



Benefits from a Music Coordinator

By Philip Casmer

"I really wish I could get to church...." Very softly it came, so that I had to lean over to hear. His eyes were half-closed, breathing labored, skin paper-thin, and that pale near death. I didn't know how to reply to his words just then. So, I moved instead into the comforting words I had prepared from John's Revelation (21:1-4). "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." There seemed nothing more appropriate for that place where death colors everything sallow than that place where God is with his saints in glory brilliant.

I've thought about that visit many times since. What if I missed something simple in that moment? Maybe longing for God's brilliant presence was exactly what this home-bound member had meant when he said, "I really wish I could get to church." And isn't it true that public worship expresses that heavenly longing in ways that we can't achieve in our living rooms? Isn't there a comforting encouragement as scores of believers gather around God's Word? Though it doesn't approach heaven's glory, isn't the gathering of God's people in worship a different and blessed order of things?

That blessed nature of worship that fills a congregation with joyful life leads to one conclusion: excellence in worship is a benefit to the people of God.

Worship is all those things; a bit of God's newness, shared and redoubled in resounding praise. In a way unlike any other activity the visible church undertakes, worship defines the spirit of a congregation. There God's family confesses sin and is absolved, hears gospel joy proclaimed, sings in thanks for Word and Sacrament, joins in prayer, and leaves with blessing. Worship blesses God's people. And, as God's people employ their time,

talents, and treasures in worship, they bless God too! That blessed nature of worship that fills a congregation with joyful life leads to one conclusion: excellence in worship is a benefit to the people of God. The goal of this article then is very practical: to show how the position of music coordinator can be a great help in pursuing excellence in worship.

At Christ the Lord in Brookfield, WI, God has blessed us greatly. Our two-pastor team serves about 700 members. We maintain a vibrant LES and a busy preschool. God has graciously granted a family atmosphere to prevail as we gather around his Word. Our church and school have a long history of people who've employed their musical talents in a variety of ways—volunteer, stipended, part-time. That service and the blessings it rendered for the spirit of our congregation finally led our Board of Elders to consider a permanent called position. They assessed how much time was being spent, what functions were being filled, and what benefits had resulted. Their process culminated in calling a half-time music coordinator or, as we call it, "director of parish music."

Every setting is different. This is how our position generally works. Our grade 7-8 teacher serves part-time in the classroom and part-time as music coordinator. She generally works with one of our pastors, whose duties include overseeing worship. One pastor prepares an outline of worship which looks ahead six to nine months. This includes planning any overarching seasonal themes, each Sunday's theme, a regular rotation of liturgies (from CW, CWOS, NSS, CWS), possible sermon texts, and potential hymn choices. Our music minister then uses that outline to lay out opportunities for instrumentalists, soloists, and choirs of various sizes. From the outline, she provides organists the ability to schedule their rotation and repertoire as much as nine months in

Philip Casmer has served Christ the Lord, Brookfield, WI since 2007. He has given presentations on the topic of this article at the seminary's Mission and Ministry event as well as at the WELS national worship conference.

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advance. She also uses her musical talents and experience to find appropriate psalms, hymns, and choral songs. She then approves them through the pastor. These all fit well with the duties we've assigned our music coordinator¹, some of which include:

- planning music
- coordinating instrumentalists
- directing bell choirs (adults/youth)
- practicing with instrumentalists and vocalists (readers and non-readers of music)
- organizing and keeping an extensive church music library
- attending services where music is performed
- setting up microphones, bell tables, etc.
- practicing with LES classes and choirs
- teaching students hymnology and vocal musicianship
- and more...

Essentially, our music coordinator handles much of the preparation and carryout of music in worship at Christ the Lord. We rely on her suggestions and her talents. We employ her skills and ask that she employ the skills of others. And, from it all, we benefit.

But why spend time and money on *this* position given the many needs of a church's ministry?

If you are blessed to serve as a pastor, you understand the preparation that precedes the weekly sermon. You know the love of digging through God's Word to find words to speak. You understand the sweat of illustrating, of stringing together thoughts with precision, of parsing law and gospel. It can be a great blessing when God's people encourage their pastor with thanks for his hard work. At my church, those kinds of words usually come as people shake hands on the way out: "Thanks pastor, that was a great..." But very often those words sound like this: "What beautiful *music* we had this morning," or "I loved how all the themes and the words and the songs tied together," and "Pastor, that was just the *service* I needed!"

