

# Why Lutherans Do What They Do

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From protecting our pews to having mandatory Jell-O at potlucks, here are 10 things that help make us Lutherans a unique bunch - see if any of them sound familiar!

**Q: How many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb?**

**A:** None. Lutherans don't believe in change. The joke makes us chuckle because we see ourselves in it, however on the outskirts of actual truth it may be. It's not that we're inflexible when it comes to change. It's just that we put our hope in someone who does not change - God. His love, His grace and His word are eternal. In honor of Martin Luther's 526th birthday Nov. 10, here are 10 unique ways Lutherans believe, think and do, served up with a little humor. We asked Kristofer Skrade, editor of the indispensable *Lutheran Handbook* series, and the Rev. Todd Wilken, host of the Lutheran radio show *Issues, Etc.*, to shed some light on why Lutherans...

**1. Sit in the back of the church and/or protect our pew like it's reserved seating at a rock concert.**

Staking out the back rows facilitates a quick escape for those wanting to avoid the Sunday restaurant rush, Wilken says. "Plus, Lutherans are leery of being too devout. We have a proper understanding of our sin, so we shy away from the holy things up front."

As to pews, Skrade believes we get into ruts that are unrelated to holy rituals. In his first congregation, he had everyone switch seats during a sermon to get people thinking from a different perspective. "The congregation was good-natured, but it was, 'Ha, ha, don't do that again,'" he says.

**2. Reprint the entire worship service in a bulletin when we have hymnals.**

Count this habit as an evangelism tool: The hymnal is a Lutheran legacy, but these days we understand that it can be intimidating to guests. "If a visitor has to decipher this ancient Rosetta stone that is the hymnal, it can be daunting," Skrade says. "A huge bulletin may be wordy, but it's easier to navigate."

### **3. Consider our main form of socialization the potluck - with mandatory Jell-O®.**

The potluck, a long-standing tradition among many Lutherans, is an opportunity for the same kind of table fellowship Jesus practiced throughout his ministry. "Recipes make good conversation like nobody's business, and that sharing is community-building," Skrade says. "You could never start a church without hosting food gatherings. They're critical." Wilken believes Lutherans understand that food is a good gift of God. "If God gave it to us, why not enjoy it, and why not all together in the church basement?" (The Jell-O dessert is just a bonus.)

### **4. Consider it a badge of honor to show as little emotion as possible.**

Our Lutheran ancestors were from northern Europe, where the cold climate made stoicism a survival tool. Though it began with physically enduring difficult environmental conditions, fortitude became an emotional state of mind as well. "When things get bad, Lutherans say, 'Well, it could be worse.' And when things go really well, we don't say anything, because we're afraid to jinx it," Skrade says. "You can't waste energy celebrating, because there's work to do."

**5. Approach the church's spending with a careful eye, but often give anonymously to those in need.** We take pride in our thriftiness, which extends to getting full use out of every penny for God's church, too. "There's just not a penny to be wasted, and if we as a faith community can get by with an unheated building and secondhand hymnals, then we'll get by. It's almost a point of pride. We don't need fancy soap dispensers in our church," Skrade says. But Lutherans aren't stingy: "We're certainly frugal, but when Lutherans see someone in need, they're incredibly generous," Wilken says. "In my experience as a pastor and nonprofit radio show host, the more someone gives, the less they want anyone to know about it."

### **6. Live our faith all day and all week, even in our work.**

Luckily for those of us who aren't church workers, Lutherans believe in the doctrine of vocation - that is, every job performed by a Christian is a call to serve others, not just that of a pastor. Luther once wrote, "The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship." The idea isn't new - Paul said as much in I Corinthians 10:31: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

### **7. Avoid saying hello to new people in church.**

Again, our wallflower tendencies surface here. We're secretly afraid of this conversation: "Hi, welcome to our church." "Umm, I've been here for 30 years." "Oh." Skrade says that in the small northern European communities of our ancestors and even in the first Lutheran communities in the U.S., everybody knew everyone else. "Welcoming strangers was an underdeveloped muscle," he explains. "It's hard to overestimate just how strong our habits really are."

### **8. Volunteer endlessly even though we believe we're saved by grace alone.**

One of the main tenets of Lutheranism is found in the fourth article of the Augsburg Confession, which says we are saved by grace - through faith in Christ - not by works. (See also Ephesians 2:8-9: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast.") "When we feed on God's word, the natural result is service to our neighbor," Wilken says. "What Jesus did for us, He did willingly. We in turn serve freely and willingly, 'in fervent love toward one another,' because everything in the church is free - the grace of God and service to our neighbor."

### **9. Pass the peace when secretly we feel that shaking hands and/or hugging our neighbor in church is too intimate.**

Passing the peace is an ancient Christian tradition that has survived in the Lutheran church, even if it's "the most uncomfortable 25 seconds of Sunday morning," Wilken says. "Sunday morning worship isn't a spectator sport. We are there and bound together in unity by the word and the sacrament, a bond closer than any handshake or hug can communicate." Skrade says it's more than just your weekly chance to say hello to someone. "Passing the peace can be disarming and uncomfortable, but it's an opportunity for a literal connection with your neighbor during corporate worship instead of being in your own mental silo," Skrade says. "It's part of the glue that holds the community together."

### **10. Baptize babies.**

While many Lutherans are baptized as babies, it's actually a nondiscriminatory practice: "We baptize sinners," Wilken says, as Jesus commanded in Matthew 28:19 ("Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"). We're not stingy with grace. Luther taught that if grace is available, everyone ought to get it... including babies.