

The Lutheran Church Choir Today and Tomorrow

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[What is the State of the Choir in the Congregations of Our Synod?]

Since we are together today to consider this topic (as it was first given to me and later focused for me), I believe we share concerns. It is probable that all of us are interested in reviewing the current practice of choir involvement in worship in our WELS congregations. In fact, as I heard from many of you recently, several made reference to studies within some districts of the synod which asked choir directors to tell of their church choir's work in some detail. The interest reaches beyond a mere desire to know, however. Perhaps some are concerned that things are not what they ought to be. Undoubtedly, many are concerned that church choirs and directors receive the support and encouragement they need to function as well as possible in service of their Lord and his people.

It is important to "know what is" before making assumptions and attempting to prescribe "fixes" to problems. Generalizations do not acknowledge the exceptions that usually exist (perhaps even in large numbers). It seems to me that the only way we can know for sure about the actual work of choirs within the WELS is through a thorough survey, as scientifically controlled, administered and evaluated as it can be, to yield accurate information that describes "what is." It may be that the survey which some have used can serve the purpose. For the present, however, it is good to encourage and support, providing ideas and materials that can help dedicated but busy choir directors carry on this important work in joy, to the best of their God-given abilities.

To be sure, directors throughout our church labor faithfully and diligently out of love for God, and he blesses that labor. Still, I believe that some wonder if our Lutheran church choirs are tending, in greater numbers, to function in ways that do not reflect the uniquely Lutheran understanding of worship. Again, without hard data it is uncomfortable, at best, to speak in sweeping generalities about what is wrong (or right, for that matter) about the practice of church choirs in our synod. I suspect, though, that enough people have had enough experiences to be rightly concerned.

Have some choir directors drifted from the basic understandings that have guided Lutheran worship and church music since the 16th century, or have some never acquired these understandings? Have backgrounds, traditions and practices that are not Lutheran clouded our perception of the choir's role and function in Lutheran worship? Are we losing our rich worship heritage, or is it already lost? Is a new "plugged-in pop" style threatening to change our worship dramatically? Are diminishing interest, numbers and musical abilities making it too difficult for the choir to serve as fully as it should? Did Pastor Joel Gerlach hit the nail on the head when in his Sept. 15, 1991 editorial in *The Northwestern Lutheran* he said "the number of churches willing to sacrifice their heritage to accommodate those who want to be entertained is growing steadily?" Does he mean WELS churches, too?

These are samples of questions I have heard. Some may lack foundation, but I think they rise from real experiences that suggest that there is a lack of understanding or awareness about the church choir's historic functioning in Lutheran worship, perhaps among many church choir directors and worship leaders. Or, if understanding and awareness are present, perhaps some challenge these practices as being outdated and inappropriate to the worship life of soon-to-be 21st century Christians. Still others may think they lack the knowledge, confidence, resources or time to help their choirs to do more than an anthem a month. Practices rooted in history may now seem brand new and perhaps foreboding to directors and choir members alike.

In eager anticipation of *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*, which will serve our church for many decades, it is good to consider the present state of choirs in congregations of our synod and to be reminded of those traditional functions which Lutheran church choirs have enjoyed for centuries. The three main orders of worship which will appear in *CW* offer the choir ample opportunity to assume its historic role of SERVICE. This service, which follows historic models, need not be dull and boring. Rather, the choir will find vibrant vehicles through which it may send its prayers, praises and thanks heavenward and also assist the congregation in its worship.

Lutheran Worship and the Choir

Lutheran worship is God-centered, not man-centered. Worship forms and choir participation in various form are not prescribed in Scripture. It seems good, then, to take our lead from Martin Luther, who desired to retain all God-pleasing and useful elements of the Mass, adding opportunities for the congregation to participate musically in the order of worship.

Music has been known and appreciated among Lutheran Christians as the creation of God, not people, given as God's gift to proclaim his saving Word and to offer prayer, praise, thanks and adoration to him. To Luther, music in worship was to continue to be liturgical song, no matter how modest the musical resources. Hence, the choir and the congregation sang songs that were part of the structure and order of worship. The congregation sang hymns related to the parts of the ordinary of the Mass, especially the Kyrie, Gloria in Excelsis, Sanctus and Agnus Dei, and, in that way, was enabled to participate in the liturgy. The choir helped the congregation in learning and singing the gradually expanding corpus of hymns. In addition, the choir was given the proper songs which were beyond the normal capabilities of the congregation, largely because of regularly changing texts. Finally, the choir sang attendant music that permitted jubilation and praise in response to God's Word. Music was directed to God and at the same time served to build the faith of the believers who were worshipping. Therefore, the Lutheran church choir serves and helps God's people as it:

1. Supports and enriches the congregational singing of hymns, including the teaching of new hymns; as it,
2. Brings variety and richness to congregational worship and aids the thrust and momentum of the liturgy by singing portions of the propers assigned to it; and as it
3. Presents attendant music that is appropriate to the service and to the choir's capabilities and limitations.

