



How do congregations recognize secular occasions and holidays in the liturgy?

The worship staff receives a number of similar inquiries on worship-related topics from across the church.

These responses should not be considered the final word on the topic, but useful guides that are to be considered in respect to local context with pastoral sensitivity.

The response herein may be reproduced for congregational use as long as the web address is cited on each copy.

Lutheran worship ordinarily focuses on an ecumenically shared pattern of scripture readings (a lectionary) and prayer that is shaped according to seasons and days of the church year. This means that occasions of a secular origin will not ordinarily dominate the primary weekly services of a congregation. Yet there are many ways in which secular occasions may be acknowledged in the liturgy without their becoming the exclusive focus of the day. Oftentimes a secular occasion may provide an opportunity for preachers to illustrate how faith is active in the midst of our daily routines and commitments. Such occasions may also be opportunities to extend a congregation's ministry of prayer.

Incorporating Secular Concerns into the Prayers

People who are responsible for leading prayers of the congregation (oftentimes a lay assisting minister, or perhaps a pastor), rightly prepare for that task by looking not only to the scripture readings that will be used at a given service, but also to calendars that list secular holidays as well as special community observances. Mother's Day, Father's Day, high school graduations, and national holidays (Memorial Day, Independence Day, Veteran's Day) are all examples of occasions that can be reflected in the congregation's prayer petitions. Here is where the liturgy readily provides a natural opportunity for these occasions to be recognized, without them necessarily becoming the focus for an entire service.

While worship leaders may be eager to celebrate those occasions that have wide acceptance within the larger culture, they will also want to take care that these occasions are not used to divide the worshiping assembly inappropriately. Not everyone at worship on a given day will be part of the group that is recognized. It's not just fathers who worship on Father's Day (there may in fact be quite a number of men in attendance who are not fathers). Not all worshipers at services close to Independence Day will share a similar patriotic enthusiasm, though prayers for the country and for careful exercise of freedom will certainly be appropriate. Worship leaders who are sensitive to the fact that some worshipers will expect to have their favorite occasions honored, while other worshipers may be uncomfortable at these times, will help both types of people by

acknowledging the occasion in modest ways, yet without departing from the church's own liturgy and calendar at these times.

Recognizing Groups within the Assembly

While mention in the prayers of the church is a significant way to include a variety of occasions and secular holidays, there may be other ways to honor people within the assembly. Some congregations may present special gifts to people on various occasions (perhaps flowers for mothers on Mother's Day, or a book for graduates), an action that is probably best handled quite simply before the service as people gather, or during a time of fellowship that follows the service. In this manner undue attention is not placed on those who do not represent certain cultural norms (for example, women who have never been mothers or whose children have died, or those who have not graduated from school). If mention is made of these days in preaching or otherwise, it will be helpful to note that people live out their vocations as parents, students, veterans, etc, in various faithful ways.

When Separate Services are Warranted

Even though a congregation's regular services of worship may incorporate concerns related to secular holidays, or recognize specific groups of people, there still may be occasions when it is best to hold a separate service other than at the time of a congregation's regularly scheduled worship. One example is with a high school baccalaureate service. Schools that in previous years might have held a baccalaureate service for their students may no longer do so. This can be an opportunity for congregations to hold their own baccalaureate service, or for many congregations from a number of denominations to sponsor a single ecumenical service. Many graduating seniors may find this latter approach more meaningful rather than being singled out during a special service within their own congregation.

Primary worship resources of the church suggest a number of occasions for which readings and prayers might be included to recognize various secular holidays and other events in people's lives (see in particular the list of occasions in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, pp. 61-63; and the many different occasions for prayer given in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Occasional Services for the Assembly* and *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Pastoral Care* (such as prayers/readings at the birth of a child, adoption, vocation in daily life, birthday, separation or divorce and blessing for a home).

Below is a sample Blessing of Graduates that could be included in a service near their graduation date.

Blessing of Graduates

Near the beginning of the service, or at some point following the sermon an Assisting Minister leads the following:

We are delighted to recognize high school graduates of (name of congregation) today. It is our privilege to affirm these members of our congregation who have completed one phase of their lives and move with great expectations onto another.

High school graduates, please stand as your names are called.

An assisting minister reads the graduates' names.

The presiding minister addresses the graduates:

Graduates, as you celebrate your achievements and prepare to begin new endeavors, be mindful of your grounding in faith, and of your vocation to serve God in all your life's work and accomplishments.

Let us pray.

Gracious God, you bless your servants with many achievements. We give thanks especially for the milestones that (names of graduates) will have attained in their upcoming graduations. As they begin new phases of their lives, may they also know your love and experience your peace in all the experiences they encounter.

Bless also the parents of these students who have raised their children and nourished them in the Christian faith. Give them strength in your continuing presence, and give them many joyful reunions with their sons and daughters who may be leaving home soon to begin new and varied ventures, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Graduates may be seated.

At the conclusion of the service, just prior to the general benediction, graduates may come before the congregation together with their parents for a blessing. Invite all worshipers to raise their hands, and for parents to place a hand on their son or daughter's shoulder during the following words.





Go out into the world in peace; be of good courage; hold to what is good; return no one evil for evil; strengthen the faint-hearted; support the weak; help the suffering; honor all people; love and serve our God, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

The general benediction for the congregation follows.¹

RESOURCES

[Resources Available from Augsburg Fortress:](#)

-  *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Pastoral Care.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008.
-  *Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Occasional Services for the Assembly.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009.
-  *Welcome to Christ: Lutheran Rites for the Catechumenate.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997, page 60.
-  *Sundays and Seasons.* Many additional blessings/resources are available to subscribers in the Library section entitled "Sundays and Seasons Resources" at sundaysandseasons.com.

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¹ Adapted from "Affirmation of the Vocation of the Baptized in the World," in *Welcome to Christ: Lutheran Rites for the Catechumenate*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997, page 60.