

Church Music and Covid-19

A Response from the Presbyterian Association of Musicians

May 21, 2020—Ascension of the Lord



We weep with the psalmists.

Like those who made their lamentation by the waters of Babylon, our harps are hanging on the willows. Our tongues have been silenced. How can we sing the Lord's song ... in a time of exile, illness, and isolation? ... when singing has become a dangerous activity? ... when choir rehearsals are "super-spreader events"? ... when the breath of life disperses disease and death? As people who have devoted our lives to leading the people of God as they lift their voices in song, we are heartbroken. At the same time, we respect the wisdom of experts who have warned of the high risks associated with public singing during the Covid-19 pandemic. We believe that current measures to restrict singing—as much as we might lament them—are in the best interest of the church and world at this time. (See "**Resources for Information Concerning Singing and Worshiping in Covid-19 Times**" below.)

We weep with the psalmists.

But we also pray with the prophets.

Remembering Jeremiah's counsel, we will build houses and plant gardens, even now. We will continue to learn new music, educate young musicians, train our hands and minds and voices, select hymns and anthems for worship, imagine special programs, conceive of choir tours, and listen for the Spirit leading us into songs as yet unknown. We will trust that the Lord has good plans in store for us, plans for our well-being, to give us a future with hope. Remembering Isaiah's promise, we will listen with longing for the distant music that will herald the homecoming of God's people, when flowers begin to bloom in the desert and the ransomed will return with joyous song. We will be praying, preparing, practicing for that great day. (See "**Making Music in the Meantime**" below.)

We weep with the psalmists.

We pray with the prophets.

And we sing with the whole creation.

We know that the praise of God can never be silenced. The ancient and eternal song of God's saving love will never end. The rivers and oceans sing "hallelujah!" The stones along the road shout "hosanna!" The trees of the fields clap their hands. The mountains and hills skip with joy. We will keep tuning our hearts to that cosmic symphony, joining our voices with a great cloud of witnesses, the people of God in every time and place, forever singing: Holy, holy, holy! Until our final breath, we will proclaim the final words of the final psalm, "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!" As we seek to sing the Lord's song in these challenging times, the psalm prayer for Psalm 150 expresses our fervent faith, steadfast hope, and abiding joy:

Great and glorious God, unite our praise with the praise of all creation: singing your mighty acts with every breath, playing music to your name with all our instruments, joining the dance of stars and planets with our whole bodies; for you alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord, you alone are the Most High—Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father. **Amen.** —*Book of Common Worship* (WJKP, 2018), 1077.

Making Music in the Meantime

The following ideas are offered for congregations as they navigate the return to public worship and seek to bridge online and in-person gatherings. These suggestions may need to be adapted for a particular context of ministry. They should be undertaken only insofar as local resources and current conditions allow.

1. Provide hymnals for each household or invite people to procure their own. Make use of these hymnals in online worship and encourage members to employ them for personal study, devotion, prayer, or in music making. The *Glory to God* hymnal is available for purchase through the PC(USA) Store (pcusastore.com/hymnal).
2. Recruit choir members and other singers in the congregation to call or video chat other members and sing a favorite hymn for them, or record in advance and send by email. This may serve as an entrée for pastoral care, outreach, or fellowship.
3. When congregational singing is not possible, worshipers may read and pray the words of hymns in silence while they are interpreted on the organ, piano, or other instrument(s).
4. As long as singing and wind instruments are restricted, organize handbell, string, or percussion ensembles to provide collaborative instrumental music—wearing masks as needed and maintaining appropriate distances.
5. Identify musicians who live in the same family or household and have been sheltering in place together and invite these persons to contribute collaborative video or audio recordings for online worship. When it is safe to gather outdoors or at a distance in the sanctuary these persons may also present musical offerings in public worship.
6. Select a hymn or song for the week, perhaps based on the biblical readings used in public worship or a season in the Christian year. Invite members to study, pray, sing, illustrate, or even memorize the selected hymn each week.
7. Teach the use of hymns as a resource for personal spiritual disciplines. Hymn texts may be used in *lectio divina*. An image, phrase, or word may be used in breath prayer or centering prayer. An instrumentalist might practice a melody as a form of prayer. Phrases or stanzas from hymns can be used in contemplation while exercising, creating visual art, or exploring the natural world.
8. Include meditations on hymn texts in sermons, educational offerings, church newsletters, social media posts, and other avenues for formation and communication. Hymn texts are a valuable resource for theological reflection because they are often so memorable, evocative, concise, and accessible in their articulation of the faith.
9. Collaborate with neighboring congregations and ecumenical partners to encourage one another, learn from one another, and find creative (and safe) ways of teaching new songs, reflecting on hymns, and making music together.
10. Do what you can with what you have ... and trust in God's grace. Try not to be anxious about keeping up with the most technologically adventurous or proficient congregations on the internet. Just glorify and enjoy God, worshiping and making music to the best of your ability at this time. Perhaps it was for times such as these that the psalmist exhorted us: "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth" (Ps. 100:1).

Resources for Information Concerning Singing and Worshiping in Covid-19 Times

The Presbyterian Association of Musicians (PAM) encourages church musicians to research information about the safety of singing in the midst of Covid-19, knowing that information and situations are developing each day. Share knowledge and inspiration so that we can remain hopeful as we look forward to the time when we can safely raise our voices together in praise. In addition to the PAM website (presbymusic.org) and PAM Connect Facebook group, the following resources may be helpful.

SINGING

Summation of the “science and data” webinar listed below

<https://www.middleclassartist.com/post/nats-panel-of-experts-lays-out-sobering-future-for-singers-no-vaccine-no-safe-public-singing>

Webinar Conversation: What do Science and Data Say About the Near-Term Future of Singing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFI3GsVzj6Q>

(in the comments section, see the Outline with Timestamp for ease of viewing)

For smaller bites, see the link for Part 1, and click on “more” to get links for Parts 2–7

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0zdiD9_4F_o

Risk Assessment for Group Activities with Dr. Amesh Adalja, Choralosophy Podcast

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGzh4r5qxTw&t=1236s>

Words from Dr. Heather Nelson, PhD in Voice Pedagogy and Voice Science

<https://www.drheathernelson.com/singingandcovid19>

WORSHIP

Questions to ask before returning to worshiping in person

<https://kenbraddy.com/2020/04/18/20-questions-your-church-should-answer-before-people-return/>

Infographic for Covid-19 Prevention Strategies for Faith Communities

<https://myemail.constantcontact.com/COVID-19—Letter---Reopening-to-Reimagining-Task-Force.html?soid=1011272361012&aid=hH6IDPiZQk8>

The Transylvania Presbytery in Kentucky lays out some considerations

<https://media.myworshiptimes31.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/94/2020/05/07115620/Guidance-for-Resuming-In-Person-Worship-version-C.pdf>

Guidelines on returning to public worship from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/covid-19/returning_to_public_worship_may_2020.pdf