

Lutheran Mission Matters



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Inside This Issue

Text, Music, and Context

“Text, music, and context” is the chosen theme for the May 2026 issue of *Lutheran Mission Matters*, the journal of the Lutheran Society for Missiology, now in the thirty-third year of publication. Professor James Marriott of Concordia University Texas, an expert in the field of church music with years of experience as a pastor, conductor, organist, and professor, served as special issue editor. The editorial committee is grateful to Dr. Marriott for proposing this theme of contemporary relevance to the mission and ministry of the church and for bringing together competent authors and preparing this issue for publication.

This issue includes several research essays, mission observers, and presentations at the 2026 Multiethnic Symposium held on the campus of Concordia Seminary St. Louis on May 5 and 6. The journal is privileged also to include a summary of the presentation by the Rev. Aaron Putnam and Rev. Dawit Bokre, speakers at the LSFM Banquet on May 4. Under the topic “New Life Through New Leaders: A Vision for Replanting in a Changing Culture,” Putnam and Bokre lay bare the fact that many Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) congregations are fading as they fail to recognize the changes taking place in their own immediate neighborhoods. Using Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Hayward, California, as an example, Putnam and Bokre stress the importance of appreciating the new generation of immigrants who navigate life between two worlds of faith and culture. They are a gift God has sent to our shores as a new mission opportunity, people who have gifts and abilities that may revitalize existing congregations. The full video of the presentation is available on the LSFM Website (<https://www.lsfm.global/>).

The major essays inside this issue interpret worship and worship styles, their composition and performance, and their effectiveness in communicating the gospel message in meaningful ways.

Editor James Marriott’s essay on Context as a framework for analyzing text and music has the goal of equipping worship leaders and congregations to make their own assessment of worship materials. Marriott posits that the intercultural dialogue that music fosters within the LCMS and the church at large acknowledges a subjectivity of perspective. This dialogue promotes diversity and encourages unity, acknowledging that uniformity is not a required norm. Musical forms in the service of the gospel must be framed with an understanding of context and culture to benefit those who participate in Christian worship.

The Marriott essay is followed by Robert Kolb’s substantive essay on Martin Luther’s appreciation of music as an essential of culture. In fact, Luther calls music “mistress and governess of human emotions.” Lutherans must therefore interact with the varieties of cultures, music, and liturgy so that they serve as a bridge for worshipers to connect directly with the God we worship. Kolb goes on to explain culture as God’s

creation where “the combination of God’s gifts of time and place constructs the setting in which each one of us experiences all His other gifts.” [This essay was a part of a keynote presentation at the Seminary’s Multiethnic Symposium.]

Veteran missionary, seminary professor, and anthropologist Greg Klotz contends that worship behaviors are present in *all* human activity. Rites and rituals are common cultural objects, and all languages capture and achieve transcendence in the sphere of the natural knowledge of God. With a clear Lutheran theological perspective, Klotz examines the structural nature of, and the ontological need for, ritual worship as a human phenomenon (anthropology) used to transcend mundane earthly existence, as part of an innate quest for an in-depth understanding of the Creator (theology) who is also the Redeemer of the whole cosmos. In his words, “a Lutheran framework illuminates the anthropology of worship as both diagnostic of the Fall and prescriptive of redemption, underscoring mission as the restoration of created relationality.”

Sally Messner asserts that a common lectionary helps to unite all Christians in worship as a common witness before the church and world. Liturgical worship connects the worshiping community to the larger biblical story and energizes worshippers to bear witness boldly to the one Gospel. Luther has observed that if Scriptures are the cradle where Christ is laid, then liturgy is the nursery.

This issue then turns to the work of Samuel Deressa, a faculty member at Concordia University St. Paul, and a member of this Journal’s editorial committee. He writes on “Singing the Gospel,” illustrating how storytelling through song is an effective way of communicating the truth of the Gospel. Deressa’s observations report his research in his native Ethiopia, analyzing Oromo oral traditions. Songs are highly significant in Oromo culture. In a culture rooted deeply in the past, the Oromo use storytelling songs, both secular and religious, to maintain their cultural identity. This cultural medium was quickly adapted by Oromo Christians to spread the gospel in the early years of evangelical Christianity in Ethiopia.

Another example from the Global South, is Marcell Silva Steuernagel’s work examining how the role of the composer is essential for the life of the church today to give Christians a voice in their own time and place. In this research essay, the author demonstrates the ongoing need for hymn writing with attention to context for successful Gospel communication. Steuernagel enables readers to see the community (congregation) as a living organism that responds in real time and is in constant dialogue with the music during its worship experience, making music and liturgy relevant and worship meaningful.

The Mission Observers section shows examples of how diversity of music and worship style depend on the investigation of context both in the United States and in faraway lands. Music is an expression of heart language. The people of God make use of this unique gift to always sing to the Lord a new song (Ps 33:3).

At the Multiethnic Symposium, Zank and Preston from the Center for Worship Leadership (CWL) at Concordia University Irvine presented various ways to assist worship planners in the careful selection and integration of songs and liturgies,

tradition, and innovation as a matter of confession and faith formation. In this article, they introduce Weave as a tool to aid worship leaders in tracking and selecting appropriate music to fit a certain time and place.

David Mennicke, professor and choir master, leads the reader on a global experience with his team as it bears witness to Jesus Christ in the world—including Minnesota and distant countries. Their message shares the spirit of reconciliation, racial integration, healing and hope, even for those suffering the threat of deportation. Mennicke shows that under the cross of Christ, music has the power to inform and transform lives, to unite in hope, love, and peace. Church musicians have been given these gifts of music, people, and faith. With those gifts, guided by the Spirit, we can join in Christ's mission to the world.

Adam Fosse, who serves with the Mission of Christ Network, observes that music in the mission of the Gospel is a divine gift to beautify the proclamation of God's Word, facilitate its retention, and amplify human response to all the blessings of Christ. In Christian communities, this unique gift must be utilized fully in the service of the gospel. He suggests that Christian people can appreciate the diversity of meaningful musical expressions of faith which are found through investigation of our human contexts.

Miriam and Richard Carter served as volunteers in Mongolia, and they reflect on three main areas of Lutheran and Christian mission in Mongolia: the work of foreign missionaries, the life of new believers and ministry workers, and the blessings that come with ministry in Mongolia. They show that Christian mission in the present generation is mainly one of partnership and encouraging local leaders to take ownership of Christ's mission to reach people and celebrate the new life God offers for all.

We conclude this issue with the homily that Dean of Ministerial Formation at Concordia Seminary, Professor Timothy Saleska, preached at the Theological Diploma Service at the seminary May 17, 2026. Saleska's text was John 16:23–33, and the message focused on the centrality of Jesus' love in all we do as His people, serving others in word and deed. In a world which is in desperate need of the love God lavished upon all people in Jesus Christ, His people must show love and proclaim the love of God as the gospel message in our present world.

Sharing the love of God for all in Jesus Christ in the service of the Gospel is the overall theme of *Lutheran Mission Matters*, and this issue focuses on the role of music in that task. We pray the essays, presentations, and mission observers represent that theme as we grow in faith and share the one true faith throughout the world.

Victor Raj, Editor

Context as a Framework for Analyzing Text and Music

James Marriott

When I was pursuing my undergraduate and graduate degrees in Parish Music, I encountered a document prepared by the 2004 Commission on Worship for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) entitled *Text, Music, and Context: A Resource for Reviewing Worship Materials*.¹

The document offers guidelines for evaluating appropriate texts and music to be used in corporate worship services of LCMS congregations, especially for congregations who utilize worship resources outside of those hymnals and liturgical books which are explicitly synodically approved. These outside resources include most of the songs of the Praise and Worship genre as well as ecumenical hymnody, choral anthems, psalm settings, and other musical works that might be included in corporate worship but would not be found in a LCMS Lutheran hymnal. Instead of providing lists of music and texts that would meet the approval of a doctrinal review board, the goal of this document is to equip worship leaders and congregations to make their own assessments of worship materials.

Many of the principles promoted by the document are salient, i.e., the use of texts which are in accord with the Word of God, the use of music which is accessible and facilitates congregational participation. Principles of contextual balance are prominent: the balance of the wide range of emotions which are part of a community experience, or also the balance of old and new worship materials as part of a

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community's expression. Nevertheless, the engagement of "context" as a cultural phenomenon is almost completely absent in this document, creating a variety of issues. The method of evaluating worship materials according to their text and music assumes a cultural contextual foundation—that may or may not be shared throughout the ecclesial body.

At best, this assumed cultural foundation creates confusion when implementing the evaluation methods; and worst, this assumption sets the whole system for evaluation as one that objectifies appropriate or inappropriate worship resources based on the standards of one fixed perspective.

Without the acknowledgment of cultural diversity and hermeneutical subjectivity, the evaluative tool is rendered almost totally ineffective; it is a subjective tool that seems to betray a relatively objective, universalized result. To that end, I hope to reframe the conversation by expanding the "context" portion of the document *Text, Music, and Context* in an attempt to render this and other similar tools more useful. Cultural context forms our worshiping communities and thus informs the way we utilize and evaluate our worship resources. To speak of "text" or "music," one must first speak of culture and context, and only from that foundation can any authentic evaluation of text and music occur. My thesis, then, is that the intercultural dialogue that music fosters within our Synod as well as within the universal Church acknowledges the subjectivity of perspective, advocates a dialogue of diversity, and encourages the celebration of unity even in the absence of uniformity.

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In a previous article for *Lutheran Mission Matters*, I suggest a working understanding of culture and cultural context, with an emphasis on the theological notion of enculturation, and an endorsement of Robert Schreiter's model for intercultural hermeneutics. For the sake of brevity, I will simply point the reader to that text.² Building upon that previous work, I will establish a hermeneutical foundation for intercultural dialogue that will help us treat context more comprehensively. With that foundation established, I will consider the idea of tradition, especially as it relates to the music of the church. Finally, I will suggest a framework by which our congregations might enrich one another through the acknowledgement of subjectivity, the dialogue of diversity, and the celebration of unity. While the argument could be crafted using either text or music in context, I will speak more exclusively to music, and will engage various musical examples to help illustrate the tenets of these various sections.

Hermeneutical framework

Hermeneutics is understood as the art of interpretation. Much like the understanding of culture, hermeneutical thought has developed and evolved over the last few centuries. While Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) sought to understand the author's perspective of a text³, hermeneutists such as Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) increasingly saw the difficulty of this objective, author-oriented interpretation, since each interaction between interpreter and author bore significant barriers of time, language, and culture.⁴ Thus, the hermeneutical emphasis began to shift, instead, to the interpreter's own situation.⁵ This reader-oriented perspective works to establish "a common understanding about something of interest to both reader and author."⁶ This perspective recognizes the multiplicity of meanings derived from the varying inherent biases of the readers and advocates a hermeneutical dialogue between various readers to achieve a richer comprehension of a text.⁷ Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) expanded this even further by focusing exclusively on the text and its ability to speak independently of the author; the text itself discloses meaning in an immediate way.⁸

Thus, there are three perspectives when approaching a text: author, reader, and the text itself. Hermeneutics works to navigate the various horizons of meaning that come from the interaction of these perspectives.⁹ This allows for subjectivity in interpretation that acknowledges contextual differences between author, reader, and the text as appropriated in various contexts. This does not preclude the notion of better or worse interpretations, but it does recognize that the content and integrity of one's interpretation is conditioned by context and experience. Meaning, then, is not as much discovered as it is performed, and in a manner in which the immediacy of performance fosters a certain subjective uncertainty of meaning.¹⁰

Music provides an excellent demonstration of this. The performance of a piece of music is, inevitably, an interpretation of that music. That interpretation takes into account the intentions of the composer, which are relevant and yet ultimately inaccessible, the cultural conditioning of the performer, whose skill, knowledge, and experience interpret the score, and the audience, who receive and interpret the performance from the myriads of backgrounds that inform their

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experience. The interpretation of the performance by a single audience member, then, combines that listener's experience of the performance, knowledge of the composer, and understanding of the artistry of the performer.

For example, my interpretation of the performance of a Bach organ work by a particular performer is conditioned by my knowledge of Bach's music, my experience of the performer's unique artistry, and my own conditioned affection for the music and the performer. Someone else with a different understanding of Bach and a different experience of the particular performer may interpret the performance in a remarkably different way. Similarly, my interpretation and experience of our congregation singing "God Who Bleeds" by Cara Berg and The Songwriters Initiative is conditioned by my friendship with the composer, my history with the song (I've had some unique performance opportunities), and my experience of the present performance in congregational context. It is the particular performance that brings forth a layered interpretation, one which is as immediate as the performance itself and one which fuses the horizons of composer/author, performer/text, and my own ability to ascertain the performance.

Furthermore, the communal reception of such a performance heightens the experience of a performance, even if the individual interpretations that make up the community are certainly nuanced subjectively. The same song is received differently by different people based on their own access to the author, their own history as reader/performer, and their encounter with the text/performance itself. The dialogue that results from these subjective perspectives enriches each individual perspective and can help the community to come to a kind of interpretative consensus. In a class session, we heard a hymn text recited by a single voice, then read aloud in unison, and finally sung to its assigned tune. We were asked to evaluate each performance of the text and to offer our perspectives and preferences. Through the ensuing dialogue, I came to appreciate aspects of the performances which I had dismissed, leading to a fuller understanding of the exercise as a whole. Thus, while my individual interpretation was a fusion of horizons of meaning, the ensuing dialogue furthered that process.

Along with the foundation of cultural hybridity, enculturation, and hermeneutics, let us now also consider the role of tradition, since the Church's tradition and traditions are foundations and mediators of ecclesial praxis, even as these traditions themselves are formed by hybridity, enculturation, and hermeneutics.

Tradition

Tradition, like culture and hermeneutics, has a wide range of meaning. For some Christians, the scope of tradition encompasses the entire history of God's interaction with creation, while for others, tradition means little more than the inherited practice of the previous one or two generations. For some Christians, tradition is seen as the systematic source and norm of all Christian experience, doctrine, and practice, while for others, tradition carries overtones of colonization, oppression, and cultural

destruction. For some Christians, tradition means a dynamic, contextual, evolving corpus of Christian expression, while for others, tradition is an exclusive, static, and fixed set of practices that transculturally¹¹ apply to all corners of Christianity. Moreover, one might ask what contributes to tradition: Scripture, creeds, conciliar statements, Confessions, liturgy, music, attire, gesture, architecture...the list could continue! How these balance together, what is included, what is excluded, what is dynamic, what is static, etc., contributes to the wide range of meaning for Christian tradition. Here I suggest four categories in which we might consider tradition: as the Church's experience, as having local origins, as being dynamic, and similarly, as having permeating boundaries.

Before we explore each of these categories, I first want to lay a foundation for our conversation on tradition by recalling Robert Schreiter's use of Noam Chomsky's model for language acquisition.¹² In this analogy, tradition, for Schreiter, functions as a language system, or the all-encompassing system in which something, in this case, the Christian faith, is communicated.¹³ The Scriptures, creeds, and other "loci of orthodoxy" function as the grammar, or the criterion used to structure the boundaries of expression within the language system.¹⁴ The Christian faith is a kind of language competence; just as a child can have language competence without knowing the intricacies of grammar, so faith exists as "the source of our relation to God."¹⁵ Thus, the Christian faith and the loci of orthodoxy, while certainly interdependent, are nonetheless distinct entities that function very differently, just as language competence and grammar function distinctly within a language system.

Christian faith, then, is expressed in Christian performance, whether in liturgy, music, teaching, art, prayer, etc. These performances are critiqued by the "loci of orthodoxy" in the same way that grammar critiques a well-structured sentence from a poor one.¹⁶ In this model, then, tradition is the all-encompassing system in which faith is communicated through word and action and critiqued by the authority of Scripture and Church. Furthermore, even as grammatical structures can change, however slowly, throughout the life of a language, it is evident that the "loci of orthodoxy," or at least the contextual hermeneutics that engage these loci, also have a dynamic character to them.

On this foundation, let us first consider how tradition is the Church's experience. Without the experiences of the Church, there is no Christian tradition. James Cochrane says it this way: "If Christians call themselves thus, they necessarily relate to that particular heritage as the source and touchstone of identity, however critically they may judge parts of its legacy."¹⁷

This, of course, is a double-edged sword, so to speak, as the Christian tradition includes some Christian performances that have been oppressive, destructive, and antithetical to the Gospel, and includes shifts in the loci of orthodoxy that have been hurtful, exclusive, and difficult.¹⁸ When one becomes a Christian, one is baptized into this heritage, for better and for worse. Tradition does not, however, prescribe normative Christian performances; rather, tradition encompasses the eclectic diversity

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of Christian performances through its history. Thus, tradition is not the source of the Church's experience but is the witness to the Church's experience. Again, Cochrane says:

Christian tradition may best be grasped as the history of the attempts of the Christian community to discover truth and to frame their discoveries in the languages, cultures, and symbolic resources of their time. It is the deposit of wisdom borne of experience transmitted in claims about reality that endure over time, but it is not the source of known certainties or absolutes.¹⁹

Furthermore, the loci of orthodoxy and the Christian performances that comprise our Christian tradition all have local origins. In the same way that hermeneutics must, in some form or fashion, take seriously the influence of the author, for our tradition to maintain its meaning, it can never become fully divorced from its contextual locality. Almost all theologians would concede that all theology is contextually derived; however, it is not enough to say this, for this allows that tradition be an essence to be appropriated to every situation. Rather, tradition is contextual in that the context in which it is formed is part of a "concrete totality," a totality of life circumstances that must be interpreted as a whole in order for the theology or tradition to be properly represented.²⁰ Thus, in our weekly celebrations of Word and Sacrament as local communities, we bring a fresh, dynamic, and perpetual expression to these local origins, holding in tension the duality of their locality—original and immediate.

In this way, tradition is inherently dynamic. Not only is tradition the collection of a loci of orthodoxy and Christian performances with various local and contextual origins, but the expression and re-expression of that tradition in various contemporary contexts guarantees that it would be impossible for tradition to become static. Cochrane says it this way:

It is clear that the Christian tradition must be understood as dynamic, as an unending development of various trajectories in faith...They live only because they enable human beings who claim the Christian faith as significant, to represent, orient, transform, and communicate their lives in ways they find realistic, meaningful, and hopeful.²¹

In this way, tradition is much more about the future than about the past; tradition is more about passing on and re-expressing the loci of orthodoxy than it is a preservation or reification of the past. This notion, however, is not without difficulty. For, in many cases, when tradition forgets the locality of its origins, tradition can also become blind to the way in which it is re-expressed in contemporary contexts. When this happens, tradition ceases to be tradition and rather becomes a hegemonic tool in the hands of the powerful to dictate Christian performances in a manner that fails to properly discern the body of Christ. Also, in the dynamic evolution of Christian tradition, it is possible for the structure of the tradition, as formed by Christian

performances through the critique of the loci of orthodoxy, to outlast its meaning. When this happens, the Church must decide whether to appropriate new meaning to the old structure, to revive the old meaning, or to abandon that aspect of structure in favor of other, more meaningful, structures.

Finally, in the same way, tradition must have permeating boundaries. Because Christian performances continue to occur constantly throughout the world, tradition is exponentially expanding. When the dynamicity of tradition is recognized, then the boundaries which help to shape tradition will necessarily remain porous. This does not mean that anything goes. It does, however, recognize the cultural contextuality of the Christian performances that have comprised and continue to comprise the Christian tradition, giving the Church the opportunity to critique these performances through the loci of orthodoxy and by the principles of intercultural hermeneutics described in the previous section. It also holds those who make these critiques, especially our ecclesial leaders, accountable for properly discerning the Church as a whole.

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One of the challenges, especially in a postmodern, globalized world, is to remain attentive to all voices, not just the voices of the dominant or the majority. Tradition, and theologians who study it, can help shape the lives of the community as one voice, but must do so as a partner with the community, and a subservient partner at that.²² This will aid in an authentic development of local Christian performances that will contribute to the overall shape and spectrum of the Christian tradition.

In light of all this, what does it mean, then, to speak of “traditional” music? How does music participate in the formation and transmission of the Christian tradition? Music is a medium through which the Christian religion is communicated. From the early church to the present-day, music has been part of the Christian community’s expression of faith and, moreover, music itself is a method of God’s revelation *to* the Church and the world.²³ Nevertheless, while there is a corpus of essential *texts* which have survived through the history of the Church, such as the Scriptures, the ecumenical Creeds, and the texts of the liturgy, very little *music* can claim the same continuity. Even the broad notions of musical style have varied throughout Christian history, from the value of austere music by the Church Fathers²⁴ to the ornate sounds of polychoral Baroque works, from the introduction of the pipe organ to the introduction of the electric guitar. Thus, music has been instrumental in transmitting the tradition from generation to generation, yet at the same time it is difficult to speak of “traditional” music with any historical integrity. Rather, the music used by the church has been a

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reflection of the cultural practices and contextual values of every place and time. Throughout the course of church history, various genres of music have been seen as revelatory of God and especially apt at communicating the Gospel text and essence: plainchant, Palestrina, Bach, Mozart, etc. At the same time, the dynamic nature of music in culture has led each generation to appropriate new musical expressions to this same text and essence. This does not mean, for example, that plainchant is no longer a carrier of the tradition, but rather that it is in partnership with a dynamic range of other musical genres employed for the same purpose.

Conclusions: A new framework for assessment?

Thus far, I have suggested the following:

1. Culture, from a postmodern perspective, is dynamic, with permeating boundaries, leading to a proliferated notion of cultural hybridity.
2. The field of enculturation facilitates the conversation between culture and faith, giving the Church the sense of what is Gospel essence and what is cultural accretion.²⁵
3. The hermeneutical framework of intercultural dialogue stems from the interpretation of a performance in a cultural context, acknowledging the subjectivity of interpretation and relying on communal social judgment to establish consensus.
4. Tradition reflects this cultural hybridity and hermeneutical subjectivity in its inherent dynamicity; tradition, then, is a social construction by which faith, culture, and interpretation are transmitted from generation to generation.

From this nuanced understanding of context, therefore, we can better approach an evaluation of music in Christian worship.

First, it is helpful to acknowledge that music in general is a gift of God and a demonstration of God's transcendence and God's immanence.²⁶ At the same time, music is made manifest *within* humanity, and thus, is a product of the cultural and contextual influences that distinguish human communities over time. The music of Christian worship, then, is an enculturated entity, revealing the truth and essence of God through the medium of human performance. This performance is consequently interpreted by individuals in community, an interpretation which itself is conditioned by the cultural context and experience of the individual. The interpretation is one that recognizes God in music²⁷, depicting again the difficult distinction enculturation calls for between Divine essence and cultural accretion.

This leads finally to the evaluation of music. Albert Blackwell, referencing the work of Luther and of others, suggests that there are two categories of music: "good" and "bad".²⁸ Good music, for Blackwell, seems to be that which acknowledges, abides by, and thrives within the created order²⁹; good music, furthermore, transcends the

ordinary in a kind of classic timelessness. Good music reveals God's transcendent and immanent nature as "perfectly" as possible; bad music does not.³⁰ Bad music is identified as "music too vacuous to mediate sacramental depths...which, I'm afraid, is quite a lot of music."³¹ This acts as a continuum of quality, with some musical expressions achieving more success than others. All musical genres have the potential for this perfection; yet, in Blackwell's opinion, some genres of music have more good than bad, while others more bad than good.³² For Blackwell, Mozart's music achieves this type of transcendent perfection. The music of Mozart, for Blackwell, has a timeless character of transcendence, limited neither by Mozart's own cultural context nor Blackwell's cultural conditioning for comprehending Mozart's music, even if Blackwell acknowledges that context does matter. Blackwell's teenage son acknowledges the excellence of Mozart, but sees similar greatness in the music of Paul Simon, which his father also concedes.³³ So how does one judge between "good" and "bad" music?

As evident through our hermeneutical discussions above, the very notion of this evaluation is subjective. Subjectivity does not make our evaluations invalid, but it also does not make them authoritative outside of their limited subjectivity. Thus, based on my cultural and contextual preconditioning, I may deem a performance of a piece of music as "bad," while my fellow audience member might see it as "good." Now, I may be tempted to consider my fellow audience member who deems such a terrible performance as incompetent or even "uncultured," but that attitude only reinforces a pre-modern type of cultural understanding that posits one perspective as "better" than another. At the reception following the performance, I may also be tempted to associate only with people who share my sentiments about the performance, but this would limit my horizons of meaning and understanding to my own narrowly conceived ideals. Alternatively, I may choose to engage in dialogue with my fellow audience members, hearing and even appreciating how their perspective enabled them to see greatness in the performance, while perhaps also sharing what I thought could have been improved in the performance. This dialogue enriches both perspectives.

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This dialogue, in macro form, is one manner in which music becomes associated with the Christian tradition: Music that is deemed to be good by an intercultural hermeneutic continues to be used throughout the life of the Church.³⁴ The music has local origins and is hermeneutically renewed in each performance; consequently, it is constantly evaluated for its ability to communicate God. At the same time, the dynamicity of culture ensures that the interpretation of a performance will always be somewhat nuanced. This dynamicity of culture also allows the same song to be recast in new genres, timbres, and forms, just as the dynamicity of tradition allows new song

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genres, timbres, and forms to be included into the Church's practice. Thus, there is music that, having been deemed "good" by the Church, exists as part of the church's tradition; however, the dynamic nature of music, culture, and tradition ensure that "traditional" music is constantly in flux.

Therefore, when we consider music and context in our corporate worship services, we would do well to do so within this framework. In my experience as a church musician, songs ranging in style and genre including "A Mighty Fortress," "We Praise You and Acknowledge You," "Deep River," "In Christ Alone," "Revelation Song," "Jesus, Remember Me," "Siyahamba," and new songs from The Songwriters Initiative³⁵ all would be evaluated as "good" songs by various members of my congregations. Furthermore, I have come to see these songs as "good" songs in my various contexts because of the way they work in that context. Not all songs work the same, and songs that might not work in some contexts are highly effective in others. This doesn't keep me from evaluating these songs based on my understanding of their melodic integrity, musical worth, and corporate accessibility; however, it does nuance my understanding by the cultural and contextual hybridity that enriches our Christian community, helps me acknowledge my own biases based on my own cultural and experiential formation, and discourages me from making sweeping generalizations based on narrowly sculpted perspectives. Likewise, as our Synod equips congregations to make evaluations of their music for corporate worship, we must recognize the cultural diversity and hybridity that exists within the Synod, acknowledging any hermeneutical biases that would unjustly limit this diversity, and must especially refrain from making sweeping generalizations about genres of music based on narrowly sculpted perspectives, as has been done far too often in the scope of my experience.

In closing, then, it is difficult to associate music with a specific cultural context or influence; rather, music facilitates intercultural dialogue. Early church practice sought to avoid music with secular and profane cultural connotations.³⁶ In the same way, I have heard colleagues suggest that church music in today's profane and pluralistic world must be equally countercultural. I'm not sure this is the best approach. It certainly does not foster intercultural dialogue by which the Gospel might be richly enculturated into our North American context, nor does it recognize the historical cultural influences on the music advocated as "countercultural." If the Church attempts to divorce itself from the culture, it will be neither the Church *of* nor *in* the culture. Rather, intercultural dialogue, cultural hybridity, and enculturation enable the Gospel to enrich the Church in the world by acknowledging the subjectivity of perspective, advocating a dialogue of diversity, and encouraging the celebration of unity even in the absence of uniformity. Context, then, is the framework by which music and text might be most effectively evaluated in our congregations.

Endnotes

¹*Text, Music, Context: A Resource for Reviewing Worship Materials* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004). <http://www.lcms.org/page.aspx?pid=539>.

²James F. Marriott, “Postmodernism and Mission,” *Lutheran Mission Matters* 31, no. 2 (2023): 150–63.

³David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 163.

⁴Dockery, *Then and Now*, 173.

⁵Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 103.

⁶Dockery, *Then and Now*, 173.

⁷Grondin, *Hermeneutics*, 119.

⁸Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 92.

⁹Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 93, referencing Gadamer’s idea of a “fusion of horizons.”

¹⁰Lawrence Kramer, *Interpreting Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 12.

¹¹For one example, see Arthur Just, *Heaven on Earth: The Gifts of Christ in the Divine Service* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008), 28–9. In speaking of Lutheran liturgy, Just claims that “there is a common assumption today that the liturgy must reflect the language and the ethos of the current culture. If this is true, then liturgies will veer toward the pop culture in which we live. These culturally devised liturgies are at times exciting and entertaining but are not transcultural. . . Lutheran worship is its own culture, distinct from both the pop culture of secular society and the worship that characterizes most evangelical denominations in our country today. The Lutheran Church must develop and maintain its own cultural language that reflects the values and structures of Scripture, not of the current culture.”

¹²Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 114.

¹³Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 115.

