

Leading Congregational Singing

LEADING AS A VOCALIST

- Joyce Poley

DEVELOPING A STYLE

Song/hymn leading is an important skill that can make an enormous difference to the way a congregation sings. If the song leader is primarily a vocalist, there are a number of qualities that are important for success: having enthusiasm for singing; being able to establish a good rapport with the congregation; being comfortable with your own voice; having accurate pitch and a pleasing vocal quality; being excited about introducing new ideas and repertoire. These attributes will help ensure a good singing experience for both the leader and the congregation.

Song/hymn leaders use a variety of approaches when leading the congregation, and no single approach or style is "right". What is important is to develop a style that is unique to your own personality and comfort level. The following are some things to consider:

- Energy & enthusiasm

Probably nothing affects your success as a song leader as much as your own energy and enthusiasm. People respond to those who love what they do; enthusiasm truly is contagious. Those who already enjoy singing will simply become even more enthusiastic; those who are more reluctant, or feel they can't sing, will want to be a part of all this positive energy. The more encouragement they get from the leader, the better they will sing. The better they sing, the more confident they become, and the more willing to try new things. Enjoy yourself and be at ease, and they will journey almost any distance with you into the music.

- Building rapport

Much of what you accomplish as a song/hymn leader will be the result of the kind of rapport you build with the congregation, and much of this depends on creating an environment conducive to singing. This means building trust by creating a safe place where people can sing what they know with gusto, and attempt what they don't know with eagerness and determination. Be open, be friendly, be accepting, and remember to make eye contact. The more they can relate to you as a leader, the better they will sing.

Invite everyone to sing, accept where they are musically, and encourage them to stretch to new singing heights so their confidence will grow, and with it their musicality and their personal involvement.

Expect good singing and they will give it to you!

- Vocal delivery

Whether you are a soloist or not, work on your own vocal production. It's important that you feel comfortable with your own voice so the congregation can relax and simply try to emulate what you're doing. They will copy you, so be sure to be as accurate as possible, and to model the kind of vocal production you're after. It shouldn't be a singing lesson, but if you demonstrate clearly, they can pick up many nuances without your ever having to formally "teach" them.

Most of the time you will need to use a microphone. Even if you have a big voice, it's a strain to try to lead a group larger than 30 or so without the help of some amplification. If a song is very well known, you may be able to step back from the microphone once they get started. But if the song is new, they'll need to be able to hear you. The trick is to be heard without being overpowering. This requires some practice with the sound system ahead of time.

- Doing what feels natural

What you do with your body is also important. Song/hymn leading is not the same as choir directing, in that the congregation did not “sign up to learn how to sing on Sunday morning”. They also did not come to sing to somebody else – they have simply come to worship together. So your body language will probably be a little less formal and a little less directive than it would be for a choir rehearsal. You need to find gestures and body movements that feel natural to you, and that the congregation responds to. This may mean using simple movements like snapping your fingers, keeping time unobtrusively with one hand, or gently swaying. Do whatever works in order to keep the rhythm going, and to provide clear cues for verses, harmony parts, etc. Keep it simple, unaffected, and inviting.

LEADING A FAMILIAR SONG/HYMN

Congregations tend to sing better when someone is leading. This is true even when a song or hymn is very familiar. Following are some basic ideas and techniques that apply to all songs, old and new:

- Careful preparation

1. Know the song really well.

If you're well prepared and at ease singing the song, the congregation will be able to relax and concentrate on their own singing. (They'll also have a much better chance of learning how to sing it correctly!)

2. Prepare a brief verbal introduction. (“brief” means 1 to 3 sentences)

Some suggestions:

- provide some background about the composer, or the song
- offer your own interpretation of the song's theme
- read aloud some of the song's text
- make a statement tying the song directly to the theme of the service
- give a personal testimony about why the song touches you.

