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“There must be mouse dirt with the pepper.” A Lutheran Approach to choosing songs

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This paper is a result of my doctoral research on the question, “What is a good song?” It is a response to the Praise and Worship movement, which started within the charismatic churches, but has spread to many mainline churches, including my own in South Africa. While I am supportive of much that is good in this movement, I am also critical of the content and theology of many of the songs. At the last conference in Soweto I gave a detailed critique of the theology of 50 of these songs. This paper focuses on what we as Lutherans can learn from our founder when it comes to choosing what and how to sing in our services.

The fairly provocative title of this paper is taken from one of Luther’s hymnal prefaces published in 1528. The publication of Luther’s first hymns had an explosive effect. Leaflets and hymnbooks containing his hymns were reprinted again and again and sold like hot cakes. Some publishers looking for easy money did not take much care in checking out their sources. Other writers added and tried to improve on Luther’s hymns, until more and more corrupted versions were in circulation. This prompted Luther to produce an authorized version and sign his hymns with his name, pleading that they may not be changed:

“...since I realize that there is going to be no end to this haphazard and arbitrary revision which goes on from day to day, and that even our first hymns are more and more mutilated with each reprinting, I fear that this booklet will ultimately fare no better than good books everywhere, namely, to be corrupted and adulterated by blunderheads until the good in it will be lost and only the bad remain. Similarly, we see in St. Luke 1 [:1-4] that in the beginning everyone wanted to write a gospel, until the true gospel was all but lost among so many gospels. The same thing happened to the books of Ss. Jerome, Augustine and many others. In a word, there must be mouse dirt with the pepper.” (LW 53: 318)

It seems that the words in the title were a common proverb at the time. Pepper was very rare and expensive, imported from the Spice Islands reached by very hazardous sea or land voyages. There must always have been the temptation for traders to mix other substances, even mouse-droppings, with the precious peppercorns to extend their stock. At least there seems to have been the suspicion that they did this. But could one simply discard something so precious and buy more? Would one risk eating mouse-dirt with pepper or rather discard the lot? It is typical of Luther to use such crass examples, but in a way it hits the nail on the head. It rings true of some of the results of my three year research into contemporary songs, and also songs produced through the ages: People have produced sizeable quantities of strong, spicy pepper and mounds and mounds of mouse-dirt. I myself would never have put it in those words. I prefer another picture which I have used in lectures: “You have to move a lot of rubble to find the gems”. There have been good and not so good songs produced in every generation, but I think seldom has there been the production of such enormous quantities of songs in such rapid succession, and seldom have they threatened so much to completely crowd out the good. This paper is a result of a major concern, that in my own church, the wave of “Praise and Worship” music, while enlivening worship and attracting people, is threatening to make our theology shallow and conform to the model of Western mega churches. What we should be singing in a Lutheran service is a source of conflict in congregations. Many of

our congregations now have worship teams, but even committed worship teams struggle to stay abreast of the deluge of music that is flooding the market. Congregations often get left behind, turning into spectators, while songs become disposables, used and then discarded. I have started a song collection for our congregations and have indeed found many wonderful, sparkling gems (or to use Luther's example) spicy peppercorns among the masses and masses of songs out there, but I have had to dig, sort and sift.

What should Lutherans be singing? Should we play it safe and stick with the authorized Lutheran hymnals, never touching the contaminated heap of peppercorns just outside our door? We know there is "shallow" and even "bad" theology in that heap. We would rather not touch it and throw out the pepper with the mouse-dirt, or the gems with the rubble. So we stick with the "safe" songs which have sustained generations. Some congregations do that, with the consequence that young people often leave and the service becomes static. This is what happened with post-Reformation Lutheran orthodoxy. They fixed and almost closed the "canon" of Lutheran hymns. Fortunately God continues to call poets and musicians. People continue writing, whether or not the institutional church approves. But it may interest those who love Paul Gerhardt's hymns, like I do, that it took about 50 years for his hymns to be included in official church hymnals. (Hesselbacher 1982: 170) We can be grateful that even then some people recognized that not everything new and contemporary was rubble.

