



Do We Really Need a Choir?

Challenge 1: An Unclear Purpose

By Jonathan Bauer

As the king and his people returned to their homes, what would you guess they said about the choir? As far as choirs go, this one didn't stand out. Its members weren't professionals. These were amateurs. Their voices weren't fine tuned from pedigree or practice. They were more accustomed to shouting the cries of war than singing the canticles of worship. There were no nimble-fingered instrumentalists. Their clumsy, calloused hands were more accustomed to holding a sword or spear than a harp or trumpet. They were not well rehearsed. In fact, they were selected for an impromptu performance. They did not unveil a recently-commissioned work by the most talented composer of the day. Instead, they sang a simple piece that the assembly had heard many times before. So as the king and his people returned to their homes after hearing this choir, what would you guess they said?

Confronting challenges

Have the people you serve participated in such a conversation? People head home after Sunday church. As they discuss the morning, they eventually get to the choir. When they talk about your church's choir, what do they say?

Choirs¹ in our churches face many challenges. Perhaps some of the characteristics of the choir mentioned above sound familiar. Is talent hard to find? Has membership dwindled? Does the library seem limited? Has the director expressed disappointment and

frustration? Have the two of you even talked about discontinuing the program? For all the time, effort, money, and stress involved, does the benefit often seem minimal?

If so, there is good news. This is the first of seven issues that will confront some of the challenges facing the Lutheran choir. In the issues to come, authors with education and experience in choral music will share useful information that will benefit your choir and encourage its director. However, before those authors share that valuable information, this issue addresses the person who is able to have the biggest impact on your church's choir: the pastor.

Believe it or not, it doesn't matter if you are musically gifted. It doesn't matter if you can keep a beat or carry a tune. As the pastor, you can guarantee the success of your church's choir. How? By making sure it serves a purpose.

The importance of purpose

The brief history of the choir described above is written in 2 Chronicles 20. Under King Jehoshaphat, the people of Judah were facing the threat of attack from the armies of Moab, Ammon, and Edom. These three nations had formed an alliance and were approaching to attack.

However, through Jahaziel, the LORD offered a comforting promise: "The battle is not yours, but God's."² God was going to deliver the

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Challenges for the Lutheran Church Choir

A new series begins with this issue. It will explore various challenges affecting Lutheran choirs. Some articles will be written with the pastor's role as worship planner in mind, others for sharing with a choir director, worship committee, or lay leaders for encouragement or training or solving challenges. The series has been planned by Jonathan Bauer and Katherine Tiefel.

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victory singlehandedly. The people would not need to fire a single arrow. God wanted them simply to go out to the field of battle and confidently wait for the victory he promised.

So as the people set out, King Jehoshaphat urged them, "Have faith in the LORD your God and you will be upheld; have faith in his prophets and you will be successful."³ Their success was guaranteed. The only way they could suffer defeat is if they rejected God's promise and foolishly tried to win the victory themselves. God made a promise. He wanted them to cling to that promise in faith. And so Jehoshaphat consulted with the people. And they all came to the same, somewhat surprising conclusion: ***We need a choir.***

As a result, Jehoshaphat appointed a group of men to march out to the field of battle at the head of the army. No, these weren't the professionals.⁴ However, they served a vital purpose. They served as the voice of the people. Even before they saw any dead enemies or held any plunder, the choir expressed the people's confident faith. If God made a promise, it was as good as done. And so the song they chose was perfect for the occasion: "Give thanks to the LORD, for his love endures forever."⁵ At the end of the day, the most important thing was not how they sang. The choir was successful because it served a vital purpose.

Is the purpose of your church choir any different? God's people are surrounded by a trio of enemies: sin, death, and the devil. They have formed an alliance and are approaching to attack. However, we have a promise: "The battle is not yours, but God's." God has guaranteed us the victory. No effort of ours is required. In fact, the only way we can be defeated is if we reject God's promise and foolishly try to win the victory ourselves.

