

## **A SINGING CHURCH**

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Salisbury Congregational Church  
Sunday, May 10, 2015

Let us join our hearts in prayer.

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Good morning. As an organist, it is a pleasure to see you face to face. You realize that I observe most worship services in reverse through a mirror.

For many years I have seen pastors struggle with sermons for Mothers' Day. How do you celebrate a secular holiday in a service of worship? Today, this challenge is easy for me. My mother, and father led me to my faith and to my love of music. My parents were like so many of you...when the doors of the church were open, they were there. And of course my brother, sister and I were in tow. My mother and father performed every imaginable task in the church. My mother loved the bells, and was always purchasing new bells for bell choirs. How appropriate to have our Bell Choir here today. Thank you Mary and members for enriching our services. Growing up, I sang in each of the choirs. My love of God and music came from singing "Glory to God" many days of the week. Our minister of music Miles Gottshall profoundly influenced my life. I turned pages for his preludes and postludes and I remember vividly the Sunday when he was playing a magnificent postlude and leaned over to me and said: "someday you will be an organist and minister of music." Thanks, Miles.

In this environment, I learned first-hand that the people of God sing. Exodus 15 tells that the people of Israel sang a song to the Lord after escaping from the Egyptians and crossing the Red Sea. In First Chronicles, we read that singing was part of Israel's formal worship in both tabernacle and temple. The Psalms bear rich testimony that in joy and sorrow, in praise and lament, the faithful raise their voices in song to God. Matthew 26 tells about Jesus and his disciples singing hymns. The Apostle Paul instructed the Colossians, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God."

Music and song continue to play a vital role in the life of God's people today. Contemporary culture and modern technology bring new possibilities and new challenges to the music ministry of the church. People's lives are surrounded with music--television and radio, the background music of video games, the muzak of shopping malls, CDs, and synthesizers. Yet most of the time, music functions as "background" rather than as an opportunity for serious listening, much less participation. Outside the church there are few occasions or opportunities in North American culture for people to sing together. Much of the popular music composed today is for performance rather than for participation.

The church also has shown greater openness to a variety of music--from classical hymnody to Christian rock, from European cantatas to South African choruses. Such diversity is to be welcomed and celebrated; it reflects the diversity and richness of God's creation. The people of God sing.

Today, I am sharing with you eight brief thoughts about the role of music in worship.

**First, music is a gift of God.**

From its inception, creation is musical. "When the morning stars sang together, all the heavenly beings shouted for joy." "All nature sings and round me rings the music of the spheres." Human music-making participates in this music of creation and reflects the order, beauty, and diversity of God's creation.

**Second, the human voice has priority over all the musical instruments that may be employed in the praise of God.**

Other instruments are to be used primarily in the service of the singing of God's people. John Wesley, Founder of the Methodist Denomination said this so well: "I have no objection to instruments of music in our chapels, provided they are neither heard nor seen." Theologian Karl Barth pointed out that singing is not an option for the people of God; it is one of the essential ministries of the church. Martin Luther is remembered for his famous quote: "The organ in the worship service is a sign of Baal." Had they lived at the same time, a debate between Luther and Johann Sebastian Bach would have been interesting to hear.

**Third, the Christian church sings.**

The church is not a choral society. Its singing is not a concert. But from inner necessity it sings. Singing is the highest form of human expression. We can say quite confidently that the church which does not sing is not the church. Where it does not really sing but sighs and mumbles, it is at best only a troubled church. This is a community that is not sure of its cause. From this ministry there can be no great expectation. The praise of God finds its culmination in the singing of the community.

**Fourth, singing is a ministry that belongs to *all* the people of God.**

The congregation is always the primary choir. The role of professional or volunteer choirs and musicians is to aid the whole people of God in their worship. We do not have to have anthems or solos. Congregational singing, however, is essential. It is possible to be actively engaged in worship and in prayer while listening to an anthem or solo. But we will have impoverished worship unless there is ample opportunity for all the members of the congregation to join in song.

**Fifth, of all the art forms that may be employed in worship, singing is especially corporate.**

Indeed, it is the art form most suited to expressing the church's unity in the body of Christ. Different voices, different instruments, different parts are blended to offer a single, living, and unified work of beauty. John Calvin recognized the power of congregational singing and unison prayer in helping the church express and experience the unity of the body of Christ. He believed that the human tongue was especially created to proclaim the praise of God, both through singing and speaking.

**Sixth, the church's ministry of song is for the glory of God.**

The principal direction of congregational singing is to the Lord (Ps. 96:1). Music is made first of all to the Lord and only secondarily to each other. Music should communicate and express a sense of awe and wonder in the presence of God; it should lead our thoughts toward God rather than toward ourselves. God can be glorified by beautiful sounds, and spirits may be uplifted by a pleasing melody, but it is primarily the joining of the tune to a text that gives meaning to Christians' songs. Both text and tune should glorify God.

**Seventh, the church's ministry of song is for the moral and spiritual improvement of God's people.**

Christian faith is formed through congregational singing. (repeat) People tend to remember the

theology they sing more than the theology that is preached. Thus, a congregation's hymn repertoire is of critical importance in shaping the faith of its people. Through congregational song God's people learn their language about God; God's people learn how to speak with God. Songs of worship shape faith. A congregation needs a rich vocabulary of praise. Simple, repetitive music such as praise choruses and Taize chants can be very effective in moving some individuals to prayer and to praise. But it is also important for the congregation to know the great hymns of faith in order to have a sense that the Christian faith is both relevant and enduring. Ancient and modern hymns stretch minds, increase vocabulary, rehearse the biblical story, and teach of the nature and the mighty acts of God. Hymns are essential for the congregation's growth in faith.

**Eighth, the emotional power of music is a vital and moving aid to worship.**

The spoken word speaks to the intellect. Music speaks to our emotions and music is capable of evoking powerful emotions. Hearts are stirred and feet set to tapping by a rousing Sousa march, while another melody may move people to tears. In his Geneva church, John Calvin recognized this emotional power of music and for that reason included the singing rather than the saying of Psalms. According to Calvin, such singing "lends dignity and grace to sacred actions and has the greatest value in kindling our heart to a true zeal and eagerness to pray."

In our music ministry, we know from the expressions on people's face when the music has spoken to them. In my two brief months with you, I have seen the full spectrum of emotions from tears to smiles of joy.

Yesterday, a friend sent me a devotional by Kenneth L. Samuel entitled "Sing A New Song." Psalm 98 starts:

*"Sing unto the Lord a new song, for the Lord has done marvelous things."*

Mr. Samuel says, as I have tried to say this morning, that we often look to the classic hymns and anthems of the Church to inform and enhance our worship celebrations. There is a certain "blessed assurance" that embraces us when we sing the songs bequeathed to us by our fore-parents and fore-runners of the faith.

Mr. Samuel goes on to point out, that, according to the Palmist, every generation is afforded a fresh look at the wondrous acts and amazing grace of Almighty God. Thus, every generation is called to not only echo the praises of the past, but to creatively contribute their own expressions of gratitude for God's new and ever unfolding mercies.

Undoubtedly, in the next 50 years, the church will be much different from how we've done church in the past 50 years. Some call it post-modernity. Some call it the ascendancy of the Millennials and the Gen X's.

Whatever we choose to call it, we can expect to remain a singing church and we will hear some new songs. Praise God! Amen.