So what should we be singing in Lutheran services. Should we be traditionalists and stay with the hymns of the faith of the sixteenth and seventeenth Century? Should we throw our doors open to the songs of the "Praise and Worship" movement, hand over to guitars and keyboards because that is what speaks to and draws people today? Should we stay with our hymns of good theology, even though most young people seemingly do not enjoy singing them, or shall we sing what people enjoy, never mind the theology? Or is this a false alternative? To go back to Luther's image: Do we eat the mouse dirt with the pepper or do we throw the whole lot away? Or is there, as I would like to argue, a way, perhaps painstaking but worthwhile, to separate mouse dirt from pepper, rubble from gem stones and at the same time preserve the best of the old?

Let me say right at the outset: Sifting and sorting is definitely not the easiest option. It is easier to say: There will be no worship team in my church, and the pastor continues to choose all the hymns, or on the other hand – I will allow a worship team and will give them completely free reign in the choice of hymns. Inviting people in with different ideas and different taste in music but trying to maintain some kind of basic theological standard is not easy at all.

This paper does not even try to give an answer to the many human and emotional stumbling blocks that can trip you up if you begin to try to separate the rubble from the gems. But I do want to attempt to list some principles I believe to be of importance which can be derived from the way Luther approached the issue of music and singing. Not because we Lutherans need to do everything the way Luther did – not at all, Luther was a human like everyone else, but because much of what Luther said in this regard makes sense, and is part of our heritage.

I want to just outline ten principles derived from Luther's own musical praxis and then go into each one in a bit more detail:

- 1) Music is a gift or creation of God. We can and may use it to praise God in whatever way we can.

- 2) We sing because of what Christ has done. We proclaim it, we praise and thank him.
- 3) We should sing Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs
- 4) We can and should sing about anything that affects our faith, about our joy and awe, but also our pain and doubt.
- 5) Songs should be accessible and understandable
- 6) Songs should teach good theology.
- 7) We should take along the best of the past, but leave behind what is theologically inappropriate.
- 8) Any instruments and any style can be used to praise God – no instruments or styles are “holier” than others, but we should be wary of inappropriate associations.
- 9) We should encourage people to write new creative tunes and texts which fit into contemporary styles. We should proclaim Christ to the generations today.
- 10) The congregation should participate, the service is not a performance

Discussion of Principles

1) Music is a gift or creation of God. We can and may use it to praise God in whatever way we can

To us who have grown up in church singing hymns or perhaps even in the choir, this may seem obvious. But in the time of Luther the role and function of music deeply divided the church. The way the different churches answered this question set the musical agenda for generations to come. Both Calvin and Zwingli were deeply suspicious of music and its power to manipulate emotions. They saw music as a human construct that could be easily misused. For this reason it needed to be strictly controlled in the service. Zwingli suggested there should be no music at all in church as this only detracted from the proclamation of the word. (Leith 1981: 211) Music was there for human entertainment and diversion and should be taught and practiced in the home. (Söhngen 1967: 41) Zwingli was apparently the most musically gifted of the three composers, but saw it as drawing people away from prayer, proclamation and contemplation. The church in Zürich did indeed try services without music for some decades, but then gave it up in favor of Calvinist psalm singing. (Söhngen 44)

Calvin’s approach to music had more success and as we know it, is practiced even today in some reformed churches. He too thought that music was a human invention, easily misused to distract and manipulate. (Calvin *Institutes* 3 XX:32) Therefore it should be carefully controlled. However music had a purpose as powerful carrier of the word. Sung words enter the human heart more deeply than spoken words, so it can be allowed, but carefully monitored. (Leith 81:211) Music should only be added to biblical words, or biblical paraphrases, so as not to allow simply human words to be manipulated. Thus

was born the Genevan Psalter, which was always sung unaccompanied. Instruments, Calvin believed, have a tendency to obscure or overshadow the word, which is the important element. (Söhngen 1967: 66) The tunes were also carefully chosen or commissioned to have a “sacred” rather than “secular” feeling. There was a clear separation here. He did not allow the use of secular styles, never mind tunes or instruments. Texts should be strictly biblical. (Söhngen 70).

