

Variety in congregational singing – Hugh Wetmore



Worship conversation with Hugh

Hugh Wetmore is a songwriter and student of worship trends. He invites you to join the worship conversation by commenting on his monthly column.

My close friend Wolf Binder passed away suddenly the other day. He was about to visit Nepal on one of his many “Kings and Priests” trips, combining his business interests with his Kingdom missionary commitments. In one of his last emails to me, he said that he wanted to sing in the annual massed choir rendering of Handel’s *Messiah* in the City Hall this year. “This is on my bucket list”. But now he is part of that bigger choir singing the bigger Hallelujah Chorus in glory! Envy him, with holy envy!

In that same email, he commented on John 4:24 “Jesus wants our worship to combine both ‘Spirit’ and ‘Truth’.” I replied that this underscores the two key Scriptures about congregational singing: Ephesians 5:18-20 with its emphasis on the “Spirit”, and Colossians 3:16 which emphasises the Word, the “Truth” of God’s message.

And both are to be expressed as we “sing to one another Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs”. Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs – God wants variety in our congregational singing.

Think about these three genres that God wants us to sing.

Psalms ... these are in our Bibles. The Book of Psalms was the

Jewish hymnbook first compiled by David, with others by Asaph, Ethan and anonymous added later.

Hymns ... these began to be sung in New Testament times. Jesus sang a hymn at His last supper (Mark 14:26). Paul and Silas sang hymns when they were jailed in the Philippian prison (Acts 16:25).

Spiritual Songs ... the latest genre of music sung in the assemblies of God's people.

Defining these three genres

How do the pundits define these three genres?

The Adam Clarke Commentary admits that "we can scarcely say what is the exact difference between these three expressions". But he suggests:

- Psalms may probably mean those of David.
- Hymns are the extemporaneous effusions in praise of God, uttered under the influence of the Divine Spirit, or a sense of His especial goodness (see Acts 16:25).
- Spiritual songs are odes; premeditated and regular poetic compositions; but, in whatever form they were composed, we learn that they were all spiritual – tending to magnify God and edify men.

The International Dictionary of the Christian Church overlooks Psalms and spiritual songs, but is very helpful in defining a hymn as "a Christian song, normally metrical (= a consistent rhythm). It praises God (Augustine) and can also include songs of meditation, description, exhortation or teaching. A good tune is important. The tune should carry the words, and not vice versa."

From our 2018 perspective, it seems as if these three genres cover the whole history of the Church: Psalms were inherited from the Jewish synagogues (AD 35 – 1500). Hymns became popular with Luther and then Watts and then became the

dominant genre AD 1500 -1970. From 1970 onwards contemporary Christian songs, pioneered by Kendrick and others, edged hymns out of the Churches' repertoire. Spiritual songs are now dominant in many churches.

Three genres for three purposes

I also see the three genres as catering for three purposes in our singing: Psalms often express to God, in brutal honesty, our personal feelings of joy, depression, thanksgiving, envy, faith, doubt, frustration and hope. Hymns are an ideal medium to sing sermonettes from Scripture, teaching and correcting each other in our faith. Good spiritual songs lift our spirits to God in shorter expressions of love, joy, faith and hope.

Yes, of course these are generalisations. I could generalise further: Grandparents like singing a Psalm now and then, parents favour hymns, and the youth enjoy avant garde spiritual songs. These are often generational choices.

However we define these three genres: Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, one emphasis stands out – God wants variety in our congregational singing! Let every worship leader ensure that over time the Sunday song-list includes songs of all three genres. Avoid a single-genre rut. God is listening! He wants to hear you sing Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs in your services.

God wants variety in our congregational singing!

God wants variety in our singing: Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. We must not get hooked on only one of these genres and ignore the others – bring them all on!

Singing in the fulness of the Spirit – Hugh Wetmore



Worship conversation with Hugh

Hugh Wetmore is a songwriter and student of worship trends. He invites you to join the worship conversation by commenting on his monthly column.

