

At breakneck speed, Paul Soulek endeavors to outline the theoretical and practical aspects of creating a congregational (and school) culture that boldly sings the song of Jesus. From bulletin articles to junior high hymn festivals, this nuts-and-bolts workshop will focus on ways we can engage with our communities through music ministry—and do it boldly!

This is one church musician's methods. I do not highlight this enough: this is an overview of the things I've found helpful and useful in my context. I'll tell you a little bit about my context and the things it has taught me over the years.

I'm still serving at the location of my first call - St. John Lutheran Church in Seward. Depending on where on the theological and musical spectrum you happen to fall, we're either crazy traditionalists because we don't use screens in worship and love singing harmony from hymnals...or we're crazy liberals because we use musical resources outside of *Lutheran Service Book*. St. John was divided among worship styles among other matters of conflict when I arrived. Besides having a music degree and being able to play the organ, I knew very little about what I was stepping into.

I quickly discovered the necessity of **developing relationships first** and **making changes second**. I made so many mistakes in those first few years but had wonderful people around me in my senior pastor and my congregation. Midwestern culture, especially small town culture, depends on personal relationships and living life together over a period of years in order to establish trust. I thought I came out of college with many answers - but listening, especially listening to the stories and paying attention to the people around me, was a more important skill, one that continues to be needed.

I less quickly discovered that it's really important to **take Jesus and the Gospel seriously - but not take myself too seriously**. There are so many things to get worked up about, but when I get so worried and concerned about what's happening in my corner of the Kingdom, my eyes are blinded to the friend of sinners and the griller of fish and the forgiver of His own executioners, who's already making something out of my nothing and walking toward me in the storm. I do not graduate from my need for the crucified and risen Christ and His continual rescue. It's important for me to not only *sing* this Gospel truth - but also receive it as part of my larger life and conversation.

So I've now been at St. John for 17 years. I am called the *cantor* and my long job title is *Director of Parish and School Music*. I direct our church choir, an intermediate and advanced handbell group in our school, our Wall of Sound instrumental ensemble, lead the music from the organ/piano for 85% of regular services, do worship planning, and play for weddings, funerals, and other community things. I also love my role as an adjunct professor at Concordia, Nebraska - teaching 8 organ students, Church Music Administration, Arranging, and Male Chorus create a good musical schedule. When it's on paper it seems like a lot, but I really, really enjoy the people I work with and the things I get to do.

Back to my congregation - here are some of the words that we've used to describe our culture of worship and music. This isn't an exhaustive list, but it's the basis for good order and helps us to sing together.

Liturgical. We receive and celebrate the patterns of worship that have come to us from those who have gone before us. The structure of the Divine Service (Gathering / C&A, Word, Meal, Sending) gives us a framework for receiving and responding to God's Word. The liturgies and hymns of *Lutheran Service Book* are our core resource - so while I'll be talking about things outside the hymnal, know that at least 80% of what we do on a given weekend comes from *LSB*. The hymnal is not a straight jacket - but the process of collecting and reviewing materials that are in line with the Biblical witness is *important* and worth considering.

Participatory. We hear, sing, taste, and see. God is working on us - we are not just spectators in this process. Our primary choir is the congregation, and our musical decisions and efforts revolve around that. The primary role of our other musical groups and musicians is to support the congregation's song - so that might mean the choir singing a stanza of a hymn, rehearsing a hymn in canon, or having instruments support what the organ or piano are doing. There are certainly times to listen too - choirs, soloists, and instruments often provide standalone pieces - but the congregation's song remains primary.

