

Nurturing the Congregation's Voice

BY C. DAVID BOLIN

Every congregation is an unmatched creation with lessons to learn about its voice—what music it is intended to make and what music is meant for another congregation. These lessons can be learned through the disciplines of hearing, joining, sounding, remembering, and coaching their voice.

Familiar sounds reverberate through the room just as they do in any church fellowship hall—the comfortable, friendly sounds of people at ease with one another. They both know each other's stories and share a common one. There is laughter at the telling and retelling, and there are interruptions as latecomers are welcomed to the table, the sugar is passed, or a child demands her mother's attention. This conversational cadence, however, is unique. I've heard nothing like it before. At one moment it is soft and song-like, then it quickly turns loud and staccato. My slow Texas drawl cannot sync up with the rhythm of this Hawaiian island church where I have come as minister of music—to encourage and enable this voice I hear.

Yet, I am aware that these gentle folk have more to teach me than I them. They know their song, the song I dare to join and, even more audaciously, lead. My lips attempt to pronounce the family names—Miyashiro, Galacia, Kuroiwa, and Matsui. Thank the Lord for a few names like Cook and Edwards! As the years pass, there is still the occasional giggle as I give directions to the picnic at Kawaikui Beach Park, and never is there need to announce my name over the phone—whatever answers immediately knows on hearing my voice. I listen with amazement as my children are born into

this voice sounding like any “local,” while I am unable to shake my drawl.

Then comes the day when someone says, “Your voice is what we find charming about you.” I have always been grateful for those words. They put in perspective the voice of this and every other congregation. We have all journeyed from somewhere: the descendants of immigrants who worked Hawaii’s sugar plantations, the military families, the couple from the Northeast who moved with their children in search of unending summer, and the strong, beautiful Polynesians whose ancestors navigated the vast Pacific guided by the stars. My Oahu congregation is made of people from many places who in spite of their mother tongue have sought and found a common voice.

When pastors, music ministers, or church members listen deeply to the voice of their congregation, they realize the sacred responsibility of calling it forth. Any suggestion that it should be made to sound like another voice will seem as ludicrous as proposing a bird should imitate a frog. I still chuckle at the mega-church that beamed to Hawaii a satellite conference on how island churches could become like their North Dallas congregation. I remember the puzzled expression on a Hawaiian boy’s face when someone with a mainland youth choir said that one day by God’s grace, our choir might be as big as theirs. Quit listening to the voice of your congregation and the temptation grows strong to be big, to be loud, to be on the “cutting edge,” and to obliterate the voice’s God-given uniqueness.

One need not travel to faraway places to hear a congregation’s “special music.” As I said, it can be heard in most any church building. “How blessed are the people who know the joyful sound!” (Psalm 89:15, NASB).¹ The people at any church—even your church—long for the sound and know it when they hear it. All too often it has been lost as a succession of pastors and music ministers ride in on the wave of the latest trend and are pulled under by the next new thing. Paul warned the Ephesians about riding the waves of changing doctrine, gimmicks, and schemes (Ephesians 4:11-16). Pastors and teachers are gifted to equip the saints, build the body of Christ, and avoid musical gimmickry until the congregation attains unity and finds common voice.

Hawaiians know all about surfing, but the music I remember of my congregation there sounded not like the waves but a valley stream—ever running, singing, and nourishing the weary traveler who kneels on its banks for a drink. It’s the “spring of water welling up to eternal life” of which Jesus spoke (John 4:14, NIV).² The banks limit yet direct the water’s flow. Build a high wall on a third side and the flowing water will overflow its banks and make mud as it is lost to the earth. Build a wall on a fourth side and the water will become a stagnant pond. The music minister (every church member should assume this title) keeps the water flowing, respecting the limitations that direct the flow while eliminating its barriers.

The limitations as well as the possibilities of a congregation’s voice are

realized through the gifts and abilities of its people—the old and the young, the musically literate and illiterate, the talented and the ones who struggle to find their singing voice. Knowledge of the congregation should guide decisions about music for worship, education, mission, and ministry. Make pronouncements apart from such an understanding, and barriers will be built. “We’re blended (or contemporary, or traditional).” Such state-

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ments can dam a flowing stream into a stagnant pond or muddy mess. Will the classically trained vocalist be allowed to join the voice of the new church in the suburbs? Will the gospel singer’s improvisations be considered “charming” by the hundred-year-old church downtown? A congregation’s voice is a stream deeper and broader

than its members ever suspect. But it also has been directed in its course by traditions, history, the worship space, and countless other factors making it unlike the voice of any other congregation.

