

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.

The Psalm Debate Continues...

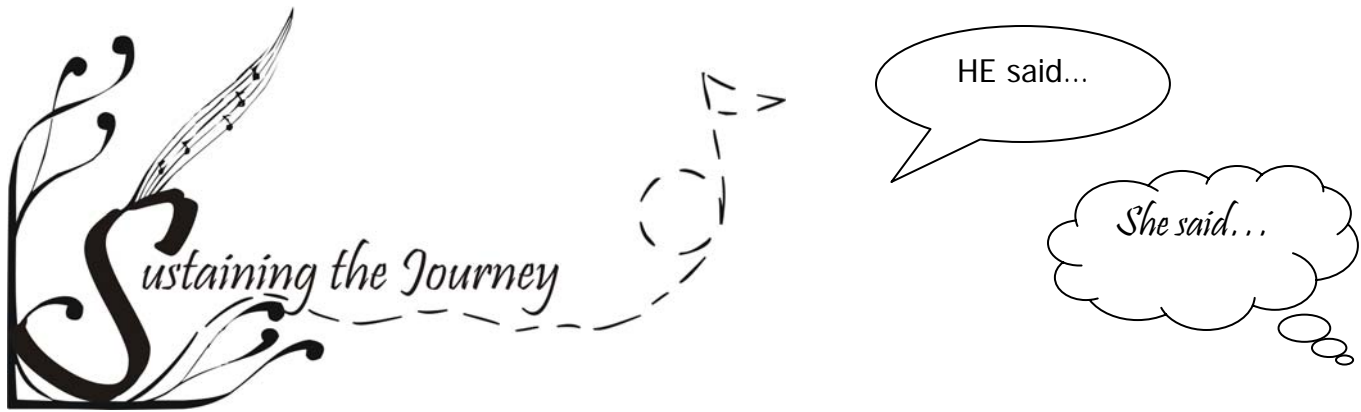
Mary's perspective:

One of the blessings of our friendship is that Bob and I connect in many different ways, and we address similar concerns within our work days. With over 65 years of liturgical ministry experience between us, we've learned a few things – and each of us has formed definite opinions, whether it's about pieces of music or seasonal approaches to liturgy planning, or some of the musicians and clergy with whom we've worked over the years! We were once again having a conversation about responsorial psalms over coffee recently. Yes, we are nerds immersed in our work – but our weekly coffee meetings have therapeutic results! Anyway, this is one of those items where we have pretty different perspectives and experiences. We both agree that the psalm should be sung, and it should be as true to the text as possible. So, for example, although I love Marty Haugen's *Shepherd Me, O God*, it is an interpretation of Psalm 23, and should not be used as a responsorial psalm at mass. (The pleading of "Shepherd me beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life" is definitely not the same as the conviction, "The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want.")

However, my experience at my parish has been that melodic settings of psalms are easier for our assembly to sing, and they participate better when I select melodic psalms instead of chants. So, when possible, I choose psalms where at least the refrain is melodic. Bob favors chant pretty much ALL THE TIME. His experience is that, when we sing a melodic psalm, his mind gets wrapped up in the melody. But when we chant a psalm with a simple chant tone, he is able to focus more clearly on the words.

In our recent coffee conversation, I pointed out that I am much more likely to retain the words if the refrain is pretty and melodic. Think about the challenge of memorizing a poem – but when you put it to music, the words are easier to remember. We use this technique all the time in teaching children. It may be a male/female difference, but for me, chanted psalms don't stay in my head because all of the words mush together. For example, I very often use the Alstott version of Psalm 23 (found in *Respond & Acclaim*), but even though I literally sing it probably 50 times a year, I am challenged to surface the words of the verses as I type this. If I start to sing one of the Haugen/Haas psalm settings found in the *Gather* book, I can not only sing the refrain but typically at least two full verses. So I have been able to learn and retain more scripture by putting it to melodic settings.

Bob argued that the responsorial psalm is intended as just that: response to the readings. Response to what was proclaimed live in our midst. Not necessarily our homework to memorize and be able to resurface at home later in the week. And so if we are to respond fully, we need to be conscious of the words and focus on them. I will acknowledge that the parish where Bob ministers does respond vibrantly to chanted psalms (further supporting his argument). Our two parishes are very similar in size and makeup, and so it is interesting to me that his people prefer chant, while mine sing out with melodic settings. I sometimes wonder if that's just a



matter of how they have been trained – like the chicken versus egg question. Does his bunch sing chant well because they like it and that’s why he continues to utilize that style? Or do they sing chant because he has systematically over the years used and reused the same chants until they are comfortable like an old flannel shirt?