¹⁴Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 115.

¹⁵Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 115.

¹⁶Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 116.

¹⁷James R. Cochrane, *Circles of Dignity: Community Wisdom and Theological Reflection* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 45.

¹⁸The evolution of the doctrine of the Real Presence, the justification of slavery in the period of colonization, and the role of women in the church, are a few of many possible examples.

¹⁹Cochrane, *Circles of Dignity*, 64.

²⁰Cochrane, *Circles of Dignity*, 55.

²¹Cochrane, *Circles of Dignity*, 43.

²²Cochrane, *Circles of Dignity*, 62. Steven Bevans also makes this point in his *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011), 106. On p. 18, Bevans references Leonardo Mercado, who speaks of theologians as “midwives to the people as they give birth to a theology that is truly rooted in a culture and moment of history.”

²³Maevae Louis Heaney, *Music as Theology: What Music Says about the Word* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 2.

²⁴Calvin R. Stapert, *A New Song for an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 131.

²⁵*Adiaphora* is a synonym to this idea.

²⁶Albert L. Blackwell also makes this argument in *The Sacred in Music* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 16, 47.

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²⁷See Mary McGann, *A Precious Fountain, Music in the Worship of an African American Catholic Community* (Liturgical Press, 2004), 263, for her notion of the epicletic nature of music to invoke the Holy Spirit.

²⁸Blackwell, *Sacred in Music*, 17.

²⁹See Blackwell, *Sacred in Music*, 49–124 for the formation of his notion of musical perfection around the universal Pythagorean principles of music.

³⁰Blackwell, *Sacred in Music*, 17.

³¹Blackwell, *Sacred in Music*, 153.

³²Blackwell, *Sacred in Music*, 17.

³³Blackwell, *Sacred in Music*, 122.

³⁴This is not to deny the role of authoritative ecclesial power in much of sacred music's retention or dismissal throughout the history of the Church.

³⁵<https://www.cui.edu/academicprograms/christcollege/center-for-worship-leadership/songwriter>

³⁶Stapert, *New Song*, 131.

“Mistress and Governess of Human Emotions” Luther’s Appreciation of Music as an Essential of Culture

Robert Kolb

Abstract

Within the framework of culture as God’s creation and the ongoing dialogue between faith and cultural expression, Luther celebrates the gift of music. Luther’s treatment of the liturgies of the church and the use of music in them demonstrates his tendency to preserve what would provide a bridge from what the people were accustomed to in the service to his radical recasting of the fundamental shape of the Christian life and of the very definition of being Christian.

Culture as God’s Creation

Each culture consists of our common use of the gifts of God. Some cultures conform more closely to God’s will for the use of His gifts, some less closely. Lutherans are—ideally if not always in practice—highly appreciative of His ways of giving in their cultures while sharply critical of the abuse of those gifts by squatters on the Father’s property. H. Richard Niebuhr famously describes the relationship between Christ and culture as “in paradox.” But that framing misses something essential: the clear distinction between God and the world, and the equally clear difference between our relationship with our Creator and our relationships with all His creatures.¹

The combination of God’s gifts of time and place constructs the setting in which each one of us experiences all His other gifts. His gifts serve similar functions in different ways in different times and places. We call this amalgam of God’s gifts that sustain and fulfill human life “culture.” Luther had no word for “culture” as we understand it.² Our usage stems from Samuel von Pufendorf (1632-1694), a German Lutheran jurist, whose contributions to legal and political theory have lasted to this day. The term was further developed by the German Lutheran pastor Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), who, before he moved to Weimar, a center of German literary culture, served a congregation in Riga, Latvia, a meeting point of German and Lettish languages and cultures. Herder emphasized language in particular as a key mark of



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each culture.³ *The Oxford English Dictionary* notes that the usage of “culture” to designate “a particular form or type of intellectual development, also the civilization, customs, artistic achievements, etc. of a people, especially at a certain stage of its development or history,” began in the 1860s.⁴

We might define culture as the organic (that is, composed of mutually related elements) whole of human activities and relationships which define the meaning and significance of life for a specific group of people, who are linked by these elements in a common identity and in common endeavors. “Culture” presumes shared assumptions, values, and allegiances, and it involves systems, institutions, and individuals. Cultures embrace a number of aspects: language and literature; religion and values systems; social structures and relationships; economic relationships; political institutions and practices; sports, leisure, recreation; natural sciences and technology; health care; media; military service; educational systems; festivals, including public and individual rites of passage; practices regarding death, burial, and interactions with the dead; humor; transportation; and others, *including the graphic arts and music*.⁵

Music

Music occupies a vital place in every culture; certainly, it did in the German culture of the Late Middle Ages. Luther and his students had learned music theory as a part of the mathematical quadrivium, the second level of a child’s education in their day. Luther’s remarks regarding music demonstrate his recognition of the power that music exercises over every human being. Birgit Stolt analyzed the reformer’s oral rhetoric as a “rhetoric of the heart.” Luther used the biblical term “heart” to embrace the medieval anthropology that described the human being with reference to mind or reason, will, emotions or affects, and the motor activities of the body. Luther knew the rules of rhetoric inherited from Quintilian and Cicero, and Philip Melancthon reinforced and strengthened his rhetorical perceptions. Luther also grasped the rhetoric of music, as he wrote to Ludwig Senfl in 1530, “except for theology there is no art that could be put on the same level with music since except for theology it alone produces what otherwise only theology can accomplish, namely a calm and joyful disposition”⁶

The biblical promise of liberation from sin and evil through Christ’s death and resurrection rides on language written, spoken, and sung, also as our multi-media Creator enunciates His promise to us under sacramental elements. Even visual presentations of the story of our salvation evoke reactions in verbal form, even if the beauty of artistic creations can evoke feelings that we find impossible to express with words.⁷ Likewise, music adds an element of moving our thinking and feeling, with or without words, that defies a description that captures the whole of its essence and impact.

Music affects the human mind, emotions, and body in ways that can move our will in specific directions. James Brauer describes the ways in which melody and pitch,

harmony, rhythm, timbre, and form of sounds or notes are brought together to permeate those who participate in it. Participation may be passive, simply listening. Even then our bodies and our minds are drawn into melody and rhythm, through the music's own power or a memory of hearing it earlier. Participation may also be active, as we commit lungs and lips, fingers, and feet, to singing or playing a piece of music. Music calls us to thinking and feeling in new ways or leads us into old thoughts and emotions. It may arouse us to action or permit us to retreat into a safe place of meditation or relaxation. In its Dionysian mode, it can open access to new relationships and experiences, while in its Apollonian mode, it allows retreat from threatening or unpleasant situations.⁸

Music exercises external potential in being able to project sounds over great distances; it exercises internal potential in moving, even swaying, our thoughts and moods. Music possesses its own rhetorical forms and powers. Brauer notes that music is "an imprecise language" that is often considered to be "more abstract and more challenging to decipher than a painting. Musical impressions are elusive because pitches and rhythms flow by in time. Except in their memories, listeners cannot back up and reexamine what just happened."⁹ That poses a challenge to our use of music.

Luther and Music in His Cultural Setting

Luther's frequent praise for music is well known. In 1538 he wrote:

...next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise. She is mistress and governess of those human emotions ... which as masters govern human beings or more often overwhelm them. ... For whether you wish to make the sad rejoice or make those who rejoice sad, to terrify the self-confident, to encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, to calm the passionate, or to tame those full of hate ... what more effective means than music could you find? The Holy Spirit himself honors music as an instrument for his proper work when in his Holy Scriptures he asserts that through her his gifts were instilled in the prophets, namely, the inclinations to all virtues.¹⁰

Robin Leaver traces Luther's musical biography from its beginnings with his mother's singing popular ditties to urge good behavior and his father's urging him to sing rather than drink. In primary school in Mansfeld he learned Latin by singing it; he never lost sight of the pedagogical benefits of singing Latin. Already in primary school and then in secondary school in Magdeburg and Eisenach, music remained in his curriculum, and he continued to sing in the boys' choir that enhanced worship services. Although the university curriculum did not usually provide lectures on music, Luther read music theory in Erfurt as well. In the cloister, chanting the psalms and other standard liturgical elements impressed medieval monastic texts deeply on his mind. They continued to shape his life as professor and friend, husband and father. Leaver notes that Luther was both connoisseur and composer, cultivating new forms

of music himself or through others. He appreciated the work of Josquin de Prez, Ludwig Senfl, whom he knew personally, and Johann Walther, one of his several friends among the cantors who supported his call for reform.¹¹

In the Middle Ages the congregation had sung responses to certain parts of the priest’s chanting the liturgy, but believers did not learn hymns that they could take home with them and integrate into their thinking. Luther’s first venture into composing for public singing came in 1523, not in the preparation of a hymn, but in the use of a popular ballad form to broadcast his polemic against the bloodthirsty church officials who had martyred two friends of his in the Augustine Eremite order, Heinrich Voes and Johann van Esch.¹² (On July 1, 1523, in Brussels, they were burned at the stake for refusing to renounce their Lutheran beliefs, becoming the first martyrs of the Reformation). They had participated with him in the reform efforts of their superior, Johann von Staupitz.¹³

This provided the impetus for Luther to begin composing such music to spread his theology as well, probably beginning with “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice.” Leaver demonstrates that Luther did indeed turn to a secular style of tune, the “court song” genre (*Hofweise*). However, Leaver also notes that “the secular influence on these eight [initial Evangelical] hymn texts was primarily textual rather than musical.”¹⁴ “Most of the music Luther provided and promoted for evangelical worship was based not on worldly ballads but rather on the chant of the church.”¹⁵

He transformed the chant of the church through his musical experimentation, including his fond exploration of the polyphony that musicians such as Senfl were introducing to German ears. He stated his goal in composing songs in the vernacular and urging colleagues to do so as well: “so that the Word of God even by means of song may be alive among the people.”¹⁶ Luther composed with sensitivity to text and tune. Leaver points out that his two musical settings for “Our Father, Who from Heaven Above” are in two different modes, the Ionian, akin to the major scale, and the Dorian mode, akin to the minor scale.¹⁷

He stated his goal in composing songs in the vernacular and urging colleagues to do so as well: “so that the Word of God even by means of song may be alive among the people.”

As with his use of theological vocabulary, Luther’s treatment of the liturgies of the church and the use of music in them demonstrates his tendency to preserve what would provide a bridge from what the people were accustomed to in the service to his radical recasting of the fundamental shape of the Christian life and of the very definition of being Christian. He now centered worship around the sermon: “the preaching and teaching of God’s Word is the most important part of the divine service,” as he stated in his *Deutsche Messe* of 1526.¹⁸ In 1523 he had proposed a “Formula for the Mass” with the intent “not now nor ever to abolish the liturgical worship of God completely but rather to purify the one that is now in use” He did

not, however, propose that his form be adopted by all, for he did not want “to prejudice others against adopting and following a different order.”¹⁹ In 1526, he began his *Deutsche Messe* by requesting readers “do not make [this order of service] a rigid law to bind or entangle anyone’s conscience but use it in Christian liberty as long, when, where, and how you find it to be practical and useful.” He did state that “as far as possible we should observe the same rites and ceremonies,” but he recognized that localities differed in various ways. His fundamental concern centered on the proper proclamation of God’s Word. He regarded it as the identifying characteristic of his reform and of Christ’s church.

Luther’s liturgical reform totally dismissed the canon of the Mass, viewing the Lord’s Supper as His gift to sinners, not as a mutual exchange of sacrifice and praise—although he obviously set the Supper in the context of the response of God’s people to His gifts.²⁰ But both his *Formula Missae* and his *Deutsche Messe* set forth the traditional form of the liturgy, cleansed of sacrificial concepts, especially in the canon of the Mass. He defended the continued use of Latin in the liturgy for pedagogical, not theological, reasons in towns with a Latin school. In village churches, on the other hand, there was no purpose to preserve the Latin because almost no one would have understood it. Worship was to be the conversation between God and His people, no longer a recitation of magical formulas to make people feel safe and remain dependent on the learned clergy. In towns where the schoolboys needed the singing of Latin to improve their language skills and where at least some of the town’s residents had learned enough Latin to understand what was sung, he advocated its retention.²¹

The stamp of Gregorian chant remained embedded in his mind, but its use in actual worship orders decreased. Luther dismissed medieval Latin sequences and responsories, striving to replace them with vernacular singing.²² He retained or reworked favorites such as “*Victimiae paschali laudes*” (“Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands”) and “*Veni, sancte spiritus*” (“Come Holy Spirit, God and Lord”).²³ He also revamped a hymn attributed to Jan Hus, explicitly converting its text to a Lutheran understanding of the Lord’s Supper.²⁴

Luther emphasized the importance of the congregation singing in its own language and said little about instrumental accompaniment. Brauer describes four families of musical instruments: “tubes, strings, membranes, and percussion.”²⁵ Luther played a stringed instrument and knew various forms of tubular wind and brass instruments. He found the organ too closely associated with the medieval practice, but his somewhat negative expressions regarding the organ never became an issue, since he regarded all music that supported instruction and praise as God’s good gift.²⁶

In his immediate circle in Wittenberg, Philip Melancthon,²⁷ Justus Jonas,²⁸ and Elizabeth Cruciger,²⁹ the wife of his colleague Caspar Cruciger the Elder, penned hymns that became part of the German hymnody. Johannes Bugenhagen adapted the Wittenberg liturgy and cultivated Wittenberg hymnody as he traveled to Denmark and eight German towns and territories to help compose new Evangelical church ordinances.³⁰ The nineteenth-century German hymnologist Philipp Wackernagel

published 3,860 texts of German Evangelical hymns, most from Lutheran authors, that appeared in the sixteenth century.³¹ These hymns took form as catechesis and praise, as protest and polemic, comfort in times of war and want, in crises in personal life and society.³²

These hymns transformed public worship and became a way to express the faith. Luther’s student Cyriakus Spangenberg (1528-1604) observed Luther’s catechetical hymns were shaping the expression of the faith of the children of his parish and others:

Now a boy or girl of ten or twelve years, or more or fewer years, is better, more, and more humbly learned and grasps the articles of faith and matters of religion – and can talk about them and report on them – than could the teachers in the schools of higher learning, together with all the monks, priests, and nuns.³³

He went on to describe the impact of learning the catechism, also in Luther’s catechetical hymns as they were sung by “artisans in their workshops, peasants and shepherds in the field, charcoal-makers and woodcutters in the forest, seamen and fishermen on water, couriers and pilgrims on the road, servants and children in the home.” Spangenberg believed that parishioners could use Luther’s hymns “to practice the catechism in a beneficial way and at the same time confess their faith and their Christianity to honor God and to teach others and give them a good example as an aid and a comfort.”³⁴

Luther’s hymns had quickly become a public means of advertising commitment to Luther’s call for reform, sometimes provoking public disorder, as happened in Magdeburg in 1524. A broadsheet of Luther’s “Out of the Depths” provoked singing in the public squares of Magdeburg after mass one Sunday morning, and the resulting hubbub eventually led to the city council’s appealing to Wittenberg for aid in introducing evangelical reform. They transformed other aspects of normal life. Medieval burials were accompanied by dirges as the corpse was borne from the home to the cemetery. Evangelical burials not only replaced the memorial mass at the center of burials with the sermon but also changed the hymnody to songs of resurrection and triumph over death.³⁵ Luther counseled singing a hymn as part of morning devotional prayer,³⁶ and families incorporated hymns into the daily recitation of the catechism and the reading of Scripture.³⁷

Lutheran Music Following Luther

Luther’s followers immediately caught his insights into the usefulness of music in spreading their message and cultivating the faith of their hearers. Luther’s student Cyriakus Spangenberg, who extravagantly praised his mentor’s musical abilities, reflected the opinions of many:

Among all the master singers since the apostolic times, Luther was the best, most talented, and it will remain so. In his hymns and songs, you cannot find a single wasted, unnecessary word. Words and music flowed from his pen in the most beautiful, artistic manner, full of the Spirit and Christian teaching, so that a single word is a sermon in itself. ... There is nothing forced or patched together or rough; the rhymes are well done, the words chosen carefully, the meaning clear and understandable. ... The melodies are appealing and speak to the heart, in summary they are glorious and precious, and have vigor, warming the heart and giving comfort.³⁸

Joachim Mörlin (1514-1571), another devoted student of Luther, ecclesiastical superintendent of Braunschweig, and an architect of the theology of the Formula of Concord, demonstrated that Luther's high appreciation of music continued among his students. Mörlin commented in a sermon on Psalm 28:

Music is a particular gift of God that moves the heart to godliness and the Holy Spirit delights to be there along with it. ... The devil does not like to remain when a person makes music in godliness with beautiful psalms and hymns. ... A beautiful song, and beautiful music on the organ or from other instruments, creates good thoughts, a tender, soft heart, arousing desire for worship, and some, when they hear a psalm sung, can express an idea better than ten sermons. Beautiful music on the organ can give a preacher more desire and material than if he had meditated and read several hours. ... In every tongue and with every musical instrument, God's people recognize God's grace and respond to him with thanks through music.³⁹

Nikolaus Selnecker was superintendent of the churches in Leipzig, professor of theology there, and a member of the committee that composed the Formula, himself an author and composer of hymns and accomplished organist from age twelve. Preaching on Psalm 37, he praised music, both "figural and choral," whether played on the organ or other instruments, for it gave pious hearts joy and encouragement. The harmony of the sound reinforces the message of the words, as was true in David's time, when trumpets, psalters, and harps joined with drums, string and wind instruments, organs, and cymbals to aid the singing of praise to God. The devil opposes such music. Selnecker criticized musical styles in papal ritual and the "Sacramentarian" diminution or rejection of the role of music in worship. From the ancient fathers of the Church, he learned that a good melody and a well-crafted text refresh both body and soul. The Holy Spirit uses music to console and teach believers; thus, Christian music—beautiful song, skillful composition, and rich melody—offers a foretaste of eternal life, when angels and the blessed will join in perfect harmony, singing and playing instruments to the glory of God.⁴⁰

At least three pastors in the generation following Luther employed texts of his hymns as sermon texts.⁴¹ Preachers incorporated hymn texts and occasionally the singing of a hymn into their sermons.⁴² Along with the text of the Small Catechism (which was, at least in theory, memorized by all), the pious followers of Luther, a majority of whom could not read or write, carried the proclamation of the faith with them in the hymns that they had learned by heart.

The role of printing in the spread of Luther’s message receives high praise, but, as Mark Edwards ascertained in his study of the impact of printed works in the early years of the Reformation, oral communication conveyed the Wittenberg proclamation to many more than did books and pamphlets.⁴³ Books, however, enabled the spread of the message to preachers and laity. So it was with the use of song. Singing hymns in worship and in homes, in the field and in the shop, grew under the promotional power of hymnbooks.

Of those early Lutheran hymnals Robin Leaver writes,

these collections of hymns marked the beginning of the remarkable sequence of Lutheran hymnals that expanded throughout the centuries and throughout the world—a vast and overflowing chronological procession of anthologies of corporate song that not only identify the essence of what it is to be a Lutheran but at the same time have contributed significantly to the content of the hymnals in use of other denominations.⁴⁴

Leaver’s collection of essays by himself and nine other authors gives a sample of the richness of the efforts of the editors, authors, and composers who have kept the musical life of Lutheran churches alive and attuned to this day. Nineteen books on music theory appeared from Wittenberg printers between 1520 and 1563,⁴⁵ and Lutherans continued to produce such theoretical works for use in the education of children and the cultivation of musical performers.⁴⁶

When Counter-Reformation forces bore down on Lutherans in the Habsburg lands and forbade them public worship, their gathering in the forests and in their homes sustained their Evangelical faith through Bible reading, the catechism, and their hymnody. Commenting on the Roman Catholic attempts to eradicate Lutheran doctrine and practice in Joachimsthal, Bohemia, (where Luther’s student Johannes Mathesius [1504-1565] and the town’s reforming cantor Nikolaus Herman [ca. 1480-1561] had implanted Luther’s thought with cutting-edge hymnody), Christopher Boyd Brown wrote: “Hymn-singing in Joachimsthal thus helped to form a Lutheran identity that transcended political borders even as a proud local tradition of Lutheran music flourished. This vital element of the Lutheran culture of the town extended into the life of its population even outside the worship service.” And it sustained families well into the time of oppression in the seventeenth century.⁴⁷

The high appreciation of music within Lutheranism throughout the early modern period dare not hide the fact that the actual use of music caused significant conflict

among Lutherans. Joseph Herl's study of musical developments in German Lutheran churches from Luther's time into the late eighteenth century is entitled *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism. Choir, Congregation, and Three Centuries of Conflict*.⁴⁸ Strife continued in the effort to find the balance between the congregational singing that Luther employed to sing his message into his contemporaries' hearts and minds and the choir performances in worship that he fought to retain.⁴⁹ Throughout the period after Luther's death, the careers of Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672), court musician in Dresden, Samuel Scheidt (1587-1654), court musician in Halle, and Hermann Schein (1586-1636), cantor in Leipzig, to the era's culmination in Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) demonstrate the continued vitality of the Wittenberg musical impulses.⁵⁰ However, these leaders and many other church musicians of the era experienced strident criticism for introducing new styles, generally coming from Italy, to distract from truly pious worship.⁵¹ Even Luther's love of polyphony could not still condemnation of its use.⁵² Some labeled "Orthodox" and some labeled "Pietist" raised strong objections to organ music as a detraction from pious meditation, especially as organists elaborated their performance of hymns and other music.⁵³

Some labeled "Orthodox" and some labeled "Pietist" raised strong objections to organ music as a detraction from pious meditation, especially as organists elaborated their performance of hymns and other music.

Such conflicts continue into our day, indicating how vital and precious the role of music is in the worship and pious life of believers. The historical record suggests many factors that should go into the consideration of our use of music today.

Missiological anthropologist Paul Hiebert (1932-2007) raised the problem of the "excluded middle," the realm between heaven and earth inhabited in many traditional religions by spirits and demons that govern human life.⁵⁴ Christian missionaries often simply ignored that vital space and its functions in traditional religions. So, for some generations, their message did not meet the perceived needs of the people they had brought into the church. In parallel fashion, as we bring the gospel to those around us who have developed their own, often unarticulated, religious structures, we need to be sensitive to what we are saying or failing to say to the way in which those who enter our communities conceive of reality. We will not want to meet every musical taste and style with Christian lyrics to old tunes. We need to use the proper kind of music that conveys both our rejection of the old power of music in their lives and Christ's power riding on melodies in words that address their realities.

We need to recognize that some music bears associations that cannot be baptized. Among Christian Dalits in India, at least among the initial generations of converts, the use of drums, so vital for their traditional manner of contending with forces of evil, cannot easily be cleansed of pagan associations. That does not mean that a new generation may not reclaim drums for proper worship, because the old associations

have been lost in subsequent generations of Christian families. The same phenomenon has occurred in attempts by Indian graphic artists to follow the model of Lukas Cranach and other Christian painters of Luther’s time in placing the scenes of Christ’s birth, life, death, and resurrection in familiar settings with little, if any, resemblance to Judea two millennia ago.⁵⁵

The mysterious nature of music is perhaps to blame for the fact that choices regarding properly worshipful music arouse such emotions that make sober discussion of the best use of this great gift among us difficult. If we wish to take Luther seriously, we will recognize that the identifying mark of those who take his name should rest in our proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. With that orientation, we should share Luther’s openness to the variety of ways that different communities within the church, in their specific cultural settings, will work out their choices of the best ways in which to place the promise of new life in Christ in the setting that speaks to the people around it. We will share Luther’s openness to changing styles, and we will be particularly sensitive to the breakdown in the semiotics that encase our words of God’s truth. The whole life of the church in its worship and its use of music is a life of experimentation and repentance, a life of rejoicing in the promise to which our worship and music is responding.

Richard Lörcher, a 20th century church musician and trombonist who lived through the *kirchenkampf* (“church struggle” of the Nazi period) wrote the following foreword in his *Musicbook for Trombones*:

In a time so alienated from the Word of God, it is doubly important for us to hold fast to it. The Word of God gave rise to the songs. It is the original, the first and most important, the core of our songs. We brass players are always tempted to be content with the musical form of the songs, with their embellishment. But not music, but only God’s word has the promise of victory in the battles of God’s people. Therefore, let it be said to all who use this book: Do not perform any brass playing without the testimony of the Word of God. Structure your time with the Word of God and prayer. Proclaim and spread the Word wherever you move and reach people’s hearts with your music.⁵⁶

Richard Lörcher wrote the hymn, which was often sung in the circles of the Confessing Church during the years of the *Kirchenkampf*:

Jesus Christ, King and Lord,
is the kingdom, the power, the honor. Amen.
In the light of the last day, when all the world collapses,
everyone will have to confess at Christ’s feet:
Jesus Christ, King and Lord,
is the kingdom, the power, the honor. Amen.

Endnotes

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⁴*The Oxford English Dictionary. Second Edition* 4 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 121.

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¹¹Robin A. Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music. Principles and Implications* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 21–64.

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¹⁴Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 13.

¹⁵Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 18.

¹⁶WA Br 3:220, Nr. 698.

¹⁷WA 35:463–7, with melodies, WA 35; 527, LW 53:296–8; see Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 132.

¹⁸WA 19:78,26–7, LW 53:68.

¹⁹WA 12: 206,15–211; LW 53:20.

²⁰*The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, WA 6:502,1–526,33, LW 36:19–57.

²¹WA 30,2: 545,16–548,25, LW 46:231–2.

²²WA 12: 208,14–211,22–211, 218,15–21, LW 53: 24–25, 36. See Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 227–41.

²³Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 228–33.

²⁴WA 35:435–7, LW 53:250–1.

²⁵Brauer, *Music*, 51–3.

²⁶Robin Leaver explains his negative expressions regarding organs as the result of the quality of organs in northern Germany although he also supplies evidence that this was not always the case. Luther also recognized that most villages did not have organs and did not have resources to acquire one, *Luther’s Liturgical Music*, 7–8.

²⁷*Lutheran Service Book*, 522, “Lord God to Thee We give All Praise,” and 585, “Lord Jesus Christ, with us Abide.”

²⁸Philipp Wackernagel, *Das deutsche Kirchenlied von der ältesten Zeit bis zu Anfang des XVII. Jahrhunderts*, 5 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1864-1877), 3: 42–5.

²⁹ Wackernagel, *Kirchenlied*, 46–7. See Mary Jane Haemig, “Elizabeth Cruciger (1500?-1535): The Case of the Disappearing Hymn Writer,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 22 (2001), 21–44.

³⁰ Johannes H. Bergsma, *Die Reform der Messliturgie durch Johannes Bugenhagen (1485-1558)* (Hildesheim: Butzon & Bercker, 1966); Matthias Schneider and Beate Bugenhagen, “Johannes Bugenhagen und die Musik im pommerschen Messgottesdienst,” in *Johannes Bugenhagen (1485-1558), Der Bischof der Reformation*, ed. Irmfried Garbe and Heinrich Kröger (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2010), 111–28.

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³² Irene Dingel, “Gesungener Glaube. Das Kirchenlied als Medium von Frömmigkeit und Protest in der Frühen Neuzeit,” in Irene Dingel, *Die Reformation in Gestaltungen und Wirkungen: Speyerer Vorträge* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2023), 97–124.

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³⁵ Robert Kolb, “Orders for Burial in the Sixteenth Century Wittenberg Circle,” in Irene Dingel and Armin Kohnle (ed.), *Gut Ordnung. Ordnungsmodelle und Ordnungsvorstellungen in der Reformationszeit* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2014), 257–79.

³⁶ BSELK 890/891,28–9, BC 363. [BSELK= *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*].

³⁷ E.g., the report on the devotional life of the family of the physician and friend of Luther, Matthaeus Ratzeberger, in Andreas Poach, *Vom Christlichen Abschied aus diesem sterblichen Leben des lieben thewren Mannes Matthei Ratzenbergers der Artzney Doctors* (Jena: Thomas Rebart, 1559), a2a.

³⁸ Spangenberg, *Cythara Lutheri. Die schofe[n]en/Christlichen/trostreichen Psalmen und Geistlichen Lieder/ des Hochwirdigen thewren lehrers und Diener Gottes D. Martini Luthers. Der Erste Theil* (Erfurt, 1568), A3a-b.

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⁵⁰ The literature on Bach's theological expressions is immense; see, e.g. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Bach among the Theologians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

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The Anthropology of Worship: Understanding Ritual as Humanity's Innate Quest to Know God and the *extra nos* Revelation of the True God in Lutheran Worship

Greg Klotz

Abstract

The subject of structured (liturgical) worship/ritual has mostly been treated as a theological topic. While the structure of *ritual* and human behavior in ritual/worship has been studied by anthropologists, theologians focus on the innate reason behind worship. Together they aid in understanding (1) that the *need* for worship/ritual is not unique to a specific religion or ethnicity; it is essential to all humans. (2) that worship/ritual *structure*, as well as the elements used in worship, are nowhere universally prescribed. While anthropology theorizes the structure of ritual/worship, theology alone gives an answer to the *why*.