God wants to hear congregational singing that spans the generations and the genres. But, as could be expected, it is the contemporary generation and genre that tends to dominate our song-choices. Let's think about a current, popular pitch:

Elevation Worship (Acoustic Cover) – Alisa Turner

"I certainly hope you love the video. But what I pray is, you end up forgetting to even watch and just lose yourself in the midst of worship. That again, you feel the Spirit move within and all around you. He is with you, he really, really is always waiting for you, always ready to welcome you in. ..."

The emphasis on the Holy Spirit is not only valid, but necessary. Listen to the not-so-contemporary Paul: *"Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit (which leads to) Speaking to each other with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."* – *Ephesians 5:18-20*

I have jokingly said that this Ephesians 5:18-20 is "the Charismatic version" (because it emphasises the Spirit), and

that Colossians 3:16 is “the Reformed version” (because it emphasises the Word). – *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him”.*

Whole Church, whole repertoire

Yes, it is easy to polarise Charismatic and Reformed Churches because of their distinctly different worship-singing styles. Charismatics love exuberant contemporary worship songs, and seldom sing psalms and hymns; Reformed churches love the more thoughtful psalms and hymns, and seldom sing contemporary worship songs. God isn't happy with this division. He wants His whole Church to sing His whole repertoire: *“Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs”*

Yes, it is essential that everyone, Charismatic and Reformed, be *“filled with the Spirit”*. However, Alisa assumes that when you *“feel the Spirit move around and within you”*, you will *“just lose yourself in the midst of worship”*. This is un-Biblical. When you are worshiping filled with the Spirit you will definitely not be in a quasi-drunken stupor. No, you will *“speak to one another”*, you will *“make music”* and you will *“give thanks”*. These are the actions of Christians who have *“found themselves”* as they worship the Lord with every gift and faculty they have! They certainly have not *“lost themselves”*.

But then Alisa contradicts and corrects herself: *“... I've said this before and I'll keep reminding you – that Satan loves to get you isolated ... Stay close to the Father and to the ones He's placed in your life. All my love to you –Alisa-”*. You haven't *“lost yourself”* when you are conscious of *“the Father and the ones He has placed in your life”*. God and His family, the congregation of believers worshipping with you. This is her plea for conscious congregational worship and singing.

In a recent radio news-bulletin, people are warned “not to walk alone in isolated places” because of the danger of being mugged and murdered. God has placed you in the congregation of believers for your spiritual security. “Satan loves to get you isolated” for he knows there is safety in numbers – in the congregation-family of believers.

And that’s where worship singing happens. When Jack Hayford, pioneer in the Charismatic Renewal of the 1970s, failed three times to get a choir going in his mega-“Church of the Way” (Van Nuys, California), he told the congregation “You are the Choir!” – and the singing took off like a rocket. (*Worship His Majesty*, page 152ff). He called it “enchoiring” the church. Have you enchoired your church yet?

But since then many churches have backslidden. The congregation is no longer the choir – it has become “the audience”. Sad. Let’s recover enthusiastic congregational singing! And let’s sing the rich variety of all three genres of music: Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs! Let’s have Spirit-filled people offering Spirit-filled worship!

Songs of the generations: Part 2 – Hugh Wetmore



Worship conversation with Hugh



Hugh Wetmore is a songwriter and student of worship trends. He invites you to join the worship conversation by commenting on his monthly column.

Each generation has its own musical preference. This preference tends to be sourced in the style of music I enjoyed as a teenager. This becomes the style of music I enjoy most throughout my life.

In the typical congregation, we'll find every generation present, so we will give each one affirmation. And we will exercise our tolerance for styles we don't like, but others do

“Psalms” for the older traditionalists, “hymns” for the middle-aged conventionalists, and “spiritual songs” for the younger inspirationalists.

Of course, that's a simplification. But the picture is clear: These are the three musical genres prescribed by Scripture, as the congregation sings to one another in their get-togethers. (Ephesians 5:18, 19; Colossians 3:16).

This “generational theme” was sparked by my friend's email: “... Maybe our younger generation does not like to use hymns and choruses in worship, but to us from the older generation, we long to have these incorporated, as they have such depth and rich Scriptural content.” Musical style is one aspect of the generational divide. The other aspect he mentions is “depth and rich Scriptural content”.

