

## **“Glorious the song, when God’s the theme”**

(Christopher Smart, *Song to David*, 1763)

by Dan Locklair

*Spotlight on Music*, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church/Winston-Salem, NC

22 January 2012, 10:10 AM (Colhoun Room)

Thank you, David. And, David, I promise to try and not mess up the solid reputation of your splendid, ongoing Rector’s Forums! I also wish to thank Lucy Painter, Ed Robins, the Year-Round Stewardship Committee, and Darby Everhard for your kind invitation – a true honor – to speak today on behalf of St. Paul’s music ministry at this Stewardship kick-off.

I have titled this talk, “*Glorious the song, when God’s the theme.*” The title comes from a poem entitled **A Song to David** by the 18<sup>th</sup> century British poet, Christopher Smart. Though Mr. Smart wrote for a number of popular magazines, it is through his creative Christian writings that we remember him (with several of his hymns in our hymnal). British composer Benjamin Britten set words of Christopher Smart in his cantata, **Rejoice in the Lamb**. Mr. Smart was a high church Anglican. Poor man, though, for he was not exactly “smart” in dealing with his father-in-law, the publisher John Newbery. It seems Mr. Newbery had a “Commission of Lunacy” drawn up against his son-in-law. Mr. Smart was then committed to London’s St. Luke’s Hospital for Lunacy for “religious mania.” History does report that Mr. Smart had a habit of praying loudly in public. But, history also leads us to suspect that Mr. Smart was hardly a “lunatic,” but, instead, a deeply religious man who just happened to owe his father-in-law some money. Talk about family values!

Giving thanks to all committed (even if committed!) poets and composers who have written texts and tunes to fill our vast and ongoing body of hymnody, using your handout of hymns from **Hymnal 1982**, may we begin by singing Hymn # 377 **All People That on Earth Do Dwell** to the 16<sup>th</sup> century tune, *OLD 100TH*. Think of Psalm 100 as you sing these words of praise and thanksgiving, for this well-known hymn is a metrical paraphrase on that Psalm. [SING OLD 100<sup>th</sup>.]

You may be interested to know that not one student in my upper level theory class a year ago at Wake Forest University had ever heard this hymn tune – a tune that has deep roots in the Christian church. But, given the current state of church attendance and the state of music in the churches that some do attend, it is not surprising. When present-day college students don’t even know **Row, Row, Row Your Boat** or **Three Blind Mice**, it does paint a concerning picture that we are becoming an un-singing society and are on our way to becoming an uncultured one as well.

Though the *OLD 100<sup>th</sup>* Psalm tune we just sang would not originally have been accompanied by any instrument at all, we have just acted out one of the few specific references to music in **The Bible** : We’ve sung a hymn and we’ve done so with the help

of one of the finest collections of hymns and service music available to any denomination, the Episcopal **Hymnal 1982**. After the Last Supper, Matthew 26:30 tell us : “And when they had sung an hymn, they went out into the Mount of Olives.” Thus, with this scriptural guidance, hymns and singing in worship have always gone together. Though the quality of the theology and music of what is sung has varied widely and continues to vary widely throughout the Christian Church, we are so blessed at St. Paul’s to have both high quality traditional liturgical worship and a very high quality program of music.

Survey after survey in this church has repeatedly expressed that both high quality traditional worship and a first-rate music program are top priorities for St. Paul’s members. The two really go hand-in-hand as we seek to give God our best and, at the same time, for us – the worshippers – to be enriched by the worship experience that we lift up to Him. So, week after week our musicians work on their own and in conjunction with our clergy to insure that the extensive musical component of our liturgy is appropriate, prepared and of the highest quality. And even when a sound system “gremlin” occurs (as it did last Sunday), at least our music needs no amplification!

We have so much to be thankful for in our program of music here at St. Paul’s. It is a fact that music frames worship and involves the congregation in a way that goes beyond words. Through our hymns and service music, the congregation actively participates in the music of the service. Through the organ service music and anthems, the worshipper utilizes that most underused God-given sense: Listening.

Music has the power to transport us beyond ourselves and into the spiritual realm. Perhaps you have even had an experience at St. Paul’s similar to the one reported in 1632 by poet John Milton:

There let the pealing organ blow,  
To the full voic’d choir below,  
In service high, and anthems clear,  
As may with sweetness, through mine ear,  
Dissolve me into ecstasies,  
And bring all Heav’n before mine eyes.

