

# CONGREGATIONAL SONG – shaping faith, making disciples

## Week 1

David MacGregor / Indooroopilly Uniting Church 15 November 2009

Early in service (especially 6 pm) invite people to text in their response to this question: ***Why do we sing in church?***

### HENRY SWINDON GIVES INTRO

Immediately before beginning speaking:

1. Worship song – ***When in our music, God is glorified***

2. Play unannounced a 3 minute video montage:

- a. e.g. African Children's Choir, Taize, U2, Kings College Cambridge, Hillsong, Paul Kelly/Kev Carmody/John Butler, Michael Jackson

### Introduction

There's something, isn't there, about music.

I was reading *The Courier Mail* last weekend – was browsing through Kathleen Noonan's "Last Word" column. It had a music focus ... and had this thought:

Music is our GPS, says the voice on the radio, as I wait outside the computer shop. It works like a global positioning system, helping us find our place in the world and feel at home in a strange world ... every tribe on earth has music. It tells other tribes who we are.

### The cherished place of music in the life of Christian community

Many thousands of years of experience and practice have left the church in no doubt as to the cherished place of music in the life of Christian community. Christianity is a singing and musical faith. Music helps us find our place in the world. Music helps us get in touch with who we are and who we are called to be. It's the melody, form, harmony and rhythm of our tribe. Music helps us get in touch with God.

Share (6 pm) responses to earlier question" ***Why do we sing in church?***

At 8 am/10 am – ask this as question for silent and/or buzz group reflection

Invite responses

From the most remote jungle village to the cathedral at the centre of the largest bustling city, musicians, singers and congregation join as one to share in song. It is “song” which these pages seek to offer reflection on, recognizing at the outset, the place for dance and instrumental music in worship.

It is song which not only offers praise to the triune God, but allows us to voice our lament and propels us forward together as disciples.

There’s something, isn’t there, about music!

One of my earliest memories of the church I grew up in was a musical one. It was Indooroopilly Presbyterian Church – once across the road from here.

I must have been about 9 or 10. We had a large Sunday school. It was those days – early 60s. We’d always start Sunday School with singing. The superintendent was a man named Eric Walter ... quite elderly these days and still a member here. He really got us singing.

One song stands out so many years later. It was called: *In my heart there rings a melody*. Eric got us all singing – eventually with about 3 melodies all happening simultaneously. It was indeed a joyful (and mostly in-tune) noise to the Lord, let me tell you.

But most importantly – as I reflect over 40 years on, and in the context of this teaching series – it was so clear to me that via this song that in the heart and life of Eric Walter, there indeed ring a melody. That had a profound effect on me – convinced me then – and convinces me still that music has such a marvellous role in forming faith and discipleship ... and connecting with the joy of the Lord.

A few years ago a father and daughter got together to write a book. In fact, a noted theologian and a noted folk-rock singer. I’m talking about theologian Don Saliers and daughter Amy Saliers of noted folk-rock duo – *Indigo Girls*.

The book: *A Song to Sing, a Life to Live* – reflections on music as spiritual practice. A fascinating book. In the chapter: “Music and the Search for God” they relate the experience of a writer by the name of Anne Lamott and her intensely restless years of struggle as a young person and of her subsequent discovery of a true home in a small Christian church.

A key turning point takes place as she visits a flea market near Sausalito, California.

If I happened to be there between eleven and one on Sundays, I could hear gospel music coming from a church right across the street. It was called St. Andrew Presbyterian, and it looked homely and impoverished, a ramshackle building with a cross on top, sitting on a small parcel of land with a few skinny pine trees. But the music wafting out was so pretty that I would stop and listen.

I knew a lot of the hymns from the times I'd gone to church with my grandparents and from the albums we'd had of spirituals. Finally, I began stopping in at St. Andrew from time to time, standing in the doorway to listen to the songs.

I couldn't believe how run-down it was, with terrible linoleum that was brown and over shined, and plastic stained-glass windows.

But it had a choir of five black women and one rather Amish-looking man making all that glorious noise, and a congregation of thirty people or so, radiating kindness and warmth. During the time when people hugged and greeted each other, various people would come back to where I stood to shake my hand or try to hug me; I was as frozen and stiff as Richard Nixon. After this, Scripture was read, and then the minister ... would preach ... and it would be ... enough to send me running back to the sanctuary of the flea market ....