Lyrics are important

God considers the content of the lyrics as most important, even more than the style of the music. Listen to this emphasis in Colossians 3:16:

The content of the lyrics must be sourced in the “word of

Christ, dwelling in you richly.”

The content of the lyrics must “*teach and admonish one another*” – the singers in the congregation.

The content of the lyrics must “*be full of wisdom*” – no shallow cliches or empty meanings are tolerated.

To many it seems strange that these criteria should be applied to our songs. Isn't Paul talking about the sermon???

No, he deliberately equates the song with the sermon. They both have the same purpose: to encourage us to do “*everything in the name of the Lord Jesus*” (v17).

Living for Jesus

God wants the totality of our daily lives to bring credit to the Lord Jesus. To this end we preach the Word, and to this end we sing the Word. So that we will live for Jesus all the time.

So, just as we would not tolerate pious cliches and shallow content in the sermons we hear, we should be just as intolerant of the vacuous, meaningless lyrics which we so often sing.

This is not a generational thing at all. We insult our youth when we feed them songs that have little exposition of the Word, that focus on feelings rather than on “*teaching and correcting*” the way we live, songs that are superficial, with no meaty wisdom in the lyrics. If their minds can be stretched to understand science and maths, literature and philosophy during the week, let's not dumb down “*the deep things of God*” on Sundays (1 Corinthians 2:10).

As we sing, we must be “*filled with the Spirit*” (Ephesians 5:18,19), and it is the Spirit who “*searches all things, even the deep things of God ... that we may understand what God has given us*” (1 Corinthians 2:12). That's why, whatever the

generational style of music, we must “*sing with all wisdom*” (Colossians 3:16). As my friend wrote, the song lyrics must have “depth and rich Scriptural content”.

Use this checklist in choosing your Sunday song-list:

- Is this sourced in Scripture? Can you cite Scripture to support the content of the lyrics? Such songs are worthy of singing!
- Do these lyrics teach us about God and the way we should live? Do they correct wrong ideas and behaviour? Use such songs – they will bear fruit.
- Are the lyrics superficial and dependent on feel-good cliches? Omit such unworthy songs. Is there meaningful thought connectedness and progression of ideas? Choose such wise songs.

Songs of the generations: Part 1 – Hugh Wetmore



Worship conversation with Hugh

Hugh Wetmore is a songwriter and student of worship trends. He invites you to join the worship conversation by commenting on his monthly column.

Thanks for the various responses I receive to my musical musings about worship in the congregation of God’s people. Some as comments through this column, other in direct correspondence. I learn much, and am stimulated to explore new

facets of this precious gift.

Here's another email received recently: "... Maybe our younger generation does not like to use hymns and choruses in worship, but to us from the older generation, we long to have these incorporated, as they have such depth and rich Scriptural content."

I replied: "... Very true. I do not object to the contemporary worship musical style of the younger generation ... but I do object to the vacuous, meaningless lyrics which they so often sing. I plead with contemporary song-writers to fill their music with worthy lyrics. I point them to God's criteria for the songs He wants to hear such in our congregations. Each word in Colossians 3:16 is rich in meaning. Let our songs meet those listed criteria – and I don't mind what cultural musical style they use."

Musical styles are always changing. Some people will always prefer some styles over others. This is human nature, and musical preferences are not sinful.

Let's get this clear, so that everyone of every generation and of every ethnic culture gets the message: Musical styles are always changing. Some people will always prefer some styles over others. This is human nature, and musical preferences are not sinful.

I've got books on my shelves that demonise rock-music and condemn those who use it in a Christian context. One book is titled *Why I left the Contemporary Christian Music Movement*. Dan Lucarini left because of the associations which music styles held for him. He'd come out of a secular rock music band culture, with some sinful lyrics and practices of the world, and he did not want to go back. I can understand how he views these temptations, and his clear break with them. But

there are many others who don't have these associations and are not similarly affected.

That is why we must distinguish between Gospel essentials, and the non-essentials of our faith. (See my book *Why Christians Disagree* (Struik/TEASA 2001) for more on this.). Music styles are not "Gospel issues", for which we must be prepared to die. They are cultural issues about which Christians may differ in love.

