

# Music in the Church

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Michael Gillingham is currently serving as Director of Youth Ministry at Bethel Lutheran Church in Sherwood Park, Alberta. Michael has served in two previous churches as a worship music planner and leader. He is a guitarist and vocalist who has also worked as a music teacher and a music trainer for Crew Ministries. He is a songwriter with songs published by Concordia Publishing House in St. Louis, Openbook Publishing in Australia and Crew Publishing in Canada. He's recorded several solo and group music projects.

## Some Basic Truths

As we focus on music in the church, it's helpful to remember some basic truths. First, music was created by God. All things that exist were created by God and music is one of those creations. Some music sounds twisted and evil but that's not the way that God originally intended it to be. Satan does with music what he's done with so many of God's good gifts: he has twisted and distorted it for evil purposes. This does not change the truth that God created music.

Second, music is a gift from God. For those who appreciate music, it can be a very wonderful thing to enjoy and to share. Martin Luther was an active and enthusiastic musician both before and after his dramatic encounter with God. He insisted that music was a very good gift from God.

Third, music has been used to worship God. The church throughout the centuries has included music in worship. Whether it involved simple accapella singing or very complicated choral and instrumental arrangements, the church has used music in the praise and worship of God.

Fourth, church music has varied throughout the centuries. We have very early references to church music in the letters of Paul and some even feel that certain Biblical texts may have first been written as songs. As the church grew and moved into different cultural and historical contexts, the music of the church grew and changed. We have very little church music remaining from certain time periods but we know that the church has been singing for a long time.

## Some Basic Assumptions

I personally work with some basic assumptions when I think about and talk about music in the church. First, God's music is not like human music. As humans, we experience music in time and space. Part of what defines music for humans is a linear experience of music in time. Listening to a very simple melody, we hear the first note and then the second and the others that follow. Part of what defines music for us is the order and relationship that the notes

have in time. God is not bound by time and does not experience music in the same way that we do. We've yet to hear what music sounds like for God. Maybe in heaven? Until then, I remain skeptical when someone tells me about God's favorite human music. I'm assuming that our human music, regardless of its quality, simplicity, complexity and reverence, does not begin to approach the music of heaven.

Second, the church has great music from the past. Even though we've lost much of the church's music over the centuries, some very strong and beautiful pieces of church music have been preserved. We can benefit today from using these tried and true songs of the Christian faith. For some, certain texts are almost as inspirational as the Bible and certain melodies are associated with wonderful, warm memories of worship and faith. The church has great music to use from the past.

Third, there are great new songs and new pieces of church music being created today. Some are modern hymns and others sound more like pop songs. In both cases, excellent texts and tunes are being wedded together as the church is blessed with the creativity that God provides. Not every new song is a good song but there are some really interesting writers working today to give the church new songs to sing.

Fourth, I assume that it's possible that some of the greatest church music we'll ever hear has not yet been written. We can't predict how God will work or what these new songs will sound like but we can at least admit the possibility that the best is yet to come. As time rolls on, it gets harder and harder to write a great hymn or a great song as there are so many good ones. Still, we should be aware that God may have some wonderful surprises ahead for us.

Regardless of what we know to be true and what I might assume, it is safe to say that music in the church today can be a source of real blessing and a source of real conflict. Pastors, musicians, singers and other members of the congregation can find great joy as they sing and praise God together in song. Music can also be a reason for some to become angry and frustrated. That anger and frustration can serve to surround the question of music in the church with much pain and division.

#### Some Questions To Ask

As I've served in different churches with music, I've come to realize that there are some basic questions every Lutheran church can and should ask.

1. Can Lutherans sing old songs and new songs in a way that is faithful to God, to the Scriptures and to the Lutheran Confessions?

2. Can we use organs\* in worship? (\*feel free to substitute the following into the last question...pianos, guitars, drums, violins, flutes, accordions, etc.) Some feel more comfortable with certain instruments than others so the question is important.

3. Can we have an organist\* in worship? (\*feel free to substitute the following into the last question...pianist, guitarist, praise band, orchestra, choir, etc.)

4. Do we want a paid, professionally trained musician (or musicians) leading us or do we want some non-professional volunteers leading the music in the service? What level of quality do we aspire to have in our church music?

The answers to the above questions are important to consider as we move forward in this area of worship life in the congregation.

#### More Questions

As we move from the theoretical to the practical, more questions arise. In any particular congregation, I think it's helpful to ask the question "What have we been doing?" In some congregations, music in worship has consisted of the liturgy and hymns from the hymnal played by an organist on an organ. In other congregations, music in worship has consisted of a mix of songs played on the piano and on the guitar. In still other congregations, music in worship has included guitars, drums, pianos, an orchestra, a choir and / or a vocal group playing hymns and newer praise songs. What has been done is important and one needs to respect the past as one considers the present and the future. Making changes in any direction without considering this important question can be, at best, foolish and, at worst, disastrous.

The next question is equally important. "What can we do today?" In some congregations, the talented musician has moved away and that musical presentation is no longer possible with the current musicians who are available to play and sing. If a certain style of church music cannot be presented in at least a half-decent manner, it made be time to reconsider what is done. Who is available to play, lead and sing? What instrument(s) do they play? What styles and songs can they play? These questions can be considered for volunteers and any paid musicians that might be willing and available to serve.

