

WORSHIP PLANNING TOOLBOX FOR LAY LEADERS: CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP AND HYMN SELECTION

Hi, I'm Cathy Ammlung, and this is the next-to-last installment of "Worship Planning Toolbox For Lay Leaders." We're going to talk about contemporary worship services and music. Now, I'm a more traditional worship/music kind of person. So I offer this with humility. Also, not all contemporary services are alike. There's a wide array of contemporary music, and many worship leaders are adept in finding what they need for their congregations. Still, you might appreciate learning a few things, and planning your contemporary services in a way that focuses on our consistent worship planning goals: Being encountered by God, glorifying God, and building up people as better worshippers of God.

First, let's talk about what contemporary worship *is*. It's *not* simply swapping out old German chorales and foursquare English tunes for heavily amplified Christian songs with drums, guitars, and a snappy beat. Much contemporary-style worship originated in evangelical, charismatic, and community church settings. Formal liturgies featuring the Kyrie, Hymn of Praise, and Creed aren't common. That's not to say there *isn't* structure – we'll get to that shortly. But it means that those *traditional* structural components of the Great Tradition of western Christianity (Lutheran, Catholic, Anglican/Episcopal, some Methodist and Presbyterian, and some others) may be missing or greatly abbreviated. That also means that worship planners who come from more traditional backgrounds might feel out of their element. They may defer to praise team leaders whose own background, experience, or preference is mostly *non*-traditional. That can lead to tension, confusion, and a sense of working at cross purposes. So let's tackle that and see if you can work more cooperatively and productively. Because you all have

similar goals: Be encountered by God. Glorify God. Be formed into better worshippers of God.

We'll start by recalling a key point in the very first video in this series. *All good worship services have a flow, a structure, that in some way helps accomplish those goals of encounter, glorification, and formation.*

How do traditional and contemporary worship accomplish that? Think of a traditional service as a river. It has a flow, whether it meanders slowly or ripples swiftly. The “riverbanks” are the liturgical infrastructure of the service. Those unchanging elements direct the course of God’s living water each week. We prepare to hear God’s Word; listen to that Word; respond to the Word; receive the Word made flesh; and are sent with the Word into our everyday world. Regardless of what day in the church year or which readings are used, the overall structure of traditional Sunday worship generally has that flow. The shape of the service helps to shape our worship, *and* our identity as worshippers of the Triune God.

Some – though not all – contemporary worship is structured differently. Picture the ebb and flow of waves crashing onto the shore. That’s the mighty power and presence of God encountering us! The gathering music may start gently, then build in intensity of praise and joy. Then it may subside to a more meditative style, in which receptiveness to the Word is emphasized. Prayers and Scripture reading, testimonials and prophetic utterances, more prayers, a sermon or discussion of the Word are all interspersed with songs. Those songs may build and ebb again in emotional and spiritual intensity. Instrumental music might quietly interweave with free prayer, laying on of hands, and the like. Generally the waves of song will build and subside several times before the service concludes

with “sending songs.” The ebb and flow of waves of the Word are another way in which worship is shaped, and we are shaped as worshippers of the Triune God.

Here’s another way to see differences in structure and emphasis between traditional and contemporary worship. Traditional worship is comprised of Word and Sacrament (in different proportions, based on the denomination and on congregational circumstances). The Word, in the Lutheran version, is properly divided as Law and Gospel. God’s “You *got* to” and his, “In Christ, you *get* to,” as Professor Robert Bertram used to say. The Triune God is encountered and received largely, though not exclusively, through the Second Person, the Son of God, the Word made flesh and given to us in his very Body and Blood. *Occasionally*, the spoken Word can crowd out or overshadow the importance of the Sacrament, which is one of the principal struggles we have within traditional worship venues.

Contemporary worship is often comprised of Word and *music*. It’s almost impossible to imagine a *spoken* contemporary service! The music, while not a sacrament per se, has a sort of sacramental *quality* that invokes and partakes of the presence *of the Holy Spirit*. The Triune God is encountered and received largely, though not exclusively, through the *Spirit* of the risen Christ, who blows like the wind where he wills. That’s going to be expressed somewhat differently in charismatic and non-charismatic churches, but the emphasis on Spirit-led and Spirit-filled worship remains constant. *Occasionally*, the music can crowd out or overshadow not only the Sacrament of the Altar, but even the spoken Word, which is one of the principal struggles we have in contemporary worship venues.

