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Encountering Mission

Singing a Song in a Strange Land: Music in Worship during the Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has altered every aspect of our lives throughout the world. For church musicians (and all who cherish gathering in musically expressive worship), a core element of life – singing the faith in community – ceases. Beyond the known fear associate with this Coronavirus, group singing was tarred by “super spreader” events such as the infamous Skagit Valley Chorus rehearsal in which nearly every member contracted COVID-19, with two dying.¹

Further professional research, including a study conducted by a group of professional musical and educational organizations indicated that the aerosol spread created by singing in enclosed spaces created a contagious environment.² Gathering in worship, particularly with singing, could no longer happen. These realities cast a dark pall over worshipping communities. Indeed, this pandemic has forced us into a modern-day Babylonian exile faced with this question: “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” (Ps 137:4 KJV)

I am involved in three communities that have answered the question in different ways: Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Twin Cities, a 3000+ member church in Minneapolis (ELCA), Jehovah Lutheran Church, a 150-member church in St. Paul (LCMS), and the Concordia University, St. Paul chapel and music department programming (LCMS) for its 5600 students (1700 residential). Each created new practices to try to continue meaningful worship and interpersonal connection. This article describes those practices, concluding with what has been learned and will be carried forward even after the pandemic ends.



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Bethlehem Lutheran Church quickly set up a livestream of Sunday worship services. The church had begun using cameras and recording equipment in the previous few years to project the service to overflow seating areas and record it for shut-ins; they had never done a livestream sharing of the service. Tapping into the expertise of technologically adept lay members, Bethlehem used their setup to video record services and share them live on a YouTube channel (with a recording available for later viewing). Prior to the service, there was an online Zoom invitation to a virtual “coffee hour” for people to connect. For the service itself, the only people present in the sanctuary were the preaching pastor, the recording technician, the organist, and one or two singers distanced in the balcony who sang the liturgy and hymns. Often a guest solo instrumentalist performed offertory music. Those viewing were invited to follow the service live and sing along on the hymns and liturgy at home. Communion was observed at home by parishioners using their own elements at home. The service was kept to a shortened length of no more than 45 minutes.

In the fall of 2020 through May of 2021, four of the adult music ensembles at Bethlehem each created a “virtual” performance about once a month for the offering music slot. Musical ensembles did not meet in-person to practice, but had weekly Zoom meetings to share devotions and prayer, vocalize, and practice music. This “practice” was done with mics muted and members listening to their parts being played with instructions given by the director; it was not possible to sing together with mics on because of the sound lag from each device. On their own time, individual musicians (choir singers or handbell players) video recorded their own performance of their parts at home on their phones while following a recording track created by the full-time church musicians, Maria Bucka and Mark Paisar. Dr. Paisar taught himself (via the internet) how to compile and edit all of these videos to create a final virtual recording to include in the livestream service. That editing took up to 40 hours for a 3-minute piece.

Jehovah Lutheran Church created weekly service recordings thanks to the expertise of Dr. Mark Schuler, a Jehovah member and professor at Concordia University, St. Paul. Director of Music Elizabeth Wegner and organist Timothy Buendorf organized a quartet of singers to audio record up to six weeks of service music at a time. The organist also recorded preludes and postludes for each service. Approximately once a month, Jehovah’s praise band ensemble recorded items for the service as well. Dr. Schuler video recorded the pastor, Dr. Joshua Miller, leading prayers, liturgy, and the homily. Lay readers sent video recordings of their readings from home. For offering music, the church used recordings of choral groups connected to Jehovah, notably the Concordia University, St. Paul Christus Chorus, the King of Kings Lutheran Church school choir and band from Roseville, MN (LCMS), and other resources. Dr. Schuler and Dr. Rhoda Schuler, the pro bono liturgist at Jehovah, then wove these recordings into a single service, using a variety of artwork as the background for audio music. The final recording was shared each Saturday on Jehovah’s YouTube channel for viewing at home at any time. The Eucharist was not observed in these distance services. In the fall of 2020, Jehovah offered a couple of parking lot “drive-through” communions. Bible Study continued

Sunday mornings online, and Mrs. Wegner led a weekly telephone chat for shut-ins.

