



## SPOTLIGHT: AN INTERVIEW WITH PETER CRISAFULLI, MINISTER OF MUSIC

### **Where are you from? What is your family and musical background?**

I was born in Chicago and lived all my life in Evanston, Illinois, until moving here in 1988 to take the job with All Saints.

I was interested in music from an early age - my family was musical, and my father was in the *Chicago Symphony Orchestra* for 50 years. At age 7, I insisted on joining the boys choir at St. Luke's, the church where I grew up. The main requirement was to be able to sit still through two services - which I was determined to do! I played the clarinet from 4th grade through high school. In my HS yearbook, I was named "most likely to be playing in a symphony orchestra".

### **What else did you do and like?**

I loved science. I enjoyed various science projects, and was a member of the science club. I especially experimented with electricity - batteries, wires, doorbells, - you name it. A lot of fellow students figured I'd be an electrician when I grew up!

### **How did you move to being an organist and church musician?**

St. Luke's was very instrumental in my musical background. I had listened to the organ every week as I grew up, and the choir master was inspiring. But in 8th grade, a seminal event occurred: the (frankly terrible) organ in the lady chapel at St. Luke's was replaced. I took home some of the pipes from the old organ, and from then on, began to learn everything I could about the organ. God was already drawing me in and forming me, without me realizing it.

I actually started the organ rather late. When I realized what I wanted, I first had to begin taking piano lessons, which I did in spring of 8th grade - despite already having choir and clarinet. And I was allowed to "fool around" for an hour a week on the organ. It was hard and took commitment, but my goal was to audition for college on the organ. The clarinet eventually fell by the wayside - although more than one college said they'd accept me as a music major on the clarinet, and not the organ! I ended up at Northwestern — my hometown school — where I learned and thrived, while also continuing in the choir at St. Luke's.

### **How did your professional career begin and grow?**

My professional resume is actually rather short. I took my first official church job in my junior year of college as the organist for the student Episcopal Ministry at Northwestern. After graduate school, where I learned to be more self-reliant and to trust what I had learned, I served as the Director of Music at St. Mark's in Evanston, Illinois, for 14 years, until taking the job at All Saints.

## **And just how did you end up at All Saints?**

Looking back, it is easy to see God's hand in our call to All Saints. I was happy at St. Mark's; I was in my early forties, life was good, and Linda also had a thriving career playing and teaching flute. But, through a series of "coincidences" several contacts heard of the opportunity at All Saints, and encouraged me to apply.

The change, frankly, was difficult. We were born & bred Midwesterners and we gave up a lot, personally and professionally, to make the move. But now, it is easy to look back and see God's hand in preparing both us and the soil in which we were going to be planted. It is easier to see in hindsight than it was to look forward. We really did take a leap of faith! But God cared for us - from the people here at All Saints who were so supportive, especially during our first year, to the various "coincidences" that led to Linda finding her place professionally teaching at The Cathedral School, and more.

I always expected to have one more "call" to another position, but I never did, and I am satisfied.

## **You clearly have a depth of musical and spiritual understanding. Can you tell us how you choose music for a Sunday morning?**

First, and most important is scripture. We are a liturgical church and follow the discipline of the three-year cycle of the Lectionary. I take time to study the scripture some weeks in advance, especially the Gospel reading, and then the Epistle, Old Testament, and the Psalm for the week. It is not about choosing my favorite pieces - though of course I have those! I use various guides for inspiration and suggestions, and select the service music very carefully, especially the "Sequence Hymn" that comes before the Gospel readings. It is important that the music enhances and connects to the scriptural theme of the day. I usually choose the organ pieces last.

I also consider what the choir, mostly volunteers with a range of musical abilities, can sing well, and what a good balance is. That is, what can keep them both interested and challenged, while also being secure and not intimidating to novices. It really is a balance. I try also to mix new pieces with time-tested and beloved pieces. Finally, I try to give the choir sufficient time to learn a new piece; it can take from 2 - 6 weeks for the choir to practice and learn something new, and to blend the melody and harmonies.

## **Can you give us an example of some favorites?**

One year - I think it was a "year C" - the lectionary reading was on the healing of Bartimaeus. I chose music for the Anthem that was already in the choral library - a "text painting" of that story. It was difficult to learn, but on that Sunday it was like fireworks going off. We experienced the Holy Spirit — the minister told me afterwards that we "didn't need [him] to preach the gospel" as we had already done that!

Another favorite is a wonderful choral anthem of the Publican and the Pharisee. The music is almost a mini-opera of the story, with a musical dialogue going back and forth. It is a masterful and beautiful exposition of the story.

**We see your name on some of the pieces we sing. Can you tell us about that?**

I love to compose, and composing is an important part of what I do. I mostly compose for use in our services and not so much to get published. I enjoy writing liturgical texts, such as the Magnificat, O Gracious Light, Nunc dimittis; Psalm responses; or singing the prayer book. One day I would love to set one of Peggy Eastman's poems to music! I pour myself into that - writing lovely tunes that can be readily sung, but hopefully are not dull, simplistic, or trite.

**Do you have a favorite memory here at All Saints?**

I would have to say that a highlight was when the parish celebrated Linda's and my 25th anniversary here in 2013. Unbeknownst to me, Kate Huntress-Reeve and the parish prepared a wonderful anniversary fête. The choir practiced on Monday nights for weeks - without me knowing - 6 or 7 compositions, including two special pieces. We were so touched and overwhelmed.

**Finally, what are you looking forward to?**

As we move out of Covid, like most people, I am simply looking forward to being more comfortable together and to losing the masks. I still have choir members who are not yet singing with us because of Covid and they long to be back. We know that singing poses a greater risk than merely being or talking together. It will be a glorious day when we can all be together, sing, and glorify God!