And so, each week God's people gather together to hear those gospel promises and to cling to them in faith. Each week, the gospel takes center stage as believers gather together. And because God's promises are the focus for us, just like they were for Jehoshaphat and Judah, can we come to any conclusion other than the one to which they came? ***We need a choir.***

The purpose of the Lutheran choir

Among the many ways in which the gospel is proclaimed, Lutherans in particular have always valued the gospel attached to music. It has been this way from the start. "For Luther, music and the gospel were a wedding made in heaven. The gospel is the good news that brings faith, hope, and joy. Music has the power to light up that message, give life to the words, impress it on the human heart and express the joy it brings."⁶

As a result, music has found its way into nearly every aspect of our worship. We sing hymns. We sing parts of the ordinary, those words of the service that stay the same from week to week. We sing parts of the proper, those words of the service that change

from week to week. In fact, Lutherans have sensed that the gospel joined to music is nearly indispensable to their public worship. "The congregation *needs* a concise verbal form, which comprehensibly summarizes the basic element of the message of salvation and the central content of glorification. It is impossible for the congregation to have the entire text of Paul's Epistle to the Romans before it, but it may very well be conversant with Luther's hymn "From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee" In a tangible, forceful, and impressive form the hymn visualizes and presents the message of salvation."⁷



Because music serves such a valuable purpose in our public worship, so does a choir. The Lutheran choir assists the congregation as it publicly proclaims the gospel through music. It serves as the voice of the congregation as it gathers around God's gospel promises. In our services, the choir has many opportunities to do so. Those opportunities, in order of importance, are these:⁸

- 1) **The Lutheran choir leads and supports the parts of the service assigned to the congregation.** Our services include many songs that are assigned primarily to the congregation: hymns and repeating songs of the ordinary. The purpose of the choir is not to take away these

songs from the congregation. It is to lead and support the congregation as it sings them. The choir, whether sitting together or not, supplies a group of voices that have rehearsed the hymns and songs of the liturgy.⁹ They add enthusiasm and precision to the congregation's singing. The choir builds the congregation's repertoire by introducing new hymns and new musical settings of the liturgy. The choir provides the congregation with an opportunity to pause and reflect on the words of a hymn as it sings stanzas in alternation with the congregation.

- 2) **The Lutheran choir brings variety and richness to the parts of the service assigned to the choir.** Our services also contain songs that provide opportunities for the choir to sing alone. These include the changing texts of the proper. In the services found in our hymnal and supplement, the primary examples are the Psalm of the Day and the Verse of the Day. Musical settings of these texts punctuate the reading of the lessons and highlight the central truth of the day's Gospel.
- 3) **The Lutheran choir presents attendant music that is appropriate to the service.** Attendant music, commonly referred to as an anthem, is one more opportunity for the choir to assist the congregation by proclaiming God's gospel promises in song. For more thoughts on planning attendant music, see "Is an Anthem Even Necessary?" in this issue.

Have there been times when you or your director has asked, *Do we really need a choir?* When you consider the number of opportunities in which a choir can benefit your congregation's worship, a better question might be, *Can we survive without one?* The simple answer, of course, is yes, especially if we consider only one Sunday's worship or even one year's worship. Your church certainly can survive without a choir. But do you want it to?

If you as a pastor were to list characteristics of public worship that you want people (members and guests alike) to experience, what would you include? Along with excellent preaching, a suitable worship space, and friendly people, your list might include:

- A solid repertoire of hymns, old and new, which proclaim the gospel clearly and which the people sing accurately and enthusiastically
- The stability of a liturgical framework without the staleness of identical worship every week
- A unified service that reflects a seasonal emphasis and highlights a specific facet of the gospel in both spoken word and vibrant song
- The saving gospel set to a variety of musical forms from different times and places within the Holy Christian Church

As you consider those characteristics of worship and others that you desire, ask yourself: are any of them easy to achieve without a choir?¹⁰ Are any of them difficult to achieve with a choir? At the end of the day, the most important thing is not how they sing. Your church choir will be successful because it serves a vital purpose. "The worship life of a congregation with *any choir at all* will be enriched in many ways, and the possibilities for the worship life of a congregation with the strong musical leadership of a well-trained choir are almost limitless."¹¹

The Lutheran choir assists the congregation as it publicly proclaims the gospel through music.

