

Although sharing much common ground when it comes to philosophy and ministry, often Mary and Bob find themselves approaching ministerial concerns from different angles... *He said - She said* is a venue to share differing perspectives and provide food for thought.

Holiday Survival Guide

Mary's perspective:

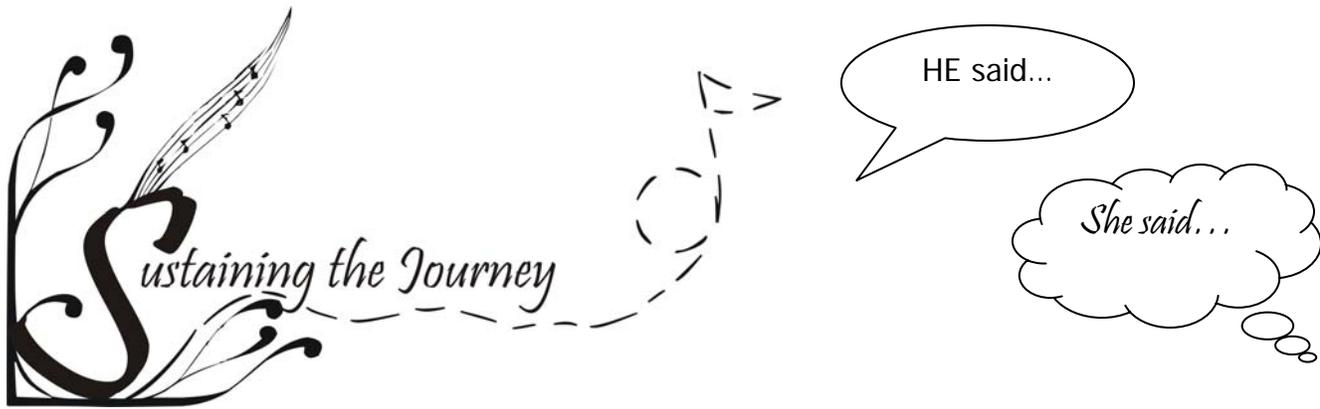
Congratulations, you survived another Christmas season! The tree is probably long gone (or, in Bob's case, tucked back in the corner with the big dry-cleaning bag over it). Cherished presents have been incorporated into our daily routines. Our Christmas music is filed neatly, organized for next year... okay so maybe two out of three isn't so bad!

While thinking about next Christmas may be the last thing on your mind, we suggest taking a little bit of time *now* to prepare for *then*. Think back over the past month. What worked well? What events were fun, worthwhile, and repeatable? Were there songs used that perhaps weren't embraced by the community? Did you schedule enough choir practices to be prepared without being burned out? Have you planned (or did you have) a social event to thank your volunteers for a job well done?

My music ministry did a couple of new events this year. This is our pastor's first Christmas at our parish, and he suggested having a "blessing of the Bambelinas". We put together an evening of music, scripture, sing-along, prayer, and blessing of the infant Jesus from our nativity displays. Everyone brought a tray of cookies to share and it turned out to be a great time of fellowship and celebration. We also had a group sing for a local radio broadcast, that was well received.

As I put away those music files, I will take some time to jot down a few notes. There were songs where I might want to rearrange the harmonies, or where our use of "ladies only on this verse and men only on that verse" might not have been as effective as we had hoped. There are songs that worked very well, and should be used again. I even write notes about how many worship aids I created, or where book lights would be helpful because of the dim lighting in the church. That becomes valuable information for next Christmas season's preparations.

Notice that in 2017, Christmas falls on a Monday. That means the Fourth Sunday in Advent (in the morning) is Christmas Eve (in the evening). If you haven't already planned out the times of your



church services, it's better to do this early in the game. Also, I believe it is going to be imperative to have extra assistance - both musical and clergy - to get through this coming Christmas. With resources spread thin, it's a good idea to ask your helper musicians and clergy friends to commit early to helping with Christmas.

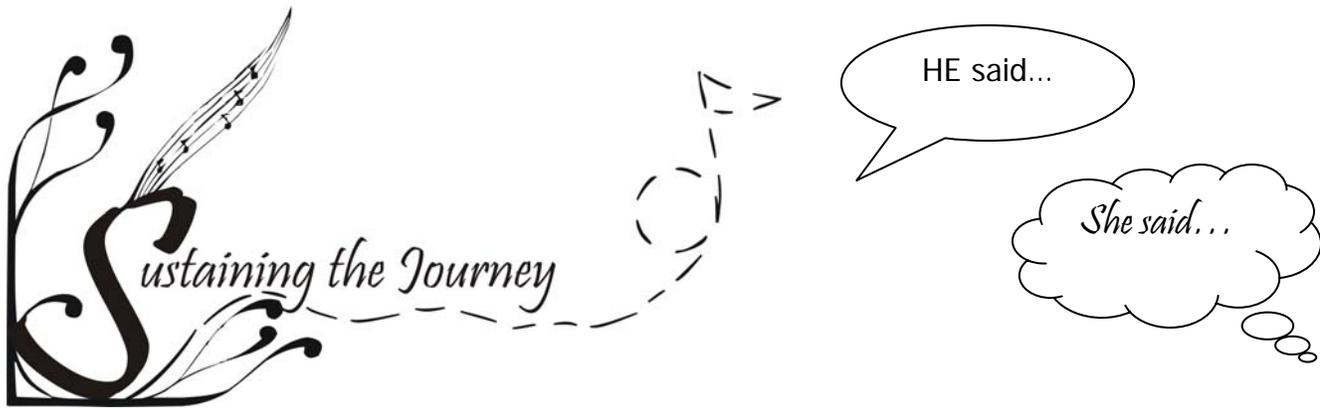
Everything from decorating the church to practicing and executing the music bears review and careful planning. As a musician, if ever there was a year I would tackle at least a couple of Christmas pieces in August, this would be the year. That first choir practice can be about getting to know each other and introducing the one cool new Christmas prelude!

