

Still A High and Holy Calling?

by Zebulon M. Highben

A few months ago, at the behest of Mark Lawson of MorningStar Music, I interviewed Paul Westermeyer about his book *A High and Holy Calling: Essays of Encouragement for the Church and Its Musicians*.¹ If you're not familiar with this volume, its contents are aptly described by the subtitle. The title is derived from the final line of the "Role of the Cantor" print that ALCM produced a number of years ago.²

I have been thinking a lot about that interview, book, and print over the last several weeks. I confess that most days during this pandemic, I have not felt much like giving or receiving encouragement about anything. The rhythms of my calling have become unfamiliar and seem neither high nor holy. The never-ending flurry of contingency plans, alternate teaching scenarios, and revised budgets we are generating in academia is exhausting. And I find little joy in the herculean efforts we church musicians and pastors are undertaking to repackage worship and music into—well, something—that reaches the diaspora of our unassembled assemblies.

On the Wednesday evenings when I meet with choir members via Zoom, singing and playing *for* them since I cannot sing and play *with* them, I am blessed to see their faces but unsettled by

their silence. I watch their mouths move as they sing along with me, but no sound comes from their muted microphones; it is as if we are actors in some experimental theatre production.

Each Sunday when I arrive at Duke University Chapel to help lead our livestreamed worship services, I am struck by the vastness of the empty space. As eleven o'clock approaches and the two clergy, two musicians, and a single AV technician gather to begin, the emptiness of the nave seems to grow rather than lessen. We stand to sing the opening hymn, so spread out across the deep chancel that we cannot hear one another; in these moments, a different hymn text comes unbidden to my mind: "We need each other's voice to sing, each other's strength to love."³ The preacher looks a little uncomfortable as he stares directly into a distant camera instead of glancing around the room at the faces of the people. The presider awkwardly responds "and also with you" to herself so that the words are audible. The organist's hands and feet lift from the final chord of the postlude, which lingers in the nave of Duke Chapel for a full seven seconds without the usual competitive accompaniment of dispersing humanity. The empty building itself reminds us that what we are doing defies our conventional definitions of "right and salutary" worship.

Taken together, the cycle of Zoom choir rehearsals, online hymn sings, virtual worship services, and endless hours of screen time are all deeply unsatisfying, like empty calories. They certainly don't look like the normal components of a cantor's calling; some feel directly contrary to it. The title "content producer" seems more apt to this work than "cantor" or "worship leader." The whole enterprise feels slightly foolish, like something the writer of Ecclesiastes would comment upon:

I find little joy in the herculean efforts we church musicians and pastors are undertaking to repackage worship and music into—well, something—that reaches the diaspora of our unassembled assemblies.

Vanity of vanities, says the teacher,
 vanity of vanities! All is vanity. . . .
 All things are wearisome;
 more than one can express;
 the eye is not satisfied with seeing,
 or the ear filled with hearing.
 (Ecclesiastes 1:2, 8; NRSV)

And yet: I know that this wearisome work is more than vanity.

Every week at Duke Chapel, we hear from people attending to what we do in worship. Some of them express gratitude for a word of hope heard in the sermon or for a prayer petition that addressed racism and racial violence. Others offer critiques—this is church, after all—about what we should have done differently. Still others write merely to let us know they were present, perhaps to encourage us to keep going.

My choir members keep going, too, in regular Zoom sessions throughout our normal summer hiatus. They know these gatherings are not an adequate substitute for the embodied joy, fellowship, and collaborative music-making of real rehearsals. But the sessions are still strangely valuable, perhaps as a collective expression of defiance and hope—hope that this pandemic will end and we will be together again, defiance that not even our separation will prevent us from singing.

When I observe the fortitude of these people I am called to serve, my weariness does not lessen, but my grief and self-pity do.

I look again at the “Role of the Cantor” poster. This time, I notice the frequency of the word “people.” It appears six times—as often as the word “cantor,” and more often than the words “assembly,” “music,” and “musical” combined. I note that all six descriptions of the cantor’s work are framed in a single context: service to God’s people.

I page through Westermeyer’s book, and stumble across passages like this one that strike me as forcefully as Duke Chapel’s empty nave:

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There are times when the assembly is learning new things or is in the midst of turmoil. There are times when singing is under duress from both external and internal, conscious and unconscious sources. Like music itself, the church’s song is not a static condition.⁴

I consider again the nature of the cantor’s calling, and I remember two sayings about our work, temporarily overlooked, perhaps, in the daily stress of the pandemic.

1 The church’s song does not depend upon us.

In Martin Luther’s explanation to the third article of the creed, he reminds us that the Holy Spirit “calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies” the church.⁵ The church is formed and sustained by the power of the Holy Spirit. It cannot be saved by us nor will it cease to exist because of our action or inaction, in this time or any other.

What applies to the church also applies to its song. The Christian faith will take on sounded form in melody, rhythm, and harmony as long as there continues to be a church. The song endures. Cantors are stewards—not saviors—of the song and, as stewards, the nature of our stewardship changes depending on the circumstances. The song and its stewardship, as Westermeyer put it, are not static.

When we cannot make music together in the usual ways, in an era in which the very acts of communal singing and worshipping may be dangerous, we do our best to come up with alternatives. Why? Not because we must keep corporate worship going at all costs. Not because the internet needs one more virtual choir video or pre-recorded hymn accompaniment. Not because our busyness will save us, nor because we fear for our job security—though fear, like grief and exhaustion, is naturally palpable these days. We do this odd virtual work because:



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2 A cantor is a shepherd, and a shepherd's work is the welfare of the flock.

The label “shepherd” is more often applied to pastors than cantors. But cantors are shepherds, too. Our methods and tools are different but complementary. In “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague,” Luther wrote that:

Those who are engaged in a spiritual ministry such as preachers and pastors must likewise remain steadfast before the peril of death. We have a plain command from Christ, “A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep but the hireling sees the wolf coming and flees” [John 10:11]. For when people are dying, they most need a spiritual ministry which strengthens and comforts.⁶

Later, Luther applies the same standard to “all persons who stand in a relationship of duty or service toward one another.”⁷

Cantors steward the church’s song and shepherd those who sing it. It is our duty, now as much as ever. I may not feel much like singing, or editing recorded audio, or curating hymn playlists. But I have a duty to serve Christ’s people in song. In this time of great suffering, that duty means offering them—in whatever way I can, on whatever platform is available—a prophetic, melodic reminder that death does not have the last word.

And *that* is the high and holy work to which we have been called.

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Notes

1. Paul Westermeyer, *A High and Holy Calling: Essays of Encouragement for the Church and Its Musicians* (St. Louis: MorningStar, 2018). The interview can be viewed at https://youtu.be/u_wkcHWW1HA.
2. The print has been recently resurrected as a color poster, with calligraphy by Anne Kirchoff. See <https://alcm.org/marketplace/role-of-the-cantor-poster>.
3. Thomas Troeger, “We Need Each Other’s Voice to Sing,” © 1994 Oxford University Press.
4. Westermeyer, 13.
5. Martin Luther, *Small Catechism* (ELW, p. 1162; LSB, p. 327).
6. Martin Luther, “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague,” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 738.
7. Luther, “Whether One May Flee,” 739.