Set them up for success

So what can you as the pastor do? Set them up for success. As you lead your congregation in their life of public worship, assign the choir an indispensable purpose. Make sure singers and director realize how important they are. Make sure your director understands and appreciates the purpose of the Lutheran choir. Share whatever resources are at your disposal, including the seven issues of this series. Lead your congregation in its support of the choir with words of encouragement, positive publicity, and generous resource allocation.

And then you will know what they say. When they sit in their cars on the way home from church, you will know what they say about the choir. They will say what they have heard you say about the choir many times. "Really beautiful"? Let's do all we can to get there. The information offered in this series will help. But even if "really beautiful" is never used to describe the singing of your

church's choir, that wasn't the primary goal in the first place. The Lutheran choir assists the congregation as it publicly proclaims the gospel through music. And when it does, all who hear its valuable service will go home recognizing "a real blessing."



Is an Anthem Even Necessary?

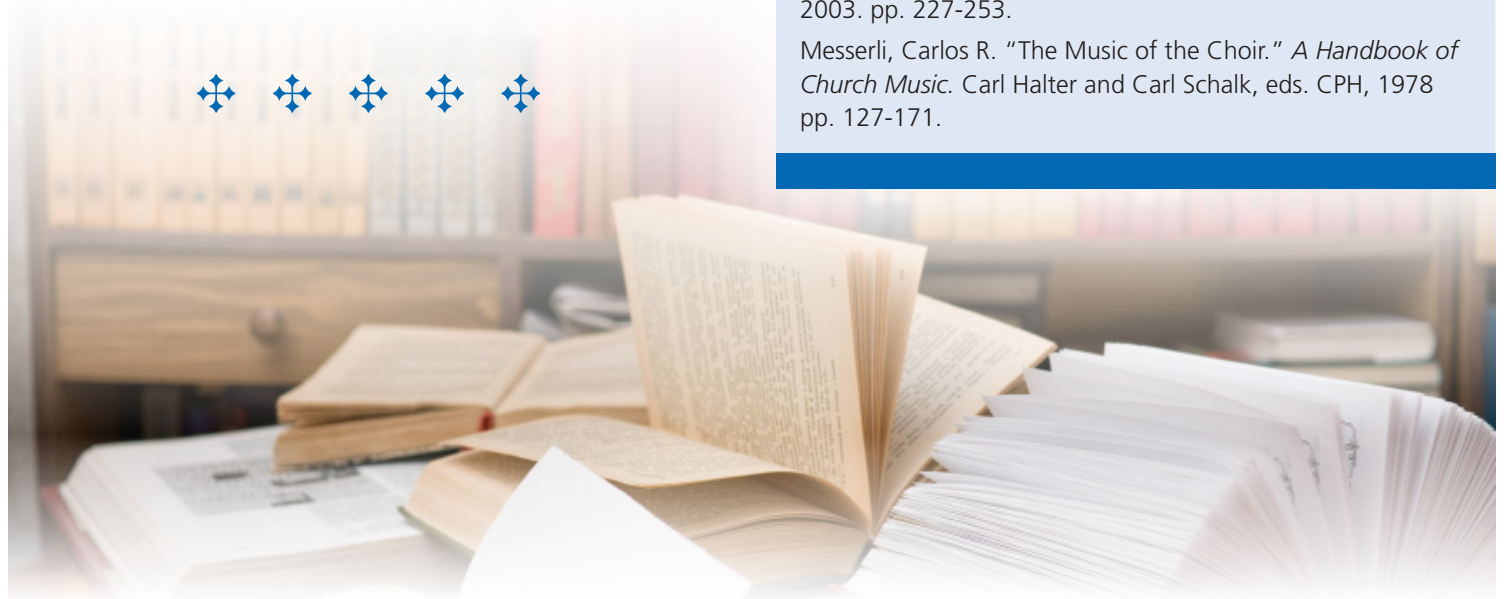
Among the three ways in which the Lutheran choir serves a congregation, presenting "attendant music," or a standalone anthem, ranks third in importance. A quick glance at most sacred music catalogues would reveal that it ranks first in other circles. Would a glance at our singing schedule or rehearsal outline reveal the same? Do we spend more time and effort preparing anthems than on anything else?

