
Summary: Vertical Habits

Who we are

St. Luke's is a 25-year-old congregation with a relatively young membership (40% of our members are under the age of 18). We offer three different styles of liturgical worship (traditional, blended, and contemporary) and average around 430 in attendance each week.

What we wanted to accomplish

As a liturgical church, we have always practiced certain Vertical Habits as a part of our corporate worship. Not everyone who worships with us regularly, however, has a good understanding of why we do what we do. We wanted to use this project as a way of deepening worshippers' understanding of the meaning behind the rituals. Vertical Habits offered us a way to do this by using everyday language and simple actions.

Martin Luther described worship as a dialogue between God and us – a dialogue that consists of both revelation and response. We approached each habit from the perspective of both revelation and response. We also examined the horizontal dimension of each habit as well as the vertical dimension. So, for example, we talked about confessing to those whom we have wronged (horizontal) as well as to God (vertical).

Our goal was to help people realize that vertical habits are not limited to corporate worship, but that they can be practiced throughout the week – and not only in our response to God but also in our interactions with others.

What we did

At St. Luke's, we emphasized six Vertical Habits – lifting up one each week during the season of Lent, which is a time when the congregation traditionally encourages a special focus on spiritual renewal or discipline. In preparation for this series, we invited members of the congregation to identify specific activities which we could do during worship which would help us focus on the habit for the week. We also asked them to prepare an Activities Booklet for each week, which would focus on that same habit. The Activity Book included a devotional for each habit (one a week), one or more suggested activities to be done that week, and a daily challenge.

For corporate worship, we developed a liturgy around the six habits, which we used on the Sundays in Lent. The focus for Sunday worship and sermon was on the vertical aspect of the habit of the week. At our midweek services on Wednesdays the focus was on the horizontal aspect, looking at how we can utilize that same habit in our relationships with others. At each Sunday service, we included some

sensory activity to highlight that week's habit. For example, the Sunday that we focused on Prayer we used a thurible (censer) to burn incense and read Psalm 141 ("let my prayers be set before you as incense").

The six Vertical Habits we chose were:

- 1) Confession ("I'm sorry")
- 2) Praise ("I love you")
- 3) Word ("I'm listening")
- 4) Prayer ("Help")
- 5) Holy Communion ("Come to the table")
- 6) Benediction ("God bless you")

What we experienced

The real value we experienced from this project was that it provided us with an opportunity to talk about worship in a deeper way. The simple language and concepts behind Vertical Habits struck a responsive cord with our members, especially our younger members. While this project did not change what we were doing in worship, it did increase the meaning and effectiveness of our ritual and liturgy. We believe that because of this project our members have a much deeper understanding of what we do week in and week out – both in corporate worship and in personal/family devotion.

We are not sure how much these vertical habits have gotten translated into the daily lives of our members. While many people were able to grasp the vertical dimensions, it seems that most of them struggled with making these actions habits throughout the week. In the same way, they seemed to grasp the vertical dimension better than the horizontal dimensions. While they could see how these habits play out in their relationship to God, they struggled with extrapolating these habits into their relationships with those they encountered day to day.

This would suggest that we need to give more attention to the horizontal and the habitual aspects.

What we would advise

The most important thing in helping a congregation grow in worship is talking about what worship really is and finding creative ways to lift worship up as a way of life, rather than as something that we do at certain times during the week. Vertical Habits can be very beneficial in facilitating such conversation.

While a project like this will almost always be staff-led, it is important that the staff involve as many congregants as possible in every aspect of the project. The more people who are in on the planning and implementation, the deeper the impact will be on the congregation as a whole.

We would also recommend that the Vertical Habits be introduced or explained using as many multisensory elements as possible. Worship is drama, and the more dramatic that we can make our worship experience the more meaningful it can be. Be sure to use the senses of smell, touch, and taste in addition to seeing and hearing.