As an aside: I’m not going to address the non-sacramental character of some contemporary worship, as that’s a topic unto itself. Besides, many of your

congregations struggle to have regular communion services at all because you don't have regular pastoral coverage or the ability to use the reserved sacrament. Just be aware of that dynamic; maybe we can address it down the road.

Anyhow: maybe you see why contemporary and traditional worship "feel" so different: it's not just a matter of the style of music or type of instruments!

That difference leads to others – and some of those secondary differences can lead to tension and misunderstanding in congregations that have more than one style of worship. Many traditional services accommodate *some* contemporary elements – usually the choice of music, dropping some liturgical elements like the Kyrie or Lamb of God, a casual style, and finding ways to focus on the person and work of the Holy Spirit. They're often called blended or family services. Whether this feels seamless or awkward depends a lot on the theological and liturgical wisdom of those who plan such services!

Some contemporary services chafe at incorporating almost *anything* associated with traditional worship practices! Responsive readings, confession and absolution, a Creed, Old Testament lessons, and frequent celebrations of Communion are sometimes resisted. I supply preached at a congregation that *refused to allow any Scripture readings at all*, apart from whatever Scriptural citations might occur in a sermon! That's an extreme example. But other congregations balk at, say, responsively reading the Psalms, deeming it – their words – "too traditional." The lectionary and church year – same thing. So for people coming from a more traditional worship background, a contemporary service can feel strangely untethered from the larger Church and the long history of Church traditions and practices. Again, I recall preaching at a contemporary

service on the Sunday after Christmas. *And there was not one mention of Christmas, no Christmas music, no visual or auditory reminder of the Nativity of our Lord anywhere in the service!* Well... except for my sermon, which was an extended children's sermon based on the carol "The Twelve Days of Christmas," which I had everyone singing with gusto throughout!

So: how do we even begin to plan a contemporary service and selecting music for it – or is *planning* too traditional and constricting of the Spirit's activity? That's a serious question, not a snark. Can we connect contemporary worshippers to the larger Church, the Great Tradition, which has helped form untold millions of people as worshippers of God, while being open to the Spirit's presence as we're led to encounter and glorify God?

As they say, your mileage may vary; you know your congregation and worship leaders better than I ever could. You know what kind of collaborative worship planning will be possible. Here are a few suggestions.

First: be absolutely clear about your underlying motivation. Regardless of worship style, you gather to be encountered by the living and triune God; to worship that God in Spirit and in truth; and to be more perfectly formed as worshippers of that God. This same God sends you into his broken and death-shadowed world with the priceless good news of reconciliation with the Father, by being united with the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. That's the non-negotiable bottom line of planning traditional AND contemporary worship services! And it probably needs to be repeated often, because we humans are forgetful and therefore we sweat the small stuff.

Second: there are some reasonable parameters within which good, faithful contemporary worship can function in a Lutheran setting. *There should be a strong emphasis on proclaiming God's Word through the Scriptures.* Don't eliminate the Old Testament, either. How can people be formed to worship in Spirit and in truth if they aren't immersed in the very Word that formed the identity of Jesus himself, his disciples, and the early Church? How can they understand atonement, the Lamb of God, the I Am statements, and Jesus the Good Shepherd if they don't hear those words and concepts in their original setting? That's becoming sadly true, by the way, in far too many so-called "traditional" services, too. In the interest of time, they lop off the trunk of the very tree to which Gentile Christians have been grafted!

In a bit, I'll give some suggestions about how music can make this easier. For now, let's move to my third point for planning contemporary worship. News flash: even contemporary services share two major features with traditional worship. *They all have a beginning and an end!* Plan your music accordingly! Encourage your musicians and worship leader to intentionally select songs that help people set their concerns and distractions at the door, and to prepare to meet their Savior as he comes to them in, yes, word and music. At the end, songs rightly focus on thanksgiving for blessings received, and for guidance as we take God's Word into the world in many ways.

Third: as I noted earlier, much contemporary worship has an ebb and flow dynamic. Not only does music build and subside in intensity; it also brackets the spoken and performative elements of the service, such as Scripture reading, communion, laying on of hands, healing, prayer, preaching, and the like. Wherever they occur in the service, think of a miniature beginning and end to each of *these*

elements. Then, think about planning the songs to prepare folks for what is coming up in each element, and then reflecting on or expressing thanks for them when each section is completed. That will simply give a bit more form to the ebb and flow, while helping – shaping – people to hear or participate more fully. In short, helping them become better worshippers.

Fourth, remember that the church year isn't meant as a straitjacket. The colors and themes provided often-unspoken ways of focusing people's attention so they were more receptive and responsive to God. That's not a bad thing!

