

# Call to Worship

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# Singing God's Song Faithfully

Charlotte Kroeker

In 2003, Adam Nicolson gave us a remarkable story, *God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible*.<sup>1</sup> He also explored how the process itself might have contributed to its continuing use from 1611 to the present. King James did not have particularly pure religious motives for the project, nor did he seek assistance only from the religious sector. Rather, he intended to achieve the finest of products. He sought the best scholars, theologians, poets, translators, historians, linguists, and writers he could find to create a Bible that has served English-speaking Christians for centuries.

A lesson can be learned here regarding the preparation of Christian worship. Text and song have been the elements of worship since Old Testament times. Psalms and hymns have carried the story of our faith forward from generation to generation. We are indebted to saints before us who have penned music and word, teachers who have passed on the craft of music, and leaders who have inspired us to use the gift of music for our praise and prayer. We have rich resources from our past with more new resources than ever before. How can we faithfully steward these gifts in singing God's song? Perhaps King James' example of a process can help. He sought the best.

## OFFERING OUR BEST

1. *Our best is the accumulated wisdom of the gifted people in our midst.* We do our best when we identify those people who are most gifted musically to lead and discern musical gifts in others. First Corinthians 12 is helpful here in identifying "many gifts but one spirit."

We are the strongest community of faith when we tap the best expertise in our midst for the betterment of the entire community.

2. *Our best is the accumulated wisdom of the disciplines of music and theology.* When asked how to find a musician for a church, I often ask, "Who is the best musician in your community?" Finding the best musician with faith commitments and a passion for using musical gifts for worship often yields a good result. A well-trained, professional musician with the tools and resources needed for church music can access the rich treasure of the accumulated history of music of the Christian faith as well as incorporate new and authentic musical vehicles for worship. Presbyterians have long valued education for their ministers. Educated musicians are the necessary component to complete the leadership for our worship. Further, pastors must work with musicians to integrate music with theology for worship to make sense as a whole.
3. *Our best is a congregation equipped to fulfill its task in worship.* If liturgy is indeed the work of the people, then what is it the people need to know in order to do their work? Mark Chaves, in his book *Congregations in America*,<sup>2</sup> reports that at least 20 minutes of a 70-minute worship service involves music. One-third of an average worship service relies on the congregation's ability to participate in music in the same way they interpret spoken word or read words of a text in liturgy. How do we equip our

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congregation to sing and to participate in the musical offerings of worship? Is some degree of musical literacy not a goal worthy of consideration for understanding and carrying our faith just as reading literacy might be?

4. *Our best is the development of a repertoire of music within a congregation that has lasting value over the years, music that can provide nourishment during the Christian journey.* Just as Scriptures become a primary place of reference for a Christian, the music that carries our theology becomes a primary reference as well. Music is the vehicle that creates memory and helps us to retain theological truths. The more worthy the vehicle is musically, theologically, and liturgically, the more capacity it will have to carry the deeper elements of our faith and the more lasting it will be.
5. *Our best is the development of leaders of music for future generations.* In a recent study of successful models of music programs,<sup>3</sup> effective music and worship leaders were identified early in childhood and mentored by adults through their developmental and educational years. Spiritual and musical development are processes that cannot be accomplished overnight. It takes years of persistent nurturing, education, and reflection to produce the kinds of leaders who are most effective. It is important to start as early as possible. As stewards of our heritage, it is our responsibility to provide for the future too.

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#### ACKNOWLEDGING MUSIC AS A DISCIPLINE ALONGSIDE THEOLOGY

The body of Christian music from earliest times to the present is remarkable in its depth and breadth. It was the church that transmitted the music of worship from generation to generation and preserved some of the finest musical treasures, whether sacred or secular. The Christian church has a wealth of repertoire from which current Christians can choose to enrich present-day worship.

Church musicians have been engaged in music-making for hundreds of years, working alongside clergy to give voice to the prayers of the people through song. These musicians have set Scripture to music in myriad ways for choirs and congregations, and have developed a performance practice (an appropriate means of offering music in worship) that gives depth and meaning to liturgy for worshipers today.

Music is a discipline that functions in worship just like music functions elsewhere in our society. But whether we **acknowledge** that music works that way when we use it in worship is a matter for discussion.

For example, do we require the same education and screening of our musicians as our



clergy? If the “maintenance of divine worship” is one of the Great Ends of the Church in the *Book of Order* and music is at least one-third of that process, do the qualifications of our musicians not have merit in our consideration? What about their compensation? Further, do our clergy have adequate education in music to fulfill their responsibility for maintenance of music in divine worship? Do clergy anticipate preparation and planning for music as they do for sermons?