3. Look after the details

- check any copyright concerns before committing to using a song
- photocopy a leader's copy of the song so it's easier to hold
- establish where the microphone & music stand will be positioned
- have a glass of water nearby
- confirm where the song is in the Order of Service, and check for accuracy

4. Check the sound system

- communicate with the sound technician:
 - be clear about the equipment, settings & volume you need
 - establish that the microphone needs to stay on for the entire song or hymn, even though you may step away from it
 - e.g. you may decide to stay close to the mike if the hymn or song is new, or you may choose to back off for something more familiar.
- become an expert with the microphone:
 - know where the on/off switch is
 - get someone (preferably the technician) to listen for clarity, balance and volume when you rehearse
 - determine the best distance for you to be from the mike
 - a mike on a boom stand, or hand-held, is most versatile; the disadvantage of a lavalier (clip-on) mike is that you can't move close, or back off, as needed
 - if you plan to hold the microphone, practise singing, talking, and moving around with it

Note: Don't underestimate the value of spending some time working with the sound system. It takes practice to learn how to use a microphone to best advantage.

- Clean entries

It's imperative that everyone know not only what song they're about to sing, but what note to start on. When singing *a cappella* there are a number of ways to provide this starting note:

1. sing the note yourself, using a pitch pipe if you need one;
2. use a keyboard or other instrument to sound the note;
3. sing a line from the song as an introduction, thus establishing the correct key.

Deciding what key to sing in is extremely important. If the song is pitched too low, it loses its brightness and vitality; if it's too high, many singers simply drop out. As a general rule, it's usually safe to pitch songs that fall between the A below middle C, and high D. This is not to say one shouldn't go lower or higher than this, but it does provide a rough guideline.

When attempting songs outside this range (particularly at the upper end of the register), much depends on how long a note is sustained; whether or not it's repeated frequently; and what vowel it's being sung on – as well as the vocal experience of the group, of course. You need to keep re-evaluating your group to know when to leave them in their comfort zone, and when to push them a little more (usually higher).

If you begin an *a cappella* song and realize that it's not in an easily singable key, it's better to stop, then start again in a more suitable key – even if this happens during a worship service.

- Establishing tempo

In addition to getting the right starting note, a clean entry also means that the group knows ahead of time what the tempo will be. So, as you give the starting note, you should also indicate the tempo in some way, either by verbally counting it in; using a hand gesture or body movement; or by using percussion instruments.

Once the song is started, it's important to maintain the rhythm in a way that feels natural to you – swaying, snapping, clapping – whatever is comfortable. It's not necessary, or perhaps even desirable, to use formal beat patterns (unless you feel this works best for you and your particular group). In general, leading should look a little more informal, and a little less directive, than conducting.

If it suits the song, encourage the congregation to move as well. You could lead them in clapping, snapping, etc, or you might suggest that they try any kind of movement that helps them feel the rhythm from within – even if it's just wiggling their toes! A song's rhythm is in many ways its most important element. If a group happens to sing off key, or scramble the words – all is not lost. But once they lose the rhythm, they lose the song!

- Modeling good singing

You don't have to be a soloist to be a song leader. But you do need to be able to use your voice in a way that's both authentic and accurate. The following are some qualities worth nurturing:

1. Clarity – The congregation needs to be able to hear and understand you.
2. Conviction – They will pick up your energy (or lack thereof) immediately.
3. Voice Production – In particular, your voice should match the style of the song (e.g., don't sing a folk or jazz song in an operatic voice)

So much can be taught simply by modeling: singing without straining, breathing at the appropriate time, having good posture, and singing with passion. These are just some of the skills that can be learned by example. But above all, it's the love of singing that is most important to convey. It's contagious!

- Adding a surprise

When doing a very familiar hymn, it's often a good idea to add something unexpected. Variations such as modulating, or changing the rhythm, are simple ways to give an old song a real "lift".

More ideas are listed below in the section entitled "Adding Variations".

- Clean endings

Just as it is important to know how to start a song, it's also important to know how to stop. This is especially true when doing rounds or part songs, but also true when singing unison. Be clear about endings, slowing down as you might with a choir, or cutting off quickly for effect. It's amazing how much the congregation will follow you once they get used to having a leader. And most people seem to get more out of a song if they are given direction about slowing down or singing softer. These little nuances add immeasurably to the whole experience of singing together.

TEACHING A NEW SONG/HYMN

Try to do any teaching of something new during “Ingathering Singing”, which could be done 5 to 15 minutes before worship actually begins. (You might even schedule a longer time if your group is so inclined). This allows the congregation to prepare for what’s to come without interrupting the flow of the service.

