

LCMS

Worship Library

Title: Teenagers and Church Music

Category: Youth in Worship

What Do They Really Think?

In 1995 Dr. Barbara Resch conducted a survey of nearly 500 teenagers from across the United States on the topic of the appropriateness of music for the church. The research and findings, which are summarized in this interview, formed the basis of Dr. Resch's doctoral dissertation at Indiana University.

The findings of this research certainly do not answer all of the questions related to the issue of church music. They do, however, provide valuable insights into how the young people in our churches think about these matters. These findings may also challenge us to rethink some of our assumptions about what our youth are looking for in worship.

Dr. Resch is currently professor of music education at Indiana-Purdue University, Fort Wayne, Ind. She is also director of the children's choir at St. Paul Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, and has directed the choir in two recordings of hymns and liturgies.

What motivated you to do this project?

Pastors, youth directors, parents, teachers, church musicians, and anyone else who works with and cares about teenagers have probably asked at some point: "How can we keep these kids interested and involved in the Church? Now that they're confirmed and off to high school, what can we do to keep them worshipping faithfully?" Often this discussion has led to an examination of the Divine Service and further questions: "Is it the music? Wouldn't they rather hear and sing their own music in church? Won't they be much more inclined to hear God's Word if it's accompanied by a musical style that they like?"

What was involved in your research?

479 teenagers from Massachusetts to California were asked for their input on this topic. The students were asked to imagine themselves in a worship service and to determine if each of the 40 taped musical excerpts they were hearing sounded "appropriate for church" as they knew it. Since 34 different religious bodies were represented, including Roman Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, mainline Protestant, non-denominational and Pentecostal churches, world religions, and cultic groups, the students' experiences with church services were diverse.

As you prepared your survey, what results did you expect?

First, I expected that the music deemed appropriate would, like their church affiliations, be diverse. Second, knowing that the vast majority of teenagers enjoy listening to rock and pop music, I also expected that those styles would be identified as appropriate for church by their standards.

What did you learn?

Surprisingly, neither of my predictions proved true. Across this diverse group of students there was clear agreement about the kind of music that was "right for church": it was

- choral music, not instrumental;
- sung by a group of singers rather than a soloist;
- characterized by a simple musical texture and understandable text.

Musical examples reminiscent of popular styles (rock, jazz, country) were overwhelmingly rejected as church music. Of the 40 examples, the one rated most appropriate was that of a male choir singing a four-part version of Psalm 98 (TLH 667). The piece considered least appropriate was the loud and rhythmic "Midnight Oil," performed by the Christian rock group Petra.

Were there any common factors that influenced the responses?

Church background was an important predictor of the kind of music considered appropriate. The frequency with which a given style was heard also tended to be related.

For example, some settings of traditional choral music were considered appropriate by nearly everyone. Conversely, the examples of Christian rock and jazz were considered inappropriate by the great majority. But it was also clear that students from nondenominational churches who heard contemporary Christian music in their churches considered that music more appropriate. Likewise, gospel choir music and popular styles were considered more fitting by students who attended Pentecostal churches. The traditional choral sound was given its highest ratings by the Catholic and Lutheran students in the study.

What does that information tell you?

What it says is that the kind of music that is heard in a church service seems to become the accepted norm for that context. Contrary to expectations, these representative teenagers do not bring to the church service their own musical preferences (e.g., rock and pop music) as the right music for that occasion. Rather, they tend to accept as appropriate for that context the music that the church has already put in place, whatever that music may be. While they liked rock music and thought it was the right music for some times and places in their lives, they didn't believe that the church service was that time and place.

Several students wrote comments on their survey sheets indicating when and where each excerpt would be appropriate. Although all of the examples played were representative of the range of music heard in American churches today, the contexts with which the students associated various pieces were Sunday brunch, a movie soundtrack, "church services of the 40s," a campground, and an opera. They apparently had clear opinions regarding the fittingness of musical styles for particular occasions, including that of the church service.

Not all of the students who took the survey were churchgoers. How did they respond?

Nearly 12% of the respondents did not belong to or attend church. As might be expected, their responses were very diverse. One surprise was that their responses were not significantly different from the church members in their disapproval of rock music for church. Interestingly, the unchurched students gave their lowest ranking of appropriateness to contemporary Christian music. Several wrote on their survey forms: "This sounds like my parents' music!"