Luther was different. He opened the gates wide for all kinds of ways to use music in the service. Music can praise God on its own terms. It is not simply a carrier of the word. Simple instrumental interludes have their space in the service. Choirs can be used, even if the rich harmonies sometimes obscure the proclamation, the harmonies themselves can praise the creator. (Söhngen 89) Luther encouraged people to write songs – words and tunes, and did not prescribe any style. People should praise God and proclaim his wonders with music. He writes:

“Nor am I of the opinion that the gospel should destroy and blight all the arts, as some of the pseudo-religious claim. But I would like to see all the arts, especially music, used in the service of Him who gave and made them.” (LW 53, 316)

This we should still encourage today. People, young and old should use this gift of God to express themselves, to proclaim the faith, to praise him and worship him. The lack of restrictions on the production of songs and church music unleashed amazing creativity and made the Lutheran areas the leaders in Church music production for centuries to come. That much mouse dirt was also produced cannot be denied. But the creativity produced many, many gems that we continue to treasure today. This is something I want to remember: Let people make music. Do not place too many restrictions on them. But then do set systems in place that can begin to separate out the best from the worst.

2) We sing because of what Christ has done. We proclaim it, we praise and thank him.

In the “Preface to the Babst Hymnal” of 1545 Luther gives an eloquent description of why Christians sing:

“For God has cheered our hearts and minds through his dear Son, whom he gave for us to redeem us from sin, death, and the devil. He who believes this earnestly cannot be quiet about it. But he must gladly and willingly sing and speak about it so that others also may come and hear it.” (LW 53:333)

Singing and speaking (singen und sagen) became quite a fixed saying in Luther. The phrase found its way into his famous Christmas carol, “From heaven above”. (LH 23) Singing is always a way of proclamation. Yes, it is also a way of worship, or praying, of lamenting. But first and foremost we sing to proclaim. Then we also praise and thank and worship.

I think this is something we Lutherans should keep in mind. For my taste, many of Luther’s hymns are too dry and didactic. We need not always follow this. However we should be very cautious when songs begin to be primarily about what we do in response to God, rather than about what Christ did. This is one of my main problems with contemporary worship music. We sing more about ourselves busy worshipping than about God and what he has done. We need to remember: What God has done for us is

certain and unchanging. It can “cheer our hearts” even when we are in periods of doubt and fatigue. What we do for God can “cheer our hearts” only in those times when we are high, and enthusiastic and sincere. When I am tired and anxious and can sing only a half-hearted Hallelujah, singing about the fact that I am singing so joyfully is unlikely to cheer my heart. Rather it is likely to make me feel guilty. But whether or not I am filled with joy, I can still sing about Christ saving me from sin, death and the devil.

So I can say that while not all Lutheran hymns need to be proclamation, we need to get concerned if there is not a decent size group of hymns that proclaims the message, and proclaims it in simple contemporary language.

We should sing songs not only to proclaim our adoration and praise to God but also to teach and build the character of believers. According to Luther’s view of the service – God serves us first. God does not need our praise and worship. We need it to be built up to be of service in the world. Our songs should give us a deep sense of what our faith is all about, to be able to sustain us in our daily life.

