

Dear St. Cecilia

Ron Koch



Pastor Ron Koch, the “Dear Abby” of the Lutheran church music world, is the voice behind St. Cecilia, and he welcomes your questions and concerns. You can reach Ron at st.cecilia@alcm.org or by snail mail to Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, 1735 Hecker Pass Highway, Gilroy, CA 95020. Phone calls are also welcome at (408) 842-2713. If the writer wishes, his/her identity may remain anonymous.

Dear St. Cecilia,

I recently undertook a new position as Music Director at a Lutheran (ELCA) congregation whose musical tradition is long and rich. I'm coming in on the heels of a rather unpleasant parting of the ways between the former Music Director and the Pastor, so I'm stepping gingerly...for now.

I am settling in and enjoy working with the vocal and handbell choirs. The only fly-in-the-ointment so far, at least for me, is a long-standing tradition of the choirs and handbells “performing” their anthem/special selection between the first and second readings (there is a very spotty practice of singing the psalm in this congregation and they are probably not ready for an every-week singing of the psalm). Coming from congregations that have, at minimum, recited the appointed psalm, this feels wrong and disrespectful of the liturgy, and I've done my best to move away from this practice. I have had the handbells providing prelude selections and music during the offering and the choirs singing during the offering, at communion, or, on occasion, a choral setting of the psalm of the day between the readings. This has been met with strong, and very vocal, opposition from both the choirs and ringers, as well as some members of the congregation.

Firstly, is this a fight worth fighting? Is this nothing more than my own personal bias showing and choral or instrumental selections between the first and second readings is a perfectly acceptable practice? I have looked at numerous liturgical/musical websites and I've been unable to find this addressed at all.

Or, if my gut-reaction is correct and making a change in this practice is a good idea, what are my best arguments for doing so? I've invoked an appeal for the integrity of the liturgy of the Word; that an anthem or other musical selection is the choir's offering to God and the congregation and where do “offerings” fit in the liturgy; and that the choir's desire to have the congregation listen quietly and attentively is a pretty poor excuse for placement of the anthem between the readings.

What say you, O Wise St. Cecilia?

Signed,

Mired in Liturgical Controversy

Dear Mired,

Thanks for writing. There are many issues, it seems to me. There is more than just one fly in the ointment.

1. It is a long process for a choir to move from performance choir to leader of the assembly song. It is worth it, but slowly is better than quickly. And you need the pastor on board.

2. Before moving too quickly on things, it might be worthwhile to discover the reason for the unpleasant parting of the ways between your predecessor and the pastor. Don't try the same things unless you also want to try to find another position.

3. Maybe a good first step would be to get that Psalm in place between the lessons. Over the summer maybe you can find different volunteers to take the leader part. Church publishers have great settings in the Psalter for worship. They are easy, mostly, but can also be more complex and led by the choir in the future. Again, the pastor needs to be part of this move to a more complete expression of the Word in Sunday worship including three readings and a sung psalm.

4. Various sources offer reasons for all sorts of variations in the liturgy. A compelling reason for including the psalm is that the three readings and the psalm

form a unit, with the first reading and the psalm chosen specifically for their thematic link to the gospel reading. (During the “non-green” times of the liturgical year, the second reading also complements the gospel reading thematically.) The ELCA worship website includes a FAQ entitled, “Why and how do we sing the Psalms?” You might find that article a good place to start. Go to www.elca/worship and click on the link to “Frequently Asked Questions” on the left side of the page. It’s the last FAQ under the “Music” heading. (While you’re there, you may want to check out some of the other FAQs!)

5. There is best practice, and there is also local practice. It’s not a matter of right and wrong. However, I think that it is good to try to move to best practice over time. One wag in a church asked the new church musician, “What are you trying to do around here? Set some new kind of standards?” Of course! That’s what we are trained to do. It sounds like you know best practices and are working to implement them in a local practice congregation. The key thing is how to go about it without alienating people. You are basing your direction on more than personal bias.

It may be that local practice “wins,” and you have to adjust. There are many “battles” we can fight, but some of them are not worth it. It also may be that longevity will bring about the changes you wish to make. In that case, patience is your best friend.

Blessings, St. Cecilia

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Stained glass windows in the axial chapel of Reims Cathedral were designed by Marc Chagall and made by Charles Marq in 1974.