

singing in community



Paperless Music for Worship

Augsburg Fortress
Minneapolis

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Introduction

There is a certain irony that, at the same time I was developing a process to introduce a new worship book and hymnal to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, I was invited into an experiment that sought to rediscover an ancient way of singing without words and music printed or projected for worshipers. In that venture I experienced deeply relational singing where singers need to trust the leader and the leader needs to trust the singers, allowing the assembly of singers to bear responsibility for the song. Singing in this way can offer a remarkable vision of the church at its best. This ecumenical project became Music That Makes Community, now an independent organization seeking to strengthen all kinds of communal singing.

In the essays that follow, you will get a glimpse of what may be experienced at a Music That Makes Community event:

- Why we might consider singing some of our songs in this way
- What we need to consider as we prepare to lead
- What kinds of songs may be sung in this way

The songs included in this collection are a sampling of the many possibilities. Some come from the original Music That Makes Community resource, *Music by Heart* (churchpublishing.org); others first appeared in different published sources; many are new compositions, some of which were created at Music That Makes Community events. We hope this small collection will inspire you to look and listen for additional paperless possibilities and perhaps to create new songs for your unique community and context.

Since this is largely an oral endeavor, you may venture beyond printed resources such as this book for inspiration. YouTube and Vimeo offer a multitude of songs that may be sung in this way, including many clips from various leaders at Music That Makes Community events. Visit musicthatmakescommunity.org for a wealth of resources, including many songs, tips for leading, and details about upcoming events.

Singing in this way that seems new—yet is really very old—does not replace other methods we know and treasure, such as singing from hymnals with instrumental leadership. In today's ever-expanding universe of congregational song, however, we find splendid opportunities in which looking into leaders' and singers' faces and trusting one another is exactly what is called for. Singing in this way may seem risky at first, but as confidence builds, it has the potential to strengthen all our singing.

So dive in! Welcome to the adventure of paperless singing.

Scott C. Weidler

Scott is a member of the Music That Makes Community board of trustees, and formerly program director for worship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Why sing this way?

Hear it, sing it, own it, share it.

Christians had sung together in the liturgy for a millennium and a half before Gutenberg made it possible to “put the music in people’s hands,” and this book in your hands invites us to relearn the old ways people learned congregational song and folk hymns in the traditions of oral transmission song. What can paperless song—oral-tradition song making that the ancient church had in common with religions and cultures across the globe—contribute to our music and common life today?

Beyond a style or genre

As a practice, this way of singing together is deeply traditional. But the songs can be as new as the day we sing them. Songs can have deep roots and long history. This way of singing makes old and new paperless songs accessible to someone who is new to the church as well as to those who have a history of singing in church, whether the music they’ve sung is “traditional,” “contemporary,” or any other genre. Paperless singing isn’t a style or genre of music.

Paperless music can be strongly rhythmic in march time, triple time, or any other meter. It can be delightfully syncopated, or it can be chant-like in classic, flowing, speech rhythm. It can be in major, minor, modal, or a non-Western tonal structure. It may be new (as many of the songs in this book are), or it may be very old. It’s not a genre but a practice of music making. Composers (or folk, oral transmission processes) shape this music from a cluster of possible forms that make teaching the music by hearing and repetition simple. Liturgy becomes wholly hospitable to learning. In planning ecumenical gatherings, we are freed by what “we all know” in common. Whatever our tradition (or if we have none), we can learn as we sing and pray in music that is new in the moment.

A spiritual practice that builds community

Music That Makes Community, in teaching and refining these ancient human practices of learning song and singing together, has found oral transmission singing to be a powerful spiritual practice that builds community. Song by song it builds collaborating communities of compassion and creativity by encouraging everyone to find their own voice in the community’s corporate voice.

John Bell of the Iona Community teaches and leads song from the global church and Iona’s new shorter songs this way, saying it helps heal “vocally disenfranchised” people, the many people in our churches who were told—perhaps by a music teacher or a family member—that they can’t sing and ought not try. Consider how often the apostle Paul exhorts us to sing. Don’t we imagine that when Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn (probably a psalm) at the last supper, some of the disciples were “non-musicians”? The African saying “If you can walk, you can dance; if you can talk, you can sing” would have made good sense to apostolic Christians and to the early church. God made humans to sing together, and singing together makes us more fully human.