I went back to St. Andrew about once a month. No one tried to can me into sitting down or staying. I always left before the sermon. I loved singing, even about Jesus, but I just didn't want to be preached at about him .... Something inside me that was stiff and rotting would feel soft and tender. Somehow the singing wore down all the boundaries and distinctions that kept me so isolated. Sitting there, standing with them to sing, sometimes so shaky and sick that I felt like I might tip over, I felt bigger than myself, like I was being taken care of, tricked into coming back to life.<sup>1</sup>

Music, I want to suggest has a power to get us in touch with our human condition – both individually and globally.

<sup>1</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999); quoted in: Don E. Saliers & Emily Saliers, *A Song to Sing, a Life to Live*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 172,173

Music, according to James McMillan:

“... is a phenomenon connected to the work of God because it invites us to touch what is deepest in our souls, and to release within us a divine force ... Music allows us to see ... beyond to what lurks in the crevices of the human-divine experience.”<sup>2</sup>

According to Martin Luther:

Next to the word of God, music deserves the highest praise”

According to Don & Emily Saliers, music is:

“soul practice ... (it awakens) our souls to matters beyond the ordinary ... Music is not simply the ornament of something already understood in words ... Rather, ordered sound mediates the world to our senses and animates – literally, ensouls – those who enter it deeply”<sup>3</sup>

The question I want to pose is this – and I pose it to myself as musician and minister *just as* I pose it to the wider church. In its musical life in worship, **how well does our congregational song name “the human condition”?** How well does what we sing address who we are ... and who we are called to be in Christ? How honest are we in what we sing, about our relationships with God and neighbour. Are we being truthful – or are we being untruthful ... to God ... to our neighbour ... to ourselves?

Worship music has a particular role to play in addressing the human condition. When music is omitted from a particular dimension of the liturgy, the community’s worship risks being diminished.

### **Hymns and songs in fact ‘do theology’.**

According to British hymn writer and United Reformed Church minister, Brian Wren: “The words of familiar songs help shape a congregation’s theology, and music summons them in a time of need.”<sup>4</sup>

- Can you think a time when a song – any song – not necessarily a worship song – “summonsed you” ... spoke to you “in a time of need”?
- Share an example
- Invite congregational/small group sharing & reflection

<sup>2</sup> James MacMillan, “God, Theology and Music” in *Composing Music for Worship*, S. Darlington, and A. Kreider, (Canterbury Press: Norwich , 2004), 48

<sup>3</sup> Don E. Saliers & Emily Saliers, *A Song to Sing, a Life to Live*, (San Francisco: Josey-Bass, 2005), 12, 37

<sup>4</sup> Brian Wren, *Praying Twice – the Music and Words of Congregational Song*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 91

There's an old adage coming from about the 4<sup>th</sup> century: *lex orandi, lex credendi* ... what we pray shapes what we believe ... how we worship ... the words ... the songs we sing shape our faith; they shape what we believe. It works in reverse – or perhaps should. What we believe about God needs to be reflected in this instance in the words we sing. How easily can we sing some of the words we sing ... do they reflect our theology ... what we believe about the living God who comes among us in Christ?

And what about Charles Wesley? One could argue that the greatest influence on the British Evangelical revival of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the accompanying rise of the Methodist movement may have been the outcome, not so much from the teaching and leadership of John Wesley, but rather – through the hymnody of his brother Charles. This is a portfolio 9000 pieces strong! So strong was the musical influence of Charles Wesley that it is frequently said that the early 'Methodists' sang their creed.

Sing Charles Wesley – ***And can it be*** TIS 209 vv, 1,3,4,5

## **Eight key musical roles in worship**

Noted American worship theologian Karen Westerfield Tucker speaks of music as a language of faith ... a language of faith that can be well-voiced in the context of worship.

She suggests that music can be understood in three ways:

1. As **faith-full** ... music as a way of articulating the faith of the church
2. As **faith-filled** ... the making of music as an act of faith
3. As **faith-filling** ... the gospel-spreading quality of music – as evangelism, as mission<sup>5</sup>

We will keep **faith-full, faith-filled and faith-filling** in mind as we now go on a musical journey. So - invite you to journey with me over three weeks, as together we explore eight possibilities – eight possibilities among many others, whereby in our worship song, God's people can be shaped in faith and discipleship through music.

