

Church Terminology: What does it mean?

Are you new to Lutheranism? Or maybe you're looking to brush up on your church terminology? This page will walk you through some of the “Lutheran Buzzwords” you may encounter from your first steps through the door and into a typical Divine Service at your local Lutheran Church–Canada (LCC) congregation. If you are coming from a different denominational background, or even if you have never stepped foot in a church before, you may find that you are already familiar with many of these terms. It is helpful to keep in mind that this glossary of church terminology approaches these words from a confessional Lutheran perspective.



As you enter the church . . .

Narthex

Greek for “enclosure”. The narthex is an entryway or gathering room leading into a church. This area is sometimes also referred to as a “vestibule” or “foyer”. In the narthex people often gather before and after Divine Service to greet each other. It is an area bridging the “sacred” and the “secular”.

Please be seated . . .

Nave

This is the area where the congregation sits in pews. It is between the narthex and chancel.

Pew

A bench used for sitting in a church.

Kneelers

Long, narrow padded bars at the base of a pew on which worshippers may kneel in comfort.

Hymnal

The hymnal is a guide for worship used by the congregation. Along with Orders of Service, the hymnal also contains the Psalms, prayers, and hymns. During these Services, God's people receive His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation through Word and Sacrament. In singing hymns and joining in prayer, God's people respond with thanksgiving and praise to God for His gracious gifts given through Divine Service.

At the front . . .

Chancel

The section of a church building beyond the nave where the altar and pulpit (and often the baptismal font) are located.

Sanctuary

From the Latin *sanctuarium*, meaning "a holy place". This refers to the area surrounding the altar, which is often enclosed by a communion rail, setting it off from the nave, the place where the people are seated.

Cross

A cross serves as a reminder of the sacrifice Jesus Christ made for all people and that he lived, died, and rose from the dead. The cross serves as a reminder that in Jesus sin, death, and the devil are defeated. A cross and a crucifix (Christ on the cross) represent the same message—Christ's death paid for the sins of the world.

Crucifix

A Middle English term derived from the Latin meaning "fastened to a cross". A crucifix is a cross bearing the image of the crucified Christ, pointing to the reality of the One who came in the flesh to be the Saviour of the world. A cross and a crucifix represent the same message—Christ's death paid for the sins of the world.

Sanctuary Lamp or Eternal Flame

Commonly the "Eternal Flame" or "Sanctuary Lamp" in Lutheran churches is seen to represent the eternal presence of God.

Altar

Together with the font and pulpit, the altar is the chief focal point of the church building. Here as the pastor prepares the Sacrament of Holy Communion or the Eucharist, the elements of bread and wine are consecrated. Here also the prayers of God's people are offered on behalf of the church and the world.

Altar Candles

Candles which sit on or beside the altar and are lit during the Services. They are to represent the presence of Christ as the Light of the World among us. When a candle burns it slowly gives itself to provide the light in the flame. This reminds us that as the candle gives itself up to provide light, so Christ gave Himself up to be the Light of the World. Some congregations only light these candles when they celebrate Holy Communion.

Altar Book

A large book usually placed on a stand on the altar has additional prayers and portions of the Services that are not included in the hymnal. The pastor makes use of the Altar book while leading the Services.

Communion Ware

Special vessels or "dishes" are used to serve Holy Communion. There is usually a dish (paten) upon which the wafers are carried and a large cup (chalice) in which the wine is poured. There may also be a large pitcher (flagon) which holds a larger amount of wine and another container (ciborum) which holds a larger amount of wafers.

Communion Rail

A "fence" separating the nave (the pew area) from the area of the altar (chancel/sanctuary). The communion rail often functions as a support for those kneeling to receive Holy Communion.

Pulpit

From the Latin *pulpitum*, "scaffold", "platform", "stage". This is the place from which a pastor preaches the sermon. The sermon is a message based upon the Word of God in the Bible. Through the preached Word, people hear about the Good News of the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life.

Lectern

The lectern is the reading stand from which the Word of God is read. In some churches it is highly ornamented, though usually less so than the pulpit. The Word of God is read to the congregation and through it God strengthens and creates faith in those who hear it.

Paraments

This is the general term for the liturgical cloths placed on the altar, pulpit, and lectern. The paraments are usually in various colours for use during specific seasons and days of the Church Year. They are often adorned with artwork illustrating a biblical theme.

Baptismal Font

A baptismal font is where the pastor baptizes infants, children, and adults. Through the waters of

Holy Baptism a person is received into the family of God and is given the gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation earned by Jesus.

