

Q3. How can congregational singing be encouraged?

Congregational song is a unique medium in music. It is designed to be participatory - sung by the gathered -- rather than performed to an audience. It is not a concert, the radio, a CD, or even karaoke! Further, all people are invited to join in the song - men and women, adults and children, young and old, trained and untrained, musicians and novices. Congregational song does not discriminate and is therefore beyond issues of musical style, personal preference, and individual taste. In fact the church's song is more akin to "Happy Birthday" than to a Bach motet, a John Rutter anthem, a *Lost & Found* song, or Michael W. Smith's latest hit. Congregational song is unrehearsed, unrecorded, and unperfected; yet it is well-planned and prepared, meaningful and genuine on many levels, and a sincere expression of faith through both heart and mind.

While the choice of music is not irrelevant, it is the actual singing of that music which is the focus of this article. If the goal is to enrich worship through congregational song, then revitalization can be attempted no matter what the current level of singing. To this end the following suggestions are made so that God may be praised more heartily and his people edified more expressively.

1. Stand up! Nothing hinders song more than sitting down! The vocal mechanism, particularly the breath, is far better supported when standing than sitting. Look up! Sing to God, sing to each other, but don't sing to the hymnal, the bulletin, or the floor. Perk up! Sing the whole song, an entire verse, or an individual phrase as a unit rather than each note and syllable. Sing what you can from memory (by heart), even if it is short-term memory.

2. Choose a vibrant tempo! Most congregational songs, especially those based on chant, chorales, hymns, and even gospel songs are devoid of life because they are simply too slow. Choose a beat pulse bigger than a quarter note. Realize the essence of the music: its rhythm and meter, its phrase structure, and musical character

- The rollicking alternation between dotted half notes and half notes in "Comfort, Comfort These My People" requires a brisk tempo.
- The dance-like lilt of "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty" is only evident when the beat is on "praise," "Lord," "-might-," and "King," not on every quarter note.
- The jubilation of "Thank the Lord" (in 6/8) lies in stressing the first beat of each bar, or better the first beat of every other bar: "**Thank** the Lord and **sing** his praise; **tell** everyone what **he** has done. **Let** ev'ry one who **seeks** the Lord **rejoice** and proudly **bear** his name." etc.
- "Son of God, Eternal Savior" is based on half notes, not quarter notes; otherwise it becomes plodding and boring.

But, the choice of pulse and tempo is more than just going faster. Its primary importance is that it allows the people sing entire thoughts and phrases in one breath. In planning the tempo, read through a verse and sing a verse through to get a sense of direction of the phrase as well as the textual and vocal needs for a breath.

The refrain on "All Glory, Laud, and Honor" is two phrases (not four): 1. "All glory, laud, and honor to you, Redeemer, King" and 2. "To whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring." If breaths are taken after the words "honor" and "children" it becomes very easy to lose the meaning of the words.

Other songs require quicker tempos to ensure that the people can sing unified texts in one breath. "At the name of Jesus," "Jesus Shall Reign," and "Lord, Take My Hand and Lead Me". Even tunes with marks in them like "Oh, that I Had a Thousand Voices" work best without the mid-phrase breaks!

Stick to it! While a subtle ritardando or decrescendo might be appropriate at the end of the final verse, it actually throws the people off when done after each verse. Keep the tempo vibrant and constant throughout. Change the harmonic accompaniment if necessary. Simplify chords or lessen chord frequency, if technical skill limits leading at a crisp tempo. Delete the accompaniment completely if it hinders the congregation singing. Do whatever it takes to ensure that the people singing have the opportunity to be energetic in their song!

3. Look at the words! Strong Christian song includes meaningful lyrics. The text may include profound insights, deep affirmation of faith, expressive thought and feeling, reminders of God's Word, or passages of Holy Scripture. If deliberately chosen, a particular song is connected to the worship in God's gift of word and sacrament. Why then do we so often ignore the text?

In a recent service, the words to "Now Thank We All Our God" were printed in the service folder. A simple typo resulted in the end of one verse reading:

". . . and guide us when perplexed
for thus it was, is now, and shall be evermore."

One or two of us laughed at being perplexed for all eternity, but most people simply sang what was there without regard for what we were singing. Perhaps there is more meaning to this combination of stanzas than we realize!

How can we refocus on the words? Explain the text before singing, simply read the poetry expressively, highlight certain words and phrases by encouraging meaningful singing in musical leadership. Stress certain words; alter dynamics or accompaniment to reflect the text. (How often have you heard verse 3 of "O Little Town of Bethlehem" blasted away - "How silently, how silently...?") Relate how a particular song fits into the context of worship.

