

Please do not stand for the next hymn

By [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#)

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As I came down the escalator at the library, the man in front of me apologized when he saw that I had stopped behind him. He gently moved his cane-carrying companion over to one side, apologized again, and motioned me past. “No apology needed,” I said as I accepted the offer to pass. But the interaction stayed on my mind.

Years ago, I might not have thought twice about it. Now, having a family member for whom movements such as standing up can be painful because of [degenerative arthritis](#) has made me more aware—perhaps nowhere more so than at church.

My eyes are more attuned to notice when a person needs a cane in one hand and a partner’s arm in the other in order to rise for a hymn or the benediction. The instruction “Please stand if you are able” may be received as a permission to sit, but that leaves some out of the practice in which others are engaging.

And that caveat divides people into the able and disabled. In the Eucharist, we say that we share one loaf because we are one body, and so [we need a common loaf](#), and not a little dish of allergen-free wafers on the side. When we add lines into our liturgy such as “The congregation will stand if they are able and if they so choose” we move the accent from the communal to the individual. We are visibly not one body when some cannot stand or need to remain seated.

But the solution of simply sitting for the whole service doesn’t feel like much of a solution, though I can see why some churches, especially those with many elderly members, might adopt it. I realize that this can become a rabbit hole, trying to attend to all of the various needs. We can only make a good effort. But for worship to be truly corporate—as one body—we need to keep growing and stretching in how we attend to our bodies. And not just the bodies that can engage in the practices we are used to, because those aren’t the bodies that many of us have and are trying to love.

I also suspect that for many of us who stand with relative ease, rising to our feet in worship has become more rote than a purposeful act to show reverence to God. I wonder if by becoming more attentive to the physical needs of some in worship, we might all become more attentive to how we present our bodies to God.

A variation on the liturgical instruction I heard at a church I visited was “Please rise in body or in spirit.” Lovely words, though they suggest that one can’t do both.

The next time I lead worship I’m thinking of asking everyone to remain in their seats, and to rise both in body and spirit by rolling their shoulders back, placing feet on the floor if they’re not there already, and opening up their chests. A former choir director suggested this for improving singing while seated. It may also help each of us be more aware of our bodies and spirits as one. I know it won’t change the practice right away, but maybe it will spark some new ideas.