

MUSIC MINISTRY MATTERS

No. 3 - Some Personal Reflections on Congregational Singing

When I made the fateful decision in the 1970s to become a full-time, career church musician, I quickly discovered my twelve years of higher education to that point had not prepared me for the road I had chosen. My vocal performance and conducting technique was solid. My knowledge of classical sacred choral repertoire was broad and would continue to grow over the years. My training, however, was lacking in at least two areas: First, while I had grown up in the church and sung in choirs for as long as I could remember, my view of music in worship was hopelessly limited. My collegiate training had instilled in me a desire to share the joys of great musical art with the worshipping community I was joining. Those, I naively assumed would be embraced enthusiastically without question. In truth, many hearts were spiritually opened and blessed by the repertoire we presented.



But it was also evident to me that the musical needs of others in the congregation were not being met. As a church musician, I felt strongly that my work was a ministry – a servanthood to all the people, not just a select few. While I had an unshakeable faith in the power of great sacred choral music to witness, looking back I can see an element of hubris in my attitude. I had always been taught that there was the “good church music” – mostly classical and Eurocentric – and the “bad music”, nearly everything coming out of pop culture. I would find that this dualistic perspective was antithetical to music ministry in a church situation.

My view of gospel songs as a genre – particularly those of Moody/Sunday ilk through Homer Rodeheaver – had not been positive. I had once lectured a Baptist retreat on their musical and theological deficiencies (it was not well received!). I think a turning point came from my experience with the “Friendly Tuesday Group”. It was the 1970s, and this was a weekly gathering of seniors from the surrounding area at the United Methodist church I was serving. It was a large group, completely filling the church’s fellowship hall. A full morning of activities was planned for each Tuesday morning ending in lunch. Forty-five minutes to an hour of that time was devoted to singing from the Cokesbury Hymnal. For those of you not familiar with the Cokesbury, it’s a collection of hymns and gospel songs originally published in the 1920s by the Methodist Church South.

I will never forget experiencing those senior citizens belting out songs like “Rock of Ages”, “The Church in the Wildwood”, “Blessed Assurance”, and “Far Away the Noise of Strife” (Beulah Land). My old valuations based on musical and theological content no longer seemed so important. For these people in that place, those songs tapped an inner reservoir of faith that was absolutely magnetic. If the movement of the Holy Spirit is an essential component of vital and engaged worship, it was certainly evident in that room.

My point is not that churches should embrace gospel songs – or Contemporary Christian Music, or J. S. Bach for that matter – but that great congregational singing is a powerful vehicle for the Spirit. The genius of worship choruses is that they are short, tuneful, and easily taught by a songleader. The theological focus of the lyrics is generally personal and therefore emotionally impactful. That being said, within the canon of Christian hymnody are some of the greatest statements of faith and witness ever put to pen. I have been brought to tears by the robust singing of hymns and spirituals repeatedly over the years. Usually what moved me was not only

the music and text, but also that this was truly corporate worship with the body of Christ lifting its voice in song. Every congregation can experience this, but with regard to hymn singing, it can only be achieved by making it a priority. Clergy and musical leadership together must adopt a plan.

The truth is that in most congregations few read music, and even fewer have the courage to sing out when the music is unfamiliar. A sure route to making members of your church family and visitors hate hymn singing, is to program an unfamiliar hymn once – no matter how wonderful the music is or how appropriate the text – and then put it away. Time must be allotted to introducing new hymns and re-visiting ones, passionately explaining their history and message, and encouraging all to participate. Some churches have an informal singing time before worship once a month. I have found that the old-fashioned “hymn sing” format works wonderfully as a vehicle for teaching. Always a wide variety of worship music is planned with varied accompaniments (guitar, organ, and keyboard for example). Solos and ensemble renditions are interspersed with congregational singing and providing a bit of historical and/or theological background on what is being sung.

The struggle to embrace congregational singing as a universally-participated-in and essential component of the corporate worship experience in American churches is nothing new. How to achieve it roiled the colonial meetinghouse and still challenges clergy and church musicians in the twenty-first century.

*Best wishes and Peace,
Stan McDaniel*

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