

*both sides now*

## **Worship and Music Committees: Love Them, or ...**

by Nancy Raabe

**n**o. We do *not* love them, and of course we won't leave them. But sometimes it takes some doing to maximize the potential of this group—a group that can be central to a congregation's well-being.

ALCM recognizes that “worship is the indispensable center of the church's life.”<sup>1</sup> For this reason, the team that guides and shapes that life plays a crucial role in ensuring the well-being of the body.

It has been said that “a congregation that is fully alive seeks lay involvement, especially in its worship life.”<sup>2</sup> The more roles people are gladly willing to take on, the greater the potential for the new and sustained life in that worshipping community. It is the worship committee's calling not only to guide musical selections but to promote and encourage vigorous participation in the act of worship.

And what else?

Most of us have had a variety of experiences with worship and music committees over the years. On reflection, my experiences pretty much run the gamut from a large, actively involved team to a “whatever you think is best” mentality. One thing I've observed is that this gamut exists in inverse proportion to the size of the congregation. Have you noticed that too?

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For example, the first congregation in which I worked as a volunteer had an average Sunday attendance of 15. Two-thirds of that total—eight to ten folks—served on the worship committee. The monthly music planning meetings typically lasted three hours, and the organist would sit at the rickety upright playing through pretty much whatever came into people's minds as they sang vigorously, usually all the verses. After each hymn, they'd weigh in: “I liked that one,” “I didn't,” and so on. That's how they chose. To me these sessions were grueling, but the rest of them loved it, and who was I to say I didn't love them? So month after month we'd spend an entire evening this way.

Then there was the slightly larger church (average attendance: 25) with a vigorous worship and music committee of four who met once a month, surrounded by piles of hymnals and sheafs of all the Scripture readings I had prepared. We'd take two hours to work through a month of hymns. The committee chair had strong opinions and was generally inflexible, but thankfully her ideas were well informed.

After that came a medium-sized congregation that had no worship and music committee as such. Everyone seemed happy to delegate the hymn choices to the organist and me. She would prepare a list each quarter from Sundays and Seasons<sup>3</sup> that we'd tweak in our monthly meetings. She was always amenable to out-of-the-box suggestions and to music whose styles were beyond her experience—in those cases she'd let me try my hand.

Currently the minister of music and I work together to select hymns for the coming month and review those choices in weekly meetings. The practice for the worship and music committee is generally hands-off where the music is concerned; instead they oversee virtually every other aspect of our worship life, for which I am grateful.

So, different sizes, different approaches, different purposes. Let's indulge ourselves and sketch a picture of an ideal worship and music committee. To my mind, they would:

- be guided by a vision of which decisions about music and worship are in the best interests of (1) tending to the needs of current members, and (2) attracting new members. These two factors *can* be in competition (“our people want the same old hymns,” “we would find more energy by embracing new streams of



hymnody”), but not necessarily. For example, perhaps your church is the only one in a 20-mile radius that sings the strong, timeless hymns of faith. That definitely could be a draw.

- select hymns in consultation with the pastor and musician, guided by review and study of the week’s Scripture lessons.
- work with the pastor and musician, review and recommend liturgical settings appropriate to the season.
- maintain a lively curiosity about new hymns and hymnal supplements, and be open to their incorporation into the congregation’s repertory. Perhaps one meeting every three months might include singing through new hymns or resources.
- seek feedback from the congregation and convey that to church leadership in a healthy, constructive way (*not* “People are saying ...”).
- be in regular communication with the congregation council, altar guild, and publicity and technical teams, ideally through liaisons on the

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- worship and music committee with each of those teams.
- oversee the training and coordination of lay assisting ministers, readers, altar guilds, acolytes, crucifers, and ushers and greeters, with the pastor’s assistance as needed.
- be aware of the worship environment and recommend adjustments as needed (e.g., relieving clutter, repositioning furniture, rearranging pew chairs).
- be involved in seasonal decorations of the worship space or other use of the visual or liturgical arts.

I think we’d all agree that this is a tall order. Please let me know at [president@alcm.org](mailto:president@alcm.org) what your experiences have been, and in the next column we’ll consider some do’s and don’ts for pastors, musicians, and committee members.

*The worship planning team for the Institute of Liturgical Studies 2016 sings through a new hymn by Delores Dufner and Mark Sedio and includes Fred Niedner, Steven Wilco, Bob Farlee, John Morris, Anne Krentz Organ, and Julie Grindle (at the piano). Photo by Zebulon Highben.*



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### Notes

1. Association of Lutheran Church Musicians, “Statement on Worship and Music” (2003), [https://alcm.org/about/worship\\_statement/](https://alcm.org/about/worship_statement/).
2. ELCA Worship Formation and Liturgical Resources, “What Is a Worship Committee?” [https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/What\\_is\\_a\\_Worship\\_Committee.pdf](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/What_is_a_Worship_Committee.pdf).
3. An annual lectionary-based worship planning publication from Augsburg Fortress, also available as an online subscription, <https://www.sundaysandseasons.com>.