How Can I Keep from Singing: The History and Practice of Church Music, PT 725
Trinity School for Ministry/North American Lutheran Seminary
Spring 2021

Instructor: Dr. Amy C. Schifrin, STS
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Course Description:
Christians inherited the practice of singing of the faith from the world of ancient Judaism, where the singing of the psalms in temple and in synagogues were central. Throughout the centuries that practice of singing and of instrument music in the Christian church has created a rich repository of hymns and other forms of sacred music by which the faithful Christians continue to give glory to God. This course will take us on a historical journey through this music and will allow us to reflect upon how the music in the Western church, particularly hymn, chant, and sacred song have shaped our theologies and have been shaped by them. Practicums will also be available for those students who wish to learn basic skills in reading music.

Required texts:

Key Words in Church Music: Definition Essays on Concepts, Practices, and Movement of Thought in Church Music, Carl Schalk, editor (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing 2004)

Liturgy and Music: Lifetime Learning, Robin Leaver, Joyce Ann Zimmerman, editors (Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 1998)


Sing with Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Hymnody, Harry Eskew and Hugh T. McElrath (Nashville, Church Street Press, 1995)


Recommended texts:


Leading the Church’s Song, Robert Buckley Farlee and Eric Vollen, editors (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 1998) Important and useful information (including demo CD's) about ways to understand and lead people in singing music from a variety of the world’s cultures.

The Hymnal 1982 Companion, Raymond F. Glover, editor (Church Publishing Corporation, 1990) Three volumes, the first of which contains thirty-seven essays about various aspects of church music as well as a brief glossary. (or Hymnal Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship, Mary Kay Stulken (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1981)

Theology, Music, and Time, Jeremy Begbie (Cambridge University Press, 2012)

Relation to Curriculum: This course is an elective for students in all degree programs. (Assignments for STM and D. Min. students will be tiered.) There are no prerequisites.

Course Objectives: This course is designed to acquaint students with the rich history and practices of the church’s music that is our inheritance as 21st century Christians. It is especially designed to give students a basic knowledge of the hymnic repertoire as they prepare for parish or missionary leadership as well as connect the historical narrative of the church with the major genres of church music. Holy Scripture and confessional traditions, liturgical history and theology, and hymnic performance practices will shape our lectures, discussion, and pracitcums so that students will be prepared to faithfully lead congregations in giving glory to God through hymns, chant, and song.

Learning Outcomes:
1. Be well versed in the Scriptural roots and historical developments of the Church’s musical expressions especially the Reformation churches move to vernacular hymnody
2. To be able to articulate the theological interrelationship between the sung word and theological commitments, and how these affect each other
3. To lead in congregational song with a growing confidence
4. To know how to work collaboratively with church musicians in a way that allows the richness of the inherited tradition to inform weekly musical decisions
5. To know the available resources for congregational singing and possess the ability to evaluate such resources theologically, musically, and ritually
6. To be able to understand and articulate the tensions present in a congregation’s musical choices as a lived tradition which seeks to continue the church’s mission in new contexts.

Course assignments:
1. A 5 minute oral report on an assigned chapter in Leaver and Zimmerman (15 pts)
2. An 1000-1200 word reflection paper on either Kroeker and McGann (25pts), due week 6
3. A final project or paper (2000-2500 words) on a topic to be approved by March 15 to be presented in class during the last two class sessions of the semester (60 pts)