



Everything from chant to praise band

Presbyterian Association of Musicians resources, trains,
and gathers church musicians and music directors in exciting ways.

BY CARY ESTES

Imagine attending a high-school or college football game in which the teams and the fans and the cheerleaders are all there, but there is no band. Sure, the competition will be intense, and the cheers and groans of those in the stands will create a constant wave of noise. But conspicuously absent will be the music that provides energy and enthusiasm and transforms a mere game into a joyful event.

Beth Thompson, a member of First Presbyterian Church of Dallas,

feels much the same way about the presence of music during church services. Without it, there's simply something missing.

"We're called to praise God in many different ways. And a very important one is through music," says Thompson, who was the director of music ministries at The Woodlands Community Presbyterian Church in suburban Houston for nine years before moving to Dallas. "It's from the heart. That connection we have with God through music and with



WORSHIP IN PRACTICE: Montreat and MoRanch PAM Worship & Music Conferences

each other is something that is deeply felt and emotional. It is a way to connect with each other, and with God, beyond words.”

Since 1970, the Presbyterian Association of Musicians (PAM) has worked to strengthen that bond between worship and music. The organization supports church musicians, pastors, and worship planners through a variety of initiatives, including publishing an updated list

of job openings within the PC(USA), providing seed-money grants to help underwrite events which promote worship and music, and publishing resource booklets to provide information for church musicians and churches.

But the high notes for PAM involve the conferences the organization holds every summer that attract church music directors and musicians from across the country.

The two primary ones are the Montreat Conference, which draws more than 2,000 participants, and the Mo-Ranch Conference in Texas, which has had annual crowds of approximately 200 since it officially became affiliated with PAM in 2009.

“These conferences provide a time when we can move beyond our own congregation and be exposed to new and sometimes innovative worship ideas and styles and trends in

music,” says Thompson, who helped lead the effort to wed the Mo-Ranch and PAM West conferences. “The hope is that those who participate in these conferences will come back

ministry,” Thompson says. “You can figure out what kind of music to use, how to structure your program, what to do throughout the year. A choir director who doesn’t know a

in worship without having to think, ‘OK, now I have to make sure that the choir remembers this cue and this measure.’ It’s so nice to have that release from all those responsibilities.”

And for those who enjoy combining music and worship, there can be no better release.

“Music is a way for human beings to express things that words don’t express well,” McConnell says. “We’re wired for music. That’s very clear in Scripture, and it plays out in our lives. Music is an important aspect of our worship, and it should be. It’s another way to keep people engaged in the church.”

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just chock full of new ways to enliven their own worshipping communities.”

PAM executive director William McConnell says the conferences attract a wide array of participants, from veteran professional musicians to directors of children’s choirs to people of all ages who simply enjoy listening to and taking part in good music and creative worship.

“There are classes and seminars, opportunities for people to gather ideas from the conference leadership and from other people who are attending,” McConnell says. “But it’s also an amazing musical event. At Montreat you’re worshipping with a thousand other people, most of whom are musicians. So the singing is incredible.”

Nationally known music leaders facilitate most of the seminars, lead in worship, and conduct the ensembles. There are directors of adult, youth, and children’s choirs, even handbell directors. There are lectures about new trends in music. There are music reading sessions in which participants sit together in a room and read through new music options that they can then take back to their congregations.

“If you wanted to start a children’s music program at your local church, this would be the perfect place to go to get all kinds of resources and talk to experts in children’s music

lot about handbells, he could go to a handbell class. There are all kinds of workshops that go on at these conferences.”

Or as McConnell says, “In the course of one week, you can learn about and experience everything from chant to praise band. Worship music is no longer just three hymns, an anthem, and a benediction response. We’re looking for creative ways to integrate music in worship, and also an openness to presenting music of different styles.”

Peter Haley, the director of music at First Presbyterian Church of Anderson, South Carolina, says he has been attending the annual PAM conference at Montreat since 2001, when he was still singing in a youth choir. Now Haley teaches the youth choir and others at his church and says he learns something new every year from the Montreat meeting.

“Montreat often ends up being one of the biggest influences,” Haley says, on his choir’s music. And then there is the joy of once again having a seat in the choir and singing for the sake of singing.

“As a music director, one of the things I miss is the opportunity to just sing in the choir,” Haley says. “At Montreat I’m able to sing in a choir with other talented musicians and then go and sit in the congregation and just participate

PAM UPCOMING EVENTS

Montreat Conferences on Worship & Music

Montreat Conference Center,
Montreat, NC

Week I: June 16–21;
Week II: June 23–28

Leaders include Bradley Schmeling,
Michael Burkhardt, Martin Tel,
Kimberley Bracken Long, and
Tom Trenney

Mo-Ranch/PAM Conference on
Worship & Music

Presbyterian Mo-Ranch Conference
Center, Hunt, TX

June 16–20

Leaders include Shannon Johnson
Kerschner, Mary Louise (Mel)
Bringle, Susan Palo Cherwien, David
Cherwien, and Gradye Parsons

Registration information:
presbysmusic.org/conferences

Learn more at presbysmusic.org, or
email pam@pcusa.org.