

Music in the Small Membership Church

by Wanda P. Galloway

Models for Ministry in Smaller Membership Churches are publications of the Hinton Rural Life Center and demonstrate examples of programs, organization, or procedures that have provided effective ministry and mission in small membership church settings. The models are suggestions by which a local church may gain insights for strengthening their own ministry and mission.

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Music is of great importance in the worship experience of any church. It provides an atmosphere for worship, setting the stage for celebration or contemplation; it brings the members of the congregation into one body as they sing; and it touches the hearts of those who may be untouched by the spoken word.

In the past, the worship service was aimed toward the spoken word, the sermon; but now we realize that different parts of the worship service also speak to worshipers. This means emphasis must be placed on all parts - prayer, music, corporate readings, scripture, and sermon. Also, in planning worship it has become increasingly important that we find ways to include the congregation as participants rather than spectators. Music provides an ideal way to do this.

Planning for Music in Worship

In the small membership church we often hear refrains that aren't particularly musical, such as, "Oh, I wish we had a choir," or "Oh, if only we had an accompanist." The creative use of music and good congregational singing will do much to promote spiritual and numerical growth in any church. People will often join a particular church because the music there is a blessing to them. This can be as true of a small church as a large one.

However, music in worship is a little more difficult for the smaller church and requires thoughtful, timely planning. Good music does not happen by itself. Planning should include the pastor, the accompanist, the choir director (if there is one), and one or two representative members of the congregation. This diversity insures a broader investment in the music as well as that the hymns chosen are neither all new nor all the "20 Best Known." This group, or worship committee, could then plan the worship music for one, two, or three months in advance. In this way you can work with an overall picture of worship, and anthems appropriate to the liturgical year can be presented and hymns selected for both familiarity and learning.

"...but we don't have a choir."

Small membership churches often have no choir or they have one of few numbers. This doesn't mean there cannot be special music presented in a meaningful way each Sunday. Again, planning is the key. The pastor and those involved with music can plan the special music for a month or two in advance to make sure it takes place; otherwise, nothing different occurs.

Alternatives to a choir include:

1. **Invite soloists from other churches to perform for you once a month.** They may bring their own accompanist; but more likely will bring their accompaniment on a tape or CD. I have found many soloists are glad to do this, even those of other denominations.
2. **Use those young people (and others) who play musical instruments.** This affirms them as people with talent who have a valued place in worship. "Fairest Lord Jesus" played on the flute and "Holy, Holy, Holy" played on the trumpet are wonderfully moving experiences.
3. **Remember to let the children sing as a special even if there are only two or three.** This is a marvelous moment everyone enjoys and could become an evangelistic outreach.
4. **Let the congregation be the choir.** For example, select a hymn and let the women sing one verse, all sing the chorus, then the men sing a verse, all sing the chorus, and everyone sing the last verse and chorus in full voice or very softly.
5. **Use "specials" other than singing.** Scripture maybe presented by two, four, or more people by having them read antiphonally or as a choral reading presentation. This can be rehearsed before or after Sunday School or church but should be practiced several times. Anything we present for worship should be our very best.
6. **Introduce interpretative movement to express song or scripture.** One of the most effective worship moments I've experienced was an interpretative movement done by four young girls to the music of "The Lord's Prayer." The Contemporary Drama Service prints booklets titled *Let's Move* and *Let's Move Again* that tell what movement to do for each line of hymn or scripture. This can be learned by anyone relatively quickly. [PO Box 771042, Colorado Springs, CO 80933.] And look for other resources from Cokesbury.
7. **Create an instant choir;** have the women or men or some other group sing from their favorite book of hymns. This can be done just before worship. They will pick a well-loved hymn to sing for the group, and even if most of the congregation ends up in the choir, that's all right. It is a special moment for them when it is offered up in worship at its special time.
8. **Have someone "sign" a hymn as would be done for a hearing impaired audience.** The words will come alive in a new way when this is done while the congregation sings. Contact the local school speech therapist, community college, or school for the deaf for this resource.
9. **Use the talent in your church or charge.** Do you have someone who plays the autoharp or guitar and sings? They can do a special. Do you have a group who sing together even though they are not a formal choir - perhaps a quartet or small group that just gets together to sing for fun or entertain at a nursing home? These are untapped sources for special music.

