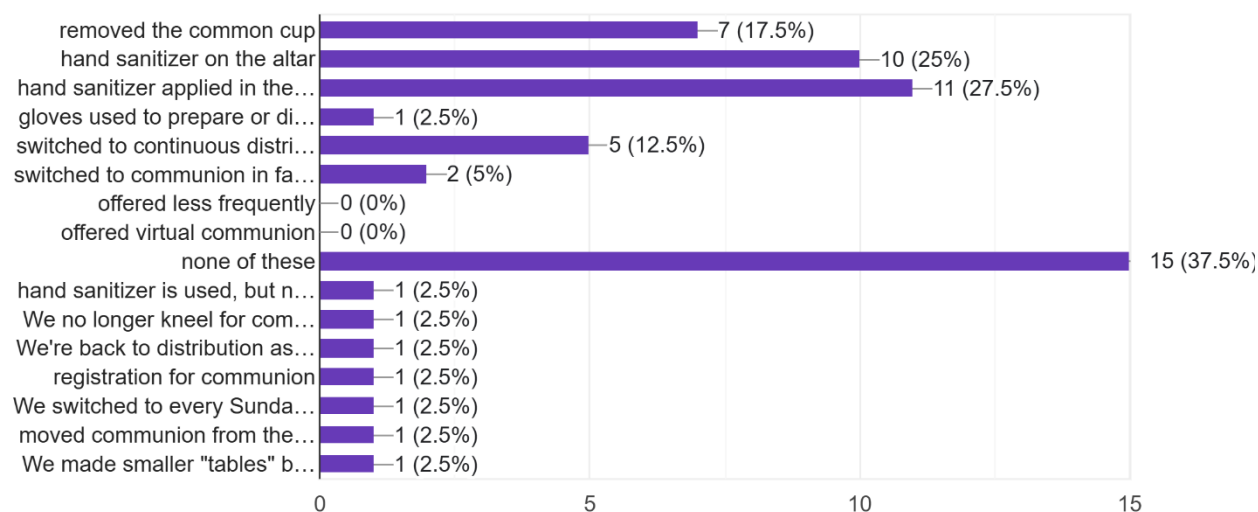


112. The hidden choices on page 2/2 of the chart: “music - introduced the new hymnal” (3), “music - took the hymnals out of the sanctuary” (1), “none of these” (14), “other” (4).

Question 3:

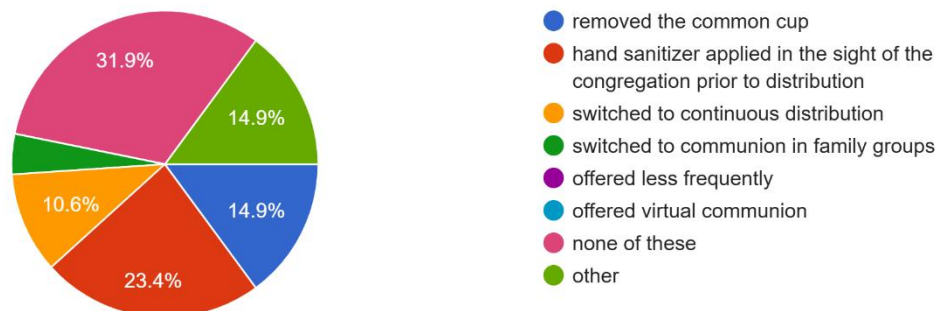
Lord's Supper - What covid changes continue in your church?

40 responses



Lord's Supper - What covid changes continue in your church?

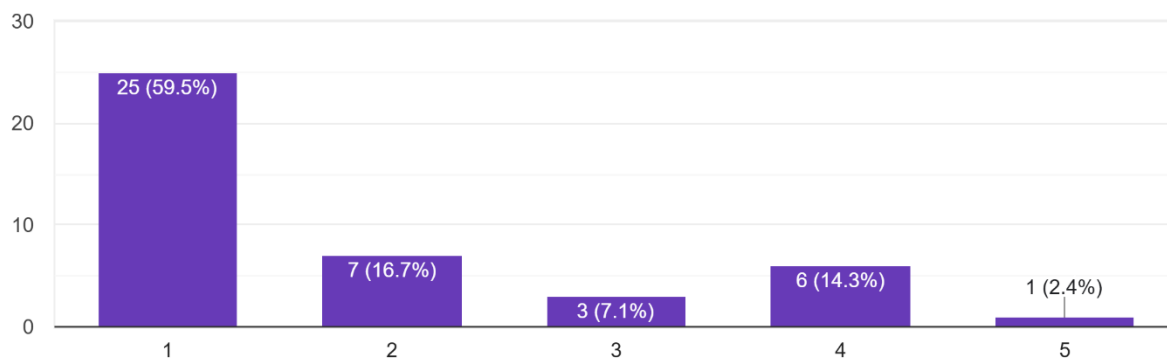
47 responses



Question 4¹¹³:

Covid continues to affect worship in your church.

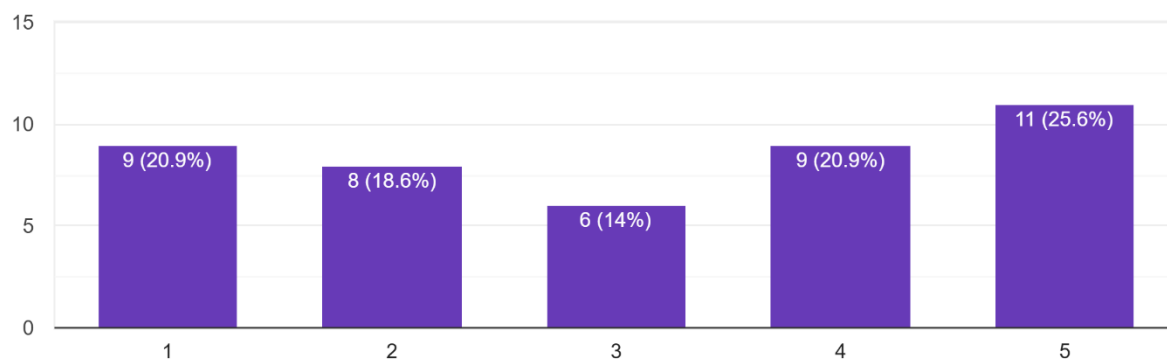
42 responses



Question 5:

The "covid changes" in your church today are here to stay. It's the "new normal."

43 responses



113. Questions 4 and 5 both prompted selecting from a spectrum of agreement: 1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree.

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