



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Nurturing the  
Congregation's Voice  
(*Singing Our Lives*,  
pp. 74-80)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Music as Spiritual  
Practice  
(*Singing Our Lives*,  
pp. 89-93)

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### Christian Reflection

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# Nurturing the Congregation's Voice

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 its voice.

### Prayer

**Scripture Reading:** Ephesians 4:11-16

**Responsive Reading:** Psalm 84:1-4

How lovely is your dwelling place,  
O LORD of hosts!

**My soul longs, indeed it faints  
for the courts of the LORD;  
my heart and my flesh sing for joy  
to the living God.**

Even the sparrow finds a home,  
and the swallow a nest for herself,  
where she may lay her young,  
at your altars, O LORD of hosts,  
my King and my God.

**Happy are those who live in your house,  
ever singing your praise.**

### Reflection

Just as an individual has a voice, David Bolin says, each congregation has a distinctive common voice to discover and develop. "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," he writes. Rather than declare, "We're blended (or contemporary, or traditional)," a congregation should find its singular voice that is shaped by "traditions, history, the worship space, and countless other factors making it unlike the voice of any other congregation."

Five ongoing activities help a congregation find its singing voice. Each one is "most clearly observed as a particular age group encounters it for the first time," Bolin says. Yet we should not simply balance generational interests or play one group off the other. As the Ephesians model implies, each activity is a gift to build up the congregation's common voice. The activities are:

- ▶ *hearing the voice (childhood)*. Children are tuned in to sounds. They "learn to pray by hearing their parents pray, and they learn to sing by hearing their parents sing." Young parents should read Scripture, pray, and sing with their children in the home and in worship. "Hearing the voice only begins in childhood," says Bolin. "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 (adolescence)*. What can I add to the beauty of the church's voice? This insecurity grows in adolescence as "the exploration of God's world begun in childhood turns



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inward as appearance and personality are evaluated for their worthiness in joining a social order outside the home." While the culture urges us to celebrate the moment and value attractiveness, the gospel says we "have worth unfettered by what is fashionable," Bolin notes. "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."

- ▶ *sounding the voice (young adulthood)*. "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." Young adults, as they build careers, start families, and find places of service, have new songs to proclaim God's word. Their "spirit of adventure is often associated with bravado that exceeds acquired wisdom," Bolin says, yet it reminds us that a congregation's voice is "a work in progress as a new generation adds its vocal line to the chorus."
- ▶ *remembering the voice (senior adulthood)*. Music can transport us to other places and times in our lives and in the life of the Church. "Senior adults best understand this power," Bolin believes. They "are trying not to dominate the church's music-making, but to... [provide] memories, the carriers of life experience, which can enrich the songs of those who follow."
- ▶ *coaching the voice (middle adulthood)*. Coaches help us to hear, join, sound, and remember the congregation's voice. "When children are not taught the music by which they can learn the language of praise, the coach becomes educator. When teenagers are not given opportunities to join the congregation's voice, the coach becomes advocate. When the unguided visions of young adults turn to disillusionment, the coach becomes mentor. When the songs of yesteryear are blasted away by the electric guitar, the coach becomes storyteller reciting the history that gives birth to the present." Middle-aged adults often are good coaches, Bolin says, for they parent children or adolescents, have developed discernment in young adulthood, and are learning to care for their parents.

### Study Questions

1. Bolin notes that "every congregation is an unmatched creation," with a different history, set of challenges, ministers, and members. What events and people have shaped your congregation's singing voice? What challenges does it face?
2. Which of the five activities mentioned by Bolin does your congregation do well? How could the others be improved?
3. What are your gifts in music? How do you use them to help your congregation develop its voice through hearing, joining, sounding, remembering, or coaching?
4. Nathan Corbitt believes that "musicians' greatest gift to the kingdom is the critical listening skills to evaluate the present, the prudence to remember the past, and the wisdom to extend the kingdom outside one's own frame of reference." How are these three gifts shaping your congregation's voice?

