

Planning Worship

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At a recent Liturgy Committee meeting of The Lutheran Church of the Resurrection in Roseville, Minnesota, where I am a member, Gary Butler, our Cantor, asked me if I could substitute for him on July 4, 2021. I said I would love to, as I had done many times in the past, but that I had no business destroying the congregation now with my organ playing. Neuropathy and a knee replacement with its collateral damage of Complex Regional Pain Syndrome have destroyed my pedal technique. Pedal technique is the only instrumental technique I've ever had that was really good. It immensely helped my fingers to do what they could never do without it. Sarah Friesen-Carper, our Pastor, asked, "Couldn't you play the piano?" I thought about that for a moment and said I probably could do that since my fingers still work well enough to play a responsible service.

I mentioned this in a conversation with Charlotte Kroeker before a class on Hymnody that I was co-teaching for Brite Seminary and the Church Music Institute. She said, "Why don't you use the manuals of the organ?" I had thought about that, but had decided that the piano would probably work better, partly because I could be at the piano in the front of the choir rather than on the side of the choir loft at the organ console. That would provide better sight lines between the choir and me. I hoped the choir and instrumentalists would help to stand in for the absence of my pedal technique.¹ This was all before I started planning.

I asked instrumentalists (there are some very fine ones at Resurrection) if they could play. A violinist, two clarinetists, and a trumpet player all were going to be away on July 4. One fine violinist and one fine bassoonist were available, however, and they were happy to play. So I started planning the music with them in mind. I began, like normal, by looking for music related to the hymns we were singing on July 4. I quickly realized that I could arrange pieces from organ and choral literature for the instrumental and choral resources that were available on July 4 and that I could lead well from the organ console using only the manuals of the organ with the instrumentalists and choir to help for the pedal absence.

It dawned on me that this kind of planning was exactly what I had done weekly for years before I retired and that it's what all responsible Cantors do every week. Then what I had realized many times before also dawned on me with a newly increased consciousness—that

¹ This was at the end of the COVID pandemic during which there had been a small representative choir and a small representative congregation for online services. On July 4 a small representative choir was still going to sing, but the congregation was to be back in the nave worshipping together for the first time since March 8 of 2020. Actually June 27 turned out to be the first time we were together because the service that day, which was planned to be outside, had to be moved inside because of rain.

even moderately able musicians should and could serve congregations responsibly with whatever resources are available to them.

Then something else I had known before dawned on me with a new consciousness. A responsible Cantor in planning the music for a worship service is planning a kind of symphony. “Symphony” is the wrong word if it is understood to describe a lengthy composition like a Beethoven symphony, that is, a completely pre-planned high art piece. It may be the right word, however, if “symphony” is understood from the word’s derivation as “harmonious” and “together,” defining a lengthy piece made up of various components with both simple and complex folk art and high art. No matter how simple or complex, however, many syntactic musical components join to make a planned yet flexible overall whole that includes more or less complex improvisation, depending on the skills of the Cantor. Even Cantors like me with moderate and disintegrating abilities can listen and adjust. Tempos, keys, introductions, organ registrations, articulations, and harmonizations are all planned, but listening to the congregation leads to improvised modifications.²

There is nothing new or astounding about any of this, but it is instructive that it became especially clear to me now that I have fewer capacities. It means that all musical leaders in all congregations can do their jobs well, no matter what abilities, capacities, and resources are at hand. And it points to the responsibility of the church’s schools to provide the educational resources and supports that help all musicians and congregations in all of their varied sorts and conditions figure this out. The vocation of the clergy is not the only vocation in the church, nor the only one with something to study. Clergy are not a privileged and elitist class that stands above and apart from everybody else in the community of the baptized. Other vocations, including the musical one, require study and need to be supported.

² I learned about this need for adjustments in high school when I began playing for congregations. It became especially obvious, however, on one occasion much later. When I worked with Pastor Paul Landahl at Ascension Lutheran Church in Riverside, Illinois, one year some older people in the congregation asked if we could duplicate the Wednesday evening Lenten services at noon for them. Having services for one specific group is usually not a good idea, but this was a reasonable request so that these people could avoid coming through the dark of night in bad weather. I planned the first of these services thinking that older people needed slower tempos. In the first stanza of first hymn I realized that I was wrong. They needed faster tempos because they had less breath support. So I pushed the tempo as possible while we were singing the first hymn and then re-thought the other hymns.