Creative Use of Music

Some small membership congregations sometimes have to be taught to sing; others have a history of singing and will sing with gusto at every occasion. I believe it is vastly more important that the congregation sing with enjoyment, whatever the style, than to insist they sing from a certain hymnal, with the result that resentment and conflict occur. After all, congregations that already sing may be led to other music over time. Never should the congregation be made to feel that their music is somehow "not right." After all, they are singing God's praises the way their parents did, the way they were taught.

However, if they are not already using it, it would be appropriate to lead the people to sing from *The United Methodist Hymnal*, a process that takes planning and time. The hymnal is a wonderful resource,

but those with another background may have a bias against it unless it is introduced adequately. They need to know that

- it is more of a peoples' hymnal;
- the hymns are written in a lower key than either the *Cokesbury* or the previous hymnal;
- the words are in larger print;
- it contains a major portion (111) of the hymns from the *Cokesbury Hymnal* as well as several hymns that predate *Cokesbury*;
- in addition to the well-known hymns, it contains contemporary gospel hymns and choruses with which they are already familiar.

A sampling of hymns at Sunday worship goes a long way toward promoting the hymnal's acceptance.

The same approach can be used with the newer hymnal supplement, *The Faith We Sing*. This new collection of hymns includes contemporary hymns and choruses, familiar African-American spirituals, new words written to familiar tunes, and music from other countries and traditions. It comes in different editions for choirs, accompanists, and for the pew. If a choir is available, it is a good place to begin to introduce the music from this hymnal. Many “specials” can be found in this collection.

There are also new collections of music for contemporary worship (Abingdon's *Chorus Book* and *Come Celebrate!*) and a wonderful hymnal of African-American and traditional gospel music, *Songs of Zion*, that you may want to investigate. All are readily available from Cokesbury.

Congregational Singing

As we have noted, some congregations sing well already and others need to be taught. Here are some suggestions I have found helpful:

1. **Encourage people to sit closer together** so that in hymn singing each one does not feel like he/she is singing a solo. This situation is most discouraging, and people tend to become quieter and quieter as the hymn progresses. They also develop a feeling of uninvolvedness with the worship experience. To encourage congregational singing and to make visitors more welcome, newcomers should be invited to share the pew with those in regular attendance instead of being left to wander around and finally settle on the back seat.
2. **Take time to teach new hymns.** Many times congregations have a bias against new hymns because they have been “sprung” on them without any preparation. Fellowship suppers and the time just before worship are good times to teach a hymn or chorus which will be used later in a service; they are times when people are more relaxed and open to trying new things. If the church has a choir, a new hymn may be sung as a special, or the accompanist can play it as a prelude or offertory, all of which allow the congregation to hear the hymn before they are called upon to sing it. Also, using a new “Hymn of the Month” in conjunction with familiar hymns will help the congregation really learn and appreciate the newer additions to the hymnal. However, don't forget they need to be sung again to become “regulars.”
3. **Make familiar hymns interesting again** by telling something about how the hymn happened to be written or something about the writer. Many have fascinating stories behind them; personal stories that people can relate to. This enables them to see the words in a fresh light, providing a more meaningful worship experience. Look for *101 Hymn Stories* and *Hymns of the United Methodist Hymnal* in your Cokesbury catalog or store.

4. **Stop them and urge them to sing.** When the congregation is singing in an unenthusiastic, uninvolved manner and the hymn is a rousing one, just stop them. Point out the meaning of the words and encourage them to sing from their hearts. Don't forget to express appreciation when they do well.

“but we have no accompanist!”