Music styles are not "Gospel issues", for which we must be prepared to die. They are cultural issues about which Christians may differ in love.

Culture is always changing, especially in music. I read somewhere that the musical culture of a teenager changes every four years. And think of the gap between that musical culture and the musical preference of a 70-year old who hankers after old-fashioned hymns sung to pipe-organ music! It's a fact that the music you enjoy in your youth is the music you'll enjoy throughout your life. Long after upcoming generations have replaced it with their kind of music. And future generations will not like the music of today's teen-culture.

Add to the generational musical mix the ethnic musical mix of the cultures of our nation, and you have a challenge second to none. You can't please everyone all the time. Don't even try!

Each of us, young and old, black and white, African and Oriental must handle his/her musical preferences in a Christian way. That is why I respect all musical tastes, because Christians are different. Our calling is to promote Christian unity in our human diversity. Human diversity includes differing musical tastes.

Because humans are different, and cultures are different, I must not insist that all music suit my tastes. Rather I must insist that the musical interests of others in our congregation be included.

Because humans are different, and cultures are different, I must not insist that all music suit my tastes. Rather I must insist that the musical interests of others in our congregation be included. This is the Christian way to handle our inconsequential differences. *Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others (Philippians 2:4)*. That's a God-inspired motto for the one who makes up the Sunday song-list!

Paul applied this principle to the congregational singing of his day. He insisted we must *use three genres of music when we sing to one another in church (Ephesians 5:18, Colossians 3:16)*. These are listed as "Psalms" (really old-fashioned), "Hymns" (favoured by the middle-aged) and "spiritual songs" (which the youth enjoy most). Include all three genres in the singing mix, so that there will be some of each generation who are glad we are playing "my kind of music". (To be continued next month ...)

The integrated worship service – Hugh Wetmore



Worship conversation with Hugh

Hugh Wetmore is a songwriter and student of worship trends. He invites you to join the worship conversation by commenting on his monthly column.

(This is a true story, though two services have been conflated.) At a nearby institution, various preachers conduct the regular Sunday Services. Recently, the visiting young pastor was expected to lead the whole service. The pianist handed him the hymns to be sung. He announced the first hymn, then the second, and then the third.

At this the pianist stopped and called out “Does this mean the service is now ended and we can all go home?” Puzzled, the preacher, with his unpreached sermon still on the lectern before him, said, “No, not at all – why do you ask?”

“Well, this is the final hymn. It reads: Lord, dismiss us with Thy blessing!”

Afterwards, I chatted with him, commenting on this incident. He admitted that in his Church someone else led ‘the worship’, going through a list of songs one after the other, and then handed over to him to preach the sermon. He thought this was the way to run a Church service. He admitted that this was a rut that he’d got used to following.

We swapped email addresses, and this is what I wrote to him:

Dear J,

Your exposition of Luke 5 on Sunday was rich and helpful. It was one of the best I’ve heard. Thank you for feeding our souls!

You’ll remember that after the service we spoke briefly together at the door, about the ingredients of a “worship service”. Allow me to expand on what we spoke about:

Using your sanctified imagination,

and open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, a corporate worship service can include many components: adoration of Jesus; specific thanksgivings; confession of sin; aspiration for Christ-like holiness; intercession for local and international circumstances and political/economic situations; intercession for the Church; intercession for families; intercession for the unsaved; and intercession for missions etc. (These days such praying in all its facets is absent, or, at best, rather thin in Church services. By deepening and widening our public prayers we are enriching the service, and also teaching by example how to pray in family devotions and private quiet times.)

Components of a worship service:

**adoration of Jesus;
specific thanksgivings;
confession of sin;
aspiration for Christ-like holiness;
intercession for local and international circumstances and political/economic situations;
intercession for the Church;
intercession for families;
intercession for the unsaved;
and intercession for missions**

Another ingredient that God specifically requires is *the public reading of Scripture (1 Timothy 4:13)*. This is sometimes relegated to a few Scripture verses, read during the sermon. Rather we should give it the status it deserves as the inspired Scripture – the Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16). If possible, choose an Old Testament Scripture, and then a New Testament Scripture. Maybe also have a Scripture from “the Gospels” and another from “the Epistles/Letters”. If possible, explain how they fit together. But vary the format from service to service.

