

St. Mark's Music Survey 2021 Report

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With the departure of Rebecca Maggi, our former music director, and Jim Welch, our former organist, and ahead of our much-anticipated regathering after a long year in online services, the St. Mark's music task force initiated a music survey. All members and visitors to St. Mark's who received the Messenger or attended services during April and May were invited to participate via an online google form or submission of paper survey.

The survey employed an appreciative inquiry approach to help the congregation reflect on what we have appreciated about St. Mark's music ministry as it has been, and on what we might be interested in exploring or changing.

We had terrific participation and good diversity among our respondents. Out of a total of 73 responses, longtime church members (10+ years) comprised 55% of respondents, but we had good participation from newer members as well. Nearly 50% of respondents were between 60 and 80, but all other age groups from 20 to 100 had at least one respondent. 58% of respondents were female; 25% were male; and others identified as nonbinary or nonconforming or declined to state. Our respondents' formative worship experiences occurred predominantly in the Episcopal or Anglican church (41%) or other mainline protestant contexts (24%). Significant numbers of respondents also reported formative experiences in the Catholic church or evangelical protestant churches (13% each). From the responses to the survey, we can conclude that:

Music is a very important part of worship for the people who responded to this survey. In reflecting on the question of "how important have the musical elements of worship been to you?" where '1' was 'Music is not an important part of my total experience of worship at St. Mark's' and '5' was 'Music is an extremely important part of my experience of worship at St. Mark's,' 82% of participants responded with a '4' or '5.'

- **Recommendation:** *Invest time and energy in getting the right people for these roles. This could be difficult given cost-of-living concerns and the need to find music professionals who can bridge both traditional and contemporary styles in line with our liturgical traditions (see below), but given the importance of music to so many people in our congregation, a careful, broad search will be worth it.*

The high quality of our worship music was by far the most appreciated aspect of music at St. Mark's (65% of respondents chose this as one of their three most appreciated elements). Invited comments reflected on St. Mark's "excellent choir," its "quality music ministry," "amazing talents," "beautiful voices," "traditional classical music that is well done," "quality of both organ and choir music," "high quality of musicianship," "gifted and experienced leaders in music," "beautiful organ music," "the superstars taking care of choir and organ," and the "high quality and seriousness of intent" of our worship music. Several respondents called specifically for

talented professionals to carry on the quality of the program established by Jim and Rebecca, while being open to new music styles and experiments. Multiple respondents also called out Matt's gifts in leading music during worship and at our retreat, and recognized other individuals within our community (including "Randy and his trumpet" and "Ryan and Sophia") as being important to the overall quality of our music.

- **Recommendation:** *Look for experienced external music leaders to guide development of our music program in a way that builds on its current quality and maintains or creates roles for talented musicians in our community.*

Many respondents appreciate the familiar or repeated elements of music in worship (40%) and communal aspects of singing together (38%). Invited comments expanded on just how important these elements are. People called out specifically that "the repeated and communal pieces we sing each week [feel] more inclusive of the whole congregation and have a wonderful energy to them," and multiple people named Marty Haugen's "Let my prayer rise up" antiphon (and pieces "we sing in rounds" or "we sing around the altar") as particularly important parts of their worship experience. Some respondents called for *more* repeated and communal elements of worship, noting, for example, that "not everybody can read music," and "the more folks singing together, the more cohesive the community will be."

- **Recommendation:** *Call out a desired focus on familiar, repeated and communal music in worship in the job description(s) for new music leaders, and be sure to include some congregation favorites in regular worship during the transition to new leadership.*

As is true in many mainline protestant congregations, our respondents were divided on preferred musical style in worship, and on whether we should stay the course, or change things up. 43% of respondents named the traditional or classical nature of much of our music (43%) as one of the three elements they most appreciated in music at St. Mark's, while 37% named the jazz, folk, or acoustic elements we incorporate into some services. (Note that we did not ask people to choose a preferred style, but provided multiple opportunities to give input on what they appreciate and long for.)

Many individuals appreciated multiple music styles and diverse musical experiences, including "the mixture of music and instruments and voices," and "traditional hymns and inclusion of other styles." Several respondents were excited about adding new opportunities for Taize or contemplative chant (within Sunday morning worship or as an additional musical worship experience); "Anglican music from around the world, indigenous to those communities;" and "songs in different languages."

A significant number of respondents expressed strong feelings about musical style, including:

"For me, traditional classical music that is well-done is one of the most important elements of the worship service. One of the most important factors that drew me to St. Mark's and was

instrumental in motivating me to make St. Mark's my church home was the music program. Don't change a thing!"

"I find many of the hymns to be excruciatingly dull to the point of pain. During a typical droning arrhythmic dirge, I try hard to think about something else, like my household chore list or taxes. Can we expect to grow our community by subjecting newcomers to this?"

