

Congregational singing before the Reformation

According to Joseph Herl in his book *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism*:

“It is difficult to determine the extent of congregational singing before the Reformation because, although German hymns are known from a large number of manuscripts and books, in many cases we cannot be sure if they were sung by the entire congregation or only by the choir or, indeed, in church at all. There do exist throughout the German speaking region books that contain references to German hymns, mostly incipits; these hymns, at least, we know were sung in church. But only a very few sources unequivocally refer to singing by the assembly. Anthony Ruff cites instances from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries in which the people sang the Kyrie, Christ its erstanden, and other songs. Johannes Janota cites a reference from the thirty-first sermon Berthed of Regensburg (d. 1272) to the people singing a creedal paraphrase in the **vernacular: ‘For thereafter follows what is called the Credo in unum’; that is, the Creed. You begin thus and sing with common supplication: ‘I believe in the Father, I believe in the Son of my lady Saint Mary and in the Holy Spirit; Lord have mercy.’ Beginning in the early thirteenth century there are many references to vernacular songs sung before and after the sermon.** The vernacular Christ its erstanden was interpolated into the Easter sequence Victim paschal and sung by the entire congregation, this practice being widespread. Other vernacular hymns were later interpolated between the lines of the Christmas and Pentecost sequences as well, and the Lutherans retain what was to them an ancient tradition of singing these sequences with their interpolations on the appropriate days.

Even these few unequivocal references make it clear that congregational singing **was practiced prior to Luther’s time, but it is still uncertain how widespread** congregational singing was across the German-speaking region and how frequently churches where it was in use actually employed it. The size of a typical **congregation’s repertoire is also unclear, nor do we know how well the people** sang. A situation in which a different hymn was sung with enthusiasm each week before and after the sermon throughout Germany is a far cry from one in which a handful of former choir members in isolated churches sang Christ its erstanden once a year for Easter. Unfortunately, while it is clear that neither extreme applied, we cannot tell from the currently available evidence which end of the continuum lies **closer to the actual practice.”**

Most of the pre-Reformation Catholic churches had choirs to lead and often do most of the singing. The larger more urban churches had two choirs, one comprised of trained adult male singers, and the second comprised of boys. The smaller rural churches often had only smaller boys choir, and possibly no choir at all in which case a cantor or other person would lead and direct congregation responses and songs.