Concordia University, St. Paul shared daily (Monday-Friday) twenty-minute chapel services live on the University YouTube channel. These were video recorded live and led at first by either the CSP Pastor, Tom Gundermann, or the CSP Ministry Associate, DCE Shelly Schwalm. The person leading these daily devotions shared a Bible reading, brief commentary, a song they led with guitar, and prayers. These services invited live chat commentary on the site. As the pandemic moved into the summer, both leaders led devotions on Tuesdays and Thursdays, sometimes inviting a guest such as the University President, Brian Friedrich.

In each setting, the response of worshippers offsite was one of gratitude. Worship attendance, at least in terms of YouTube views increased for each group. There was also an increase in people outside each institution's community.

Each of these communities eventually introduced in-person worship in different ways and time schedules. Bethlehem Lutheran hired a full-time technology professional to manage and oversee their service recordings. They remained in livestream-only services until April of 2021, when they opened to pre-registered worship with spacing and no congregational singing. Gradually over the summer, pre-registration was dropped, congregational involvement was added, and the choir returned to sing an anthem and support hymn singing on September 13. This fall, the church is doing the full sung liturgy with hymns as in pre-pandemic times, but with everyone masked and worshippers distanced in family groups. The Eucharist is shared with individual wafers and cups of wine or grape juice. Communion is also offered out of doors each Sunday after the final morning service.

Jehovah Lutheran Church reintroduced in-person worship services in mid-March of 2021, with no congregation or cantorial singing. Everyone is masked and distanced in a large sanctuary. From March through June, parishioners were required to pre-register online for services and submit a health screening/tracking form on arriving. The pastor preaches unmasked behind a Plexiglas shield, at least 25 feet away from parishioners. He is masked for the rest of the service. The Eucharist was shared with pandemic protocols. Hand sanitizer is available at the entrance to receiving the elements and the exit. The Pastor is masked

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and distributes the host from an extended hand (initially using a "Pez"-like dispenser) and parishioners then move a few feet away to consume it. They move on to a station several feet away to pick up and consume an individual cup of wine (in the spring filled from a squeeze bottle; in the summer, pre-filled cups). Gradually

through the spring and into the summer, vaccinated cantors began singing an abbreviated liturgy and one or two hymns. By August, the congregation was singing the communion liturgy and final hymn in the service. The church celebrated its traditional “Baroque Cantata” Sunday in early August with a masked choir of twelve singers and organ in the balcony weaving the Vivaldi *Gloria* into the liturgy. Jehovah’s plan is to add the congregational singing of the Hymn of the Day in early October, with a return to the full liturgy with hymns sung by the assembly and choir for Reformation Sunday. This plan could change based on the pandemic.

After being entirely online from March 15 through the summer, Concordia University, St. Paul shifted to in-person classes (along with hybrid and online instruction) in September 2020 for its fall semester. COVID-19 case counts remained low throughout the year, with zero on-campus transmissions. Chapel services followed these protocols in the fall semester and through mid-February 2021:

- Distanced, masked worshippers
- Speakers behind a Plexiglas shield, 25 feet from the nearest worshipper
- Services limited to 30 minutes or less (usually 20 minutes)
- No congregational singing
- Soloists or small ensembles (up to 4 singers) for brief liturgy responses, hymn verses, or praise songs, distanced and masked
- Choirs distanced and masked from an adjoining narthex on microphones, with the sound broadcast into the sanctuary
- Weekly communion services for small groups (fewer than 10 people), with distancing, masking, and no singing; bread and wine from pre-packaged, individual cups with a wafer in a sealed package on top of the cup

The chapel hosted a livestreamed Lessons and Carols Service in December 2020. Handbells, a six-member vocal jazz ensemble, and a chamber string ensemble performed short pieces in the chapel proper, with small ensembles from the Concert Band performing in the adjoining narthex. Carols were sung by masked soloists from the balcony with organ. By mid-February, the assembly was invited to sing one or two verses of a final hymn for the service, allowing people the opportunity to leave before the hymn if they were not comfortable with that situation.

