



“Preserving tradition with imagination”

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Breaking Down The Walls: Congregational Song as Catechesis for Spiritual Seekers

Beau Surratt

It seems that we can hardly be on social media these days without seeing some article about the “nones,” the “dones,” or those of us who identify as “spiritual but not religious (SBNR’s).” Often the assumption seems to be that those people are not in our churches, and this is true to an extent. However, *those* people may just be us. There may be (and probably are) “nones,” “dones,” and *SBNR’s* (acutally, acronyms get on my nerves but I thought I’d use one here for fun) in our pews on any given Sunday. In other words, they are us. We may not see them every Sunday, maybe only once a month or so, and they may be slightly embarrassed to be there, but they are there and we, church leaders that we are (this dualistic “us vs. them” language gets on my nerves too, but I think its use in this case illustrates my points), are called to welcome them, these children of God who may not be “church native,” as Christ in our midst.

In the current context where I serve, at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church (ELCA) in Chicago 2 blocks from the friendly confines of Wrigley Field, we have many such folks in our congregation on any given Sunday, folks who are of an age that they would be categorized under a certain generational label (which I will not name because generational labels get on my nerves and I refuse to have an article of mine join the long list of articles that talk about this generation). It is a joy to serve a congregation that is continuing to grow in an environment like this. My intention in this article is to share some ideas about how we make some musical decisions (mostly in regards to congregational song) at Holy Trinity given our context (our “mission field” if you will) as well some of my own thoughts about how we might minister musically in similar contexts while also being faithful to our liturgical heritage. For those who are interested, you can find out more about worship at Holy Trinity here (<http://www.holytrinitychicago.org/worship>).

1. Use more ecumenically known tunes with new texts.

There are so many rich and wonderful hymn texts being published these days. Ones that treat traditional theological themes in new and imaginative ways and ones that bring faithful and creative theological reflection to social justice issues and current events. A fabulous example of this is the Hymn Society’s recent project, *Hymns In Times Of Crisis* (<http://www.thehymnsociety.org/hymns-in-times-of-crisis>). Often these texts are also set with new tunes that, while they are beautiful and worthwhile tunes to sing sometimes, aren’t (yet) in the ecumenical hymntune “memory bank” (to Paul Westermeyer’s term). Perhaps, when there is strong choral leadership, we might choose to sing these new texts to their new, more challenging tunes, or perhaps we might choose to sing them to a more well-known tune. I often hear the question, “Well, if they

don't go to church what makes you think they'll know those "well known" tunes?" Here's my answer: they may not know them, but the people who have been going to church for ages know them and can sing them with gusto, and these tunes are easily accessible to a wide variety of people, so much so that even a person who isn't "church native" may have heard them at some time in some context. Sometimes the treasure of these deeply formative texts can be obscured when having to concentrate too heavily on singing a new or challenging tune. Though singing a stirring new tune can be an exhilarating experience, we most often choose hymns because of the formative value of their texts, so sometimes it may be most appropriate to choose a tune that will let the text speak more immediately.

Here's an example, on Sunday, September 10, Lectionary 23a or Proper 18, we are singing Susan Palo Cherwien's moving text "Beloved, God's chosen." In Evangelical Lutheran Worship it is set to Robert Hobby's fine tune, *Andrew's Song*, originally published as a choral setting. While this tune is certainly suitable for congregational singing, we decided that since we don't already know it, the choir won't yet be back on this particular Sunday, and we don't have a plan for using this tune with other texts throughout the year, we'd choose to sing this text to *Kremser*, traditionally associated with the text "We gather together." Now we get to experience the full power of this text with a sturdy, though still lilting tune that fits well with the meter, a tune that is fairly widely known and easily accessible. I have plans to use the text with the Hobby tune in its original choral setting on another weekend with the choir at the Saturday liturgy for which I lead music.

