

## Occasional Reflection 15:

### The Church's Song II

The Church is a gathering of people in song at a weekly worship service on the Lord's Day, around Word, Font, and Table. We gather with song, hear the Word with song, come to the Table with song—the Font too if there are baptisms, and are sent out with song. Other worship services plus koinonia, study, and service to the world emerge from this central gathering. Song about the love of God in Christ through the Spirit infuses the Church's life. This song persists in the midst of occurrences beyond human control and in the midst of the brokenness and sin in the Church and in the world. It embodies the Church's message of forgiveness, health, wholeness, and salvation that God gives in Christ through the Spirit.

A summary like the previous paragraph accurately describes the life of a faithful church and its members. However, it is impossible to describe this life with specificity unless one focuses on one particular church or one ethnic, linguistic, theological, or other identity that informs a church or a group of them. Even then it is deeper than words can describe. This is no surprise since the Church is not a generalized spiritual phantom. The body of Christ takes flesh in a particular people with various ages from birth to death and with various proportions of ethnic, linguistic, and other identities. And the song in any of these particularities is not only what comes from that single group. It includes singing what other groups from many times and places across the history of the Church have sung—from the Hebrew Old Testament through the Greek New Testament and then through various peoples with their various languages and identities in the world for the next twenty centuries. This mix provides checks and balances on the blind spots every group has, and then the song itself transcends all of it.

In addition, the Church sings its message of the Gospel no matter what challenges it faces. The song convicts and comforts us. It does not do this alone, however. It carries the whole story in tandem with the more visible Word and Sacraments in their readings, proclamation, and actions at pulpit, font, and table—connecting specific themes across the Year to our journeys of joy and pain.

Our pandemic in 2020 has made the importance of music more obvious as we observe Church musicians doing all sorts of creative things to keep the praise, prayer, proclamation, and story of the Gospel before us with the gift of music even when we are deprived of the gift's living nature in live sound among a gathered people. This substitute of the *virtual* for the *alive* can trick us into thinking that what we are seeing and hearing online is the “real thing.” It is the “real thing” in the sense that the Word is the “real thing” no matter what. We should not minimize the the importance of our online “gatherings.” We should be very grateful for them.

But the “real thing” of the gathering is deeper. It’s also deeper than concerts or performances of music which are more easily appreciated in recordings because of the kind of participation they imply. It’s also deeper than group singing that is not associated with Word, Font, and Table. And it’s deeper than seeing music on a page because music is sound passing through time which helps us understand what Luther meant when he said that the Church is a “mouth house.” A musical leader may lead us without being seen because music travels through time and can be led by sound alone. But this should not trick us into thinking that the image of online worship is the same thing as the in-the-flesh singing together of the body of Christ in large or small gatherings.

We Church musicians lament how we are sometimes treated, how music is given short shrift, and how musical programs of study can be deleted more easily than programs of study for other leaders in the Church. Our laments are legitimate, and administrators are especially tempted to collapse into the fallen world’s misguided values. Paradoxically, however, music’s importance is hidden in its very nature. Musicians in turn are hidden in the song which is not seen but persists. Musicians can be overlooked even though the Church sings in the most difficult of circumstances which include administrative collapses into the fallen world. Such collapses themselves collapse as faithful pastors and lay people continually call able musicians, thank them, and testify to their importance for the community and its individuals. Even though bad things happen, and even though resources differ widely along with musical talents, abilities, and training, the Church continues to sing, no matter what.

The Church’s song reminds us that God sustains the Church. For that, for the Center for Church Music, and for all similar groups and efforts which help us sing, let us give thanks.