Bob's Perspective:

The last time that Christmas fell on a Monday was in 2006. As Mary mentioned, this again will be the case in 2017. The reason for such a gap (11 years) is because of leap year, so Christmas skipped Monday in 2012 and instead was on a Tuesday. To state the obvious, we haven't dealt with the scheduling and practical challenges that this presents for quite some time.

I agree with Mary that planning and preparing earlier will help to alleviate much of the stress. In most cases, scheduling liturgical ministers will be the biggest challenge in that over four days many will be called to do "double duty." I disagree with Mary about covering my little 3 foot Christmas tree at home with a canvas bag. Truth be told, I only decorate and light $\frac{1}{2}$ the tree (the part that's visible in the living room and the part that shows out the front window). So, when I turn it around and move it to a corner of the room, it becomes another decoration ready to evolve again next year.

While I admit that this may seem a bit eccentric, this practice happens not out of laziness (ok, well maybe just a little) but more so out of logic. So here it goes: Summer doesn't just become Winter, nor does Winter just become Summer. Fall is the transitional period between Summer and Winter. At least in our part of the country (Ohio), the season of Fall is the time when changes gradually begin to occur. The weather becomes milder and cooler. Precipitation turns from rain to sleet or maybe even to light snow. Frosts become more common as grass and flowering plants go into hibernation. Leaves on the trees begin to change color and gradually fall and carpet the ground. Woodland animals store food and begin to hunker down. Now granted, we sometimes get those years when this happens quite quickly (like Advent to Christmas 2017), but for the most part this tends to be a more gradual process.



Let's apply this to the liturgical calendar. The Church calls us to be counter-cultural. This means, for example, that we don't begin our celebration of Christmas before Halloween as do department stores and radio stations. We observe the liturgical seasons appropriately in their proper time and order. However, the Church doesn't call us to be counter-natural. We know when Winter is approaching and what it will bring. In the same way Christmas is not a surprise – we know when it's coming and we know what it's about. It's not the re-enactment of an event. It is a holy time which we anticipate and for which we prepare spiritually and socially. The Nativity of our Lord was a historical event that took place circa 2000 years ago. For us now, Christmas is the time when we give thanks and praise to God for humbling himself to dwell among us in human form in the person of Jesus - and we long for his second coming.

The liturgical progression is Ordinary Time (Summer) to Advent (Fall) to Christmas (Winter). Just as in nature, liturgical transitions from season to season don't need to be abrupt, but rather follow a gradual and progressive solemnity. Music and environment in Ordinary Time can subtly change and become what they need to be by the first Sunday of Advent and again evolve over the four week period into that which is appropriate for the Christmas Season.

I'm not saying that we should sing Christmas carols in Advent (because we shouldn't), but songs like People, Look East or O Come, Divine Messiah have a somewhat festive but anticipatory text and feel. Arrangements of O Come Emmanuel (like the Advent Gathering Rite by Rory Cooney and Gary Daigle) which treat the traditional text and melody with rich and beautiful major 7th chords that have a warm but wintery, romantic quality that just brings you into Christmas – or Emmanuel (Steve Angrisano), a more contemporary treatment of the text that has a joyful lilting refrain with verses that have a bit of rhythmic tension that builds anticipation well.

The same holds true for Art and Environment. Rather than the drastic transition on the first Sunday of Advent or on Christmas, décor can gradually evolve. Again, I'm not saying that we have fully decorated Christmas trees in the middle of Advent (because we shouldn't). However, bare trees with tags requesting gifts for those in need that people can take home and use – or maybe trees or wreaths adorned with purple bows that become white and gold (or maybe even lighted up) on Christmas. How about an Advent Wreath, that “blooms” into a Christmas wreath by simply changing colored candles to white? If a Nativity scene is placed somewhere in the Church, maybe it can somehow evolve through the liturgical seasons rather than magically appear and abruptly disappear. Given the short transition from the fourth Sunday of Advent to Christmas Eve in 2017 (a matter of only a few hours), this might be an approach worth considering – or not.