

Suggestions For Furthering Congregational Appreciation Of The Better Lutheran Hymns*

By Ralph D. Gehrke

Antiphonal Singing

One of the most frequent suggestions at our Church Music Seminars for furthering the appreciation of the better Lutheran hymns in our congregations has been the recommendation of Antiphonal (Alternate, Responsive) Singing between congregation and choir. Antiphonal singing of the hymns may be used whether the choir sings in harmony or unison, whether it is small or large, whether it is musically far-advanced or just beginning. This method of singing the chorales was the universal practice in the great age of Lutheran music, is again common in many parts of Germany today, and has even been used recently to great advantage in some of our own congregations.

What are the advantages of Antiphonal Singing of hymns?

1. It enables the congregation to learn the better hymns more easily (by alternate listening and singing);
2. It focuses attention on the text of the hymn;
3. It helps the choir feel its proper relationship to the congregation—a part of the worshipping congregation rather than a kind of outside group that is giving a performance to please an audience;
4. It enables a congregation to sing all verses of such a great chorale as “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice” without destroying the magnificent unity of its thought by cutting off after four or five verses;
5. It enables that part of the congregation that has been musically trained (the choir) to interpret the message of particular verses of the hymn in the wonderful settings of the old Lutheran masters (e.g. Bach’s excellent harmonization of verse six of “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice”).

Hymn-Sings

Antiphonal singing alone—valuable as it is—will not, however, accomplish a revival in the use of the better Lutheran chorales. We must face the fact that the old Church modes and the carried rhythm of many chorales pose more problems to the modern congregation than do the flattened-out melodies of a later date, even though in the end the congregation may learn to love the chorales much more because of their genuine musical verve and superior Gospel-preachment.

Though special song services for the purpose of learning three or four new hymns can be arranged on occasion, and though the meetings of various groups in the congregation offer opportunities for practicing the better chorales, something more is certainly needed. One of the most effective methods for cultivating an appreciation in the entire congregation is that of holding Hymn-Sings after the Sunday service at various times in the Church Year (eg. during Advent in preparation for Christmas; in Pre-Lent in preparation for Lent; during the joyous Easter Season; etc.)

Suggested length for such a Hymn-Sing is about ten minutes. It may begin immediately after the Benediction (*before* the postlude and the accompanying dispersing of the congregation). After a few *brief*, well-prepared words of introduction (concerning the basic thought of the text or interesting origin of the hymn, etc.), the choir may sing the entire hymn for the congregation, and then phrases of it (to lead the congregation). If the choir alternates with the congregation according to a pattern arranged in advance by the “director” (pastor,

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organist, choir-director, or anyone else qualified and called to do so), it will be surprising in how short a time the congregation can learn even otherwise difficult melodies—and that with joy and enthusiasm. The Easter Sequence-hymn “Christ Is Arisen” (L.H. 187) is well within the reach of every congregation and can be sung for instance as a response to the Epistle Lesson by the whole congregation on every Sunday of the Easter Season. Such a custom gives an Easter tone to the entire season that few other customs can give.

Practical Demonstration

At our first Seminar in Farmington Pastor Kurt Eggerr gave a practical demonstration of a Hymn-Sing, using the choir of Immanuel congregation to lead our Seminar group in the alternate-singing of hymn 247, “God the Father, Be Our Stay.” He pointed out that this is one of our finest, but now unfortunately less-sung Lutheran chorales—a hymn that asks in simple wise for “the big things in Christianity” (God’s help, forgiveness of sins, life, protection from the devil, courageous faith). He also pointed out the fine manner in which the sturdy melody fits this sturdy prayer of the Church Militant.

Lines 1–2 of this hymn correspond musically to lines 3–4; likewise lines 5–8 correspond to lines 9–12. Hence these are natural alternate parts, and so the choir sang lines 1–2, while we, as the “congregation,” sang in response lines 3–4; again the choir sang lines 5–8, while we responded with lines 9–12. Finally all joined together in the confident and jubilant ending of lines 13 and 14: “Amen, Amen, this be done; So sing we Hallelujah!” Another way of practising this chorale might be to alternate between choir and congregation in every line (choir 1, cong. 2, choir 3, cong. 4, etc.) until both join together in the last two lines. If it began in this manner, a congregation would soon learn to sing and appreciate not only the melody but also the text of this great chorale.

Steps Toward Introducing Antiphonal Singing

In the ensuing discussion at Farmington as to what steps are to be taken in introducing Antiphonal Singing, it was pointed out that a genuine appreciation of and a love for the chorales and the Gospel they proclaim is the primary requisite. If such love and appreciation is present with the pastors and church musicians, then it will be fairly easy to lead the congregation in that direction. The practical problems will be solved. For instance, how shall the congregation be made aware of which verses of a given hymn it is to sing and which the choir? *This can be done in the Sunday bulletin*—the congregation soon learns to watch for this. The first times the pastor could simply announce it or point the people to the bulletin. Or the information could be placed directly on the hymn board, if large enough. Simply the number of the hymn and under it the various verses the *congregation* is to sing. Possibly colored numbers could be used for those hymns to be sung antiphonally. After the custom of Antiphonal Singing is no longer strange in a congregation, no extra helps may be necessary. The congregation will know from the way the organ is stopped down at the end of a given verse that the choir is to sing the next alone.

The practical problems involved in introducing and using Antiphonal Singing are not great. A little effort will be well rewarded here.