- Lining it out

“Lining it out” is a very useful technique to use with a new or unfamiliar hymn/song, whether teaching by rote or reading from the page. The leader simply sings one line at a time, and has the group sing it back, keeping as true to the rhythm as possible.

At the same time, it’s helpful to move your hand higher or lower to show the direction of the melody. This is a very simple technique, but very effective.

Depending on how quickly they seem to be getting it, you can move on to singing the whole chorus (or verse, or whatever it is you’re teaching) right through. The important thing is to be aware of how well they’re picking it up, and to gauge accordingly how many times you need to line it out.

- Singing or playing the melody first

If you’re teaching a very short song, or just a chorus, it probably isn’t necessary to line it out. Instead, you can sing it right through so they get a sense of the whole song or chorus, and then simply invite them to sing it with you.

- Teaching by rote

Whenever you have a short song that you can teach by rote, do so! It’s such a freeing experience to put down books and sheet music and simply learn something by ear. This is a great way to teach an impromptu grace, or round, or some other easy song. Just make sure that it is, in fact, short enough and easy enough to learn this way. Nothing frustrates a group faster than getting left behind because there are too many words or notes to memorize quickly.

- Using the choir

There are many ways that a choir can augment your work with the congregation. Here are a few suggestions:

- Teach the choir something new, then on Sunday have them seated throughout the congregation so they can help lead with their voices.
- Do some responsive singing where the choir sings one part (perhaps the verses) and the congregation sings another (perhaps the chorus).
- Have the choir and congregation sing the whole song, but have the choir add harmony part way through, or on a chorus.
- Teach a simple harmony or round to the choir and use them to lead that part for the congregation.

The choir can be a real force in improving how the congregation sings. Including them in this important work of leading congregational singing reinforces and augments their own calling to serve the musical life of the church. At the same time, the congregation reaps the benefit of much improved singing.

ADDING VARIATIONS

Any song or hymn can become stale if it is always sung in exactly the same way. Following are some suggestions to add a little interest and variety:

- Changing tempo – Example: #100 *Peace Like A River*
 Start by doing the first verse very slowly, pick up the tempo for successive verses, then repeat the first verse in original tempo.
- Changing dynamics – Example: #352 *Find A Stillness*
 This hymn can be beautifully colored by singing it *a cappella* with some careful attention to dynamics. Using a style closer to “conducting”, sing the first verse very softly, increasing the volume somewhat for the second verse.
 It’s often difficult to get a group to sing softly really well, as they often equate softness with a loss of energy. So model using a lighter voice that still carries with it some intensity.
- Modulation – Example: #36 *When In Our Music*
 Modulating up to G in the last verse gives this hymn a lovely lift. Just be sure to communicate with your accompanist ahead of time to make sure he/she is comfortable transposing.
- Dropping out accompaniment – Example: #108 *My Life Flows On In Endless Song*
 Surprise the congregation by having the accompanist drop out on the last verse. This sudden switch to *a cappella* has a lovely effect, and often encourages people to add some harmony on their own.
- Adding other instruments – Example: #1030 *Siyahamba*
 Adding sticks, a shaker and a drum to this song can really add a lot of vitality! If you have people who are good at percussion, use them. (Another great addition is to get the congregation clapping twice on the second beat and once on the fourth.)
 The addition of almost any instrument, from flute to double bass, can add considerable vitality and interest to a song. Be proactive about finding out who else within your congregation can contribute instrumentally. It’s surprising, sometimes, who will surface with a little investigating!
- Signing, or simple gestures – Example: #389 *Gathered Here*
 There are some very simple gestures one can do for the above song, and there are many children’s songs (e.g. chorus of *A Place in the Choir*) for which it is easy to make up some hand movements. (The children could lead this.)
 Also, if you are fortunate enough to have someone in your community who signs, their participation can make a beautiful visual addition to many songs and hymns – especially for special occasions like Christmas, Earth Day, etc.
- Alternating women/men – Example: #207 *Earth Was Given As A Garden* (or #1064)
 Having women sing one verse and men another, then joining together for the last verse, is a wonderful way for everyone to tune into and appreciate the unique tones

and qualities that each group brings to the whole singing experience – both musically and metaphorically.