John Milton **II Penseroso** (1632)

Just imagine for a moment what our 9:00 and 11:15 services today would be like without music. Or, reflecting back to December, imagine what that very moving Nine Lessons and Carols service or the Christmas Eve services would have been like without music. Without a doubt, the scriptures are powerful, at the heart of what we believe as children of God and, at that Lessons and Carols service, were beautifully conveyed to us by a variety of fine readers. But, it was the music of the prelude and the hymns, carols and anthems, with their power and great variety so skillfully planned and interpreted by our musicians, that gave us – the worshippers – the opportunity to go beyond words and

instill in us deeper spiritual meaning. Music offers us another dimension with the power to mysteriously connect with God. Or, as the pioneering American composer, Charles Ives, wrote in 1924 : “Music is one of the ways God has of beating in on man” (*Epitaph for David Twichell – 1924*).

Our worship experience at St. Paul’s is further enhanced by the setting for our weekly worship: Namely, our stunning Ralph Adams Cram-designed sanctuary. Further, music from all centuries past and present is skillfully led and accompanied by our church musicians on our priceless original 1928 Ernest M. Skinner pipe organ. When our worship takes place elsewhere, it is most often in our still relatively new Chapel with the really new stained-glass windows and our outstanding 2004 Fisk pipe organ. All of this only re-iterates our riches at St. Paul’s and how truly fortunate we are!

Around budget time at St. Paul’s, I could, personally, imagine hatching a plan toward deeper appreciation and thanksgiving for the abundance of our blessings here. Though I’d have to think a bit more in order to come up with a name as catchy and memorable as a “9-9-9” plan, I CAIN’t imagine, though, a better appreciation plan than to suggest that St. Paul’s members worship at at least three other houses of worship within our region. The sole purpose of this exercise would be to experience the worship of other churches in general and the music of those churches, specifically. While there would, for sure, be rewards found in the worship at other places, my guess is that each St. Paul’s visitor would have his or her eyes opened and see more clearly than ever that, at St. Paul’s, our total worship experience is exceptional and that our program of music is second to none within our region.

To say how blessed we are is about the only way to say it, for it is true. But, this gift comes at a cost : It comes about through the daily hard work and practice of the leaders of our music program, John Cummins and Don Grice, and through the demanding weekly rehearsals of the many dedicated members of our choir program, a program that, by the education and active singing of quality music, helps insure that our choir members will always know *OLD 100th*! The highest standards of choice and appropriateness of music and the execution of it at the highest level are always the goal of our musicians here. After all, our worship is to God and how on earth could we offer Him anything less than the best of what we’re capable? Again, those surveys have repeatedly shown that St. Paul’s members, through their presence and financial support, want to sustain a music ministry that is second to none. While such programs of music are created out of dedication and hard work over a long period of time, we have to always be aware that quality programs of music are fragile and, if support for them wanes in any way, they can so quickly be lessened or disappear altogether.

Thank God for the Episcopal Church and our rich Anglican tradition! And thank God for the conviction of our St. Paul’s clergy and musicians about how our worship is conducted at St. Paul’s. In addition to our clergy, music leaders and choirs, additional participants in our worship help make it what it is and include our acolytes, healing ministry people and an altar guild who, week after week, prepare glorious and inspiring flowers for our worship of God. The Anglican/Episcopal tradition of which we are a part has produced

liturgy for worship of the highest order. It has, of course, stood the test of time and allows musicians – working in conjunction with our clergy – to frame and support our weekly worship with the highest quality of music. Further, because both are of substance, the liturgy and music call upon worshippers to participate with heart, mind and voice. We at St. Paul's are all stewards of this tradition and can never forget its importance to our worship now and for generations to come. In short, we must support it in every way in order to see that it continues!

Today, the threats to the organized, traditional church are real. Even certain churches within our own denomination have, in desperation, dumbed down aspects of worship and music in an attempt to drum up, as it were, new members (especially youth) in any way possible. While all, undoubtedly, should be and are welcome in this place, cheapening worship is not the way to insure a loyal, dedicated (through thick and thin), committed congregation. Thank God that churches of substance like St. Paul's remain!