3) We should Sing Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs

Twice in the Pauline letters, Ephesians and Colossians, Paul encourages the congregation to sing “Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs”. While it is not clear whether this was a recognized division at the time, one can speculate that it refers to the song tradition of the Old Testament, the recognized Greek-style formal hymns of praise and spontaneous, new songs inspired by the Holy Spirit. Luther did exactly this in that he encouraged people to sing psalms, putting quite a few into a singable, metrical form. (Rössler 1990: 30) He encouraged the preservation of the best of the medieval, traditional hymns putting them into a singable vernacular form. And he wrote new songs in the styles and idiom of the time. Strangely enough, in spite of this clear biblical encouragement, churches throughout the ages have concentrated on one to the exclusion of the other: the Calvinists on Psalms, the Lutheran orthodox on classical hymns and the newer Pentecostal and charismatic movements on new songs inspired just recently by the holy Spirit. In my discussions with a worship team leader active in our church, she spoke of several songs as “old” which were written 20 to 30 years ago. This age seemed to disqualify them from her worship service which was aimed at attracting the youth. However concentrating on just one of the three invariably impoverishes the church. I do not deny that trying to integrate styles creates new problems and often leaves all groups feeling hard done by. But the alternative of splitting these up impoverishes everyone. It means that generations no longer sing together, that the youth are deprived of the wisdom of previous generations and the older generations are deprived of the vitality of the newer songs.

4) We can and should sing about anything that affects our faith. Not only happy songs.

In contrast to the reformed position that allowed only biblical passages and paraphrases, and the catholic position that allowed only the parts of the mass to be set to music and used in services, Lutheran hymn writers could write in contemporary language about anything that affected their faith. And not long after the Reformation songs on a vast range of themes began to fill the hymnbooks. Luther himself was an example here. He wrote on a great range of themes: songs for the church year, songs to teach, songs to comfort, musical settings for the liturgical pieces. (Rössler 1990:34) Most interesting is to

observe the themes of his first two sacred hymns. The first is the joyful song of confidence in faith: “*Dear Christians one and all rejoice*” (LW 53:219). But the very next theme he chose was a metrical version of the psalm of lament and penitence, Psalm 51: “*Out of the depths I cry to you*” (LW 53: 221). Was this deliberate or subconscious? Whichever it was, it shows that Luther had a healthy instinct for the need to keep themes in balance: we need cross and glory hymns, hymns of joy and hymns for comfort and to express our pains and doubts. Contemporary hymns have a serious gap here. I spent some time in my last paper critiquing the emphasis on happiness and on the message that you leave your problems behind you when you give your life to Jesus. This is a dangerous trend and Lutherans, with their emphasis on the theology of the cross, should sing a good balance of songs. They should sing enough songs that take human suffering seriously.

Luther pays tribute to the importance of songs as an encouragement in everyday problems. He repeatedly refers to David playing to King Saul as an illustration that music lightens burdens and drives away the Devil and temptation.

“One of the most beautiful and wonderful gifts of God is music. It is an enemy of Satan and can drive away many afflictions and evil thoughts. The devil cannot tolerate it. Music is one of the best kinds of Art. The notes make the text come alive. It drives the spirit of sadness away, as one can see with King Saul “(own translation – *Luther EA 62, 307*)

5) Songs should be accessible and understandable

It hardly needs mentioning that Luther got people to sing in German in the services, in a language they understood and in an idiom which was comprehensible to them. The principle that hymns and songs should be accessible and understandable is an important one, but of course also a difficult one. Accessible by whom? Many people argue with good reasons, that “A mighty fortress” is no longer accessible to people. The language and images are antiquated, the militant language inappropriate. I have sympathy for such sentiments, and as much as I love many of our old hymns, their language is no longer the language of today. However is it indeed true, as people also argue, that young people are no longer able to take in content of more than one verse? Is it really true that they are unable to pay attention to a theological thought process longer than one sound bite? Or can one say that if one sings enough simple, accessible songs, which touch people’s hearts, they will also be receptive and appreciative of one or two hymns that bring across a theology of greater depth? Here of course one can add the necessity to add to our services choruses and simple hymns in the language and idiom of the people involved. This also leads to openness to hymns of substance. It is not easy to lead young people into an appreciation of hymns. However if people they respect witness to the meaning of a hymn in their life of faith, a previously incomprehensible hymn may become accessible or even attractive. This is something I have experienced repeatedly.

