



*“Gathered By
Grace”*

**Leader’s Guide:
Worship Practices as Diaconal Formation
for the Baptized**

Learn more about The CaSTLE Project at:
wartburgseminary.edu/the-castle-project
or email castle@wartburgseminary.edu

Introduction

This Lenten series is designed to help parishioners of rural and small-town churches explore how worship practices shape and form them for daily Christian life and service. This series is ideal for midweek gatherings that many churches have every Lenten season. If your church has not gathered for midweek worship in recent years, this series is a great chance to restart the habit. Additionally, the series could be adapted for use on Sunday mornings as well.

There are six Wednesdays in the season of Lent if you include Ash Wednesday. Because many churches have a full Ash Wednesday worship service, this series could be structured as either **six weeks** or a **five-week** series by omitting Week 1 (*Worship as the Foundation of Christian Life*). The sessions are adaptable for various settings, including congregational study groups, worship planning teams, or personal reflection.

Each session includes:

- **Opening Litany** (for use in worship or group gatherings)
- **Discussion Questions** (to guide conversation and reflection)
- **Suggestions for Leaders** (helpful tips, supplemental ideas, and practical applications)

Session 1 (Optional): Worship as the Foundation of Christian Life

Theme: "Gathered by Grace, Sent in Mission"

Key Focus: Worship as God's work in forming us for discipleship.

Suggestions for Leaders:

- Use this session if participants need a foundational discussion on the purpose of worship.
- If omitting, incorporate a brief discussion on baptismal identity into another session.
- Encourage participants to reflect on how worship currently shapes their daily life.

Supplemental Ideas:

- Provide a handout with key elements of the ordo (Gathering, Word, Meal, Sending) and discuss how each part connects to Christian living. Refer to the pattern for worship on pages 91-93 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.
- Share a personal testimony or invite someone to reflect on how worship has impacted their faith journey.

Session 2: Confession and Forgiveness

Theme: "Reconciled to Reconcile"

Key Focus: Worship as a space to receive and live out forgiveness.

Suggestions for Leaders:

- Encourage participants to reflect on personal experiences of confession and reconciliation.
- Emphasize that confession is not only about personal guilt but also about communal and social restoration.
- Provide space for participants to write down something they need to release to God.

Supplemental Ideas:

- Introduce a "forgiveness challenge," encouraging participants to practice reconciliation in their daily lives.
- Include a brief history of confession in Christian worship, discussing how it has evolved. Refer to the Small Catechism and "How people are to be taught to confess" on page 1165 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.

Session 3: Thanksgiving and Praise

Theme: "Living a Life of Gratitude"

Key Focus: Worship as formation for gratitude and generosity.

Suggestions for Leaders:

- Encourage participants to keep a gratitude journal during Lent.
- Explore the link between gratitude and generosity—how does thanksgiving move us to serve others?
- Discuss how music and singing shape faith and community.

Supplemental Ideas:

- Invite participants to choose a favorite hymn and share why it is meaningful to them.
- Consider incorporating a time of spontaneous prayer or thanksgiving during the session. Open an extended time of prayer by inviting participants to respond to the prompt, "God, I'm thankful for. . ."

Session 4: The Word of God in Daily Life

Theme: "Scripture Shapes Our Steps"

Key Focus: Worship as a time to be shaped by God's Word.

Suggestions for Leaders:

- Encourage participants to bring their own Bibles and share a passage that has been personally formative.
- Discuss different ways to incorporate scripture into daily routines (e.g., morning devotionals, lectio divina, memorization).
- Emphasize that scripture is not just read but enacted in daily life.

Supplemental Ideas:

- Consider using creative scripture engagement methods, such as dramatization or art journaling.
- Provide a handout with a list of key scripture passages that relate to daily discipleship. Refer to the Scripture and Worship section on page 1154 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.

Session 5: The Eucharist and Radical Hospitality

Theme: "Welcomed to the Table, Sent to Serve"

Key Focus: Holy Communion as a foretaste of the kingdom and a call to radical generosity.

Suggestions for Leaders:

- Discuss how Holy Communion shapes our relationships and sense of community.
- Invite participants to reflect on a time they felt truly welcomed or excluded and connect this to Eucharistic hospitality.
- Encourage participants to think of one tangible way they can practice hospitality this week.

Supplemental Ideas:

- Share stories of hospitality in scripture (e.g., Jesus feeding the 5,000, the Last Supper, Emmaus road).
- Explore different cultural expressions of hospitality and how they connect to faith.
- Refer to the Small Catechism and The Sacrament of the Altar on page 1166 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.

Session 6: Sending into the World

Theme: "Go in Peace, Serve the Lord"

Key Focus: Worship as preparation for living out Christ's mission.

Suggestions for Leaders:

- Challenge participants to identify one specific way they will live out their faith in the coming week.
- Discuss the significance of the dismissal in worship—how does it propel us into mission?

- Encourage a commissioning moment where participants bless one another for service in the world. Refer to the Affirmation of Christian Vocation on page 84 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.

Supplemental Ideas:

- Invite a local community leader to speak about ways the church can serve.
- Consider writing a group prayer or commitment statement to reflect on at the end of Lent.

General Tips for Leaders

- **Facilitate, Don't Dominate:** Encourage conversation and participation rather than lecturing.
- **Create a Welcoming Environment:** Foster a space where people feel comfortable sharing and reflecting.
- **Encourage Action:** Challenge participants to take what they learn in worship and apply it in daily life.
- **Be Flexible:** Adapt the sessions based on the needs and dynamics of the group.

This guide provides a framework for engaging discussions and meaningful reflection throughout Lent. May this series deepen the congregation's understanding of worship as a transformative practice for daily Christian living!

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What is The CaSTLE Project?

The CaSTLE Project stands for Country and Small Town Lived Ecclesiology. The emphasis is on a new way of being church, particularly in rural contexts, and a more focused, specialized way of forming leaders for these congregations.

- Wartburg Theological Seminary has received a 7.4-million-dollar Lilly Endowment grant, for the purpose of supporting and renewing small town and rural congregations, and their leaders. This grant will enable Wartburg to be a hub and resource for ELCA synods in all regions of the country looking to connect around lay leadership formation, mentoring/coaching programs, and congregational renewal.
- The overarching theme of this grant is a new ecclesiology; that is, a new understanding of the form, ethos and mode of congregational life. In this way of being church, the emphasis is on nurturing the baptismal vocation of each member to witness to the gospel in word and deed in all aspects of their lives—work, family life, civic engagement. The Sunday assembly, including Word and Sacrament, will support this baptismal vocation of witness.
- The majority of funds will be distributed as sub-grants to synods and other applicants, for the creation of specific educational resources, the development of mentoring programs, and the fostering of a new identity and vitality in small town and rural congregations.
- We are excited about the potential of this grant, both to create a strong network of lay leadership formation within the ELCA, and also to change the culture in small town and rural congregations so as to promote their long-term flourishing, and the flourishing of the communities in which they serve.

What does this mean for congregations?

- We argue that one of the most pressing challenges facing rural and small-town churches is the decline of these communities in population, economics, and educational capital, which has created a dominant narrative of loss, shame, and a sense of failure for not being good enough. We hear from these congregations their palpable grief at feeling like no one wants to be their leader, that they are forgotten, and that they are dying. However, numbers are not the only way to measure a congregation's flourishing and the impact it can have on a community. We believe that this baptismal ecclesiology creates a new narrative—a story of hope for the future, confidence in the present, and a compelling desire to live out one's faith in the context of the deep relationality that exists in small town and rural contexts.



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