This paper examines the structural nature of, and the ontological need for, ritual worship as a human phenomenon (anthropology) used to transcend mundane earthly existence, as part of an innate quest to know the Creator veiled in the surrounding nature (theology). May the reader appreciate the greatness of how the Almighty and Gracious God of the Universe has chosen to be one with His creation, sharing in their depraved condition, to ultimately assure an eternal future life of wholeness in His presence. In the conclusion to this paper, I offer guidelines for consideration among missionaries and pastors preparing worship structures in differing cultural contexts.

Introduction

In the discipline of theological anthropology, worship emerges not as a peripheral religious practice but as an innate expression of human existence. Created in the *imago Dei* (Gn 1:26–27), humanity knew, trusted, and related naturally to the Creator. The Fall, however, destroyed this orientation. With the essential human need to once again know God, and with the capacities given by God remaining as part of human nature to know Him, humanity's essential need to worship His creator, redirected into a quest to find Him in the surrounding world. Martin Luther incisively captures this universality in his *Large Catechism*: “A ‘god’ is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and to which we are to find refuge in all need. Therefore, to have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe in that one with your whole heart.”¹



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This paper contends that worship behaviors are present in *all* human activity. Rites and rituals, employing common cultural objects and language, attempt to achieve transcendence, yet in the fallen state these gestures remain under the Law, lacking knowledge of the true God. The Gospel enters through God's self-revelation in the incarnate Christ, who, as true man, speaks the language of culture and, as true God, reveals the Father *extra nos*. Believers then echo this revelation by their confession (ὁμολογέω) of sin and faith. This Lutheran framework illuminates the anthropology of worship as both diagnostic of the Fall and prescriptive of redemption, underscoring mission as the restoration of created relationality.

The *imago Dei* and Innate Worship Capacity at Creation

Lutheran theology understands the *imago Dei* not primarily as rational faculties or dominion (though these remain) but as original righteousness.² As the *Formula of Concord* affirms, humanity was created “in righteousness and true holiness,” possessing unmediated communion with the Creator.³ That is to say, before the Fall, Adam and Eve lived in perfect *Shalom* (שָׁלוֹם).⁴ In Hebrew, *shalom* means “wholeness, completeness, lacking nothing, grounded” in eternal communion with God and with one another.⁵ In the Gospel of John, Jesus expresses this shared wholeness in terms of His redeeming mission: “...just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us...” (Jn 17:21). In this pre-Fall relationship, worship flowed from the essence of the creature: the heart trusted God alone.

Luther, in his Genesis commentary and catechetical writings, describes pre-Fall humanity as walking in intimate trust and praise without mediation or fear.⁶ This original state entailed worship as natural behavior: the heart trusted God alone (First Commandment), the mouth invoked His name (Second Commandment), and daily life sanctified time through His Word (Third Commandment). The Creed's articles—creation, redemption (foreshadowed), sanctification—were lived realities, not doctrinal propositions. The Lord's Prayer's address “Our Father” and petitions to hallow the name and usher in the Kingdom reflected unbroken filial dependence. Worship, therefore, was not ritualized effort but the spontaneous outflow of creaturely dependence upon the Creator.

Common objects (garden, animals, fruit) served as evidence of God's provision; language named reality in perfect alignment with divine truth. Thus, trust, invocation, relational cultivation were good and perfect gifts at creation, innate to human anthropology. They constituted the structural capacity for transcendence to relate beyond the self to the divine source of all good. Lutheran anthropology, therefore, insists this capacity persists post-Fall as a formal remnant, though materially corrupted, explaining why no culture lacks worship forms. Humanity *must* worship; the question is which god.

Universal Corruption by the Fall: Relational Incapability, Language Failure and Worship Distortion

The Fall inverted the *imago Dei* into what Luther calls an *imago diaboli*—the heart now trusts created things or self as ultimate good. Original righteousness and knowledge of the true God lost, yet the behavioral structure remains. Luther's First Commandment exposition universalizes worship: “Anything on which your heart

relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.”⁷ Whether mammon, power, or self, all humanity exhibits this behavior. The Second Commandment reveals the name: we are commanded to use God’s name “in the service of truth and of all that is good... Call upon Me in the day of trouble.”⁸ Fallen humanity will always invoke some name (thing, action) when in distress in search of refuge. The Third Commandment, reinterpreted by Luther as sanctification through God’s Word rather than ceremonial rest, exposes the relational void. In spite of rituals, non-Christians worship “without keeping a single day holy, because they neither preach nor practice God’s Word.”⁹ Yet all cultures set apart times, spaces, and objects for “holy” activity—festivals, shrines, meditations—to cultivate an ongoing relationship with what/who is worshiped as *God*.

The Creed’s articles expose the inability to know the true God without His *extra nos* revelation. The Lord’s Prayer’s relates directly to the first three commandments: the introduction addresses (confesses) God as Father. The first petition “hallows the name” in agreement with the Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed and the Second Commandment. The third petition echoes the need to “sanctify the day” through His Word (Third Commandment) and confesses that this is the word of the Holy Spirit (Third Article of the Creed). These confess and reveal by faith precisely what fallen rites cannot deliver.¹⁰ Thus, all worship behaviors persist: having a god (trust), naming it (invocation), relating through ritual (worship).

The impossibility to know, love, and trust God above all things is easily noted in post-Fall humanity’s language. Human language is void of vocabulary to describe or discuss the nature of the true God because “the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God” (1 Cor 2:14). Luther’s *theologia crucis* emphasizes that reason knows that God exists but not *who* He is—*deus absconditus* in majesty terrifies; only *deus revelatus* in Christ comforts.¹¹ Under the Law, humanity experiences only wrath; the Gospel relationship—unmerited grace—remains unknown. This relationship is contractual fear, not filial Gospel trust. Rites using common objects (stones, trees, money) or cultural language (myths, proverbs) achieve fleeting liminal experiences but never the true God. All attempts at transcendence—whether shamanic trance or philosophical mysticism—remain self-projections, trapped *intra nos*.

Rites, Rituals, and Cultural Vessels for Transcendence

Anthropologically, that is, *by nature*, humans employ symbols to bridge immanence and transcendence in ritual (worship). Noted anthropologist Émile Durkheim (in 1909) argued that all religions divide the world into the sacred and the profane: sacred things are set apart, protected by interdictions, and revered as embodying collective representations that bind society into a moral community.¹² Rituals reinforce this division, generating social solidarity through shared effervescence in communal rites. This effervescence is indispensable in achieving the transcendent quality of the ritual.

A contemporary rival of Durkheim, anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, regarded ritual differently. Whereas Durkheim focused on how ritual created *social solidarity* to maintain the identity of a social group, van Gennep focused on *change and movement*; particularly, how ritual provided a rhythmic framework for individuals to cross over boundaries from one status to another. His tripartite model of rites of passage (separation, transition, aggregation) has become the cliché definition of ritual.

In the ritual performance, van Gennep focused on the change and movement (social status) of the individual from before to after the ritual performance.¹³

During the 1960s, however, within van Gennep's tripartite division of rituals, anthropologist Victor Turner concentrated on the transitional phase, which he called the *liminal phase*. He emphasized this phase as the "betwixt and between" —the transitional stage wherein social structures dissolve, allowing for ambiguity and equality, leading to *communitas* (a spontaneous, homogenous fellowship, the apex of transcendent feeling).¹⁴

Turner's distinctive contribution locates the power and purpose of rite and ritual *not* primarily in the final reintegration phase (the restored social structure) but in the liminal moment itself. In this "betwixt and between" state, familiar words, objects, and symbols of everyday culture are deliberately "played with"—stripped of conventional meanings, recombined, inverted, or exaggerated—so that they acquire new, transcendent purpose. Ordinary elements (a stone, a loaf, a spoken proverb, a gesture) cease to function as mundane tools and become vessels for a transcendent re-signification that points beyond the visible and the structural. For Turner, the express reason rites and rituals exist is to transcend mundane structure—albeit momentarily—creating a temporary anti-structure in which participants explore "what is not seen."

Although not referring specifically to the ritual process, I believe this is what St. Paul means when in 2 Cor 4:18 (NIV) he writes, "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." The liminal experience itself, that experience to move beyond the temporary to the unseen spiritual. It is not the post-ritual status, but the liminal period when objects, words, gestures, are set aside to be used in a way that transcends their *worldly* cultural referents and vested through the ritual process to the *other-worldly*. This process generates the experience of transcendence, reflexivity, *communitas*, all of which are the purpose of ritual/worship.

This liminal dynamic is a common, universal feature of human rites and rituals across cultures. Turner, drawing from ethnographic evidence in Ndembu society, viewed liminality as an innate human capacity and quest embedded in the very process of social and cultural life. Liminal areas (rituals, carnivals, pilgrimages, dramas) generate new models, often fantastic, that refresh or challenge normative structures. Liminality thus represents an existential "bending back" upon the self, a reflexive anti-structural moment inherent to humanity's need to breathe, generate novelty, and encounter possibilities beyond the constraints of structure. Far from being an anomaly or a Christian-specific phenomenon, this liminal quest for transcendence through anti-

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structure is an anthropological constant. In the liminal phase, the liminal space becomes a *sacred space*.

A colleague of Turner's at the University of Chicago, Mircea Eliade, focusing on world religions, universal myths and symbols, describes this sacred space as an irruption of the transcendent into the profane, often centering on an *axis mundi* (cosmic axis) such as a mountain, tree, or pillar that connects heaven, earth, and underworld.¹⁵ This manifestation of the sacred enables communication with the divine. Common objects—stones, trees, altars—become vessels for this breakthrough, transformed from profane utility into sacred conduits.

Lutheran theology neither dismisses nor sacralizes culture *per se* but critiques its fallen deployment. Luther observes that God himself appoints “places, times, persons, and the entire outward order of worship” for the sake of the Word.¹⁶ Yet fallen humanity perverts this: idols crafted from wood or stone (Is 44) or modern equivalents (wealth, technology) become “gods” via ritual. In addition, using local proverbs, stories, songs, etc., human religious rituals elevate and encode cultural myths through culturally recognized speech forms that produce a *speech narcosis*,¹⁷ bringing about transcendence in the liminal phase, but ultimately reveal post-Fall bondage to language.

In Christian worship (ritual), however, the same universal liminal principle functions redemptively and eschatologically. Sacraments employ everyday cultural objects (water, bread, and wine) joined to Scripture; God's real presence irrupting through common cultural elements. In Lutheran worship, however, worshipers do not utilize cultural objects and nuanced speech forms to invent or project God's presence (*intra nos*). Within this liminal phase (worship), God's presence irrupts in, with, and under cultural objects by way of His Word (*extra nos*) in accordance with His specific command: that is, in bread, wine, and water **in union** with His Words.¹⁸ What anthropologists here see as shared human phenomenon becomes, for me, theologically incarnational: God uses human forms precisely because fallen humanity can only encounter Him through tangible, cultural means. Rites achieve genuine transcendence not by human technique but by God's Word, transforming cultural vessels into Gospel conduits.

Christ Himself embodies and perfects this liminal dynamic as the incarnate Word. Not limiting His presence specifically in the Sacraments (*intra sacramentum*), during the worship ritual, He irrupts into human existence through the recited Word of Scripture, the preached Word, the sung Word, and the confessed Word within the ritual but outside the sacrament context (*extra sacramentum*).¹⁹

This is not a fleeting liminal experience that dissipates upon reintegration into structure; it is the permanent establishment of a new creation in which the liminal becomes eschatological reality. Christ, as the true Light (Jn 1:9; 8:12), becomes present and fulfills the innate human quest for transcendence by making the “unseen” visible and tangible in His own person, words, and Sacraments. Thus, while all human rituals reflect the created capacity for projecting and achieving liminal transcendence, only Christ's incarnational presence through Word and Sacrament transforms that capacity from a momentary glimpse into an eternal, Gospel-grounded communion with the true God *extra nos*.

The Missio-Anthropological Purpose of God's Self-Revelation in Christ

God does not, therefore, abandon humanity's essential cultural tools but redeems them through the incarnation. Jesus **is** Emmanuel— "God with us" (Mt 1:23)—not abstractly but concretely: true man, "confined to humanity under the Law," yet true God who alone reveals the Father. As true man, Jesus speaks the language of Galilee: parables drawn from agriculture, fishing, coins, sheep; He employs objects (water jars at Cana, loaves, fish, temple coins); He engages institutions (synagogue, temple, Roman authority) and history (fulfilling prophets). He uses proverbs and cultural sayings, giving them new meaning— "You have heard... but I say to you." (e.g., Mt 5). In the structure of first-century Jewish culture, unknown realities (Kingdom as grace, not works; God as Abba) become known.

This is missio-anthropological: God enters human anthropology to redeem it from within, reorienting the innate worship capacities toward their proper object. Parables do not merely illustrate; they reveal, creating and calling to faith where none existed. Even the "cross and resurrection"—the cultural tool of Roman execution—becomes the historical nexus between heaven and earth, between the divine and the human.

God enters human anthropology to redeem it from within, reorienting the innate worship capacities toward their proper object.

The Believers' *Homologia*: Confessing the Revelation Back to God

Faith responds through confession (*ὁμολογέω*). Believers reciting back to God what God has revealed: the Creed is *homologia*^{7.26.26} of the articles; the Lord's Prayer echoes the petitions; the confession of sins (1 Jn 1:9) acknowledges God's diagnosis ("lost and condemned creatures"). Luther ties this to the Second Commandment: "first the heart honors God by faith and then the lips by confession."²⁰

In Lutheran worship, the creedal recitation, absolution, and hymns confess sinfulness under the Law and faith in the revealed God. Confession thus completes the anthropological circle: revelation *extra nos* calls humanity's response *intra nos*, restoring relationship. No longer living in the judgment of the convicting Law, the believer lives in Gospel freedom, using a new language created in Christ to praise the true God.

Conclusion

The anthropology of worship reveals humanity as essentially religious but tragically misdirected in their quest to know the true God. The Lutheran catechetical framework diagnoses the Fall's distortion while pointing to Christ's remedy. Through rites employing common objects and language, fallen humanity quests for transcendence; only the incarnate God-man fulfills the quest *extra nos*, reorienting every dimension by His word, inviting to know the true Father. Believers' *ὁμολογέω* returns the gift, completing the missio-anthropological purpose: creation restored in redemption.

The uniqueness of Lutheran worship is not located in any formal structure of ritual labeled as “traditional” or “contemporary.” Rather, what qualifies worship as true worship of the true God is the incarnational presence of God’s Word in worship: preaching, congregational singing, corporate confessing, the administration of the sacraments, and prayer. Terminology such as “traditional” or “contemporary” often betray human biases that elevate outward media or aesthetic preference over the crucial content and power of the Word. In Lutheran understanding, it is the Word—promising, proclaiming, and delivering Christ—that makes of water baptism, of bread and wine the body and blood, and confessions, songs, and prayers, a proclamation of the true God. Without this Word-centered reality, forms of reverence remain under the Law, mere human attempts at a feeling of transcendence. With the Word, every cultural vessel potentially becomes a living conduit for the transmission of the Gospel, fulfilling the innate human quest in the person and work of Christ. Worship remains *missio-anthropological*: God’s self-revelation *extra nos* continues to encounter and redeem fallen humanity.

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An Illustrative Example: The Liturgical Sequence as Divine Drama of the Salvation Narrative across Cultures

Having examined the anthropological dimensions of human worship, this inquiry offers practical direction for pastoral and missional practice. The question arises: how might an anthropological understanding assist pastors and missionaries in preparing and leading worship that facilitates effective proclamation and affective reception of the Gospel across a diversity of cultural contexts?

The normative Western liturgical order can be fruitfully reconceived as a dramatic narrative, a purposefully sequenced divine drama of salvation history. In this paradigm, worship unfolds as an intentional, theologically coherent progression of acts within God’s redemptive drama, wherein the Triune God sovereignly initiates, discloses, and consummates His saving work.

Conceptualizing worship as narrative drama enables the worshipping community in any culture to participate in the liturgical structure holistically. This narrative hermeneutic fosters deeper personal engagement, allowing believers to inhabit the salvation story individually and communally, thereby enhancing both cognitive comprehension and affective transformation. Ritual/worship structures and elements—language, objects, specifically nuanced musical and elocutionary forms,

kinetics and proxemics—should be chosen according to their potential to effectively communicate God’s salvific self-revelation and conform to the Christ-centered reality as the drama unfolds.

Specifically, in *oral cultures* (story-telling cultures or functionally illiterate cultures), conceptualizing worship as a narrative drama invites the community to participate in an already culturally nuanced manner. This holistic, flowing perception of narrative frequently takes on a cyclical character which can be seen specifically in the nature of the order of worship. Beginning with the worshiper’s life in Baptism, we repeat a cycle of renewal and forgiveness, progressing, circling back in confession and absolution, the creed, the reading of Scripture lessons, hymns, prayers, and the Sacraments as the story unfolds. Only with the advent of writing—and later print—did cultures gain the technological ability to freeze a narrative, break it into labeled parts, and subject it to academic scrutiny.²¹ The oral world knew no such fracture. For the singer, the elder, the griot, or the shaman, the story was always a participatory flow, a holistic event, and often a cyclical return that renewed both teller and hearers in the living present.²²

A Structural Model:

Invocation: The initial moment of the liturgical drama constitutes the divine initiative—an opening act wherein God does not summon the worshipers to *remember* their baptismal identity, but to be *ontologically incorporated* into the Triune God. The invocation “in[to]²³ the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” enacts a performative grafting, echoing Pauline language (Rom 6:4), by which the assembly is drawn into the death and resurrection of Christ to be co-heirs and co-participants with Him. It has been customary to refer to this invocation as “making our beginning,” but as a repeated cycle, this can also be the end, since in Baptism, we have “died to sin” being “buried therefore with Him”; we rise with Him. (Romans 6). The invocation is at once a funeral pall to the believer’s former self under the Law, and their robe of righteousness covering the new self, created in Christ (Gospel). Here, the drama commences with the irrevocable act of divine incorporation, through which the believer participates in God’s salvific work.

Confession: The act of confession (*ὁμολογέω*) constitutes a personal and theological articulation wherein the assembly aligns its language with God’s. This is not a mere enumeration of deeds, but an acknowledgment of the ontological reality of sin—an embodiment of the Law that binds the creature to finitude apart from God. There is a new language given *extra nos* that leads the believer to respond through examination (*intra nos*), revealing the impossibility of self-deliverance.

Absolution: The pronouncement of absolution is a decisive moment wherein God, acting *extra nos*, bestows forgiveness and salvation through words that originate outside the human subject. The drama thus progresses from the worshiper’s confession of existential gravity to the liberating act of divine speech, bringing reconciliation and restoration.

Collect (Prayers) Having received absolution and been restored, the assembly is now invited to approach God as a loving Father, calling His name (2nd Commandment). The collect marks a dialogical response, wherein the creature, freed

from alienation, participates in the intimacy of the Garden—reclaiming the primordial communion lost through sin and expressing itself with new words.

Readings and Sermon: The proclamation of the Word constitutes an act of divine self-disclosure. Through the scriptural readings and the prophetic office of preaching, God reveals Himself, granting the worshiping believers application of the divine to their present lived context. They can see the living Word become incarnate in relationship to their lives, especially if the message includes situations familiar to believers' context.

The Creed: The act of confession (*ὁμολογέω*) constitutes a personal and theological declaration; it marks the transformative transition from confession of sin to confession of faith; a positive confession wherein the assembly, having received God's self-revelation in Christ, appropriates a new linguistic and conceptual framework. This revealed vocabulary—Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier—discloses the formerly unknown Triune God, reorienting the heart's trust, the mouth's invocation, and the life's relational dependence toward the God who is truly God.

The Sacrament: The problematic word accounting for denominational differences in the interpretation and utility of the Sacrament is the Hebrew word (זָכַר) to *remember*. *Remember* is taken as a command, which worshipers have frequently equated to something they must do: "remember." However, *remember* is God acting in accordance with His covenant, the body and blood of His Son, Jesus Christ. His *remembering* is *creating that past event in the present, for the present*. When God *remembers*, He acts in accordance with the covenant He made, "the new covenant in His blood."²⁴ The words, "This do in remembrance of Me," more accurately can be seen as an invitation for worshipers to participate in the covenant that God makes with them, now in their presence, to make them whole. When God "remembers" his covenant, He acts to save (Gn 9:15); when Israel "remembers" the Sabbath, they participate in it. (Ex 20:8).

Here, the gathered assembly encounters God's presence offered for them. The liturgical act of withdrawing the corporal²⁵ serves as the semiotic threshold, initiating an advanced phase of this *divine drama* wherein the congregation transcends the finite to engage in a face-to-face encounter with the Triune God. Christ becomes incarnate through the Word and in strict accordance with the New Covenant, manifesting His ontological presence—specifically His body and blood—in, with, and under the elements of bread and wine. Consequently, the act of removing the corporal functions is an invitation for the communicants to see beyond the temporary, visible realm and participate in the eschatological banquet, an anticipative realization of the "feast to come." This covenantal promise ensures that the assembly does not merely observe an historical symbolic rite but actively inhabits an eternal feast that bridges the temporal present with the celestial future.

Nunc Dimittis: Simeon's "Nunc Dimittis" (Lk 2:29–32) serves as a liturgical "seal" upon the sacramental encounter, effectively recapitulating the assembly's experience of God's covenantal faithfulness. In the petition, "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace," the verb *depart* (*ἀπολύω*) functions as more than an ending to the Sacrament; but a beginning to Christian living in relation to God. In its first-century setting, *depart* described the formal release of a bondservant by his master.²⁶ Liturgically, this suggests that through the Sacrament, the worshiper is emancipated

from the ontological “destitution” of sin and restored to the freedom of the children of God.

Furthermore, the departure in *peace* invokes the profound Hebraic concept of *shalom* (שָׁלוֹם): made whole and complete. Having encountered Christ, the believer’s life is redeemed and lacks nothing, as the breach between the creature and the Creator has been mended.

However, a comprehensive sacramental theology must also account for the witness of Anna the Prophetess (Lk 2:36–38). Luke’s genealogical detail—identifying her as the daughter of Phanuel—is significant. The name Phanuel literally translates to “Face of God” (פָּנֵאֵל)²⁷, and signifies *presence*, evoking the site where Jacob wrestled with the Divine and survived (Gn 32:30). By positioning the worshiper alongside both Simeon and the “daughter of the Face of God,” Luke illustrates the dual nature of the Sacrament: it is a site of unmediated theophany (seeing God face-to-face) and a catalyst for missional release (departing in the freedom of *shalom*).

Benediction: While the worshiper’s quest to transcend and know the true God ends here, the Aaronic benediction sends the worshiper out to live in God’s *presence* (פָּנִים - *face*) as His child, lacking in nothing (שָׁלוֹם - *peace, wholeness*).

Synthesis: In summary, this liturgical sequence provides a functional “shape” capable of informing preparation for culturally communicative, holistic worship across diverse cultural and missiological contexts. Crucially, this outline remains indifferent (*adiaphora*) toward specific cultural media or aesthetic expressions, with the essential exception of the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper in which word and element are both mandated. Beyond these instituted signs, liturgical labels are functional descriptors that can convey their theological significance within the local assembly’s vernacular and community.

In this Lutheran understanding, worship is not a static ritual of human performance (*sacrificium*), but the incarnational narrative of salvation history, not as a human work, but the efficacious action of the Word of God, come to dwell among His people, divine service (*Gottesdienst*) of God to His people. God draws all people unto Himself from temporal life into the hidden, yet certain, reality of everlasting life.

NOTE: It would be remiss not to acknowledge relevant issues of contextualization and syncretism in worship related to cultural media. Investigating the complexity of this problem was not within the scope of this paper.

Endnotes

¹ Martin Luther, *Large Catechism* in Kolb, Robert, and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), I.2, 386. (hereafter, KW and LC).

² *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* II, 15–22 (KW, 37–39).

³ *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration* (hereafter FC SD), I.9 (KW, 533); cf. I.10–11, where original sin is described as the loss of this concreated righteousness and the ensuing corruption of human nature.

⁴ Jacques B. Doukhan, “Shalom: The Hebrew View of Peace,” *Shabbat Shalom* (2001);

“Shalom: Peace in Hebrew,” My Jewish Learning, accessed March 1, 2026,

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/shalom>; cf. also the root *shalam* meaning “to make whole” or “restore” in Torah contexts (e.g., Exodus 21–22), as discussed in FIRM Israel, “The True Meaning of Shalom” (2020).

⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 258n14.

⁶ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1–5*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. George V. Schick, vol. 1 of *Luther’s Works* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 95, 165–67, 228.

⁷ Luther, LC 1.3 (KW, 386).

⁸ Luther, LC 1.64 (KW, 394).

⁹ Luther, LC 1.90 (KW, 398).

¹⁰ Luther, LC 1.70 (KW, 394).

¹¹ On Luther’s distinction between *deus absconditus* and *deus revelatus*, see Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*. Translated by Thomas H. Trapp. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 165–80.

¹² Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995 [1912]), 44–47.

¹³ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 15–25. [Note: Page numbers added for consistency].

¹⁴ Victor Turner, “Liminality and Communitas,” in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969), 94–130, esp. 94–7, 126–30.

¹⁵ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), 20–65.

¹⁶ Luther, LC 1.94 (KW, 399).

¹⁷ Within discourse theory, “speech narcosis” refers to the lulling nature—a neurological effect—that unique stylized speech uses instinctively within ritual to differentiate between “informational discourse” and “commemorative discourse.” John H. McDowell, “Folklore as Commemorative Discourse,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 105, no. 418 (1992): 403–23.

¹⁸ McDowell refers to the “words” within ritual as *words of the ancestors*. These “words” within specialized speech forms are used to highlight the importance of specific spoken portions of the ritual. These words appear as archaic or antiquated verbiage which, in some instances, may lack translation or transcend lexical meaning to preserve the original “words of the ancestors.” Lexical meaning and translation in the ritual is not as important as fidelity to the original and the rhythmic cadence of the speech form itself, causing feelings of transcendence. (McDowell, “Folklore as Commemorative Discourse,” 403–23.)

¹⁹ I use the term *intra sacramentum* to refer to Christ’s incarnational presence in, with, and under bread, wine, and water—elements where He has promised to be present through His Word. By *extra sacramentum*, I refer to His incarnational presence, by His Word, redefining quotidian objects and language of human culture, revealing the Kingdom of God.

²⁰ Luther, LC 1.70 (KW, 395).

²¹ Richard A. Jensen, *Thinking in Story: Preaching in a Post-Literate Age* (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing Company, 1995), 25–40 (see esp. chap. 2, “The Gutenberg Eclipse,” and chap. 4, “The Electronic Age”). Jensen posits that print culture encouraged “linear, analytical thinking,” causing the church to move away from the *experience* of the Gospel (the Story) and toward doctrinal propositions and systematic theology.

²² On cyclical structures in oral narrative, see Andrew Wiget, "Cycle Construction and Character Development in Central Algonkian Trickster Tales," *Oral Tradition* 15, no. 1 (2000): 39–73; and Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 95–123. Many oral traditions align with seasonal or ritual cycles, rendering narrative a recurring, holistic renewal rather than a one-way linear progression.

²³ The Greek phrase *eis to onoma* signifies entry into a relationship of possession; to be baptized *into* the name implies the person becomes the property of the Trinity and moves from the world into a mystical union. Hans Bietenhard, "Ὀνομα," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (hereafter *TDNT*), ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 274–5.

²⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 154.

²⁵ The customary veil used in worship to cover the elements prior to the Words of Institution.

²⁶ Friedrich Büchsel, "Ἀπολύω," in *TDNT*, vol. 4 (1967), 353–54.

²⁷ A. S. van der Woude, "פָּאָנִים (*pānīm*)," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, trans. Douglas W. Stott, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 603–4.

A Common Lectionary, a Shared Context: Planning Worship with All the Church

Sally Messner

Many have called the Bible a “good book.” And it is good. But it’s not a book. The Bible is, rather, a library—made up of sixty-some books, give or take a few, depending on your tradition. This collection, this library, contains multiple literary forms—poetry, song, narrative, history, and letters, to name a few—and was written over a dozen centuries by a host of authors living in a variety of communities and locations. This library in all its diversity invites us to explore and learn from hundreds of voices, thousands of perspectives—all sharing with us their experience of a good and awesome God. The biblical library is a place where ideas are planted and continue to come alive in the minds and hearts of visitors.

