

sing with all the people of god

A HANDBOOK FOR
CHURCH MUSICIANS

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Birmingham, Alabama
Holy Cross Day
14 September 2019



Skills and time are ours for pressing
toward the goals of Christ, your Son:
all at peace in health and freedom,
races joined, the church made one.

Now direct our daily labor,
lest we strive for self alone;
born with talents, make us servants
fit to answer at your throne.

*"God, whose giving knows no ending"
Evangelical Lutheran Worship, #678*



Prelude

It is a Sunday morning in January, the festival of the Baptism of Our Lord. In the rural Midwest, a pianist has braved a long drive in subzero temperatures to accompany spirituals such as “Wade in the water” (ELW 459) chosen for the morning’s liturgy. In the rainy Mid-Atlantic, a singer warms up the choir by teaching a newly composed, paperless acclamation to be sung during the thanksgiving for baptism. In the Southwest, a volunteer organist adjusts registrations for a Baroque chorale prelude based on Luther’s baptism hymn “To Jordan came the Christ, our Lord” (LBW 79). In a large city near the Gulf Coast, a guitarist—who also happens to be a rostered deacon—checks over lead sheets to make sure that every member of the ensemble has their songs and hymns in the correct order. And in many other places and in various ways, church musicians set about their most important and fulfilling task: leading their respective assemblies in song.

The stylistic variety of these brief scenarios—not to mention the array of gifts, training, and experiences represented by these four musicians—reflects a small fraction of the diverse communities, spaces, and pieties in which church musicians serve. Each and every time the church gathers for worship, a dazzling abundance

of musical expressions are voiced. Each time the people of God sing, a miraculous machine—a corporeal, cosmic symphony—is set in motion; a rhythmic pulse first felt in the song leader’s body is, through articulation and steady timekeeping, given over to the assembly to take as its own. Within nanoseconds, an intricate system of nerves, neurons, and muscles transforms inked letterforms and symbols for musical notation on a printed page—perhaps from the same book held by someone down the street or across the country—into embodied sound. Or perhaps we bypass the page and, instead, sing by heart.

Whether singing a cappella or with accompaniment, many voices become one voice—breathing together, feeling a pulse together, sensing the arc of a melody and trajectory of a harmonic progression as one. Together these voices sing texts: psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs from poets of many times and places. Old words such as *Kyrie* or *Gloria* are sung to new melodies; new words are sung to old melodies. Regardless of style or accompaniment, bodies are synchronized. Diaphragms and rib cages move. Lungs are filled with breath. Lips, teeth, and tongues form vowels and consonants. All to sing Spirit-inspired texts that form, call, shape, and teach us to be the body of Christ in the world. Maybe there’s some spittle, missed words, or wrong notes along the way. But that’s okay; this is proclamation, praise, and prayer—not performance. It has been created by God, and it is good.

The singing of God’s people—the songs themselves and ways in

which they are selected and voiced in the assembly—is the principal subject of this handbook. Though written for those who primarily serve the church as musicians, hopefully its contents find use among pastors, worship committees, musician search committees, and all who join their voices in the hymn of all creation. Before proceeding to the chapters themselves, a few words about what this book is, what it isn't, some assumptions (perhaps presumptions) that it makes, and how it may be used.

The church musician's role is vocational

In sermons and other writings, Martin Luther was careful to distinguish between one's occupation (job) and one's vocation (calling). For Luther, vocation was oriented toward others, using God-given abilities in all aspects of daily life, whether at work, at home, in the community, or in the church. Vocation was not, as the word is sometimes used today, simply a trade or skill, but a response to God's call enacted on behalf of the wider community. As Mark Tranvik reminds us in *Martin Luther and the Called Life*, the Bible tells us that “God summons Moses so that he might lead the people of Israel out of bondage. Mary is called so that she might bear the one who fulfills God's promises to Israel and the world. The disciples are called so that they might constitute the beginnings of a new community charged with telling the world of a new way that God has acted in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.”¹

1 Mark D. Tranvik, *Martin Luther and the Called Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 22.

Like Moses, Mary, and the disciples, we are also called to vocations that serve God's people in many and various ways. Or, as one of the hymns in the Vocation, Ministry section of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* teaches us:



We all are one in mission,
we all are one in call,
our varied gifts united
by Christ, the Lord of all.²

The concept of vocation has been important for Lutheran church musicians since the Reformation. In a large, three-volume biblical commentary that he owned, Johann Sebastian Bach marked passages about those who offer the first fruits of their God-given gifts on behalf of the nations and peoples, both in the church and in the city. Like their musical forebears, today's church musicians exercise their vocations in ways that transcend boundaries between work, home, community, and church. Through music, they share in the joys and sorrows of choir members and the assembly, watch God's children begin and end their baptismal journeys, and reveal profound scriptural and interpretive insights through their musical selections and leadership, both in worship and beyond. Their vocation is simultaneously musical, theological, and pastoral.

