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Music of the Church: An End to Division?

Fall Conference Report

by Nancy Raabe

TO MANY OF US, SUMMER MEANS CONFERENCES. It is that happy time of the year when we look forward to being challenged, stimulated, and inspired by gatherings of fellow workers in the kingdom. It is a time to share ideas and experiences, to drink in the wise words offered by mentors and peers, to join together as the body of Christ in worship that summons from us the very best we can offer using the gifts God has given us. We return home refreshed, renewed, and restored.

Yet in the Upper Midwest, as hearty souls brace for the icy blasts that are just around the corner, mid-autumn has also come to be a time of great vocational enrichment. We owe this to a pair of well-established conferences: the Vi Messerli Memorial Lectures in Church Music at Concordia University Chicago, held each year during the third week in October, and the Good Shepherd Institute at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, IN, which takes place two weeks later at the beginning of November.

The music of the church was the subject of close scrutiny at both events. It was addressed pointedly by Paul Westermeyer in his keynote address at the Lectures, and less directly at the Good Shepherd Institute, whose theme this year was "An Open Conversation on Music in the Church: A Look at the Elephant in the Room."

At Fort Wayne, Thomas Winger—who is president of Concordia Lutheran Theological Seminary, St. Catharines, Ontario, and who served on the liturgy committee for *Lutheran Service Book*—spoke on music in the liturgy. In "What's Right for the Rite? Theological Discernment in Matching Music to the Liturgy" he tried to establish an "axis of mandate" that indicates which parts of the liturgy are divinely mandated, which are the product of human decision, and which are mixed (or somewhere in between). In his chart, music appeared in both the "mixed" and the "human" columns: the use of music, he noted, is mandated in both the Old and New Testaments. But what we play, how we play it, and what instruments we use have no such mandate, so humans are left to make those decisions—putting us, it would seem, right back where we started.

Other presenters were Kent Burreson, dean of the chapel at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis (see his similar article in this issue); conductor and music educator Barbara Resch, who talked about how we are shaped by the music we listen to and helpfully pointed out that music designed with an affect (emotion) in mind has no place in worship; and composer Stephen Johnson, who gave us an engaging foray into the theological shortcomings of praise songs (the product of the sentiment-steeped pop style) and cautioned composers to strive to "communicate the poetry but to give our modern listeners something to grab onto," given that they are writing for ears dulled by popular culture.

Westermeyer's keynote talk at the Lectures in Church Music was titled "Lutheran Church Music in America: Roots and Identity, 1864 and 2014" (reflecting Concordia University Chicago's 150th anniversary next year; it will also be the 50th anniversary of the Lectures in Church Music). Yet this was no dry historical address. Rather, it opened before us the sometimes tortured and sometimes inspired

pathway that has led the church and its music to the sadly divided position in which we now stand. And best of all, Westermeyer proceeded to lay before us a clear road forward with signposts by which we may recover not only our identity but also our sanity.

He began in the morass of 1864 when one would have been hard-pressed to distinguish Lutheranism from Methodism. In the ensuing years a return to Lutheran confessionalism gathered steam, leading to Harriet Reynolds Krauth's landmark *Church Book* (with music) in 1872 and then the uniting influence of the Common Service in 1888. This confessional revival, Westermeyer affirmed, was centered on "congregational and choral song intrinsically linked by alternation" and was "conceived around word, font, and table, and as the song of the royal priests in continuity with the whole church."

Westermeyer moved us through the neoclassicism of Distler and Bender and the music of such composers as Hillert, Bouman, Pelz, and Schalk—who were identifiably of their age but also strongly rooted in history—to the 1960s when the civil rights movement brought strong reactions to the surrounding culture in which people "abandoned worship and took to the streets." Two decades later, however, the church found itself trying to align *with* the culture in the belief that that was what would attract more people. The presumption was that "people will sing easily that which they know well."

Projecting ahead to 2014, Westermeyer continued, we live in the wake of division, beset by unresolved disputes extending back into the 19th century and mired in disagreement on how or whether the church should respond to the surrounding culture. As a result, he said, "We have split. We have taught ourselves how to hate one another on the basis of differing musical styles."

Exacerbating this, Westermeyer said, is the way social media are being used for personal branding. This reinforces the culture of "like" that has invaded the church. "Choosing hymns has become about what we like. And we've divided the intergenerational body of Christ into pieces [family service, seeker service] under the assumption that there are different brands that will get more customers to buy your product."

Yet people know on a deep level they are not being nourished by worship that is based on personal preference, he continued, but they don't know how to express it. "We have set up a dishonest system that denies that disappointment exists," Westermeyer observed. "One of the church's great temptations is to pretend to rejoice, a forced spontaneity that music can attract people like TV commercials—but never admitting there is frustration."

But we know there is always hope. "Debates have required us to think more deeply and critically about worship," he said. In each time period the challenge is taken up, and the roots of our identity have been re-examined. "As the 19th century indicated, where roots and identity are strong, where identity has integrity, balance is found. In this way the ship moves forward and the church serves the world well."

So what might our road map look like? Westermeyer urged us to:

- Reinforce the conviction that worship takes place in continuity with the whole church and that we, as members of the church, share in its song.
- Look to the liturgical resources that have been bequeathed to us, through trial and error, across history. "We are not starting from scratch. We are called to strong singing, strong preaching, strong celebration of the sacraments."
- Be aware of ongoing sectarian challenges including the "like/dislike" that goes into worship planning; of pastors who conceive of the church as a noncollaborative business model; of music that tries to market an agenda; and of music that is really entertainment.
- Be prepared to respond to these challenges: remember that "the cloth of the liturgy protects us from idiosyncratic tendencies and the tyranny of leaders"; remember that "pastors are not CEOs; a good rule is that they are to be silent unless the liturgy calls them to speak or sing"; remember that church musicians in their settings are cantors, not entertainers or impresarios; and remember that "the music of the church is fundamentally vocal and communal."

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- Celebrate the Eucharist weekly and the prayer offices during the week with the fullness of our Lutheran heritage; support the pastoral office; support collaborative discussion; do the work of the church to the glory of God and resist anything that pretends to be a silver bullet; resist defining worship by instrumental style; resist the temptation to be exclusively local and contextual; support the use of the Revised Common Lectionary; and trust the Holy Spirit to sustain the church.

Both conferences included outstanding hymn festivals. At the Lectures the music of Walter Pelz was featured, with Pelz heroically holding forth at the organ for the entire service. Perhaps most affecting was his magnificent setting of "All the Earth with Joy Is Sounding," which sent into heavenly orbit Stephen Starke's soaring images of the resurrection ("He, the greater Jonah bounding/From the grave, His three-day bed,/Wins the prize:/Death's demise—/Songs of triumph fill the skies"). The hymn festival at the Good Shepherd Institute featured a string of typically creative, elegantly crafted settings by Kantor Kevin Hildebrand, including a joyous processional for trumpet and organ prefacing "Rejoice, O Pilgrim Throng" in which one could vividly see the high-mounted festal banner waving and sparkling in the sun.

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