

Assist Our Song

Music Ministries in the Local Church

Douglas Galbraith

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Preface

We are in the early stages of a profound church renewal.¹

This rather unexpected claim, when many prefer to talk of managing decline, appears in the opening pages of a book for those whose ministry is the leading of worship. *Assist our Song* is for those others whose ministry is leading and making the music in the local church, but the remark is equally apt.

For the music-makers, this is also a time of renewal, adjusting to fewer resources but seeking new strategies to meet greater opportunities. There can be bewilderment about the volume of new writing, frequently found online, and the need to navigate a good deal of hurt and resistance when changes are proposed. There is a revaluing of the traditional, but some unease about how the old and the new may marry.

The author of the book quoted observes that in a time of church renewal, questions begin at a fairly superficial and manageable level, and then almost imperceptibly each problem and question invites us deeper and deeper into the heart of the church where all roots are intertwined. The solution, he suggested, does not come from clever techniques and new programmes; nothing less than conversion and total commitment is required.

Worship and its music is one of the strongest roots upon whose nourishment Christian people draw. The church which looks to its roots in our day needs to find an increased commitment from its music-makers, new skills, fresh energy, a deeper understanding of worship, more imagination, greater risk-taking, especially in the local parishes throughout the land who are nearest to the challenges to existing patterns of church life and worship which arise from changes in public life: in how

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people communicate, how they understand belonging, and the multifarious ways they approach matters of inner health and the life of the spirit.

Assist our Song explores the ministries carried out by directors of music and their associates, and the ministry of choirs and other groups of singers and players. It is less obvious that the congregation have a music ministry, or that the clergy also have ministerial duties and responsibilities of a musical nature. Yet these two categories are included also, and what they have to offer is of high importance at this particular time.

The book from which the opening quotation comes is arrestingly titled *Strong, Loving, and Wise* and is by Robert Hovda, who was an American Roman Catholic priest. Yet in spite of the denominational divide, this particular representative of a Reformed branch of the church had the uncanny feeling of meeting someone who knows us better than we know ourselves. This should not be a surprise. It is in the areas of worship, liturgy and music that the churches come nearest to experiencing the unity for which Jesus prayed (John 17:21), and the present book has drawn from the experience of all denominations and seeks to share the results with all.

If this book has an inspiration, it was a volume published by the Church of Scotland in 1932, *Manual of Church Praise* – which must have been widely used if the fact that no fewer than six copies have accumulated on the writer's shelves nearly a century later is any indication. As the title suggests, it was intended as a practical guide, including necessary background, for the music-makers of the church, with the congregation firmly included. It is hoped that the present volume will also be of practical use to their successors in any branch of the church.

Douglas Galbraith

Note

1 Hovda, Robert, 1981, *Strong, Loving, and Wise: Presiding in Liturgy*, Colledgeville, MN: The Liturgical Press.