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Pastor Hopes Banjo Strikes A Chord With Congregation

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TEMPLE TERRACE - It started with a high school graduation gift.

'I'd like a banjo,' Wally Meyer told his parents. They, being musicians themselves, were quite open to this idea.

And so began his love affair - in his case, with a five-string bluegrass banjo.

Meyer didn't go on to become a professional banjo player. Instead, he followed a calling into ministry, something he'd decided back in third grade. Like his grandfather, father and older brother, Meyer is a Lutheran pastor.

But the clergyman didn't have to abandon his love of the instrument. For the past two years, he has offered an Americana music service at Christ Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, where he serves as senior pastor.

On the first Sunday of every month at the 10:30 a.m. service, the 57-year-old trades his black robes ('Too hard to play a banjo with a robe') for more casual garb and claims a seat off the main altar with fellow musicians. On this day, he doesn't lead the spoken liturgy, opting instead to just preach from the pulpit and make music not typically heard in a Lutheran church.

'I know it sounds a little unorthodox, but it's very traditional the way we've done it,' Meyer insists.

For this service, Meyer rewrites the historic liturgy and sets it to an eclectic mix of bluegrass, African-American spirituals, Christian folk songs and traditional church hymns.

He's joined by other church musicians playing the oboe, mandolin, guitar, keyboard, sometimes a fiddle, and soon, a string bass. Songs such as 'Amazing Grace' and 'Holy, Holy, Holy,' with new arrangements by Meyer, take on a whole new sound. Although some bluegrass tends toward mournful vocals, he chooses a faster, uplifting beat with elements of jazz.

Let other churches offer splashy multimedia presentations, illustrated sermons, rollicking choirs and celebrity preachers. Meyer has his own niche with this monthly service. And to my knowledge, it's unique in the Tampa Bay area.

Naturally, Meyer hopes that the Americana service will draw new visitors, potential church members, to Christ Our Redeemer. With younger people drifting away from church, clergy need to make their services and programs more appealing to that crowd. That's a challenge faced by most mainstream denominational leaders these days. Fail at this, and who will fill the pews in the future?

Meyer's approach combines his two great loves: God and music. He doesn't have to compromise his commitment to traditional Lutheran worship; he's just injecting a twist to make it more contemporary and appealing to a youthful crowd.

He believes that God intervened in his early life and kept him on track with the banjo. In the early 1970s, while attending seminary in St. Louis, he and his wife came upon a music store with a sale on instruments. Meyer still had that first banjo from his folks and was yearning for an upgrade. But money was tight, so he stared wistfully at the rows of instruments.

'I wish my Uncle George was here,' he said of the banjo-playing relative who had taught him a thing or two about fast-fingered playing. And then, right on cue, Uncle George walked into the store.

'I took it as a sign from God,' Meyer chuckled. 'So I didn't hesitate to scrape together the \$200, which was a lot of money back then, and make the buy.'

He admits that banjo practice didn't always take precedent in those post-school years of pastoring and raising four children with his wife. 'Maybe 25 years or so,' he says of the hiatus. 'But I always knew I'd come back someday.'

When he did start practicing again several years ago, Meyer got his lessons from a teacher half his age. As for role models who have distinguished themselves with banjo excellence, Meyer couldn't come up with one. Then he remembered: actor-comic Steve Martin.

'Except when he plays, he's usually wearing a fake arrow through his head,' Meyer says. 'Most bluegrass people would not claim him.'

On Nov. 4, at the next Americana service, Meyer will be joined in the musicians' corner by his older brother, Art, a fiddler who pastors a church in New Mexico. On that day, he says he will be imagining his parents, who met at the Box Society Choir in St. Louis, singing God's praises with them from their perch in heaven.

And what does Meyer hope congregants and visitors will gain from a service that combines Americana music with Lutheran liturgy?

'I would love for them to be walking away still humming some of the tunes,' he says. 'I want them to remember the whole experience. Not just the music experience, but also the presence of God.'

Christ Our Redeemer Lutheran Church is at 304 Druid Hills Road, Temple Terrace. For information on the Americana service, call (813) 988-4025. Get a sneak preview of the service on Michelle Bearden's 'Keeping the Faith' at 9 a.m. Sunday on WFLA, News Chann

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