

Dear fellow worshiper,

My decision to resign from my current post as Organist and Choir Director of FPCY came rather as a surprise to myself. In one afternoon, I had made up my mind about it, wrote a letter to Pastor Keith, and dropped it in the mailbox that evening. However, the process that eventually brought about the decision was much more drawn out, involving at least 3 or 4 meetings with pastors, choir members, and liturgists. I eventually came to a conclusion that I am unfortunately unfit to serve in this church, and that my musical proposals for the service, which primarily aimed to set larger parts of the liturgy to music, were vastly out of line with most of the congregation's current mode of worship.

I think that the structure and content of the service outlined in the current Presbyterian Book of Worship makes a lot of sense. However, a liturgy is like a Shakespearean play: the writing may be spectacular, but if it is executed on stage without proper direction and preparation, then the end result is not what it could be. Exterior parameters like set design, choreography, costumes, and sound effects all play significant factors in the overall production of a play, not to mention the factors that affect the performance of the text itself, such as the voice tone, acting skills, interpretation of the poetry, etc.

Worship parallels much of the above: "all the church is a stage, and we are the actors". We have a divine audience. Exterior parameters like church architecture, liturgical movement (processions, standing, kneeling, etc.), robes and garments, and music all play significant factors in the overall production, not to mention the factors that affect the performance of the liturgy itself, such as the voice tone, reading skills, scriptural and musical interpretation, etc.

The statement in my letter of resignation that there is a "**distracting lack of solemnity and reverence**" is a commentary on a gut feeling I have, that many people are not coming to church adequately prepared to meet the Almighty. Of course, I have no way of verifying this, as I am busy offering preludes and postludes as people are coming in. However, this notion is heartily supported in the healthy levels of ambient noise that regularly surround the beginning and end of services. Bryan Zaros, former director, noted that from his past experiences, he could tell how many people were transformed by the service by how many remained after it had ended, and stayed quietly to pray, instead of rushing down to coffee time, or out to lunch.

In music for the stage or concert hall, we aim for perfection so as to present something artistically beautiful and without blemish. In performing music for the church, we also aim for perfection, but on very different grounds: so that the mistakes do not distract other worshipers from their (hopefully) vertical state of mind. This should be applied to the roles of pastors and other lead actors in the worship play.

In my short duration as Choir Director for FPCY, I have tried to break down the barriers that have been raised in Protestant worship over the years, which have caused musical offerings to become discrete and stand-alone elements of worship, rather than a medium through which the words of service can be flowingly expressed. I wish more Protestant churches could realize that their services could be so much more musically pliable than the usually excellent hymnody and choral repertoire that is already used. Singing words heightens their importance; singing the liturgy heightens important worship phrases. Repeating a sung liturgy weekly locks these key phrases into the minds of people for the rest of their lives (e.g. Doxology and Gloria Patri). Aside from exploring settings of liturgical words to music, **I wish, even more importantly, to encourage you, as Presbyterians, to rediscover Psalmody.** This one book of the Bible represents the worshipping voice of centuries of congregations before you, and expresses every possible state of being that humans can experience. Psalmody also happens to be the only musical "claim to fame" that the Scottish and Swiss reformers had. Keep your tradition alive (or, actually, resurrect it).

With me "in charge", currently, and with most of my proposed musical plans already rejected by the congregation, there is no hope of moving forward anymore, and thus, there is not much reason for me to stay - in other words, "my work here is done" (pun intended). I should further clarify that the reason why I feel that there is no hope is because I do not have a backup plan. The Chorister's Handbook was the *only* plan I drew up in the summertime, when I actually HAD time to concoct such a publication. I am unwilling to sacrifice more hours right now, during the school term, to propose an alternative set of music that is perhaps in between where the congregation stands now, and where it could be. So, to some extent, the decision was made in light of the fact that I am still primarily an engineering grad student.

I was able to cope with various quirks in the services when Bryan was around, because I knew that we shared a similar mind of moving worship in a direction that would interlace liturgical words with sacred music. However, Bryan was what Pastor Keith very rightly calls a populist. He tried to please everyone at once. Even though he found contemporary music to be irreverent and not awe-inspiring, he still sang with the contemporary group during those Sundays. Every once in a while, he would choose popular songs and other less-worthy pieces as closing hymns, etc. To counter this, he would introduce thematic Gregorian chant (in vulgate Latin, no less), sung Calls to Worship, and other similar pieces into services. In this way, everyone was offended a little bit, occasionally, but not constantly.

I am a self-confessed idealist. I believe in things strongly, but am not as easily willing to make compromises in order to achieve these things. I do believe that a more gradual introduction of new ideas would have been the most effective way. However, I must share with you that I would have planned to release myself from the position by June anyway, and that I kept it in the back of my head that I had only one year to do my work. I guess I rushed things a bit too much. Read this amazing quote, shown to me by one of my composer friends, whose Organ Piece was premiered this past February at one of our YPOF concerts: "Congregations with an undeveloped musical taste should be exposed to good music. It is not only possible but, in fact, desirable to raise the standard of music to a high level, and here the organist should work slowly. It takes time to learn to appreciate better quality music." (Basic Principles of Service Playing, by Samuel Walter, professor, Union Theological Seminary, 1964)

To the next search committee who will find my successor: I hope that you can find someone who has an excellent working knowledge and appreciation of music for the church. He or she **MUST** not be simply a skilled organist and/or choral conductor, but must know how to select appropriate pieces to fit the service that are transcendent, high in quality, and speak to and involve the congregation. Be wary of those irresponsible and irreverent enough to consider this dignified post to be just a job to 'pay the bills' or to gain performance experience. In all things, I pray that the Almighty will continue to bless this congregation, which has faithfully worshipped for close to two centuries, with an abundance of riches.

Blessings,

Aaron Tan

30 October, 2009