

## THE ROAD WHERE FAITH IS FOUND

### HOW CAN I KEEP FROM SINGING?

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN WORSHIP • 763

THE GIFT OF SONG TO NURTURE GOD'S PEOPLE



*Susan Johnson writes...*

"Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." — *Ephesians 5:18b-20*

Music is a gift to us from God. Martin Luther certainly understood and appreciated this when he wrote "I would certainly like to praise music with all my heart as the excellent gift of God which it is and to commend it to everyone." <sup>1</sup> And not just any gift. Luther recognized "God's absolute and perfect wisdom in his wondrous work of music." <sup>2</sup>

He also wrote "next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise....For whether you wish to comfort the sad, to terrify the happy, to encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, to calm the passionate, or to appease those full of hate...what more effective means than music could you find?" <sup>3</sup>

In other words, music has the ability to touch our emotions. It has the ability to move us at a very deep level and in ways that nothing else can. Let me give you an example of what I mean. As they practiced parish ministry, both my father and grandfather were in the habit of singing hymns to people as they visited them in nursing homes and hospitals. I have seen them be able to reach through to people and get a reaction and response from those who are otherwise unresponsive as they sing an old favourite hymn. Music has a way of triggering memories and reactions in us that we are not even aware of.

My life flows on in endless song; above earth's lamentation.  
I catch the sweet, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation.

— *Evangelical Lutheran Worship 763, stanza 1*

We Lutherans have long had a reputation of being a "singing church" and frankly we've been proud of that reputation. Garrison Keillor, in his piece "Singing with the Lutherans" takes delight in both affirming and teasing us about this reputation:

If you ask an audience in New York City, a relatively "Lutheranless"

place, to sing along on the chorus of "Michael Row the Boat Ashore," they will look daggers at you as if you had asked them to strip to their underwear. But if you do this among Lutherans they'll smile and row that boat ashore and up on the beach and down the road!

And 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. And 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 who love to sing in four-part harmony are the sort of people you could call up when you're in deep distress. <sup>4</sup>

My experience as I have moved around this church of ours, is that we are losing our ability to be a singing church. Many congregations don't sing in four-part harmony. I've often invited people to join me in singing the doxology — something I've usually been able to count on as a time when all the harmony singers come out in full force — only to hear fairly weak unison singing. I've experienced congregations where hardly anyone sings — members just look at the words in front of them as if singing is something others can do on our behalf.

There are many reasons for this change:

1. There aren't many places where people gather to sing anymore. My family for example used to sing as we travelled in the car — but families are smaller now and with the ever-increasing complexity of our lives, many families don't spend much time together in or out of the car.
2. It has become much easier to be a *consumer* of music — cds, music videos, downloading, ipods — and so many people don't feel the need to *make* music.
3. Sometimes people are afraid to sing — they listen to so much music and compare themselves to their favourite artists, usually unfavourably. This loss of confidence inhibits their singing, leading to poor vocal production. Several such timid singers can bring down the singing of a group.
4. Music programs are often first targets in budget-cutting within the educational system — so students often do not get to experience singing at school.
5. Fewer and fewer people read music.
6. Much of the contemporary music sung in our churches is written in a style that is only suited to unison singing.

I think it's time that we put some major energy into reclaiming our singing heritage!

There are ways that *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* is designed to help us do just that!

1. Hymns where singing in harmony is encouraged include the harmonization for singing. Hymns that are more suited for unison singing include only the melody line. (I know that not everyone agrees with the choices that have been made between the two, but for the most part I think these distinctions are helpful!)
2. There are many old favourites in Evangelical Lutheran Worship that some members of the congregation will remember singing in harmony.
3. There are many hymns and pieces of service music that are both four-part and shorter in duration — ideal places to start to teach people to sing harmony.
4. There are many hymns that come to us from our sisters and brothers from churches around the world. This “world music” can serve as a bridging music between styles and generations and often is meant to be sung in harmony.

But it takes more than a new worship book to help us move from a singing heritage into a singing future. Here are some things we can do in local congregations to help and encourage people to sing, and sing in harmony.

1. We need to reclaim our teaching heritage. We need to intentionally teach and rehearse new music, including harmonies, with our congregations.
2. We need to remind music directors and choristers that the prime function of the choir in worship is to support and encourage congregational singing.
3. We need to enlist the help of the choir in teaching and supporting congregational song including part-singing. Perhaps choir members could be “salted” throughout the congregation to encourage congregational song.
4. To support this teaching, we need to repeat more of the music we sing week by week. And not just by singing the same liturgy for a month or a season (or forever!) We need to bring back the hymn of the month, or the hymn of the season so that we can sing hymns until they become well-known — part our DNA.
5. We need to think about using good musical pedagogy — starting with more simple harmonizations — rounds, 2-part harmonizations — before we move on to four-part singing.
6. We need to consider using a song leader, other than the organist, who can face the people and give encouragement with facial expressions and manual gestures.
7. We need to encourage singing at all of our congregational gatherings — pot-lucks, committee meetings, Sunday school, and ELW meetings.
8. We need to learn who the musicians are in our congregations and communities and invite their help as we undertake this challenge.
9. I was at a Lutheran church in the ELCA recently that had a music school as a part of its community outreach program. Teaching individuals to read and play music would certainly help in increasing our congregational musical ability.

It's not going to be an easy task and there is no quick fix. But the point of this gift of music is that when we join together and sing hymns we focus our attention on God.

Johann Sebastian Bach believed this to be the whole purpose of music. He wrote that "the aim and fundamental reason of all music is none other than to be the glory of God and the recreation of the spirit".<sup>5</sup> Luther would certainly agree with this. In his words, "After all, the gift of language combined with the gift of song was only given to man to let him know that he should praise God with both word and music, namely by proclaiming the Word of God through music and by providing sweet melodies with words."<sup>6</sup> Luther saw a side benefit to this as well: "...let this noble, wholesome and cheerful creation of God be commended to you. By it you may escape shameful desires and bad company."<sup>7</sup>

In other words, if we keep busy singing and praising God we won't get into trouble! You know, it's not such bad advice!

So let us enjoy this great gift that God has given us. Let our bass line, the foundation of our music, be a strong faith in God our creator. Let our melody be praise and thanksgiving to Jesus our saviour and redeemer. And let our harmony be the working of the Holy Spirit among us, uniting us in love for God and for each other.

The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing!  
All things are mine since I am his! How can I keep from singing?

— *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 763, stanza 4

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1. Ulrich S. Leopold, ed., Luther's Works (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), vol 53, p. 321.
  2. *Ibid*, p. 324.
  3. *Ibid*, p. 323.
  4. Garrison Keillor, "Singing with the Lutherans" as found at [www.northwestern.edu/lutheran/keillor.html](http://www.northwestern.edu/lutheran/keillor.html).
  5. Jane Stuart Smith and Betty Carlson, A Gift of Music: Great Composers and Their Influence (Illinois: Good News Publishers, 1978), p. 46.
  6. Leopold, pp. 323-4
  7. *Ibid*, p. 324.

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