Supporting the Singing of Hymns

It is understandable that the Lutheran church choir of the WELS may have lost sight of the first of these functions; to help the congregation to learn and sing hymns. With a hymnal in place since the early 1940's, the comfortableness that has developed with it, and limited inclination and opportunity to examine new hymns, the choir has not been needed so importantly in this area. With the coming of a new hymnal, I see a critical need for our church choirs to take the leadership role in teaching and supporting the new hymns found therein. Now directors will have a clear reason to devote regular portions of rehearsals to learning hymns. Now they will provide real help as they plan and carry out ways to introduce and teach new and altered hymns to the congregation. Here they will offer valuable assistance to the congregation as it worships.

Our hymnody is a precious gift of God through which he teaches, encourages, comforts and builds up his flock of believers, showing them how they should call upon him and rely on his help as they travel through this life to their eternal home in heaven. Christians serving in the choir also reap rich spiritual benefits from regular rehearsal of hymns, even the most familiar ones. Certainly hymns provide an excellent repertoire for the choir's solo songs as well. Adult and children's choirs love to learn and sing the treasures of Lutheran hymnody, finding strength and comfort in those texts and melodies into old age. Choirs should seize every opportunity to make the present and the new hymnals their "choirbooks."

One special way in which choirs can prepare and sing hymns on a regular basis is in partnership with the congregation through the Hymn of the Day. This normally familiar hymn has been sung in an alternating manner for centuries, and in practice has been an additional proper song. Suggestions for this involvement will be given later in this presentation.

Related to the service the choir provides in supporting congregational hymn singing is the support and assistance it leads in singing congregational songs and responses of the liturgy. When *Christian Worship*

appears, choirs will enjoy the opportunity to learn the new songs and responses of the liturgy that are assigned to the congregation. The choir will be prepared, then, to take the lead, helping the congregation to learn them quickly and to become confident and comfortable in its participation.

The Choir's Proper Songs

If regular time is allotted in rehearsals to the preparation of those portions of the liturgy entrusted to the choir, eventually the manner of rendition and the musical content will become familiar and more easy to prepare and present well. The two important opportunities for service in this area are through the Psalm and the Verse. An additional opportunity could exist in the Seasonal Response of the services of "Morning Praise" (Matins) and "Evening Prayer" (Vespers). Again, with the arrival of *Christian Worship*, choirs will have an especially golden opportunity and responsibility to introduce or re-introduce the sung psalm into Lutheran worship in the WELS. Over 50 psalms with tuneful refrains will be included in the hymnal. Further, places for the sung psalm are prescribed in every order of worship included in *Christian Worship*. Until the hymnal appears, numerous resources exist for the choir to use as it begins to reinstate the sung psalm into our worship. Suggestions for performance options are given later in this presentation, and they hint that there is considerable room for variety of expression in psalm singing.

Resources presently are available for choirs that wish to sing the appointed verse in worship services. Plans are being developed to provide verse settings that will correspond to *CW* as well. These texts, Scripture verses normally with Alleluias, are set simply and tunefully and provide additional focus to the central message proclaimed from God's Word. Further information about the verse is given later in this presentation as well.

Attendant Music

I believe that church choirs have prepared attendant music for worship on a regular basis for many years. Perhaps this has been the exclusive mark of many choirs—to present an anthem, motet, chorus or hymn at an appointed time in the service. I trust that most directors consider the selection of these pieces very carefully, aiming to fit the text and music of the choir's song to the theme, central thought or Gospel message of the day. It seems that the possibility of making that connection clearly is enhanced when the choir director is planning to have the choir sing the psalm and verse as well. Involvement in the psalm and verse will bring the director closer to the whole proclamation of the Word of God for that day.

As the choir wishes to present attendant music, it serves best when it prepares an appropriate response to the Gospel and, when the Sacrament of Holy Communion is celebrated, it prepares fitting music for the beginning and end of the distribution. It is suggested that as Gospel responses fit the meaning of the Gospel lesson, they also address God in a mode in which believers address him in the Psalter; with expressions of thanks, praise, petition, trust, commitment or confession. With this in mind, Psalm texts, hymn texts or free texts can serve. The choral response at this time and in this manner aids in making the Gospel lesson a focal point in worship, and thus permits this response to function liturgically. A further discussion of the Gospel response and choral music for communion is found later in this presentation.

All attendant music should be within the musical limitations of the choir, but may also explore the full capabilities of the choir. When time constraints limit the amount of music the choir can prepare, the Gospel response should be considered to be of lower priority than the psalm, verse, or hymn of the day.

Within this liturgical functioning of the Lutheran church choir is potential for great variety of musical expression. The liturgies of *Christian Worship* will encourage unity, not eclecticism in worship. However, within and among the various worship forms is abundant variety. The church choir director may present a wide range of musical service opportunities to the choir. There is room for variety of musical styles and amount of involvement from Sunday to Sunday. An exciting time awaits the church choir as our new hymnal is introduced.