"I consider the traditional music at St. Mark's to be an important component of my worship. The quality of both the organ and choir music has been outstanding and greatly contributes to service. I can't imagine St. Mark's without this quality music. It's as if it is a part of our being."

"I have found the contemporary music that we sometimes have in our service is much more uplifting. The traditional hymns, although beautiful, are sort of depressing. I would love to end the service with a hand clapping, foot stomping song that leaves a smile on your face for the rest of the day. I love the music we sing at the church retreat!"

"One of the primary reasons I joined St. Mark's was because of its traditional Anglican hymns and the organ compliment to our excellent choir. I can go to any church up and down Middlefield and find contemporary music styles. St. Mark's traditional music is what makes us distinctive, and it's the music I am looking for."

"Moving beyond the 18th century would be a productive change. A 21st century Christian music approach would be a huge improvement."

"I'm a millennial at St. Mark's, and I am not interested in jazz or rock music in worship. I left churches that had the music to get away from those styles. If people want that kind of music, they have dozens of churches to choose from just in Palo Alto. The worship of the ages or worship across cultures is much harder to find."

- **Recommendation:** Look for new music leaders who have deep experience in traditional/classical music and at least one alternative musical style, and who can create inclusive musical experiences for congregations with different tastes in musical style. Candidates should be able to articulate new, specific ideas about how to do this, based on past experience, and be excited about experimentation and iteration.

Most of our congregation is open to including new or different styles of music, and/or different musicians and instruments, in our worship services. In response to the question, "How would you feel about Sunday morning services that featured styles of music other than traditional hymns?"

- 37% of respondents said, "This would appeal to me; I would look forward to these services.
- 16% said, "I might enjoy these services."
- 3% said, "I'm not sure."
- 29% said, "I might enjoy these services, but I would miss the traditional music."

- 15% said, “I would probably not enjoy these services.”

Similarly, 42% of respondents said they would “look forward to services” that featured musicians, instruments, or musical groups other than our choir and organist, and 24% said they might enjoy these services.

Interestingly, 51% of respondents imagined a future (3-5 years) thriving music ministry at St. Mark’s in which, “The stylistic diversity of music at St. Mark’s is a draw for a more diverse community of members.” Other comments echoed this idea that more diverse music could “widen the welcome mat to St. Mark’s.”

But respondents also have a strong desire to build on our traditions and existing strengths. Among seven choices for how we might “make music at St. Mark’s a more inclusive and meaningful form of ministry,” 70% chose as one of their top 3, “Build on our traditions and existing strengths with talented new music leaders and musicians.” Comparatively, 38% chose, “Increase the variety of music styles included in each worship service,” and 37% chose, “Diversify our musical “talent” to include more parishioners or other local musicians.”

- **Recommendation:** *Communicate the desire to build on our traditions and strengths and our openness to change to the congregation, and frame new musical experiences as experiments that we want to learn from.*

Our congregation wants to do a better job of engaging children, youth, young adults and families in its music ministry, but we don’t have clear ideas about how to do this.

When asked to choose three features of a thriving music ministry at St. Mark’s 3 - 5 years from now, 35% of respondents chose, “Families with children or youth report that music is an important part of their family’s worship experience and/or spiritual formation.” This number is notable because adults in the age range most likely to have children at home or contemplating children soon were relatively under-represented in our sample (only 1/8 of respondents were aged 20 to 50).

This issue was very important to some respondents, as captured in comments like, “Adding in opportunities for children and youth is CRITICAL, especially as we rethink how children will participate in worship.” Several people recommended trying to develop a youth or children’s choir, including one that might “involve some vocal and musical training...if the numbers permit.” Most respondents who mentioned children and youth were hopeful about creating more opportunities for them in music at church, but didn’t have clear suggestions about *how* to do this.

Some comments focused on the idea that younger people might need more contemporary music to be engaged in worship. But no respondents spoke directly about their own childrens’ or teens’ music preferences. Young adults were divided on contemporary music. One person commented, “I love when Rev. Matt sings and when his son and son’s partner come and sing. As a young adult myself, I appreciate these more contemporary styles of music.” But another person wrote, “There is a problematic ageism... in St. Mark’s discussions around worship music. Often, some of the older

parishioners will advocate for new music styles on behalf of what they perceive is the desire of younger generations...Many millennial families and younger are deeply drawn to traditional liturgies and music styles, and at St. Mark's, it is often the older generations that seem to be most vocal for incorporating [different] musical styles. If I want a rock concert or a jazz festival, I'll go to one. I don't come to church to supplement Spotify. I come to church for worship, and that is not about me and my preferences, but about joining my voice with the music that has carried the church across time and space."

