

A GUIDE FOR SONGLEADERS

The primary purpose for congregational singing is to worship God. In addition, congregational singing articulates connections between theology, faith, our church community, the global Church, and the world. Song leaders who prepare carefully and thoughtfully are the key to worshipful congregational singing. This guide outlines a process for planning congregational singing in Sunday morning worship and gives suggestions for selecting, preparing, and leading hymns.

I. THE PLANNING PROCESS

A. Mark your calendar. When you sign up or agree to lead singing, please mark the dates you are scheduled on your calendar.

B. Begin planning early. Normally, the worship leader will contact you 2-3 weeks in advance with information about the service—theme, scripture readings, speaker, sermon title, a service outline including placement of hymns, etc. Use this information to initially select a wide range of hymns with possibilities. If you don't hear from the worship leader, please feel free to initiate a call yourself. The worship schedule is also posted on the church's website: <communitymennonite.org>. Select from the menu: "Congregational Life", then "Worship", then "Worship Planner".

C. Collaborate with the worship leader. Collaboration creates a process through which connected and meaningful worship services can evolve. After you've made your initial selections, invite the worship leader to help narrow your choices and suggest alternatives where appropriate. The worship leader can often be helpful in identifying hymns that are unfamiliar to the congregation—a judgment which may be difficult for musicians to make. You also may want to work directly with the speaker/pastor to find an appropriate song to precede or follow the sermon.

D. Be aware of your selection deadline. Communicate your final hymn selections to the worship leader in advance of the bulletin deadline, which is Wednesday morning prior to the Sunday you are scheduled to lead singing.

E. You are a member of the worship team. Plan to meet with the worship team in the room behind the sanctuary (the "old library") at 8:00 AM (prior to first service) to review the order of service and have prayer.

II. SELECTING HYMNS

A. Select hymns thoughtfully. Hymns and worship are inseparable. Hymns express in music what the spoken word communicates. Hymns in partnership with the spoken word create a powerful worship experience. Select hymns with this in mind. What spirit or mood should the hymn communicate musically and verbally (praise, supplication, joy, lament, etc.)? Does the hymn musically and verbally complement what precedes and what follows it? Remember that some people in the congregation will feel uncomfortable trying too many new hymns and prefer familiar standards. On the other hand, if you have the skills to competently teach new material, these songs will enhance our singing tradition. Feel free to lead familiar hymns, and stay within your comfort level.

B. Be open to other singing traditions. We Mennonites have a rich heritage of four-part a capella singing in the German tradition—a wonderful gift few churches enjoy. Yet many of us have lived in other parts of the world and appreciate different musical traditions and styles. Our hymnals contain a wide variety of international songs that can be fun to sing and are often easy to learn; these songs enrich our singing and connect us with our Christian brothers and sisters around the world. If you wish to lead an international song but aren't sure how, contact a mentor or accompanist that can help you.

C. Be aware of our musical skills. Some CMCLers read music, others sing by ear. While note reading lends itself to wonderful four-part singing, it's important to include songs that invite participation of those who sing by ear. Consider filling one slot with a round, a hymn with one-line melody, or a hymn that invites us to improvise our own harmonies.

D. Try to include our children. All of us wish to pass our rich singing tradition along to our children. Children love to play percussion instrument, learn new languages, and sing songs with a contemporary flavor. Consider filling one slot with a hymn that invites children's participation. Make it fun. Pull out our wonderful collection of percussion instruments, teach the children some simple rhythmic patterns and have them accompany our singing.

E. We have three hymnals at our disposal. For ease of handling, do not use more than two hymnals on any particular Sunday. Accompaniment books are available for all three, kept near the piano, but **MUST BE USED AT CHURCH**, and not borrowed or taken home. You can request a hard copy or electronic copy of a hymn from the accompaniment book; contact the church office, giving a week's notice if possible.

F. Communion. Music to be sung during the serving of communion is generally chosen or determined by the pastor(s). You may want to discuss how you can help with this with the pastor if you are leading on a communion Sunday, but it is not your responsibility to arrange this. Communion generally takes place the first Sunday of each month.

G. Be aware of hymns used in the previous weeks. To avoid repetition (unless it is intentional), check prior Sundays' bulletins for hymns used in prior weeks. Go to <communitymenonite.org> and click on the link About Us; you will see all the dates for the past number of years available here.

III. PREPARATION

A. Prepare mentally. Begin by exploring the hymn itself. Is the sound joyful? Meditative? Supplicating? Exuberant? Like a lullaby? A march? Or a gospel song? How does the hymn move me as a leader? Does the text express joy? Lament? Prayer? Praise? Or some other emotion? Think through the hymn; in your mind, listen to the sound and sense the emotion.

B. Prepare musically. Choose technical strategies that will help the congregation experience the hymn as you hear and feel it. Note the starting pitch and time signature. Think about how you will establish pitch and tempo. Does the hymn begin on the upbeat or downbeat? To keep the tempo moving, try beating 4/4 meter in a slow 2/2, and ¾ meter in slow triplets—one beat per measure. Practice the beat pattern.

IV. LEADING HYMNS

A. Get the congregation's attention. Enthusiastically invite the congregation to stand with you and join in singing. Eye contact with the congregation is very important. Announce the hymn number at least once; you may wish to announce the hymn title as well.

B. Starting is critical. Blow the pitch and hum the starting note loudly enough so that people can hear it. Sometimes it's helpful for the congregation to hear you sing the opening phrase at tempo. Move far enough away from the microphone so that your voice blends in with the congregation. Lift your eyes from the song book and make eye contact with the congregation at the beginning and end of each verse.

C. Make special preparations for unfamiliar hymns. Consider working with an accompanist or small vocal ensemble when introducing unfamiliar hymns. Perhaps the prelude/offertory musicians would be willing to play. Vocal ensembles are advantageous because the various ensemble voices make it easier for the listener to hear his or her part. After listening to the accompanist or ensemble perform alone, invite the congregation to sing a verse or two in unison before breaking into parts.

D. Accompaniment or a capella? Hymns such as those with one-line melodies are often written to be sung with accompaniment. The presence of guitar chords in the written music typically suggests this. Consider working with an accompanist whenever it would enhance the musical experience. This is particularly important when the group is small. Feel free to ask any of the persons who have done accompaniment in the past to help you, but please ask early enough—generally a week ahead—to give them time to prepare.

E. Other musical enhancements. Encourage movement, clapping, improvisation, etc., where appropriate. Drums and other percussions instruments are available as needed and provide a wonderful way to involve our children.

--Worship Committee

original Jan. 1998

revised Dec. 2010