

Effective Songleading By Sarah Dan Jones

How do we sing this song? Why is my congregation not able to sing in rounds? What can I do to include people of all ages in making music in worship? What does this song mean and when should I use it?

All of these are questions I encounter in my travels to UU congregations around the country promoting community building through music, and the empowerment of worship as a participatory event. Below are some tips for effective songleading using *Singing the Journey* and *Singing the Living Tradition* in groups of all sizes.

Do your homework. Before one can teach a new song, or revisit a favorite in a different light, one must be prepared by understanding the context of which the song was written, how it can be used, and mindful of honoring the composer's intent. There are many resources available to research the history behind songs we chose, and the more information we can impart on the singers, the better they will respond. For example, if I am able to give the history behind *Daona Nayeesh (#1032)* it will enhance the individual's experience of singing, and honor the intent. I need to know when certain Jewish music is appropriate for use and be able to present that wisely. And, I need to be aware of "who is in the room" or "who *might* be in the room" and how will the music we sing may resonate with them.

Be flexible. There are many songs in *Singing the Journey* that are open to interpretation. The chords noted with each piece give me the chance to simplify tricky theory in support of the melody. I may be able to teach a song by 'call and response', even though it is not written that way (such as #1010 – *We Give Thanks*). I may just teach the congregation the chorus of a song, and have the choir and/or a soloist sing the verses, such as #1008 – *When Our Heart is in a Holy Place*. There are options for me to be creative and encourage successful singing of this music.

Utilize your resources. With many of the songs I use, I am able to use youth, children and adults to accent the music with rhythm instruments, instrumental accompaniment and leaders in singing. Family choirs can be a great way to teach all ages the music in our UU hymnals, and often youth are involved in school band programs where they are learning an instrument. Find ways to include your congregants in the music of worship.

Let yourself be heard. If there are microphones available for use, please do so. The adage "My voice is loud enough to be heard" just hasn't proven true in my experience. This is also an accessibility issue for those who need amplification. Practice with microphones if they are uncomfortable so that you are able to incorporate them in your presentations. I like using a lavalier mic so that I am able to move around the space where we are singing, but I also know I often need to adjust to a handheld or a wired mic.

Let yourself be seen. Just as important as sound is placing yourself in sight range of the people who are singing. I often move around a congregation, making eye contact and encouraging folks in their singing. Also, when teaching a song, I will move my hand up and down the scale to indicate pitch placement and length of notes.

Introduction and Repetition. It is important to ‘set up’ each song with a bit of history and context so that singers will understand what they are singing and why. Often, congregations have a “hymn of the month” that they will sing every week so that it becomes part of the repertoire of songs. Ingathering Music is very effective in teaching new music and gathering the community into the spirit of worship. This can be done 10-15 minutes prior to a service and is a great way to empower congregations to take an active part in worship.

Be energetic. Your congregation feeds off the energy you present when teaching or leading a song. If you are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with a song, it will spread through the congregation. Conversely, if you are prepared and able to lead with a certain amount of confidence, the response will carry through the community.

All of the steps above have been proven effective in engaging congregations to sing and empowering them to be a part of the music in worship.

Seek help from others. Know your material. Include as many as possible. And, have fun!