The content of the bound volume we call “The Bible” developed over centuries, in many cases deriving from the stories early Hebrew and Christian assemblies were telling each other, being collected into standard stories, being read together, and shared in worship.¹ The stories shared in communities and especially in corporate worship were passed down through generations, telling the whole story of salvation history, from Israel to Christ to our present day.

Over time, worshipping communities figured out which texts would be recognized as canonical. And others would have strong opinions about those choices, mostly famously, perhaps, Luther’s “canon within the canon” insisting on scripture’s focus on Christ. This seems ultimately to be Luther participating in this very tradition of figuring out which texts merit commendation across the community, which texts tell a story worth repeating over and over, which texts should be most central to who we are as humans in relationship with one another and with God, which texts help us share the good news with others or—just as importantly—don’t get in the way of the sharing.



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The process of assembling the various biblical collections we call “The Bible” has a counterpart in the practice of developing lectionaries, those lists of selected pericopes that help a reader move through some or all of scripture in a prescribed and, often, chronologically patterned way. A lectionary is in many ways another layer of curating our biblical library, creating a canon within a canon for those who want to read and pray scripture hourly or daily—usually as an individual or small religious community—or weekly, typically for communities gathering in worship.

Lectionaries are necessary for weekly gatherings because we end up with more scripture than we can possibly handle in any reasonable way for a community that gathers weekly, even if we read several pericopes every time we meet. And lectionaries provide coherence and digestibility to the biblical witness. Scripture has plenty of overlapping themes and even specific content. The thousands of verses of scripture in the Revised Common Lectionary cover only 16% of the 30,000-plus verses in the Bible.² But 16% of 30,000 is still a lot of scripture. Those developing a weekly lectionary for worship commend to the worshiping community which of these biblical texts seems good for corporate worship. When created by groups of people, lectionaries help ensure that the texts we hear in worship—and, particularly, the texts that are preached from pulpits—are faithful to the big arc of scripture rather than focused on individual theologies and agendas. The texts chosen to accompany each other on a given day are diverse, meant to supplement each other by agreement or argument, always pointing to what Gordon Lathrop calls the “rich Christian hope for unity in diversity because of Jesus Christ.”³

Enter the cantor, who, with the pastor and other congregational leaders, is called to plan worship. Most church musicians serve in a congregation that follows some sort of lectionary, whether a cyclical or narrative developed by an ecumenical committee or a leadership plan that goes from one themed sermon cycle to another. Cantors help select and often compose liturgical pieces, psalms, hymns, anthems, prayers, and other parts of worship. They offer further curation of which scripture we hear, sing, and pray, and which pericopes just don’t make the cut. The cantor, like the preacher, can introduce supplemental texts from outside the common lectionary—biblical texts as well as all sorts of others, like poetry, prose, paraphrases of biblical texts, and so on.

For both preacher and cantor, this task is centrally important to the pastoral care of the congregation, because it determines what the assembly will hear and take to heart and, in the case of musical selection, have in their ears and on their lips the rest of the week. The entire liturgy, and perhaps above all, anything we sing corporately—because when we sing together, we breathe together—takes on a corporeal and relational nature. When biblical proclamation is

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heard in the liturgy, the words become the Word, embodied in Jesus and embodying Jesus, who is with us where two or three are gathered. His promise of new life is shared most clearly in the proclamation of the word, and the proclamation carried out through the sacraments. Christ's presence throughout this scriptural library is realized in the liturgy, where the breath of God inhabits all that is spoken, sung, and heard.⁴

So, a common lectionary, first and foremost, ensures our worship planning remains within this historical dialogue of what texts are and are not most important to us, what stories are central to who we are as a Christian community, what pericopes best proclaim a Christ crucified for all the world. Here the very mission of God, the *missio Dei*, is propelled by the Holy Spirit into human communities most often and most reliably—that is, when we don't get in the way—by the scriptural and lectionary traditions as they do their work of keeping us creatures focused on Christ's promises to us and not on someone else's gospel.

Common lectionaries are to be commended for many other reasons as well. The formulaic structure of a lectionary can save time in worship planning, and the repetition of readings can help parishioners commit important scripture to memory. The shared context of readings and related liturgical components bind Christians across geographical and cultural borders. It can also provide points of collaboration for church leaders within and across ecclesial traditions.

Bringing the biblical witness week after week in formal structures, Christian liturgy is an ecumenical endeavor. In the years since the Second Vatican Council, Christian church bodies have worked together to create a collection of Scripture readings—for Sundays, for feast days, and even for every day of the week—for use in worship and for use in daily prayer in the home. The collection in this common lectionary ensures we are listening to the variety of voices in this library of "The Bible" and is therefore an indispensable tool in worship planning. The Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), compiled by the ecumenical Consultation on Common Texts, is a strong resource to provide diverse voices for Sunday liturgies and feast days, particularly. From my father-in-law's rural, multi-point Lutheran parish to my large, urban United Methodist congregation to my grandparents' suburban Presbyterian church, the RCL is a thread that binds us together even when our styles of music, language, orders of service, and liturgical structures differ. The comfort that comes from recognizing meaningful, proclamatory texts—from holding those texts in one's heart and mind—allows church members in the pew to see their shared journey with Christian siblings across the country and around the globe.⁵ With that scriptural-lectionary reminder of God's love for them, of their freedom in Christ, they are free to be little Christs to their neighbors, sharing those same words of hope and promise beyond the limits of their local worshiping community.

To some, a cycle of assigned readings—three years for the RCL—sounds limiting. But, like the liturgy itself, the framework of a lectionary can be understood as freeing rather than restricting. Because the lectionary provides a plan from which to work, church leaders are free to tend to other parts of their ministry. Sure, some occasions

require deviation from the plan, but, generally, it is worthwhile to follow the calendar. A lectionary worthy for Christian liturgy tells the story of Jesus' life and ministry from the varied accounts of the Gospel writers in connection with other parts of our ancestors' stories.⁶

Following a common lectionary encourages opportunities for ministerial collaboration, within denominations and ecumenically. Preachers and cantors will meet to discuss the upcoming texts and how they might be best proclaimed. Doing so ensures parishioners are hearing the whole arc of salvation history rather than the worship leaders' favorite themes. The temptation to "mine" the scriptures to support our individual agendas is avoided; creativity is not made an idol. The Good News we are called to proclaim is the same each time the community gathers for worship—proclaiming this story to our people in our time and place so that they are prepared for the week ahead. As the Second Vatican Council offered, "The treasures of the bible are to be opened up more lavishly, so that richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word."⁷ The lectionary was formed because church leaders agreed that evangelism and learning were connected to the liturgy. The texts they speak, sing, and hear in the liturgy are what they carry out into the world—what they hear in the worship life of the community affects the public life of the community.⁸

What many Christians know of scripture, the verses they've committed to memory and can recognize outside of church, was learned in the liturgy. All were from scripture—confession and forgiveness, prayers that quote Bible passages, hymns that sing the faith, pericopes and preaching. If the scriptures are the "cradle wherein Christ is laid," as Luther describes, then the liturgy is the nursery.⁹ By virtue of being in the pews during the Sunday morning liturgy as a child, I learned scripture. The lectionary connects the biblical narrative to the liturgical year and the life of the worshipping community so that we hear the story, the same story that other Christian siblings around the globe hear in their contexts and cultures.

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If the true test of liturgy is found in the life of the people, then the cantor's role is paramount to building the connections within the community's worship life and their public life. With covering less than seventeen percent of the content of the Bible, the goal of the RCL is not to teach scripture. Daily Bible reading and study groups can tend that learning. The RCL, rather, creates yet another canon within the canon. Each set of lections within and across the three-year cycle highlights Sunday as the festival day in the Christian community, the "eighth" day, when the community gathers to proclaim Christ's resurrection. Honoring the plan of the lectionary for the most part keeps the Sunday fest primary, avoiding the pitfall of other agendas.¹⁰ When it comes

to worship planning, the lectionary helps to shape all musical aspects of liturgy—congregational hymns, choral anthems and other “performance” music, liturgical music, and the psalms. Using the lectionary as a baseline for planning creates cohesion around not just the liturgy but all aspects of congregational life. The lections provide a helpful structure for selecting music that tells the broader story of salvation, rather than fitting a limited theme. A specific theme can still be lifted up in the sermon or in the prayers of the people but connecting the whole of the liturgy to the larger story in the Sundays before it and after it strengthens the worshiping community, sustaining members to bear witness to the gospel.

Several denominations have created worship planning tools based on the RCL cycle. There are databases with robust catalogues of hymnody, and, in some cases, “performance” music—preludes, postludes, hymn introductions, etc.—designed to be searchable based on thematic words and organized according to the Sunday/Feast Day pericopes. These tools save time for church leaders by providing an organized and narrowed structure for planning. Because some hymnody is shared across many traditions, we are reminded of the shared Christian journey. Paul Westermeyer, in his research, discovered that across fourteen English-language hymnals, there are about 750 tunes repeated at least five times.¹¹

The reliability of a lectionary cycle means that worship planners can be proactive, begin their work early, planning ahead for busy times of the church year. Choirs and bands need to rehearse for ensemble, altar guilds need to prepare the linens and elements, and teachers need to coordinate learning for faith formation. Of course, it is good to be ready to respond to emergencies and other current events, but long-range planning need not be rigid. The structure of the liturgy and the lectionary is the foundation on which relevant, vibrant worship is built. It builds upon the familiar and stable, while responding to the immediate needs of the people in context.

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The compilation of the RCL emerged from the lectionaries that came before it—from the sacred texts read in synagogues that Jesus himself read and explained, to early Christians who gathered in community to hear the story of salvation. Eventually, a codex of readings was made and shared between assemblies. The Bible was a communal book, intended for public proclamation; individuals did not own private copies.¹² Using the RCL today connects contemporary Christian assemblies to their Christian and Jewish ancestors—to the faithful across time and space, rejoicing with their rejoicing and lamenting with their lamentation. Connecting with history in this way and being attentive to how the pericopes work together on a given Sunday hold

church leaders accountable to the whole story. The worshiping assembly retains a broader biblical understanding of salvation history.

The common lectionaries strengthen the Christian community, forming ecumenical bonds among clergy, other church leaders, and lay people alike. Common lectionaries help people in the pews appreciate and understand the liturgical year and the rhythm and seasons of life in the worshiping community. The lectionaries move Christians beyond their local context and connect them to the global Christian community. Telling the story with these values in mind helps make sense of the overwhelmingly complex library of story, song, history, post, and poetry we call the Bible. In the repeated hearings of the whole story of salvation, we are invited deeper into the Word. The Word proclaimed in the liturgy takes root in us, renewing our minds for Christ, binding us to our neighbors, and sending us out into the world for ministry and witness to the gospel.

Endnotes

¹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), Second Vatican Council, December 4, 1963, 24.

“Sacred scripture is of the greatest importance in the celebration of the liturgy. For it is from scripture that lessons are read and explained in the homily, and psalms are sung; the prayers, collects, and liturgical songs are scriptural in their inspiration and their force, and it is from the scriptures that actions and signs derive their meaning. Thus to achieve the restoration, progress, and adaptation of the sacred liturgy, it is essential to promote that warm and living love for scripture to which the venerable tradition of both eastern and western rites gives testimony.”

² Normand Bonneau, *The Sunday Lectionary: Ritual Word, Paschal Shape* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1998), 49.

³ Gordon W. Lathrop, *Saving Images: The Presence of the Bible in Christian Liturgy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 18.

⁴ Cally Hammond, “Today This Scripture Has Been Fulfilled in Your Hearing,” in *Lively Oracles of God: Perspectives on the Bible and Liturgy*, ed Gordon Jeanes and Bridget Nichols (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2022), 1.

“Luke 4:16-21...Luke 24:13-35...both show the man Jesus—before *and after* his resurrection—reading a recognised form of Scripture and then explaining it to his hearers. These two narratives capture in microcosm the approach used in modern reading and interpretation of Scripture in collective worship. They shift between the written word and the proclaimed w/Word; and in both cases their ultimate target is the living Word—through the breaking of bread through which Christ is made known.”

⁵ *The Reims Statement: Praying with One Voice*, English Language Liturgical Consultation, August 16, 2011, 1.

“We celebrate the sense of being at home in one another’s churches that comes with praying the same texts and hearing the same scriptures in the Sunday liturgy.”

⁶ Bonneau, *The Sunday Lectionary: Ritual Word, Paschal Shape*, 145. On guiding principles for the compilers of the Sunday Lectionary: “They sought (1) to include as much of the story of Jesus’ public ministry as possible, and (2) to underline the uniqueness of each gospel

writer's way of telling the story, all the while tailoring the results so as (3) to respect liturgy's need to tell the same fundamental story each year."

⁷ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 51.

⁸ Hans Boehringer, "The Common Lectionary," in *Word and World: Theology for Christian Ministry*, X, No 1 (Winter 1990): 27. "...Massey Shepherd, responding to a question about what makes for good liturgy, remarked that the true test of a parish liturgy was not whether it followed rubrical direction; the true test was to be found in the lives of those who celebrated that liturgy...that worship has to do with the diaconal ministry and witness of the church."

⁹ Martin Luther, *Word and Sacrament I* (Luther's Works, Vol. 35), E. Theodore Bachmann, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1960), 236.

¹⁰ Adolf Adam, *The Liturgical Year: Its History and Its Meaning after the Reform of the Liturgy* (Collegeville: Pueblo, 1981), 49. On the *General Norms for the Liturgical Year* released in 1969:

"These new regulations in defense of the Sunday liturgy are in danger of being frustrated once again by well-intentioned initiatives that tend to give many Sundays a special theme and purpose which are foreign to Sunday itself. We may add the widespread practice of celebrating on Sundays 'motif Masses' or theme Masses that are meant to 'raise people's consciousness' with regard to ecclesial or social problems and prepare them for appropriate 'actions.'"

¹¹ Paul Westermeyer, *Let the People Sing: Hymn Tunes in Perspective* (Chicago: GIA, 2005), 5.

¹² Gordon W. Lathrop, *Saving Images*, 6.

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Singing the Gospel: Narrative, Hymnody, and Identity among Oromo Christians

Samuel Deressa

Abstract

This article explores the culture of storytelling through song among the Lutheran Oromo of Ethiopia. The Oromo language is spoken by over 40 million people, primarily in Ethiopia and parts of Kenya and Somalia. For the Oromo people, oral traditions are fundamental to preserving their history, culture, and collective identity. The oral heritage includes storytelling, poetry, proverbs, and most notably, songs, which record events, teach social values, celebrate milestones, and pass down knowledge to the next generation.

Introduction

In his seminal work *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre famously declares that man is a “story-telling animal.”¹ This claim captures a fundamental aspect of human existence: the pervasiveness of narrative in the fabric of daily life. Indeed, whether human experience unfolds in a tightly sequential, cause-and-effect manner or proceeds through a more fragmented, “zigzag” trajectory, it remains deeply saturated with stories.² Storytelling appears to be an irreducible feature of how individuals make sense of their actions, relationships, and place in the world.

Building on this insight, scholars such as John D. Niles have extended the narrative principle to the very origins of cultural production. As Niles argues, all forms of narrative—ranging from oral folk tales and epic poetry to the most sophisticated genres of contemporary fiction—have their ultimate origin in the storytelling nature of human beings. That is, the human propensity to narrate is not merely a psychological or social curiosity but a generative wellspring from which entire literary traditions flow.³



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Perhaps it is Walter R. Fisher who most explicitly fashioned the notion of *homo narrans*—the understanding that human beings are, above all, storytelling beings, and that narration therefore constitutes the very foundation of human communication.⁴ Fisher’s narrative paradigm represents a significant departure from long-dominant models of rationality, challenging the assumption that meaningful human exchange must be grounded primarily in logic, evidence, and systematic argumentation to a “narrative rationality.”⁵

The claim that human beings are *homo narrans* represents an extension of a richer tradition, one that conceives of humans as fundamentally symbol-making and symbol-using animals—a lineage most prominently associated with such scholars as Ernst Cassirer and Kenneth Burke.⁶ Cassirer, in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, argued that humans do not live in a purely physical universe but in a symbolic one, mediated by language, myth, art, and religion. Burke, similarly, understood human beings as “symbol-using, symbol-making, and symbol-misusing animals” perpetually engaged in the enactment of meaning.⁷

This article explores storytelling through song among the Lutheran Oromo of Ethiopia. The Oromo language, known natively as *Afaan Oromoo* or *Oromiffa*, is a major African language with significant cultural and demographic importance. It is spoken by over 40 million people, primarily in Ethiopia and parts of Kenya and Somalia. The Oromo people are the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia and represent a significant population in the Horn of Africa. For the Oromo people, oral traditions are not merely a form of entertainment but are fundamental to preserving their history, culture, and collective identity. This rich oral heritage includes storytelling, poetry, proverbs, and most notably, songs. These songs serve multiple purposes: they record historical events, teach social values, celebrate community milestones, and pass down knowledge from one generation to the next. In the absence of a widely used written script for much of their history, these oral forms became the primary vehicle for cultural continuity.⁸

In the mid-20th century, evangelical Christianity began to grow significantly within the Oromo community in Ethiopia. Missionaries and early Oromo converts recognized that to effectively communicate their message, they needed to use culturally resonant methods. They therefore adopted the existing oral traditions, particularly music and song, to spread the gospel. Traditional musical styles, melodies, and poetic structures were used to create new Christian hymns and worship songs in *Afaan Oromoo*. By using a trusted cultural medium, the evangelical message was integrated into the community’s existing social and cultural fabric, which greatly aided its acceptance and growth.⁹

Storytelling through Song among the Oromo

Within recent ethnomusicological and historical scholarship, the practice of storytelling through song has emerged as a critical site of inquiry for understanding the Oromo cultural and political experience.¹⁰ This focus recognizes these songs not

merely as artistic expressions but as dynamic, living archives of collective memory and identity. As a cornerstone of the Oromo oral tradition, narrative song serves as a primary pedagogical method, ensuring the intergenerational transmission of historical events, social values, and ethical codes. These performances function as aural history lessons, more easily memorized and recalled than prose, safeguarding cultural continuity in the face of historical erasure and political marginalization.

These songs operate as a nuanced and often coded public discourse, articulating the community's collective social, economic, and political experiences. They provide a sanctioned space to voice dissent, critique authority, and process collective hardship.¹¹ In particular, contemporary analysis has focused on how these narrative songs articulate a profound historical consciousness of collective pain. They are interpreted as sonic vessels for expressing the social experience of loss, the enduring weight of intergenerational trauma from periods of conquest and displacement, and the resilient, ongoing struggle for freedom and self-determination. Through this lens, the singer-storyteller becomes a historian, a social critic, and a philosopher. Oromo narrative songs become a potent force in the socio-political landscape.

The historical development of the Oromo oral tradition, particularly its narrative and musical forms, is fundamentally intertwined with the history of their language and external cultural influences. A pivotal factor shaping this tradition is the relatively recent adoption of a written form for the Oromo language in the early nineteenth century, primarily through the efforts of Christian missionaries.¹² Prior to this orthographic development, the transmission of culture, history, law, and collective values was almost exclusively dependent on oral-aural channels. In this context, the culture of storytelling through song (*weedduu*) emerged not as a mere art form but as an essential and refined mnemonic technology. Its poetic structures, rhythmic patterns, and melodic contours were meticulously engineered to ensure the accurate preservation and intergenerational transfer of vast bodies of knowledge, making it the primary custodian of Oromo identity and collective memory.

This oral medium presented both an opportunity and a necessary pathway for new forms of knowledge dissemination, including religious teaching and tradition. Following the introduction of evangelical Christianity into Oromo territories towards the end of the nineteenth century, missionaries and early Oromo converts quickly recognized the efficacy of the existing oral tradition as a vehicle for communication. The established practice of storytelling through song was strategically co-opted and repurposed to facilitate the propagation of the Christian gospel.¹³

Translating biblical narratives, theological concepts, and evangelical hymns into Oromo poetic and musical forms allowed for a more

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resonant and accessible indigenization of the new faith. This process represented a significant cultural synthesis, whereby a traditional mechanism for preserving Oromo identity was adapted to serve as a conduit for a foreign religious system. Consequently, the very tradition that had long safeguarded indigenous Oromo culture became a principal instrument for its transformation, demonstrating the remarkable adaptability of oral genres in the face of profound cultural and religious change.¹⁴

Storytelling Practice in Traditional (Secular) vs Religious Songs

Within the Oromo language, the tradition of song is categorized into distinct genres, defined primarily by subject matter and cultural purpose. This indigenous classification broadly mirrors—though is not reducible to—the common global distinction between secular and religious music, a binary that has long structured ethnomusicological inquiry. However, the Oromo lexicon provides specific terms for these different types of songs. For secular songs, the Oromo employ the terms *sirba* and *weedduu*. *Sirba*, derived from the root verb meaning “to sing” or “to compose melodically,” represents the broader category of secular vocal expression. *Weedduu*, by contrast, often refers more specifically to particular regional song styles or ceremonial contexts, sometimes implying a more formalized or tradition-bound genre than the more general *sirba*.¹⁵

This secular category, encompassing both *sirba* and *weedduu*, comprises a vast array of songs that engage with the myriad aspects of everyday human existence. Love songs sung by young herders under the vast Ethiopian sky, work songs that synchronize labor in the fields, lullabies, praise songs for warriors or respected elders, satirical tunes that gently mock social pretensions, and dirges for mourning—all find their place within the secular Oromo musical tradition. Unlike sacred songs, which are typically bound by strict ritual protocols and performed only in designated spiritual contexts, secular Oromo songs enjoy a flexibility of occasion, form, and content. They can be improvised or memorized, performed solo or in call-and-response with a crowd, accompanied by traditional instruments such as the *krar* (lyre), *dhidibbo* (flute), or drum, or offered *a cappella*. What unites them is their rootedness in the contingent, changing, and often unpredictable texture of human life—its joys and sorrows, its small triumphs and daily disappointments, its celebrations of love and expressions of political resistance.

In the absence of widespread written historiography, these songs operated as living historical chronicles, preserving detailed accounts of military campaigns, political transformations, dynastic successions, and significant social events across generations.¹⁶ Through carefully composed verses transmitted orally from elder to youth, from one *oggessa* (wisdom-keeper) to the next, Oromo communities maintained a dynamic record of their collective past—remembering not only victories and defeats but also the names of heroes, the strategies of generals, the grievances that sparked rebellions, and the treaties that secured fragile peace. Crucially, these songs functioned as alternative historical narratives, often providing perspectives that subtly

challenged or openly contested the official accounts promulgated by political authorities, imperial powers, or religious institutions. Where formal chronicles might have served the interests of ruling elites, *sirba* could preserve the voices of the ordinary herder, the woman warrior, the defeated clan, or the dissident elder. In this sense, Oromo secular song tradition represents a form of counter-history—a people's archive encoded in melody, capable of resisting erasure and sustaining memory across what Paul Ricoeur might call the selective forgetfulness of power.¹⁷

Beyond their historiographical function, secular songs also served as pedagogical tools, transmitting cultural values, moral principles, and practical knowledge across generational divides.¹⁸ In societies where formal schooling was historically limited or unavailable, *sirba* and *weedduu* became the curriculum through which children learned what it meant to be a virtuous Oromo: the obligations of hospitality, the respect due to elders, the courage expected of young men, the resourcefulness demanded of women, the proper conduct in times of drought or abundance. Through carefully crafted melodic structures and repetitive patterns—refrains, parallelisms that aided memorization, rhythmic “hooks”—complex social concepts were made accessible to both literate and non-literate community members. Musical form itself became a medium of enculturation, its aesthetic pleasures serving as the vehicle for moral and practical instruction.¹⁹

These songs are not merely for entertainment; they reflect a holistic concept of life, portraying “the totality of the physical world: man, animals, plants and trees, material inorganic things plus the world of artificial objects: artifacts, food and beverage, clothing.”²⁰ They serve as social commentary, historical documentation, and cultural transmission from one generation to the next.²¹

A more specialized sub-category of secular song is denoted by the term *wellu*. The term *wellu* is specifically reserved for songs that explore themes of love, romance, and affection. The Oromo language recognizes that the expression of amorous feeling requires its own generic category, distinct from the songs of labor, politics, or ritual. *Wellu* songs are used to praise, compliment, or express admiration for a beloved person, whether that beloved is a prospective marriage partner, a newlywed spouse, a distant lover separated by circumstance, or even an idealized figure celebrated in song across great distances. The performance context of *wellu* varies considerably: each verse seeking to outdo the other in eloquence of praise and depth of feeling.²²

In contrast to the secular *sirba* and *wellu*, the Oromo use the term *faarfaana* (or *faaruu*) to describe songs of a religious nature. It reflects a fundamental conceptual boundary within Oromo culture between the profane and the sacred, between the realm of everyday human concerns and the sphere of divine encounter. A *faarfaana* directs the voice upward—or inward toward the spiritual dimension—in explicit acknowledgment of powers that transcend the merely human. The primary function of *faarfaana* is to praise a divine entity, most centrally *Waaqa* (God), the supreme creator and sustainer of the universe in traditional Oromo belief. However, the term may also encompass songs addressed to lesser spiritual beings, ancestral spirits, or personified natural forces depending on regional and historical variation.²³ This praise constitutes an act of recognition, gratitude, and dependence—an acknowledgment that human flourishing is ultimately contingent upon forces that no amount of labor or cleverness can fully command.

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Mission and Storytelling through Song

The development of *faarfaana* (religious songs) and *faaruu* (praise songs) within Oromo culture represents a fascinating convergence of indigenous musical traditions and evangelical Christian influences. To fully understand this phenomenon, one must examine the broader context of translation movements in Ethiopia and their profound impact on vernacular literature development.

A mission society that came to Ethiopia, perhaps a more successful one, was the Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM). The SEM missionaries first tried to reach Ethiopians, particularly the Oromo tribe, via Sudan in 1866.²⁴ When they were blocked from reaching their goal by the Ethiopian emperor, Tewodros, who had closed all access to the Oromo territory out of suspicion of the missionaries' desire to connect with that part of the country, the missionaries remained in Kunama (near Eritrea) and started to work among the people of that area until the situation changed.²⁵ They built their mission station at Imkulu where they established a school named "School for Freed Men."²⁶

At this institution, the SEM trained local missionaries with the purpose of sending them back to their people as evangelists.²⁷ They adopted a notably indigenizing approach to missionary training. Using Johann Ludwig Krapf's pioneering Bible translation into Oromo—completed in the 1870s despite significant linguistic and political obstacles—the SEM educated local evangelists who would be sent back to their own people.²⁸ Unlike models of mission that relied heavily on foreign clergy, this strategy privileged the Oromo language as the medium of religious instruction and Scripture reading. The graduates of this training were thus equipped not only with theological knowledge but also with the cultural and linguistic competence necessary to evangelize effectively among their own communities. In doing so, the SEM helped cultivate a cadre of indigenous evangelists who bridged the gap between missionary enterprise and local religious life, planting the seeds for what would become a lasting Lutheran Oromo Christian movement.

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The SEM also came from a revival group in Sweden, and therefore singing of hymns was an important aspect of their devotional life. The first hymnbook was compiled by Bengt Peter Lundahl, the SEM missionary in the early 1880s and was used among the evangelical Christians in Ethiopia. This book was entitled *Yegubae Mezmurat* (which in Amharic means hymns of the congregation).²⁹ These songs were translated from *Den Svenska Psalmboken*, a hymnbook used in the Church of Sweden (Originally in Swedish and German),³⁰ Sankey's songs (originally in English), Pilgrims-Sånger (originally in English), and from Ahnfelt's songbook (Swedish) to the Amharic language.³¹ In addition to these translations, Lundahl also composed hymns in Amharic by paraphrasing biblical texts and stories.³² This way, evangelical missions prioritized vernacular accessibility. This approach reflected what Lamin Sanneh termed the "translatability principle," that Christian messages must be communicated in the heart language of the people to achieve authentic conversion and understanding. "Christian missions are better seen as a translation movement, with consequences for vernacular revitalization, religious change and social transformation."³³

Onesimos Nesib, one of the freed slaves who studied at this school, translated the whole Bible and the hymnbook by Lundahl into the Oromo language.³⁴ His first translated work, in 1887, was a hymnbook that contained 100 songs, which he titled *Faarsaa fi Weedu* (hymns and songs).³⁵ His book is a collection of hymns that included translations of some from *Yegubae Mezmurat* and a Swedish hymnbook, *Sion's Tuner*.

It also added Luther's hymns, among others translated from the Swedish language to Oromo.³⁶

Aster Ganno and Feben Hirpe, both freed slave girls trained at the same school with Onesimos by SEM, were also key indigenous leaders in the translation movement and written record of Oromo oral culture. They were gifted linguists who were very familiar with the cultural context and tradition in Ethiopia. Aster Ganno, in particular, was a linguist who helped Onesimos in his translation work. She remembered words, tales, and poems Onesimos had either forgotten or never known. While Onesimos was working on his Bible translation, she was assigned the task of composing a dictionary of Oromo words. Her work enabled Onesimos to find the right words to translate the Bible into Oromo, even though she was not acknowledged for her contribution. Her work, the dictionary, was revised and published by the Imkullu Press in 1893.

