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## Study guide

# Let there always be a song

By Robert C. Blezard

Along with coffee, communion and potluck suppers, music constitutes a big part of community life in many Lutheran churches. Music not only brings us together for fellowship and common purpose in choirs, choral groups, praise bands and bell choirs, it also forms us in the faith by teaching us and inspiring us with poetry put to song. How has music been part of your faith journey and the life of your congregation?

### EXERCISE 1: "A SERVANT OF THE GOSPEL"

The ELCA's 1991 statement on liturgical practices describes the role of arts and music in our worship life. "The Use of the Means of Grace" declares: "Music is a servant of the Gospel and a principal means of worshiping God in Lutheran churches. Congregational song gathers the whole people to proclaim God's mercy, to worship God, and to pray, in response to the readings of the day and in preparation for the Lord's Supper" (page 16).

- What does "music is a servant of the Gospel" mean? What are other "servants" in worship and church life?
- In your congregation, how does music serve the gospel?
- For your faith community, how does music serve as a principal means of worshiping God?
- If a liturgical service were like a "meal," under what circumstances would music be the "appetizer"? The "main course"? The "side dish"? The "dessert"?

### EXERCISE 2: FAVORITE HYMNS

As a study group, share your stories and experiences of church music. Perhaps the group can pray over this list for a week or two before gathering to share.

- My favorite hymn.
- My least favorite hymn.
- My most inspirational hymn.
- The hymn that brings back memories.
- The hymn I wish they'd play more often.
- The hymn I never want to hear again.
- Thy hymn that always makes me cry.
- The hymn that always makes me smile.



## Study guide: **Let there always be a song** *continued*

### EXERCISE 3: FELLOWSHIP

Music brings people together in all sorts of ways. Choirs and bands gather for practice and then bring their skills to the worship service. The congregation gathers for worship, but also for concerts, recitals and performances of sacred music. Discuss:

- What role has music played in your personal relationships with others in your congregation? What friendships have been formed or deepened through music?
- What role has music played in deepening and enlivening congregational life for your church?
- If music were to be taken out of your congregation's life entirely, how would that affect you? How would it affect the vitality and congeniality of the congregation?

### EXERCISE 4: LUTHER HYMNS

"A Mighty Fortress" was only one of dozens of hymns our spiritual ancestor Martin Luther wrote. Like many hymn writers, he saw poetry put to music as a way to teach, inspire and gather God's people. Below is a list of hymns in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* and the *Lutheran Book of Worship* credited to Luther.

Look up these hymns, read the poetry and explore their meaning in faith and life. Then discuss:

- How does Luther use his hymn lyrics to teach? To inspire? To glorify God?
- What elements and messages of Luther's hymns do you find distinctly Lutheran?
- How are Luther's hymns a treasure to preserve and cherish?
- With which Luther hymns were you familiar? Which were a surprise?
- Looking over them afresh, do you have a better appreciation for Luther and his genius? Explain.

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#### *ELW (LBW)*

- (48) "All Praise to You, Eternal Lord" (words)
- (79) "To Jordan Came the Christ, Our Lord" (words)
- 263 (28) "Savior of the Nations, Come" (translator)
- 268 (51) "From Heaven Above" (words and music)
- (308) "God the Father, Be Our Stay" (words)
- (335) "May God Bestow on Us His Grace" (words)
- (350) "Even as We Live Each Day" (words)
- 370 (134) "Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands" (words)
- 395 "Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord" (words)
- 411 (374) "We All Believe in One True God" (words)



## Study guide: **Let there always be a song** *continued*

440	“In Peace and Joy I Now Depart” (words and music)
499 (215)	“O Lord, We Praise You” (words)
503, 504, 505	“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (words and music)
(228, 229)	“A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (words and music)
509 (239)	“God’s Word Is Our Great Heritage” (music)
517 (230)	“Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word” (words)
594 (299)	“Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice” (words)
600 (295)	“Out of the Depths I Cry to You” (words and music)
743 (317)	“Now to the Holy Spirit Let Us Pray” (words)
746, 747	“Our Father, God in Heaven Above” (words)
784 (471)	“Grant Peace, We Pray, in Mercy, Lord” (words)
868 (528)	“Isaiah in a Vision Did of Old” (words and music)

### EXERCISE 5: MUSIC IN A PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic forced us out of our churches and into our homes, where instead of gathering with others we worshiped through our televisions, computers, tablets or cellphones. Discuss how your congregation coped, what creative strategies it used to present music, and how you experienced worship digitally.