4. Create variety from verse to verse! The nature of congregational song is often strophic, which means that the tune is repeated to different words (verses). This provides the opportunity to be musically interesting or musically boring! Be creative from verse to verse! Using the text as a guide, be creative on successive stanzas. Keeping the fundamental melody as clear as possible, embellish the music in different ways.

One possibility is the use of *alternatum praxis* (alternating practice) which not only provides musical variety, but also gives the opportunity to listen to words and music without singing. The possibilities are many:

- Treble voices/ bass voices (Women/Men). Have the people role play. In "O Sons and Daughters of the King," the women can sing verse 2 about "the faithful women" on Easter morn; the men can sing verse 4 about "the apostles" meeting that night.
- Left side/right side - Specify a specific verse for a specific part of the congregation, particularly with complementary inner verses. ("Come to Calvary's Holy Mountain" verses 2 and 3)
- Children - Give the kids verse 1! Allow them to inspire the congregation and be responded to. Let them sing a familiar refrain by themselves ("This is the Feast" is a great one!)

- Choir - Allow the choir to model expressive singing of the melody. A strong unison verse phrased sensitively with dynamic inflection can be more inspirational than singing in four-part harmony.
- Soloist - a "choir of one" can do everything a choir can, except harmonize. It doesn't take advanced vocal technique to sing melody lines of congregational song.
- Instrumentalist - use the musical talents of congregation member, especially youth, by having them play one verse either independently or with the congregation. Teaching instrumentalists to play more than the notes can be enhanced as they reflect the text and its meaning.

Try something different on a verse. Deliberately sing it loudly or softly, repeat an important verse, read it, listen to it being read, sing in canon, sing on "oo" while the text is read, act out a verse, dance a verse, paint verses on slides. Be innovative! Try something!

5. Truly accompany! Remember that the main thing is the congregation singing. Everything else -- the organ, piano, band, choir, guitar, song leaders, drums -- is accompaniment and is not essential. Other than providing clear pitch and rhythm of the melody, everything else is decorative. Use different decorations for different verses.

Organists, there are different stops for a reason. Use them! Pianists, play idiomatically. Since a piano cannot sustain notes, add arpeggios, repeat bass notes to fill out harmonies, especially on long notes. Guitarists, use different strum patterns.

Change the harmonic rhythm - rather than a new chord on each beat, how about one every two beats or each measure?. Change the harmonies - substitute chords, 'jazz it up' by adding 7ths, 6ths, 2nds, or 9ths. Accompany the melody with drones or ostinatos (short repeated patterns). Orff instruments are great for this. Put the melody in the bass with harmonies above it. This also helps the men in the congregation hear their melody notes.

In addition, remember that accompaniment is optional. People can fundamentally sing without instruments. Let them go a cappella with a vital tempo, they'll keep both pitch and rhythm just fine. (If you're nervous, 'air-play' or play just on down beats.)

Use the accompanying instruments to introduce congregational songs. Make sure the people have a clear melody they can hear and see. Even non-musical people can intuitively follow the little dots moving up and down the staff! Help the people phrase by breathing with them at appropriate places determined by the text.

Teach people how to sing. Model for them--not only pitches, rhythms and words, but phrasing and dynamics that make the music expressive. Stress important words and syllables. Conversely unstress unimportant words and syllables. "The" simply isn't as important as "Lord" but most of us sing it that way! Sing the punctuation. Who are the modelers? - pastors, choirs, song leaders, certainly, but also members of the congregation. Encourage people to sing musically, expressively, meaningfully.

Finally, plan for the long term as well as the short term. Help your worship space to be singing-friendly. Particularly in these days of the electronic church, do all you can to encourage the natural acoustic. There is nothing better for honest, genuine,

corporate song. While one can mic the pastor, instruments, soloists, or even the choir; it is impossible to mic the congregation in a meaningful way. They are encouraged and edified when they hear each other. A sanctuary is not a concert hall where music is performed one-way from stage to audience. Rather it is an assembly hall where the congregation gathers for worship, often using corporate song.

Insist on good singing – for the congregation’s sake. They will be uplifted by vibrant song, they will understand more, feel more and express more using music as a vehicle. God created us to sing and provided many other resources to highlight that song. Ask Him to inspire your creative gifts. He will direct you to his Word. Take to heart the words from Colossians: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” Christ’s word does dwell in us as we teach, admonish, and sing, “giving thanks to God.”