Other components that add value to the worship service, and please our heavenly Father, can be ... testimonies (prepared beforehand) ... reports on God’s Work from various parts of the world ... children’s talks ... Christian commentary/perspective on

current affairs ... and of course a lively presentation of “the announcements” and a creative introduction to “the offering”. From time to time the worship service will include dedication of young children, Baptisms and regular Communion.

This then will be a richer more God-pleasing worship service than merely a string of songs followed by the sermon (which has become the common practice these days). The whole congregation will be disciplined afresh in each service. This is our responsibility as Church leaders – to take our people ever deeper in their worship and Christian experience.

The singing should embrace all the genres listed in Scripture – Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. They should not only be ‘praise and worship’ ... but some of them should consciously *teach and admonish* each other. Colossians 3:16 gives important and helpful direction for our singing.

Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish with all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

Choose songs/hymns that are easily singable by the whole congregation. Avoid staging a ‘concert’ with the ‘audience’ standing to listen to the music on ‘the stage’ and mouthing or mumbling the words. Scripture tells us to “sing to one another”. The band should facilitate, not dominate, the congregation’s singing.

I use the term integrated worship, because our human minds resist hotch-potch unrelated ingredients, and themes that are constantly changing. Try to integrate each

Components that add value:

testimonies (prepared beforehand);

reports on God’s Work from various parts of the world;

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component into the whole service. Stick to a theme, or develop a connected succession of themes that will carry the congregation together, so that our minds are moved along – just as they are in a good sermon. Colossians 3:16 views the song as doing similar ‘teaching and admonishing’ as the sermon does, drawing from ‘the Word of Christ’. Blend all these ingredients together in a meaningful, integrated way, and so build up the people of God in their faith.

Of course, this will take time in preparation. I used to lead a service and pray, spontaneously – sort of ‘off the top of my head’. Now I give the whole service the same serious, prayerful, written preparation that I give to my sermon.

In closing, thank you for asking to be on my Deep and Wide free email list. I enclose a recent issue. It comes out every alternate month.

God has given you special gifts and a heart in tune with Him. May you be blessed in your future Life of service. There’s nothing like it!

Yours in Christ,
Hugh

Chapel and classroom – Hugh Wetmore



Worship conversation with Hugh

Hugh Wetmore is a songwriter and student of worship trends. He invites you to join the worship conversation by commenting on his monthly column.

“Some of the best worship songs are like a chapel and a classroom at the same time,. They teach you something about God, and they give you space to reflect and respond to that.” (Matt Redman – quoted by Chris Molyneux in his 31.8.2015 *Music Musings*.)

“The Chapel and the Classroom”. Matt is a prolific worship-song writer – his songs are sung all over the world every Sunday. This is his unusual way of describing “worship songs”. But very valid.

This captures so well the two dimensions of all Congregational Singing: The vertical (chapel) and the horizontal (classroom). Praise and thanksgiving, directed vertically to “God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (chapel). Instruction and correction, directed horizontally to “one another” (classroom).

Foundational Scripture

Matt’s model illustrates a foundational Scripture that must control all our singing in church: *Colossians 3:16 – Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.*

Colossians 3:16 refers to “the chapel” when we are told that it is “to God” that we “sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in our hearts.” That is vertical praise and thanksgiving.

Colossians 3:16 refers to “the classroom” when we are told to that it is “one another” that we “teach and admonish with all wisdom as we sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs”. That is horizontal instruction and correction.

The two dimensions belong together. Matt says that it is “at the same time” that they “are like the chapel and the classroom”. So don’t separate them. Don’t spend all your singing-time in vertical praise and worship songs. Don’t spend all your singing-time in horizontal instruction and correction songs. Thoughtfully, “with all wisdom”, blend these two purposes into your Sunday service.

What is the perspective that holds the vertical and horizontal together? What is the architecture that ensures that the chapel and the classroom are actually one building?

