

Just a note

Why we do what we do: The Church Year

By Joshua Taylor, Director of Music



This column is the third in a series examining the “why we do what we do” in worship. Last month’s column focused on the use of hymns in worship. This month we begin a two part discussion of the church year and the lectionary.

This month’s article is made up of excerpts from a previous article, “Church Music Basics: Using the Church Year to Plan Music” written by Joshua Taylor (2005).

Perhaps one of the most daunting tasks facing a church music director is what the music should be. There is no right or wrong way to plan music, as long as the music director’s goal remains to help promote the mood of the service and provided each selection adds to the worship experience. The first step in selection is consulting with the minister. How a minister chooses the theme, scripture, prayers, etc. for any service is imperative knowledge for the music director selecting music. Some may choose to use the lectionary, a book of assigned scripture readings on a three year cycle, or choose their own readings while following the broader outline of the Church or Christian year. The broad overview provided by the Church year, may be used to assist music directors in selecting music for each of the Christian seasons and, in most cases, is the backbone of planning in the church.

The church year is a very general outline of the feast days and holiday seasons traditionally celebrated by the Christian church. It is made up of six broad seasons (Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Ordinary Time) with specific feast days and other worship days throughout, which will be discussed in more detail. Understanding the meaning of each season as well as their specific worship days gives an idea of what worshippers should expect to see in worship. Let us explore each of these seasons individually:

Advent: Advent begins the Christian year. It consists of the four Sundays prior to the festal celebration of Christmas. Advent, the first of two penitential seasons during the year, is considered to be a time of reflection and preparation for the coming Christmas season. Advent texts, most commonly, tell the stories of prophesy and the coming of Christ. Music selections typically encourage the quiet, contemplative mood of the service.

Christmas: The Christmas season begins with the festal celebration on Christmas Eve. Ancient Hebrew tradition was to celebrate a feast day from midnight to midnight on the Sabbath. This tradition is continued in many churches today where Christmas Eve services begin the Christmas season prior to Christmas day. Traditional Christmas songs that many of us know and love should be saved for Christmas Eve and beyond. The Christmas season continues through Epiphany, which is celebrated on the Sunday falling closest to Jan. 6. This day celebrates the visit of the magi to the baby Jesus. Music for Epiphany typically focuses on telling the good news, the mission of the church, or the symbolism

of light, as it relates to the star that led the magi to Jesus.

Ordinary Time: Following Epiphany, the church enters into the less concrete season referred to as Ordinary Time, between the Christmas season and the season of Lent. Without any major feast days to offer structure to the services, ordinary time, typically, offers ministers and music directors opportunities to explore themes not explored during the other seasons of the year.

Lent: Lent is the second penitential season of the Christian year. Concerned with the events leading up to and the passion of Jesus Christ, Lent offers a second season of renewal and reflection. Subtle changes may be made during this season such as eliminating the word “alleluia” from worship. Lent begins with Ash Wednesday held 40 days before the festal celebration of Easter. Following four Sunday of Lent, the season continues with Holy Week worship.

Palm Sunday, a feast day commemorating Jesus’ ride into Jerusalem, begins Holy Week and while triumphant in nature begins the week long focus on Christ’s passion. While services on Holy Monday, Holy Tuesday, and Holy Wednesday are not unheard of, typical Holy Week services include Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Maundy Thursday worship remembers the last supper when Jesus instituted the sacrament of Holy Communion. Lent concludes with Good Friday services which commemorate the crucifixion and death of Christ on the cross. Darkness is often a theme for this service, with many churches practicing a Tenebrae service, which ends in total darkness.

Easter or Eastertide: This begins with the celebration of Christ’s resurrection from the tomb on Easter Sunday. With Easter, alleluias are returned to the church and the mood of the service takes on an extremely upbeat and triumphant persona. Easter celebrates the essential aspects of the Christian faith. Eastertide continues for seven Sundays (including Ascension Sunday, the Sunday preceding Pentecost) and concludes with Pentecost on the seventh Sunday. Pentecost celebrates the birthday of the church and the coming of the Holy Spirit to be with the church until the second coming of Christ.

With the end of Pentecost comes a return to ordinary time until the cycle begins again with Advent. In addition to the feast days of the major seasons, churches may choose to celebrate the lesser festal days including: All Saints Day, Reformation Sunday, or a patron saint’s feast day. All of these depend on the denomination and local tradition.

As we continue to explore the why of what we do, a basic understanding of the church year will provide the churchgoer with a better idea of what to expect each Sunday, and other feast, they attend church.

Sources: J.E. Lawrence and J. Ferguson. *A Musician’s Guide to Church Music*. The Pilgrim Press. New York. 1981 L. Rosten. *Religions of America*. Simon and Schuster. New York. 1975.