- In your congregation’s online worship, how were hymns presented? How did you like it? What was good about it and what was lacking?
- Though it was not the same experience as hearing and participating in live sacred music, how did the hymns help connect you to the worship experience? To the congregation? To God?
- As you listened to the worship online, did you sing along with the hymns? Why or why not?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How would you explain the difference between secular music and sacred music? How does each make you feel?
- Sacred music brings people together across boundaries of age, income, status, gender, race and other divisions. When have you seen this at work in your life or your congregation? Why do you think this is so?
- Thumbing through *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* and the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, you note that some hymns and tunes are many centuries old (Luther’s are all about 500 years old!). What do you think when you consider that faithful Christians have been spiritually nourished on these hymns for scores of generations? How does it make you feel? What do you think of the faith wisdom and insights that have been preserved for so long?

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## Study guide: **Let there always be a song** *continued*

- What worship song or hymn best expresses your faith journey? Why?
- If you were to put together a “playlist” of hymns or worship songs that fed you spiritually, what would the list include and why? What does the playlist say about where you are in your faith today? What does it say about your journey that brought you here? About where you’re going?
- List your top five hymns or worship songs. Explore: What do they say about you and your faith journey?
- Here’s the scenario: You are in church, singing a hymn you really like, listening to how your voice blends with others, appreciating that these are voices of your siblings in the faith. Describe your thoughts and feelings in such a time.
- Do you now or have you ever played or sung in a choir? Participated in a praise band or bell choir—or any sort of church musical ensemble? What was the experience like? What was the best part? What did you find difficult? How did your participation increase your appreciation for sacred music’s ability to glorify God and speak the gospel? Did participation help you form deeper relationships with your siblings of faith?

# Let there always be a *Sing*



Photo: Kevin Barger

## THE CHURCH AND ITS MUSIC IN PANDEMIC TIMES

By Jennifer Baker-Trinity

One thing to come out of the pandemic is creativity in worship. Epiphany Lutheran Church in Richmond, Va., created Steel Crosssticks, a group for second- through sixth-graders. The children use Jumbie Jams since they can't sing together.

*Let my spirit always sing,  
though my heart be wintering,  
though the season of despair  
give no sign that you are there,  
God to whom my days belong,  
let there always be a song.*

—Shirley Erena Murray,  
“Let My Spirit Always Sing” (ACS, 1020)

This hymn text by the late New Zealand hymn writer Shirley Erena Murray (1931-2020) might have readers pushing back about the *always* of song. Does my spirit *always* sing? This Easter season may feel more like the extension of a very long winter. Does my spirit feel like singing? If I sing by myself in front of a computer monitor or distanced from others and muffled by a mask in a pew, is it complete? Where is the joy in that song?

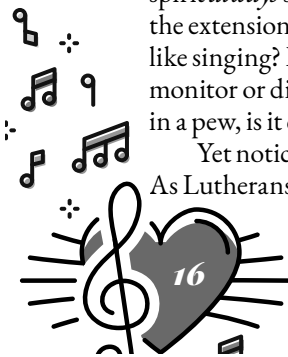
Yet notice: “always” refers to the *song*, not the singer. As Lutherans, we rejoice in music as a gift of God, a

gift of the whole creation. Since the morning stars sang together and the trees of the field clapped for joy, there has always been song.

What has changed in this pandemic year has been our experience of this gift of song. This most basic human impulse, to sing, now comes with warning labels. The same breath that animates the song can spread a deadly virus that has stolen the breath of over half a million people in the United States alone. Out of love for our neighbor, our songs have temporarily ceased in the ways that we have known.

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Even as our singing voices have been quieter in these months, one sign of our continuing song and its importance for the church was the November 2020 publication of *All Creation Sings (ACS)*, the new worship and song supplement to *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Hymn and song texts from ACS are woven throughout this article. Find out more at [augsburgfortress.org/allcreationsings](http://augsburgfortress.org/allcreationsings).





We've faced many questions about our experience of music in this pandemic time, specifically our experience of assembly song. How will this time of reduced assembly singing shape our song in the months and years to come? How will it impact the church musician's vocation?

*Seek the disconcerting answers,  
follow where the Spirit blows;  
test competing truths for wisdom,  
for in tension new life grows.*

—David Bjorlin,  
“Ask the Complicated Questions” (ACS, 1005)

“In tension new life grows.” As musicians and worship leaders met for conversation about the new worship supplement, a common theme was the “both/and” dimension to our questions regarding the church's song. This is very much in accord with our theology as Lutherans: saint *and* sinner, law *and* gospel. Marcell Silva Steuernagel, a Lutheran and a professor of church music at the Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, said it succinctly: “Opportunity and grief go hand in hand.”