Building confidence in singing

For a tiny congregation with “no musician,” priming one or two leaders to become confident enough to begin leading songs in the oral tradition can restore singing to the congregation’s life. For a congregation developing an intergenerational liturgy, training youth to lead songs this way gives them voice and authority in the assembly, enabling them to make a contribution to the whole. And for a congregation with a richly layered, professionally led music program—multiple choirs, bell choir, organ, and instrumental offerings in the liturgy and multiple concert series—introducing oral tradition music in a

few logical places in the liturgy (for example, as people are going to communion) can invite a habitually non-singing congregation, an assembly that has become a passive audience, to begin singing together.

Some may recognize oral-transmission song-leading practice from summer camp or perhaps from the civil rights movement in the United States. Others may have glimpsed South Africa's "Revolution in Four-Part Harmony," the song-filled antiapartheid movement documented in *Amandla*. At the heart of this way of making music together, imitation and repetition echo all our classic spiritual practices.

Let's recall singing at camp. Some of us will remember how the counselors or musicians would sing something, new campers and old would repeat what we heard until we owned it, and then just as the counselors had given it to us, we could offer it to others. Funny, silly, tender, or occasionally achingly beautiful, those songs are some we can still sing.

Finding and sharing our voice

Paul tells us, "Imitate me as I imitate Christ." And in paperless singing, like imitating Paul in his teaching or living into grace, this way of imitation doesn't produce copies. We don't become Paul; we become more like Christ and more ourselves. We don't become a lifeless copy of a leader; we find our own singing voice as we imitate the leader's voice and movement. Singing, listening, imitating, listening, blending, and supporting, as we find and share our voices, we become more Christlike and more ourselves.

Imitation and repetition are the core practices for this way of singing together. We hear the song and then sing it (and sing it and sing it) until we own it, and then when it's ours, we can share it. This foundational pattern of human learning invites us into creativity and freedom. When Ike Sturm, jazz bassist at Saint Peter's Lutheran Church in New York City, heard me describing what I said was a gospel version of human creativity—imitation, repetition, new creation—Ike smiled and added, "It's like what Clark Terry said when people asked him how he made jazz: you imitate, assimilate, and then you innovate."

Power and grace are found in all kinds of singing, but listening attentively, taking in the logic of song, hearing our sisters and brothers working to hear and interpret with us, encouraging and supporting timid singers, opening our hearts (and letting go of assertive ego) to sing together—these are qualities that come to the fore in paperless singing. We think you can find in this book, and in the practice of paperless singing, a way of revealing and opening up the power in all types of church music.

Donald Schell

Donald is a founder of Music That Makes Community and serves as chair of its board of trustees.

Hands of Healing

Hands of heal-ing, — Je-sus, lay on me; gen-tle

The first system of the musical score is in 4/4 time. The vocal line (treble clef) begins with a quarter note on G4, followed by a quarter note on A4, a quarter note on B4, a quarter note on C5, a quarter note on B4, a quarter note on A4, a quarter note on G4, and a quarter note on F4. The piano accompaniment (grand staff) features a steady bass line in the left hand and chords in the right hand.

hands of heal-ing, — Je-sus, lay on me.

The second system continues the melody. The vocal line (treble clef) starts with a quarter note on G4, followed by a quarter note on A4, a quarter note on B4, a quarter note on C5, a quarter note on B4, a quarter note on A4, and a quarter note on G4. The piano accompaniment (grand staff) continues with the same harmonic support.

Text and music: Carol Ann Webb

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This simple melody may be sung during anointing at a healing service, during prayers, or at the bedside of someone in need of healing. Individual names may be substituted for "me" ("Hands of healing, Jesus, lay on Esther"), adjusting the rhythm as necessary. The piano accompaniment is optional.

If in Your Heart

If in your heart you make a man-ger for his birth, then God will once a -

gain be - come a child on earth. If in your heart you make a man-ger for his

birth, then God will once a - gain be - come a child on earth.

Text: Angelus Silesius (Johann Scheffler), 1624–1677; tr. Stephen Mitchell

Music: Ana Hernández

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This 17th-century text is set to a lyrical melody that might be woven beautifully into any Christmas liturgy or used throughout the season. Harmonies may be improvised.

Yarabba ssalami

God of Peace

1 Ya - ra - bba ssa - la - mi am - ter a-laya - na ssa-lam.
 2 Ya - ra - bba ssa - la - mi am - ter a-laya - na ssa-lam.



Ya - ra - bba ssa - la - mi im la' qu-lu - ba-na ssa-lam.
 Ya - ra - bba ssa - la - mi im' nah bi-la - da-na ssa-lam.

Text and music: Arabic traditional

This Arabic song of peace is presented with phonetic text. You can hear it sung by an Arabic singer at musicthatmakescommunity.org.