Presbyterians have a reputation for valuing education. We know that our seminaries do a superb job of preparing ministers. We also know that the curriculum for the Master of Divinity degree is exceedingly demanding and that little time is available for worship and music training.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps by default, music planning and implementation are given to musicians, most of whom are part-time and few of whom are trained as church musicians. What happens educationally in the music of the church falls far below what we expect of educational standards otherwise.

Is it surprising that we find difficulty in determining coherence in churches’ music programs when pastors likely do not have background in music, a field they are charged to oversee in worship, and music leaders are trained in fields other than church music, if they are trained at all? Add to this a congregation steeped in a consumer-driven culture, who has its own preferences for what it expects of a music program in worship. Then, omit regular planning sessions between pastor and musician that are necessary for building coherent worship services and provide lead time for musicians to rehearse adequately. How can we sing God’s song faithfully in this situation? Unless music is acknowledged as a serious component of worship, requiring thoughtful preparation by leadership, it is unlikely music can be a worthy carrier of praise and prayer.

Musical expertise is needed to know how to judge the capacity of a congregation to sing a hymn or psalm and how to introduce new music for its participation. Likewise, how much might a congregation miss in not hearing Gilbert Martin’s anthem setting of “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” or Thomas Tallis’ “If Ye Love Me, Keep My Commandments,” sung by those gifted in the choir, or children singing a Natalie Sleeth anthem, or the use of a Kyrie from another part of the world during Lent that demonstrates our communal cry for mercy with the larger church. Or, how enriched is a

congregation when talent is recognized, developed, and appropriate repertoire is given to young and volunteer musicians that is incorporated seamlessly into corporate worship of the community? While everyone is commanded to make a joyful noise, and one hopes that musicians are part of the congregation, a church needs strong music leaders for these complex tasks.

Singing faithfully involves the big picture, and prepared, educated, wise leaders know how music engages faithful worship. Educated leaders will understand the dual roles of music and theology, and how each contributes to the music of worship. Educated musicians will unleash and encourage the abilities of the congregation so that their voices and gifts empower communal praise and prayer. Wise clergy will work closely with such musicians to find the best music to accompany theological texts for the day, creating worship that addresses the whole person—heart, mind, and body.

#### UNDERSTANDING THE IMPORTANCE OF MUSICAL DECISIONS IN SHAPING SPIRITUAL FORMATION

The past few years have brought us new awareness of the power of music. We have Baby Mozart, Baby Bach, Baby Beethoven, and their relatives, along with knowledge that music contributes to intellectual development. Music therapy offers healing for mind and body. Marketing experts use the suggestive nature of music to tap our purchasing instincts. Educators understand the capacity of music to help children learn facts and concepts. We watch Alzheimer’s and stroke patients retain the capacity to sing and play an instrument much longer than they have capacity to speak words or carry on conversation. Music creates memory that is more lasting than words alone. Music takes us beyond the periphery to a deeper place where mystery and metaphor live happily, as Shakespeare describes:

And this our life exempt from public haunt  
Finds tongues in trees books in the  
running brooks  
sermons in stones and good in every  
thing.  
I would not change it.<sup>5</sup>

A good friend said, “We are what we sing.” The music we encounter in worship is important for at least two reasons: (1) We are much more likely to



remember text associated with music than text that is only spoken; and (2) the theology of a text can only be conveyed as deeply as the music will allow. Trite music will diminish the text associated with it. Quality music and text will be worthy of repetition and can become part of our being, to be drawn from our memory many times over.

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Are we thoughtful about choosing music that represents the whole of our history and theology, music that can delve into the richness and breadth of the treasure of what is available to us? Do we use best practices of music education to help congregations sing well? Do we combine knowledge of melody, harmony, key relationships, texture, and compositional style to create beautiful worship services? Just as we use grammar and sentence construction to form spoken worship, so the grammar of music functions (or does not function) in worship.

If we are choosing music casually, we may miss an important experience in Advent such as the singing of a hymn like "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence":

Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with  
fear and trembling stand;  
Ponder nothing earthly minded, for with  
blessing in His hand,  
Christ our God to earth descendeth, our full  
homage to demand.<sup>6</sup>

Not exactly the language of casual conversation, nor is the tune likely to be in the ears of someone who has not heard it in church. But if a thoughtful clergy person and musician choose it to accompany Scriptures in the lections for Advent, situate it appropriately in the service and prepare the congregation to sing it (perhaps by introducing

it with the choir or an instrument), the text is powerful and memorable. This singable, ethereal tune and text from the fourth century will find its place with twenty-first-century Christians, bringing the mystery and wonder of Advent anew.