“This and That”

The choir director who seeks still other ways in which the choir may function liturgically may consider consulting with the Pastor about singing choral or hymn settings of the songs of the ordinary or of canticles on occasion. This provides greater opportunity for variety of choir involvement, however, since these songs are normally sung by the congregation, they should not be taken from the congregation often. An occasional opening call-to-worship or a choral benediction can serve well also.

I encourage all choirs of the congregation to participate in liturgical ways discussed heretofore. Junior choirs or children's choirs, ladies choirs, men's choirs, youth choirs; all can present music that fits appropriately into one or more of the five preferred locations for choir participation in our worship orders: psalm, verse, hymn of the day, Gospel response, or music during the distribution of Holy Communion. Directors should consider, if they have not before, how their choirs can present music other than attendant music, at least an occasion.

While the choir's primary role is not to "beautify the service," all involved in church choir work should strive continually for beauty and excellence, as gifts and abilities given by God permit. Battle mediocrity. Always look for ways to improve singing and choral technique. These lead to beauty and excellence of musical expression, and beauty and excellence serve the texts, encourage God's people and give all glory to him. When these are missing, the communication of the text, the flow of the service and the edification of the assembly of believers can be disturbed. Weak musical vehicles and musical expressions tend to call attention to themselves and away from the message. This means that directors and singers need to learn about and work toward good vocal technique and the important choral concerns of tone, balance, blend, precision, diction, intonation and expressiveness. Seldom is it satisfactory simply to sing the right notes at the right time.

For the choir to be of service in the fullest sense of the word, it must have the full support and encouragement of the congregation, for the congregation benefits in important ways from the choir's work. This means active participation and encouragement to participate. Often choir directors and members are disheartened at a seeming apathy over against their service. Recruitment efforts seem to bring limited results. Do ways exist in which church councils or other agencies or leaders concerned with worship can assist and support the choirs of the congregation? Finally, it is important that the choir be given generous funds with which to purchase the materials it needs. Choir music is rising in cost as is everything else. Further, photocopying of copyrighted materials is neither legally nor morally defensible, especially in the church. How shall the choir vary and expand its offerings if funds are continually limited? Directors, on the other hand, must make their realistic needs known to church officials well before budget planning sessions.

Directors are encouraged to seek opportunities to locate the very best choral literature for inclusion in our worship services. Summer and fall choral reading sessions or choral symposia not only offer such opportunities, but often address issues relative to choral technique, rehearsal efficiency and conducting skill.

Three publishers that offer the most useful material for WELS choirs are Concordia Publishing House and Morning Star Publishing, both in St. Louis and Augsburg-Fortress in Minneapolis. It would be good to get on the mailing lists of these three publishers and perhaps enroll in their respective "choral subscription programs" to receive regular samples of their new publications.

The products of other publishers are, in my view, less useful and appropriate for Lutheran worship on a consistent basis. Nevertheless, excellent choral works are available from several other publishers. GIA, Chantry, G. Schirmer, Carl Fischer, E.C. Schirmer, Oxford and others publish some real gems. However, their issues are not as consistently useful as the other three. Careful scrutiny is required in any case. Not every publication of Concordia, Augsburg or Morning Star is well suited for our use either.

Experienced directors have long known the value of building a personal library of single copies from which a good majority of the music they select is chosen. Young directors are encouraged to begin building such a library. Another idea might be to have the congregation develop this single-copy examination library, including good samples for all types of choirs, for use by all the choir directors of the congregation. Computer organization of such libraries as well as of the regular church choir library is possible and extremely helpful, once the initial and considerable effort of entering information has been completed.

Conclusion

We are certainly a blessed and privileged people. By God's grace we are saved through the blood of Jesus. We have received his Word through which we have come to know him and his will for us. Through Spirit-wrought faith we believe that our salvation is in none other than Jesus Christ.

We who serve the church with music are given a special measure of blessing and joy. The sweetness, beauty and power of Word and music together is often overwhelming, perhaps among the richest experiences we can enjoy on this earth. This is a gift from God. Hence, our work is not merely a duty or job, but rather a labor of love for God who first loved us. With his help we prepare to do this work and we carry it out with our focus clearly on service to him and his Word and to the congregation of believers. With so important a work to do, we will desire to bring only our very best efforts and the very best of God's gift of music before his throne.

Carl Schalk says in his booklet *Music in Lutheran Worship*, "The choir has a unique and significant place in Lutheran worship. It can fill that role with music ranging from the simplest to the most complex; but complexity is never a criterion for liturgical suitability. What is important and crucial is that choirmaster and singers together—as well as the pastor and congregation—understand what the real function of the choir in liturgical worship is, and that, understanding their priorities, they work toward carrying them out in interesting, effective and meaningful ways that will contribute to the worship of the whole congregation." May God ever bless and guide us that our worship will always be pleasing to him and faith-strengthening for his people.