

embodying confidence and grace

A HANDBOOK FOR
PRESIDING MINISTERS

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God is here! As we your people
meet to offer praise and prayer,
may we find in fuller measure
what it is in Christ we share.
Here, as in the world around us,
all our varied skills and arts
wait the coming of the Spirit
into open minds and hearts.¹

"God is here!"

Evangelical Lutheran Worship, #526

Introduction



Since the early days of the church, leaders have been raised up from among assemblies. You are among them, called by God and called by a local ministry. This is a calling into community, since without an assembly you would not be a presiding minister. Without the call of God, we would not have the gift of this vocation.

The vocation of presiding has been likened to other roles. William Seth Adams compares presiding ministers to orchestra conductors: “No one disputes the importance of the conductor’s role, but clearly the conductor’s work depends on the prior existence of the assembled musicians and their willingness to respond to the leadership of a conductor.”² Presiding is not about us (that is, the ones who preside). It is about the assembly’s prayer and praise, which we will encourage and facilitate. The presiding minister’s vocation is intricately intertwined with the vocation of all of the baptized. We need one another, and we are all in need of God’s mercy, grace, and love.

Elaine Ramshaw, in her book *Ritual and Pastoral Care*, compares presiding ministers to midwives: “The pastor’s work is to midwife the labor of the people of God. She presides, leads, directs, and organizes, all to help the people of God do *their* work.”³ Midwives cannot do the labor for those giving birth.

They can only attend, encourage, prepare the way, and be very present to those laboring. A midwife's vocation is rooted in the understanding that the women inherently know how to do the work; they need only companionship, support, and direction. Likewise, the vocation of the presiding minister is rooted in the promises of God that in baptism we are delivered from sin and death and made one with Jesus Christ. Therefore, we join with all of the baptized and are midwives to the work of prayer and praise. We attend, encourage, prepare the way, and are very present to the assembly.

To be raised up as a presiding minister in an assembly is inherently a public position of power. People will look to you for leadership and as an example of holy living, ready or not. As Adams explains: "Presiding in the church's liturgy is certainly an exercise of power, but it is just as certainly power exercised in the company of the One who chose to die, for the sake of the One for whom powerlessness itself was lifegiving."⁴ We are called to offer leadership confidently, yet with humility, and to reflect God's grace to all.

The ordination rite for ministers of word and sacrament in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America asks candidates these important questions:

Will you be diligent in your study of the holy scriptures and faithful in your use of the means of grace?

Will you pray for God's people,
nourish them with the word and sacraments,
and lead them by your own example in faithful
service and holy living?

Each ordinand responds:

I will, and I ask God to help me.⁵

These lines remind us of the central aspects of presiding in worship. We rely on God's word, the means of grace, prayer, and God's forgiveness, even as we are certainly imperfect.

I offer you these reflections on presiding with deep humility. You already know—or are gaining wisdom about—your particular assembly in your specific context. You are the only one called to preside in the authentic, embodied ways in which only you can. Please adapt all of these ideas to your local context and your assembly.

In this handbook, we will explore the before, during, and after of presiding:

- **Planning with confidence and grace**, including planning collaboratively, contextually, and humbly, using the range of resources available.
- **Preparing with confidence and grace**, including preparing our voices, hands, and feet, as well as the rest of the

ministers with whom we serve. We will pay special attention to preparing our spirits to lead worship as whole, embodied leaders.

- **Presiding with confidence and grace**, including paying attention, navigating disruptions and distractions, offering hospitality to newcomers, and letting go of what we cannot control.
- **Reflecting after worship**, both individually and with those who plan and lead along with us, to facilitate continued learning and growth.

This small book is not meant to be a comprehensive description of the task of presiding. Much has already been written and will yet be written on presiding in worship. You are invited to explore additional resources in the section “For Further Reading” on page 67. Perhaps this book can serve both as a refresher for those who have presided for many years and as a word of encouragement to those new to this calling. Know how grateful I am to share in this calling to preside with confidence and grace.