Luther worked hard to make both the psalms and the medieval hymns accessible and understandable to his generation. This meant translation, smoothing out tunes and meters and simplifying text. (Rössler 1990: 45) However he trusted enough in the power of the old words to believe that they would reach people, just as the new songs in contemporary styles would. And indeed, many of them we still sing and love today. In his letter to Georg Spalatin 1523 he pleads for psalm paraphrases in contemporary language:

“Our plan is to follow the example of the prophets and the ancient fathers of the church, and to compose psalms for the people [in the] vernacular, that is, spiritual songs, so that the Word of God may be among the people also in the form of music. Therefore we are searching everywhere

for poets. Since you are endowed with a wealth [of knowledge] and elegance [in handling] the German language, and since you have polished [your German] through much use, I ask you to work with us on this project; try to adapt any one of the psalms for use as a hymn, as you may see [I have done] in this example. But I would like you to avoid any new words or the language used at court. In order to be understood by the people, only the simplest and the most common words should be used for singing; at the same time, however, they should be pure and apt; and further, the sense should be clear and as close as possible to the psalm. You need a free hand here: maintain the sense, but don't cling to the words; [rather] translate them with other appropriate words. I myself do not have so great a gift that I can do what I would like to see done here...." (LW 49, 68-9)

In the end Martin Luther out of necessity wrote more and more and showed a great gift for putting the gospel into simple, understandable sentences, many of which are still sung today.

While I believe that one verse choruses have their valuable place I think that we underestimate our young people if we believe they cannot take in song content of more than a few lines. A student of ours conducted an extensive survey of worship preferences among our congregations. It became clear that while most people had their preference in music, there were very few that exclusively liked only the one or the other style (Lütge 2008, 35-36). Most young people have a favorite stock of hymns that sustains them too.

6) Songs should teach good theology

That songs should teach theology is something that seems a foreign idea in the Praise and Worship movement. Here songs are our expression of love and adoration to God. Generally today, the purpose of songs is not seen as teaching. This was perhaps a particularly Lutheran approach to singing. Luther deliberately used songs to teach. Knowing that melody is a powerful aid to memory and to engraving truths in people's minds and hearts he set his main teachings to music, including his whole small catechism in rhyme form. (LW 53: 253, 272,278,281,296, 300) Some of these hymns are so dry that I have never used them and probably never will. But this "teaching" component remained part of Lutheran tradition, and hymn writers kept up the didactic element of Lutheran hymns. Until today the hymnbook and songs form a vital part of instruction in confirmation class. I know for me in the children's ministry, songs are key. I know—the children will probably forget the lesson and what I told them, but they will remember the song. I would argue that people's theology is shaped primarily by songs, and that songs teach theology whether we like it or not. The question is what kind of theology they teach.

Fortunately there are many contemporary songs which teach quite admirably. There are songs which express the essence of faith in just a handful of accessible lines. And in the later published song books, songs with more content, contemporary hymns are making a comeback. Perhaps people are now rediscovering that nothing can sustain you in times of doubt quite as well as a song which expresses the truths of faith in our own contemporary words.

7) Take along the best of the past, but leave behind what is theologically inappropriate

As was said above, Luther tried to make the traditions of his time accessible to people, by translating and adapting. He was much more free with his tradition than most

of us dare to be, but he had the right idea that tradition needs to be adapted if it is to be preserved. (Rössler 1990: 42) He preserved whatever he could, but without compromising on theological integrity. In his Preface to the Burial Hymns of 1542, he speaks of the beauty of much Catholic burial music, but its theologically problematic nature:

“This is also why we have collected the fine music and songs which under the papacy were used at vigils, masses for the dead and burials. Some fine examples of these we have printed in this booklet and we, or whoever is more gifted than we, will select more of them in the future. But we have adapted other texts to the music so that it may adorn our article of the resurrection, instead of purgatory with its torment and satisfaction which lets their dead neither sleep nor rest. The melodies and notes are precious. It would be a pity to let them perish. But the texts are non-Christian and absurd. They deserve to perish.” (LW 53, 327)

