Leading Congregational Singing

Music As Ministry

The Importance of Congregational Singing

- **Heartbeat of the community**

  As musicians, we are called to enhance the life of the congregation through music. We do this in many ways, but none is more vital than through congregational singing. When we sing together, we are expressing who we are, and this expression may well be described as the “heartbeat” of the church. We can take a congregation’s pulse by observing their singing. What kind of voice do they have? Do they sing with confidence, vitality, and enthusiasm? Does everybody feel welcome to sing? Do they get to sing often? Do they sing together outside of worship? Are children and youth included in their song? These are all indicators of the general health and well being of any congregation.

- **Participation vs. observation**

  When singing a hymn or song together, we become participants rather than observers of worship. Singing gives us an opportunity to make ourselves really and truly present – to “step into the room” and take an active part. We become givers as well as receivers. We give our individual voices to the whole ensemble, and in turn receive the creation of that ensemble – thus demonstrating first-hand how “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts”. When done with confidence and enthusiasm, this totality of sound created by the group – combined with each individual contribution, voice by voice – moves us from simply being those who attend worship to those who experience worship. This is the beauty and the power of congregational singing – a special time to be actively involved and to contribute.

- **Power to touch and to heal**

  With full participation comes the opportunity to be touched in some way through singing. Our combined voices carry on its collective breath the joy and wonder that we celebrate – as well as the pain and sorrow that we seek to heal. When combined with thoughtful lyrics, music creates moments of wonder and delight – an experience to celebrate! It also leads us down paths of longing and loss, and if we allow ourselves to follow, opens us to its healing power. Few experiences have as much emotional impact on our lives as music. What we create together through hymns and songs provides us with an opportunity to touch and be touched, to heal and be healed.

- **Expression of diversity & commonalities**

  As we sing, we build community, striving to express our commonalities as well as our diversity. Singing reinforces the reasons we come together. It speaks of our common struggles, often moving us to action toward a common objective. Singing also expresses our diversity – of belief, of religious background, of ethnic origin – for we welcome all who come in search of individual truth and meaning. This is perhaps our biggest challenge as a religious institution, since people come with such a wide range
of religious convictions, as well as a wide range of preferred musical styles. But if we can encourage people to sing with confidence and enthusiasm, and model flexibility and graciousness about what we sing and how we sing it, congregational singing will flourish with a healthy heartbeat, enriching each individual soul while building a vital community.

Our Calling as Hymn/Song Leaders

• To Make All Voices Welcome

In Africa, there is a saying: “If you can walk, you can dance; if you can talk, you can sing”. Unfortunately, we in North America have not embraced such a lovely, empowering, and inclusive idea. In most of our own congregations, we still find a percentage of people who, as youngsters, were asked to just “mouth the words” if they had trouble staying in tune. The result is the presence in every congregation of a number of people who feel either unwelcome to sing, or unwilling to try.

We all need to know that church is a safe place, and that no one has to be a perfect singer, or have the most beautiful voice, to be a part of worshipful music. As a well-known quotation reads, “The woods would be very silent if only those birds sang who sing the best.” It’s our job as leaders of congregational singing to encourage ALL voices to join in. Almost everyone can eventually learn to carry a melody. (Statistics tell us that only about one in a million is truly tone deaf.) And everyone can improve the quality of their tone. So our job is to encourage lots of singing, and to emphasize that more attention to “listening” is the key to more accurate pitch and better tone. The point is that everyone wants and deserves to be included, and the more they are encouraged to participate, the more likely they are not only to deepen their worship experience, but also to improve as singers.

• To Provide an Abundance of Opportunities to Sing

One of the most important things we can do as hymn/song leaders is to provide our congregations with as many opportunities to sing as possible. The fact is that the more we sing, the better we get, and the more confidence we have to try new songs and skills.

We can begin by looking for ways to include more singing on Sunday mornings. One very simple way of increasing our singing time (without adding any length to the service) is to have Ingathering Singing before worship, in place of the more common instrumental prelude.

We could also consider having three hymns instead of the standard two, or doing a sung chalice lighting. Why not have a sung response after a reading, or after the offering? Perhaps the children’s time could be a song that tells a story.

Just as importantly, we need to look for ways to incorporate music into activities outside of worship: during social events; as a grace before meals; at intergenerational gatherings – or at any other time we are gathered together as a group. A church doesn’t become a real “singing church” unless it is infused with music throughout every aspect of its life. So think of “abundance of opportunity” in as broad a spectrum as possible.
• To Encourage Singing from the Heart

Congregational singing is really about an experience; it’s about everyone contributing their own voice to produce something beautiful and meaningful in a way that moves us, touching us emotionally and making us feel more whole. It is a musical celebration, created and experienced by each person present, and expressed within the context of community.