Colossians 3:16 gives the answer: *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.* It is the word of Christ that integrates the vertical and horizontal.

If we are filled with “the word of Christ”, this will “richly” enrich our choice of songs, so that they will express our praise and thanksgiving vertically to God, and they will also instruct and correct us who sing them, to become more Christlike in our daily lives.

Make sure that you carefully compile your Sunday song-list to include both vertical and horizontal songs. Make sure each song is based on the word of Christ (not on your own feelings, preferences or experiences, or on the current flavour of the day).

Such worship songs, says Matt Redman, will be “some of the

best worship songs”!

Common denominators for super congregational singing #5 – Hugh Wetmore



Worship conversation with Hugh

Hugh Wetmore is a songwriter and student of worship trends. He invites you to join the worship conversation by commenting on his monthly column.

Yesterday I was caught up in some super-fantastifabulous congregational singing, such as I’ve not experienced for 20 years or more. You’ll find it hard to believe, and I’m still pinching myself to know it was real.

It was not on a Sunday – it was a Friday morning.

It was not in my first, second or third language – it was in Afrikaans.

It was not a homogenous congregation – it was multi-racial and multi-generational.

It was not shared with people I know – I knew perhaps 10 of the 200 people present.

It was not in a venue I was familiar with – it was in a different church premises.

It was not led by a worship leader – the MC simply announced the songs.

It was not sung from a screen – it was sung from printed hand-outs.

It was not even in a Worship Service – it was at ... a funeral!

Of course, I was singing as enthusiastically as everyone else – I couldn't help it. Even though I had never sung four of the five songs before, the tunes and rhythms were so easily singable, with such natural cadences, that I could sing them easily. Such singing was contagious, it swept everyone up into a symphony of praise to God. The deceased, a dominee founder of Afrika Jeug Evangelisasie, had asked that this be a "Thanksgiving Service". If funerals can be glorious – this one was full of glory.

Two more common denominators

As I participated, I was actively trying to identify the factors that made this congregational singing so unique, so special. Some of the eight "common denominators for super congregational singing" listed previously were present here. I now can add:

- Tunes with natural cadences and
- Instrumental music which leads the singing.

Before the programme began, I looked through the songs on the hymn-sheet in my hand. I was not familiar with them ... when last did I sing in Afrikaans? But once the instrumental music struck up, I instinctively felt I knew the tune-progression, and by the second verse I was quite at home.

Focus on predictable melodies

While performance singing is often written to show the virtuosity of the artist singing the song, congregational singing should focus on smooth, simple, and predictable melodies. The tune should not spring unexpected surprises on

the singing crowd.

Some really simple tunes with predictable cadences are *Hallelujah, Hallelujah (x8); Amen, Amen, ...; The Farmer's in his den; Kum ba yah; John Brown's body; Angimbonanga; Uthando luka Baba; Sarie Marais; Ten green bottles; and Silent Night*. Anyone who puts Christian lyrics to these tunes will have the congregation singing along in no time.

The tunes should easily slip into natural cadences. Then the congregation will easily slip into these tunes. And the people did, as they sang at that funeral. So, make sure that, for congregational singing, you choose songs that have ...

- Tunes with natural cadences.

Then, tenthly, make sure your instruments or band give a clear lead to the singing:

- Instrumental music must lead the singing.

Incidental music before the service

The music up front was led by four musicians, one pianist and three violinists. The pianist, one of the deceased's five children, was brilliant on the keys. She was augmented by three violinists 'imported' from a church in another city. They made a fantastic team.

As we entered the sanctuary, they were already playing. This created the musical atmosphere for what followed. Later, I realised they had been playing the tunes of the songs we sang together. (Maybe they had been practising?) This suggests a valuable tip: The incidental music preliminary to the service could well be used to plant in the congregation's minds the tunes of the songs that will be sung later.

The musicians confidently led each song with the tune of the song. There were no awkward interludes. There was no background musical haze with vocals singing the tune over the

blur-noise, as often characterises songs these days. (Leave that to the broadcast and ear-plug songs, where we don't have to sing-along.)