In order for a small membership church to have music that is a positive part of worship and good congregational singing, a competent accompanist or a dynamic song leader is really necessary. But many of our small churches have none of these. One of the following suggestions may be of help:

1. **Contact local piano teachers or music departments of colleges/community colleges.** Often they have students who are capable of playing and who need the experience of playing before groups. I know one pastor whose accompanist is a teenage girl who travels to both services with him each Sunday in order to play. This is the way I got my start in church music, and the experience was invaluable.
2. **Hire an accompanist.** I know this is a radical thought, but if the congregation can be encouraged to see this as *an investment in the future of their church* rather than an unnecessary expense, it will pay great dividends. A church needs someone who will be there *every* Sunday to support congregational singing and special music. If a church cannot afford it for a year, try it for a month or every other month. The result might encourage them to budget for it.
3. **Use a congregational member who plays an instrument other than piano or organ.** You may have in your congregation someone who plays the guitar, or even better, plays the guitar and sings! Hymns can be sung well when accompanied by guitar, especially if there is someone to help the congregation get started singing, and there are accompaniment books for the hymnals that often provide the necessary chords. (In fact, *The Faith We Sing* has a separate guitar accompaniment book available.) Other instruments that are useful are the autoharp and electronic keyboards. Both of these can provide helpful musical support. The keyboard is designed so that it can provide support even if just the melody line is played. It also has other sound capabilities, such as bells, which can be used creatively in the service. You may be lucky enough to have a teenager who plays the synthesizer in the school band, which gives you yet another option.
4. **If there is no accompanist to be found, try locating a song leader.** Sometimes a member of the congregation can be persuaded to perform this ministry. It's not necessary to have a "belter," just a person who sings with confidence and enthusiasm who can encourage others to participate. An inexpensive pitch pipe can be used to give everyone the pitch. If there is no one to lead in the congregation, look around in the community. Many rural communities have persons noted for their singing who might agree to be involved in this service to the church, if only for a month or two. Even members of other denominations will sometimes agree to do this since their worship may be at a different time. *A cappella* (unaccompanied) singing can be as effective today as it was in the early days of the church when all singing was done with just a leader and no accompaniment.
5. **Plan. Plan. Plan.** The worship committee can meet and plan the hymns for a month or two. This allows the accompanist time to practice the hymns so they can be played confidently, with a marked beat, a sense of rhythm, and an identifiable melody. The accompanist will then be able to feel good about his/her contribution to the worship service. *Be sure to emphasize that this is indeed a ministry and as such should be done to the best of everyone's ability.*

6. **Apply praise and recognition liberally.** One thing the church often fails to do is express thanks and appreciation for work done by volunteers. All who give of their time and talent need and deserve recognition periodically. Special words of appreciation in the bulletin or from the pulpit as well as honor at fellowship dinners are all valid means of affirming their ministry.
7. **Encourage all to participate.** Some may feel they cannot sing because they are older and have little breath. However, they can be encouraged to participate by silently reading the hymn as it is sung rather than by simply waiting for the hymn to end. Other people have just gotten out of the habit of singing. Read John Wesley's instruction for hymn singing found at the front of the hymnal (especially the one about singing "lustily") and encourage all to try again.
8. **Be creative in the use of the hymnal.** It is a treasure of wonderful material that can be used in exciting ways. Worship should never be boring or routine; it should be an exciting, renewing experience for the congregation. Don't forget, a hymn can be read as well as sung when its message is appropriate to the meditation or sermon.
9. **Teach the wonderful choruses found in the hymnal;** the congregation can then be the choir. They can sing a chorus to gather for worship, to prepare themselves for prayer, to express thanks or praise, or to share in the benediction. The choruses provide a wonderful chance to include the congregation in worship more actively, and the more a congregation takes part in the worship service the more alive it is for them.
10. **Vary the way hymns are sung.** They do not have to fall in the same place each Sunday nor do they have to be sung in the same way. Too often hymns are announced and sung with little focus on the singing of the message. Varying the way a hymn is sung puts more emphasis on its message. The congregation may be asked to sing the verses from soft to loud in volume or vice versa, to sing one verse without accompaniment, or to hum as a verse is read. Instruments such as flute, trumpet, tambourine, or even drums will add emphasis and interest.
11. **Sing at every opportunity.** The more people sing, the more they feel a sense of community. A chorus can be sung before Administrative Council Meeting as part of the devotional or as a blessing before fellowship suppers. (See page 621 in the UMH.) Let the children sing for worship even if there are only two or three so they will know they are an important part of worship. Help the congregation learn that worship is an action verb meaning "participation." Many have gotten into the habit of being "preached at and performed for," and when worship becomes a spectator activity, the congregation is untouched and uninvolved. Singing can involve everyone, and it is a natural expression of joy, pain, and praise, making worship an experience all can look forward to each week.