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Here are a few of the blessings we've seen as a result of putting time and resources into worship with a position like "music coordinator."

Worship

What helps people to leave with thanks on their lips and anticipation for the next time they'll gather? A variety of things, of course! Worship would be nothing were it not Word-infused. God's Word cuts, convicts, comforts and cultivates faith; and it calls people back again and again. But at the same time, think of the service in which a poor microphone made a great solo mostly inaudible, or where the pastor spoke the liturgy in a boring monotone, or when

every hymn was led with the same generic accompaniment or slow tempo. It was a distraction from the message. Instead of those poor worship moments, think of some of your most memorable. Chances are, some of those memorable moments are the ones at which great preparation and attention to detail overflowed in seemingly effortless enjoyment of God's gospel joy—an area mass-choir, a particularly moving solo, a poignant sermon.

At my church, just like at yours, there are bad hymn moments and awkward pastor-read-the-wrong-reading times. But more often the expenditure of time and resources in a music coordinator bears good fruit in worship. Time is allotted for someone to consider a variety of musical options that will complement vocalists' abilities, will connect with Scripture's themes, and will beautify the service. Vocalists, instrumentalists, and music coordinator work two to six weeks ahead of a service so that their musical offerings are presented with excellence. Attention is given to Sunday-morning details like levels on a sound-board and what type of microphone to use. Great to mundane, what all our combined effort leaves behind is a generally comfortable worship experience. It's a happy atmosphere in which participants can simply focus on God's Word as they hear it in word and in song. The time and attention given to worship by our music coordinator has helped us focus our abilities and focus our attention on the right things.

Member Participation

Every two years our board of elders sponsors a Music Appreciation Night at Christ the Lord. It's a time to say thank you to all the volunteers who serve worship with their musical gifts. Of course, we have volunteers of all kinds in every area of ministry and we thank them all in different ways. But we feel strongly that the effort and time we pour into



worship is worth reinforcing in a special way. So we gather the people who play flutes and oboes and recorders, people who play bells or organ or keyboard, those who sing solos or participate in choirs. We gather them and feed them and thank them, formally. We have fun and we laugh and think about the great benefits we've shared in worship. This year's event had about 75 attendees—over 100 were invited.

We have a variety of musicians at Christ the Lord. In fact, we are astoundingly blessed. We have concert-level instrumentalists and recordable soloists. We strive to enable them to use their gifts. We also have members who never imagined they'd ever ring a note. We help them to discover opportunities to steward new talents. Overall, the time and effort we pour into a music coordinator position allows for musical talents great and small to be cultivated and applied and appreciated.

School

Not every place is blessed with a Lutheran elementary school. Those that are, of course, take time to teach children hymns and to participate in worship. Our music coordinator does too. Our setup puts our coordinator in contact with the children of the school daily. I can remember in the first year of my ministry, roaming the halls one school day and listening to something I hadn't heard before. It was the sound of our music coordinator teaching the children how to sing— younger children—to understand this thing called pitch and how to make their little voices go up and down accurately. I've heard more than once parents sharing a story in the hallway about how their second grade son or daughter was singing loudly next to them in the pew. And when they asked how they knew that song, the child replied, "My teacher taught us..." I've heard our upper grade students tackling music as a choir, reading it for the first time together— because they've been trained to do so! I've also listened with joy as young voices practiced what they learned and lifted many hearts in worship with an anthem or beautified the offering moment with a Junior Bell Choir selection. When we apply time and resources in a position like music coordinator, it can benefit another generation by encouraging them with good examples and ample opportunities to grow their talents and to use them to God's glory.

The presence of a music coordinator position intentionalizes focus on worship.

Beyond those anecdotes, there's one simple truth from the addition of a music coordinator position. Given time and resources, it demands ministry attention. I mean that in a good way. The presence of a music coordinator position intentionalizes focus on worship. It demands attention to finding people for the musical opportunities; we keep an eye out and an ear open for them. It demands time from our pastoral team in planning and approving and evaluating worship. It also demands that

we teamwork ministry—music coordinator and pastors relying on each other talents, helping one another out, coordinating schedules and gifts, and appreciating those the others bring to the table. This position has benefited the pastors' ministry.