As Music Directors, we are challenged to respond to the peoples’ needs (i.e., use music that helps them pray), while encouraging them to reach higher (encountering the Almighty in a variety of ways, using all of our senses and abilities). There is certainly room for different styles of music, and I would even venture to say that Bob provides for his parish and I provide for mine what they need, even though we do it differently. This may be one of those times when we agree to disagree.

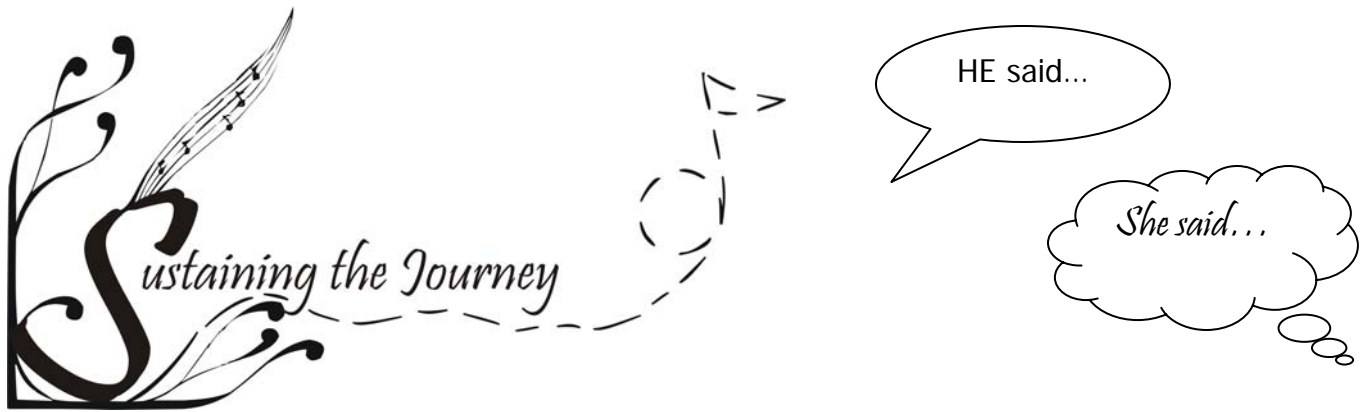
As I look back at this, I recognize I have truly entered the depths of nerddom, and it’s time for more coffee!

Bob's perspective:

I by no means intend to devalue a more song-style approach to the psalms as opposed to chanted. In my humble opinion, I think that the debate is more about aesthetics than substance. Song-style psalms, in many cases tend to create warmer, richer qualities of mood than chant. However, I’m not sure that they always do the best in terms of proclamation of the word. That is to say, a complex melody or a busy accompaniment may actually distract from the importance of the text. In some cases, the altering of text in order to fit the style of the song can actually change the meaning from its intended purpose (as Mary pointed out).

Putting aside the issue of appropriateness for a moment, I think it could go without saying that Mary Haugen’s *Shepherd Me, O God* captures the mood of Psalm 23 much more effectively than Owen Alstott’s setting by placing a greater emphasis on melody and accompaniment. However, from a proclamation standpoint, Alstott’s setting is much stronger, putting greater emphasis on textual content and accuracy - and less emphasis on melody and accompaniment. So, how would I handle a request for *Shepherd Me, O God* at a funeral? Rather than saying we can’t use it, I often place it as the Communion Chant AND use Owen Alstott’s setting as the Responsorial Psalm. I know that some may criticize using the same text twice in a liturgy as being overkill - and there are times I would agree with that premise. But, sometimes presenting a text with two very different musical treatments in close proximity can bring a deeper clarity and richness that neither may be able to capture as well on their own merits.

Another aspect that must be considered in this conversation is “full, conscious and active participation.” Does this mean that as long as we sing loudly and well, we’re in good shape? Focusing on the aspect of “conscious” might also mean that we need to strive for a deeper meaning that would come with more emphasis on the text at certain times.



What I'm getting at here is that I don't think that we should look so much at "either or" but rather maybe "both and" when considering choices of selection for Responsorial Psalms. We see this done over and over by those who select hymns or songs that parody the Gospel or one of the other readings as Mass – so why not the Responsorial Psalm?

The GIRM says, "after the first reading follows the responsorial psalm which is an integral part of the Liturgy of the Word, and has great liturgical and pastoral importance, since it fosters meditation on the word of God." (*GIRM #61*). Meditation is much more than just mood or feelings, and it's much more than just academic understanding. Meditation is about integration – getting to the depth and breath of something and making it a part of myself.