But, the bottom line is that churches like ours, with quality, traditional music programs, continue to be threatened. Aside from a handful of conservatories and universities, many of our nation's degree programs in organ have either been cut out completely (such as Northwestern University) or dramatically scaled-back (such as Stanford University). Close by, at Wake Forest University, last semester I had, for the first time ever, zero organ students. In short, there is a shortage of organists throughout America today and even fewer quality musicians trained as both organists and choral directors dedicated to church music. Going hand-in-hand with this reality is the fact that there are fewer and fewer traditional full-time employment opportunities for church musicians.

Again, at St. Paul's we are so very fortunate. Our Vestry during the 2007-2008 year made the wise decision to seek two full-time musicians in the Anglican/Episcopal model for our music program here. Based on the reality of shortages of quality organists and church choral directors, our parish sought to be self-sufficient by insuring that all of our choirs, Sunday services, evensongs, diocesan events (such as Friday's front-page, multi-bishop convention gathering), weddings and funerals were led by outstanding professional church musicians. The resulting searches yielded Dr. John Cummins and Dr. Don Grice, both of whom are outstanding church musicians with substantial experience and ability to play the organ and lead and teach choirs. Both are Christian leaders who do not look on their employment as just a job, but as a calling. Due to our chancel's unique, unmovable design, two quality musicians are essential at St. Paul's in order to do accompanied anthems and the host of other responsibilities that rest with music leadership here.

In addition to enriching our congregation and its members, a quality music program such as ours offers a rich opportunity for outreach, such as our monthly evensongs. Certainly, within our diocese, St. Paul's has a well-known and deserved reputation as a church with a quality program of music. And as traditional worship, accompanied by the pipe organ – the finest instrument for congregational singing – continues to be under attack, many Christians of all backgrounds are seeking alternatives. It is ironic that, only a handful of years ago, so-called “contemporary Christian worship” with trite praise choruses and

deafening amplified guitar-led combos, was considered “alternative” worship. Sadly, for today, it is quality, traditional worship that has become the “alternative.”

Thankfully, at St. Paul’s our parish continues to thrive and our traditional worship and music are at the heart of it all. But, again, we must ever remind ourselves how fragile all this is! Its sustainability is dependent on our support in every way, be it in the form of keen parental support for our youth choir program to our monetary support of the budget itself. Supported and sustained, however, a high quality, flourishing music program offers riches beyond all bounds, including congregational growth. When those riches are a part of our very spiritual health and welfare, they are not to be taken lightly! Please read with me Psalm 23 as found on your hand-out. [READ Psalm 23 in unison.]

Familiar to us all, this Psalm (like Psalm 100 and all the Psalms) would have originally been sung. Read, the words of Psalm 23 bring comfort, peace and depth to God’s children generation after generation. Like our traditional worship, these words offer comfort with substance.

Although they are usually rehearsing at this time, what a treat it is to have John Cummins, Don Grice and the St. Paul’s Choir here this morning. We thank you for all you do!

Anglican Chant, a product of our own tradition, is different from Gregorian Chant in that it is written to be sung in parts. Let’s listen now as our St. Paul’s Choir sings an Anglican Chant on the Psalm 23 words we just read. See if you don’t agree that, beyond words, the music assists in taking their meaning to another level. [Choir sings Psalm 23 set as an Anglican Chant.]

Originally I had planned to end our session together with us singing another hymn, a metrical paraphrase of Psalm 23, **The King of Love My Shepherd Is** (which you have on the handout). But, since we have the choir right here, they have agreed to conclude by singing yet another Anglican Chant, this one being based on Psalm 150. Like our beginning Psalm 100, Psalm 150 is a Psalm of praise and thanksgiving, making it a most appropriate ending for this unabashed time of thanksgiving for our outstanding program of music at St. Paul’s. The choir, incidentally, will sing this setting of Psalm 150 next Sunday at a joint, outreach evensong with Christ Church in Charlotte. Even without the words in front of you, you’ll clearly hear them, for that is but one of many technical aspects of quality choral singing that first-rate choirmasters like ours obsessively rehearse!

Our program of music at St. Paul’s is embraced by so many of us as it enhances and deepens our worship experience on a weekly basis. With all of our support, may it ever be so! [Conclude by the St. Paul’s Choir singing the Talbot Anglican Chant setting of Psalm 150.]

Dan Locklair is Professor of Music and Composer-in-Residence at Wake Forest University.

From 2007 – 2008 he served St. Paul’s as Interim Director of Music.

Dan and his wife, Paula, are members of St. Paul’s.