With that in mind, our objective is much more than merely singing with accuracy. What we’re really trying to do is help people to sing from the heart – in other words, to always be conscious of the message, style, and “feel” of a song or hymn. If we lead *Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee* the same way we lead *I’ve Got Peace Like A River*, the congregation will likely not get the right “feel” for at least one of them. But if we lead with the gestures and vocal style appropriate to the song, the congregation’s singing will reflect that. Singing from the heart, then, has to do with understanding the intent of the song. When our singing truly reflects that intent, the emotional impact of the song becomes much more important than the technical skill of the singers.

• To Instill Confidence through Repetition & Teaching

A congregation that sings really well is a congregation that is confident, and one way to instill confidence is by taking the time to teach what is new. We often expect people to simply “pick things up” as they go, joining in as they are able. But if there is time allotted for teaching something new, people can feel more comfortable about taking part when it’s time to sing the song in the service. (It’s preferable to do this teaching before worship begins, during Ingathering Singing, so as not to interrupt the flow of the service.)

Another way to increase confidence is through repetition. When a new song or harmony is repeated often enough, singers enjoy the familiarity that comes with really “owning” what they’ve learned.

It’s important, then, to make time to consciously teach new songs and techniques, and to reinforce that teaching through repetition. Add to that a good dose of encouragement and you will soon have a congregation that truly wants to sing. As they get better and better, your job is to keep raising the expectations!

• To Improve Musical Knowledge and Skills

As the congregation becomes more confident, it’s inevitable that they will grow in musical knowledge and skills. One of the best and most immediate ways to increase knowledge is to give verbal introductions to songs. This makes people aware of such things as where the song comes from, how or why it was written, something of its history – anything that might bring new insight about the meaning or origin of the song. We can often add a whole new flavor or meaning to even a very familiar hymn or song by offering some small detail about its genesis, or a personal anecdote about the importance of the song to you. Even reading aloud a line or two from the song before beginning to sing can draw attention to a lyric that one might otherwise sing on “automatic pilot”.

Improving musical skills is another byproduct of good leadership. By giving some direction about dynamics, or by modulating or changing the tempo, we increase
the congregation’s appreciation of how a song can be colored and shaded to give it more depth and meaning. These variations raise the musicality of a group, and demonstrate the effective correlation between what they sing and how they sing it.

- **To Make Room for Diversity of Musical Styles**

  When planning songs for the congregation to sing, it’s important that we make room for a wide variety of musical styles. Because music speaks so directly to our heart, we tend to have very strong feelings about what we like and what we don’t like; what we think is “good” and what we think is “not good”. Whatever our own preferences, it behooves us to make room for many different styles, from standard hymns to folk and jazz. Certainly this would be in keeping with the wide spectrum of musical tastes that we find in our churches.

  So if there’s a style you’re not comfortable with, but you know there are those who would like at least a few songs done from that particular genre, you might take the opportunity to find other musicians to step in from time to time who have more facility with that style. No one can be all things to all people. But if, on occasion, you make room for something different, the whole program will be the richer.

- **To Draw from a Wide Range of Theological Ideas & Traditions**

  We also need to be aware of the diversity of religious backgrounds from which we come. Some are Unitarian Universalists from birth, some are atheists, and some are humanists. There are also those who come with deep religious roots from other traditions, and long to sing the familiar songs from that tradition. This can sometimes cause dissension among those who may want to leave those same traditions behind. It can be a real challenge to select songs without offending at least a few people! But if part of our calling is to be as inclusive as possible, it’s important to be gracious about what each member of the congregation holds closest to his or her heart. Our choices concerning these challenges must always be tempered by an overarching objective to unify and build a strong Unitarian Universalist community, with room enough for everyone. Sometimes we may simply need to be gracious about a song we may not like, or one we may not even want to sing. In other words, we may “graciously” decide to sing it anyway (or at least not complain about it) simply because we know that it’s important to someone else.

**A Little History**

In July of 2006, a group of about 30 UUMN members met at the Murray Grove Retreat & Conference Centre in Lanoka Harbor, N.J. to begin developing the basic curricula needed to provide leadership development to musicians working or volunteering in UU churches. Several small groups were formed, one of which was asked to develop the curriculum for Leading Congregational Singing. It was to be the first course offered under the newly formed LDB (Leadership Development Board) whose mandate was to implement a process, and a series of courses, leading to certification of UU musicians.

This section of the course, compiled by Joyce Poley, is the result of ideas generated during discussions by that congregational singing group, whose members were: Frances Fitch, Mark Freundt, Jeannie Gagné, Sarah Dan Jones, and Joyce Poley. Compilation of all sections of the first draft was done by Melanie Feather. It was then taught (by the 5 members of the group) during the UUMN conference, August 2006, in St. Paul, MN.— the very first class of a full credentialing process!