So, how does a congregation sound its singular voice in all its diversity? How can the living water be directed without building a dam? To answer these questions, we will consider five ongoing activities that keep the stream flowing onward and singing its song. Each activity may be most clearly observed as a particular age group encounters it for the first time, but all will be experienced many times over.

HEARING THE VOICE

The boy Samuel heard a voice calling in the night. So real was the call that he supposed it to be Eli, the high priest with whom he was living. Children are particularly attuned to God’s voice. It calls to them inviting exploration of the world God has made. They listen to what big people tuned out long ago. “I tell you the truth,” Jesus said, “anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:15, Luke 18:17).

Children encounter their first sounds in the home. This is where they learn their language skills and discover music. What they hear tells them who their parents and siblings are and consequently who they are themselves. They also learn what is important to their family—the values by which they live. An embarrassed mother exclaims to the school principal that she has no idea where her kindergartner could have learned such a word. The principal knows—most likely the child learned it at home.

The ancient Israelites were instructed to introduce their children to God (in Deuteronomy 6:4-7, NIV):

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

Young parents should be encouraged to read Scripture to their children and listen to their bedtime prayers. Parents should also be the voice of praise within their home and bring that voice with them to worship on Sunday morning. Children learn to pray by hearing their parents pray, and they learn to sing by hearing their parents sing. When dad will not open his hymnal, chances are that junior will not either.

Hearing the voice only begins in childhood. One must continue to listen intently to the world of song in all its diversity. Listen like a child for the voice that speaks in, to, and through your congregation.

JOINING THE VOICE

Just as you and I have a voice, so does the congregation. As we hear the larger voice in all its beauty and power, we may wonder what our voices could possibly add. Indeed, many people are afraid to join the congregation in its song for this reason. They do not want to hear their seemingly inadequate voice against the beauty of the collective singing.

This insecurity first becomes apparent in adolescence with questions like “Do I fit in?” and “What makes me special?” Mom and dad’s opinions no longer count—not as much as the opinions of teens’ peers and the people they may fantasize as their peers. The exploration of God’s world begun in childhood turns inward as appearance and personality are evaluated for their worthiness in joining a social order outside the home. Contemporary culture rushes in to set the standard. Celebrity tied to marketing and product restricts teens to a certain way of looking, being, and acting. It dictates the music and mores for acceptance in a world that celebrates the moment and makes a good time the ultimate goal.

The congregation abides by a different standard—it is love. Love says people have worth unfettered by what is fashionable. Love insists that God has gifted everyone and that each gift is to be honored as important to the congregation’s life and voice. Love provides a mirror truer than culture by which teens can acknowledge their strengths and accept their limitations. The congregation helps them find the songs that fit their voices. When a congregation listens, encourages, and provides occasions for its members’ gifts to be used, it invites them into its fellowship in a way that the mere completion of a membership card cannot. Even as Paul admonished Timo-

thy, the congregation encourages teens to “kindle afresh the gift of God” and to do so with “power and love and discipline” (2 Timothy 1:6, NASB). Teens join a larger family than the ones into which they were born. Accepted as children of the congregation, they join in its song. Choirs, bands, solos, scripture reading, and public prayer are all ways that people in their teens and older can unite their voices to the voice of the congregation.

The psalmist said, “O magnify the LORD with me; and let us exalt his name together” (Psalm 34:3). This is an invitation for everyone to join the congregation’s song. The adolescent learns how to join the congregation’s voice, and the congregation learns how to join the Voice that calls all things into being.

SOUNDING THE VOICE

Though contemporary culture must not set the standard by which the congregation sings its song, the congregation does exist within culture and relates to it. The congregation’s voice is meant to proclaim God’s word as did Jesus, so that the people of the world might know joy (John 17:13). The question of how to relate to culture as citizens of God’s kingdom becomes of primary interest to young adults as they begin their journey through life—establishing their careers, starting their families, and finding their places in both the world and congregation.

