

Calling for Songs of Loudest (and Quietest) Praise

Paul Soulek - paul.soulek@stjohnseward.org

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One church musician's methods for making the "puzzle pieces" of worship planning (text, music, context) fit together. Topics covered will include online resources for worship planning, ideas for teaching new ideas to your worshiping community, and methods for encouraging all worshipers to "sing boldly."

Please note and circle the four word caveat in the session description: 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. I came out of college with many answers - but I probably needed to do more listening and ask more questions. That hasn't changed.

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 - 6-8 organ students, the Church Music Administration course, Arranging, and Male Chorus round out a busy musical time. 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.

So here are the deliberate choices we've made at St. John as to who we are and what we're about. This isn't an exhaustive list, but it's the basis for good order.

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 works on us in this time - 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.

Repetitive. And new. 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!

A 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 gets 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!

Planned as a team. 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.

Generally printed. We have screens, but we don't use them for worship things. 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.

Communicative. 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.

The description of this workshop includes things about *text*, *music*, and *context*. These are three points that can help us evaluate music as it's used in the church:

Text: what do the words say

Music: what notes and rhythms are used

Context: how does this combination of text and music land on the ears of the people who are gathered here?

We could dive deeper...

Text: are these words true to the witness of Scripture? Do they point us to God and His objective love for His people? Or do they depend on me, my feelings and emotions at the moment? Are they something a large group of people can honestly say together? Or are they more a solo performance?

Music: what is the range of this piece? Is the tune "folksy" enough to be grasped by a group of generally untrained singers? Can it be sung unaccompanied, or does it rely on support from other instruments?

Context: how is this similar to the larger body of the congregation's existing song? Are there words or phrases that might be challenging or difficult to appreciate?

This all sounds really theoretical - and that's good! We need good theories in order to form good practices.

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

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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