

## **Principal Priest and Chief Musician:** *Shepherding the Congregation's Song*

Over the years I have come to develop a great love for the sound of the Lord's people singing together, and I hope to share some brief thoughts on how to cultivate it further in our churches.

An important decision in any congregation's worship life is who will ultimately be in charge of choosing the hymns, psalm settings, service music, canticles, and spiritual songs for use in worship. No doubt, it is the rector who is charged with full responsibility over worship. In some parishes the rector will delegate this important responsibility of choosing worship music to the church's chief musician and oversee their work. The rector will then maintain the freedom to make occasional requests for music to be sung. If the chief musician for the parish is well-versed in song selection, the congregation's known repertoire, and has proven himself adept at the task, I would recommend delegating to the music person the responsibility for shepherding and overseeing the music parts of worship and delegating to the celebrant or officiant the responsibility for the spoken words of the liturgy with the rector overseeing all. This work is holy work, best approached in humility, dedication, and prayer.

For certain, it is a lot to ask of a rector to oversee a parish, preach regularly, visit the sick, teach, administrate the church and staff, and at the same time be highly knowledgeable of and actively lead his congregation in the fullness of hymn repertoire, the many psalm settings, and the seasonal changes of service music. Admittedly, responsibility for the shepherding of the congregation's song is a significant role in the parish's worship life and requires research, record keeping, careful selection, effective song leading, listening, teaching, regular evaluation, loving sensitivity, courage and encouragement, and prayer in order to be met with the reward of a truly "singing congregation." This duty is no small matter.

In situations where the church has no experienced chief musician, or he or she has no interest or time to choose worship music, this role will likely fall on the shoulders of the rector. For whomever has this important responsibility, I will share some specific traits of shepherding the congregation's song that have proven effective with both experience and time.

When first thumbing through a hymnal, most of the pages look quite similar: little black blobs on the page and horizontal lines with text printed in between. But the value of hymnals is that the richness they contain is so much more than mere shapes and words. In them resides a collection of hundreds of years of carefully collected Christian music, representing poets and musicians from Europe, North America, and in some cases, Mexico, Russia, and the Asian continent. On the left page of a hymnal you may find a chant from 13th-century Europe, and on the page facing it, a spiritual from 19th-century America. Turn the page, and you might see a grand processional hymn from England written in the early 20th-century and on the facing page a folk

song from Asia, or a rich harmony from Russia, or a sprightly tune from Appalachia, or a tune of early Hebrew origin, or even a dance tune from the Renaissance. To be certain, you will find hymns that will *not* stand the test of time there, but you will find far more that will. With this wealth of cultural riches in mind, let us begin the journey of effectively shepherding the congregation's song.

1. Get to know your congregation's known repertoire of all music used in worship. Knowing this will well serve whoever chooses the music for worship. If you want to know what songs your congregation loves to sing, ask them! Place a simple form in the Sunday bulletin and ask the worshipers to share their most beloved hymns and spiritual songs with you. Then make a point to use the best of them in worship over the next year as appropriate. You will earn the congregation's trust by doing so and will learn much by observing the vigor with which they do or do not sing a particular song.
2. Do not choose hymns, spiritual songs, or service music solely for their text content, as this is a sure recipe for disaster. This method for selection may be an easy road, but it assumes that the melody tied to the text is known, singable, well-crafted, and tuneful – a quality melody. If the hymn does not possess in these traits, many in the pews will become observers rather than singers. We have worked diligently in this hymnal to avoid this, but some melodies in print certainly do not have these characteristics. Sometimes such songs make it into our hymnals and our worship music collections. Compare the tune HELMSLEY, beautifully married to the Advent text, "Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending," with the same text, less effectively set to ST. THOMAS (found back-to-back in *The Hymnal* 1982). The power and poignance of excellent worship song comes when text and melody are of fine craftsmanship and are well paired together. (e.g., the weaker melodies for "This is My Father's World" or "For the Beauty of the Earth," found in *The Hymnal* 1982, vs. the stronger melodies of TERRA BEATA and DIX respectively found in this hymnal; both of which have been long associated with these texts for all the reasons stated above).

If you choose to introduce a new song to the congregation, avoid simply throwing them into it and hoping for the best. Try these methods instead:

- a. Have the church keyboardist play a prelude on the tune the Sunday the new song is introduced.
- b. Include an engaging write-up in the Sunday bulletin about the history of the song and key elements of its text and/or melody. There is much good information to be found on the internet here. Heighten the congregation's interest in the new song they are about to learn. Share with them why the new song was chosen.
- c. Introduce the song through "alternation singing": part of the congregation listens and absorbs while another part is singing. Here's one sample:

1. soloist
  2. choir
  3. women and children (if there is a refrain, have all join in from there on)
  4. men
  5. all
3. Repeat the new song three Sundays in a row, knowing that it will take that long for the congregation to learn it well enough to begin to worship through it. Also know that not everyone attends every Sunday, so some will miss out here and there during the weeks of introducing new music. It can be helpful to create a hymn of the month slot (e.g., “New Hymn for October”) when introducing a new hymn. If you are introducing a song to be sung during communion, place it somewhere in the middle of the sequence so that it is nestled between songs already known, and repeat it often.
4. Work toward always printing or projecting a melodic lead sheet with words for each song in the order of worship and even the full singing parts for hymns. Printing only the words requires the singer in the pew to learn and particulate entirely by rote. Those in the pews or in the choir who read music at any level have their effectively nullified, and the congregation’s song is the poorer for it, and trained singers are often the very people who carry the singing in the congregation. Even those with little or no musical training are helped by having a visual representation of the melodic contour to guide them when to move up or down in pitch (the “y-axis”), and to provide for them a general idea of rhythmic duration (the “x-axis”). Words only “dumb down” congregational singing, reducing all participants to the lowest common denominator, and generating more spectators than confident participants in our weekly act of worship.
5. A sometimes-used but poor song selection tactic is to keep a hymnal on your desk and mark the date at the top of each hymn when it is chosen, with the intent that that no single hymn is sung more than once or twice each year, and that the congregation is exposed to as many hymns as possible. Pragmatically, this might seem like a good idea. However, if the congregation is going to be shepherded, encouraged, and built up in their worship through song, many of the texts of the great hymns will eventually be learned by heart the ample repetition so that they travel with the worshiper through the week, and to the end of their life. Additionally, this will imprint these great hymns upon the hearts of the congregation, worshipers of all ages, so that the songs can more and more become vehicles for worship and allow the congregation to sing confidently. I repeat new songs (hymns, spiritual songs, and service music) often to allow the singers to become familiar enough with them that they can move from learning them to *worshipping through them in heart and mind*. My friend and colleague George Mims says, “If it’s a new hymn or praise song, we sing it three Sundays in a row

so that the congregation can grow into it. We then know after three weeks if a new song has taken or not.”

6. For the church’s song leader, both good modeling and use of analogy or simile can be highly effective tools for teaching a new song. Model a phrase of the music in its authentic style, and then have the worshipers sing back to you what they have heard. Or use a simile or analogy such as, “Sing it as if the notes were beams of light pointing up to heaven,” or, “Sing the musical phrase with the weight of an elephant walking on soft clay,” and then clearly model what you want from them. For contrast, you might reinforce this by modeling what you do *not* want from them. It might take two or three repetitions for the congregation to “sensitize their ears” and get the notes and the song style right. Make it both meaningful and fun, and once they get it, the bedrock of that song or style will have been laid for future success.

A trained and prepared choir can certainly aid immensely in the leadership and learning of new congregational song. In the end, teaching the congregation new music is not as difficult a task as one might initially think. It requires practice, planning, intentionality, and frequent encouragement of both lead musicians and congregation!

7. I would challenge church song leaders to dare to listen deeply, to listen to the core (or “inner mantle”) of the sound that is being made, and from that, to encourage and lovingly coax the congregation, the choirs, and the instrumentalists toward a more authentic expression of the music at hand. I strive hard to have the song be presented in its original style as authentically as possible, whether it is through the choir’s leadership, the leadership of the song through a keyboard, or through the instruments of our folk group or praise team. I work diligently to find a tempo that allows the music to dance and to be successful with the acoustics of the room in which it is being offered. “Singing tempos” in acoustically dry rooms will need to be different than tempos in acoustically live rooms.

What do I mean by the phrase “presented in its original style as authentically as possible”? If it is a chant, then chant it based on the rhythm of speech. If it is an Appalachian folk song, let it dance as one. If it is a spiritual, seek out the appropriate musical tempo and style of a spiritual, and let it be that. Ask yourself, “Who wrote this song, and how would the people who wrote it have sung it?” You can learn much about how to properly “clothe” an authentic expression of the song by taking the time to explore the fine print at the top and bottom of the musical page and answering these questions: When was this music composed? What country does it come from? What is the meter of the song? What is the origin of the text before you? These are all important questions in this journey. Friend, teacher, and composer Alice Parker explains, “This can become a most gratifying trek, and when the journey is taken, you will discover that the

notes on the page are waiting there to be unlocked.” When the right tempo and inherent dance of the song are found and expressed, when the song is “properly clothed,” the words will fly off the page, and our work of worship through song will be the richer for it.

An early mentor, Dr. Peter Hallock, would often exclaim, “All excellent music-making must dance! Where’s the dance?” Without this vital characteristic, our music-making withers on the vine, quickly becoming merely paper and ink. Sing the melody to yourself and get it beyond the “little black blobs” on the page until the music has unlocked its dance to you. Your singers and the worshipers you lead with be the better for it.

8. In order for the principal priest and the chief musician of the parish to work together as a team in the selection of music, perhaps a workable solution could be as follows: if neither has been assigned the duty of choosing all music for worship, the chief musician could be assigned the responsibility for selecting and monitoring the hymns for processing in and out, the psalm setting, the anthem/s, and the music to be sung or played during communion. The rector or person preaching could be assigned to choose the Gospel and Offertory hymns, as they are both closely related to the sermon and the Eucharist. The principal priest and chief musician could then perhaps choose the Service Music based on the tenor or “feel” of the current season of the Church Year. If the parish’s chief musician is relatively new to this task, this could provide an opportunity for equipping him or her in this important work of ministry and helping him or her to learn how to better listen to and evaluate the congregation’s song.

I have presented all these concepts and strategies with the intention of helping us to find the best, most loving, and most effective ways to lead and shepherd the worshipers’ song as the priest and church musician work together to build and further the formative work of liturgy through the power of music. Let us strive together to nurture a vibrant culture of congregational singing, for when the Lord’s people sing, they join their voices with the great choir singing eternal praise around the throne of God.

*Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!*

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