Likewise, other hymns of prior generations offer valuable lessons about faith journeys that we would not otherwise know. "If Thou but Trust in God to Guide Thee" will be most accessible with good musical and theological leadership. But how much we will miss for not knowing this hymn!

If thou but trust in God to guide thee,  
With hopeful heart through all thy ways,  
God will give strength, whate'er betide thee,  
To bear thee through the evil days.  
Who trusts in God's unchanging love  
Builds on the rock that nought can move.<sup>7</sup>

How often we need to hear that second stanza,

Only be still, and wait God's leisure  
In cheerful hope with heart content  
To take whate'er thy Keeper's pleasure  
And all-discerning love hath sent.  
No doubt our inmost wants are clear  
To One who holds us always dear.

Then, life surely cannot be complete without singing the third stanza with a community of faith:

Sing, pray, and swerve not from God's ways,  
But do thine own part faithfully,  
Trust the rich promises of grace,  
So shall they be fulfilled in thee.  
God never yet forsook at need the soul  
secured by trust indeed.

How important to choose music with lasting value! Granted, we cannot always know what music will last. But we do know what music from the past has lasted and can take lessons from that. We know what general rules guide good music composition. We know what constitutes singable melodies and strong harmonies. While we may not get it right every time, we can summon our best people and gifts to make the best decisions we can. Our choices matter.



## PREPARING THE CONGREGATION FOR ITS PARTICIPATION

What do the people need in order to participate fully in worship? More specifically, what is it that people need to know in order to sing God's song faithfully? If their participation is vital to Christian worship, so is the answer to this question. Don Saliers writes,

The gathering of a Christian community to sing praises to God seems such a simple act, and it has been going on for nearly two millennia. But we should not take this practice for granted. It needs to be learned and nurtured and taught. And it needs to keep developing, as it has done through the centuries and continues to do today.<sup>8</sup>

Garrison Keillor, humorist and self-identified Lutheran, often speaks about singing in church and relates it to the nature of community as in this piece attributed to him, "Singing with the Lutherans":

Lutherans are bred from childhood to sing in four-part harmony. It's a talent that comes from sitting on the lap of someone singing alto or tenor or bass and hearing the harmonic intervals by putting your little head against that person's rib cage. It's natural for Lutherans to sing in harmony. We're too modest to be soloists, too worldly to sing in unison. When you're singing in the key of C and you slide into the A7th and D7th chords, all two hundred of you, it's an emotionally fulfilling moment. I once sang the bass line of Children of the Heavenly Father in a room with about three thousand Lutherans in it; and when we finished, we all had tears in our eyes, partly from the promise that God will not forsake us, partly from the proximity of all those lovely voices. By our joining in harmony, we somehow promise that we will not forsake each other. I do believe this: People, these Lutherans, who love to sing in four-part harmony are the sort of people you could call up when you're in deep distress. If you're dying, they'll comfort you. If you're lonely, they'll talk to you. And if you're hungry, they'll give you tuna salad!

All too often the congregation's voice is forgotten. Paul Westermeyer reminds us that the

director of music is the leader of the *people's song*, known as a cantor in the Lutheran tradition.<sup>10</sup> The song belongs to the people. However, the task of the cantor is to develop the *voice* of the congregation. In our era of performers and audiences, of microphones and speakers, of stages and spotlights, the idea of the gathered body of Christians being the primary actors of worship is a bit odd. Yet, that is precisely the foundation of Christian worship, affirmed by Vatican II documents and embraced by all Christian denominations:

The Church earnestly desires that all the faithful be led to that full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations called for by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" is their right and duty by reason of their baptism.<sup>11</sup>

So how might a congregation and its leaders go about claiming this right and performing this duty?

**Identifying the best leaders and supporting them with resources needed to do their jobs.** In my forthcoming book, *The Sounds We Offer: Achieving Excellence in Church Music*,<sup>12</sup> I report finding a consistent characteristic of the churches I studied: They searched for both pastoral and musical leaders who would support and sustain the music program in their churches. In all cases, it was the *congregations* who made sure the song continued through changes in leadership, that instruments were provided and maintained, that new generations of children were taught the music of the church, and the best possible musicians were in place to give voice to the praise and prayer of the congregation. The current leaders might be in charge at the moment, but the music of the church was important to that congregation long before the current leaders arrived and would be long after they departed.

