

Why Do We Do That?

This is the Seventh in a series of articles on Lutheran customs and practices. Do you have an idea for a church practice you would like to have explained? Suggest it to Pastor Becker

Candles

Candles flanking a cross are a commonly recognized symbol of Christian worship, whether in a classroom or on the battlefield. In the Old Testament, God instructed that a seven branched lamp stand be placed in the tabernacle, burning continually. The light symbolizes the all-seeing presence of God and the revealed truth of God, which enlightens our lives. Our candles are lit during worship.

In addition to the two candles on the altar, many churches have candelabra on or near the altar, each having sometimes three, five or seven candles. Three symbolize the trinity, seven symbolize the perfection of God and his spiritual gifts. When candelabra are used, the two candles on the altar, known as “eucharistic lights”, are lit only for services including Holy Communion.

Christ Candle

The single large candle is traditionally known as the Paschal Candle because in Christian tradition it is lit with new fire on the evening before Easter and lit for worship until the gospel reading on Ascension

Day. It is also traditionally lit for baptisms.

In our church, this candle is lit beginning at Christmas and is also lit for funerals.

An eternal light, often in a red glass container, is a custom which began in Roman Catholic churches as a symbol of the continual presence of Christ in the form of a consecrated communion host kept on the altar. It is kept constantly lit. Some Protestant churches have adopted the eternal light as a symbol of the constant spiritual presence of Christ.

Advent Wreath

The use of an advent wreath, first in homes and then in churches is a custom which has developed over the years in north European culture, from a Yule log holding candles of which one additional candle was lit each day as Christmas approached, to an Advent tree with candles gradually added.

The Advent wreath has four candles, one lit on the first Sunday in Advent and one more lit on each of the four Sundays. These symbolize the increasing light of prophecy pointing to the birth of Christ. Traditionally, the candles are white or purple - a symbol of the Advent focus on sober repentance. An exception is one pink candle, lit on the third Sunday in Advent on which the scriptures call us to rejoice in the coming savior. The Christ candle in the center, a more recent development, is lit beginning on Christmas Eve.

Christmas Tree

Martin Luther has been credited with originating the idea of a Christmas tree, although its “roots” likely go

back earlier. It is commonly used in Lutheran churches. The evergreen tree is seen as a symbol of the eternal life given by Christ and the shape points to heaven. More specifically Christian, the chrismons used to decorate the tree in churches include a large variety of Christian symbols and symbols from the Old Testament which point forward to the coming of Christ.

Flags

The United States flag began appearing in Lutheran churches during World Wars I and II, apparently as a sign that the members, especially those who still worshipped in German, should not be considered unpatriotic.

The Christian flag was invented some time later, in imitation of the U. S. flag, and may be seen as a balance to the U. S. flag to show where our ultimate loyalties lie.

Because the flags, while adornments of a public assembly hall, are not related to the focus of our worship, they are properly placed outside the chancel. Authorities on Lutheran worship discourage their use all together as unnecessary, distracting and overly nationalistic, but this has not kept them from being commonly found in Lutheran churches.