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Music in Churches: Nourishing Your Congregation's Musical Life

Linda J. Clark

New York: The Alban Institute, 1994

xv + 121 pp. \$20.15 Cdn.

This study is the fruit of a huge project undertaken by Clark, a church musician, through the Boston University School of Theology, called the Music in Churches Project. An extensive survey of church music was sent to 1,700 persons in 24 congregations and parishes in the USA. Of these, 824 responded. The survey asked questions about all aspects of parish musical life. The original questionnaire, 32 pages long, is included as an appendix to this book. On the basis of the responses, Clark has written this short book on music in the church. It is a fascinating and valuable study which will be useful to both clergy and musicians. It attempts to answer questions regarding the music of the church and choir, and why music in worship is so often a lightning rod which attracts criticism and causes conflict.

She begins with some statements about music in the church. All decisions regarding the regulation of music and worship in a congregation, she claims, should flow from the life and faith of the congregation. This is at the centre of any successful music program: there is a vital connection between music and the life of a congregation. Music not only *expresses* faith, it *forms* faith. Our favourite hymns ARE our faith. Our music is an aural image of the shape and feeling of our faith. Pastors and musicians do not create this: it is already there, before we come upon the scene. We simply join the tradition, standing on the shoulders of those who have come before.

That's one side. The other side, she says, is that pastors and musicians are to draw people forth in faith through worship and music. They are prophets who challenge the existing idols of a congregation. Therefore, she says, successful music and worship is a compromise or balancing act, which respects peoples' tradition while at the same time drawing them ahead in faith.

It is critical to remember, Clark says, that people and churches differ. Church music programs are not generic or interchangeable. She uses the term coherence to help us understand how worship and music planning in any situation can function. Coherence means integration, harmony, working together, in a situation. But there are two kinds of coherence at work in the function of worship and music in life. There is internal coherence, the kind for which most pastors and church musicians strive. This seeks elegant design, integrated structure, and clear meaning, the kind of worship where all the parts of a service are organized around a central theme, whether it be the lectionary, Mother's Day, Advent, Thanksgiving, and so on. However, this is not the kind of coherence average worshipers want. For most of them, coherence means an experience that involves the fabric of their lives,

inside and outside worship. Both these views of coherence are important to worship. Sensitivity to both is crucial. Coherence must be both aesthetic and practical, respecting both ideals and life-experience.

Clark recognizes and discusses the issue of power in worship and music planning. Control over the music program of a church is often an issue, and often involves the choir. The choir can be a divisive factor, what she calls the "War Department" in a church. And so it is important to ask how the choir functions in worship, and to whom the choir is accountable.

She discusses the issue of planning for worship, and shares a number of insights regarding the process of planning for coherent worship. To some they will be obvious, but they still bear repeating: bad planning structures can create bad relationships; planning can be informal (such as phone calls) or formal (such as staff meetings), but should be intentional and responsible; planning should grow out of the common life of the congregation, and be congruent with the values and intentions of the congregation; planning should result in people taking responsibility for segments of worship, and give them the authority to make decisions without constant criticism.

In line with this theory of music in churches, Clark provides good advice on choosing music. Each congregation has its own culture and history. If the music chosen and used in worship consistently violates this, and is irrelevant to the congregation, it will be ignored. This does not renounce the prophetic role of the musician, but recognizes that musicians, like pastors, are teachers.

She notes that the most bitter conflicts today revolve around traditional music versus so-called popular music. She warns us not to confuse quality with style. Judgments made completely on aesthetic merits are inadequate, even when they also include theological and liturgical considerations. This is because we are earthen vessels, and all our judgments are influenced by our own values and background. We need to re-learn how to evaluate, from people whose lives are both wider and narrower than our own. This means learning about the musical- and faith-lives of those in the pews. Our music is an iconic symbol-system, which reflects our faith and culture. No community or individual takes lightly a threat to the symbol-system which undergirds the meaning of their lives. It hurts when what you love and offer is rejected, ignored, or scorned.

Clark's book is a unique study of music in the church, exploring territory as yet uncharted. The issues raised are current and real, and you will find yourself saying, "Hey, that's our church!" Her aesthetically neutral stance may concern some readers. Some may even wish her conclusions had gone further. But this is, in a sense, a "work in progress". Read the book for your own and your church's interest. Apply and use the questionnaire. Look at your own presuppositions in light of Clark's ideas.

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