**Learning a broad and deep repertoire of hymnody that resides in the memories of the congregation.** Granted, this will be different for every congregation and will be changing over time. Every congregation is situated in a different cultural and ethnic context and has different musical gifts. Experience shows that the life of a hymnal is about twenty to thirty years. Yet a series of hymnals in any one denomination will share a surprising



number of the same hymns, as will a variety of denominational hymnals. Familiar hymns can form a basis for the ongoing repertoire and set a standard for other hymns to be added to the collection. Then, a wealth of new hymns await exploration. The people of God have always found new ways to give song to their faith. We must encourage gifted writers and composers to continue that stream of song. However, a typical congregation knows only fifty to 100 hymns,<sup>13</sup> limiting its ability to express faith musically. A treasure of new music awaits congregations in their existing hymnals. Introducing music that has not been screened as carefully as the hymns in the hymnals requires extra work so that the “best” standard is maintained.

#### **Teaching the congregation the art of singing.**

Singing is a physical act requiring breath and movement. Basic understanding of how the body produces sound is one aspect of singing. Reading music is another—sophisticated knowledge is not necessary, but movement of pitches and some understanding of simple note values help. Perhaps a twenty-first-century equivalent of the early American singing schools is an option! Bulletin notes, Sunday school classes, adult education offerings—all are possibilities for such education. Of course, the very best place to begin is with children. A graded choir program for children and a companion curriculum for Sunday school to learn hymns are good places to begin.

#### **Providing the acoustic environment for singing.**

Perhaps the greatest deterrent to good congregational singing is a dead acoustic. Hard surfaces create the best sound environment for singing, where voices can blend easily and no individual voices sound alone. Even in acoustically dead environments, simple remedies such as painting some surfaces and removing carpet can help.

**Accompanying with sensitivity.** Instrumentalists who are too loud or do not “breathe” with singers will discourage singing. Good accompaniment facilitates, but does not dominate, the “voice of the people,” helping the people listen to one another rather than to the accompaniment.

**Seeking out capable musicians in the congregation to give richness to the song.** Choirs, instrumentalists, children, those with special musical gifts can add enormously to the song of the people because they come from the people. When woven

carefully into the fabric of the music of worship, they provide a richness indicated by “many gifts but one spirit.” When added to a verse of a hymn, a descant, a prelude, or offertory—all reflect the tapestry of the congregation and give cause for celebration and thanksgiving.

## **BUILDING OUR FUTURE**

Spiritual and musical development requires years of training and discipline. It is important that we identify young people with gifts early and nurture their development. Children develop much of their ability to hear and match pitch during their early years. To learn music as a child is very important. While beginning as a teenager or young adult is possible, most cannot recover the time or skills lost as children.

In 2006, the Knight Foundation released statistics from a study of fifteen orchestras across the United States from 1994 to 2004.<sup>14</sup> I will lift conclusions from that study that have application here:

- Despite predictions of the death of classical music and its audience, there is healthy support for the art form. The problems of orchestras stem not from the music they play but from the delivery systems they employ.
- An orchestra cannot be all things to all people. The mission of an orchestra needs to be clear, focused, and achievable.
- Free programming and outreach do not turn people into ticket buyers. They simply turn them into consumers of free programming.
- There is growing evidence that participatory music education—primarily instrumental lessons, ensemble, and choral programs—will turn people into ticket buyers later in life.
- There is no evidence that exposure programs for children—especially the large concert format offerings for school children—will turn them into ticket buyers as adults.<sup>15</sup>

Some may argue that the church has no relationship to the symphony orchestra. I contend we are dealing with a treasury of music that historically parallels that of orchestral music. The demise of our music has been predicted along with that of the orchestra.<sup>16</sup> In the church, we affirm a gospel that is 2,000+ years old and have a repertoire of sacred music that goes back centuries. (Recall the hymn from the fourth century mentioned earlier



in this article.) There is evidence that hymnals are still in use in churches, organs are still installed and maintained (72 percent of churches according to the recent *Presbyterian Hymnal* survey),<sup>17</sup> the majority of choirs are still found in churches (80 percent according to ChorusAmerica),<sup>18</sup> and more live music is made in churches than in all other venues combined in our society.<sup>19</sup> Despite the predictions of the death of church music as we have always known it, church music is still alive and at least somewhat well. Perhaps we need to examine why and where it is working and how it could work better where it is not. As with orchestras, perhaps an examination of our delivery systems is due.

