

Introduction



“Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” John 13:34b

Welcome. We begin a journey together here to explore the beauty and dignity of the assisting minister role in worship. We will consider the basics of assisting in worship—the why, who, and what questions. As an assisting minister, you will find it helpful to have some biblical, theological, and historical understanding of the role. That background is provided in chapters 2 and 3. And, of course, this handbook provides guidance on specific how-to questions. You may wish to turn directly to chapter 4 where such questions are addressed—but do come back around to the “why” and “who” chapters. Those new to this crucial role will do best as assisting ministers when they have gained a basic map of the territory.

Serving as an assisting minister is much more than technique, even if posture, bearing, and bodily skill do matter a great deal. As with the presiding minister’s role, the assisting minister communicates with words and actions, verbally and through body language. Taking care to understand the *reasons* for words and gestures entailed in worship leadership informs the style of presence the worship leader inhabits. As one classic

book on worship leadership puts it, such study and preparation can form leaders who are “strong, loving, and wise” (Robert W. Hovda, *Strong, Loving and Wise: Presiding in Liturgy* [Liturgical Press, 1976]).

Why would an assisting minister aim to be “strong, loving, and wise” in worship leadership?

- **Strong** here does not signal the need for physical might. Rather, it refers to a grounded assurance, a proper confidence in inhabiting the role. This proper confidence arises from baptism and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, not moral (or some other sort of) superiority.
- **Loving** invites us to see that we do this worship leading in the first place simply to aid the gathered assembly in worship—whether they are lifelong Christians or first-time visitors.
- **Wise** means the practical judgment we gain over time through prayer and the Spirit’s work in and through training and practice. We cannot simply jump up on a moment’s notice and lead worship wisely. Instead, we grow into wisdom regarding all the subtle aspects of leading, which allow the leader to become less prominent and the thing led—prayer, scripture, song—to be central. In a word, the goal is to be transparent to the gospel.

It should be said that these three terms—strong, loving, wise—apply to the presiding minister as well. Both assisting and presiding ministers share, as in a dance of mutuality, a servant posture toward the assembly. The Holy Spirit calls worshipers to gather where God promises to be present in word and sacrament. The ministers are called out from the assembly for specific leadership roles, fostering the rhythm and pace of this encounter.

Blessings on your journey to strong, loving, and wise worship leadership for the sake of the assembly's prayer and for the sake of the world.

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You are asking me? The joys of assisting in worship

What is so joyful about serving in this role? If you are new to this role, you may experience many emotions, including anxiety! The truth is, when you open yourself to hearing a call to the role of assisting in worship, and even when you feel a deep call, the role might feel like a challenge to do well for quite some time. That is fine. But remember these three things, as well:

- First, the **authority** you stand upon is God's promise made in baptism. All ministers called to lead a particular congregation in worship stand on this same foundation. You are not alone, but held and guided by the work of the Holy Spirit present in the assembly. Be bold and say, "I am baptized, a beloved child of God!" Then step forward and lead using the gifts you have been given by the Spirit.
- Second, your task is to be a **servant** of God's proclamation of mercy and love, to communicate Christ for

this people, this moment, and to facilitate the people's reception and response in prayer and praise. We do not and need not have something to say or do to make our leadership acceptable or worthy. As you offer your gifts of leadership, they are taken up and used by God to communicate God's own word in Jesus Christ.

- Third, you will **grow in confidence**. We cannot simply stand up and lead the liturgy the first time in a “strong, loving, and wise” manner (see page 6). We, and those we serve with, grow into this confidence—never a haughty confidence but always a humble one. We can inhabit this confidence so as to be transparent to the gospel of God's love.

A wise assisting minister I spoke with describes the journey of learning over time, and how it matters for partners working together to grow together:

“As you get to work more with someone and you get to know their preferences—where do they want the book held, how high, do they want you to turn the pages or not, just some of those things you learn as you work with someone over time—it just makes it easier. Working at these things, talking about them beforehand, helps both assisting and presiding ministers gain confidence. They don't have to worry about me, I don't need to worry about them. We can deal with whatever else happens in the space together.

What is so helpful about this comment is how it points to the little things as fundamental. First, the little things are fundamental because learning them gradually, by *doing* them, is the only way to see and feel how the parts fit together in an interactive pattern of leadership with others. You can't—and needn't—have it all straight the first time you assist in worship. You will make mistakes, *and* you will grow in your ability. Even seasoned leaders continue to grow and learn.

Second, this learning over time allows a self-forgetting, an ease in the flow of the role, and this makes it possible for the worship leader to focus on the worshipping community, on what is next, and on whether things are going smoothly. This kind of leadership pays attention to the life of the whole, not only in worship but as the assembly's worship connects to daily life in the world. Those deeper connections are what you can bring into each part of your ministry, in and out of the worshipping assembly. Here, in the flow of worship leadership, true joy can be found, and it is not merely happiness. Rather, it is the joy of knowing you are being put to use for God's purposes, and in ways drawing upon the Spirit's gifts in you. As you find your way into this experience of servant leadership in worship, may you find blessing and joy overflowing!