TEACHING ROUNDS & PARTNER SONGS

The use of rounds and partner songs is a good way to introduce congregations to harmony. Most people appreciate having an opportunity to produce something that sounds more multi-layered. Here are a couple of things to take note of:

- Don't assume they know it

Even if the song you choose is quite familiar, always sing it through in unison before asking the group to sing it in parts. A good example to start with is *Go Now In Peace* (#413) since it's used in most churches, but not necessarily as a round.

A simple partner song to start with (especially at an intergenerational service) is *What Can We Do* (#29 in *May This Light Shine*). This can be done as a round, or you can teach each section of the song to separate groups and they can put it together as a kind of partner song. (Partner songs are two songs that can be sung simultaneously, such as *Go Down Moses* and *Joshua Fought the Battle of Jerico*.)

- Solicit some help

Rounds provide a great opportunity to use the choir (or an individual singer, or a small ensemble) to lead one section. If your congregation is inexperienced, or simply lacks confidence, it really speeds up the whole process if you have another "leader" to help out.

- Give very clear instructions

The most important thing to remember when teaching rounds is to be very clear with verbal instructions, and very precise about entries and cutoffs. People need to know who sings what, when. They also need to know how many times to repeat (or you need to be very clear with your gestures about when they enter and when they stop).

TEACHING SIMPLE HARMONY

Once a congregation feels secure with rounds and/or partner songs, you might try moving to a simple harmony part. Example: *When Our Heart Is In A Holy Place* #1008. (Harmony part available in sheet music.)

- Readiness

Once again, don't assume everyone knows (or remembers) the song. Review the melody first, and then teach one harmony line (usually the higher one) to the entire group. (If everyone initially tries the harmony, they get a better sense of how the parts fit together.) Then divide the group and try both parts together. (This is another opportunity for the choir to help teach something new.)

Repetition is important here, so give them a few opportunities to sing the song in two parts, perhaps waiting to add the third part at a later date. Success is key to their willingness to go further, so it's important to gauge how much your group can handle comfortably in one sitting. In short, introduce harmony only when the group is ready.

- Working with an accompanist

When teaching new skills (during *Ingathering Singing*, for example) there is often a lot of stopping and starting, and perhaps some jumping around from part to part. Be sure to keep your accompanist informed about where you're going next, and what kind of support you want. Also, be sure to discuss major things (like key changes) well ahead of time. It's really important to develop a good, respectful working relationship with your accompanist. Keep him/her "in the loop" through good communication, and be willing to collaborate and accept suggestions. Two heads usually are better than one!

- Encouraging *ad lib* harmony

In every congregation there are those who are capable of adding harmony on their own, either by ear or by reading the music. The more you encourage people to do this, the more willing they will be to do so. Often all it takes is a verbal invitation at the beginning of a song. It can be quite amazing to hear what people can offer once you give them permission to harmonize at will!

INTERGENERATIONAL SINGING

- Children as leaders

Getting children and youth involved in congregational singing is a great way to build a truly intergenerational community. Many churches have a "Family Time" during the service – a good opportunity to make a song the focal point. Even better, teach a song to the children beforehand, and then get them to help lead it. This is a wonderful way for them to realize they can contribute something really worthwhile to the service.

- Encouraging a "Family Singers" group

Another way to involve the children is to form a "Family Singers" group for children, youth, and parents (or other interested adults). This could be a short term commitment in preparation for a special service (e.g. Christmas), or something more long term where the group is called upon to lead songs on a more regular basis.

EXPECTING THE UNEXPECTED

No matter how well we prepare, there are always things that will not go as planned. If you make a mistake, the important thing is to realize it's not the end of the world. Someone once said that it's not the mistakes we make that are important – it's what we do with those mistakes. So if you can recover quickly – perhaps even with a little humor – the congregation will tend to empathize with you and be supportive.

If you learn to expect the unexpected, you are more likely to develop a facility for being spontaneous. But remember that in order to be spontaneous, you have to be really well prepared!

*The whales do not sing because they have an answer.
They sing because they have a song.*