

Teaching Your Congregation About the Church's Music

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Stories told by musicians for centuries about the beauty and power of music have been validated in our time by the behavior of people so deeply affected by that beauty and power that they have been known to walk unaware into the path of a moving vehicle. Only tiny wires hanging silently from their ears, and eyes apparently insensitive to their physical surroundings reveal the human being's state of enchantment by invisible vibratory patterns of sound.

But electronics will never give them the thrill of singing music themselves, when sound vibrates throughout their entire bodies. Fortunately, singing is an experience that churches have nourished and passed on for centuries, even multiplying it to include the joy of music-making with others, especially in the singing of congregational song.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, however, institutional (schools, churches) support for programs that develop singing skills began to slip away, even as many publishers expanded their church music offerings to feature increasing amounts of material that required less vocal and music reading skills. Some churches now offer the congregation only the experience of listening to music sung by others. Many musicians have continued to engage the congregations they serve in music drawn from a wide variety of traditions and historical eras. In more than a few cases, however, such efforts have been strongly opposed by some members of their congregations.

For literally years we organists could ignore or deny reports of diminishing support for established church music programs and their leaders. And even when its effects invaded the decision-making process of the institutions we serve, many of us were astonished and seriously unprepared to do battle. Where did all these people determined to redesign church music programs come from?

We suppose even now that if only everyone taking part in decisions about the congregation's music has a wide-ranging view of the music choices available, a generous vocabulary with which to discuss the matter, and an up-to-date knowledge and love of the congregation's worship tradition (as well as a commitment to Christian principles of discourse), the tyranny of personal opinions would not overwhelm the discussion.

However, we will be thinking more realistically if we consider the scarcity of ways people in our congregations have opportunity to be prepared for their musical role in the democratic processes of our churches. We should not be surprised when the opinions they express about music are primarily personal opinions. Unless they have sung in choirs, attended a church music class or read books on the subject, it is unlikely that they will have had any reason to think seriously about the purpose, history, nature or practice of music within the Christian community. But that

cannot be a reason to criticize the people, or the clergy either. In the case of the latter group, when a lack of knowledge about the music of the church is apparent, it usually can be traced back to the courses they were not required to attend in seminary.

We all have had the experience of looking into the eyes of someone who is entirely convinced that their “new” plans for the congregation’s music program will fill the church to overflowing in a month. We wish that someone had given us warning that what we had heard being whispered for some time had now reached a formal proposal stage. At the point of encounter, however, that wish holds no benefit for our situation.

But what if the congregation’s adult education offerings during the past year had included a presentation by the organist about some aspect of church music? And what if the program last year and the year before also had given the members of the congregation two additional opportunities to learn about the subject and to sing together during the session? Could hearts and minds have been changed? Could respect and admiration for the musician, who often is unseen behind the organ console, have been increased?

Musicians who lead music in Christian congregations are uniquely positioned to do more than lament the lack of awareness of the nature and value of church music among the faithful. Musicians serving churches, by definition, also are the congregation’s music educators. In working with our choirs, in offering sessions of education for all ages, and in worship planning with clergy, knowledge of why and how church music practices have developed help everyone, including ourselves, to better understand the basis of the most recent developments in the music of worship. We know from experience that clergy who have an opportunity to learn about church music are likely to be much more supportive of the music program, as they develop musical awareness, skills and the confidence that knowledge brings.

In an effort to encourage the reader to take part in the kind of congregational education in music that we are advocating, we offer below an outline which you are welcome to use in your church’s adult education program this year. This outline and bibliography also may be useful for those undertaking study on their own.

Your congregation’s positive acceptance of your offering will depend, as in the case of the organ music you play, on your careful and creative preparation. Here are several suggestions for that exercise. We urge you to read through the entire outline before making a decision about your willingness to offer this presentation. New things always seem daunting, but time for reflection can allow the clouds to part and the benefits to shine through.

1. Preparing yourself to offer an excellent presentation

A. Explore the contents of these two books (and other sources, including Internet, additional books and periodicals that you may find helpful).

