



Shaping theFuture

August 2026 ■ 26–8, No. 1

Lutheran Education Association ■ lea.org

Singing in the Classroom: *Don't Leave It to the Professionals* **PART I: The Importance of Singing in Classrooms**

By Dr. Samuel Eatherton

Little Paula Mueller grew up in the 1940s and 50s on a farm in rural Nebraska. When she was old enough, she walked down the gravel road about a mile each day and joined her classmates in the one-room public school. Every morning at the start of the day they would gather around the teacher at the piano and sing: folk songs, patriotic songs, and even sacred songs. After 20 or 30 minutes, they would go back to their desks and start their other lessons. They did this every day school was in session.

Paula grew up and attended Concordia High School and Concordia College in Seward, NE, before beginning a teaching career with her husband, Stan, that spanned forty years. Though neither would say they were particularly skillful at music, both sang with their students regularly in daily devotions, in weekly chapel, and in the music classes they taught themselves (being two of only a handful of teachers in their rural schools). Most of their experience in music came from their childhood experiences: singing at school, singing in the home, and singing in church. Yet here they were, incorporating singing into each day's routine.

Having taught music in Lutheran schools for many years myself, I often marvel at my in-laws, Stan



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and Paula. As amateur musicians, they kept music alive in their classrooms and gave their students the words of faith expressed in many hymns and liturgical songs. I also realize there are teachers that do this today; although they may not have extensive formal music training themselves, they sing with their students to their benefit, helping each one use the most versatile and expressive instrument built into them by their Creator: the voice.



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Music and singing seem to be missing from many schools in the third decade of the 21st century. Choirs have been on a general decline ever since the Covid-19 pandemic. When budgets need trimming, one of the first things to be snipped is often the music program because it is not considered a core subject and therefore not seen as important as subjects like math or science. Even where there is singing in schools, it is sometimes done in such a way that leaves the children shouting rather than singing in a beautiful and expressive way. As a church and school musician, I find it easy to become discouraged and long for a time when singing and other forms of music-making were more widely appreciated.

If we go back even farther than when Paula was growing up, there was once a day when music

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was ubiquitous in the home and in school. Before the rise of radio and recorded music in the 20th century, if people wanted music, they had to make it themselves. Piano lessons and singing in the home were much more common. A living room was not complete without a piano for mom or dad to play and for the children to learn their lessons. People made music in church every week by participating in the hymns and sometimes singing in the choir or playing instruments. Attending concerts was much rarer and only for those who could afford it. This was even more reason to make music oneself: it was inexpensive and could be done at any time. It was understood—or at least assumed—that singing was an inherent part of being human, therefore, people just did it. Paula remembers singing at home with her mom while doing the dishes after supper. Singing passed the time and brought joy to hearts, but above all, one did not have to be an expert. It is simply what people do—they sing.

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Fast forward to today: our default mindset is to relegate singing to professionals. If we want music, we queue it up on our playlists, or we buy tickets to concerts. This frame of mind has crept into our churches. I have looked around during hymn singing and have seen many people with mouths closed. We have come to depend on other people to make music for us. I have encountered many people over the years who have told me, “I can’t sing.” When exploring a little further, what they mean is that they would never want their voices recorded and played for the masses to hear. (I’m a professional musician, and even I would not want to do that!) But these people *can* sing—they simply have not had anyone encourage them to do so before. They have come to believe that “real singing” is what one hears performed professionally—either at a concert or through AirPods.

This is where Lutheran teachers enter the picture. We can be the ones to encourage people to sing, connecting with them at a time in their lives when it can make the greatest difference—when they

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are children. We can cultivate a love of singing in children from a very early age and encourage them throughout their years of growing up. We do not need to be professional singers ourselves. We only need to sing a melody and the rest will follow. Children naturally resonate with music and will follow the lead of a teacher who sings.

In one Lutheran school where I taught music for grades 3 through 8, I was walking down the hall one day when I heard singing coming from the first-grade classroom. I stood outside the door and listened. Our first-grade teacher would probably admit that she did not have the most mellifluous or pleasant singing voice. However, she was unafraid to lead her little six-year-olds in singing every morning during their devotion time, and they learned hymn after hymn each week. The impact of this became clear to me one day on the playground when I heard these children singing snippets of hymns while swinging. I remember thinking, “What a wonderful gift this teacher is giving these children—they will carry these sacred texts and melodies with them for the rest of their lives.”



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So, what do we do in our Lutheran schools, amidst a 21st-century society that would rather leave singing to the professionals?

