

Meet Weave

Steve Zank and Matt Preston

Weave, a tool curated by the Center for Worship Leadership (CWL) at Concordia University Irvine (<https://weaveworship.com/>), exists to assist worship planners in the careful selection and integration of songs and liturgies. Because congregational music is never theologically neutral, discernment in what the church sings is not simply a matter of taste, tradition, or sound: it is a matter of confession and faith formation.

Prescribing the musical diet for a congregation is no trifling matter: the right kind of songs teach the faith and keep God's people safe from error, while the wrong kind of song implants distorted views of God, the world, and our place in it.

In today's rapid-fire culture of song publication—particularly in regard to songs with contemporary instrumentation—leaders need help in discerning what songs to provide to the congregation to sing. Recognizing this need, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), in its 2007 convention, (responding to the prior convention's directive to the Commission on Worship to “initiate a process leading toward the development of diverse worship resources,”) recommended the creation of “regularly



Matt Preston serves as director of Weave, an initiative of the Center for Worship Leadership focused on equipping pastors, musicians, and worship planners to evaluate and select congregational resources through a Lutheran theological framework. He also serves as a called Director of Parish Music at Christ Greenfield Lutheran Church in Gilbert, Arizona, where he has worked in parish ministry for more than 16 years. His work explores the relationship between theology, congregational song, liturgical practice, and the formation of worshiping communities.



Rev. Steve Zank serves as Director of the Center for Worship Leadership and the Parish Music Program at Concordia University Irvine, where he helps equip church musicians and pastors across the church. Steve also enjoys working as a musician, PhD candidate of Concordia Seminary St. Louis, and co-host of The Lutheran Worship Podcast. He and his family live in Southern California, where they are actively involved in their local church and community life.

updated Web-based lists of appropriate and accessible resources that are easily and readily available to pastors and music leaders.”¹

Weave is designed to serve LCMS congregations as such a regularly updated Web-based list. Weave aims to provide the church with a structured, theologically grounded process for navigating the selection of both hymns and contemporary songs, articulating clear criteria by which these songs may be evaluated and integrated into congregational life.

Weave’s functionality draws some insights from resources like *Text, Music, Context*,² published by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, which offers a framework grounded in confessional Lutheran theology. Weave’s primary means of diagnosing a congregation’s song selection over time was inspired by Johanna Gertrud Tönsing’s doctoral dissertation, *Searching for the “Good Song:” Determining the Quality of Christian Songs within the Polarities of Worship* (Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria, 2013). Tönsing’s study examines how theological, musical, and contextual factors interact in shaping the quality of Christian song.

While Tönsing acknowledges several common approaches for evaluating whether or not a song is “good” for worship—emotional, evangelistic, aesthetic, theological, traditional, and personal-meaning approaches—she ultimately puts forward what she calls an “integrated approach.”³ In this framework, a song’s quality is determined by its ability to make “connections, between words and music, between people, between theology and emotion and many other such polarities.”⁴ It is this approach which makes use of a framework of polarities that allows Weave to not only be a database to discover doctrinally reviewed resources and craft services that proclaim the Gospel, but also a diagnostic tool that provides real-time feedback on the whole diet of songs a worship leader has set before the congregation. As Tönsing observed: “[w]eaknesses of one song can be offset in another used in the same worship service.”⁵ This can be extended to include the principle that emphases in one song in one service can be offset by different emphases used in another.

The Weave development team developed a system of “polarity pairs” to analyze and describe music proposed for use in congregational worship. These pairs include the following: Gospel/response, transcendence/immanence, celebration/lament, objective/subjective, present help/future hope, and vertical/horizontal. Each song or hymn is assigned a score within each polarity, allowing the system to analyze how a congregation’s repertoire uses these emphases over time. The guiding principle is straightforward: faithful worship planning makes space for both sides of each polarity. Congregations need songs of immanence and transcendence, celebration and lament—not as isolated moments, but held together through intentional, long-term curation.

This implies that the congregation tracks its use of music over time, and Weave’s ability to analyze a given congregation’s song-selection history is supported through integration with the widely used worship-planning platform, Planning Center Online (<https://www.planningcenter.com>).

At the discovery level, Weave functions as a searchable catalog. A worship planner can explore doctrinally reviewed hymns, contemporary songs, liturgical settings, and other resources by title, first line, author/composer, tune, meter, scriptural references, theme, doctrines taught, season, or service-part use. It includes an increasing number of entries offering considerations for each song, including an analysis of the Law and Gospel applications of the text. This is important because the planning question is rarely, “What songs exist?” The question is usually, “Given this day, this text, this congregation, and this liturgical movement, what resources will best serve the Church’s confession?”

For this reason, Weave treats individual song selection and whole-service analysis as inseparable. A song may be doctrinally sound and yet contribute to an imbalanced musical diet if it becomes the default choice week after week. Conversely, a song with strong polarity imbalances may be pastorally useful when paired with other texts that supply what it lacks. In this way, Weave lives out Tönsing’s insight that weaknesses in one song can be offset by another used within the same service.

Practically, this means Weave can provide feedback not only on whether a song is usable, but on how it functions within a wider pattern: within the movement of the liturgy on a given Sunday, and within the formation of a congregation over months and seasons. When a planner builds a set of songs for a service, Weave can expose patterns that are difficult to notice otherwise: a persistent overemphasis on celebration without lament; repeated subjective response with minimal objective proclamation; abundance of vertical address with little horizontal “we” language; or a strong “present help” repertoire that rarely sings of the resurrection and life to come. Such patterns have implications on faith formation and, therefore, invite more careful attention.

In service of this task, Weave draws not only on contemporary song resources, but on the breadth of the Church’s sung confession. Its library includes the hymns found in the English-language hymnals of the LCMS, representing more than a century of liturgical, theological, and musical reflection, and new contemporary song catalogues, like those of Concordia’s Center for Worship Leadership’s own *The Songwriter Initiative*. This breadth is offered as an act of stewardship: presenting the Church’s received song to congregations whose planning habits may make it harder to encounter these riches, while also placing hymns and contemporary songs in meaningful conversation with one another.

What distinguishes Weave is not simply the size of its database, but the way it invites worship planners to think both liturgically and “formationally” over time. By holding individual songs within a framework of theological polarities, Weave helps leaders see how weekly choices accumulate—how patterns of proclamation, response, lament, celebration, and hope quietly shape a congregation’s imagination and faith.

Weave does not replace musical or pastoral discernment; it exists to support it. It brings visibility where habit can obscure, memory where fads can dominate, and structure where abundance can overwhelm. In a moment when the Church is confronted with more music than ever before—especially contemporary songs—

Weave helps congregations sing not merely what sounds good, stirs emotion, or reflects personal taste, but what is faithful and confesses Christ clearly and richly.

Endnotes

¹ The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Convention Proceedings, 2007: 63rd Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Houston, TX, July 14–19, 2007 (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2007), 115–6.

² The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Commission on Worship, *Text, Music, Context: A Resource for Reviewing Worship Materials* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2011).

³ Johanna Gertrud Tönsing, *Searching for the “Good Song:” Determining the Quality of Christian Songs within the Polarities of Worship* (PhD diss., University of Pretoria, 2013), 103.

⁴ Tönsing, *Searching for the “Good Song,”* 103.

⁵ Tönsing, *Searching for the “Good Song,”* 130.