After their complete shutdown in spring 2020, the music ensembles at Concordia, St. Paul returned to live rehearsals in fall 2020. Choirs wore specially tailored singers’ masks, distanced six feet apart. Rehearsals were limited to 30 minutes in one room, after which the choirs shifted to another room. The choir members also signed a “Mutual Covenant” promising to adhere to CDC and University COVID-19 guidelines. All ensembles did much of their rehearsal broken up into smaller ensembles in the fall semester.³ The choirs, Handbell Ensemble, Chamber Ensemble, and university organist recorded Christmas music in mid-October. Dr. David Mennicke collated these recordings with Bible readings, still-

life artwork, and video clips to produce an online Christmas concert released in early December. All the video editing was done by Concordia's chapel choir director, Prof. Shari Speer.

In the spring 2021 semester, groups moved to more frequent full ensemble rehearsals, while still masking (for singers) and distancing in 30-minute segments (for all groups). Concordia's concert choir, the Christus Chorus, video-recorded 13 short pieces and an 18-minute semi-staged segment of the Schütz *Passion According to St. John*. All these public domain pieces were shared with Concordia's church constituency to use for free in their own worship services. Over 60 churches in the region made use of these videos on multiple occasions, obtaining a much broader outreach than they would have achieved in a live concert tour. Jubilate, Concordia's chapel choir, created a pre-recorded Easter Vespers service that was compiled by their conductor, Professor Speer. Non-aerosol-producing instrumental ensembles and soloists put on live concerts for small, invited audiences. Wind ensembles and soloists shared livestreams of their concerts.

In the current 2021-22 academic year, Concordia's chapel has slightly opened its practice from last spring. The main speaker in chapel is no longer behind a shield but is at least 30 feet distant from the assembly. Small ensembles are performing in the chapel sanctuary masked and distanced. The congregation is singing at least one hymn or worship song in each service, as well as any sung or spoken liturgy in these 20-minute devotional gatherings.

While we are sadly still in the pandemic and do not know when it will cease, there have been some positive take-aways from this time. The most gratifying learning is how much people have wanted to stay connected to music and worship. They have appreciated the efforts pastors and musical leaders have made to share meaningful worship services and music. They have eagerly availed themselves of the limited opportunities to make music and/or to be in community. As a college professor, I was particularly struck at how resilient and positive the students have been. Even with the "glamour" activities of tours and concerts taken away, these young people remained involved, seeking out and cherishing the opportunities they did have to make music and be in community.

Another positive was the effectiveness of each institution's COVID-19 mitigation strategies and adherence to them, which led to limited infections. Bethlehem, being a larger community, has had a few cases but is much better off than the national average. Jehovah has had no cases. Concordia University's testing was consistently around a 1% infection rate, and case numbers on campus were below 25 at any given time (usually in single digits). Concordia had no on-campus transmission and no serious cases or deaths from COVID-19.

Another plus has been the expansion of ministry and outreach because of technology. Each institution described here was forced to creatively develop their video/audio recording, livestreaming, and social media presence. The result in each case was a broader outreach than they would have had in normal times. Concordia and Bethlehem are continuing to livestream their services—a benefit for those who are homebound and the many who remain uneasy about being in public places. Technology has been a tool for service and connection—even at a distance.

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Of course, there are downsides to this time, apparent now and potentially in the future. People have grown accustomed to the convenience of worship at home, so it may prove challenging to bring them back to in-person services. The pandemic has further revealed, and exacerbated, the political and social divisions of our country and the world at large. The great irony is that more liberal churches with higher vaccination rates (and thus higher protection from COVID-19) tend to be more reluctant to worship in-person, operating from a position of fear that can leave some members feeling incapacitated and frustrated. I know of colleagues (particularly on the coasts) who have barely left their homes for over a year. Conservative churches tend to have a higher percentage of vaccine distrusters and a lower observance of government encouraged (or mandated) health safety guidelines in worship. Such dispositions lead to higher rates of COVID-19 infection. In my opinion, neither extreme is healthy.

