

TECHNOLOGY AND THE HUMAN ELEMENT IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
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What can we do to keep alive the tradition of fine music in a world of technological answers? Here are some challenges and solutions

Picture the following situations:

St. Luke Lutheran Church has been looking for a keyboard musician to lead congregational singing for the better part of a year. They have placed an advertisement in the local paper, in a newsletter for organists in the area, and also in a national placement service for parish musicians. They have called area universities, seminaries, and music schools only to find very few people with the skills to lead music in worship. What can they do to see that the tradition of fine music continues in their parish?

Hope Lutheran Church is a new mission congregation and knows that one way to build a strong community is through vibrant music. Like all mission congregations, it must build and plan within a budget. The question of what musical instrument will lead congregational singing was raised at a recent meeting. What should they do?

Jerusalem Lutheran Church is hoping to bring a diversity of musical styles to their liturgies. They have a fine organ, which they want to continue to use, played by an excellent organist, whom they want to continue to employ.

However, when approached to consider a wider diversity of styles, Jerusalem's organist is reluctant to use any instrument other than the organ, or play music in more popular stylistic idioms. How can the congregation handle this situation?

For all three of the above situations, the latest computer technology might deliver answers. It is now possible for instruments to be programmed and played by digital sequencers without human manipulation. Compact disks can be recorded to play all the hymns or songs in a given hymnal over an audio system.

St. Luke's Church could have their organ hooked up to a digital interface and eliminate the need for an organist. Hope Church could decide to buy a sequenced synthesizer to lead its worship, thereby saving money that would have been used to pay a musician. Jerusalem Church could keep their fine organist on the organ bench and simply push a button on a sequenced synthesizer when it wants music in an alternative style.

Some Basic Truths

These simple answers, however, avoid some basic truths about music, worship, and Christian community in general:

1. Music in worship does not need to be led by an organ. For centuries, the church sang sturdy hymns without the aid of any instruments. Keep in mind, though, that this happened long before carpet and pew cushions were added to worship spaces.
2. Assembly singing can only exist with attention to communal breathing, local acoustical conditions, and consideration of the context for the singing. Machines cannot be sensitive to these variables.
3. Christian liturgy is dependent on the participation of people. Technology that displaces the involvement and leadership of human beings displaces the very body of Christ.
4. Replacing people with machines is perhaps a cultural trend, but one that the church ought to question. In the end, using machines instead of humans minimizes the worth placed on all creative artistry and excellence.

If the church does not question the replacing of humans with technology in situations such as those above, what then is to stop a congregation from playing an audio or video tape of a sermon when a preacher is not available? Why couldn't we send the Holy Communion to those homebound by means of a matter transformer?

Technology can only serve the liturgy when it allows the community, complete with its called and prepared leadership, to be tangibly present to one another. Christian assembly is one of the principal symbols of our faith.

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Congregational Solutions

Other answers to these situations might be less easy, but ultimately more sensitive to the nature of Christian worship and its accompanying music:

St. Luke Church: The congregation might investigate whether a choir member or several choir members would feel comfortable leading congregational song without accompaniment. Check first that the place of worship is at its optimal acoustical condition to support unaccompanied singing.

The congregation might prepare for the future by offering a scholarship to a person in the congregation to study the piano or organ. In exchange for the lessons, the student would play for worship.

Johann Sebastian Bach supervised the music of four congregations in Leipzig at one time. Two- or three- (or four-!) point positions for musicians might need to be the way of the future. Can your congregation schedule Sunday worship so a musician could be shared with the congregation nearby? Perhaps, such a person could be more instrumental in enabling and energizing local talent, than providing all the leadership themselves.

Hope Church: Rather than purchase an electronic instrument, Hope Church might consider a used pipe organ or a fine grand piano, counting on its durability and viewing such a decision as an investment in the future. Are any of us watching the same electronic televisions we watched 20 years ago? Pipe organs and pianos last hundreds of years.

The congregation might ultimately discover that all they can afford is an electronic keyboard or synthesizer. The finest of these instruments are very suitable for worship, especially when amplified sensitively. However, Hope Church will want to be sure that someone plays the synthesizer, and not simply pushes a button.

Jerusalem Church: The congregation might want to offer their organist time and money to study the implementation and performance practices of a variety of musical styles by attending a worship and music conference. The conferences of the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians or the clinics of Augsburg Fortress Publishers would be a good place to start.

Lastly, be sure to note: using synthesizers in worship is not the issue. Electronic instruments have brought a great diversity of sounds to our musical palette. The issue is that technology that eliminates human participation and leadership ought to be discouraged in Christian worship. We would do well to welcome innovation, creative sounds, and artistic expressions, but only when they serve the assembly gathered and the gospel that our assemblies proclaim.

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