

WELCOME GUEST

Our sincere desire is to present a welcoming face to our visitors, to include them and get to know them, but two obstacles sometimes arise before we get the chance. It is our hope that this brochure can remove these two obstacles. The first sometimes confuses visitors from our sister congregations of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the second has a tendency to confuse, and even offend, visitors from other denominations.

FIRST - A Word about Liturgical Worship

The simple reality is that our services can feel foreign to many protestants in America – including those who grew up in the Lutheran Church. We use historic vestments, we chant, and we have traditional ceremonies. In fact, our services are very similar to the sort of worship practiced by Martin Luther in Wittenberg after the Reformation. We do not prize aesthetics and art over content, but we do contend that form follows function and the medium carries meaning along with the message. Our ceremonies are not accidental or even merely habit. They are very deliberate and always based on historic practices. Though they are aesthetically pleasing to many, their intent is not to convey beauty but to communicate God's presence among us in Word and Sacrament.

Yes, the music of the liturgy, and even our hymns, may be more “difficult” than that found in other protestant churches. It requires serious initial effort on the part of our visitors. However, we have suggested to many first-time visitors that they should listen and concentrate upon the words if the liturgy is too much of a struggle for them. Participation can be very salutary through the ears. Visitors have told us that it does not take long for the liturgy to become easier for them. We believe that the effort pays off. The liturgy, for all its complexity, is very beautiful and seems to grow in appeal over time, once people get comfortable with it. It carries the sacred text remarkably well, too.

SECOND - A Word about Closed Communion

The traditional Lutheran understanding of communion is absolutely foreign to the majority of American protestants and to the pious members of the ELCA. Whatever else they believe about Holy Communion, they almost always seem to regard it first and foremost as an act of hospitality. For them to deny people communion is to be unfriendly, rude, and even judgmental.

We have a different understanding – one that requires us to deny communion to those we do not know. And we are well aware that Bethlehem visitors can find this unwelcoming.

We are sorry for this and do not wish anyone ever to feel unwelcome or judged. At the same time, the difficulty is born of doctrinal division. Our understanding of the Holy Communion is that it is an expression of doctrinal unity, not hospitality. We feel that hospitality is conveyed in providing a warm greeting and genuine Christian care and conversation ... and even a cup of coffee after the service.

We are glad to have visitors. We want visitors to speak to Pastor Adler before the service in order to introduce themselves and announce their intention to come to the Lord's Supper. Our ushers can help you locate him. We are happy to welcome non-Lutherans to join us for worship, but there are intimacies attendant to participation in the mystery of Christ's bodily presence in the Holy Communion that are reserved only for the immediate family.

We realize that this view of Holy Communion feels wrong to many Christians. We ask, however, that you would respect our wishes and get to know us. Please believe that our deepest desire is not to commune alone. We want you to join us. But we want you to join us understanding what it is you are getting into and what it means to be a part of our growing family. True Christian love comes from God and is born out of unity in doctrine, understanding, and purpose.

If these obstacles seem like too much for you and you would like to talk about them, please don't hesitate to contact Bethlehem Ev. Lutheran Church. We welcome the conversation.

We invite you to visit our website www.belctx.org. There you will find many resources designed to assist you in knowing more about our Church.

Again, Welcome to Bethlehem!