Onesimos Nasib's books impacted the lives of many people among the early believers because they "were the first eye-openers for the Oromo. They were read aloud in public gatherings, and those who could not read listened."³⁷ Since Onesimos's books also included hymns, the leaders sang songs for and with the people in addition to reading the Scriptures to them. This way, the Oromo Bible and songs produced by indigenous leaders enculturated the gospel message in a way that made its public proclamation effective.

The early evangelical Christians expanded Onesimos's work and published an expanded version of it in 1935, entitled *Galata Waaqayyoo Goofaa Maccaa* (Glory to the Lord of Hosts).³⁸ It contained 16 more songs (116 songs total). According to Martin Nordfeldt, Onesimos himself was the one who revised his first published hymn book, *Faarsaa fi Weedu*, in order to incorporate new songs into this new edition. However, Onesimos died on June 21, 1931, in Naqamtee, in the western part of Ethiopia, before he finalized his revision.³⁹

"[Onesimos] passed away before this new hymn book was published. Therefore, we took the responsibility to revise his work and get it published. We have edited some hymns and have eliminated those with no melodies. Instead, we have added new hymns that he [Onesimos] did not include in his revision."⁴⁰

What Nordfeldt refers to as hymns with no melodies that he decided to eliminate are those that Onesimos had composed using Oromo traditional tunes which were common in the region at that time. It seems that the new Swedish missionaries did not appreciate Onesimos's attempt to adopt enculturated hymns for use in the congregations. Instead,

It seems that the new Swedish missionaries did not appreciate Onesimos's attempt to adopt enculturated hymns for use in the congregations. Instead, they continued the old approach of translating hymns from Europe and using the melodies found in their mission's hymnbook.

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In 1957, a hymn book, *Sagaele Lubbuu Galaata Waaqayyo* (Words for Our Soul, Praise Be to God) was prepared by Lamessa Bato for use in congregations in addition to the 1935 edition. It contained 34 songs, mostly written by Bato himself with Oromo traditional melody in responsorial forms. It also contains liturgy in the last section. In the liturgy section, Bato shows how the liturgist can make use of the hymns. According to Bato, this book was needed because the European tunes and melodies that the missionaries introduced to the church were odd to the Oromo people.⁴¹ Bato's hymnbook was used in addition to the other hymn book, *Galata Waaqayyoo Gooftaa Maccaa*, which was revised in 1976 and 1991.

Bato states that he had been working on this hymn book since 1949, and the reason it took this long to finish the work was that many Oromo Christians were opposed to using traditional melodies because they associated these songs with traditional religious and secular songs. Bato adds that 1957 was an appropriate time to publish this revised work because most Oromo Christians had now changed their minds after trying some hymns in Oromo traditional melodies.⁴²

Another important Oromo hymn book is the one used by Bethel Church in the western part, *Macaafa Faarsa*, published in 1967 until they merged with the EECMY in 1974. This book contained 86 songs, mostly translated from English hymn books used by Presbyterian missionaries. Some of the songs, however, were composed by indigenous song writers using "new-composed lyrics sung on traditional melodies in responsorial form."⁴³ Bethel church started as a Presbyterian church in Ethiopia under the leadership of Thomas Lambe, an early missionary to Oromo of Ethiopia.⁴⁴

By early 1991, however, the Latin alphabet was adopted and used in the Oromiya region of Ethiopia. As a result, another version of the Oromo Bible emerged in 1993 in the Latin alphabet. A revised hymnbook, *Macaafa Faarfannaa: Galata Waawayyoo*, was also published in 1998. This hymnbook contains 293 songs. According to the publishers' introduction of the book, the book is a revised version of the 1957 (Bato's work), 1976, and 1991 editions, and it includes a hymn book that was used by the Bethel church in Western Wollega since 1967.⁴⁵ The hymnbook also contains the Lord's Prayer, Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, and the Athanasius Creed. The use of the Latin alphabet, which began in the early 1990s, helped the Oromo evangelical Christians to enculturate the Christian message and communicate the gospel better.

Passing on the Faith through Oromo Gospel Songs

The introduction of Christianity to Oromo communities marked a significant turning point in the evolution of Oromo musical expression, leading to the development of new forms of religious song that combined Christian theological content with traditional Oromo musical forms. This development occurred through two distinct but interconnected pathways that reflect different approaches to cultural

adaptation and religious expression within the context of Christian conversion and evangelization.

The initial mechanism for introducing Christian musical expression to Oromo communities centered on the translation and cultural adaptation of established missionary hymn collections that foreign evangelists and missionaries had brought with them as part of their evangelization efforts. This approach represented a deliberate strategy employed by Christian missions to rapidly establish familiar forms of worship among newly converted Oromo populations, drawing upon the extensive repository of hymnic literature that had been developed and refined within Western Christian traditions over centuries of ecclesiastical history.

However, the implementation of this translation-based approach revealed significant challenges inherent in the cross-cultural transmission of religious and artistic traditions that had been developed within specific cultural contexts. The process of linguistic translation, while addressing the immediate barrier of language comprehension, proved insufficient to bridge the deeper cultural and aesthetic gaps that separated European musical sensibilities from Oromo artistic traditions. Despite the significant obstacles associated with cross-cultural musical transmission, certain translated hymns managed to achieve meaningful integration within Oromo Christian communities.

The second and ultimately more successful pathway for developing Oromo Christian music involved building upon local oral traditions and incorporating elements from both *sirba* and traditional *faarfaana* to create new forms of religious expression that felt authentically Oromo while communicating Christian theological content. Missionaries who were members of Oromo communities and deeply familiar with traditional musical forms played crucial roles in developing this indigenous approach to Christian music. The tradition of storytelling through song provided an excellent foundation for communicating biblical narratives and Christian teachings, as it offered established patterns for presenting complex information in accessible musical formats.

The core components of traditional Oromo storytelling that have been adapted for gospel music include the use of familiar narrative archetypes, such as the journey motif, the struggle between good and evil, and the ultimate triumph of righteousness over adversity. These archetypal patterns provide ready-made frameworks for presenting Christian theological concepts such as salvation, spiritual transformation, and divine redemption in ways that resonate with deeply embedded cultural expectations about how meaningful stories should be structured and developed. Using familiar narrative patterns, gospel messages feel coherent and compelling to audiences culturally conditioned by storytelling approaches.

When the Lutheran faith began to take root in Ethiopia during the late nineteenth century, early endogenous missionaries strategically enculturated the Christian gospel by appropriating existing Oromo oral traditions—particularly the storytelling function of narrative songs to facilitate the reception and internalization of Christian teachings.

This indigenization strategy allowed the new religious message to be communicated through culturally resonant channels, ensuring greater accessibility and communal participation. Below is an example drawn from a hymn written by Chali Fufa, published in his hymnbook, *Waaqayyoon Jajadhaa: Faarfannaa Haafuura* (Praise God: Songs of the Spirit).

My enemy [devil], you will not get me since Jesus has called me
 He called me Adam, and asked me where I am
 He told me I have sinned, and showed me why I am naked
 Making my enemy to eat dust, he has called me
 He said the one born of a woman will crush his head
 He said his promise will be fulfilled, he has called me⁴⁶

A seminal melody is traditionally employed to narrate stories in responsorial (call-and-response) form. In performance, the singers adopt the persona of Adam, following the Genesis narrative, and collectively recount the story by declaring God's promises to one another. Within a church setting, the hymn typically begins with the liturgist or song leader improvising the opening line, after which the congregation responds in unison. In a community setting, the storyteller initiates the hymn, and the response is taken up by those listening—most often, children and youth.

Significance of Storytelling through Song among Oromo

Jesus is born in Bethlehem
 Yes, he is born
 He is born in Manger
 Yes, he is born
 A light shines over darkness
 Yes, he is born⁴⁷

This song is taken from Lamessa Bato's hymnbook. Biblical narratives are transmitted in the same responsorial manner within the community in which I grew up, and these stories continue to shape how communities perceive themselves and others. As a child, I sang this very song while simultaneously internalizing the story it conveys. My imagination regarding biblical narratives—and the moral and theological messages each story portrays—was profoundly shaped by this pedagogical practice of storytelling through song. Thus, personal experience corroborates the broader argument: responsorial hymnody functions not merely as artistic expression but as a formative instrument of communal identity, ethical formation, and scriptural transmission across generations.

Ada María Isasi-Díaz defines narratives as tools “one uses to organize lived-experiences into meaningful episodes.”⁴⁸ Narratives possess the power to picture reality in diverse forms. Crucially, they have the capacity to shape self-imagination

precisely because it is through these stories that a given community visualizes both “others” and itself. Singing biblical narratives—such as the birth of Jesus—did not merely transmit information; it actively constructed a moral universe within which the singing child (and community) learned to locate themselves, imagine divine promise, and relate to neighboring peoples. Thus, narrative songs function as what Isasi-Díaz might call lived texts, mediating between collective memory and contemporary identity formation.⁴⁹

This understanding of narrative's formative power resonates with Anthony Cohen's argument that communities are defined by the consciousness of their members, a consciousness encapsulated in the perception of the community's own boundaries as these emerge from ongoing social interactions.⁵⁰ For Cohen, community as a social entity is “where one learns and continues to practice how to ‘be social.’”⁵¹ Narratives serve as the cohesive force that upholds communal existence and frames collective identity. Situated within communal life, narratives function as instruments whereby the community recognizes the individual, and the individual simultaneously identifies herself as a member of that community. This dynamic closely aligns with Paul Ricoeur's claim that “recognizing oneself *in* contributes to recognizing oneself *by*,”⁵² suggesting a hermeneutical circle of mutual recognition. Such mutual identification also marks the fusion of two identities—the individual *qua* individual and the community *qua* community. “[Reality] is found in the transmission of information from one generation to another, not simply in that which is transmitted, but in the process of transmission itself.”⁵³ In Oromo responsorial hymns, antiphonal singing of biblical narratives exemplifies this principle: the transmission process is as formative as the narrative content itself. The child who sang Bato's hymn about the birth of Jesus was not merely receiving information but was being socialized into a community's way of seeing, remembering, and believing.

Notably, many Oromo songs arise directly from the receptacle of human suffering and anguish, unlike traditions that might prioritize only triumphant or didactic themes. Oromo Christian hymnody takes as its point of departure the lived realities of the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed, engaging these experiences through critical reflection.⁵⁴ These songs come into being when people cry out in protest and lament: “How long, O God?” or “O God, but why?” In this sense, the responsorial tradition functions as a theological and communal response to theodicy—a way of giving voice to pain while simultaneously refusing to let suffering have the final word. Lament songs are not mere expressions of despair but active sites of meaning-making. They enable the community to name injustice, remember divine promises, and sustain hope across generations. Thus, the Oromo storytelling tradition through song is simultaneously a hymnody of survival, a pedagogy of resistance, and a liturgy of lament.

It is for this reason that the tradition of storytelling through song proved exceptionally helpful for Ethiopian evangelical Christians. This indigenous practice enabled them to understand, describe, and navigate their circumstances through the lens of Gospel narratives. In contemporary Ethiopia, many millions live in utter poverty. Many people endure inhuman conditions and lack adequate

This indigenous practice enabled them to understand, describe, and navigate their circumstances through the lens of Gospel narratives.

clothing, while violence in multiple forms pervades nearly every region. Yet for Ethiopians—and particularly for the Oromo—evil is first and foremost that which destroys community, and violence is regarded as the greatest evil precisely insofar as it ruptures fellowship, undermines harmony, and destabilizes the social fabric. Given this communal ontology of evil, the responsorial hymn tradition described above assumes profound theological and ethical significance. The same songs that cry out “How long, O God?” in the face of suffering also reaffirm the bonds of mutual recognition and intra-communal identification theorized by Ricoeur and Cohen. They do not merely lament individual pain; they articulate collective trauma while simultaneously rehearsing the promises that hold the community together. Thus, storytelling through song functions as both a diagnostic tool—naming the evils of poverty and violence—and a therapeutic practice—rebuilding fellowship through shared vocal expression. In a context where violence destroys community, the antiphonal hymn becomes an act of communal restoration, transforming raw anguish into a structured, shared, and therefore bearable narrative.

Conclusion

Stories play a normative role in Ethiopian community life, particularly among the Oromo. Storytelling—especially through the responsorial hymn tradition—is not merely a form of entertainment or artistic expression but a fundamental mechanism for shaping identity, transmitting values, and negotiating communal existence. Through the study of storytelling and folklore, numerous researchers and theologians have sought to explore the cultural conditioning of Oromo people's thinking, aiming to discern the belief systems to which they subscribe and the moral frameworks that guide their collective life.⁵⁵ As anthropologists have shown, communities are formed by the stories they tell about their existence. The past and present of a community are conjoined by its narratives, such that memory and contemporary identity are inextricably linked. Communities are constructed through a constant and dynamic interplay of social interactions that are characteristically 'narrational'—that is, human beings become who they are and understand who they belong with through the ongoing act of telling and retelling their shared stories.

In the case of the Oromo, this narrational dynamic finds its most vivid expression in the antiphonal hymn tradition. The Oromo community has long used narratives to

explain their origin, justify their beliefs, build a moral foundation within their community, and warn one another of impending dangers that await the collective. Narratives function as bridges between the past and the present, and when current challenges arise, narratives serve as a path forward because they contain instructive stories from the past. This tradition enculturates new religious commitments, as demonstrated by early Lutheran missionaries who adopted indigenous melodic and responsorial forms to transmit the Christian gospel. It shapes the moral imagination of children, who learn virtue, courage, and communal responsibility through singing. Most profoundly, it provides a theological vocabulary for confronting suffering and violence in a context where evil is understood primarily as that which destroys community. Thus, for the Oromo, storytelling through song is not a relic of oral culture nor merely a pedagogical tool. It is the living medium through which origin is explained, beliefs are justified, moral grounds are secured, warnings are issued, and hope is sustained—ensuring that even in the face of fragmentation, the community continues to sing itself into being across generations.

Endnotes

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² MacIntyre puts the development of human morality along with the narrative formation of the self, which is guided by the ideal of the good life and always situated in social contexts. See MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 204–225.

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¹⁴ Wole Soyinka et al., *Contemporary African Plays* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1999), 119.

¹⁵ Tesemma Ta’a. “Oromo Traditional Songs,” in Catherine Griefenow-Mewis and Tamene Bitima, eds. *Oromo Oral Poetry Seen from Within* (Koln: Rudiger Koppe Verlag, 2004), 12–40. The literal translation of the word *Sirba* is dancing. *Weedduu* is also translated as oral song.

¹⁶ T.W. Boxter “Some Preliminary Observations on a Type of Arsi Song, *Wellu*, Which is Popular with Young Men,” (Rome, Italy: Academia Nazionale Dei Lincei, 1974), 809–20.

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¹⁹ Enrico Cerulli, *The Folk Literature of the Galla of Southern Abyssinia*: Harvard African Studies 3 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1922), 146.

²⁰ Claude Sumner. *Oromo Wisdom Literature Volume III, Folktales: Collection and Analysis* (Addis Ababa: Gudina Tumsa Foundation, 1997), 17, 374.

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²⁶ Tasgaraa Hirphoo, *Abbaa Gammachiis (Onesimos Nasib) Biography: A Native of Oromiya, Enslaved, Freed and an Envoy of the Gospel (1856-1931)* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Asteer Aannoo Literature Society, 1999), 20.

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- ³⁷ Terfasa Digga. “A Short Biography of Onesimos Nasib: Oromo Bible Translator, Evangelist and Teacher,” BA Thesis in History, Haile Selassie I University, Addis Ababa (1973), 49.
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- ³⁹ See Martin Nordfeldt’s introduction in *Galata Waaqayyoo Goftaa Machaa*, 1935. Translated from Oromiffaa to English by the author.
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- ⁴⁴ Debela Birri, *Divine Plan Unfolding: The Story of Ethiopian Evangelical Church Bethel* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2014), 211–38.
- ⁴⁵ See *Macaafa Faarfannaa: Galata Waaqayyoo*, 1998, published by four EECMY Synods: Central Synod, Ellubabor Bethel Synod, Western Synod, and Wollega Bethel Synod. Online at: [Macaafa Faarfannaa \(1998\) - Ethiopian Gospel Music](#).
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- ⁴⁸ Delwin Brown, Sheila Greeve Davaney, Kathryn Tanner, eds. *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 128.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid, 123.
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- ⁵¹ Cohen, *Symbolic Construction*, 15.
- ⁵² Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, Kathleen Blamey, trans. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 121.
- ⁵³ Newell S. Booth, Jr., ‘Tradition and Community in African Religion’, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 9:2 (1978) 89.
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Composition in Context: Musical Creation and Liturgical-Congregational Expectations

Marcell Silva Steuernagel

Translator's Note of Introduction

Fernando Berwig Silva

This text was first published as a chapter in *O Ofício da Música na Igreja*, organized by Werner Ewald in 2020.¹ Aiming at a broad audience of church musicians and leaders, the volume builds on the experiences of Brazilian musicians, scholars, and clergy working within the local context of Brazilian Lutheranism. Marcell Silva Steuernagel contributes to the collection with two pieces: the present translation and another chapter, “Resgatando o Passado no Presente: Tradição e Renovação na Dieta Hinológica do Protestantismo” (Rescuing the Past into The Present: Tradition and Renovation in the Protestant Hymnological Diet). This article hovers between a translation and an English-language version. I have included contextual information for readers unfamiliar with the realities of Brazilian Lutheranism, and edited the piece for brevity.

In my own academic work—engaging decolonial thought, contemporary praise and worship music, and Latin American liberation theology—I have often felt the need for perspectives such as the one Silva Steuernagel offers here: a normative theoretical framework grounded in lived experiences and localized contexts. Such a framework helps initiate conversations around creativity, reproductivity, and land-conscious relationships for local musicians and church leaders. Silva Steuernagel’s work also presents an important case of musical epistemological hybridization. The author successfully adapts—or “digests,” to invoke the anthropophagic framework adopted by Brazilian authors following the modernist movement of the 1920s—North Atlantic theological and musical paradigms into a localized, contextually attentive mode of reflection. My hope is that this translation provides a platform for the exchange of knowledge between Global South and North contexts—particularly by recognizing that epistemologies of the South contribute not only to the numerical growth of Christianity but also to its theological development. More importantly, beyond the specificity of local sounds, I hope that my translation of Silva Steuernagel’s text enables readers to reposition land, context, and agency at the center of worship practice—away from commodification, the reproduction of models, and the logics of a global hymnological market.

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Composition in Context: Musical Creation and Liturgical-Congregational Expectations

For almost a decade, I taught musical composition workshops at the *Seminário de Música de Rodeio 12*, a summer music seminary which takes place yearly in Rodeio, Santa Catarina, South Brazil. In the context of the *Igreja Evangélica de Confissão Luterana no Brasil* (IECLB), [the largest Lutheran denomination in Brazil], “Rodeio 12,” as it is usually referred to by participants, represents a long-running and significant opportunity to train musicians that serve local Lutheran parishes throughout the country.

Over the years, I taught a mix of returning and new students, many of whom attended multiple summers. This mixture of continuity and diversity helped me understand how congregations—at least within the context of IECLB—confronted the challenge of musical composition within their communities’ musical lives. I also came to realize that many students shared a sense that their compositional contributions were undervalued. A few came to Rodeio 12 energized by local churches that valued musical creation and sought to empower these young composers, but most demonstrated a defensive posture toward their craft. My role was to encourage composition [as a vocation] and try to create in students a “compositional self-esteem” that could free them to create without feeling that they might be wasting time and energy, or transgressing non-verbal cultural and/or “theological” rules around music creation, particularly the notion that music creation is “something for those who have nothing to do.”

Our conversations about the office of the music composer would often veer into the path of the good [*“do bom”*]; in other words, what was, or was not, adequate for congregational musicking. “How can I learn how to write music that my church people



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actually want to sing?” was a common question that revealed an expectation: young composers wanted to write music that fit their context and wished to see their creative efforts validated precisely through congregational participation in musicking.

My goal here is not to essentialize local Brazilian congregations, Lutheran or not, as hostile environments for musical creativity. The polarization between a composer and the context in which they work (in this case, the congregation) is pervasive and unhelpful and rarely leads to productive dialogue about music creation. Conversely, the Romantic figure—defined in its Western, nineteenth-century sense—of the composer as a blessed (or cursed) vessel of muses that inspire composition in an almost mediumistic process similarly does not aid in musical formation, as it tends to focus on subjectivity rather than offering concrete pathways for musical growth. As Villa-Lobos famously said, “this thing of looking for inspiration, of letting the hair grow so inspiration comes, drinking, that doesn’t exist in me. I write when I need to.”²

Nevertheless, the composition of liturgical music happens precisely at this intersection between necessity and inspiration and begs the question: how to write music that suits one’s congregational context. The focus of this article is, therefore, the appropriateness of a composition to one’s congregational context.³ I want to address this problem by examining three perspectives on music and the context in which it is composed.

First, I investigate the necessity—or not—of continued efforts to write new music for Christian worship. Is it truly necessary to produce new liturgical music connected to the practice of the Christian faith?⁴ Is it not the case that there is a rich, varied, and sufficient repertoire that can meet the liturgical demands of the church?

Second, I analyze two distinct perspectives on music, context, and function. The first is historical, and emerges from the concept of *Gebrauchsmusik*, proposed by Paul Hindemith and his contemporaries as a reaction to the Romanticism of the nineteenth century, and which deals, specifically, with issues around the social function of music creation.⁵ A second, theological perspective focuses on the essential characteristics of congregational singing as proposed by Brian Wren in *Praying Twice*.⁶

Finally, I propose a “third way” regarding composition in context, in an attempt to navigate the tensions between an ideological conception of music creation, such as Hindemith’s; and Wren’s perspective, which is essentially theological. Although this alternate path recognizes and incorporates elements of the other two, it offers a hybrid conception that allows application in different contexts: the idea of environment and its resistances as a holistic approach to guide the work of musical composition in a congregational context.

“Sing a New Song”

Our first task is to justify the need and relevance of writing music for congregational use. One might argue that the church possesses an extensive, rich, and duly approved (theologically and ideologically) repertoire for use in worship. Why, then, write more music? Furthermore, one might argue that the church’s established hymnody has withstood the test of time and, therefore, has already assured its place in the canon. However, neither argument addresses composition as a theological mandate.

Furthermore, one might argue that the church’s established hymnody has withstood the test of time and, therefore, has already assured its place in the canon. However, neither argument addresses composition as a theological mandate.

Theologically, the story of creation in the first two chapters of Genesis is, first and foremost, a testimony to God’s own creative impulse.⁷ There is no force greater than God that demands the creation of the world from him; there is no external urgency that precipitates His decision to create. Creation is an expression of God himself and occurs in a completely free manner: the Creator engages in the process through word and action, putting His hands in the clay, walking in the garden. This creative impulse is inherent in created nature. If God creates humankind “in image and likeness” (Gn 1:27) and entrusts them with the responsibility of stewarding created nature—in other words, from God’s command to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gn 1:29–30) it is clear that this creative impulse is preserved in created beings. The creative impulse is part of us. And if creativity is part of what it means to be human and if it comes from God, why does it not warrant a place in the worship of God? If, as Jesus tells the Samaritan woman, God seeks worshipers “in spirit and in truth” (Jn 4:23)—who worship in a holistic way—why would the continuous use of creativity be excluded from this configuration? This concept of our image and likeness of God has a name: *imago Dei* (image of God). In the classroom at Rodeio 12, I remind students that composing is creating, and creating is part of how we were created. There is no need to apologize for creating or writing music.

The impulse to create can be expressed in various ways and in various forums. How does this impulse take shape in music-making? The Psalms are not the first hymns of the people of Israel; their compilation took place over a longer period, likely during and shortly after the Babylonian exile.⁸ Psalm 33 is just one of the passages in which the psalmist encourages God’s people to sing a new song and, in the same verse, “play skillfully.”⁹ There were songs of praise long before this in the history of Israel; yet, even after generations, the exhortation to sing a new song is still heard.

Why, then, does it seem so important to sing something new if there is previous repertoire that can be used? First, a new song denotes originality and, consequently, spontaneity. It is not repeating something already done, something memorized beforehand, or appropriated from another. Not that spontaneity is more important, or more essential, than other aspects of making music in the church. I simply argue that the new song represents an effort that, even if composed in advance, expresses something fresh and new, which is offered for use in worship. In this sense, a new hymn is contemporary: it expresses and reflects its time and context, for it is created within that context. Music composed today is born today and not yesterday or tomorrow. It is linked to its own today; it is linked to its time.¹⁰ And, based on this connection, the musical artifact has the potential to establish new relationships in time. If music is connected to its time, it is also connected to the crises and challenges, as well as the possibilities and opportunities of that time. I recognize that music from the past has something to say to us today; nevertheless, I propose that in this relationship between music and its own time, the dilemmas of a given context appear, in one way or another, in its music.

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History exemplifies this connection time and time again. In the liturgical-musical transformations arising from the Protestant Reformation, this relationship between worldview and musical practice is described by Blume in the opening of his classic *Protestant Church Music*: “Just as the Reformation, in its protest, reflected in various ways the intellectual currents of its time, so too did its music emerge from the stylistic environment of the era.”¹¹ Music speaks the language of its time. Even if other music, from other cultures and eras, has the potential to be relevant outside this original context, it is precisely in its own moment in history that a musical piece finds its cradle, for it is born in context.¹² I draw here on the words with which Paul concludes his description of David’s life: a man who knew how to “serve God in his generation” (Acts 13:36). I point to the relationship between the psalmist’s voice, which encourages the contemporary expression of praise to God in Psalm 33, and Paul’s recognition that, in serving the Lord, we do so in our own time and place. In this sense,

putting the creative impulse to write music at the service of the Kingdom means speaking the truth of the Gospel in context, always anew. Therefore, as in other aspects of the creative expression of the *imago Dei*, the role of the composer is essential for the church today to have a voice in its own time and place.

Hindemith and Wren: Function and Context

Now that we have answered the question about *whether* churches should keep creating liturgical, congregational music, we need to ask *how* they should proceed. The goal is to use these approaches as scaffolding to construct a new framework—a third way—for composition.

In the search for music suited to particular congregational contexts, questions often arise regarding the *functionality* of a musical work. The question “Does this music work for the community?” points precisely to the importance of this quality. What do I mean by functionality? Simply that, since it is written for a specific purpose in community life, that purpose is germane to its existence and influences compositional process and outcome. The idea here is not that this or that piece “produces,” on its own, a specific spiritual or emotional effect—such as contrition and repentance at confession—but rather that a musical piece fits appropriately within a context, meeting, in one way or another, the expectations that the context generates regarding its functionality. That functionality, I want to emphasize, is not related to musical style or genre. Rather, it is that specific interrelation of liturgical history, cultural context, and functional guidelines that is appropriate. It is also important to emphasize that this function can vary and need not be communal singing. Christian liturgy readily accommodates, for example, processional music or musical accompaniments linked to specific liturgical actions, such as confession. Just as there is liturgical variety among traditions and denominations, there are also multiple functional opportunities for music in this context.

Questions of functionality invite us to consider the concept of *Gebrauchsmusik* or “music for use.” This concept of musical composition was developed by a group of artists active in the political and ideological milieu of the Weimar Republic that, in the early decades of the twentieth century, sought to move away from the Romantic ideal of art for art’s sake in the pursuit of music that was connected to—and useful for—its context.¹³ The term came to be associated primarily with Paul Hindemith, who believed in music as something to be played rather than merely listened to—in other words, music that was not written to be performed exclusively by professionals. Hindemith himself preferred the term *Sing-und-Spielmusik* (or “music to sing and play”), but the term *Gebrauchsmusik* gained popularity and remains commonly associated with the idea of “functional music.”¹⁴ Auner describes this period in which many composers, instead of writing for the concert hall, became involved in composing music for children, young people, the working class, and projects linked to specific educational functions.¹⁵ Composing for these forums and audiences meant, in

many cases, modifying the technical parameters achievable in the composition. An amateur group, for example, does not possess the level of technical proficiency required to perform music written for professional performers (if it wishes to undertake this process, the group will likely invest a significant amount of time and effort in the project). Thus, Hindemith and his colleagues wrote to meet the demands of the moment: if there was a need for a duet for violin and bassoon, it was for this formation that they wrote. If the music was to be sung by children, it was written with the children's vocal range and lung capacity in mind.