Other Suggestions:

- **Start a children's choir.** It only takes a few children (three or four), and an accompanist is not necessary. At any Christian bookstore you can find songbooks are suitable for children which have an accompanying split-track tape. One side of such a tape has a children's choir singing the songs, and the other side is just the accompaniment. This way the children can learn the song using the choir side and perform it using the accompaniment side. (Songs from VBS are usually in this format and can be shared with the congregation.) If it is difficult to find time in the week for this, a few minutes before or after Sunday School or church may be used.
- **Learn a small musical presentation** for Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day, Memorial Day, or special emphasis service such as missions. This can be done with choirs of only six to eight

members. The musicals are usually fifteen to twenty minutes long and are easy to learn. Many incorporate songs and hymns with which choir members are already familiar. Again, this can be done with tape or CD.

- **Give members of the congregation a chance to be “choir angels.”** In small membership churches funds for music are often short. However, an appeal may be made for a family or individual to purchase one set of anthems for the choir; that would make them a “choir angel.” (\$.90 x 10 members = a \$9 donation.) Then, when that anthem is presented at worship it could be dedicated to them. We purchased fifteen new anthems this way as we began to build our choir.
- **Form a choir from the different churches on a charge.** They could perform only at special times during the church year, if preferred, or regularly if the interest was there. This way a mini-musical could be presented at all the churches on a charge and perhaps other places in the community such as nursing homes or community meetings.
- **Form a choir of senior citizens.** This could be an ecumenical effort involving all those who like to sing and are retired. Too often this group feels somewhat left out, and this is one instance where they can participate in worship in a way that is meaningful to them and to the congregation. There are musicals written especially for these groups which can be found at most music stores or purchased from music publishers. They could perform twice a year, giving them something to look forward to with a rest period between.
- **Join a music service club.** For a low fee (under \$50) a church may join a club and receive from them samples of anthems, children's songbooks and musicals, adult collections and cantatas (mini and full length). Included will also be tapes of each of the samples so you can hear what each one sounds like. These will arrive four to five times a year for the one-time annual fee. Especially helpful to churches in rural areas where a music source is not located nearby. Some include:
 - Lorenz.** Free samples of anthems after the first order. These are usually simple hymn arrangements quickly learned by a small choir. For samples, write to PO Box 802, Dayton, Ohio 45401.
 - Beckenhorst Press, Inc.** Provides a booklet of anthems of contemporary and traditional music with a tape of each. This is a free service. P.O. Box 14273, Columbus, Ohio 43214.
 - Brentwood/Benson Music.** \$35 annual fee. Gospel and contemporary music. 5300 Patterson SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49530, 1-800-444-4012.

Also investigate these products for accompaniment:

Synthia Hymnal Player, which plugs into an electronic keyboard and plays hymns from the new hymnal in piano or organ. It can be programmed for key transpositions and tempo. Suncoast Systems. P.O. Box 7105, Pensacola, Florida 32534-7105. 1-800-741-7464.

United Methodist Hymnal on CD, available through Cokesbury, which includes accompaniment for all the hymns in the UMH and can be played on a regular CD player; also available for **The Faith We Sing**.

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