Even so, my hope is that we come out of this pandemic with realizations that can lead to better and more faithful ministry. We have found that technology can be a wonderful gift in enhancing and expanding worship presentation. Therefore, we should continue to make use of it when it can further the Kingdom of Christ. We have also found that human beings—creatures made in the image of God—reflect the incarnate and communal nature of the Trinity. The emptiness and longing wrought by the pandemic have shown us that we *must* gather in community, in the flesh, to fully be the Body of Christ. In the Service of Word and Sacrament that God has gifted to the world, our shared physical presence—reinforced by the joy and unity of group singing—is a palpable confirmation of Emmanuel, God dwelling with us. May we rejoice in and share out this power, truth, and beauty of God’s sanctuary as “God’s Church of living stones”!⁴

Solo Deo Gloria

Summary of Pandemic Worship Formats at Three Twin Cities Sites

	Bethlehem Lutheran Church Twin Cities (Minneapolis, Minnetonka)
March - August 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No in-person worship • Livestream broadcast of worship service on YouTube (worship leaders only, masked, distanced) • No music ensembles
September 2020-March 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No in-person worship • Livestream broadcast of worship service on YouTube (worship leaders only, masked, distanced) • Virtual recordings of music ensembles
April - June 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-registered in-person worship, masked, distanced, no singing • Livestream broadcast of worship service on YouTube (worship leaders only, masked, distanced) • Virtual recordings of music ensembles
July - August 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No pre-registration, in-person worship, masked, distanced assembly singing • Livestream broadcast of worship service on YouTube continues • No music ensembles (live soloists)
September 2021-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person worship, masked, distanced with assembly singing • Livestream broadcast of Worship service on YouTube continues • Choir, ensembles return

	Jehovah Lutheran Church (St. Paul)
March - August 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No in-person worship • Pre-recorded services released on Saturday on YouTube • Organist, vocal quartet record hymns & liturgy (mask, distance) • No Eucharist
September 2020-March 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No in-person worship • Pre-recorded services released on Saturdays on YouTube • Organist, vocal quartet record hymns & liturgy (mask, distance) • Two drive- through communion
April - June 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-registration and screening • In-person worship, masked, distanced, no singing • Pre-recorded services released on Saturdays on YouTube • Vaccinated, mask, distance cantors sing communion liturgy, hymns • Eucharist in-person (COVID protocols)
July - August 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No Pre- registration and screening • In-person worship, mask, distance, assembly sings communion liturgy, last hymn • Pre-recorded services end • Cantors lead liturgy, assembly communion liturgy, final hymn • Eucharist in-person (COVID protocols)
September 2021-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person worship, mask, distance assembly singing gradually increase to full by October • No pre-recorded services • Choir (mask, distance) return by Oct. 31 • Eucharist in-person (COVID protocols)

	Concordia University (St. Paul)
March - August 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1-2 worship leaders 20-minute devotions on YouTube • No ensemble music • No Eucharist
September 2020 - March 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person community worship, masked, distanced, assembly singing begun mid-Feb. 2021 • Livestream on YouTube continued • Choirs mask, distance from adjoining room with miked sound in sanctuary • Wednesday morning Eucharist for fewer than 10 people, mask, distance, pre-packaged elements, one verse of hymn sung
April – June 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person community worship, mask, distance assembly singing at end of service, then moved to summer chapel in May • Livestream on YouTube through April • Small choirs, dance, ensembles in chapel • Wednesday morning Eucharist • Two Eucharist services in regular chapel, pre-packaged elements, no singing, no Eucharist in summer
July – August 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summer chapel in person (indoors and outdoors) • No livestream of summer chapels • No ensembles in summer chapels • No Eucharist in summer
September 2021 -	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-person community worship, masked, distanced, assembly singing • Livestream chapel services YouTube • Small ensembles, soloists/cantors in chapel proper, large ensembles adjoining room and in chapel

	Concordia University (St. Paul)
September 2021-	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wednesday morning Eucharist, Two Eucharist services in chapel with pre-packaged elements, sing one hymn, short liturgy

Additional resources for dealing with music performance in groups during the pandemic can be found at the American Choral Directors Association website at:

<https://acda.org/resources-for-choral-professionals-during-a-pandemic>

Endnotes

¹Report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6919e6.htm>

²May 5, 2020 webinar hosted by The National Association of Teachers of Singing, the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA), Chorus America, Barbershop Harmony Society, and Performing Arts Medical Association (PAMA), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFI3GsVzj6Q>

³ These practices were highlighted in a 7-minute news segment on KSTP TV's *Nightcast* in November 2020 <https://kstp.com/minnesota-news/how-the-concordia-covenant-helped-save-the-music-during-a-pandemic/5923269/?cat=12584>

⁴ From stanza 3 of "Built on the Rock the Church Doth Stand," text by Nikolai Fredrik Severin Grundtvig (1783- 1872), tr. Carl Döving (1867-1937).