Any idea what was behind their responses?

Sociologists suggest that teenagers' judgments may be formed by any one of a number of influential groups in different contexts:

- their peer group,
- a team or organization to which they belong
- their families,
- their churches.

The opinions of the church-going students were clearly influenced by their church settings. Lacking that context in which to form opinions, the unchurched teenagers were apparently influenced by the standards of popular culture, which would judge the sound of most contemporary Christian music to be neither contemporary nor popular. For adolescents who keep current with popular music trends, much contemporary Christian music has a dated sound with a greater appeal to the "fortysomething" generation. While teenagers who have come to know this music as part of the ethos of their church may consider it appropriate, unchurched adolescents may reject it.

Did your research reveal teenagers' attitudes concerning the role of music in worship?

Yes. The study revealed connections between the teens' ideas of the role music takes in the service and the kind of music considered suitable to fill that role. They had been asked on the survey how they thought music functioned in the church service, and they ranked the stated possibilities in this order, from most to least important:

- Church music is an expression of religious belief.
- Church music is part of the presentation of God's Word.
- Church music is a way for people to use their talents to serve God.
- Church music establishes or changes people's moods.
- Church music is a performance that entertains.

My analysis showed a strong connection between the students' perceptions of the way music functions in the service and the kind of music they thought was appropriate for the service. Students who saw music as part of the presentation of God's Word considered traditional choral music most appropriate for the service. Those who thought that music functioned to "establish or change people's moods" indicated that contemporary Christian music, a more mellow and easy-listening style, was appropriate. The small percentage who said that music in church was an entertaining performance also gave higher ratings to rock music and soloistic pop styles. And the only segment of the respondents who considered instrumental music appropriate were those who thought that church music functioned as "a way for people to use their talents to serve God."

This concern about music's function really lay at the heart of the study, since the main question "Is this appropriate church music?" addressed the way teenagers heard the music as fitting into a particular context. As they took the survey, they were reminded frequently that they were indicating not how much they liked the music but rather how fitting they felt it was for a specific time and place. As they visualized themselves in a church setting, it's likely that they had an idea of how music should function in

that setting, and that their judgments were based on how well the excerpt fulfilled that function. It's interesting that a great many of these teenagers took Luther's well-known position that music is the servant of the Word.

Did your research yield any other "surprises"?

The students who participated in the survey lent some amazing insight into their view of the Church gathered for worship. Many expressed a respect for the corporate nature of their worshipping congregations. One said she made her decisions based on how the "little old ladies" in her church would react: "If I thought they would be upset, I said it was not appropriate, because people shouldn't get upset by music in church." Another wrote: "This would give my Grandma cardiac arrest, so better not!" One boy had asked at the outset "Do you mean appropriate for me or for the whole congregation?" Who knows how he might have responded if he were a congregation of one, but he realized that he was not, and that appropriate church music is not an age-specific style.

What final insights from your research would you like to share with worship planners?

One insight is the strong influence that established church music practice has on teenagers' opinions about what that music should be. They were accepting of the music they heard in church and did not bring their own personal preference to that place. In fact, they expressed a possessiveness about "their own" rock and popular music styles, and a desire to keep that music in the realm of recreational listening. Attempts by adults to present an appealing contemporary popular sound were apparently unsuccessful in winning over unchurched students, who measured that sound against cutting-edge pop music and found it lacking.

Another insight is that the teenagers expressed a surprising sense of the corporate nature of worship, embracing a sensitivity to the intergenerational oneness of the worshipping community.

Finally, it's possible that pastors, youth directors, and musicians have been making decisions based on some false assumptions about teens and church music. It may be appropriate to learn from these young people and ask the same foundational questions: What is Lutheran worship? What is the role of music within Lutheran worship? What, therefore, is appropriate music for the church service?

Usage: This page may be reproduced for congregational use only. Commercial reproduction, or reproduction for sale of this work or any portion of this work, without the written permission of the copyright holder, is prohibited.

Original Source: Commission on Worship *Reporter* Insert, Winter 1999

Published by: LCMS Worship

©The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

1333 S. Kirkwood Road, St. Louis, MO 63122-7295

888-THE LCMS (843-5267), Ext. 1741 • worship@lcms.org • lcms.org/worship

