

Toward the end of October, I was lucky enough to be a participant in the Center of Liturgy and Music at Virginia Theological Seminary's "Raising the Song" Symposium, an event that brought 13 participants from across the country (and world!) to learn the art of songleading from Alice Parker (composer, conductor, educator), Marilyn Haskell (Trinity Wall Street, Music That Makes Community), and Ysaÿe Barnwell (founding member of Sweet Honey in the Rock). The focus of the symposium was on leading groups of people of varying musical backgrounds in song, reaching "beyond the page", to steal the phrase from our 2014 Hymn Society conference. Sometimes this meant paperless music, sometimes this meant rediscovering the musicality of printed hymns we all too often find ourselves plodding through. We spent two jam-packed days together, learning and singing, both in larger plenary sessions and small groups where we had the opportunity to work one-on-one to hone our skills. Each of our three presenters had completely different styles and experiences, allowing us to encounter a wide variety and start to figure out how to put these ideas together in a way that fit each of us. We also got to see this work in action in a larger group: the presenters led music for the noon Eucharist service at the seminary on Tuesday, and the event culminated in a community sing that evening, where folks from the local community gathered to join together in song, led by our presenters.

The most exciting part of the days we spent together, though, were the times we spent in conversation, hearing how each of us planned on using the skills that we'd learned. Some want to take this work back to congregations that firmly clamp the hymnal shut and stand mute as they let the "professionals" sing the song. Some want to start new communities of singers where we see deep spiritual longing. Some want to use community song to cross denominational boundaries, or strengthen music programs in public education. Everyone gathered there had a deep belief in the power and importance of singing in community. Part of the agreement upon participating in this symposium is that each of us will go and start a project based on what we learned at the symposium, and next October we will gather again and share what we have been up to. I cannot wait to see what everyone comes up with. Much thanks to Melodious Accord, the Calvin Institute for Worship, and Virginia Theological Seminary for the grants that made this possible, and to the Center of Liturgy and Music at VTS for pulling it all together!

Colleen Toole
Student, Princeton Theological Seminary