Photo: Courtesy of St. Luke



Masked and socially distanced handbell ringers record a prelude for online worship in the sanctuary at St. Luke Lutheran Church in Park Ridge, Ill.

## THE EMBODIED SONG

*Christ is risen, Christ is present making us what  
he has been: evidence of transformation in which  
God is known and seen.*

—John Bell, “Christ Has Risen  
While Earth Slumbers” (ACS, 938)

Lutherans treasure the Christ who became flesh for us and for all creation. This Jesus walked, tasted, touched, saw and heard. We trust that this embodied one is present now through the power of the Spirit. The

Photo: Courtesy of St. Luke



Youth Chime Ensemble participants play a Change Ring prelude for online worship at St. Luke Lutheran Church in Park Ridge, Ill.

spirited gift of music is an embodied art that depends on breath and heartbeat. Therefore, one of the most palpable griefs of this pandemic time has been the absence of embodied song in a gathered community. And singing together on Zoom doesn't always work well.

Brian Hehn, director of the Center for Congregational Song, remarked, “Even when singing is live, I don't get feedback. The only time I have felt any kind of connection or inspiration from music-making on Zoom was when [community song leader] Ana Hernández was leading a sing and I got to be on the receiving end. It's what I call a ‘holy duet.’”

*“How might  
we explore  
other embodied  
movement and  
ritual in this  
time of reduced  
singing?”*

Chad Fothergill, cantor to the Lutheran Summer Music community, echoed this: “There was only one time for me ... and this was during Scott's funeral.” (Scott Weidler, a former program director for ELCA worship and music, died in January.) We often sing in quieter voices, following along with prerecorded services, if we sing at all. No monitor can replicate a breathing body of singers.

Yet with this grief comes an opportunity to consider other forms of embodied creativity in worship. Amanda



Weber, director of choral ministries at Westminster Presbyterian in Minneapolis, connected with a local dancer to explore how movement could enhance the congregation's worship. "We had her do movement, inviting our livestream congregation to move with her, but then plugged that into hymn singing.

"If and when we come back together and we are not able to do hymn singing for a period of time for safety's sake, wouldn't it be powerful to have [the] congregation do a movement together?" asked Weber, a former organist and choir director at Trinity Lutheran Congregation, Minneapolis.

How might we explore other embodied movement and ritual in this time of reduced singing? Moreover, how can other arts, especially the visual arts, be nurtured more intently?

Alongside this deeply felt grief comes an opportunity to sing and make music in the home. This is nothing new. Fothergill emphasized the tradition of singing in the home inherited from the Reformation: "For so long, people brought their hymnals from the homes to worship. They weren't just books at the church."

Some congregations have created lending libraries through which people can sign out hymnals. Such practices don't need to stop once in-person worship resumes.

All home situations differ, as do our church contexts, yet finding ways to encourage home singing will only strengthen the church's song. By singing together we are reminded of the Trinity of love that surrounds us always.



Photo: Glenn Richardson

## MUSIC IN THE HOME

*As a mother comforts her child,  
so God will comfort you.  
As a hen gathers her brood,  
so Christ will gather you.  
As a wise one counsels her friend,  
so the Spirit will counsel you.  
The Trinity of love will be with you.*

—Brian Wentzel,  
"As a Mother Comforts Her Child" (*ACS*, 1015)

We grieve the loss of physical connection to our communities of faith in this COVID time. We not only miss the embodied act of singing—we dearly miss those with whom we sing. Holy spaces, tied to memory and devotion, minister to us in ways that are hard to express.

One of the most tangible griefs of this pandemic has been the absence of music in a gathered community during worship services and at events such as hymn festival at the annual conference of the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada (shown).

One example of using technology to encourage singing in the home came through the work of Paul and Elizabeth Damico-Carper. Paul, assistant director of music and worship production at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in St. Paul, Minn., and Elizabeth, pastor of Memorial Lutheran Church in Afton, Minn., began a ministry called the Community Video Hymn Sing. Each evening they or other guests would go live on Facebook to sing and pray together.

Paul noted that the service "began as a ministry of both our churches, but that enthusiasm grew."

Based on the daily lectionary, the hymn sing evolved in different directions, and thousands of people found it a meaningful way to engage with the church's song in their homes.

As Elizabeth described it, the ministry became a kind of “house church.”

The hymn sing, though no replacement for the community singing together in person, has been a kind of “flame-keeping ministry, a way to keep memory alive,” Paul said.