Departing Hymn: "Fill This Holy Place with Music"

# Nurturing the Congregation's Voice

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To explore the idea that each congregation has a singular voice.
2. To outline five ongoing activities that help a congregation discover and develop its voice.
3. To discuss how members' diverse gifts can contribute to the congregation's voice.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Singing Our Lives (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

## Begin with a Story

David Bolin, who formerly served as a minister of music in Oahu, Hawaii, describes learning the 'voice' of his congregation: "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....

"I listen with amazement as my children are born into this voice sounding like any other 'local,' while I am unable to shake my slow Texas 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 will 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" (*Singing Our Lives*, pp. 74-75).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that members will recognize and develop their varied gifts of music from God to build up the Church, the Body of Christ.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Ephesians 4:11-16 from a modern translation.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## **Reflection**

Christ gives equipping gifts to every Christian (Ephesians 4:7). These gifts are described as ministry activities that can build up the body of Christ by bringing unity to the group and Christian maturity to each person (4:12-13). This maturity (and church unity) would prevent members from being swayed by changing doctrine, gimmicks, and schemes (4:14).

David Bolin extends this biblical understanding of Christ's gifts to the ongoing activities that build up a congregation's voice. Members have received gifts that can help them hear, join, sound, remember, or coach an appropriate and rich pattern of worshiping God and serving others through music. The voice is singular because it flows from the particular history of the congregation and rich because it incorporates the gifts of every member. Bolin's notion of training a distinctive and unified voice is much richer than the gimmicks of selecting a "style" that caters to the tastes of members or seekers or bouncing from style to style in order to please everyone.

## **Study Questions**

1. Significant moments in a congregation's history might include building or arranging the worship space for singing, adding a leading musician, forming a choir or ensemble, adding or changing musical instruments, selecting a new hymnal, discovering or writing important service music, or deciding to incorporate music in a new way in the worship service. A particular event might be a stirring musical performance, a workshop by a guest composer, a meaningful hymn festival, or a member's personal testimony about a song.

Group members might mention gifted musicians who select worship music, lead congregational singing, play musical instruments, sing solos, sing in an ensemble or choir, write hymn texts, compose music, or direct choirs for children, youth, or adults. Others shape the congregation's voice by singing with sensitivity to the music in worship, encouraging the worship leaders and musicians, signing with hearing disabled members, holding a hymnal for a child, attending to a sound system or projection system, supporting the music ministry financially, arranging the sanctuary to make it conducive to singing, sharing hymn stories, reflecting on the song texts in relation to Scripture and themes in the worship service, and so on. Every member plays some role in the congregation's voice and some make significant and memorable contributions to it.

Some challenges might be careless or timid worship planning, a casual attitude toward worship, poor acoustics, inappropriate expectations by members or visitors, the wide range of members' preferences, the lack of trained musicians, financial limitations on purchasing music, domineering egos, the lack of members' grounding in the history of church music or knowledge of the world church, changing cultural influences, and so on.

2. Encourage group members to inventory how different age groups are involved in the music of worship, education, mission, and ministry. Though the five activities are most evident as particular age groups encounter them, they are practices for all members. So remember to ask how everyone is doing at remembering, and so on. If an activity needs improvement, consider how everyone can become involved in the change.
3. Do not reduce "gifts in music" merely to skills in performing music. Branch out to include many other gifts like curiosity about music in other times or places, openness to singing new songs, skill in interpreting the poetry of texts, taking joy in singing with others, recollection of texts and tunes, sensitivity and wisdom to match songs to others' needs, awareness of and discernment regarding musical trends, patience in teaching children to sing, and so on.
4. Consider how these gifts not only influence worship (e.g., selecting new music, incorporating older songs, and using music from other times and places), but also shape education (for adults, youth, and children) and outreach ministries (e.g., to people who are new in the community, have particular interests, or are marginalized by age, infirmity, or poverty).

## **Departing Hymn**

"Fill This Holy Place with Music" is on pp. 45-47 of *Singing Our Lives*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.