- (1) *The Story of Christian Music: From Gregorian Chant to Black Gospel* by Andrew Wilson-Dickson (Fortress Press, 2003), ISBN 0-8006- 34742

The scope, contemporary insight and beauty of this book will be a valuable guide to the instructor's own preparation. Be watchful, however, for occasional misstatements: for example, referring to the early writer of gospel music, Thomas A. Dorsey, as "Tommy Dorsey," (p. 204)

(2) *Christian Worship: 100,000 Sundays of Symbols and Rituals* by Gail Ramshaw (Fortress Press, 2009), ISBN 978-0-8006-6233-2

This well-organized book focuses on the world-wide ecumenical church. Music is not discussed in detail, but is described as contributing significantly to the development of worship practices throughout history. Review this book first; it will offer a strong foundation upon which to embroider the musical material you may choose to present. The author is an extremely gifted and experienced teacher.

- B. Give yourself plenty of time to plan and rehearse your presentations. Choose and examine hymns and psalms that you want to use in your presentation early in the preparation process.
- C. Generally speaking, it is better to offer an enthusiastic discussion of a few aspects of a specific topic than to leave your listeners confused by lengthy or complex explanations.
- D. You may want to prepare a simple one-page summary of the main points of your presentation for distribution to the people who attend the presentation. It will help people remember the main points and reflect your professional approach to this presentation. This will make it possible for people to re-read the handout at home and even to sing through the hymns again at a later time.
- E. When designing your presentation, keep in mind the knowledge your listeners may already have.
- F. Adults usually welcome opportunities to take part in the group's discussion at one or more points during the presentation.

2. A Presentation about Congregational Song:

When did people first sing hymns?

- People attending this session should be given a copy of the congregation's hymnal.
- Invite them to sing the hymns and psalms you discuss during your presentation.
- The two books referenced in these preparation notes are abbreviated:
SCM = The Story of Christian Music
CW = Christian Worship

-- The main points of the presentation are printed in bold font. You may wish to expand on them, but be certain to allow enough time to complete your presentation.

A. Welcoming remarks (by Presenter)

B. (Introduction)

- (1) **From earliest human history, people have used music in worship and other ritual acts.**

[A painting on SCM, p. 17, shows musicians in a funeral procession in 700 BCE. If you prepare a handout, you might want to include a copy of this photo in it, being certain to acknowledge its source.]

- (2) **One writer points out that the emotional effects of music are fundamental to worship:** [Dr. Gail Ramshaw, paraphrased from CW, p. 49]

-- **Artful melody and rhythm provide beauty and power in worship.**

-- **Music plays a role in solidifying memory.**

-- **Music creates unity in a communal gathering.**

- (3) **In the twenty-first century, the hymns and spiritual songs we sing together allow us to sing what our Christian forebears have believed and sung for the last two thousand years.**

-- **Hymns give us an inside look at the faith of the “cloud of witnesses.”**

C. We read in Matthew 26:30 that, following their last meal together, Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn together.

-- **We have no idea what the music sounded like because music notation had not yet been developed.**

D. A hymn usually is defined as the TEXT of a song of praise to God.

-- **A hymn may be sung to any tune that fits with its text.**

-- **This accounts for the fact that we sometimes encounter texts that are familiar to us being sung to unfamiliar tunes.**

- [Ask the group if they can think of a text which they sing to a certain tune but they know is sung to a different tune in other congregations.]

E. Early Christians adapted Jewish songs and wrote and sang new hymns to Christ beginning in the first centuries of the Christian era.

- **Some church hymnals contain hymns written during these early centuries by writers such as Ambrose of Milan (who lived from 340 – 397).**

- [If there are no early texts in your congregation's hymnal, you might want to find one or two such texts that are available on the Internet.]

- “Father, we thank thee” (from the *Didache*, 40 – 60)

- “Shepherd of Eager Youth”

- (Clement of Alexandria, 150 – 215)

- “O Gracious Light” (Greek, 200’s)

- “O Splendor of God’s Glory Bright”

- (Ambrose of Milan, 340 – 397)

[Have someone from the class read one or two of the texts aloud.]

[Encourage those in attendance to discuss the ways that the faith stated in these early hymns parallels the beliefs we hold at the present time.]

F. In the 1600’s in England, the Puritan government outlawed the singing of hymns in churches, saying that only paraphrased Biblical texts, particularly the Psalms, were suitable for singing during worship. (*SCW* p. 102)

- **Puritans believed that hymn texts which were written by human beings (described as being “of human composure,” *SCW*, p.110) could mislead faithful people into erroneous beliefs.**

- [Invite the people to sing one or more poetic versions of a Psalm from the congregation’s hymnal. They are usually found in the hymnal index under “Psalms.” Among the most likely to appear are,

- “The King of Love” (Psalm 23) by Henry Williams Baker

- “My Shepherd will supply my need” (Psalm 23)

- by Isaac Watts

- “All people that on earth do dwell” (Psalm 100)

- By William Kethe]

- [Bring a Bible so (if there is time) the group can compare the original Psalm with the paraphrase. What changes in the Psalm’s meaning can take place in the process of paraphrasing the Psalm to make it fit with the tune.]