It should be done with caution, but adapting or rewriting old, traditional hymns has always been a part of what hymnal commissions have done. Those who produced the last German hymnal, the *Evangelisches Gesangbuch*, have carefully and sensitively tried to adapt antiquated language and substitute gender exclusive language, where this did not ruin the poetry. It demands a fair amount of sensitivity to change poetic texts without losing their power, and should never be done without consideration. But it has restored some old favorites which had turns of phrases which were strange or problematic. In some cases, poets were commissioned to rewrite verses completely. In my own collection I have included a new version of “*Onward Christian soldiers*” which I was theologically convinced should no longer be sung, in spite of the fact that people love it. Now we can sing “*Onward Christian pilgrims*” (CAH 531) to the same tune, and hopefully people will be happy. We need to look critically at the texts we sing. Do they imply that we can do something to gain salvation and God’s favor? Do they imply that all the good is on our side, and all the evil out there in the world (which a lot of spiritual warfare songs do)? Or do they speak of spiritual warfare (if they do), as something that happens inside each one of us as well? I can speak of many other problematic phrases in both old and new songs.

Older songs no longer in copyright we can adapt, if this is sensitively done. Newer songs are a greater problem. Many of us have simply changed lines, and sometimes there is only one offending line, which we may object to, in an otherwise great song. It is not legal to change lines, unless one would get permission from the author—a good rule in itself, but one that many people have subverted. I have changed sexist language in many a song without the required permission. But if I ever publish my collection I will need to be more vigilant.

I mentioned in my previous paper the highly theologically dangerous line in a contemporary worship song:

“His Spirit in us releases us from fear,
The way to Him is open, with boldness we draw near.
And in His presence our problems disappear;
Our hearts responding to His love” (Gibson, Maranatha CD 3,2)

In our youth song book the song appears with the line: “In his presence our purpose becomes clear.” I applauded this change, even though knowing this was not quite legal. In such a case it is probably safer to discard the whole song.

8) Any instruments and any style can be used to praise God—no style or instruments are “holier” than others, but we should be wary of inappropriate associations

Unlike the other reformers who insisted on unaccompanied singing, Luther allowed instruments their space in the service. There were no “sacred” or “secular” instruments in his estimation. (Steinert 2007: 50) All music and all styles can be used to praise God. However it should be used appropriately. Luther did not deny that there is much music out there that does not serve God. One should be vigilant and lead people into wholesome and inspiring music.

Similarly he speaks of the importance of training the youth in wholesome church music:

In his words, the young “should at any rate be trained in music and other fine arts – something to wean them away from love ballads and carnal songs and to teach them something of value in their place, thus combining the good with the pleasing, as is proper for youth.” (LW 53, 316)

The famous line: “*Why should the devil have all the good tunes*” often ascribed to Luther was not actually said by Luther, but by General William Booth, the founder of the Salvation army. The Salvation army did exactly this, borrow popular tunes from all over and write evangelistic texts to them. (Kingsway 1981: CD Write up p 2) Luther was more cautious. He did borrow a secular dance tune for the original of his “*From heaven above to earth I come*”, but in the end wrote his own tune for the text, perhaps because people objected to the associations. (Kulp 1958:44) But in general he was supportive of the general trend to use folk tunes and wrote in the style itself in the case of “*Dear Christians one and all rejoice*” which may have been a reworking of a folk tune. (Kulp 1958: 370)

We can use secular styles, and even secular tunes, but the associations should be appropriate. Personally I am no great friend of worship songs, which sound exactly like the muzak in the shops and dull the senses more than draw attention to the words. I have also experienced some extremely bad matches of secular tunes to new words, a case in point being the Swiss folk tune “*Burlebübli*” matched to a text about discipleship and following Jesus. (MP 302) Here some sensitivity to the feel of tunes and texts is called for. In our youth at the moment it has become popular to sing table grace to well-known rock and roll tunes. I enjoy them and everyone can join in easily. I think, however it would probably have been inappropriate to do this in the age of rock and roll when the stars were idolized by that generation of young people. Now the associations are more muted and less problematic.