The purpose here is not to discourage anthems. However, an overemphasis on anthem singing does present some dangers. To begin with, preparing an anthem generally takes more time than preparing a psalm, verse, or hymn setting. A choir should not devote so much time to preparing anthems that it cannot devote time to other, more important aspects of its service. Second, it is more difficult to consistently find anthems that highlight the central focus of the day. Since a schedule of selected hymns, psalms, and verses is designed to highlight a Sunday's particular focus, musical settings of those parts of the service will naturally tie in closely with the service's overall focus. This close connection requires more time and effort in selecting anthems. Finally, in the pursuit of singing excellent anthems in an excellent way, the choir can easily be perceived as performers rather than servants, both in their own minds and in the minds of the people. "The chief peril encountered in the anthem repertoire is that beguiling music will lead the choir astray from its reason for existence; that service, the noblest goal of church choral performance, will be debased into mere choral pleasure and pride."¹²

Do we spend more time and effort preparing anthems than on anything else?

That being said, “Every choir should have the pleasure of preparing and performing anthems, and every congregation should hear anthems from time to time.”¹³ As anthems are carefully planned and prepared, here are some principles for the conscientious director to keep in mind:¹⁴

- 1) Anthems are to be appropriate to the Sunday, festival, or season
- 2) Anthems are to be appropriately placed within the service¹⁵
- 3) Anthems should be chosen that are within the musical limitations of the choir



Resources for the Pastor

As you clarify the purpose of the choir with your people and your director, here are some helpful resources:

Baumler, Gary and Kermit Moldenhauer, eds. “The Music of the Choir.” *Christian Worship: Manual*. NPH, 1993. pp. 256-265.

Hermanson, Roger. “The Lutheran Church Choir Today and Tomorrow.” Available at wlsessays.net.

Maschke, Timothy H. “Music in the Lord’s Service.” *Gathered Guests: A Guide to Worship in the Lutheran Church*. CPH, 2003. pp. 227-253.

Messerli, Carlos R. “The Music of the Choir.” *A Handbook of Church Music*. Carl Halter and Carl Schalk, eds. CPH, 1978 pp. 127-171.

¹ For consistency and simplicity, this article and series will refer to “choirs.” Depending on your situation, however, that might be five voices singing in unison or even a soloist. The principles discussed here apply to nearly every situation, regardless of size or resources.

² 2 Chronicles 20:15

³ 2 Chronicles 20:20

⁴ The Levites already had their turn (20:19) and would have their turn again (20:28).

⁵ 2 Chronicles 20:21

⁶ Eggert, Kurt J. “Martin Luther, God’s Music Man.” p. 4. Originally delivered to the students and faculty of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary on November 10, 1983. Available at wlsessays.net.

⁷ Brunner, Peter. *Worship in the Name of Jesus*. Bertram, M.H., tr. CPH, 1968. p. 268. Emphasis added.

⁸ Lutheran authors speak with one voice regarding the purpose of the church choir. The content of these three paragraphs are presented, in identical order, in a variety of sources. As an example, see Halter, Carl and Carl Schalk, eds. *A Handbook of Church Music*. CPH, 1978 p. 19.

⁹ This, of course, requires the director to be willing to spend time rehearsing them.

¹⁰ The objection might be raised that the model of the standing church choir is not feasible for every congregation. For now, let’s assume that to be the exception rather than the rule. A future issue will deal with that question.

¹¹ Baumler, Gary and Kermit Moldenhauer, eds. *Christian Worship: Manual*. NPH, 1993. p. 256. Emphasis added.

¹² Halter, Carl and Carl Schalk, eds. *A Handbook of Church Music*. CPH, 1978. p. 133.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 133.

¹⁴ From Schalk, Carl. “Music in Lutheran Worship,” *Church Music Pamphlet Series*. CPH, 1983. p.10

¹⁵ Several options are possible. Following the Gospel reinforces the idea that the Gospel is the thematic focal point of the service and benefits from careful selection of music. During the offering or distribution allows the choir to sing without adding to the service’s length or disrupting its flow.