



Worship the Lord

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Sharing worship ideas with WELS pastors

The supplement includes twenty-four musical settings of psalms. How were those psalms chosen? What is the benefit of singing psalms in corporate worship? This issue's author, Jon Zabell, serves as family and outreach pastor at St. Paul in Green Bay, WI, is a presenter for WELS Schools of Worship Enrichment, and was a member of the *Christian Worship Supplement* committee.



Christian Worship Supplement: Psalms

By Jon Zabell

Christians make regular use of psalms in our personal lives. We commit passages to memory. We remember them in times of trouble. We quote them to friends in sympathy cards. We especially love the psalms of comfort and thanksgiving.

But when it comes to singing the psalms in church, our people are sometimes less than enthusiastic. In School of Worship Enrichment surveys, congregations often rate themselves relatively low on their ability to sing the psalms. Some congregations opt to omit the psalm on communion Sundays. We are free to do this, of course. But it is striking that when congregations shorten the service, the singing of psalms is often at the top of the list.

This might be due in part to a lack of appreciation for antiphonal chant. Antiphonal psalm singing (alternate chanting by two groups) is a style of singing most of our people never hear outside of church. We are used to the music of commercial jingles. We are accustomed to music with instantly memorable melodies. The music of chant isn't especially memorable or even melodic.

Of course, antiphonal chanting isn't the only way to sing psalms in church. But consider its benefits. The give and take implicit in this kind of singing fits the parallelism of psalm poetry like a glove.

Psalm 24:

group one: Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors,

group two: that the King of glory may come in.

group one: Who is this King of glory?

group two: The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle.

It's not wrong to sing the psalms of *Christian Worship* entirely in unison. But dividing the congregation into two groups not only highlights the parallelism, it also promotes corporate song. You don't even have to enlist the services of a soloist or choir. Try singing the verses antiphonally by sides of the congregation. Start with the left side; follow with the right. Or divide between men and women. When the two groups join together for the refrains, people who are normally hesitant to sing out will instinctively give a bit more.

Psalm paraphrases can work well, too, but singing the original parallelism of the psalms invites us to linger a little bit longer on the message God inspired his poets to pen. As for chanting, singing long phrases on a single note might not endear itself musically the way a good melody can, but it can focus our attention on the text in a way that melodic singing can't.

In short, chanting the psalms antiphonally can be beneficial precisely because it is counter-cultural. In a world that idolizes practicality, preference, and emotion, this kind of psalm singing invites everyone to slow down and consider the text. That's healthy. We're not wolfing down lunch here. We're grazing in green pastures. We're tasting and seeing that the Lord is good.

Christian Worship Supplement offers a number of “new” psalms in the style of antiphonal chant. They’re new in the sense that they weren’t included in the lectionaries of *Christian Worship*. The supplement rites subcommittee started with a study of all the psalms. We narrowed down the choices according to seasons, thinking especially of how these psalms could highlight and support the gospel for the day. We were eager to include more messianic psalms. We wanted to include some familiar psalms that weren’t already a part of the lectionary. We hoped to expand the number of psalms made familiar to our people through regular use in worship. In the end we agreed upon ten psalms: 3, 14, 37, 40, 69, 110, 115, 122, 124, and 142. To see where these “new” psalms fit into the church year, check *Christian Worship Supplement*, pp. 80-82, or visit www.wels.net/jump/cwsupplement where the supplemental lectionary is posted online.

The rest of the psalms in the supplement were already a part of our three-year lectionary, psalms for occasions like Christmas, Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, Holy Week, and Easter. We’ve given more festival color to the refrain texts, and we’ve dressed both refrain and verse in new musical clothes. There are fourteen of these psalms: 22, 24, 30, 46, 47, 51a, 51b, 72, 96, 98, 116, 118, 148, 150.

When *Christian Worship* was released in 1993, some scholarly reviewers from outside the WELS were critical of the Joint Hymnal Committee’s decision to print only selected verses for the psalms, while others considered the psalms a good addition whose form encouraged singing by the people (*Not Unto Us*, pp. 251 ff).

Now, after fifteen years of *Christian Worship*, the latter opinion rings true. Many of us can’t hear or read the words “To you, O Lord, I lift my soul” without imagining the melody of the refrain from *Christian Worship*. I don’t have any statistical evidence, but I would venture a guess that our people are more familiar with the texts of many psalms now than they were before *Christian Worship* was produced – because they’ve been singing them in corporate worship.

When it comes to worship, it’s easy to talk about the differences between Old and New Testament. Then, people worshiped according to divine fiat. Now we worship in Christian freedom.

This is not to say that we must use only settings of the psalms from our hymnal or our supplement, or that antiphonal chant is the only way to sing them. The inspired memo found at the beginning of so many psalms is as applicable today as it was in Old Testament times: “For the director of music.” Encourage your choir director to find interesting musical settings for choir or soloist. Look online for some ideas (www.wels.net/worship). Don’t forget about the ten psalm settings printed in *Christian Worship: New Service Settings*, and reprinted in *Christian Worship: Occasional Services*. Attend a School of Worship Enrichment.

And be patient. We shouldn’t be surprised when our people don’t immediately love antiphonal chanting. The better we help them understand the benefits, the more they will appreciate how edifying it can be to sing psalms this way in church.

When it comes to worship, it’s easy to talk about the differences between Old and New Testament. Then, people worshiped according to divine fiat. Now we worship in Christian freedom. When New Testament people sing the psalms in church, we reinforce an important similarity. Then and now, corporate worship is about proclaiming law and gospel as we wait for the coming of our Lord Jesus.

To you, O Lord, I lift my soul; in you I trust, my God.

Shorthand Terms for Psalm Singing

Presiding ministers will find it beneficial to acquaint a congregation with a few short phrases that refer to the way a psalm is sung in the service. Rather than explain the psalm’s performance in several sentences, the pastor can acquaint his congregation with these phrases. Once the congregation knows what each phrase means, the presiding minister can simply indicate the psalm’s performance with a short phrase rather than several sentences. Here are some common short-hand phrases to describe psalm performance.

- **Responsively by half-verse:** The cantor or choir sings the first half of each verse. The congregation sings the second half of each verse. All sing the refrains and doxology. Note that this option only works with single-tone psalm settings.
- **Responsively by verse:** After each refrain, the cantor or choir sings the first (full) verse, the congregation sings the second (full) verse, the cantor or choir sings the third verse, etc. This works especially well with psalms that have an odd number of verses between refrains (such as several of the psalms in *Christian Worship*). All sing the refrains and doxology.
- **Antiphonally between groups:** One group in the congregation (women, men, right half, left half, etc.) sings the first half of each verse. The opposite group sings the second half of each verse. All sing the refrains and doxology. This will always require some additional explanation because the assembly will need to know which group begins. This option, when it involves congregational groups (rather than groups within a choir), makes the most sense with single-tone psalm settings.
- **The congregation sings the refrains and doxology:** One or more cantors or groups sing all the psalm verses. The congregation sings each refrain and the closing doxology.
- **The congregation sings the entire psalm:** This is self-explanatory.

Taken from an article called “Psalm Settings and Performance” by Kermit Moldenhauer, from the supplement introductory workshops booklet, posted at www.wels.net/jump/cwsupplement. The entire essay is practical and helpful reading for all worship leaders and musicians.

For additional information on psalm singing, see *Christian Worship Manual*, chapter 15. An excerpt from this chapter is posted at the Web site above.