G. Isaac Watts, who lived from 1674 – 1748 (during J. S. Bach’s lifetime), (SCM, p. 110) bravely led a gradual expansion of psalm texts which eventually included praise of Christ.

-- People found in the Watts’ hymns recognition of their own experience as Christians. His texts also were formed so that they could be sung with tunes that already were well-known to the people.

-- [Sing some hymns from the hymnal that were written by Watts.
For example,

O God, our help in ages past
Joy to the world
When I survey the wondrous cross]

H. Summarize the main points of your presentation:

- (1) From earliest history, human beings have sung praises to God.**
- (2) Hymns are the POETIC TEXTS that are sung**
- (3) In the 1600’s in England, the Puritan government did not allow hymns to be sung because they were written by human poets, rather than being taken from the Bible (such as Psalms), and were thought to spread false beliefs.**
- (4) Isaac Watts (1674- 1748) wrote texts which gradually expanded the language of psalm paraphrases to include references to Christ. This, in turn, gradually helped to encourage acceptance of the new texts as hymns.**

[Ask whether there are any questions.]

I. Close by inviting people to stand to sing a final Watts hymn, “Jesus shall reign.”

The musician who is planning to work with people to awaken their interest in church music is undertaking an adventure. It involves a significant challenge, and requires a certain amount of courage. Moving people from listening to individual music choices to the enjoyment of singing with others and appreciating the traditions of church music will be a giant leap for some. Music itself will be your greatest ally, for its beauty and its delightful variety will intrigue the people with whom you work.

Here is a list of books which you may find helpful as you prepare to offer additional presentations to your group:

-- *Acoustics for Liturgy: A Collection of Articles of the Hymn Society in the U.S. and Canada.* Meeting House Essays, Number Two (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991).

-- *All in Sync: How Music and Art are Revitalizing American Religion.* by Robert Wuthnow, (University of California Press, 2003).

-- *Beyond the Worship Wars* by Thomas G. Long (Alban Institute, 2001)

-- *Church Organs: A Guide to Selection and Purchase* by John K. Ogasapian (Baker Book House, 1990; available from AGO Headquarters)

-- *Companion to the United Methodist Hymnal* by Carlton R. Young (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993)

-- *A Concise Dictionary of Church Music*, Edward Foley, editor (Liturgical Press, 1999)

-- *Foundations of Christian Music: The Music of Pre-Constantinian Christianity* by Edward Foley (Grove Books Limited, 1992; distributed by The Pastoral Press, 225 Sheridan St. N.W., Washington DC 20011-1492)

-- *From Sacred Song to Ritual Music: Twentieth-Century Understandings of Roman Catholic Worship Music* by Jan Michael Joncas (Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 1997).

-- *The Hymnal 1982 Companion.* Raymond F. Glover, editor (Church Publishing Corporation, 1990) Three volumes, the first of which contains thirty-seven essays about various aspects of church music as well as a brief glossary.

-- *In Spirit and In Truth: The Music of African American Worship* by Melva Costen (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

-- *Leading the Church's Song*, Robert Buckley Farlee and Eric Vollen, editors (Augsburg Fortress, 1998) Important and useful information (including demo CD's) about ways to understand and lead people in singing music from a variety of the world's cultures.

-- *Melodious Accord: Good Singing in Church* by Alice Parker (Liturgy Training Publications, 1991).

-- *Music and Vital Congregations: A Practical Guide for Clergy* by William Bradley Roberts (New York, Church Publishing, 2009)

-- *Music in Catholic Worship: The NPM Commentary* (Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, National Conference of Catholic Bishops; The Pastoral Press, 225 Sheridan St. N.W., Washington DC 20011-1492, 1983)

-- *Readings in African American Church Music and Worship*, Compiled and edited by James Abington (Chicago, GIA Publications, 2001)

-- *The Singing Thing: A Case for congregational song* by John L. Bell (Chicago, GIA Publications, 2000)

-- *Trouble at the Table* by Carol Doran and Thomas H. Troeger (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992)

--*True Worship: Reclaiming the Wonder and Majesty* (by Donald Hustad (Hope Publishing Company, 1998).

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