

the pastoral musician

Living Our Call

Part 2: **Leading Worship Effectively**

by Nancy Raabe

Just as leading the church's song is a high and holy calling, so it is also for those who are entrusted with leading the liturgy of the assembly. Augsburg Fortress' excellent *Leading Worship Matters*¹ goes into great detail, but for our purposes I'd like to offer just two words: Be eager!

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know that they have been called by God, but it's the same for lecturers and assisting ministers. You may think you simply signed on or signed up for these duties, but actually it's the other way around, just as Jesus tells his disciples: "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16; NRSV). God chose you for this day for God's own purpose. Honor that choice!

Therefore, do not merely go through the motions. Whether you are reading or leading, invite worshippers into an experience with the risen Christ. Of course there is a fine line between embodying this commission and exceeding it. Worship leaders must never call attention to themselves. The task is to proclaim the gospel through the fullness of the Spirit in whatever role God has chosen for you on that day.

Lectors: Unless you've been summoned in a pinch, you have already studied and practiced the readings ahead of time. Go deeper than pronunciation. Try to grasp not only the larger purpose of the passage but care for the phrasing that the prophet, apostle, or gospel writer used to convey their message. Whether this is someone's first contact with the reading or one that they already know by heart, you are the intermediary between inspiration and imagination. Make the most of that sacred opportunity.

In your preparation, underline meaningful words or phrases. Notate pauses between phrases and sections. Absorbing the content ahead of time will enable

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you to look out regularly toward the assembly. This may even convince worshippers to pay closer attention to you rather than to the printed passage in the bulletin or on the screens. As people become accustomed to receiving the gospel in this way, the church staff may even realize there is no need for the printed text.

Presiders: Look up and out. Use inviting facial expressions and embracing gestures. For the liturgy, you know these words—there is no need to be anchored in the book. You are making visible God's presence in the assembly, new every morning, new every Sunday. Keep yourself on the safe side of the fine line that can spill over into performance. Yet if you put your heart into a compelling invitation such as the one many of us hear during the Easter season, who could not resist being caught up in the astonishing vision in which heaven and earth intersect?

And so, with Mary Magdalene and
Peter and all the witnesses of
the resurrection,
with earth and sea and all their
creatures,
and with angels and archangels,
cherubim and seraphim,
we praise your name and
join their unending hymn.²

How joyful the praise of God's
holiness will then be!

**Assisting Ministers and those
offering the Prayers of the
People:**

Here, you are speaking not *to* but *for* the gathered body. Kenneth Leech reminds us that intercessory prayer "is a releasing of God's power through placing ourselves in a relationship of cooperation with God."³ As you lift these words to God, let your heart dictate the pacing and the emphases. Plan for pauses so the petitions may be imprinted on the hearts of those present. After each petition, allow a brief silence before the prompt for the congregation to respond. People need a moment to reflect on the words they have just heard so they can make the prayer their own. Provide another brief pause before

the next intercession. This will make all the difference between reciting and praying.

Also, consider the dismissal, if this is one of your duties. You are sending people out into the world fed and nourished by all they have just heard and experienced. Be

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vigorous. Stride into the center of the assembly and turn to look at everyone as you are pronouncing that the mass has ended. You may even add a phrase that encompasses the theme of the day: “Go in peace. Serve God and neighbor.” This may elicit a more heartfelt “Thanks be to God!”

We treasure music and liturgy as supreme gifts from God to God’s people. Now that I am on the other side of the chancel in my retirement, I dearly miss leading worship on a regular basis. Yet from the pew I have become acutely aware of my need for the words being offered. As worship

leaders, you are filling hungry souls just as powerfully as our musicians are feeding hungry spirits and those in our feeding ministries are filling hungry bodies. Let the Holy Spirit guide and enlighten you in every aspect of your service to God’s people.



Nancy Raabe is a retired ELCA pastor who lives with her husband Bill and their dog Jack in

Hatfield, PA. Nancy was president of ALCM 2022-25 and has served congregations in Ohio, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania in various capacities.

Endnotes

1. Melinda A. Quivik, ed., *Leading Worship Matters: A Sourcebook for Preparing Worship Leaders* (Augsburg Fortress, 2013).
2. End of the Proper Preface for Easter, Ascension, and the Vigil and Day of Pentecost, *ELW Leader’s Desk Edition* (Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 187 (Easter), 188 (Ascension), 189 (Vigil and Day of Pentecost).
3. Kenneth Leech, *True Prayer: An Invitation to Christian Spirituality* (Harper & Row, 1980), 25.

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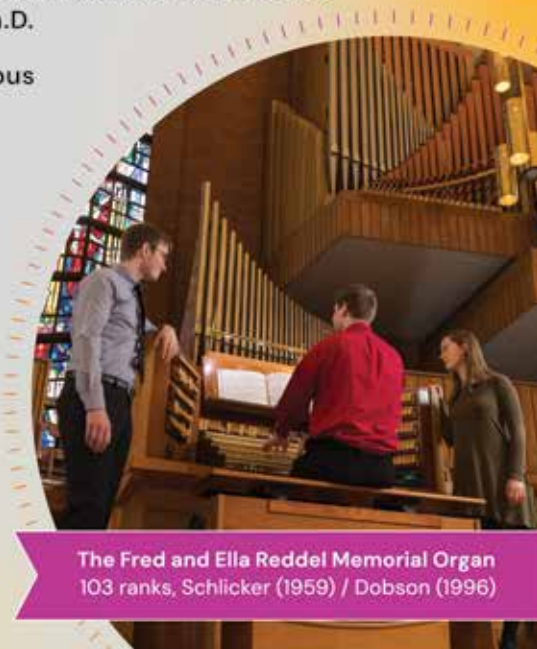
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