



ResourCenter

Stewardship and Music Ministry

By Nancy Raabe

Jesus said to her, ‘...those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty.

The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’

The woman said to him, ‘Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty....’ (John 4:13-13, Lent 3A)

The vast majority of Lutheran congregations struggle with, or more accurately, against, the concept of stewardship.

Particularly given these more trying economic times, your church is probably underfunded, behind budget, and therefore forced to make—or to at least contemplate—cuts in crucial staff and services. Is your position as parish musician half-time or even quarter-time? Is your office open only limited days and hours each week? Does the pipe organ project keep getting pushed to the back burner? Does the roof leak and your only option is to keep emptying the buckets?

The problem with the giving in many of our congregations is not that people don’t have the money. It’s that they take the church for granted. They assume either that the next person in the pew will ante up, or that the denominational headquarters will send money, or that some other source of funding will be somehow be found because each Sunday rolls around and, lo and behold, their church is still hanging on. Have you examined the “giving units” in your congregation recently? If not, if your congregation is typical,

you will be shocked to learn that the largest number give \$5 per week or less and assume they are meeting their expected obligation. (For those who try to finesse their numbers, no, in-kind services such as volunteering don’t count toward meeting the church’s budget, although they are greatly appreciated.)

How can we convey through our music that church is an indispensable part of our lives? That it should not come under the “optional” or “discretionary” expenditure line in our family budgets? That it mandates our financial support in the same way we that we accept it is necessary to pay for food, housing and clothing? That it is there for you in every circumstance of life? That it is the place where we encounter the living Christ and drink deeply of the spring of water gushing up to eternal life? That because of church we will never again be thirsty?

One place to start is by making every musical moment count. Here’s a checklist of ways you can apply whatever resources you have toward this goal.

Choose your repertory thoughtfully so that the text makes a clear connection with the lectionary themes for the day (ideally, consult with your pastor in advance about the sermon topic). Anthem texts can be more seasonal, but hymn texts should be selected to draw out themes embedded in the assigned readings. Try not to rely on printed or online recommendations. Remember, these are only the ideas other people have had, and you may have

better ones. Go to those only when you truly have come up empty-handed. The key is first to study the readings yourself, perhaps with a commentary or lectionary-based book of devotions. Once you have a clear sense of what the readings are about, and the general theme that ties the readings together, you're ready to "let your fingers do the walking" through the hymnal. It's amazing what you can come up with if you let the Spirit be your guide. Work as much in advance as possible. The farther ahead you plan, the more creativity you can bring to the task of hymn selection and the way each hymn is presented.

Creative psalmody is critical. The psalms embody scripture's most passionate, anguished, and joyous expressions of the human spirit. Strive for musical realizations that convey as much of the emotion of the appointed psalm as possible. If you can't find anything you like, write your own. Turn only as a last resort to the standard published resources whose refrains are often just plain dull.

Make sure the music your choir sings is listenable, yet not simplistic, so that it invites those in worship into a contemplative attitude in which they may sense Christ's presence in their own way using their spiritual imaginations. If your congregation is ready for more complex music, fine. If not, always err on the side of simple beauty rather than compositional sophistication. With luck, every now and then you'll find both under the same cover.

Maximize your rehearsal time by concentrating on expression. Make sure your choir knows why you chose the music you put before them. Every composition is "about" something not only textually but musically. The former isn't usually that hard to figure out, but the latter will take some discerning on your part. Once you've gotten that in hand, invite your singers into the journey of how to convincingly

convey both the textual and musical purposes of the piece. If your choir believes in what they are singing, they will communicate exponentially more than they would if they only sang the notes and rhythms precisely. Of course technical precision must be assumed, but that should be only the starting-point.

Find out from those in your congregation what music moves them and why. You could institute something as mundane as a "music comment box." Chances are you'll be surprised at the volume of responses you'll get. Steer clear of "hymn surveys," though, because then you may find yourself obligated to a litany of old chestnuts of questionable theological value. But if you and your congregation are on significantly different musical wavelengths, that can end up fostering resentment rather than promoting harmony. You need to know where they are in order to reach them most effectively.

In all these ways, you exercise the authority of your position. You may not sit at the head of the proverbial table in the church hierarchy, but you do occupy the conductor's podium or the organ bench. It is a place of tremendous importance in the life of your congregation. What many pastors don't want to admit is that music often plays a much greater role than preaching in establishing the nature and tone of worship in a given community.

As minister of music you have a rare opportunity to change hearts and shape lives. Make the most of every moment and, like the people who heard the testimony of the woman at the well in John 4, those in your congregation will be moved to go out into the world to tell others that "we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."



CALLING ALL CHOIR DIRECTORS

How do you organize your music library? What system have you developed or found to be most effective? Send your tips and tricks to Nancy Raabe (Nancy@nancyraabe.com), *GraceNotes* Resourcenter editor, by May 22, so that your wisdom can be shared in the August issue of *GraceNotes*. Include your church affiliation along with your contact information if you are willing to receive communications from *GraceNotes* readers.