Behind the concept of *Gebrauchsmusik* lie several political and social agendas. This is evident in Hindemith's own work. In *A Composer's World*, he states that

The composer, in addition to the mere technical practice of his craft, could be the helper and even the spiritual leader in a search for a more salubrious musical world: it should be his main objective to lift the consumer to a higher level by convincing him of the harm a constant yearning for entertainment produces; and as a means to this end the writing of suitable music for amateurs was recommended.¹⁶

The ideological aspect of how Hindemith viewed the composer's place and his music in society is evident in this quotation. Composers from the same circle worked under similar constraints, recognizing how they altered their compositional processes and languages. In a project originally shared by Hindemith and Kurt Weill, for example, titled *Der Ozeanflug* (1929), the composers explored radio as a substitute for the concert hall.¹⁷ Thus, when composing the music, the limitations of this mode of dissemination were taken into account so that the music would *function* when broadcast on the radio. Since radio frequency was limited, bass quality was poor, and the transmission itself was often unclear, composers strove to keep most of the music in the central range of the register and clearly outline rhythmic and melodic elements so that these would translate well on the listeners' receivers.

At least in part, the concept of *Gebrauchsmusik* is based on the relationship between compositional practice and functional *limitations* of some kind. A singing congregation church and a radio certainly offer different functional constraints. Nevertheless, in both cases, to acknowledge such limitations is to resist the deeply ingrained caricature of the Romantic composer who, accountable only to his muses, seeks to write the music he hears within himself without recognizing interpretive limitations. In that nineteenth-century caricature, concerns regarding the size of the ensemble, the acoustic environment, and the intelligibility of the material are secondary, as the composer's primary commitment is to his own work. Here, in the work of Hindemith, Weill, and other artists from the same circle, the composer recognizes potential interpretive limitations in advance, taking into account expectations and functional constraints, and integrating them into the creative process.

Would this model of functional music be suitable for the composer seeking to write for a church community? After all, the term “music for use” is still employed today, even to describe composers who write music for religious purposes.¹⁸ I fear that, especially if taken to the extreme, the *Gebrauchsmusik* proposal runs the risk of significantly limiting the composer’s creative potential. Others have already argued that this proposal would simply reduce the composer to a sort of *fast-food* cook who prepares what his audience [merely] wants to consume.¹⁹ It is not difficult to see how this reduction might occur within the context of the community, where a set of congregational expectations could significantly limit music composition. Hindemith himself sought to distance himself from the concept in later years, coming to redefine his position regarding music that is primarily functional.

I fear that, especially if taken to the extreme, the *Gebrauchsmusik* proposal runs the risk of significantly limiting the composer’s creative potential. Others have already argued that this proposal would simply reduce the composer to a sort of *fast-food* cook who prepares what his audience [merely] wants to consume.

Although *Gebrauchsmusik* was important for creating distance between a Romantic conception of the composer and his creative process and a world recovering from the traumas of World War I in which Hindemith and his colleagues were living: a Europe grappling with ideas of a new morality and a new quest for objectivity, the proposal itself has limitations regarding music for communal use due to its potential to reduce the composer (in a caricatured way) to a musical demagogue who seeks, above all, to meet the demands of his consumers.²⁰ If this is the danger of an ideological-functional approach to musical composition, other theological approaches to music for use in worship suffer precisely because they emphasize, above all, the supremacy of the lyrics over the musical elements when assessing suitability for use in worship.²¹ What is needed is an approach that keeps both in appropriate relationship.

Toward this goal, let us now analyze a theological approach to music and its liturgical function. In *Praying Twice*, Brian Wren, a theologian and pastor, develops a theology of congregational singing. Our point of contact between Wren’s work, Hindemith’s concepts, and the subject of this text is specifically addressed in the second chapter of the book, in which Wren discusses “functional art” and lists a series of characteristics considered essential for congregational singing. Before proceeding, I must acknowledge that Wren’s object of study may differ from the type of work composed by the proponents of *Gebrauchsmusik*. Hindemith and his circle were hardly thinking of music for use in Christian worship, although this is one of the categories to which the concept of music for use readily applies.

Wren embraces the functional nature of community musicking and extends this understanding to church music in a comprehensive way.²² He states that “the autonomous power of song tunes reminds us that congregational song, like church music in general, is a functional art, meaning that congregational songs are sung during the church’s ordinary and festive activities, to add intensity to them and express their significance”—a definition that he draws from Don Hustad’s work in *Jubilate II*.²³ Wren also makes a few fundamental observations that would qualify music to function in this liturgical context. The first is that “functional” does not mean better or worse; rather, it is tied to a role. Furthermore, for him, not all music must be functional, but if it is functional, the music must be judged based on the fulfillment of its function. Finally, Wren observes that the concept of “functional” cannot be reduced merely to “functioning” like a cog in a machine and the fulfillment of that function; nor can it be based on the volume of applause, the frequency of participation in worship, or an increase in tithing.

We can see this axiom in the way Wren describes congregational singing: “Congregational song is by nature corporate, corporeal, and inclusive; at its best, it is creedal, ecclesial, inspirational, and evangelical. Each characteristic is theologically important.”²⁴ We can also see it in the way Wren elaborates on the concept of functional art and lists a series of “functional genres” distinguished by musical language and literary content in the following chapter. He lists hymns, choruses, canons, refrains, chanting, ritual singing, and spirituals (which he defines as improvised congregational singing) as functional genres employed in church singing.²⁵ Nevertheless, the connection between the conceptualization of functional art and the essential characteristics he attributes to this art in worship, as well as its categorization by genre, is clear in the chapter addressing the practice of congregational singing. In other words, there is a *practical* impact that arises from a *theoretical/theological* development of the function of music in the church.

This connection between theology (in Wren’s case), ideology (in the case of *Gebrauchsmusik*), and any other conception of the “ideal” role or function of music and its concrete manifestation in context illustrates the impact of the way we think about composition within a determined context.²⁶ Nevertheless, the models presented here have specific limitations, and none of them fully encompasses the range of musical possibilities in a congregational context. In Wren’s case, his suggested list of functional genres for congregational singing omits, for example, a significant portion of the formal and technical possibilities of music from the 20th century onward—possibilities that can be applied to congregational singing, even though this seems not to be common practice in most contexts.

There remains, therefore, the need for an approach to musical composition in a congregational context that, on the one hand, embraces experimentation and the exercise of creativity and, on the other, respects the expectations, limitations, and resistances inherent in and to each context. To this end, I offer here a third way: the idea of the congregation as a medium. My previous research, grounded in Mark

Sullivan's work on gesture and music, addresses the question of the medium and its resistances in relation to the practice of composition.²⁷ Here, I propose applying this elaboration to the problem of composition in a community context.

The Community/Congregation as a Medium

In his discussion of musical gesture, Sullivan examines the resistance that a specific medium offers to the characteristic features of a musical gesture (1984). The medium is the 'channel' through which a creative intention acquires concreteness, that is, takes shape in phenomenological terms. This is what I call elsewhere "the concretization of an aesthetic intention"²⁸: the composer, starting from a creative impulse, channels this aesthetic intention through a medium so that it becomes, in effect, music—sound in time. In the first instance, the medium of music is sound itself. Secondly, this sound does not exist in isolation from an actual means of generation and propagation, be it the human voice, an instrument, or any sound-producing mechanism—acoustic, organic, or electric—that transforms this intention into sound through a compositional act. Instead of emphasizing the musical "object" (or what is commonly called "music and lyrics") as the medium, I am pointing to the *mechanism* through which this musical object acquires phenomenological concreteness or is, in other words, actualized into concreteness. This perspective reminds us that all music is only heard if and when it is produced (or reproduced), no matter how much the 'recipe' for music may exist independently of this instance of music making (such as in the case of a musical score).²⁹ From this perspective, I propose a view that treats the community that sings and listens as a medium, just as I treat any combination of instruments, voices, or amplifiers as a medium.

Most seasoned composers will recognize in this claim a common aspect of the creative process. Composers always take into account media and their limitations, and such considerations alter the way the music is written, since each medium has specific characteristics. A flute and a tambourine, for example, have distinct mechanisms for sound production. In the case of the tambourine, sound is generated by striking the drumhead of the instrument. This sound has percussive characteristics: a rapid attack, followed by a rapid decay. The sound emerges immediately and disappears just as quickly. In the case of the flute, however, the generating mechanism is different: the breath. The player creates a column of air inside the flute's tube, the length of which is controlled by the keys. The characteristics of the sound reflect this mechanism, and the sound envelope can be manipulated by controlling the breath, and consequently the air inside the tube. The attack may be percussive, but it will not be the same as the tambourine's. The decay of the sound can be controlled, and the sound can be colored in different ways by manipulating the quality of the air that generates it.

These two examples illustrate the concept of a medium and its resistances in a simplified way and demonstrate the inherent limitations of each medium. What I referred to as "characteristics" in the previous paragraph can be considered precisely these limitations; other possible terms would be "restrictions," "constraints," or

“resistances” (this last being the term Sullivan uses in his work). This is because, unless there is some additional and auxiliary mechanism for sound production (such as the methods employed in electroacoustic composition, for instance), the flute will not produce a sound like that of the tambourine, and vice versa. In other words, each instrument possesses specific resistances. Sullivan describes such resistances apophatically:

There are traces that a medium cannot preserve. There are traces that a medium can preserve but, under certain conditions, won't. A medium is distinguished by the kind of phenomena it offers to the composer who wants to create an order in it and by the way it prevents the composer from creating some orders.³⁰

Such resistances, then, “shape” the aesthetic intention realized through this medium. A good composer recognizes this idiomatic relationship between the sound in their mind and the medium chosen to actualize this intention into sound. Conversely, the composer who is frustrated by the fact that the piano does not produce the sound of the violin is wasting their time. If what one seeks is the configuration of the violin's specific resistances, then it is better to write for the violin (unless, of course, that idiomatic misalignment is intentional). Learning to recognize these resistances and use them to enhance expression is one of the skills inherent to the craft of musical composition.

Resistances Inherent to the Community/Congregation as a Medium

Having defined the concepts of *medium* and *resistance*, we must apply them to a discussion of composition in a community context. What I suggest here is to view the community precisely as a *medium*. By viewing the community through this lens and applying some additional considerations we will discuss here, it is possible to identify certain significant *resistances* that compel the composer to “listen” to the community when writing music, taking into account its inherent resistances.

When the church sings, some of these inherent resistances come to light.³¹ The very term “congregation”—from the Latin *congregatio* or *congregare*, meaning a group that gathers or exists in assembly—indicates this nature; Christian worship is for the Christian community, for the gathering of the faithful. Although music intended for worship, or religious music writ large, can certainly exist independently of this context and, in fact, can be created or enjoyed in solitude or in a concert setting, church music is essentially communal, gregarious, and congregational. This characteristic runs through Christian theology, from “It is not good for man to be alone” in Genesis 2:18 to collective worship in Revelation 7:9. The Trinity is communion, and this essence is mirrored and shared by the church of Christ, reflected, too, in musical expression. Christian worship is the gathering of this church. There, this diversity and collectivity are experienced, among other ways, through music.

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Nevertheless, this group faces specific challenges related to its musical ability, music education and training, and vocal range (to name a few factors). A fundamental rule of orchestration holds, for instance, that the larger the forces involved in music-making, the more difficult it is to achieve light, airy sounds in performance. Fast passages, interval leaps, and rhythmic precision become more difficult with a large ensemble. A full orchestra that plays or sings with the agility and lightness of a chamber group is a rarity; on the other hand, this large orchestra can produce more volume and denser textures than a chamber ensemble. In other words, the more people singing/playing, the less agility. This is a challenge that composers who wish to write for the congregation must consider. It is not surprising that church hymns are, for the most part, composed of music with simple and regular rhythmic development that favors melodic movement in conjunct intervals, and presents functional harmonic characteristics aligned with the principles of Western music theory.³²

Another challenge that stems from this collective nature concerns vocal range. The composer who wishes to write for congregational singing faces limitations related to the variety of voices in the congregation, which present various registers. When writing for the congregation, one is conscious of extremes and seeks a comfortable range, which is an intersection of such variance (thus avoiding the lowest notes of the basses and altos and the highest notes of the tenors and sopranos). The range narrows, and there lies the resistance. Although I support challenging the community vocally by exploring the extremes of the vocal range, the composer must be mindful of this

resistance. At times, perhaps, it is advisable to push the community to the limits of the collective range, but it is important to bring it back to the “comfort zone.” If there is no return, vocal fatigue—which results from singing only in the extreme low and high registers—will result in a community that stops singing.

The third form of resistance mentioned here also concerns collective vocal expression. When writing for the community's voice, one must account for the vagueness of that voice. Those who are not accustomed to singing or have not been trained to do so often do not know whether they should “join in” the melody in unison, or in the octave immediately above or below that used by the musical leader. Not everyone knows whether they are a soprano, alto, tenor, bass, or baritone. One cannot assume the same level of musical literacy among worship participants. Thus, either time must be set aside to teach, repeat, and educate, or the material must be simplified so that it can be easily grasped by the congregation. Once again, I am not advocating a “pedagogy of simplicity” in congregational music-making. Communities should indeed be challenged to expand their musical horizons. But this is a process that requires time and planning. Surprising the community with music that ignores these challenges is unlikely to have an immediate positive effect.

It is important to understand how these resistances are reconfigured in cases of silent community participation: situations where there is music, but no expectation that the community will sing.³³ Take as an example processional music for the Eucharist or a musical offertory in which the community participates by listening; the resistances change. They are linked to the means chosen for playing and/or singing; that is, the particular mix of voices and/or instruments that will be used to make music. But some of the resistances, if not all, still apply in varying degrees. One example would be the issue of musical literacy. If the chosen musical language is, for example, twelve-tone atonality, care must be taken not to alienate the congregation, which will likely struggle to follow the music prepared for it. While participants familiar with these musical languages may indeed be primed for this type of listening, congregants unaccustomed to these languages may have difficulty actively listening. In any case, the congregation's musical profile must be considered when choosing the repertoire.

Moreover, seeking this connection between music and function, I would like to address the issue of resistance from a liturgical perspective. Communal music is functional in that it serves a purpose. This statement can be interpreted in various ways, and the hierarchy of this relationship can vary greatly. Saying that two things are linked, as in a pair, does not automatically describe how this relationship plays out, nor which of the elements carries more weight in the equation than the other. In practical terms, in some contexts, the music itself may carry more weight than the liturgical narrative in shaping musical decisions for the community. In other situations, it is precisely this liturgical function that will determine the repertoire. An example would be the choice of repertoire for an important date on the liturgical calendar, such as Reformation Day or Christmas, and the selection of music for a service that takes place during the ordinary period of the calendar between Epiphany and Lent. Each of

these situations imposes specific liturgical constraints that alter how the repertoire is conceived. We sing “Silent Night” at Christmas, for instance, and not at Easter. This approach recognizes the relationship between piece and context, between music and function. It does not, in this sense, exist for its own sake, but rather for a liturgical configuration. These resistances are created and configured precisely within this relationship and vary according to changes in the community’s “musical equation.”

Such “liturgical resistances” exist both in the macrocosm of the church’s musical practice and within the microcosm of the weekly service. To illustrate how these resistances take shape in practice, I offer a few examples. Let us imagine that one is composing for confession. Notwithstanding the extensive semiotic discussion regarding music as language and its signifying and indexical functions within a cultural construct, I would like to employ the terminology of “musical discourse” as a sonic configuration, the result of musical choices made by the composer and performers, to refer to a composition and its liturgical context. That is, “musical discourse” as a form of rhetoric and not as a form of language.³⁴

In narrative terms, the liturgy of the church emphasizes different aspects of the Christian life: confession, the proclamation of grace, the reading of the Gospel, the Eucharist, a benediction. Each aspect emphasizes a different aspect of experience. Add to this the homily, or sermon, and we have a rich and diverse repertoire of narratives.³⁵ We can use this “moment of preaching” to illustrate the use of theological content in music, especially in compositions with lyrics, which add a new layer to the musical discourse. If the preacher emphasizes the sovereignty of Jesus, for example, this emphasis creates a resistance that arises precisely through exclusion: in the search for alignment or liturgical dialogue, the composer writing music to engage with the preached theme must take a stance toward it.³⁶ If we introduce, for example, a piece that emphasizes the fragility of the crucified Christ as the Lamb of God, as in the traditional “*Agnus Dei*” of the ordinary of the Mass, this decision alters the portrait painted by the preacher regarding a sovereign Jesus. Alternatively, it complements this portrait by adding a new aspect to the community’s Christology or dilutes the impact of the sermon by introducing a new focal point into the narrative. In each case, participants in the service must negotiate these elements as part of constructing the service’s meaning. The composer must therefore recognize the liturgical context in which their music will be used and the resistances that arise from this context.

Let us imagine, then, a second example: the practice of confession of sins and its place in Christian liturgy. What is sought in this case is [usually] introspection, an inward gaze, a surrender of the heart.³⁷ In this case, an extremely active, high-intensity musical discourse, with a dense texture and/or prominent rhythmic characteristics, competes with the liturgical function (exceptionally, this may not be the case. I am, of course, generalizing), as the participant’s attention is constantly diverted by the intensity and activity of this discourse. The attentive composer recognizes the liturgical function and the challenges it presents and proposes appropriate material. Note that there is no bias here toward one discourse or another, nor toward a specific

technique or timbre that “facilitates” or “is appropriate” for the confession—this decision must be made within a context, not apart from it. There would be nothing wrong, for example, with using spectral music or modal pointillism in this context. A bombastic guitar solo, on the other hand, would hardly facilitate the act of confession, because of its potential to call attention to itself, pulling participants away from the liturgical context to the musical event. Other resistances could be mentioned here. The higher the quality of the interaction between composer and context, the greater their ability to discern the resistances inherent to a medium, such as the collectivity of community musical engagement, and other contextual factors, whether liturgical or extra-liturgical.³⁸

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by considering the configuration I propose as a system as a whole, to then relate the applications of this model to musical composition in a community context. I return here to a previous illustration of an instrument as a medium with specific resistances: the flute. A piece written for this instrument is more than a thoughtless reaction to any of these resistances in isolation. It is more like a dialogue between the composer’s aesthetic intentions and the *set of resistances* configured by the medium. Each resistance either facilitates or hinders a specific aspect of the musical gesture intended by the composer while also helping shape the music realized through this medium. The same notes written on a page, for example, will sound completely different when played on a djembe, a piano, or an organ. If the composer’s intention is performance through a specific medium, they must take this set of resistances into account in the search for a configuration that is formally coherent, musically valid, and functionally relevant.

One also needs to remember that, unlike an instrument, the community is not an inanimate mechanical device.³⁹ It is a living organism that responds in real time and is in constant dialogue with the music during its worship experience. There are variables that the composer cannot control in advance and that lie beyond the composition’s specific time. Such elements belong to the moment of musical creation, which can, as in the case of improvisation, exist simultaneously with the composition or at the moment of performance, well beyond the composer’s sphere of influence. As I mentioned earlier, a composition can be transferred from one context to another, both temporally and spatially, and each such transfer creates and modifies the configuration of resistances associated with the musical object.

My goal in this text was to present a holistic alternative that meets the diverse requirements of diverse media, with regard to musical composition in the context of communal worship. In justifying the nature of composition in the life of the church, I want to make it clear that I consider the composer’s task in this context to be essential and, furthermore, that I consider it an ethical and theological responsibility—especially if the composer considers themselves a member of the family of faith—to

discern this configuration of resistances in order to write music in a way that is relevant to the community (whether local or broader) and thus serve God in their generation.

The models I have examined here contribute to this dialogue regarding composition, especially in the way they negotiate the ideological or theological demands that govern—even if hidden—the way musical creation and practice are conceived within the sociopolitical context. My intention is not to disqualify any of the models presented, but to demonstrate the limitations of their applicability as a more flexible framework for addressing a composer's specific questions within a given context. Thus, the third way is an attempt to establish a path that acknowledges these resistances and, based on this acknowledgment, construct a kind of pre-compositional “scaffolding” that can guide the efforts of the composer seeking to fulfill this calling to write for the voice of the church.

Endnotes

¹ Werner Ewald, ed., *O Ofício Da Música Na Igreja* (Otto Kuhr, 2020). “The Office of Music in the Church.” In this context “ofício” could be translated as “office” or “occupation,” referring to all aspects of church music work, including curating, composing, leading, and designing liturgy and worship.

² This famous Villa-Lobos quote is part of an interview recorded in the United States in 1957. The composer conceded this interview, a little before his death, to the reporter José Roberto Dias Leme, one of the founders of “Voz da América.” The full interview is available at <https://conteudo.ebc.com.br/portal/projetos/2014/villalobos/>.

³ Original: “adequação,” or “adequateness.”

⁴ I make a difference between congregational music, and liturgical music. Congregational music is music composed for a community to sing. It requires the vocal participation of the church. Liturgical music is written to be used in liturgy, and it can be both vocal and instrumental, but requires from the congregation active listening.

⁵ In English, *Gebruchsmusik* could be translated as “music intended, by virtue of its simplicity of technique and style, primarily for performance by the talented amateur rather than the virtuoso.” See more in “*Gebruchsmusik*,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed April 1, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Gebruchsmusik>. Paul Hindemith (1896-1963), German, was a considered by many a radical avant-garde composer: Harold C. Schonberg, *The Lives of the Great Composers*, 3rd ed. (W.W. Norton, 1997), 544. Through his publications and music, Hindemith had great pedagogical influence on the Western music compositional tradition.

⁶ Brian A. Wren, *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

⁷ There are different theological interpretations of the creation account in Genesis. Nevertheless, I draw the reader’s attention to the fact that, while theological positions regarding the reading and interpretation of the creation account may vary, God’s creative impulse survives these different interpretations with considerable certainty.

⁸ William Jensen Reynolds et al., *A Survey of Christian Hymnody*, 5th ed., (Hope Pub. Co, 2010), 1.

⁹ Psalm 33:3. This is not the only place in the Bible where there is an exhortation to sing a “new song” (see, for example, Psalms 96, 98, and 149); even more common are the exhortations to sing praises to God (see Exodus 15:21 and 1 Chronicles 16:23). I chose Psalm

33 because of its combination, in the first three verses of a “new song” and the emphasis on art, or skill, in verse 3.

¹⁰ It is also true that the music of the past flourishes through new connections with the present; consider Mendelssohn’s vigorous promotion of Bach’s work in the early decades of the nineteenth century. For a comprehensive examination of that case, see: *Mendelssohn, the Organ, and the Music of the Past: Constructing Historical Legacies*, Eastman Studies in Music (Boydell & Brewer, 2014).

¹¹ Friedrich Blume, *Protestant Church Music: A History* (W.W. Norton, 1975), 3.

¹² I am not taking into account considerations regarding quality, market dynamics, or any other complicating factor that might influence the acceptance of a piece of music. None of these factors alter the logic of my argument, although they may affect its characterization.

¹³ From an ideological standpoint, Hindemith and his contemporaries were positioning themselves in opposition to the extreme complexity and the Romantic ideals embodied in the music of Wagner, Mahler, and Strauss, for example. I must acknowledge that this position was indeed aligned with (and influenced by) the Russian socialist ideologies of composers such as Prokofiev, who were also working under the banner of music “of the people and for the people.” Due to the trauma of World War I, many artistic movements of this interwar period were characterized by “a rejection of the intense emotions and subjectivity that characterized both Romanticism and Expressionism.” Joseph Henry Auner, *Music in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 87-88. Austin describes Hindemith, especially in his youth—precisely the moment when the composer developed the idea of music for a specific purpose—as one of the most courageous radicals in the music of his generation in Germany: William W. Austin, *Music in the 20th Century: From Debussy through Stravinsky* (W.W. Norton, 1966), 397.

¹⁴ Robert P. Morgan, *Twentieth Century Music: A History of Musical Style in Modern Europe and America* (Norton, 1991), 225.

¹⁵ Joseph Henry Auner, *Music in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, Western Music in Context: A Norton History (W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), 92.

¹⁶ Paul Hindemith, *A Composer’s World, Horizons and Limitations*, The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, 1949-1950 (Harvard University Press, 1952), 219.

¹⁷ Auner, *Music in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, 92.

¹⁸ Alex Ross, for instance, makes a similar statement in *The Rest is Noise* (Ross 2007, 515).

¹⁹ Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, 186. Schonberg also dismissed the initiative of Hindemith and his colleagues as an exercise doomed to failure, due to its deliberate elimination of the expressive character of composing: Harold C. Schonberg, *The Lives of the Great Composers*, 3rd ed. (W.W. Norton, 1997), 546.

²⁰ Auner, *Music in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, 85-89.

²¹ This logocentric characteristic of theology is not unique to Wren’s work, which will be analyzed here. A more comprehensive critique of this issue can be found in my book: Marcell Silva Steuernagel, *Church Music Through the Lens of Performance*, Congregational Music Studies Series (Routledge, 2021), 22-23.

²² Wren, *Praying Twice*, 76.

²³ Wren, *Praying Twice*, 84. His source is: Donald P. Hustad, *Jubilate II: Church Music in Worship and Renewal* (Hope Publishing Company, 1993).

²⁴ Wren, *Praying Twice*, 84.

²⁵ Wren, *Praying Twice*, 123. The third chapter of Wren’s book is quite practice-oriented and addresses various issues, such as church architecture and sound systems. The author’s concern is to answer practical questions regarding the development of the church’s music ministry.

²⁶ I do not wish, here, to be accused of a kind of veiled Platonism. Simply establishing the connection between the idealized and the realized does not mean embracing a Platonic position regarding the nature and practice of music.

²⁷ For a more in-depth discussion of the question of the medium and its resistances in relation to the musical gesture, see: Marcell Silva Steuernagel, “O GESTO MUSICAL ATRAVÉS DO MA: UMA ABORDAGEM ALTERNATIVA DA FORMA NA COMPOSIÇÃO MUSICAL” (Universidade Federal do Paraná - UFPR, 2008). A more abbreviated version of the same argument can be found here: Marcell Silva Steuernagel, “O Gesto na composição musical,” *Revista Vórtex* 3, no. 1 (2015), <http://periodicos.unespar.edu.br/index.php/vortex/article/view/758>.

²⁸ Silva Steuernagel 2008, 23.

²⁹ I use “played” here both in the sense of “live” music, which is performed during worship, and in the phonographic sense, recognizing that the mechanical reproduction of music is part of musical practice in different community contexts.

To continue this discussion, let us think about a musical score. For a more comprehensive discussion of issues related to Western musical notation, see: Trevor Wishart and Simon Emmerson, *On Sonic Art* (Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996).

³⁰ Mark Valentine Sullivan, “The Performance of Gesture: Musical Gesture, Then and Now” (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1984), 13.

³¹ In this section, I am oscillating between the idea of the community, as a group that gathers, and the idea of the congregation which participates in the music by playing or singing.

³² There are also non-musical reasons for this preference for consonant intervals and regular metrical movement. One example would be Calvin’s vision of reverent and majestic music for worship and the way this vision took shape in the 1562 Geneva Psalter.

³³ For a summary of silent participation in congregational musicking, see chapter 3 of my book: Marcell Silva Steuernagel, *Church Music Through the Lens of Performance*, 65-98.

³⁴ I avoid here the word ‘text’ in relation to the narrative/theological content of worship, as this is a term that can be interpreted in various ways, especially in the context of a discussion regarding the construction of meanings and contents.

³⁵ For the question of “diet,” as a useful analogy in the context of worship, see my other article originally published in the original Portuguese edition of the journal in which this article was published: Marcell Silva Steuernagel, “Resgatando o Passado No Presente: Tradição e Renovação Na Dieta Hinológica Do Protestantismo,” in *O Ofício Da Música Na Igreja*, ed. Werner Ewald (Otto Kuhr, 2020).

³⁶ Not necessarily through alignment, as it may do so through complementarity or contrast, or even by emphasizing a specific aspect of a theme.

³⁷ The formal triptych of *the Kyrie* demonstrates this liturgical approach through the repetition of each section (*Kyrie, Christe, Kyrie*), which emphasizes the meditative nature of this section of the Ordinary.

³⁸ It is obvious that, once the composer finishes the piece, they lose their connection to the context, insofar as their music can be transported to other contexts and incorporated into other narratives. In such cases, the curation of these functional resistances and expectations falls to the person responsible for planning the liturgy and making musical choices within that context.

³⁹ It is not that the instrument is not interactive, but that this interaction depends primarily on the performer’s manipulation of the medium and not on the medium itself, in the case of a mechanical instrument. The medium may be intertwined with the performer, as in the case of the human voice. In this sense, the level of intermediate mechanical (or electronic) layers is also an important resistance factor for the composer to consider.

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.