2. Do some "musical catechesis" by highlighting a portion of the liturgy via your choice of congregational song

Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW), the hymnal and worship book of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) emphasizes the four-fold nature of the liturgy as *gathering, word, meal, and sending*, the same basic ordo as the historic Mass in its many forms, structured similarly to the Holy Eucharist in the *Book of Common Prayer*. At Holy Trinity we call our opening hymn in procession a *Gathering Hymn* and our hymn at the end of the liturgy the *Sending Hymn* because of the section of the liturgy in which they are sung. Although we often, and rightly so, choose hymns that highlight themes in the readings for the day, sometimes we might choose to highlight one of the sections of the liturgy by choosing a hymn or song for that spot that offers a bit of catechesis about what it means to gather as the Body of Christ or to be sent into the world to love and serve the Lord.

One of the things I have heard said about many of God's beloved who are not "church native" that I have experienced as true in many cases is that they are often willing to participate enthusiastically in social justice and service/outreach activities but often participate more reluctantly in liturgy and other more "religious" activities. How important, then, to make explicit, at least on occasion, the direct connection between liturgy and mission as embodied in the sending rite. – the connection between Sunday morning worship, Monday morning work, and the loving service to which we are all called.

One of the best ways we can do this is through choice of sending hymns. At least on occasion I prefer to select a hymn that offers some “catechesis” – some unpacking, if you will – of the sending rite. Again I turn to a Susan Palo Cherwien text, *Rise, O church, like Christ arisen*, found at #548 in ELW. How enlivening to sing during the Easter season in particular, “Rise, O church, like Christ arisen, from this meal of love and grace.” And never did a hymn text make such a poetic connection between the Eucharist and mission than “broken, shared, our lives are hallowed to release and to console.” Incidentally, though this text is set in ELW to Timothy Strand’s dramatic and wonderful tune *Surge Ecclesia, Lauda Anima* is suggested as an alternative in the hymnal and is the tune I have often used in the spirit of the discussion above.

3. Resist the tendency provide an overabundance of words to sing.

We live in an age when people reply to a long email with the response “TLDR” which means “too long, didn’t read.” Many of us skim any text we’re given for the most pertinent information and discard all the rest. Often times any message composed of more than 140 characters will be ignored. How might we acknowledge this reality in worship while also being faithful to our call to celebrate the liturgy with integrity and provide our congregations with good texts and tunes to sing? With all that I’ve said above about wonderful, rich hymn texts it might sound strange for me to suggest reducing the amount of words. I’m reminded of Michael Pollan’s famous phrase about eating: “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.” Certainly we need to use the depth and breadth of rich and wonderful texts old and new. But are there times when we might sing only a small bit of text, a small bit of very important, yet perhaps simple text and let that small, mustard seed of a text speak with the power of a huge tree?

Certainly Taizé chants fall into this category as do similar chants like “Calm to the waves” at ELW 794 with text by Mary Louise Bringle and music by Thomas Pavlechko and many things from the Iona Community as well. Responsorial Psalm refrains fit the bill as well. I happen to be one who really loves singing Psalms to Anglican Chant but have often served congregations who find it alienating because they either aren’t invited to participate or don’t feel like they are able. Providing a congregational refrain for an Anglican Chant psalm can go a long way in helping many, especially the “text skimmers” among us, have a bit of text they can hold onto from the Psalm, make it more a part of them by singing it, and take it home with them in their hearts, enabling them to “inwardly digest” Scripture in their daily lives.

Another place in the liturgy when we can sing a smaller bit of text is one of the most intergenerational liturgical opportunities we have: baptisms. ELW has a variety of musical settings of bits of baptism text, but one of the things my current congregation loves singing is “You have put on Christ” from *With One Voice*, one of the supplements to the ELCA’s former worship book and hymnal, the *Lutheran Book of Worship*. Our whole congregation has gotten so used to singing “You have put on Christ, in him you have been baptized. Alleluia.” each time someone is baptized that they take that refrain with them and sing it throughout the week. What a wonderful, important, and yet succinct message to have a group of people from ages 1-99 singing in church and singing throughout their lives as a reminder of their baptism! Another favorite in this genre to

sing as an invitation to the font is Brian Wentzel's "All who are thirsty" from Augsburg Fortress's new book, *Singing in Community: Paperless Music for Worship* (<https://www.augsburgfortress.org/store/product/22416/Singing-in-Community-Paperless-Music-for-Worship>) The text of this piece comes from Isaiah 55 and invites all to both the bath (come to the water) and to the table (come to the feast) and is wonderful sung unaccompanied with perhaps a djembe added for rhythmic drive.