Traditionally contemporary. Repetition is necessary (of the good things that we receive from the past and will use again). But everything was new once - and if it happens now, it's contemporary! We don't learn the words to a song by hearing (or singing it) once. Do you think people heard *Sweet Caroline* once and knew to go "so good, so good, so good?" There is a careful balance of repeating *not enough* or *too much*. My friend Cantor Phil Magness says this is a time when "sanctified wisdom" needs to be considered. Part of our repetition is ritual music for the church year - when All Saints rolls around, you can count on singing *All of Us Go Down to the Dust* between the reading of the names. When we get to Ash Wednesday, we'll sing *Bless the Lord, My Soul* as the gathering song - and there will be no music provided, we'll pick it up together. As the candles are lit on Christmas Eve, the choir will sing *Before the Marvel of This Night*. Will these things probably change at some point? Probably! Are they useful now for drawing us into the narrative of God's active love? Absolutely!

Test kitchen. Our unique setting includes composers and writers sitting next to farmers and financial advisors. Everything that's in a hymnal or resource book was new at some point, and we're one of the places that likes to wrestle through the creative process. This is *not* license to say "anything goes," but just like in a test kitchen, people are still eating the food!

Team driven. I meet with our pastors and we go through the readings for the day. We discuss preaching themes and look to plan several months at a time. We select five hymns or songs that especially support the theme of the day, using resources we'll look at very soon. After we do our planning meetings, the next time the pastors see the information is when it comes to them in the bulletin the Wednesday before the upcoming Sunday. I do the bulletin layout and make final decisions on hymns and placement. Changes often need to be made after the initial planning meeting - but you can only change a plan if you have one. It's also very important for roles to be well-defined; our pastors are very supportive of me picking hymns and managing our rotation of liturgies and other ritual music. This is not the case in every church, and it's important for church musicians to know their responsibility, authority, and accountability. Ask questions and get answers. Side note: who's in charge of the donuts?

Printed for a reason. We have screens, but we don't use them for worship materials. Singing harmony is important to our congregation, and having a core resource in the hymnal (that's also used in our school and in our homes) is important to us. When we have non-hymnal texts and tunes we want people to be able to take them home, play them on the piano, and question us about words and phrases. The pastors reference hymns and liturgies often, and we want them to have a quick way to make these connections.

Question asking - and question answering. Has someone asked a question about why we slow down when we sing unaccompanied? Time to write a bulletin article. Has it been awhile since we talked about why we chant Psalms? Bring out the bulletin graphic. Are we struggling on a certain phrase of a hymn? Let's take a few minutes before the service starts to practice it together. *Insanity is repeating the same thing over and over and hoping for a different result.* Be an agent of change.

Subject to review. We don't always hit it out of the park. There are moments when something wasn't planned or executed well. We strive to own our mistakes, collaborate on fixes, and move forward. Listening to services after the fact is difficult, but it's the only way to get good feedback. Teamwork makes the dream work.

Relational. Get to know the people. Figure out what makes them tick. Let them get to know you. Find out their favorite hymns. Listen for ways you can support them. We sing folk songs at potlucks and occasionally sponsor hymn sings at the local brewery. I spend time with the Sunday School kids each week.

Makes hay while the sun shines. Blooms where planted. Plays with the cards that are dealt.

Buffet of Online Worship Resources and Tools (a.k.a. Paul's Idea Factory)

Planning Center Online - planningcenter.com

St. James Music Press - sjmp.com

LectionarySong Blog - lectionarysong.blogspot.com

Sing for Joy - singforjoy.org

CPH Online Music - digitalmusic.cph.org

Lutheran Service Builder - lutheranservicebuilder.com

Sundays and Seasons (ELCA) - sundaysandseasons.com

Corpus Christi Responsorial Psalms - <https://www.ccwatershed.org/chabanel/>

Center for Worship Leadership, Concordia Irvine (google it!)

Christian Copyright Licensing

OneLicense.net

Sing Boldly - singboldly.org

Printed Worship Resources and Tools

Psalms for All Seasons - Faith Alive Christian Resources

Music Sourcebooks (3) for *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*

WELS Hymnal - Christian Worship (2021) and Psalter

Church Music for the Care of Souls - Phillip Magness