Singing Ourselves
Into Belief

Song Leading’s Best Practices

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Singing Ourselves Into Belief: Song Leading's Best Practices

While it is helpful to believe some of the words we sing, it is not important that we believe everything we sing. In fact, many of the words we sing are not words that we believe but words that we want to believe. We seldom are able to commit our lives at the level that songs such as “I Surrender All” suggest, and we are seldom able to be as grateful as “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” would propose; however, through singing we are able to believe more – we are engaged in singing ourselves into belief. In the Bible, the father who brings his spirit-possessed child to Jesus says, “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.” (Mark 9:24 NRSV) We often find ourselves in a similar situation in worship when we want to believe but we are unable. Through singing songs over our lifetimes, we are able to believe them more and more until at last in the presence of God, we can sing the songs with full honesty and integrity.

From Memory to Imagination: Reforming the Church’s Music

Introduction

• How does this quote resonate with you? How does it connect with your experience?
• What practical implications might it have for song leading?
• How does a philosophical understanding of the power and limit of congregational song affect the week-to-week process of song leading in worship?

My journey

• Only spoken on this subject once, yet I have been leading congregational song for nearly 40 years.
• The way that I lead congregational song has evolved over the years as congregational song has evolved – it continues to shift.
• Began to seriously reflect on congregational song leading about 15 years ago.
• There is no one right way to lead effectively; however, good practices should be emulated.
• Much of what I know about congregational song leading has been gleaned from off-handed comments offered by congregants and from trying something new.

Purpose of leading congregational song

• Someone will always lead group singing – it might as well be you (instrumentalists, congregants, etc.) Sometimes the person who is supposed to be leading is not actually leading – official leader vs. actual leader.
• To inspire the congregation to sing – encourage, empower, enable.
• To whisper the cues – inspire confidence in their participatory role.
• To enable an encounter with God that might not have been possible without effective leadership.
Qualities of a good congregational leader

- Comfortable in your own skin – body image.
- Comfortable with nothing between you and the people – barriers?
- Pleasant voice that does not distract.
- Voice that does not draw attention to itself. (Utilitarian) (What voices distract?)
- Relationship with the people. Someone who comes from the group – has group support.
- Committed to the group instead of individual performance.
- Good pitch, rhythmic embodiment, musical sense.
- Expressive face and body.
- Trusted and authentic.
- Confident but not cocky.
- Few distractions.

Congregational Song Impediments

- Keys that are not congregational.
- Tempos that are do not fit the song or the style.
- Lack of rehearsal.
- Personal idiosyncrasies – what are some?
- Volume – too low or too high.
- Poor acoustics.
- Poorly chosen songs for the context.
- People can’t get past the leader.
- False dependence on the Spirit – poor understanding of Spirit’s role.

General suggestions

- Learn who you are and how you are perceived.
- Become the best you can be within your authentic self.
- Expand the margins of your current comfortable self.
- Learn to take appropriate risks in leadership.
- Commit to rehearsal – only way we lead with confidence.
- Commit to planning well.
- Personal preparation.
- Lead with minimal or no talking.
- You do not have to lead everything the same – emotional intelligence.
- Learn to work collaboratively.

Categories of Congregational Songs

*Let the tradition of the song determine its leadership style.*

Global songs

- Led primarily by demonstration.
- Lining out – rote teaching.
- Demonstration and body language.
Traditional hymns
- Led by organ or choir.
- Led by leader conducting.
- Can you stop conducting? When?
- Verbally introducing them or not?
- One hand or two?
- Why should they be conducted?

Praise songs
- What is the tradition in terms of leadership?
- Lead while playing an instrument or not? Analyze the purpose of playing while leading.
- Conduct or not.
- Body language.
- Part of a team/band.
- Dress and look.

What I’ve learned
- Tempos can differ from rehearsal to worship gathering – while setting a metronome marking can be helpful, tempo may need to change. Rehearse tempos but keep them flexible.
- Every congregation (different each week) has a unique personality and singing DNA.
- Allow for differences in singing in the morning and singing later in the day – even allow for change from an 8:30 rehearsal to an 11:45 worship gathering.
- Learn to analyze the acoustics of a room as you rehearse and plan congregational singing.
- Hold to standards about instrumentalists doing what they plan to do – adding too much in performance.
- Accompanists (especially if they are highly musical) will nearly always choose tempos that are too slow because it feels good to play expressively.
- Melody is everything. Don’t ignore it. The more parts you add to a congregational song (the more complex) the more competition the novice singer experiences.
- People who don’t outwardly participate in singing are not always obstinate and uninvolved – some are deeply engaged.
- The more instruments you add, the fewer notes each player needs to play.
- Children with congregational singing parents become congregational singing adults – especially Dad.
- Learn the congregation’s habits – fermatas, stanza habits, etc.
- All congregational song is folksong – folksongs are not always sung the same way they are written. The correct way is the way the people sing it.
- People vote with their voices. What they like, they sing; what they don’t like, they don’t sing. We have to learn how much to push and how much to acculturate.
- We lead differently in different times in our lives – age perception, position on the platform, dress and look, and more.