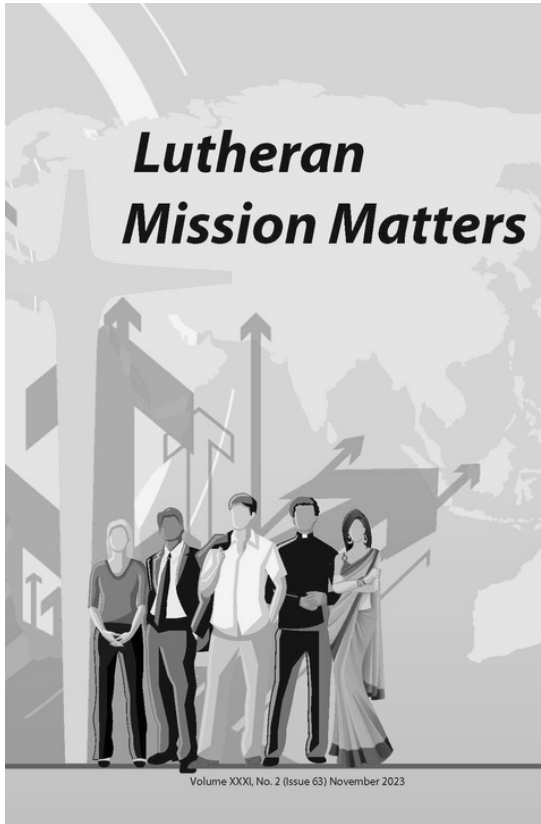
² The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Commission on Worship, *Text, Music, Context: A Resource for Reviewing Worship Materials* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2011).

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.

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Mission Observer

New Life through New Leaders A Vision for Replanting in a Changing Culture

Aaron Putnam and Dawit Bokre

The following Mission Observer summarizes the presentation by Rev. Aaron Putnam and Rev. Dawit Bokre at the annual Lutheran Society for Missiology banquet. The complete video presentation is online at <https://www.LSFM.global>

The Good Shepherd Story

In 2010, Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Hayward, California, was a congregation running out of time—Aging. Anglo. Faithful, but fading. The neighborhood had changed around them. The streets, schools, and corner stores told a new story: immigrants, working families, second-generation young people navigating life between two worlds. The congregation had a heart for the Gospel and a genuine love for their community. What they lacked was relational access and cultural credibility with the very people God had placed right outside their doors.

So, they made a decision that would change everything. They stopped waiting for the right leader to arrive and started trusting the leaders God had already sent. The first leader came from outside the Bay Area, from St. Louis mostly, though not long before his call he had been living in Guatemala—so in a sense, he came the long way.



Rev. Aaron Putnam serves as the San Francisco Bay Area Director of LINC Ministries International, a strategic urban network that empowers local missionary leaders, and partners with them for kingdom impact.



Rev. Dawit Bokre serves as Senior Pastor at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Hayward, CA, a unique multiethnic congregation, and as Director of Mission for LINC Bay Area.

Aaron Putnam grew up in a household shaped by calling and constant movement. His father began as a scientist, then became a seminarian, then a church planter, and eventually a parish pastor. The family moved with him through every transition, living in different cities and contexts across the country. That upbringing gave Aaron something rare: the ability to feel at home almost anywhere, and an instinct for mission that was formed not in a classroom but on the road.

He became a teacher, and after several years teaching high school in the United States, Aaron felt the pull toward something more. He traveled to Guatemala, where he spent more than five years teaching at a school, doing mission work, and building deep relationships within several Lutheran churches there. It was in Guatemala that he met the love of his life, Sofia, a Guatemalan woman and adult convert to the Lutheran faith. When they returned to the States, and Aaron completed his seminary studies, he was called to Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Hayward to plant a Spanish-speaking ministry.

But Aaron did not just plant a ministry. He read the room.

He noticed that Hayward's population, though largely Latino and immigrant, was primarily English-speaking among the second and "one point five" generations. These were people who had grown up in the United States, who preferred English, and who did not fit neatly into a traditional Spanish language ministry model. He noticed the long-tenured lead pastor graciously stepping toward retirement, creating space for new leadership to emerge. And he noticed what the life of the congregation already revealed: Good Shepherd was on the downside of the curve, and something had to change.

So, Aaron began the hard work of guiding the congregation toward replanting, not as an institutional strategy, but as a genuine act of missional courage. He led the Spanish ministry. He shepherded the declining English congregation. He studied with the people, prayed with them, and helped them see that their story was not over; it simply needed a new beginning.

He studied with the people, prayed with them, and helped them see that their story was not over; it simply needed a new beginning.

Around that same time, a nineteen-year-old man from Eritrea showed up at Good Shepherd's door. His name was Dawit Bokre. He had no formal ministry training, no institutional credentials, and no roadmap. What he had was a vision: to gather Eritrean Lutherans in the Bay Area and plant a community rooted in the Gospel. Good Shepherd gave him a classroom to start meeting. Aaron gave him something far more valuable: brotherhood, mentorship, and years of intentional investment.

Aaron saw in Dawit what the institution had not yet learned to see: a leader already embedded in the community he was called to reach, already trusted by the people he was called to serve, already fluent in the cultural and relational language of his neighbors. Rather than sending him away to be formed elsewhere, Aaron walked alongside him, helping him pursue formal theological education (through Concordia

Seminary's Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology [EIIT]), guiding him into LCMS ordination, and weaving the growing Eritrean ministry into the larger vision of what Good Shepherd could become.

By 2016, Good Shepherd was home to a Spanish-speaking ministry, an Eritrean ministry, an Oromo ministry from the Ethiopian community, and a "rebuilding" English congregation, all under one roof, all in various stages of growth and connection.

When the time came to discern who should lead the replanted congregation as its officially called pastor, the answer was clear. Under Aaron's leadership, the congregation looked at the young Eritrean man who had grown up among them, with his community relationships, his outreach capacity, his ability to raise young leaders and build strategic partnerships.

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church called the Rev. Dawit Bokre. What followed was not a church growth strategy. It was resurrection.

How is God calling us to be faithful as His Church right now, in our particular time and place?

Every congregation, at some point, is forced to reckon with this fundamental question.

Faithfulness to Word and Sacrament remains constant. How we live that out in a changing context requires ongoing discernment.

Not what worked a generation ago. Not what other churches are doing. Not what preserves the institution.

But *how*, honestly, faithfully, courageously, is God calling us right now, in this place, to be His Church? There are three honest answers to that question. Basically, there are three callings, three pathways forward. The health of the Church in North America depends on congregations having the clarity and courage to name which one is theirs.

Calling One: Plant

For churches with health, momentum, and resources, the most faithful thing you can do is not consolidate your success but reproduce it.

Calling Two: Replant

For churches experiencing decline but still holding resources and leaders, the mission is not over. It needs a new beginning.

Calling Three: A Blessed Ending

For churches whose season is complete, the most faithful act is to steward their legacy forward so that death becomes seed.

The Reality We Must Face: Mission begins with truthful seeing.

Culturally, the United States is becoming more urbanized, more diverse, more unaffiliated, and more distrustful of institutions, including the church. The Bay Area makes this visible. It is diverse, expensive, and the least churchd major metro area in

the country. If we want to understand the future of mission, we must understand places like this.

This is not just a church problem. It is a leadership pipeline problem.

The Shift We Must Make: From importing outside leaders to empowering local ones.

The traditional model places leaders into communities where they are often outsiders. But the leaders already present, those who know the people, speak the language, and carry trust are often overlooked. The turning point is entrustment. Not delegation, but entrustment. Delegation assigns tasks. Entrustment shares mission.

The Leaders We Must Raise: Not just more leaders. The right leaders.

Leaders who are local, embedded, relationally connected, already present in the mission field.

Leaders who feel at home in diversity, who navigate complexity and build bridges.

Leaders of character, rooted in Christ, humble, teachable, persistent, and relationally magnetic. Leaders who multiply mission, raising up others and building teams.

Leaders who create pathways that sustain mission over time.

And leaders who are supported well.

Raising these leaders means praying consistently, walking closely, coaching practically, encouraging openly, and *entrusting* continually.

The Closing Call

We bring you the story of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church and its experience in replanting with a leader from within to bear witness to what God does when His Church is willing to be honest and courageous. Mission history is not primarily about institutions. It is about entrustment.

The question is this: Do our systems actually support entrustment, or quietly resist it?

The task before us is not better strategies, but clearer missional imagination. We must recognize, form, and trust the leaders God is already raising up. Therefore, we need to intentionally identify, raise up, and entrust local, embedded leaders within our own congregations and communities. This will require renewed courage to see what we have overlooked, to trust where we have hesitated, and to follow where God is already at work. The future of our shared mission may depend on it.

New Life Through New Leaders

Rev. Aaron Putnam and Rev. Dawit Bokre presented “New Life Through New Leaders: *A Vision for Replanting in a Changing Culture*” at the 2026 LSFM Banquet in St. Louis on May 4.

View the full presentation at
<https://www.LSFM.global> or scan the QR code



Cross-bred Music: Joining Cultures to Proclaim the Gospel

David L. Mennicke

Abstract

Celebrating quality music across diverse cultures is a worthy heritage of the Lutheran Church. Combining these musics—and their people—in the context of the Christian Gospel provides new insight and relationship.

Note: This article is an adaptation of the Banquet Speech I shared at the 2023 Lectures in Church Music at Concordia University, Chicago.

The late Howard Swan, a dean of American choral conductors, once said that choral conductors are the most fortunate people in the world, as they get to work with its most wondrous gifts—people and music. When the high delight of sharing our faith in Christ through those two gifts is added, they are blessed indeed. This article relates some of my own faith experiences with music and with people from around the globe and in my local communities.

An early memory of music's impact to uplift and connect people is from grade school. I had a newspaper route, and part of the job was to try to sell subscriptions. A few of us newsboys went out with our adult manager to do some door knocking/paper peddling. It was mid-December in Northern Minnesota—cold and dark. We had a few “normal” visits at houses, even selling a couple of subscriptions, and were approaching the final stop. It was a small, run-down, dimly lit house, but we did see a Christmas tree in the window. Our boss had us knock on the door. An elderly man, alone and frail, came to the door and invited us into his warm but shabby home. He was stooped, not too clean, and hard to understand, but we went ahead with our usual pitch. He was not really paying attention to our spiel; he just seemed glad for the company. Our boss, seeing we were not going to make a sale here, started to usher us out. As we were moving to the door, I felt a little bad deserting him, so I commented to the old man that I liked his Christmas tree. His eyes brightened, and he asked if I



Dr. David L. Mennicke is the director of music and choir ministries at Cross View Lutheran Church in Edina, Minnesota, the coordinator of the St. Paul Outreach Center, and an emeritus professor of music at Concordia University, St. Paul.

knew “*O Tannenbaum*.” Having been raised as a good Lutheran, singing at home and in church, I took a stab at it, but my German was iffy. The man moved closer to me and filled in the gaps in my language. He continued with more verses as I, and, thankfully, the other boys, hummed along. (During this exchange, our boss was impatiently trying to get us out the door.) The man offered us some Oreos before we left. I remember wishing I could have stayed longer, as I sensed that we had just been given something special. The power of music—particularly when there is a deep-seated cultural connection (in this case, the German language he learned as a child) infused with our faith—was impressed on me.

Ten years later, I experienced a college semester abroad in Jerusalem. There, we immersed ourselves in the community, even singing in the YMCA Community Chorus for a Christmas concert. While the music-making was not the highest quality, the personal connections we made were rich. I had the privilege of singing a duet with the President of Bir Zeit University, a tall Palestinian Christian man with a booming baritone voice. He was a kind, gracious, thoughtful soul. The week of our concert, he missed a rehearsal because his teenage daughter was hospitalized after having been shot by Israeli soldiers. Thankfully, she recovered, and the community we shared in our Christmas concert took on even deeper significance, as our joint music-making offered comfort and peace to the people.

My next experience abroad came in May 2000, when our Concordia University, St. Paul Christus Chorus was invited to sing for the Polish government’s annual sacred music festival, *Gaude Mater*. We flew from Minneapolis to O’Hare’s international airport, planning on an overnight flight to Warsaw. On arrival in Chicago, we were informed that our flight would be delayed. We waited through further delays until the Polish airline put us up in a hotel overnight. We came back the next morning to yet more delays.

The crowd that was waiting along with us was mostly Polish nationals, eager to get home to their families for the May Day holiday. As the wait dragged on into the afternoon, the crowd became increasingly agitated, and I was becoming more and more anxious about our itinerary. Perhaps to distract myself (and occupy my students), I thought it could be helpful for us to sing for the people at the airport. I got permission from the airline check-in staff and then gathered the choir for an impromptu concert with our piles of luggage as a backdrop. Just as we began singing, the airline desk announced yet another delay. The crowd erupted, almost drowning us out. However, those close by turned to see what on earth we were doing in this chaotic situation. The piece we were singing was “*Lullajzhe, Jesu, Niyu*,” a beloved Polish Christmas carol. Gradually, the shouting mob turned to listen, leaving their anger and yelling aside to hear our song. Tears were streaming down the faces of many present as they held hands and remembered their home, family, and faith that they so longed to return to. We finished our song (and a couple more), and the people applauded, hugging and thanking us. One person said to me in broken English, “Thank you. You brought us

peace.” We eventually got to Poland and had a marvelous tour with yet more experiences of music of faith connecting people.

We were again blessed to share the gifts with others in a song trip with the Christus



Chorus to Ghana in 2008. This was a remarkable tour, full of wonderful concerts in churches, universities, and concert halls as well as service projects in villages. The event that stands out is the time when we were taught and fed by our hosts.

At St. Francis DeSales Catholic Church in Cape Coast (one of the slave castle cities on the West African coast), a young Ghanaian priest concluded our concert by teaching us a joyful Ghanaian High Life piece that they use for offerings; we sang it twice that night for two offerings. This up-tempo, pop-influenced, simple music is infused with instruments, dancing, and joy in a way that wrapped us up in their community.



103 Cross-bred Music: Joining Cultures to Proclaim the Gospel

In fall 2014, my wife, Katherine, and I were invited on my sabbatical to teach in Bethlehem, Palestine, at Dar Al-Kalima University and Christmas Lutheran Church. We learned much from these settings, where people were working, doing ministry, making music, and creating art under very difficult circumstances. The Palestinian Lutherans we met combined their heritages—Arabic music and art in a church that was founded by German Lutherans in the 19th Century.

The juxtaposition of the German and Palestinian cultures is striking. The church building has stained glass windows with inscriptions such as “*Der Herr ist mein getreuer Hirt*” (“The Lord is my Shepherd.”) For the closing hymn one Sunday, Pastor Mitri Raheb announced, “We will now sing *Grosser Gott*.” Led by their pipe organ, the congregation sang this German chorale in Arabic from their hymnal that printed the music and words right to left.

That congregation sang with such gusto on their hymns—both old German chorales and Palestinian based melodies—that I felt drawn to bring the two styles together. They regularly sang a Palestinian melody (in a sturdy e minor key) for the Gloria in their service. Because they also embraced German hymns, the meter, character, and harmony of the piece immediately made me think of another chorale: *Erhalt uns Herr* (“Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word.”) The result was a choral arrangement that combines both songs. It starts with an Arabic-stylized oboe line that disguises the chorale tune, giving way to the droning accompaniment and percussion of Palestinian folk music, alternating and ultimately combining with the German Lutheran chorale.

Link to Recording of “Hallelujah, Mazhda Hallelujah” in English:
<https://tinyurl.com/y2tdub9d>

These global experiences highlight the ripe opportunities to collaborate with musicians from LCMS partner churches around the world. Phil Magness worked with the French-speaking churches in Africa to develop their hymnal and resources. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ghana is in the midst of their own hymnal project—a collaboration in which I participated in November 2023 in Accra. The Mekane Yesus Seminary in Addis Ababa is training church musicians to recapture their heritage of singing Ethiopian music in harmony. The head of their School of Music and Media Arts, Amare Teklu, completed his Masters in Church Music at Concordia University Wisconsin, and his wife, Tsega Abebe, has completed a church music major at Concordia University, St. Paul. Through connections with them, I worked with and learned from 200 of their church musicians in Addis Ababa in November 2023. We formed a choir for a choral chapel service that opened them up to new possibilities for their worship.

In Taiwan, the LCMS is working with their church body to set up a music conservatory. Dr. Martin Dicke has been an advisor for them, and they seek to use the resources and model created by David’s Harp music ministry from St. Paul Lutheran

Church Music Conservatory in Council Bluffs, Iowa. We in the American church have tremendous opportunities to collaborate with, learn from, and be energized by the vibrance of the growing churches of the Global South. In turn, we can support their growth with our resources. These connections do not require the time and expense of in-person collaboration; with current communication resources, virtual collaborations can be quickly set up and yield a rewarding harvest.

My final story is a combination of global and local connections. In 2018, I met *29:11 International Exchange*, a Gospel music/reconciliation ministry from Cape Town, South Africa. We have enjoyed several in-person and virtual collaborations, and I now serve as their Board Chair. The group is intentional in building relationships, collaboration, and understanding—both musically and personally. Their faith in Christ is their driving force. *29:11*'s work has ranged from small-town churches (and their choirs) to schools, universities, and professional ensembles, including several collaborations with the Minnesota Orchestra.

This South African group, with singers of the African American communities of Mt. Olivet Missionary Baptist Church, Walker|West Music Academy, and the sibling pop group NUNNABOVE led to a transformative “Cross-Breeding” collaborative concert at Concordia University, St. Paul.

Concordia St. Paul is in the Rondo neighborhood of St. Paul, an African American community that was dismantled with the construction of I-94 in the 1960's. Concordia also lost about half of its acreage at the same time, so we had a shared history with our Rondo neighbors. Concordia and the Rondo community also directly felt the effects of George Floyd's killing, with destructive riots arising just blocks away in the aftermath. In conversation with community musical partners (which included one of my music composition major advisees, Carl Clomon, the Music Minister at Mt. Olivet Missionary Baptist Church and on the staff at Walker|West Music Academy), we decided to hold a “Rondo Reconciliation and Renewal” concert collaboration to directly address racial injustice and division.



This was a challenging project that took careful planning and listening. Some of my students were concerned that this concert would espouse “critical race theory.” Others felt they as white, privileged people should not sing music that expressed the experience of Black people. To address these concerns, we held

talking/listening sessions, panel discussions, service projects, and a guided dialogue

supper with all participants. Our hard work in the joint rehearsals contributed to the bonds we formed.

By the time we came to the concert, we had built relationships and understanding, making it possible for us to connect authentically. This alone, though, would have only taken us so far. The key element we shared was our faith in Christ. That Rock was the common foundation that brought us together.

In the concert, each of the six collaborating groups did a short celebratory set to revel in our diverse gifts. We then had a panel discussion about the issues of racial strife that harm us all. That set up our performance of two pieces that faced this issue head on: “Say Her Name” and “The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed.” These pieces alone would have left us in despair, but we then shifted to the “still, small voice” of a solo singing “Jesus Died for All” to the melody of the Civil Rights era song, “We Shall Overcome.” This simple piece—one that could be done with even the most limited musical resources—led us all into singing this uplifting song together. We ended with the joyful, yet purposeful “The Storm is Passing Over” Gospel song.

In March 2026, many of the partners from the February 2026 “Rondo Reconciliation & Renewal” Concert recombined for another event entitled “Love Is the Excellent Way: A Concert of Healing and Hope.” Coming in the midst of the immigration enforcement surge in the Twin Cities, our planning team felt called to offer the positive message of Christ’s love for the world in a way that was not political or partisan.

With hands joined—black and white, young, and old—we sang together as a community in Christ. Humbled before the Cross, the people present were transformed to go forth in hope, love, and peace. This is the power of music (even at its simplest) shared in community when Christ is at the center. Church musicians have been given these gifts of music, people, and faith. With those gifts, infused by the Spirit, we can join in Christ’s mission to redeem the world.

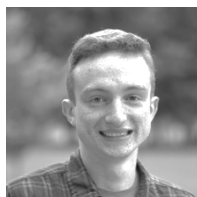
Music in the Mission of the Gospel

Adam Fosse

Music is a divine gift to beautify the proclamation of God's Word, facilitate its retention, and amplify human response to all of the blessings of Christ. Yet, we find as much diversity of expression, meaning, form, and style in the music of the earth as there are languages and cultures. For the Church to be united in her song, we must understand that the gift is not a universal sacred style or form, for these human inventions change and evolve with the passing of time. Rather, the unity and certainty of the Church is built on the pure Word of God, and meaningful musical expressions of faith are found through investigation of our human contexts. Before we can conclude what are the most appropriate applications of music in the life of a Christian, we must first observe the cultural climate in which this gift is employed.

Our experiences create the cultural context that composes the framework by which we understand our Christian faith. Life circumstances can enhance and enrich or corrupt and pollute our perception of the Truth. I once knew a pastor who kept livestock. One Sunday he shared how that week he had been reading from Malachi: "But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall" (Mal 4:2). He then looked out his window to observe a young calf skipping by, and he reflected to us, "This is a great promise. I'm really looking forward to that."

Contrast this with the story of a man in a nearby community who shared with me much about his difficult life. His tale included how at the age of seven years he had pulled a gun on his father and threatened to kill him unless he stopped abusing his brother and mother. Through our conversation, he allowed me to share the Gospel with him, but it was clear to me that his relationship with his earthly father had enormously corrupted his perception of his Heavenly Father. Despite being raised "loosely" Lutheran by his mother, he presently adheres to Native American customs and worships "mother earth." Our experiences and relationship with our earthly father impact how we are able to think of our Heavenly Father—even though He does not change.



Adam became interested in missions on a short-term mission trip in Central Asia in 2017, later studying music education there at an international university. He taught guitar, led ESL activities, and trained national youth as music leaders in local Lutheran churches. He now lives in Linn, Kansas, teaching music, serving as church organist, and working as a mission consultant supporting ongoing projects and short-term teams in Central Asia.

I see this in my own life experiences too. Since I have lived most of my life in landlocked regions of the Midwest and Asia, I am always struck by how little I know about seafaring. Hymns from recent generations, like *Rock of Ages*, *Peace Like a River*, or *Jesus Savior, Pilot Me*, retain poetic and melodic beauty, but describe a seafaring-type experience of faith that few people now understand. Certainly, the closest I have ever come personally to experiencing the stomach-churning plummet and soaking roll of sea billows is getting drenched by the flume ride at a waterpark! It is evident that context is not only bound geographically but changes with the passing of time as well. Now, when fear or grief incites the same gut-clenching, disorienting sensations that inspired the authors of these hymns, seafaring is no longer an intuitive connection for us to make; we must be directed to it. We read Bible stories about the scared disciples on the tempestuous Sea of Galilee, and rather than draw parallels to our own life, we too often think, “Silly disciples. Jesus is right there.”

Thinking about the way that context, place, and time affect our individual understanding and experience of spiritual matters has serious implications for the Church in her commission to teach the gospel. Because of the special qualities of music, the songs she sings are of great significance for growing in Christian faith.

In dealing with the experiencing of and the growth of Christian faith, we examine what the experience of music has to do with faith and whether the church can provide the experience necessary for growth in faith. We investigate our human experience to understand how people around us grow and act out their faith.

It is most certainly true that the revealed nature of God in Scripture, and the facts about what He has done for us are not altered by nor contingent on our human experience. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). In fact, some of the oldest hymns in our hymnal, “Savior of the Nations, Come” (fourth century), “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” (fifth century), and “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” (eighth century) demonstrate the timeless staying power held by singing the story of God’s mighty works in narrative song. Litanies, modeled in the Psalms (by the fourth century), recognize the unchanging realities of God and the needs of human experience, offering comprehensive prayers for all the people of God.

The “fabrication of worship experiences” is an accusation that some direct at reformed evangelical Christianity. However, whether you subscribe to contemporary music, free-form prayer, and motivational messages or you

However, whether you subscribe to contemporary music, free-form prayer, and motivational messages or you strictly adhere to historical liturgical practices and seasonal celebrations of the church year, believers are united in the understanding that the church service is a place where God is encountered, and that faith is meant to be evident in the life of Christians.

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God does not leave us in the dark about this, prescribing a worship life for His people in the Old Testament and in the New. Activities of worship, as the Lord describes them, include giving to the poor (Mt 6:3–4), prayer (Mt 6:6), forgiveness (Mt 6:14), fasting (Mt 6:17), gathering in His name (Mt 18:20), the Lord's Supper (Mt 26:26), Baptism (Mt 28:19), adherence to God's Word (Luke 11:28), teaching (Mt 28:20) and singing (Eph 5:19). There are also works such as healing, miracles, prophecy, speaking in tongues, sharing testimonies, and more commended to the church, which many Lutherans today do not teach about very clearly, often quickly summarizing such works with Paul's instruction that "all things should be done decently and in order" (1 Cor 14:40).

The need to investigate and understand how the faith grows in the lives of people becomes critically important when our discussion centers on the *missio Dei*, God's mission to all the world and His commission to His people. Christ gives us the charge to be light in the world, salt of the earth, to exhort and encourage one another, to bear sanctified fruit in keeping with repentance, and to expose ourselves to the world as Christians by our love. This fruit of faith has two audiences: Christians, those with us in Christ, and those who are outside the Church.

Lutherans, starting from a German or Scandinavian heritage, do well in cross-cultural mission reaching others when the religious traditions are similar, and people have similar values and ways of expressing their faith. They struggle when meeting people of unfamiliar cultures where, to be meaningful, they must start from what the people already know and understand.

Lesslie Newbigin describes how the evolution and diversity of human thought throughout history impacts humanity's interaction and confusion with Divine Truth. He states,

The self-evident truths of the Enlightenment are, we now see, not self-evident at all but only appear self-evident to a society which has been shaped by a particular story. (It is not self-evident to an orthodox Hindu that all individuals are born with equal rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness).¹

Applying this argument to music, it is clear that musical performances make sense within a given cultural context. In my own experience, I have often heard people extol various styles of worship music as more sacred or sincere than others. These comments do the Church a great disservice— from both sides of the aisle. Contemporary worship advocates critique traditional worship styles for their lack of sincere worship because they are perceived to have so little excitement and joy. Some who hold tightly to the

historical liturgical practices of the church also do disservice when they imply that organ music is the only music sacred enough for use when God's people are gathered.

Observing the power of music in cultural experiences around the world and throughout time, we address the role of music in our lives of faith directly. We have a record of music history just as we have a record of human civilization (Gn 4:21). Singing and music were cornerstones of temple worship. Singing combines with instruments and dancing for all manner of festivities throughout Scripture. The disciples sing with Jesus, and singing is a dominant function of the early Church.

Now consider what makes music such a good tool for instructing and imparting faith. In many ways, it is self-evident to us that music has a quality that makes words "sticky." Marketing experts certainly know the value of a good jingle. But really, God is the one who employs it first when He commands Moses to write a song to teach people, saying: "And when many evils and troubles have come upon them, this song shall confront them as a witness (for it will live unforgotten in the mouths of their offspring)" (Dt 31:21).

It is true that music alone has the ability to touch the human soul in a way unique from any other sort of art or narrative. Throughout Scripture we find potent music brought forth responsively in the most intense of human circumstances: joy and grief, victory and lament, praise and supplication. We see further evidence of the spiritual nature of music from how David is employed to calm the troubled spirit of King Saul. (1 Sm 16:23) It is also worth noting that in the end this did little to affect the salvation of Saul. May the Lord preserve us from believing that human music alone can generate faith in the Almighty God!

Because so many Christians seem confused on this point, it is important to teach this clearly. The Apostle Paul, during his exhortations on preaching in the book of Romans, makes it clear that, "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rm 10:17). And in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes, "But be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph 5:18b-19).

Faith in Christ is a result of hearing His Word, and music is a responsive product of that faith brought forth by the Holy Spirit. At times the Lord even delivers His Word to us directly in song form! This same song in turn becomes a vessel of proclamation for the Word to again be heard and employed by the Holy Spirit to kindle faith.

Generation of faith is the work of the Holy Spirit through hearing the Word. Music in and of itself has no agency to accomplish such a work of the Divine, just as we Lutherans

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teach about baptismal water. Without proper application of the Word, it is only water, regardless of whether it's cold or hot, in ornately carved stone font or a crude kitchen bowl; it is only when it is paired with the words and promises Christ gives us that the mundane becomes sacred. The vessel is merely a vessel, but when understanding the remarkable thing that happens in Baptism, the response of faith may evoke the desire for an ornate vessel to reflect the sacred nature of the act.

Music is also such an ornate vessel, appropriate for use with the preaching of the Word. But when we think of decorative vessels for the Gospel, we must take care that the vessel does not distract people from the life-giving contents of the message.

When striving to connect people of a different culture to God's mission, and wherever Christians undertake the establishment of new churches for unreached peoples around the world, every effort needs to be made to encourage, collect (perhaps edit), and record indigenous songs of praise for the local church. In this way, local saints are equipped with liturgy and songs that carry the words of Christ to their own lost neighbors in a musical and expressive language they can understand, so that they have no doubt this message is for them.