In our business-oriented, transactional, and individualistic

² Rusty Edwards, "We all are one in mission," in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, #576.

culture, the concept of vocation is often given short shrift, if not entirely overlooked. Unfortunately the church is not immune to this way of thinking. Hierarchies sometimes replace partnerships, satisfaction surveys and employee evaluations are substituted for discernment, charisma trumps calling, and the desire to be relevant or authentic can easily displace the central importance of word and sacrament. At its worst, an occupational orientation is only concerned with musical products that church musicians can dispense: they, in effect, become appliances, metaphorical human iPods that can furnish neutral background music or generate playlists with the latest and greatest styles that will increase attendance and membership.

But as the title of this book indicates, the work of church musicians is more about content than style, more about vocation than occupation, more about the relationship with one's community than about the music itself. It is about the people of God—the angels, the saints, the “myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands,” and “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea” (Rev. 5:11, 13)—who sing. Their song—God's song, our song—is an earthly foretaste of the heavenly feast where all are lost in wonder, love, and praise. As the poster on the next page from the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians reminds us, the church musician's vocation is a worthy service to God, God's people, and the world. It is, indeed, a high and holy calling.

When Christ's people, the baptized,
gather for worship
they receive God's love
in word and sacrament;
and through the gift of music,
prayer, praise, proclamation & recitation
the story of God's grace in song.

The cantor ...
the historical term
among Lutherans
is the leader
of the people's song.

THE ROLE OF THE CANTOR

The cantor
is responsible
for leading
the
musical
expression
of the people... in
assembly, choral
groups, solo singers, &
instrumentalists, among
whom organists have
been especially
important for Lutherans.

The cantor uses whatever musical
resources are available,
using them in a manner appropriate
to the talents of those serving and the
needs of the people who are served.

The cantor's work
is a worthy
service to God,
God's people,
and
the world.

The cantor leads
the earthly assembly
in a foretaste of
John's vision of the heavenly assembly
in which all creatures give
praise, honor, glory and power
to the Lamb.

— IT IS A HIGH AND HOLY CALLING —

Adapted from "The Role of the Cantor" poster, designed by Ann Siverling Kirchoff, courtesy of the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians.

The church musician's vocation is contextual

As indicated by the scenarios that began this prelude, the church musician's vocation is shaped by local context—the people served, their piety, their heritage, their languages and dialects, the spaces in which they gather, the surrounding neighborhood, and so much more. Moreover, contexts are always changing. The local, national, and international circumstances that surround the singing of God's people are always in flux. Some cause us to cry out with psalms of lament, some with hymns of thanksgiving, and others with songs that proclaim God's justice. And within each assembly are layers of constant change: baptisms, life passages, academic milestones, times of planting and harvest, transitions in leadership, and more than we can yet imagine or name. Alongside the ebbs and flows of changing contexts, the focus of assembly song moves with the cycles and seasons of the church year.

The array of possibilities in each and every context together pose a welcome challenge to labels that compartmentalize the singing of God's people into simplistic and insufficient categories such as traditional, contemporary, low- and high-church, liturgical and nonliturgical, and so forth. These labels can easily become distractions and obstructions, tempting us to focus more on styles and material trappings than on the means of grace. We would do well to let go of them and, in their place, embrace all that proclaims Christ in word and sacrament. Like

faith, contextual discernment is not easy; attitudes such as “we’ve always done it this way” or “let’s throw out the playbook and change everything” are, in most cases, excuses that prevent us from appreciating contextual richness. Like the church, context is both messy and beautiful, treasured and troubled, and resists our feeble attempts to preserve or institutionalize it. Our contexts revolve around Christ who was, is, and is to come. How can this give us faith to sing at all times and in all places even as contexts change?