Musicians have found creative ways to renew these connections. Anne Krentz Organ, director of music ministries at St. Luke Lutheran in Park Ridge, Ill., stood in her congregation’s parking lot on a cold Ash Wednesday and sang the refrain “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (“Remember



Photo: Amy Howton

Paul Vasile leads song at the Becoming Beloved Community Convocation of the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Ohio in May 2019. Vasile, executive director of the nonprofit Music that Makes Community, says music has the power to heal.

## DWELLING IN FAMILIARITY AND NEWNESS

*There is a longing in our hearts, O Lord,  
for you to reveal yourself to us.  
There is a longing in our hearts  
for love we only find in you, our God.*

—Anne Quigley,  
“There Is a Longing in Our Hearts” (*ACS*, 1078)

Music and memory are inextricably linked—love is recalled, connections revealed. Anyone who has experienced how those with memory loss respond to beloved songs knows these connections well. A deep grief in these times comes from not gathering to sing the songs that have nurtured us through the years.

That You Are Dust”; *ACS*, 919). As people drove by to receive ashes, they would hear the song.

“I was hopeful that this would call people back to remember [that] when we are in church together on Ash Wednesday, this is what we sing,” Krentz said. “Even though they weren’t singing, I hoped it would transport them in their memories to when we did sing that [refrain].”

This pandemic time has also proved to be an excellent opportunity for teaching new songs. Weber has found that, though her congregation may not be receptive during in-person worship to commentary that describes the history or context of a song, participants have been responsive to it online. She hopes this sharing can continue once in-person worship resumes.





Photo: Jon L. Hendricks

Gathering for worship, such as this 2019 service at the Institute of Liturgical Studies at Valparaiso (Ind.) University, was put on hold during the pandemic, but musicians have found creative ways to renew these connections.

## VOCATIONAL CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

*Could it be that we are called for such a time as this?*

—Jonathan Rundman, “For Such a Time As This” (ACS, 1003)

This pandemic will inevitably change what church musicians need and require. To say these months have been difficult would be an understatement.

Church musicians are often separated from their worshiping communities, unable to lead music in the same way, unable to receive the energy given by a group. Musicians recording their performances feel the pressure of expected perfection, knowing services will be available online. Others have had to figure out how to direct a “virtual choir.” New skills are required, ones that may not bring the same joy or satisfaction.

Kevin Barger, president of the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians, has heard from members that they are working hard yet feeling unfulfilled. Digital capabilities are expected. Video editing is a must. Yet in many cases, the increase in responsibilities brings no increase in pay or continuing education funds, he said.

*“Maybe it is not a return to something before but a turn to something new.”*

“This whole situation is redefining the church music profession,” Steuernagel said. “The way churches look at the role of the church musician is going to change.”

What these changes will be remains uncertain. But just as the church celebrates music as a gift from God—a gift that shapes and serves, forms and expresses—the gifts of musicians, as leaders and stewards of the song, need to be nurtured, and training should continue to be funded and valued.



## MOVING FORWARD INTO THE UNKNOWN

*Guide my feet, while I run this race,  
for I don't want to run this race in vain.*

—“Guide My Feet,”  
African American spiritual (ACS, 987)

Paul Vasile, executive director of the nonprofit Music that Makes Community, emphasizes hope, finding opportunities that musicians have in this time of trauma. As a consultant to congregations, he has to work in unsettling situations and manage anxiety. “We need nonanxious presences now more than ever,” he said. And musicians, he points out, can harness the power of music to heal.

Vasile finds hope along the edges. Lutherans recognize the theology of the cross at work as God shows up in the places we least expect. But where are the voices we’ve not yet heard? How can we foster spaces for true listening, not only in our experience of music but in our life together?

It’s tempting to talk about a “return to normal,” post-pandemic. Yet as Easter people, we are guided forward. “Maybe it is not a return to something before

As Lutherans, we rejoice in music as a gift of God. That heritage is passed on to students who attend the Lutheran Summer Music Academy and Festival, seen here at Valparaiso (see also page 32).

but a turn to something new,” said Brian Christopher Clay, director of communications and AV technology at St. John Lutheran Church in Knoxville, Tenn.

Even after we all can unite again physically in song, we can reflect on what this time has given us—if only to ask better where we have been and where the Spirit may be leading us. As with so many of our songs created during times of pandemic or injustice, beauty has risen from the ashes of suffering. We mourn, yet we can live in hope: there will always be a song.

*The spirit sings though we are shaken,  
and Christ has shared our heartfelt cries.  
Restored, our weary souls awaken  
to join God’s song that never dies.*

—Adam Tice,  
“Sometimes Our Only Song Is Weeping” (ACS, 1050)

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