Fifth, especially if you're in a vacancy and rely on lay preachers and supply pastors, don't scorn the lectionary. Yes, allow for the Spirit to prompt and guide; but trust that He can do so rather efficiently by dropping some broad hints about what to reflect on in a homily! Plus, it is courteous and respectful toward a more traditionally-grounded supply preacher if you say, "the scriptures for the day are thus and so." Most supply pastors are flexible and willing to lead whatever worship format your congregation is used to. But realistically, they will generally be grateful for the structure that the lectionary provides to their thought process!

That also allows you to see what songs are available (and doable in your setting) that might actually focus on themes or phrases from one or more of the lessons. This helps tie the spoken Word to the sung response, which embeds it more deeply into the hearts of the worshippers. If one or more Scriptures refer to, say, God as the Shepherd of his people, that gives you and the musicians a focal point for selecting at least *some* songs for that day. No, not everything has to be matchy-matchy. But as brackets for the Scripture or sermon, themes of shepherding, guidance, and protection can surely be powerful. Knowing ahead of

time what Scriptures will be used can also save you from some awkward moments in which the theme or tone of the songs is really mismatched to the Scripture!

Finally, remember how I said that some contemporary worship rejects formal elements of traditional liturgy, such as confession and forgiveness, or (primarily) readings from the Old Testament? There are some possible work-arounds that can at least occasionally be incorporated into the service. For example, there's a wonderful contemporary song called "Beauty for Ashes." The words are powerful: *"And you give me beauty for ashes, and you pull me close to your heart. You have turned my mourning to dancing – that's what you do, that's who you are. Brand new eyes, brand new hands, you have wiped away my past. Brand new day, brand new life, you have pulled me from the lies. You save, you save!"* What a marvelous song of confession, forgiveness, and encounter with Jesus! You can use that, or something similar, near the beginning of your service!

Similarly, there are tons of contemporary songs that directly quote or paraphrase verses from the Psalms, prophets, and other portions of the Old Testament. Even if your congregation doesn't generally hear those Scriptures read aloud, they can hear and sing at least some of them in so many readily available songs. In fact, that's one of the strengths of contemporary music: the frequent singing of, or echoing of Scripture, which embeds it more deeply in the mind and heart than passive hearing alone.

So here's how I went about searching for some songs that quoted or echoed themes from Psalm 51. That is a Psalm for Ash Wednesday and at least a couple of other occasions. It's also closely tied to confession and repentance themes. So I went to Grok, the AI assistant on the X platform, and asked: Find contemporary

Christian songs on YouTube, lyrics superimposed, containing one or more of the following parameters: Based on Psalm 51; Admission of fault/confession of sin; Asking for God's pardon and help; confidence that God will help us.

Grok's answer: *here are several contemporary Christian hymns (modern CCM or acoustic worship style from the 2010s-2020s) available on YouTube with lyrics superimposed and timed to the music, directly matching one or more of your parameters. I (Grok) prioritized songs explicitly based on Psalm 51(which inherently covers all 4 points through confession, pleas for mercy/cleansing, and hope in renewal/joy). I also added strong confession/repentance tracks for variety.*

Grok then listed several videos naming the song, the artists, the YouTube link, and a highlight of what words and themes were strongly present. These were listed as free, with clearly superimposed lyrics, fitting contemporary worship contexts.

Well alrighty! My takeaway from that simple exercise: if you list several pertinent parameters, AI will give you some selections without you needing to spend hours sifting through YouTube! It might help you and your contemporary musicians as you work together to select songs that are Scripturally based, fit a theme or Scripture for the day, and that the congregation can sing if it's projected. This may be old hat for folks who regularly select music for contemporary worship, but it might be helpful if, like me, you're not sure where to start!

As always, you can give a brief word of explanation that may help make it "fit." And be sensitive to the expertise of your musicians, the style of your worship, and the "ebb and flow, Spirit-led" dynamic of a contemporary service.

Add just one or two songs that are intentionally tied to the lectionary, confession, or whatever. Hopefully, your people will appreciate that connection being made, and see that the Spirit is using those “specially selected” songs to more powerfully encounter them with God’s presence, to shape more profound glory, praise, and adoration in their responses, and to shape them more fully and perfectly into worshippers of the Triune God.

The next video may be the last in this series of worship planning toolbox sessions, We’ll take a look at the prayers of the church, or intercessory prayers, and other times and occasions in which you as lay leaders may be called upon to pray. Until next time, God be with you, and to him alone be the glory.