The starting place on the journey for each generation of young adults is different from that of any previous generation, though the fears, hopes, and excitement are much the same. They are entering new territory, beginning at the place to which previous generations have brought them and following visions of what could be (Joel 2:28). This spirit of adventure is often associated with bravado that exceeds acquired wisdom. The time has come to sound their voice and hear what echoes back. This sounding is necessary and is how the congregation restores its passion. Older generations may not appreciate this new song, for young adults may change direction in their musical preference. Everyone, though, should remember that the voice is a work in progress as a new generation adds its vocal line to the chorus that generations to come will add to again.

REMEMBERING THE VOICE

Music has a power to transport us to times and places different than our own. When a congregation sings the songs of the ages, it is affirming that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). Not only by their words, but also and especially by their music, songs bear witness to our struggles and triumphs. Through association, a cherished song will carry with it memories of other times and places where it was heard or sung. Congregations should celebrate the memories attached to songs. A young adult sings a chorus and is transported back to youth camp a decade before. A middle-aged adult hears a hymn, and a departed parent again sits near her in the pew.

Senior adults best understand this power. That is why you will hear them ask to sing the old songs again and again. They are trying not to dominate the church's music-making, but to pass on the meaning of their lives to the younger generations. The Bible urges us all to "Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past" (Deuteronomy 32:7, NIV). Seniors simply are asking not to be forgotten and, more importantly, they are providing memories, the carriers of life experience, which can enrich the songs of those who follow.

COACHING THE VOICE

Singing requires coordination between the mind, body, and spirit, and a good voice teacher helps students achieve it. Coaching begins with posture—the body properly aligned so that its muscles are in optimum position and relationship to each other to do their work. Good breathing, for example, depends on controlled tension between muscles of inhalation and exhalation. This balance provides the right breath support to the vocal cords so sound can be produced. And so it goes, through the processes of phonation, resonance, and articulation. Serious singing is serious business, and even accomplished singers are greatly helped by a coach, someone who can spot potential problems and offer healthy concepts that will enable their voices to achieve their prime.

Coaches are also needed for the congregation's voice. The coach helps maintain the balance between the hearing, joining, sounding, and remembering activities necessary to the congregation's song. When children are not taught the music by which they can learn the language of praise, the coach becomes educator. When teens are not given opportunities to join the congregation's voice, the coach becomes advocate. When the misguided visions of young adults turn to disillusionment, the coach becomes mentor. When the songs of yesterday are blasted away by the electric guitar, the coach becomes storyteller reciting the history that gives birth to the present.

Middle-aged adults are particularly suited by their experience to keep the dynamic in balance. Many are parents to children or adolescents. They have developed discernment through their young-adult years and are learning the nature of senior adulthood as they care for parents. "One generation will commend your works to another," proclaimed the psalmist (Psalm 145:4a). Median adults maintain the lines of commendation so that each generation might be a source of blessing to the others.

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VOICE LESSONS

Every congregation is an unmatched creation, for no two churches have enjoyed the same history, met the same challenges, been led by the same ministers, or been composed of the same members. The work of creation is unending as folks come and go and new circumstances arise to which the congregation must respond by God's grace. The congregation's voice is a part of this work. It is being fashioned according to God's purpose and for God's glory. A proverb cautions, "you do not know what a day may bring forth" (Proverbs 27:1b, NIV). One could also say, "you do not know what a congregation's voice will bring forth!"

It is the same lesson that every parent must learn—what can be done to mold a child and what cannot. Parents come to understand that there is a lot about their child's future they will be unable to control. Whom will he marry? What will her career be? How many grandchildren will be born? Nevertheless, parents can cooperate with God's design by providing for the child's physical well being along with a stable home environment, spiritual and educational opportunities, and all the love and encouragement that is theirs to give. After that, all that remains is to watch with wonder as each day unfolds.

So too, there are lessons for every congregation to learn about its voice—what music it is intended to make and what music is meant for another congregation. The lessons can be learned through the disciplines of hearing, joining, sounding, remembering, and coaching the voice. Then all that will remain is to listen with wonder as the song comes to be.³

NOTES

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3 I develop the ideas in this article in Terry W. York and C. David Bolin, *The Voice of Our Congregation: Seeking and Celebrating God's Song for Us* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005).



C. DAVID BOLIN

is Minister of Music at First Baptist Church in Waco, Texas.