

SING, PEOPLE, SING

Sally Messner



It's Tuesday morning and you've just sat down with a cup of coffee, ready to choose the hymns for the following Sunday service. Or perhaps it's the week after Easter and you're sitting with the church musician preparing to plan service hymns for the remainder of the liturgical year. Or best-case scenario (best because I applaud service planning as a group activity): you're sitting with the church musician and a group of parishioners, a.k.a. the worship committee, ready to pick hymns and service music for the entirety of Year A. Whatever your service planning ritual may be, here are ten things to consider in order to enrich the musical life of your congregation and increase their chances of good and articulate singing, which in turn will open their ears to hear and their voices to proclaim the gospel.

1. Respect the tradition

If you've been in this congregation for many years, you'll have a pretty good idea which hymns they know. If you're new, ask around. Maybe even take a poll of the congregation so you can get to know their corpus of familiar hymns. Hymnody and psalmody are woven into a person's consciousness at an early age and, as a result, many songs are committed to memory. Even children, long before they begin kindergarten, are likely to have memorized "Jesus Loves Me" and "Away in a Manger," at the very least. Try to include in each service at least one hymn the assembly knows well. This will give them the opportunity to sing well, and it will boost their confidence as they later undertake singing something new.

Beware: If you're going to use a hymn that the assembly knows, check the translation or wording. While the evolution of language can be enlightening and deepen our understanding of the text, your parishioners might be tripped up by an unexpected word or phrase, which will inhibit their singing. If you decide intentionally to use a different translation, point it out to the congregation sometime before they sing the hymn and briefly explain why you've chosen that version.

2. Expand the tradition

Don't be afraid to introduce new hymns to add to the congregation's repertoire. Look for suggestions in various worship planning resources, flip through the hymnal yourself, or read the next issue of *Lutheran Forum*. Consider the songs of Lutherans outside your cultural heritage. If your assembly is of north European descent, incorporate hymns from South America, Asia, or Africa. Likewise, if your assembly is made up of cultures newer to the Lutheran tradition, include some German chorales or Scandinavian hymns.

3. Extend to other denominations

Broaden your hymn search to resources outside the usual Lutheran hymnals. Visit the [insert other denomination here] church across the street or across town and ask to browse their hymnal. Or consider purchasing a copy from their denominational publisher for your church's library. Many Protestant churches share hymnody, but there are hymns unique to each body. You even will find familiar texts and tunes paired differently from their partners in Lutheran hymnals.

4. Pick relevant texts

Whatever hymn you choose, be sure the text is relevant to the Scripture readings or theme of the service. This sounds like common sense, but you might be surprised to find this isn't always the case—and the search is not always that easy. Outside the genres of narrative and psalm paraphrases, biblical images and ideas can be quite obscure, making it difficult to find appropriate hymns as companions for the texts. If you follow the Revised Common Lectionary, refer to worship planning resources. These guides give several hymn suggestions following the pericopes for the day. You might also peruse the topical index of hymns, located in the back of many hymnals. This list groups hymns together ranging from concrete images like "angels" to more conceptual themes like "vocation."

Beware: At the end of your search for relevant hymns, you may find that you have an overabundance, unless your

service is three hours long! Should this happen, try narrowing down the list by focusing on a particular word or idea, perhaps the main point in your sermon, and see which hymns center on that point.

5. Use singable tunes

Sing through the hymns on your list. If you can't read music, ask someone in your congregation to sing them for you. Take note of which hymns cause you to stumble and try to figure out why you stumbled. If the error was more in the category of *this-is-my-first-time-through-the-first-stanza-of-a-new-hymn*, it's likely that the support of the church musician will guide the congregation through the hymn with confidence. If some people have trouble on the first stanza, the mistake should correct itself by the second or third. If the error was more in the category of *this-moment-feels-awkward-all-the-way-through-all-ten-stanzas*, it's likely the hymn is not appropriate for assembly singing, though it may be *intended* for assembly singing. This means that, though the hymn appears in your hymnal, which by default leads you to believe a congregation can sing it, the song probably was written or composed initially for a soloist or small group and does not lend itself to uninhibited, natural singing by the assembly.

Beware: Don't be fooled into thinking that singing hymns should be easy and unchallenging. Singing is a physical activity requiring concentration. This is the case for parishioners and professional singers alike.

Now that you've chosen the hymns, you're ready to think about how to sing them. Maybe you have new hymns that the congregation would find troublesome. Maybe you have old hymns that need a fresh sound.

6. Teach new hymns

You've decided to introduce a new hymn to the congregation. Now is the time for you to think about *how* you're going to introduce it. Rather than simply throw-

JOHN WESLEY'S RULES FOR CONGREGATIONAL SINGING (1761)



1

SING ALL.

See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up and you will find a blessing.

2

SING LUSTILY, AND WITH A GOOD COURAGE.

Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of it being heard, than when you sing the songs of Satan.

3

SING MODESTLY.

Do not bawl, as to be heard above, or distinct from, the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony; but strive to unite your voices together, so as to make one clear melodious sound.

4

SING IN TIME.

Whatever time is sung, be sure to keep with it. Do not run before, nor stay behind it; but attend closely to the leading voices, and move therewith as exactly as you can. And take care you sing not too slow. This drawling way naturally steals on all who are lazy; and it is high time to drive it out from among us, and sing all our tunes just as quick as we did at first.

5

ABOVE ALL, SING SPIRITUALLY.

Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing Him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this, attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve of here, and reward when He cometh in the clouds of heaven.

ing it into the mix of the service, you must prepare the assembly for the new hymn. You can do this in one of several ways, depending on the difficulty of the hymn. You could include in the bulletin a paragraph on the background of the hymn and your reasons for selecting it. You could speak a brief (that is to say, *brief*) introduction with information wherever you might place announcements or other verbal instructions in the service (or just before the hymn, so long as you don't interrupt the flow of the liturgy). The church musician could play an arrangement of the hymn as the prelude to the service or as an introduction to singing the hymn itself. The choir or cantor could sing the first verse while the congregation listens to the melody and follows the text; this could be done when it's time to sing the hymn in the service, or before the service, as a way to teach it to the assembly. You might think of other creative ways to present the new hymn. So long as you take care to teach it, they should be able to sing it—naturally and without restraint.

7. Use instruments to sing

Instruments can sing? Yes, you don't always need a voice to hear the text. Hordes of devils filling the land are never so animated and real than when they fly out of Paul Manz's organ pipes. While he *plays* the text of stanza three of "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" and the congregation follows along, the words become more alive and the images more vivid. Think about how to use this technique in your congregation. Not only does it give your parishioners a chance to concentrate on the text, but it also gives them a rest from singing, which is hard work.

Beware: Use this technique sparingly, so as not to take the words away from the assembly. Hymn singing is one way the people respond to hearing the word and have faith created in them (though they may well end up proclaiming the word themselves and creating faith in you). It is best

to use an instrument that can play the melody, whether alone or with other ornaments, in order to keep the assembly engaged in the story and following the text.

8. Sing without instruments

Otherwise known as singing a cappella. The literal translation of this Italian term is "in the chapel style." Since much of early church music was sung without instrumental accompaniment, a cappella became the standard way to describe singing in this way. Though it may sound daunting, assemblies are still capable of doing this when given suitable hymns. A choir could lead the assembly to sing a hymn written in four-part harmony. Many tunes from the early American tradition are easy to pick up and sustain in unison, as are hymns from folk traditions of other countries.

9. Get out of the way

The important thing to keep in mind, should you attempt to sing a stanza or two a cappella, is to let the congregation sing it. It might be good for the church musician to begin by accompanying the people to support their singing, but then, like a parent helping a child ride a bicycle, let go. Do follow them, and be ready to pick them up should they crash and burn, but give them the chance to sing well on their own. It may take only a few more times of hearing their own voices for them to gain confidence in singing unaccompanied.

Beware: If you simply stop playing, the people will think that the organ just broke down in the middle of the hymn, or maybe that the sound system gave out, unless you prepare them ahead of time. As with any of these techniques, if they are new to your congregation, warn them that they're about to try something new. Otherwise the point of the variation will be lost in giggles and looks of surprise.

10. Alternate voices

Still looking for ways to breathe new life into the people's song? Alternate hymn stanzas between men and women; pulpit side and lectern side; east and west, north and south sides; choir and congregation; cantor, choir, and congregation; treble voices (women and children) and bass voices (men and older boys). Think about variant voicings in hymns that appear to have two different voices. For example, hymns in which God speaks in one stanza or part of a stanza and humans speak in another stanza, almost like characters in a play. Consider singing the unison melody of a hymn in canon (in the round). Just be sure to test this before the service to make sure it works! Hymns of early American origin or with limited chord changes work best for rounds. Consider varying the tempo or volume between stanzas, led confidently by the church musician so the congregation knows where to go.

Whatever you do, treat the assembly with respect and care. Your parishioners are intelligent and, with the proper leadership and support, will grasp and value these new ideas. Take time to explain. Alert the congregation and teach them. If something goes poorly, try it again or leave it be. Nothing and no one says you have to use these techniques. Whenever and however the gospel is heard and proclaimed clearly in your congregation, those are the techniques you should keep and use often. *LF*

SALLY MESSNER is a professional soloist and church musician in Minneapolis.

GRACIA GRINDAL, Professor of Rhetoric at Luther Seminary, has just completed hymn texts for all three years of the Revised Common Lectionary.

ROBERT BUCKLEY FARLEE is Senior Editor for Worship and Music at Augsburg Fortress and Co-Cantor of Christ Church Lutheran, Minneapolis. He is an ordained pastor of the ELCA and a composer of church music.

In Christ, the Heavens Came to Earth

1 In Christ, the heav-ens came to earth, When he, God's on - ly child,
 2 Be - cause Eve dis - o - beyed the law She broke with God Most High
 3 The an - gel Ga - bri - el came down To Ma - ry from on high,
 4 Re - joice, that Ma - ry gave as - sent To bear this ho - ly child

6

Sub - mit - ted to a hu - man birth To take a - way the bit - ter curse
 Who with great lov - ing kind - ness saw We could not o - ver - come her flaw
 To say that when she bore a son Eve's treach - er - y would be un - done
 Who came to take a - way our sins De - spite our pride and great of - fense,

6

11

That came with Sa - tan's lies. That came with Sa - tan's lies.
 Till sin and death had died. Till sin and death had died.
 As had been proph - e - sied. As had been proph - e - sied.
 He died to give us life, He died to give us life!

11

Text: Gracia Grindal, b.1943

Music: Robert Buckley Farlee, b.1950.

Text © 2007 Copyright by Wayne Leupold Editions, Inc. Reprinted by permission.

Music © 2007 Robert Buckley Farlee. Used by permission.

GRAND RAPIDS

8 6 8 8 6 6

Permission must be obtained from Wayne Leupold Editions, Inc., to reproduce this page for congregational use if the congregation does not have a yearly license with CCLI, OneLicense.net, or LicensSing. Permission must be obtained from the composer for any subsequent use of the music alone. Please e-mail bulletins including this hymn to messner@lutheranforum.org so we can track its usage.