Alright, so maybe your congregation looks nothing like mine. Maybe your place is populated with people who don't play instruments or care if their kids ever play a piano. That's fine. You may never have a concert-level oboist join your congregation nor a professional vocalist. But at the same time, we might not have either.... What we did have was a structure in place to engage them and to develop talents. How might that kind of effort look in your place? In truth, there are as many ways as there are ministry settings.²

- Add staff, halftime or fulltime. The significance of worship in the life of the congregation might suggest thinking through a music coordinator position.
- Two or three churches pool resources to share one person to bolster worship music and singing. Churches can share a pastor—why not a music coordinator?
- Protected time. Someone talented in music is already called fulltime as a teacher. What about shifting some duties so that the person with musical/worship gifts can use them for five hours a week or even ten?
- A stipend to enable stronger emphasis on music and worship. Maybe it's 20 hours a month and a stipend of \$2500 a year to organize the choir, help the pastor with musical selections, and find musicians and vocalists?
- Volunteers. A recent retiree is looking for a way to enrich the church's ministry. It need not be a musical virtuoso. It could just be someone to gather those with the talents or to investigate music with some guidelines provided by the pastor.

Depending on the size and resources of your congregation, a coordinator position will involve managing time and talent along with exploration and expansion of possibilities. The key is planning. Planning is important for pastors to consider regarding worship. How do you plan the worship year?³ Do you give attention to seasonal themes or draw themes out of specific Sundays? How well do you make use of available resources?⁴ Does your congregation do long range planning, thinking ahead three to five years to consider where ministry might be going or to dream about what's possible together? Do you think together about what the next position to add might be? If you don't, consider doing so and thinking through how God's gifts in your place might be put to best use for the benefit of the body.

And, of course, whatever we do, we rest in the peace of serving our Savior. We know that nothing we do this side of heaven will be as glorious as what we'll experience there where God is with his people—present in glory realized. And yet, we also know that we are given the wonderful opportunity to receive the encouragement of his Word and to bless his name in worship every week. It may be that a music coordinator is something that serves to help you do that. Yes or no, worship is a worthy place to focus our time and resources and energy, a worthy activity for our thought and attention. May God bless us as we attend to his service!

Do the ideas raised in this article suggest possibilities for the 2015 planning and budgeting process?

Questions

Here are a few questions to help consider this topic from different viewpoints.

Q: How can I do worship planning nine months in advance? I like to pick the hymns after my sermon thoughts are solidified!

Why do we have to base the service on our sermons? Couldn't the sermon also serve just as well as one part of a coordinated whole?

A: Why do we have to base the service on our sermons? Couldn't the sermon also serve just as well as one part of a coordinated whole—an expansion on one of the thoughts of the service? Certainly there's something to be said for picking hymns on the basis of good text-study. At the same time, it's arguable that one could just as well have a sense for the thematic ideas of any Sunday in the Church Year and pick hymns to the same effect. Or why couldn't we think of it this way? In my setting, the hymns are picked and set by the time my sermon comes into play, so I consider that as I form my sermon. I've got three to five hymns from which to pull examples or to which I can point. On a different note, chances are good that organists would appreciate a few weeks' time to prepare hymns and other music rather than cramming it all in 24 hours before worship starts. Why not give it a try?

Q: Won't planning out all that worship stuff ahead of time make us slaves to the plan?

A: It doesn't have to. A plan is there to serve the good of the body. A worship plan lets you think ahead and take time for good preparation. But it also gives you flexibility. If you've done good planning, small changes don't rock the ship as much because there's other preparation to rely on. Your organist might feel better about a last-minute hymn change when she's well-prepared for the other three. On the other hand, we pastors might also consider whether we sometimes make participants slaves to our whims by making worship prep a week-by-week exploration.



Outcomes from the coordinator's work

- *Music by choir, children, or soloists in almost every service.*
- *Solo instruments (winds, strings) used frequently rather than for special occasions.*
- *Volunteers eager to be part of a thriving music program.*
- *Children who sing beautifully and on pitch—including upper grade boys.*
- *High school and college students continue to share their musical gifts.*
- *Tight integration of musical choices with themes drawn from the lessons.*
- *A high level of support and appreciation by members.*

- ¹ Specifics of this position can be found at connect.wels.net/worship under Planning for Worship / Worship Committees and Staffing.
- ² Some options, position descriptions, and a call document are available at the Worship Connect site.
- ³ *Worship the Lord* #12, 2005, Encouragements from a Musician for Pastors. Available on Connect.
- ⁴ *Worship the Lord* #35, 2009, CWS: Choirs, Soloists, Instruments