These are but three ways I suggest we can begin to break down the musical walls between long time churchgoers and spiritual seekers of all kinds while also being faithful to our liturgical traditions and to musical integrity. What ideas do you have? What do you think about mine? Let's start a conversation in the Church Music Forward Facebook group and see what emerges.

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Assistant Organist of the Day

Vincent M. Ryan

“My favorite part of sitting at the organ was getting to press the buttons to set up the sounds for the songs.” – Jonah, age seven.

It is not news to consider the dwindling number of organists among us. Countless hours have been spent locally, regionally, and nationally trying to address the issue. The National American Guild of Organists, for example, includes the Committee on the New Organist, whose purpose

is to create the materials and means for engaging and developing new organists, as well as to develop and promote programs and age-appropriate materials to introduce them to the organ and enable their development as organists. The committee oversees the presentation of POEs and POE+s in addition to PipeWorks programs. The committee develops educational opportunities and presentations to introduce non-organists of all ages to the organ.¹

This author has also wrestled with the question and has presented numerous workshops for children to introduce them to the pipe organ. The last workshop was held during Vacation Bible School in August 2015. We are fortunate to have a pipe organ which is easily accessible. Students had a chance to sit at the console, play notes, push pistons, view the inside of the chamber, learn about the parts of a pipe, and take home a custom-made coloring book.² Children enjoy touching things! They even had a chance to hold sample pipes. Seventy children (and a handful of adults) learned a little bit about the majestic instrument in the sanctuary.

¹ “Committee on the New Organist.” The American Guild of Organists. www.agohq.org. Accessed December 2, 2015.

² Noel Kennedy and Vincent M Ryan, *Meet The King* (1998, not published).

As a follow-up to the VBS workshop, I invited children to sit with me at the console during worship. Thus commenced our “Assistant Organist of the Day” experiment. It has been very successful. How am I measuring success? Here are three indicators:

- *An announcement was made at the end of August and a sign-up sheet posted on the bulletin board. Students began signing up immediately. From the first Sunday in September through Dec 20 (so far), an Assistant Organist (most days, two assistants) has been sitting on the bench next to me.*
- *The sign-up sheet had to be replaced twice because it was full.*
- *Adults are beginning to sign up.*

The enthusiasm has indeed spread through the Sunday School classrooms, into the sanctuary, and into students’ homes. They also had a few words to share about their experiences.

"I wasn't nervous since I wasn't playing. I liked pushing the stops, the notes, and the chimes. It was fun. I would definitely do it again." – Bradley, age nine

"I liked watching how fast Mr. Ryan's hands and feet were moving on the organ. I usually get nervous when I am in front of a whole group of people. It was hard to sit up straight without a back rest for such a long time." – Jonah, age seven

One parent observed that this is a “great way to inspire the next generation of church musicians. And my son looks forward to going to church!” – Karen, proud parent

Perhaps the greatest measure of success came on a Sunday during the postlude. About 6 weeks into the experiment, I was playing the postlude, when out of the corner of my eye I noticed five children (almost) running across the sanctuary to

stand behind me and watch. Some of them made themselves quite at home and slid right onto the bench.³

Adults have also enjoyed being an assistant: “When I saw how truly appreciative the children were as they sat at the organ during the service, I decided to sign up- and never regretted it! I had no time to prepare, given the rush of weekends in general and the holidays encroaching, but it didn’t matter. I was struck again by how a professional makes it all seem so easy, when in fact, the training over the years is part of the skill that leads to smooth transitions during the service parts. To be an assistant organist even during one service was a special treat.” – Jean, adult.