If an orchestra cannot be all things to all people, what is the expectation of the church in this regard? In the study of churches with model music programs, the churches did not try to be all things to all people but built programs that were linked to traditions important to their congregations. They did not try to “attract” worshipers by offering music as an attempt to please outsiders. Rather, they sought to make meaningful music accessible to their congregations.<sup>20</sup> Mark Chaves, in conclusions to his latest National Congregations Study, indicates that U.S. churches seem to be a mirror of culture rather than a leader or alternative to it.<sup>21</sup> Is it possible that churches could be more faithful to the gospel by being faithful to their musical traditions while also providing light and salt to their communities?

Free programming offered by the orchestra required little commitment of its participants, programming it expected would continue to be offered for free. Likewise, Willow Creek Church,

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one of the much-admired megachurches outside Chicago, learned in its twenty-five-year review that it was good at attracting seekers but not in making disciples. Seeker-services were designed to be inoffensive, devoid of religious symbols, and offered in a theater-like performance auditorium that required little of attendees.<sup>22</sup> The church's study findings speak directly to liturgy as the work of the people: If the work of the people is done by someone else, will it make disciples and promote spiritual growth? As our earlier hymn reminds us, “Christ our God to earth descendeth, our full homage to demand.”

Perhaps the next findings of the orchestral study are most important for the future of the church. What will turn our young people into “ticket buyers” for the church? What early musical involvement will help them invest themselves in the church as adults? If we continue the parallel comparison with the orchestra, the answer is not just taking them to observe and hear good worship and music. The answer is to involve them directly in participatory worship and in making good music. Teach them music skills. Help them find their voices. Imprint basic hymns, psalms and service music in their memories. Make a place for them to lead worship. Identify the potential leaders of song early so that they can be nurtured spiritually and musically along the way into adulthood. As Michelangelo is purported to have said about a stone, “I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.”

## CODA

Putting lofty principles to work in actual congregations can get messy. But something wonderful happens when we sing together that makes it all worthwhile. We knew it two Sundays ago when, in the silence following a rousing hymn, a single child's voice called out from the back of the church, “Yeah!” She spoke for us all.



## Notes

1. Adam Nicolson, *God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003).
2. Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
3. Charlotte Kroeker, *The Sounds We Offer: Achieving Excellence in Church Music* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, in press).
4. The Association for Reformed and Liturgical Worship invited representatives from seminaries across the United States to the annual meeting in 2008. Responses indicated little study in liturgy and virtually no study in music were represented in the curriculum of their institutions. These findings are similar to those of other studies.
5. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*. Act 2, Scene 1, with thanks to Arlo Duba for this reference.
6. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), no. 5.
7. *Ibid.*, no. 282.
8. Don Saliers, "Singing Our Lives," in *Practicing Our Faith*, Dorothy C. Bass, ed. (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 1997), 184.
9. Garrison Keillor, "Singing with the Lutherans," ©1999 Garrison Keillor. Used with permission. All rights reserved.
10. Paul Westermeyer, *The Church Musician* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).
11. Pope Paul VI, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Vatican II. Promotion of Liturgical Instruction and Active Participation* (Vatican Archives, 1963), 14.
12. Charlotte Kroeker, *The Sounds We Offer: Achieving Excellence in Church Music* (Herndon, VA: Alban Press, in press).
13. In the current *Presbyterian Hymnal* committee survey, 50 percent or more of the churches sang eighty-five of the 605 hymns at least once in the past year. Fifty percent or more of the churches did not sing over 400 of the hymns in the 1990 hymnal.
14. Thomas Wolf, Wolf, Keens & Co. *The Search for Shining Eyes: Audiences, Leadership and Change in the Symphony Orchestra Field* (Miami, FL: John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, September 2006).
15. *Ibid.*, 6.
16. William Easum, *Dancing with Dinosaurs: Ministry in a Hostile and Hurting World* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 81.
17. "Summary of Results," p. 1, from [www.presbyterianhymnal.org/ResearchResults](http://www.presbyterianhymnal.org/ResearchResults).
18. 216,000 of 270,000 choruses nationwide are religious choruses according to *The Chorus Impact Study 2009*, p. 4, available at [www.chorusamerica.org](http://www.chorusamerica.org).
19. Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 188.
20. Kroeker, *The Sounds We Offer*.
21. Duke University, Mark Chaves, "American Congregations at the Beginning of the 21st Century," National Congregations Study, 2009, p. 10-11, available at [www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/Docs/NCSII\\_report\\_final.pdf](http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/Docs/NCSII_report_final.pdf).
22. Greg L. Hawkins, Cally Parkinson, *Reveal: Where Are You?* (South Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Association, 2007).