Finally, my exhortation. Teach your children to play musical instruments; sing the songs of the Church in your home and imbue them with meaning through the lives you share. When you go out into the world, pray that the Lord opens your eyes to the needs of your neighbor, and arm yourself with a battery of Scripture and songs to comfort and encourage. For those who find themselves in a cross-cultural context (which I contend is most of America, whether you realize it or not), be the foreigner and ask questions. The language of the Church should be special so that people can understand it is sacred, but we need to understand how sacred things are expressed in the target culture. And finally, lights and smoke, candle and incense, organs and guitars, and all the trappings of church services—we must remember that these are peripheral to the Gospel. The message of salvation won for us on the cross was efficaciously redemptive prior to any presentation in a melodious form, and its proclamation will persist long after the Lord has called us home. “The Lord God is my strength and my song, and He has become my salvation!” (Ps 118:14).

Endnotes

¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 73.

Ministry in Mongolia

Miriam and Richard Carter

For six months we served as volunteers in Mongolia, two three-month stints, one in the spring and one in the fall of 2025. We were asked to serve by a mission team of four Lutheran pastors, one Kazakh-Mongolian, one Kazakh, and two from the United States. This was under the umbrella of the Mongolian Evangelical Church. Our assignment was to be “grandma and grandpa” in a temporary dormitory housed in a two-floor apartment. The vision was new: mission service in a new dormitory building. Our position was part of the launching process. We would be serving new believers of a Kazakh-Mongolian congregation as they came to Ulaanbaatar, the capital city, for university studies.

We introduce you to three main areas of Lutheran and Christian mission in Mongolia: the work of foreign missionaries, the life of new believers and ministry workers, and finally, the blessings that come with ministry in Mongolia.

What is ministry like in Mongolia? It is quite complex, with challenges requiring great flexibility and patience for us. But at the same time there are blessings. There has been freedom of religion in Mongolia since the time of Chinggis Khan. Although people are not put into prison for their religion, it is not always easy for people to show their faith.

What is it like to be a “foreign” missionary or worker in Christ’s service in Mongolia? To begin with, we don’t usually use the term *missionary*, as it seems to identify “mission” as foreign influence. Although Mongolia was never part of the Soviet Union, its policies were greatly influenced by its proximity. A foreigner can talk about Christian faith and share with Mongolians who are already believers. (Online reports suggest that less than 2% of the population is Christian.) Foreigners can also teach in a recognized Bible school to believers who want to learn more. Foreigners can come and serve in care ministries, and while doing that, they can answer questions and let Christ’s light shine. Believing foreigners can do a lot to serve and share.



Richard and Miriam Carter are both retired, Rich from serving as a theology professor and Miriam from serving as an elementary teacher. In retirement they continue to serve. At the beginning of retirement they served in Hong Kong for six years. In 2025, they served two six-month stints in Mongolia.

One foreigner finds his mission field in a gym. He is asked many questions about the cross he wears or why he is in Mongolia. He will talk about Jesus while talking with interested exercisers.

The opportunity to serve cross-culturally or globally in a place like Mongolia is a gift. Being there seemed like being in the Garden of Eden. Well, OK, in the city there were lots of cars, and there weren't a lot of flowers or beautiful nature much of the year, but there were so many wonderful new discoveries to make. This includes discovering the beauty of the mountains, daily, in virtually every direction on any street. In every culture, in every place, there are discoveries to be made.

Not even those wonderful mountains make life there all sweetness and light. In Mongolia, much of the year is very cold and dry and dusty. In late spring, looking for the first buds to show requires patience. Also, for us, to see so many Soviet-era old apartment buildings brought back memories of our year in St. Petersburg. In the same Soviet-era vein, you can see the huge pipes on the outskirts of the city that go underground to provide the city's heat supply. Heat goes off 15 May (Worship in the local Mongolian service was a bit cold the next Sunday.) and is turned back on 15 September. The heat was appreciated.

What is it like to be a Christian in Mongolia? Since there is freedom of religion, believers do not fear the government. Believers in Christ are free to worship as they please. In fact, there are quite a few churches in the capital city. Many are small and are more like house-churches. There are not many buildings in the city that look like churches in Western countries, but there are many around. One guess is that there may be as many as one hundred, but they are small. With the freedom that came after the Soviet era, many believing Koreans came to Mongolia. They started businesses and also shared Jesus.

But what is it like to actually be a believer? For most Mongolians, "religion" would mean a kind of Tibetan Buddhism. In the largest of the smaller ethnic groups, the Kazakhs, most are Muslims. In addition, throughout Mongolia, animistic shamanism invoking the ancestors, nature, and the Eternal Blue Sky commonly underlies both Buddhism and Islam. One of our team members who comes out of a western Mongolian /Kazakh context shared that her grandfather is a shaman. In this kind of multi-ethnic, multi-religious society, it is not surprising that Christian believers might be regarded with suspicion. Families generally

In this kind of multi-ethnic, multi-religious society, it is not surprising that Christian believers might be regarded with suspicion. Families generally do not accept new beliefs easily, and within families, there can be all sorts of trouble.

do not accept new beliefs easily, and within families, there can be all sorts of trouble. New Christians may be rejected by the family or even punished.

For most of our students, becoming a believer was relatively new. They did not go to Sunday School or have much training at all. The students did not know how to use the table of contents in a Bible or the maps. They did not have any idea where Jerusalem and Bethlehem are. For some, no one else in their family is a believer. It was exciting to see how diligently some of the students read and studied the Bible. And there are simple logistics issues. A part of our learning was that the Psalms are numbered differently in the Kazakh Bible from the Mongolian and our English Bibles.

In society, life for a believer can be lonely. One woman who works in a local government office told us she has no friends because she is a believer. One young man told his friends that he thought Christians were not too bad and he was beaten up for that comment. After that, he declined to be baptized.

It is good when church leaders are Mongolian nationals because they can openly share Jesus, although it is a very isolating position. People want to fit in and do not want to be seen as believers, and as a result, it is hard to encourage people to gather to be strengthened in their faith. Worship services can often involve only five to ten people. Congregational workers become discouraged and can become burned out trying to reach people with the love of Christ. Life is hard, and even finding time to be in the Word with other believers is difficult. This is a dominant feature of the place: Winter is long and hard in Mongolia.

Now we unfold the blessings we experienced in Mongolia. The first big one is that there is freedom of religion. That is a huge blessing dating to the time of Chinggis Khan (1162-1227). We understood this freedom more than we had in other places that mission life has taken us. There is no government threat for Christians.

Another big blessing is that by Christians serving and loving people in a Christ-like way, people can see the light of Jesus. Childcare and parenting help, care for handicapped people, English tutoring or teaching, better hygiene, and even teaching music or sports are areas that foreigners can come in and help in the development of Mongolia. There are many opportunities.

There is an organization, JCS (Joint Christian Services International), that serves as a focal point for Christian organizations coming in to strengthen and enrich the lives of Mongolian citizens. Such help leads to settings where it is appropriate to talk about Jesus. This organization sends Christian people throughout the country—and can always use more people.

In the project where we served, the future plan is to have not just the present two-floor apartment building, but an entire dormitory in the capital city for new Christian university students. Many of them come from unbelieving families, and

being with fellow Christians at the university provides an opportunity to help them become firmer in their faith. They can worship and pray together daily and grow with a weekly mentoring time by being in the Word. Whether it is in the Mongolian or Kazakh language, they join to sing praises to God with joy.

We experienced the blessing that Mongolians are a strong people who are also kind and generous. Even though hugging is not done much in many families, they do learn how to hug and are good at it!

Another blessing of being in ministry in Mongolia is that we continue to learn. As with any mission or ministry setting, that requires carefully getting our bearings. What work is going on here and how can I contribute? When we arrived in Mongolia, it became clear quickly that encouragement for the church leaders is needed. Being in the Word together was very important. Also, it became clear to us by paying attention that their devotions were not a teaching time, but a time for being in the Word and worshiping. Our role is to pay attention to the people, their needs, and rituals.

After we returned from Mongolia, we have been refreshed by some good reading: *Send Me* by a colleague, Bernice Bunkowske, tells of LCMS Nigeria mission history; and a biography of Watchman Nee, a Chinese believer, pastor, and martyr of the last century, documents his service. It would have been good to read both before Mongolia, to refresh and challenge us in our faith. They now invite us to take seriously the challenges we met in Mongolia and might meet in future opportunities to serve and grow in faith.

In spite of long-held familiar beliefs and long hard winters, foreigners and Mongolians find it very possible to work for the Lord in Mongolia. In spite of the challenges, the Word is spreading, and the church is growing there. It is a beautiful country, although rugged— and the people also are beautiful and rugged. Serving in Mongolia has so many blessings. The Lord made it a very special place.

The Church in Its Most Beautiful Form

Tim Saleska

In a worship service on May 17, 2025, the Concordia Seminary class of 2026 received their Certificates of Vocation that permit them to be ordained and called into ministry serving the congregations of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The speaker for the day was Rev. Dr. Timothy Saleska, who had served as the seminary's Dean of Ministerial Formation during their preparation for ministry. His text for the day was taken from John 16: 23–33. His message dealt with the centrality of Jesus' love for His people and their love for Him and for people.

Out of the tangled web of sentences that make up today's Gospel lesson, there is one sentence that I invite you to meditate on with me today. It's verse 27, where Jesus tells the disciples, "for the Father himself loves you, because you love me and believe that I came from God."

I don't know if you saw this or not, but several weeks ago, the *NYT* had a story about an 85-year-old French woman living in Alabama who was arrested by Homeland Security. Marie-Thérèse had married her American husband just a couple of years ago and was in the process of applying for permanent residency. She had hired a lawyer and was following the legal process—when her husband died suddenly—leaving a small bungalow, a little cash, and no will.

Evidently, she and her stepsons were in a dispute over the property. Things got so bad that one of the stepsons reported her to an ICE officer for overstaying her 90-day visa. So, ICE officers woke up this 85-year-old woman, handcuffed her, and took her to a jail still wearing her pajamas and slippers. From there, she went to detention centers in Alabama and Louisiana, chained to other inmates by her wrists and ankles.

Marie-Thérèse was imprisoned for 16 days until the French government intervened and she was flown to France, leaving every earthly possession behind. But



Rev. Dr. Timothy E. Saleska is the Gustav and Sophie Butterbach Professor of Exegetical Theology at Concordia Seminary. He is also the assistant basketball coach for the Concordia Preachers. Tim has been a member of the faculty since 1997 and was named Dean of Ministerial Formation in 2011. In addition to many articles and publications, Tim is the author of Psalms 1-50 for the Concordia Commentary Series. Tim and his wife, Diane, who teaches nursing at the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL), have three children, two sons-in-law, one daughter-in-law, and seven grandchildren.

after two weeks of detention, she had lost hope and didn't think she could survive much longer. "I was waiting to die, really," she said. "I knew I was not going to make it."

I'm sorry, but this is a horrible thing to hear. But something else happened in that jail too. Something beautiful. In that prison, there was a group of women who showed Marie-Thérèse acts of kindness that gave her hope. Fellow inmates helped her move to the bathroom and shower, she said. They made her hot chocolate and offered her cookies. The night before Easter, they sang hymns that brought her to tears.

And Marie-Thérèse said this, "They were wonderful. I found God in that jail through those women." I found God in that jail through those women. What she meant was that the God she found was not the cruel, uncaring judge that she had experienced up to that point, the compassionless face behind the law, but the God who loved her and cared for her. The God who offered hope.

This is what I want you to think about: Marie-Thérèse found a loving God through these women, because through those women, she met Jesus. Through their love and care for her, she experienced the love of our risen Lord and Savior, the subject of those Easter hymns. She met the Son, who came into our world to make known the loving, tender heart of His Father. "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father," Jesus said to Philip. That is no less true today than it was back when Jesus first said it. "By this, all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God." "No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us." The New Testament is very clear about the central place love plays in our Christian faith and Christian life.

So of course Marie-Thérèse found God through those women. And there, in that filthy jail cell, was the body of Christ, the Church in its most precious and beautiful form.

Jesus says to His disciples, "God himself loves you, because you love me and believe that I came from God." Or, in the words of Marie-Thérèse, the disciples found God through His Son, Jesus. That is, they found the heavenly Father who loved them and cared for them and promised them life instead of death. Not the God of condemnation, but the Father of mercy and forgiveness.

So, how could the disciples not love Jesus? Look at how patient and kind he was with them. Look at how much grace He gave them. Look at how He cared for the most desperate souls around Him. Look at how He loved people so completely and fully—to the death. Jesus' presence in this world was an incredibly graceful presence of God himself. Offering comfort, and healing, and hope at every turn in His ministry—even from the cross.

And of course Jesus could say to those disciples, "God himself loves you because you love me." That word "because" is not transactional. It's not that the disciples earned or merited God's love. It's like this: I have three children that I have loved since before they were born. They didn't earn my love. It just sprung up in my heart,

which almost burst with joy when each one was born. This love came into my heart from nowhere. It was a divine gift. Now I have two sons-in-law and a daughter-in-law, and I love them like I love my own kids. They didn't have to earn my love. They loved my kids, and so I love them too. Divine gift. They are part of my family, and so I love them dearly.

So, it is as if the Father says to His disciples, "Ah, my Son loves you, and you love my Son. Of course I love you too. You are my children. Welcome to the family." You see? In the Father's heart, there is always room for one more. There is always room for one more.

And here again, in the disciples gathered around Jesus, you see the church in a precious and beautiful form. The body of Christ, whose heart and head is Jesus. The church—a tangible expression of divine love: The love of the Father for His Son and the Son for His Father. The love of the Father for this world—so great a love that He sent His only begotten Son to us to save us. The love that the disciples have for Jesus, and of course the love of Jesus for His disciples—a love so deep that he gave them His life. And the love that marks the relationship God's people have with each other and with people in our world. "Love one another," Jesus says. And St. Paul adds, "Above all else put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

But of course, a lot has changed with the church in the long intermission between Jesus' resurrection and His return—and, mark my words, He will return. In the meantime, a lot has happened to the church. One thing, for example: the church has developed into an institution (or many institutions) with all the accoutrements, good, bad, or indifferent that accompany secular institutions in our day and age. "Organized religion," some people call it, none too kindly.

Now there are a lot of things we could say about this development (good and bad), and many people have. But there are two observations I want to make today. *First*, one of the dangers of an institutionalized church is that our love gets separated from the person—Jesus—and invested in things. Things—some are good things—but things, nonetheless: love of orthodoxy, love of ritual, love of worship style, love of power, piety, politics. Things like that. We can be honest with ourselves. People don't exactly identify us Lutherans as the group of people that "loves Jesus," do they?

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Things—some are good things—but things, nonetheless: love of orthodoxy, love of ritual, love of worship style, love of power, piety, politics.

A *second* thing that happens is that love gets separated from belief, when for disciples the two were inseparable. As a result, our faith can get reduced to merely intellectual assent to correct doctrine or a checklist of correctly worded doctrinal points. As one of our CTCR documents put it already decades ago, "We can start to

use truth as a dividing rather than a uniting tool, and our relationships can become loveless.” “Look how they love each other!” Nope, I haven’t heard people say that about us recently.

All of this says to me that the problem for us Christians, and all of you getting your theological diplomas today, is not only outside of us—the tribulation that comes our way in the world—but the real problem is inside of us, in hearts gripped by sin—sin we hide and sin we justify. Self-interest, self-righteousness, selfishness, envy, greed, strife, arrogance, fear. Failure to love (sin is failure to love) or love misshapen and misdirected. It happens all the time. I am thinking of my own sin as I speak. We have big heart problems.

So, the only advice that I am going to give to you today—the Lord knows you have had enough advice lately—is to suggest a small, daily devotional practice: Take some time to pay attention to your heart every day of your lives. Take a hard look at what’s in there. It’s a humbling experience—that look into the recesses of your soul—that look behind the masks you put on for the world. But it’s so important for you personally and for your ministry to have a deep realization that behind all the pious externals in which we take pride, your hearts are just like the hearts of the people you serve, and that you need God’s love and forgiveness just as they do. If you do not know this, you put yourself in great spiritual danger.

That honest look is often shameful and distressing. “Oh, wretched man that I am,” Paul said when he took a look. But no matter what, you need not despair. And it is not where you should remain, brooding on that heart of yours. The other part of your devotional practice is to move from that awful contemplation to a bigger and glorious reality outside of you. If you hadn’t noticed, the apostle John has a lot to say about love. Among many other things, he says this, “For whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.” God is greater than our heart! Yes, He is. God is greater than our heart. Think about what this means: God is greater than your heart.

No matter what God sees in your heart of hearts, no matter how awful your sin, God will not break that promise. He will not un-adopt you. He will not abandon you. God is greater than our hearts. That is grace beyond our comprehension.

It means that our cold, dark hearts will not separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. On the day that you were baptized, you became part of God’s family. Brothers and sisters of Christ and children of God. “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” No matter what God sees in your heart of hearts, no matter how awful your sin, God will not break that promise. He will not un-adopt you. He will not abandon you. God is greater than our hearts. That is grace beyond our comprehension.

Instead of condemning you, God forgives you for the sake of His Son, who loves you with an everlasting love. When your hearts condemn you, remember that your

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Father is eager to remind you of His love. In His Supper, He is eager to tell you again and again that He forgives you. When the pastor announces God's forgiveness to everyone in the room, God is reminding you that He forgives you even the most secret of sins and vices. He is greater than your heart. When you share forgiveness with each other, you can be certain that our Father is saying, "I forgive you too," as the Lord's Prayer says. I forgive you. I forgive you. I forgive you. God is greater than our hearts.

Now, I must tell you, this Word of grace is not just a promise that gives us hope for the distant future when we die. This promise is, of course, a living and powerful hope. But no, it is much more than that. This message of God's love in Jesus is an incredibly powerful and beautiful thing for our lives here in the present. When you share the love of Jesus with another person, when you share His forgiveness and grace with others, the Holy Spirit is at work in your hearts to create faith and love and joy and peace and comfort that is no small miracle.

The embodied love that we as the church are commanded by our Lord to show other people—how we treat them—our words of kindness and gentleness towards them—our hands and heart that reach out to them with the love of Jesus—this is God's tangible grace in action, and its effects are real. If you don't believe me, try showing humility and grace when you are in a bad or angry relationship with other people. Just try it. Show grace, not self-justification. Grace—not righteous indignation—but grace. Show the grace of Jesus where it is unexpected. Share His forgiveness. Show others the love of Jesus through you. I am telling you now, the Holy Spirit can work so powerfully in human hearts to kindle faith and love and peace and joy out of . . . nowhere, really. It's a divine gift.

When the Spirit strikes, He can jolt your heart, impel your hands and feet, sweeten your words, utterly transform your relationships, change your life, change your world. Through you, others can meet Jesus and find the God who loves them.

And there, in the middle of all the mess we have made in our lives, in all the sweet lies we tell ourselves, and even in the midst of all the callousness and coldness with which we often treat each other, there, gathered around Jesus whom we love and who loves us so very much, who has redeemed us miserable sinners, there, sharing His love with each other and with the world around us, there will be the church in its most beautiful and precious form.

So, my simple prayer today is to ask that the Holy Spirit continue to form all of you into people of grace, people who love Jesus and share His love with everyone around you. And, in that place where you serve, I pray that other people will meet Jesus and experience His salvation in their minds and hearts and bodies—a salvation so beautiful, so compelling, so full of love—that they could not have imagined it if they tried.

Amen



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Call for Papers

November 2026

Lutheran Mission Matters: Three Decades of Ministry

The editorial committee of *Lutheran Mission Matters* (LMM), formerly *Missio Apostolica*, invites you to contribute to the 2026 November issue on the theme “Forward in Remembrance.” With this theme we propose that the people of God in the 21st century consider openness, curiosity, and understanding in sharing and living according to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This issue addresses situations like those in much of Europe and the Americas, where a kind of “climate change” has taken place. The social and spiritual climate no longer favors the Church. Like melting glaciers, fewer attend worship, support congregations and missions, and identify as Christian. Like rising temperatures, more give up on religion entirely, or mix and match divergent spiritual beliefs and practices. Like those threatened by storms and droughts, those still devoted to traditional ways and communities often are bewildered and disheartened.

For *Lutheran Mission Matters*, now is a time to listen and learn as much as to speak and instruct. Now is a time for openness, curiosity, and understanding about these situations, so that we might share, teach, and live according to the gospel clearly and faithfully.

We are thinking about articles and shorter essays along these lines:

1. Contributions about those whom Christians should listen to. Perhaps you have first-hand experience with the so-called “Nones” or with those who seek their own paths toward meaning and transcendence. Have you been impressed with a particular approach or studies about them? How does interest and curiosity about non-Christians matter to evangelism and mission thinking?
2. Contributions about the “climate” and the “climate change.” All of us know something is going on. But what? What are helpful ways to think about our situation, and how do they advance witness and church life?
3. Contributions about larger factors that may not get much attention. For example, how does digital media matter?
4. Contributions from a global perspective. For example, what does the growth of Christianity in the Global South show us? How might we listen and learn along with church leaders and scholars?
5. Contributions about insights and ideas from outside the Christian community. For more than a century, scholars in several fields, including anthropology, sociology, political theory, psychology, and cultural

studies, have studied religious and spiritual life. What insights and ideas might they have for mission thinking? What are the most interesting, provocative, or imaginative ideas, theories, and findings from non-Christian thinking and practice for Christian life, witness, and thinking?

We especially hope to receive substantive contributions from parish pastors, mission practitioners, church leaders, and theologians who share our common confession. Articles are generally about 3,000 words in length; however longer and shorter essays of substance will be considered. Mission observers and book reviewers are encouraged.

Submission Guidelines are included in each journal issue, and available on the website. Your submissions may be sent to editor Dr. Victor Raj at rajv@csf.edu for consideration.

Lutheran Mission Matters is a peer-reviewed journal published twice a year by the Lutheran Society For Missiology (LSFM). LSFM was founded in 1991 with the purpose of providing a Lutheran perspective in the theological and practical working out of Christ's mission to and in the world. Our publication is indexed in the Atla Religion Database on the EBSCO platform, along with the full text of the articles. LMM articles are also available under "Publications" tab on the Society's web page at www.lsfm.global.

Christian Witness and Islam

May 2027

The editorial committee of *Lutheran Mission Matters (LMM)*, formerly *Missio Apostolica*, invites you to submit essays, mission observers, and book reviews for the May 2027 issue on the chosen theme: Christian Witness and Islam.

Christianity and Islam are the two largest religions in the world and expected to reach parity in population by mid-century. In addition, Christianity and Islam are each exclusive and mission focused religions that share a history of competition and conflict. Islam is often seen by Christians as an impossible missionary endeavor. From Islam's rise in the seventh century, Christian apologists, theologians, and missionaries have engaged Muslims with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Today Christians are still called by Jesus to proclaim the gospel to all nations, including Muslims, and to love their Muslims neighbors. This issue of Lutheran Mission Matters explores Christian witness and Islam by focusing on the good news of Jesus for Muslims and the following suggested areas of scholarship and missional reflection:

- Christian and Muslim relations: past, present, and future;
- Christian witness and Islam in church history;
- Quran and Scripture, and comparative teachings of confessional and missional engagement;
- Hadith and the role of tradition in Islam and Christian mission;
- Muslim and Christian understandings of Jesus and the prophets;
- Muslim and Christian ethics and praxis;
- Christian and Muslim interactions in secular and political contexts;
- Christian witness among Muslims and Muslim witness among Christians;
- Challenges and opportunities for Christian witness among Muslims;
- The Global South and Christian witness to Islam;
- Christianity in the Middle East and Islam.

Submission Guidelines

1. Manuscript Length: Articles, including endnotes, should be between 3,000 and 5,000 words. Mission observer entries should be around 2,000 to 3,000 words. Book reviews should be 650 words.
2. Submission Process: Send your articles, mission observers, and book reviews concerning the theme “Christian Witness and Islam” to the editor of the journal, Dr. Victor Raj (rajv@csf.edu), with copies to the issue editor, Dr. Joshua Hollmann (hollmann@csp.edu), and the Editorial Assistant at LSFMdesk@gmail.com. Please send book reviews to Dr. Joel P. Okamoto (okamotoj@csf.edu).
3. Peer Review: All submissions will undergo a double-blind peer review process.
4. Important Dates: Please submit final articles and book reviews by February 1, 2027.

In Christ’s mission to the world, and on behalf of the editorial committee,
 Rev. Dr. Victor Raj
 Editor of Lutheran Mission Matters

Submission Guidelines

We welcome your participation in writing for *Lutheran Mission Matters*. Please observe the following guidelines for submission of manuscripts.

Lutheran Mission Matters publishes studies of missiological issues under discussion in Christian circles across the world. Exegetical, biblical, theological, historical, and practical dimensions of the apostolic mission of the church are explored in these pages. (See the mission statement below.) While issues often focus on a theme, the editorial committee encourages and appreciates submissions of articles on any missiological topic.

Contributors can familiarize themselves with previous issues of *Missio Apostolica* and *Lutheran Mission Matters* at the Lutheran Society for Missiology's website (<https://lsfm.global>). Click on Our Journals to view PDFs of previous issues.

Book reviews: LSFM also welcomes book reviews. Submit reviews of no more than 500 words. E-mail Dr. Joel Okamoto (bookreviews@lsfm.global) if interested in writing a review.

Mission Statement

Lutheran Mission Matters serves as an international Lutheran forum for the exchange of ideas and discussion of issues related to proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ globally.

Formatting and Style

Please consult and use *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th edition for endnotes. See basic examples below and/or consult the "Chicago-Style Citation Quick Guide" (http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html).

¹ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 243–255.

² Hans Küng, *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today*, trans. Edwin Quinn (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 184–186.

³ Robert J. Priest, Terry Dischinger, et al., "Researching the Short-Term Mission Movement," *Missiology, An International Review* 34 (2006): 431–450.

References to Luther's works must identify the original document and the year of its publication. Please use the following model.

⁴ Martin Luther, Ninety-five Theses (1517) in *Luther's Works*, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 31:17–34.

Quotations of or allusions to specific texts in the Lutheran Confessional writings must be documented. The use of modern translations of the *Book of Concord* is encouraged. Please use the following model.

⁵ Augsburg Confession V (Concerning the Office of Preaching) in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. R. Kolb, T. J. Wengert, C. P. Arand (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 40.

Direct quotations exceeding four manuscript lines should be set off from the text in an indented paragraph, without quotation marks. Omissions in a quotation should be noted by ellipsis, with an additional period to end a sentence, as appropriate.

Spelling should follow the latest edition of *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*. Words in languages other than English should be italicized.

Preparation and Submission

Length: Concise, clear articles are preferred. Manuscripts should not be more than 3,000–4,000 words although longer pieces may be arranged by the editor.

Content: *Lutheran Mission Matters* is committed to addressing the academic community as well as pastors and people throughout the church and involving them in the theology and practice of mission. Use of terms or phrases in languages other than the language of the article itself is discouraged. The use of complex and long sentences is discouraged. Attention should be paid to paragraphing so that the article is easy to follow and appears inviting on the page.

Use of call-outs: *Lutheran Mission Matters* frequently uses call-outs to break up blocks of text on a page and to emphasize important points being made in the article. The author is invited to use Word's Text Highlight Color to suggest words or phrase that may be included in a call-out. The final decision will be made by the editor.

Format: Please submit articles in single spaced Times New Roman 10-point font with 0.25" paragraph indents.

Submission: Manuscripts should be submitted electronically to Professor Victor Raj, editor@lsfm.global. Submission of a manuscript assumes that all material has been carefully read and properly noted and attributed. The author thereby assumes responsibility for any necessary legal permission for materials cited in the article. Articles that are inadequately documented will be returned for complete documentation. If the article has been previously published or presented in a public forum, please inform the editor at the time the article is submitted.

Review: The editors submit every manuscript to the editorial committee for examination and critique. Decisions are reached by consensus within the committee. Authors may expect a decision normally within three months of submission. Before publication, articles are copy edited for style and clarity, as necessary. Major alterations will be made available to the author for review.

Additional Submission Information

Bio: Authors should provide, along with their submissions, an autobiographical description. Please write 2–3 sentences introducing yourself. Please include your title(s) you would like LMM to use, the form of your name you want to be known as. Tell your present position and/or your education or experience that qualifies you to write the article. If you have a head-shot photo that you would like to provide, we will try to use it. Please provide the email address at which a respondent could reach you.

Abstract: Please provide up to a one-hundred-word abstract of your article. The abstract will serve as a first paragraph to provide the reader with the basic intent and content of the article.

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Submission Checklist:

- o Article
- o Abstract
- o Bio & Photo