- **Recommendation:** *Look for music leaders with some experience working with children and youth in worship music, and/or who could develop music programming in concert with our other church leaders or local community youth music leaders. Integrate discussions about children and youth in music with other planning efforts around children's involvement in worship and religious formation, and seek regular feedback from families with children and teens, and from young adults, about the role music is (or isn't) playing in their or their families' worship and spiritual formation experiences.*

We value music as an integral part of worship and community, but what we seek in music differs.

Several respondents appreciated the role that music at St. Mark's has played in maintaining our Anglican traditions and guiding us through the liturgical year. One person wrote, "The music carries on the tradition of Anglican/Episcopal Music, which integrates into the worship service. It is deep and not trendy. Trendy music can be found in many other churches and secular venues but use of traditional music as part of worship is important to me and somewhat difficult to find." Another person commented, "Music at St. Mark's has been a truly integral part of worship, in that the styles, lyrics, emotional tones, and high quality of performance are all aligned and consistent with our liturgical seasons, lectionary, and theological traditions. It's easy to take this for granted, but I think the thought that has gone into creating such an integrated experience week after week is a huge part of what I respond to in worship." Other comments wrote about their appreciation for music that is "theologically rich, [with] many images for God," and music that crosses cultures and time.

When asked about three features that would be part of a thriving music ministry 3-5 years from now, 58% of respondents chose, "More of us experience music at St. Mark's as a path to joy, praise, delight, and enthusiasm for the holy in our lives." 40% chose, "More of us experience music at St. Mark's as a path to contemplation, reverence, reflection, and awe about what is holy in our lives." This difference in music as a path to joy versus contemplation was apparent in comments, too, including, "I just want the music to make me feel uplifted or inspire me to think," and "Music which allows for contemplation and meditation is most important for me," and an expressed desire for "music that offers space for expressions of passion and joy [and] songs that parishioners will sing at louder volumes and with more energy."

- **Recommendation:** *Speak with top candidates for music leadership positions about the different things our congregation values in music. Choose people who understand our*

liturgical traditions and who will make music choices that help our congregants find what they are seeking, with opportunities for both joy and contemplation. Communicate to the St. Mark's community that we value different things in music, as it is all too easy to assume that other people's internal experiences mimic our own.

Music can be a way to reach out to the larger community.

Several people expressed appreciation for the organ concerts that Jim Welch put on, and for community events like our Christmas Carol sings as ways for the broader community to experience music at St. Mark's. In response to a question about what three features a thriving future music ministry (3-5 years from now) would include, 37% of respondents chose, "St. Mark's has become a place that our larger Palo Alto and Bay Area communities can come to to experience music on a regular basis." This seems to be a "nice to have" interest that is likely to follow a general commitment to continued high quality musical performance at St. Mark's.

- **Recommendation:** *Inquire about top candidates' interest in community engagement around music performance. Consider pushing the congregation to imagine what our music ministry could look like if we made it a larger part of our evangelism efforts, being careful to warn against assumptions about what any particular demographic might be seeking.*

Conclusion

We are a congregation that *loves* music! We place enormous value on the quality of our music and the roles that music plays in worship, in defining our liturgical year, and in inspiring emotions that bring us closer to God and to one another. Most of us deeply appreciate important aspects of St. Mark's music as it has been over the tenures of Rebecca and Jim, but many of us also long for change. Our congregation's overall openness to some variation within and across worship experiences is very encouraging, but given some strongly held opinions about music, we need to approach experimentation with transparency, respect for diverse opinions, and an ongoing commitment to quality across all musical styles. In our search for new music leaders, we need to seek people with

- a demonstrated record of high quality music performance and leadership
- a respect for the musical traditions of St. Mark's and the Anglican church
- a deep interest in how music connects with our liturgical year and theology
- experience incorporating multiple musical styles and traditions while maintaining the integrity of the worship experience
- a willingness to experiment and the skills needed to invite the many talented musicians at St. Mark's to participate in those experiments
- ideas about how to engage children, youth and families in music, and a willingness to work with leaders in our children, youth and family ministries to integrate music into the broader picture of spiritual formation and worship experience
- good communication skills that can be deployed in helping our congregants try new things, learn more about our musical traditions, improve our confidence in participating in music, and be ready for some experiments that don't really work or may take some time to get used to

We also have work to do in communicating with our congregation about music. Some comments reflected beliefs about what other people in our congregation want or need that don't align with the data from our actual survey participants. As we know from human psychology, it's easy to think that each of us is the norm, and that surely other people think the way we do! We need to help our congregation understand how important music is to us as a community, and that what we seek in music during worship differs from person to person. We need to reassure the congregation that we can create room for people seeking joy, contemplation, passion, meditation, ebullient praise, and connection to God and to each other. We can't be all things to all people, but we can start from a place of acknowledging what unites us and where we diverge, and affirming a commitment to continuing and renewing an inclusive, high quality music ministry at St. Mark's.