

Prelude, postlude? Stand up, sit down? What's going on? What am I supposed to do?

Every congregation has particular ways of engaging Sunday worship which become the custom and thus "the way we always do it." They become part of the liturgical DNA and so ingrained in the worship life of the parish that no one thinks about them.

In one parish I served I was startled on my first Sunday when we arrived at "Our Father who art in heaven" and there was a huge commotion as people pulled out the kneelers and knelt down, remaining there until they got up to go to communion. Years later I took the confirmation class to visit another church which celebrated the Eucharist standing around the altar, and watched as the kids kind of bobbed up and down at the Lord's Prayer. They were perfectly aware that there were no kneelers, but their bodies had physical memory, and so much practice kneeling that their legs automatically started to bend.

The custom in another parish was for the congregation to stand at the end of the service until the processional cross had passed, and then kneel for a moment of personal silent prayer as the organist played the postlude. Then after a bit everyone would get up, perhaps speaking quietly to someone on the way out, but saving conversation for the narthex. Some people remained to listen to the postlude, which the organist played from the console at the front of the church next to the choir pews, and the rest went to coffee hour through a large narthex. It all worked quite nicely.

Even though we say that there's no one right way to do things, Trinity has its own quirks that over time have become its norms. I don't know another church that displays Mardi Gras beads behind the altar the last Sunday after Epiphany! - but we would think something was really missing if they weren't displayed that Sunday.

The organ prelude at the beginning of worship is an opportunity to settle ourselves and spend some quiet time in prayer or meditation. The postlude is really exit music – neither concert nor part of the service. Since the organ console at Trinity is in the back of the church many people stay standing, turn around, and look at the organist for the remainder of the prelude. I am assured by Jeff Nall that this is not a problem.

However, it does create a very awkward and uncomfortable situation for newcomers. When the entire congregation as one turns to face the rear doors of church visitors have no idea what is going on. They don't feel free to leave as is customary in most churches, nor to speak, and they feel trapped in place. One person said to me, "It creeped me out. Someone turned around at the end of the service and glared at me. I didn't know what was happening or what to do."

In order to welcome newcomers as much as possible we can use the postlude to get up and move about, greet each other, leave through the front door or go to coffee hour, or sit and enjoy the music. It's a time to begin to relax into whatever comes next in our day. So as Lent continues, let's do whatever is needed to do at the end of the service, inviting others to come into our wonderful community.

Blessings,

Anne