Assistants actually do not need any preparation, and I try to tailor the experience to the person. Generally however, they do the following:

- Turn the organ on and off.
- Prepare the next hymn, and stay a step ahead of the worshipping congregation.
- Push pistons, especially the ‘general cancel’ at the end of each piece.
- Select individual stops.
- Activate the zimbelstern.
- Turn pages if confident enough.
- Give pitches to the Pastor for intonation.

This is also an opportunity to help younger children follow the liturgy.⁴

Assistants are thoroughly engaged during the entire worship; sometimes children are not so much engaged when sitting in the pew. To date, we have had zero issues with lack of attention or misbehaving.

³ An endearing footnote: After about thirty seconds, one of the young ladies looked up to me and asked, “When are you going to be done playing?”

⁴ Our Lutheran church has plenty of service music, which keeps us busy. During the scripture readings, the assistant and I follow along, and I encourage them to say the responses, etc. At the sermon, we always take a break and sit down away from the console.

At the conclusion of worship, each student is seated for a picture on the bench, and they receive an official “Assistant Organist” certificate. The picture is posted in a very visible place in the church, and more importantly mailed (US mail) to the assistant with a thank you note within one day. Children especially enjoy receiving mail specifically addressed to them.

There is much support and cooperation from our Pastor⁵ and the congregation for this project. Practically speaking, sometimes you never know what might happen at the console, especially with younger students. We are blessed to enjoy an environment of grace, (and certain degree of tolerance) which goes a long way toward fostering learning and excitement not only among the assistants, but also the congregation at large.⁶

At the end of the day, success is measured in the form of a “Thank-you.” In the long-term, maybe one of these students will begin taking lessons. Or maybe, if they are not a musician, they will become a supporter of music. Or maybe at the very least, they will continue to develop a love of music that will last a lifetime.

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⁵ What if we also had an “Assistant Pastor of the Day?”

⁶ Part of this experiment includes being quite vulnerable to “accidents.” Consider, for example, what if the assistant slipped off the bench onto the pedals? Or an overly enthusiastic youngster just wants to play?

CMF Updates

Editorial Board Additions:

We are delighted to share that Church Music Forward Board Members Elizabeth Blood and Beau Surrat have agreed to assume roles as Co-Editors for CMF. Beau and Elizabeth bring tremendous gifts as writers, musicians, and participants in their denominations and larger communities. As editors, they will bring experience and creativity to continue to broaden and deepen our work; to network to bring articles and music of interest to the community; and to share their skills in editing and publishing in our work.

General Invitation and Call for Writers and Composers:

As we move into our fourth year, we seek your help in furthering the conversations and thoughts. If you have ideas for articles, please share them with us. If you wonder what you might contribute or if we have strict categories, please browse through our previous issues. The topics and lengths are varied. The common thread is a desire to explore, strengthen, and share our ministries with each other for the purpose of glorifying the One from whom all good gifts flow. Each of us has so much to bring to the conversations.

New Regular Feature: Ask the Engraver:

Many of you expressed your gratitude and delight in response to Michael Sanchez's articles, "Arranging for Brass: A Church Musician's Primer" (July, 2016), and "Music Engraving for the Church Musician" (April, 2016). Michael, <https://michaelsanchezmusic.org>, was a contracted engraver for a major sacred music publishing company and is a musician. His articles are chock full of expertise and golden nuggets. They also are easily digestible for those of us who struggle with music software. There are even laugh out loud moments!

When we let Michael know there was HUGE response to his articles, he offered CMF a regular venue. So, we bring to you: "Ask the Engraver"!

Do you have a piece with a page or passage that's giving you editorial fits? Michael can help! Please keep in mind that Michael is not offering help on the composition/arrangement itself, but only help on making it LOOK better on paper. The way this would work, for the whole community is this:

Send your problem passage with your questions to Michael at michael@vergers.org. Either send it in Finale format or exported into a PDF if you use another software. Michael will answer the questions and post examples of the "problems" and their "solutions" in an upcoming issue.

All postings of pieces and edits for the CMF community would be anonymous, of course, unless you'd like to be known.