Paschal Candle

A large candle that has special significance during the Easter Vigil. It is also used at baptisms and funerals. Ordinarily it is located near the baptismal font. During the Fifty Days of Easter (from Easter to the festival of Pentecost) it is placed near the altar, and at funerals it stands near the casket. “Paschal” comes from the Greek work for Passover and refers specifically to the celebration of Christ's resurrection.

Colourful artwork . . .

Banners

Hanging on stands, the walls or rafters of church buildings, banners often illustrate biblical theme or teaching. Banners are also used to communicate particular themes of the Seasons of the Church Year.

Stained-glass Windows

Works of art often communicate a Bible story or theme. These windows can serve as teaching tools and also as a way to beautify a church building. In medieval times when illiteracy was high, churches used stained glass windows to teach people the stories of the Bible. Stained glass windows have been nicknamed the “Poor Man’s Bible” for this reason.

Music . . .

Choir Loft

The choir may sing from the loft or balcony at the back of a church. The choir sits behind the congregation and faces the altar when they sing. Having the choir sing from behind the congregation distinguishes the choir’s singing from a performance.

As worship begins . . .

Divine Service

The name commonly given to the regular weekly service that includes the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Derived from the German *Gottesdienst* (“God’s service”), its meaning is dual in nature. “The idea is that God serves us with His gifts in Word and Sacrament, and we serve Him by responding in prayer, praise, and thanksgiving” (Lutheranism 101: Worship, p. 48).

Hymn Board

To assist the congregation during Divine Service, the hymn numbers are displayed on the hymn boards.

Acolyte

This “attendant” or “helper” is responsible for lighting the altar candles and assisting the pastor as required. In some congregations acolytes are those currently taking confirmation instruction.

Pastor

The pastor is an ordained minister of Lutheran Church–Canada. He is a graduate of a Lutheran seminary with a Master of Divinity degree. In addition to biblical and theological instruction, most pastors have also studied Greek and Hebrew allowing them to read the Bible in its original languages. The members of this congregation have “called” him to serve as their pastor. His duties include conducting services, preaching, performing baptisms and marriages, serving the Lord’s Supper and declaring God’s forgiveness (absolution) following confession of sins.

Pastor’s Vestments

A pastor wears various vestments to cover up his individuality. The focus is not to be upon the man but upon the Office to which he has been called. In some ways the vestments may be equated to the uniform a police officer wears in the sense that a police officer’s uniform communicates his office and not his person. You may see various vestments in a Lutheran congregation.

- **Cassock** - A full-length, black garment is worn under other vestments, most often the white surplice. In addition to the clergy, the cassock may also be worn by others, including acolytes and choir members.
- **Surplice** - A flowing, white vestment worn over a cassock (a fitted vestment usually in black). The cassock/surplice combination is frequently worn at prayer services (Matins, Vespers, etc.) when Holy Communion is not celebrated. It is also the vestment frequently worn by other assistants (e.g., acolytes) and by choir members.
- **Alb** - A close-fitting, white vestment for pastors, worn especially at the Divine Service with Holy Communion. The name comes from the Latin word for white, *alba*.
- **Chausable** - A “poncho” like vestment that is worn by a pastor only when he is administering Holy Communion. It is to be in the appropriate colour of the season.
- **Stoles** - A scarf-like fabric usually crafted in the colour of the day or season, often bearing symbols appropriate to the day or season. It is worn over the shoulders of those ordained to the pastoral office.

Offering and Offering plates

In response to God’s gift of salvation and His daily blessings, members of the congregation voluntarily present their own gifts of money. These gifts support the ongoing work of the congregation. A portion of the money given also supports the regional, national and international work of Lutheran Church–Canada.

Other areas and people . . .

Vestry

The vestry is a room where the pastor’s vestments are stored and where he dresses. A Sacristy may also be used for these purposes.

Sacristy

From the Latin *sacristia*, meaning “holy things”. The room where the communion vessels and paraments are kept. The vestments for the pastor and liturgical assistants may also be kept here or in a separate room, the vestry.

Parish Hall

A place of meeting for the congregation in a non-service setting. Meetings of the various councils and committees of the congregation may take place here. Bible study and social gatherings may also be held in the parish hall.

Elders

Lay men who have been chosen by the congregation to assist the pastor in the spiritual care of the members. You may see them assist the pastor in the distribution of Holy Communion or during a baptism.

Ushers

Lay members who assist the pastor and elders in greeting, receiving the offering and other tasks.

For online viewing: <https://www.lutheranchurchcanada.ca/resources/church-terminology/>