The church musician (cantor) attends to the voice of the gathered assembly

Like the poster shown on page 14, this book frequently refers to church musicians as cantors, the historical term for musicians in the Lutheran church. The word *cantor* is derived from the Latin verb *cantāre* (meaning “to sing”) and serves as a reminder of the church musician’s most important task—to lead assembly song. Descriptions of Christian cantors can be found in documents from the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries. Even before that, Israelite musicians who led the singing of psalms were known as *hazzān*, a plural form of *cantor* in Hebrew. During the Reformation, Martin Luther expressed a need for cantors who could teach singing in their communities, as well as compose hymns to be sung in worship and at home. Today cantors serve as organists, pianists, guitarists, singers, percussionists, conductors, and more. Regardless of their gifts, training, or abilities, all use their time and talents to equip, support, and nurture the voice of the singing assembly. All are cantors. The

hymns and songs mentioned on the pages that follow do not presume one specific type or style of accompaniment, and use of the term *cantor* for leading assembly song is meant to invite a range of creative, contextual possibilities.

The church musician's craft is rooted in the liturgy and the lectionary

The ideas in this book presume use of the Revised Common Lectionary, an ecumenical, three-year cycle of readings upon which *Evangelical Lutheran Worship, Sundays and Seasons*, and their attendant resources are based. This common set of readings serves the unity of the church and is a sturdy center from which proclamation, prayer, and preaching emanate. In *A Three-Year Banquet: The Lectionary for the Assembly*, Gail Ramshaw reminds us that the lectionary is not just for preachers and musicians, nor is it merely a specialized catalog of sermon and song ideas. Rather, she writes, “Use of a lectionary makes clear to the entire baptized assembly that the Bible is the book of all the people.”³ And, as explained in *Principles for Worship*, the lectionary serves “as a source of language and imagery for worship texts and hymnody, as a foundation for formation and devotional reflection, and as a sign of unity.”⁴

3 Gail Ramshaw, *A Three-Year Banquet: The Lectionary for the Assembly* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 13.

4 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Renewing Worship, Vol. 2: Principles for Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 8.

Similar principles apply to patterns for worship and liturgical wisdom that the church has accumulated across the centuries. “The church has gravitated to liturgical forms,” writes Paul Westermeyer, in order to “check our egos, to keep us from assaulting ourselves and one another with our personalities and personal agendas, and to point insofar as we are able to God in Christ from whom through the Spirit all blessings flow.”⁵ Or, as ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton wrote in 2015, “There is a certain humility and beautiful communion in not trying to reinvent the service each time, but to join with brothers and sisters throughout the world and across the centuries.”⁶ While special Sunday emphases such as Youth Sunday, Pledge Sunday, Rally Sunday, Music Sunday, or World Communion Sunday may be well intended, the lectionary calls us to remember that care for youth and the marginalized, the stewardship of all creation, and praise of God through music and the arts are *ongoing* concerns in the life of the church. Like a ground bass in music, the lectionary and liturgy anchor and support us even though our surroundings change from measure to measure, from Sunday to Sunday, from year to year.

5 Paul Westermeyer, *Rise, O Church: Reflections on the Church, Its Music, and Empire* (St. Louis: MorningStar Music Publishers, 2008), 7.

6 Elizabeth Eaton, “Worship Is the Heart of All We Do,” *The Lutheran* (May 2015), 50.

The cantor is called to love God’s people

To be a church musician is to enter into a relationship—personal, pastoral, theological—with one’s community, not just its music. A wise colleague and friend once quoted a mentor who said: “To be a church musician, you must love the people *more* than you love the music.”

Ideas gleaned from a book cannot substitute for the experience of knowing a community, and a book as short as this can only begin to scratch the surface. Perhaps you will find it too vague, and frustratingly so; should that happen, consult the resources listed in the footnotes and at the end of each chapter. Yet even if this were a multivolume resource brimming with footnotes and musical examples, it would still remain inadequate because it does not know you nor the community you serve. Use this book as a means of thinking about the relational, communal, and formative power of music, not just choices (important as they are) about hymns, liturgy settings, anthems, preludes, and postludes.



Use the ideas and questions posed here to develop new and better ideas and questions about your community’s voice and its song. Equip and nurture their voices. Bless their singing.