9) We should encourage people to write new creative tunes and texts which fit into contemporary styles. We should proclaim Christ to the generations today.

Luther encouraged people to write. He really began writing hymns, because others were not taking up the cue fast enough and developed an amazing talent for it. His hymns, especially those with original tunes based on folk styles obviously hit a nerve and spread far and wide. Good songs, which speak to people of that generation have great missionary potential. We need to find such songs and encourage those with talent to write. And here it is important, that although we look for quality, we again do not stifle creativity. This is a fine line. But while I am indeed sometimes irritated with the low quality of contemporary songs, it would be worse if nothing at all was written in contemporary styles. We need to encourage creativity, support creative people, and yet take the trouble to sift out the best and not swamp people with the worst. In Africa this

definitely means allowing African styles and music into the church. We can sing African choruses and encourage people to compose new choruses in African style for our time. We need songs that touch a “nerve”, that stir people’s emotions. Good theology without an element of emotional involvement is dry and ultimately leaves people empty.

10) The congregation should participate; the service is not a performance

One of the really difficult things about the advent of worship teams is the danger of the congregation getting left behind and the service turning into a concert. This is something I have observed at big charismatic churches, I have attended. Usually the whole congregation sang only one or two songs. Most of the rest was “performed” by the band and lead singers, often with the congregation as “audience” clapping and humming along, perhaps joining in at the chorus, as they would in a pop concert. This is a movement backwards from Luther, who tried to get the service out of the hands of professionals only, back into the hands of congregants. (Steinert 2007: 64) I am the first to admit that I sometimes get frustrated at the slow pace at which one can teach the congregation new songs. Nevertheless, one needs to be sensitive to this. I have told my students a rule of thumb, which I admit to have broken myself on many occasions: No service should have more than two completely unknown songs. I know it is true for me, that I feel I have not really been at a service if I have been unable to sing along. Luther placed the service firmly back in the hands of the congregation mainly through the singing, and saw this as one of the many places where the priesthood of all believers becomes a reality, as people proclaim the word, praise God and intercede in song. This should not be lost in a Lutheran service.

Conclusion

What am I saying about the minefield of sorting rubble from gems, mouse-dirt from peppercorns? Firstly we should not be afraid of letting the new into our churches. Even at the risk of allowing in some rubble, we should open our doors to those who want to present us with the latest gems. We should encourage young talent in worship teams, and find ways to guide and lead these enthusiastic people. We recently had a first training workshop for worship teams in our circuit. Many people came. And while there was an undercurrent of warning: “Please don’t stifle or restrict us”, there was also an appreciation of the fact that they can learn to do their task better if they begin to reflect on what they are doing. I have found that the simple word “balance” makes much sense to people. When they begin to realize that I do not want to shoot down “their” style, but simply to ask about whether themes and content is balanced, they become more open, to agreeing to sing a few more older, more well-known hymns in the worship service, to looking at the texts, to try to find songs that fit in with the themes of the service. And this alone, a growing sensitivity to service theme and church year has deepened and enriched the search for new songs.

It takes effort to sift. It takes sensitivity to encourage worship teams to sift, but I believe the effort is well worth it, as in the end, the generations begin to appreciate what the other has to give to the worship of our God together.

Questions for Group Discussion

1. What is the situation with singing in the church in my congregation / parish / church? What are the main debates, fixed opinions? Where do you stand?

2. Do you feel we should sing “Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual songs”? What of contemporary songs, of traditional hymns and of choruses from the local culture should we integrate in Lutheran Worship?
3. Is room for creativity given in our churches? Is there too much or too little freedom? Do we lose our identity if we let people be too free in their liturgical expression?
4. What for you is the non-negotiable “essence” of Lutheran worship?

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