First, I would encourage teachers to take a deep breath and garner the courage to sing with their students. If you are uncertain about this, find your church musician or a friend who sings and ask for their help. You may simply want to know if you can carry a tune well enough to lead your children. (It's likely that you can.) A person's voice is a very personal thing; no two people have the same sound. When one sings, one is putting a part of oneself out there for all to hear, which can be a bit frightening if one has not done it before. Talking with a friend or church musician, joining the church choir, making sure you are singing the hymns in church—all these things can help increase your confidence. Remember, singing is natural for humans to do, and you can learn if you have the desire—even if you are not yet confident. Then you can influence your children spiritually in a powerful way that only music combined with the Word of God can do.

I used the word “powerful” in relation to the Word of God and music. God's Word is powerful, accomplishing the purposes for which God sends it (Isaiah 55). The power of music is evident when a father hears his children singing “Abide with Me” at their grandma's funeral, knowing that Christ is with us even when “swift to its close ebbs out life's little day.” It is also evident when a beloved brother, estranged for years and of questionable faith, wants to hear people sing Matins in his hospital room because he learned it as a child. Music's power to imprint itself within



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us is revealed when a mother with Alzheimer's can still sing Christmas hymns from memory, even though she can no longer carry on a conversation with her own children. God has given people the gift of music along with the gift of His Word so that it might embed itself into our very being. St. Paul must have understood this at some level when he wrote, “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly,” which he immediately follows with the words, “singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Colossians 3:16, ESV). God's Word makes its home in us more easily when partnered with music that penetrates our minds and hearts.

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Lutheran churches and schools have always given a prominent place to singing. Martin Luther himself wrote approximately three dozen hymn texts and melodies and famously stated, “Next to theology, I give music the highest praise.” Luther also encouraged his colleagues to compose hymns for people to sing because he understood that these texts and melodies would teach and proclaim the faith. Following his example, Lutheran pastors and teachers throughout the centuries have included singing the hymns and liturgy of the church as a basic part of the school day. Lutherans sometimes believe that singing in church began with Luther. However, Luther was merely advocating what had been done by the people of God throughout salvation history—from the songs of Miriam and Moses (Exodus 15 and 32) to the Psalms, and continuing into the early church. We get a glimpse of Jesus and His disciples singing a hymn on their way to the Garden of Gethsemane on Maundy Thursday, and Paul and Silas singing hymns while imprisoned. Christological hymns are embedded in the New Testament, such as Philippians 2:5-11 and Ephesians 5:14. Singing has been the natural expression of praise throughout history for those who worship God.

How important was singing for Lutherans in Paula’s day? When she attended Concordia College in Seward, Nebraska, in the 1960s, everyone intending to become a Lutheran school teacher was required to take piano or organ lessons and sing in a choir. Those training the teachers understood that they would be on the



Gustav Spangenberg, *Luther encircled by his family*, 1866, oil on canvas. Museum der bildenden Künste, Leipzig

Just as we teach excellent literature to our students so they can learn to enjoy the expression of ideas and language, we teach excellent music so they can experience the joy of this fundamental aspect of being human, made in the image of God.

front lines of teaching children the faith and quite possibly leading adults in music as well. Singing was not left to those who specialized in it—it was a part of everyone’s education.

I am not advocating a return to these requirements; rather, I am highlighting how deeply music along with the Word of God is woven into our Lutheran fabric. I offer this as encouragement to teachers to take seriously the importance of singing in helping children learn the faith—and to live a life in which they can make beautiful sounds with their own voices. Just as we teach excellent literature to our students so they can learn to enjoy the expression of ideas and language, we teach excellent music so they can experience the joy of this fundamental aspect of being human, made in the image of God.

Part 2 of Dr. Samuel Eatherton’s article will be published next week in a special edition of **Shaping the Future**.



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2024, he served churches in Michigan, Texas, and Wisconsin as school teacher and church musician. Sam and his wife Lois have five children between the ages of 16 and 25.

Quoted Scripture: ESV® and NIV

Additional Resources:

Part of Dr. Eatherton's work at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis involves administering a grant called the Children in Worship Initiative. This grant offers workshops and consulting for churches and schools wanting to build or improve their children's singing experiences.

Additionally, Dr. Sam Eatherton (eathertons@csl.edu), Mrs. Lois Eatherton (eathertonl@csl.edu), and Dr. Emily Woock (emily.woock@cuchicago.edu) of Concordia University Chicago are available to answer questions and provide resources to support teachers of music, especially those who direct children's choirs in Lutheran Schools. They are happy to work with teachers and would be honored to speak with you.

Review, Reflect, Resolve

- What are some songs or hymns that you learned as a child that you still know today?
- How did music you learned as a child help to form you as a Christian?
- When have you seen the power of sacred music (a hymn or song or part of the liturgy) in your own life? In the life of someone you know? How does God use music for our good at times like this?



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