<sup>5</sup> Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, *Music as Language of Faith* (presented 16 June 2004, 32<sup>nd</sup> Annual Liturgy Conference, Music in Catholic Worship, University of Notre Dame)

I will suggest that worship music, and in particular congregational song, has **8 faith-forming and disciple-making roles**: as

- 1.Praise
- 2.Prayer
- 3.confession or lament
- 4.intercession & community-building
- 5.Justice-proclaiming & making
- 6.Faith-forming ... a teaching role
- 7.Enhancing the sacraments
- 8.The voice for discipleship & mission

## 1. Song as PRAISE

sing: ***Blessed be your name*** [8 am *Halle, Halle* TIS 720]

Scripture: ***Colossians 3:15-17; Philippians 2:1-11***

We can never be reminded too often that our chief calling, not only in worship, but also in the totality of life is to glorify God. 1 Corinthians 10:31 reminds us - *So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*

Much of this contemporary song harks back in its lyrical origins, to the Reformation's fondness towards song that was derived from the Psalms. However, in the use of direct "I", "me" and "we" and "us" language, a great pitfall lies lurking in the wings – namely the trap of subjectivity.

Of course, this is the chief hand grenade tossed at contemporary praise music – especially that of the praise band variety. Sometimes for good reason, I might add. Sometimes much too unfairly.

Let's remember that it was Charles Wesley who wrote:

*And can it be that I should gain an interest in my Saviour's blood.*

*Died he for me who caused his pain ...*

Kenneth Hull puts things in perspective when he comments that "More than half the time, it's not clear from inside a song *why* God is so praiseworthy ... they spend much more time speaking about the experience of the singer, especially

his or emotional experience, than in actually praising God.”<sup>6</sup> Hull explains that the primary subject of many praise choruses is not God at all, but the singer themselves!

Reflect/discuss – is this a fair comment. Is the primary subject of many of the praise songs you know, “not God at all, but the singer themselves?”

The writer Terri McLean calls for worship music which is “God-centred and people-related.”<sup>7</sup> I like that. God’s worshipping people are well-advised to take up that advice. Our theology is so easily reflected in the music we source for and sing in worship. How easy it is for McLean’s advice to be turned on its head! “God centred and people related” seems a good ground-rule for us to follow!

## 2. Song as PRAYER

In a broad sense, the role of music in worship is to help people pray. Music, however is more than an accessory or catalyst for prayer.

Congregational song *is*, or at least has the promise, of *being* prayer - a prayer language in its own right, or as Wren expresses it, “Congregational song helps us express a believing response in a self-committing way.”<sup>8</sup> For Wren, the prayer that is congregational song is a creedal thing – including “praise, thanksgiving, lament, trust and commitment as well as statements of belief.”<sup>9</sup>

The contribution of the Pentecostal churches has been extensive in helping the wider church grasp this.

Through the song-writing of John Wimber and colleague-musicians, the Vineyard Community in the late 1980s in California, USA pointed us to the place of song in worship as direct prayer language to God. Christians began in fresh ways to address God in the first person; with worship songs less *about* God, but now song as prayer offered directly *to* God.

Song: ***Hosanna*** (Vineyard) TIS 724

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth R. Hull, “The Challenge of the Praise Chorus”, *The Hymn*, (Hymn Society of the USA and Canada: July 2004), 9

<sup>7</sup> Terri B. McLean, *New Harmonies*. (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1998), 15

<sup>8</sup> Wren, 90

<sup>9</sup> Wren, 90

## Worship song – just “praise, praise, praise”?

We’ve sung a lot of praise to God today/tonight. There’s a whole array of congregational song left unsung. What do I mean by this?

Martin Tel suggests: “far too often we try to paint a happy face on God”<sup>10</sup>. Worship which is simply ‘happy faced’ runs the danger of leading community of faith down a one-way musical street – a street adorned with worship which is untruthful; worship which fails to declare the whole truth of God; worship which fails to declare the whole truth of the human condition.

Where in this “happy-faced” worship, is there the place – and music can so often best give voice to this – which allows room for lament, for intercession, for connecting with a broken world, for connecting with folk whose relationships are disintegrating, for sending people out in Christian service – to name but a few instances?

### NEXT WEEK:

1. We will explore how music
  - offers us the words of lament & confession
  - sends us deeper into discipleship & mission
  - calls us into intercession & community
  - acts as a voice for justice-making
  
2. Full notes from today’s/tonight’s teaching, along with the next two Sundays will be available for free, non-profit download from two places:
  - The “sermons” page on our own church website
  - My Music.Musings,Meanderings blog

Details for both of these are in today’s notice-sheet

3. I want you to come with a favourite hymn or song – be ready to share (in a small group) how that song – you won’t be asked to sing it – is helpful to you – in your life of faith and Christian discipleship!

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Tel, “Truthfulness in Church Worship in *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, (Vol. XIX, No. 1, New series, 1998), 34