

[MJTM 11 (2009–2010) R30–R31]

#### BOOK REVIEW

William Bradley Roberts. *Music and Vital Congregations: A Practical Guide for Clergy*. New York: Church Publishing, 2009. 133 pp. Pbk. US\$20.00.

*Music and Vital Congregations* offers helpful guidelines for developing thriving and effective church music programs. Roberts is a longtime church musician and associate professor at Virginia Theological Seminary. This slim handbook is the result of decades of first-hand experience and observation, mostly in Episcopalian parishes. Its eight chapters deal primarily with practical matters, ranging from music ministry with children to choosing music for weddings and funerals. Roberts's personal philosophy of church music is also interspersed throughout.

The book opens with a brief discussion of music's role in enhancing one's connection to the Christian faith. According to Roberts, "Our identity as a people—what our values are, our culture, our theology, our mission—is often signified to people by music before they ever hear it described in words" (1). For this reason, he notes that church musicians should not view themselves only as performers, but also as "pastors" educating, inspiring, and encouraging the participation of their congregations. Roberts offers the pithy words of British-American composer and theologian Erik Routley (1917–1982): "Give us the best music we have, but make it *friendly* to the people" (5). This ideal of blending quality and accessibility in church music—and particularly in congregational song—underscores Roberts' view that "music belongs to everyone" (ch. 1).

The book's value lies in its concise assessments of issues facing contemporary church music programs. Chapter 4, for example, addresses the topic of musical selection. Roberts argues that the debate over whether to include "popular" music in

church services amounts to a “war over nothing.” Using a model developed by theologian Edward Schillebeeckx and modified by church musician Carol Doran, Roberts explains that, throughout history, new music has entered the church on an ephemeral (temporary) circle. If this music is accepted, it passes into a conjectural (more stable) circle, and from there may eventually be incorporated into a structural (mainstream) circle. “In light of this wisdom,” Roberts writes, “we can’t assume that the traditional music we now cherish has always existed, nor can we exclude new music that may initially challenge our ears and souls” (50). As this model suggests, “good” or “appropriate” material is adopted slowly into the musical repertoire through a natural selection process. Still, Roberts concedes that some worship leaders may choose music that “reflect[s] the rank consumerism of American society, demanding what suits our tastes and satisfies our particular preferences” (63). For such churches, he recommends a balanced musical service, with various styles and genres embraced to bring congregants of differing tastes and backgrounds into what he calls a “family meal” (63).

Roberts offers similarly instructive comments on other areas of church music ministry, including financial issues (ch. 7) and hiring a musician (ch. 8). Each chapter has several short sections, giving brief historical overviews, summaries of contemporary issues, and an array of useful suggestions. For example, ch. 3 focuses on tensions that arise between clergy and musicians, and lists eighteen steps for mending clergy-musician relations.

This book lacks depth of musical and theological discussion. But Roberts is adept at distilling complex arguments into plain language. He rightly avoids technical jargon to make his insights and advice accessible to musicians and non-musicians alike. This is appropriate as his stated goal is to counter the lack of music education in seminaries and among churchgoers (4). *Music and Vital Congregations* can be used with profit by clergy, congregational leaders, and anyone else seeking to make informed musical decisions in their churches.

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