



ARNON LUNDBORG

Tim Sorenson is one of 20 members of Faith Lutheran, Lexington, Ky., who in the last year have continued to polish their cantor and assisting minister skills after participating in a liturgical clinic at their church last August.

Liturgical boot camp

Kentucky congregation hires expert to fine-tune worship leading

By Linda Romine

Let's just call it boot camp for congregational worship leaders.

Cantors and assisting ministers at Faith Lutheran Church, Lexington, Ky., take their calling as worship leaders so seriously they hired a noted Roman Catholic worship clinician from New York City to teach them how to be better at what they do.

Bonnie Harstad, Faith's director of music, came up with the idea. "This church has always valued excellence in worship," she said.

Faith Lutheran Church's mission for cantors and worship assistants:

'To ignite people's passion for the word of God through expressive proclamation and ritual.'

While the men and women who serve as cantors and worship assistants were all competent and dedicated individuals, Harstad encouraged them to delve deeper. "There was just another level we thought we could attain with a little more effort and diligence," she said.

So last August, Joe Simmons, principal cantor of St. John the Baptist Roman Catholic Church in New York, spent a weeklong residency in the Bluegrass State with Faith's 20 volunteer cantors and assisting ministers.

It's ministry

"I wanted them to see that their role is one of ministry," Harstad said. "They're leading people's worship. They're leading people's prayers. They're not just reading words."

Working with Harstad, Simmons (www.oculusmusic.com) tailored the Assisting Minister and Cantor Formation Workshop to fit Faith's specific needs. It began with a Thursday evening concert by Simmons for the congregation and was followed by a Friday night session on liturgy. Over the weekend, various workshops covered the basics, such as vocal technique, diction and worship leadership tips. It also included sessions on how to prayerfully and artistically present the Psalms.

"It's one thing to have a good voice and to be able to pronounce words correctly, but that's only half of it," Simmons said. "It's about proclaiming Scripture and doing it effectively so people receive it in their hearts. They have to go much deeper and engage their faith and also learn how to negotiate poetry because it's a language that moves us closer to God."

For Simmons, who holds a master's degree in music

performance from New York University and has an accomplished career as an author, recording artist and clinician, it was his first experience working with a Lutheran congregation. "I was very impressed," he said, referring to the zeal with which Faith embraced the opportunity to enrich its worship life.

Participants included men and women of all ages, from college students to grandparents.

Faith cantor Ole Wendroth, a native of Germany who has lived in the U.S. for about seven years, said he relished the chance to embrace the liturgy in a day and age when some Lutheran churches downplay its importance in worship.

Wayne Schedler, a lifelong Lutheran and pastor's son, echoed the sentiments of other participants with his observation about how the experience crystallized the profound importance of the assistant's role in worship. "We are prayer leaders," he said, emphasizing the word *prayer*. "Everything we do is a prayer."

Focus on God

Despite all the studied earnestness about presentation and delivery, the cantors and assisting ministers deliberately resist all affectations of merely giving a performance. They are ever mindful that their focus is not about them but is solely about God, Scripture and the hearts and minds of everyone in the congregation, Harstad said.

The weeklong workshop gave Faith a renewed sense of shared purpose. It still feeds their fellowship and artistic interaction. For example, in the year since Simmons' visit, Faith has kept in touch with the clinician. They also keep their momentum going through monthly sessions in the sanctuary to practice their skills and share constructive feedback.

Simmons, too, continues to practice what he preaches. In April he served as cantor of Pope Benedict's mass at Yankee Stadium. "It was an incredible experience. I really did all the things I teach people how to do, and that helped me to deal with the pressure. Then I was able to really just proclaim the Psalm and feel the sense of having an 'intimate' conversation with 57,000 people," he said laughing. □

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