The last question leads us into the future. "What do we want to do?" Do we want to maintain a certain style of music presented in a certain way? Do we want to develop a new style of music presented in a certain way? Do we want different styles at different services? If we're currently unable to do any of these things, are we willing to invest the time and money to move in these directions?

Equally important is the question “Why?” Why do we want a certain style (or styles) of music? Do we want to preserve and maintain a certain musical culture and style? Do we want church music to sound like the popular music of the day? Do we want to use music as a way to make our church services counter-cultural in feel and sound?

These are important questions to consider and I maintain the belief that local Lutheran congregations have the Christian freedom and authority to make these decisions as they feel led by God through the Holy Spirit. Arguments abound regarding the need for churches that walk together in common confession and Christian witness to be as similar as possible. While I appreciate the desire for common practices, I also argue that local resources, tastes and ministry contexts also need to be considered.

### Blended Worship

Some of the churches considering this question today have chosen to focus on a particular style. For some, that has meant only hymns and liturgy played on the organ are used in worship. For a small group of other churches, it may mean only offering worship music in a more popular style that some might refer to as “contemporary” or “pop”. For many churches, pursuing a blended style has been the option of choice.

Blended worship can look differently in different places. For some, blended worship involves a blend of newer and older liturgical resources. For others, blended worship involves more music and less formal liturgy. Some congregations are even exploring the option of dropping certain pieces of the historic liturgy. In most churches, the basics remain: invocation, confession of sins and absolution, reading of Scripture, preaching, confession of faith, celebration of the Sacraments, prayer and benediction. Pastors and people vary in their comfort level with these changes and congregations reflect that variation in practice.

### Finding New Resources

For those churches who have established a certain sound and style, new resources are not necessarily required. They continue to use hymnals and other resources in an active way and are not looking for new songs or liturgical resources. For other congregations, there is a desire to look for and find new resources for worship. When looking for new songs, I ask the following questions:

1. Is it singable?

2. Does the style of the song fit our context?
3. Does it have solid theological and doctrinal content?

Some Lutheran resources you may want to consider include:

- Lutheran Service Book (cph.org)
- God's People Sing (Dept of Parish Services, LCC)
- Singing Saints Songbook (Dept of Youth Ministry, LCMS)

I have found some excellent resources from Lutheran writers in Canada, the U.S. and Australia. The following are some that I would recommend to congregations and church workers looking for new songs:

- Terry Dittmer (Director of Youth Ministry - LCMS staffer, cph.org)  
Creating Contemporary Worship: A Workbook for Understanding and Writing Youth – Led Services by Terry Dittmer
- Jaroslav Vajda (LCMS pastor, cph.org)
- Crew Ministries songbooks ([www.crewministries.com](http://www.crewministries.com))
- Lost and Found ([speedwood.com](http://speedwood.com))
- Michael Gillingham ([michaelgillingham@hotmail.com](mailto:michaelgillingham@hotmail.com))
- John Ylvisaker ([www.ylvisaker.com](http://www.ylvisaker.com), New Generation Publishers)
- Robin Mann ([www.robinmann.com](http://www.robinmann.com), Openbook Publishers)
- Carl Schalk
- Herbert Brokering ([www.wheatridge.org](http://www.wheatridge.org))

Some Lutheran churches have chosen to use newer songs from other Christian composers from other Christian churches. While I would not recommend every song written by every writer on the following list, I have found some very solid, singable and usable songs from the following writers:

- Paul Baloche ([www.leadworship.com](http://www.leadworship.com))
- Robin Mark ([www.robinmark.com](http://www.robinmark.com))
- Tim Hughes ([www.timhughesmusic.com](http://www.timhughesmusic.com))
- Lynn DeShazo ([www.lynnshazo.com](http://www.lynnshazo.com))
- Stuart Townend ([stuarttownend.typepad.com](http://stuarttownend.typepad.com))
- Bob Fitts ([www.bobfitts.com](http://www.bobfitts.com))
- Brian Doerksen ([www.briandoerksen.com](http://www.briandoerksen.com))
- Chris Tomlin ([www.christomlin.com](http://www.christomlin.com))
- Graham Kendrick ([www.grahamkendrick.co.uk](http://www.grahamkendrick.co.uk))
- Dennis Jernigan ([www.dennisjernigan.com](http://www.dennisjernigan.com))

Some pastors and congregations raise the question of doctrinal and theological review for any resources used at the congregational level.

Thankfully, some of the material written by Lutheran writers and other Christian writers listed above has been reviewed in this way and found to be appropriate and helpful. Other materials have not had opportunity to be reviewed and require the careful review and discretion of local pastors and church workers before they are used. Our synod is currently exploring a process where more newer material might be reviewed and approved in time.

It's also important to note that some songwriters require congregations to request permission and pay fees for using their materials. Please refer to the writers, to CCLI or Concordia Publishing House if you have further questions about permission and fees that might apply.

As a further resource, The Break Forth Conference hosted every January in Edmonton, Alberta is an excellent place to see and hear new songs by some of the biggest contemporary worship writers working today. Check out the website at [breakforthcanada.com](http://breakforthcanada.com). While I can't personally endorse every speaker, presenter or musician that you will hear and see at Break Forth, I have benefited from attending and taking away those thoughts, ideas and resources that have been most helpful.

Exciting Times....

This is an exciting time in the church for church music. We have so many rich resources from the past and so many new resources in all styles being created today. I thank God that He continues to give us songs of joy to sing as we celebrate His love and grace and I pray that our Lutheran churches will continue to explore and develop the gifts that God has given.

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