If you want to hear effective crowd-singing led by instruments that follow the tune, listen to the National Anthem on SAfm at 05h58 each weekday morning. That's a sample of what super-congregational singing should be!

The 10 common denominators

Summarising the 10 common denominators for super congregational singing:

1. Enthusiasm for the message of the song.
2. Songs can be sung spontaneously – even without instruments.
3. A steady rhythm
4. The words fit the notes. Don't crush too many words into too few notes.
5. Simplicity and
6. Songs written for congregational singing (not for performance)
7. Hummability
8. Strummability
9. Tunes with natural cadences and
10. Instrumental music which leads the singing

Let the congregation SING!

Common denominators for super

congregational singing #4 – Hugh Wetmore



Worship conversation with Hugh

Hugh Wetmore is a songwriter and student of worship trends. He invites you to join the worship conversation by commenting on his monthly column.

In our search for those factors that encourage the ordinary people in the ordinary congregation to sing with easy enthusiasm, I have already listed the following:

- Enthusiasm for the message of the song;
- Songs can be sung spontaneously – even without instruments;
- A steady rhythm;
- The words fit the notes. Don't crush too many words into too few notes;
- Simplicity; and
- Songs written for congregational singing (not for performance).

Now let's add two more criteria that make for the singability of a song: hummability and strummability.

These continue to be drawn from a study of crowd-singing outside of the Church.

Hummability

There was a time when someone would hum a tune while busy with household chores. She was in a good mood, and music would be floating around in her head, and without thinking it would escape with an unconscious humming through her lips. Or, as he

walked down the street, a popular song may prompt him to whistle the tune.

A catchy tune, that is easily hummable, helps the congregation to sing.

Those spontaneous hums don't happen anymore. You are more likely to see him with ear-phones plugged into the mobile in his pocket. He enjoys listening to the song. But does he hum or whistle along with it? No. Why not? It's a nice song, but it is too complicated to hum. It is not hummable.

This is a warning sign – the tune is not easy to sing. He enjoys listening, but he could not sing it. It is not singable. So it would never go down well in the congregation. The people would prefer listen to the song sung from the platform, rather than sing it together in the pews.

So – test the singability of the songs you choose for the congregation, by whether it is easy to hum the tune on your own, unassisted by instrumental accompaniment.

Strummability

Here's another easy test. Using your fingers, your feet or your body – can you easily move to the beat of the song? Do you feel the strong beats coming through? If you're comfortable with a guitar in your hands, is the song strummable?

The more regular and simple the rhythm, the easier it is for the congregation to sing the song. A congregation of non-professional musicians will stumble and trip over an irregular rhythm ... unable to really sing the song as they want to.

If there is more than one stanza, then the same regular strummable rhythm should carry over to each stanza. Strum the tune to the words of each stanza – if they fit, then the song is likely to be singable by the congregation.

So, use every means at your disposal to “get the congregation singing”! Make sure the tune is hummable, and the rhythm is strummable. Then you will encourage singability!

Common denominators for super congregational singing #3 – Hugh Wetmore



Worship conversation with Hugh

Hugh Wetmore is a songwriter and student of worship trends. He invites you to join the worship conversation by commenting on his monthly column.

This month we aim for an “EASY Sing-Along Style” of song to get the congregation really singing! The emphasis is on easy singability.

Professionals don’t want easy songs for their performances. They revel in the challenge of music that is different and unique, that demonstrates their talent.

But congregations comprise ordinary people, not professionals. They want to enjoy their singing, with lyrics that naturally roll off their tongues when sung to a catchy tune with a swaying or pulsing rhythm. An easy sing-along style.

I’ve been reading a fascinating book: “*Honky Tonk Gospel*”, subtitled ‘*The Story of Sin and Salvation in Country Music*’,

by Veith & Wilmeth (Baker Books 2001). Country style songs naturally roll off their tongues because they are sung to a catchy tune with a swaying or pulsing rhythm. True, big name professional artists record them in studios. But their roots are among the simple hill-billy mountain-folks and the cattle-ranching plains of the Southern United. And they are easily sung by ordinary folk wherever they gather.

Hitherto, we've identified common denominators for congregational singing as:

- A. Enthusiasm for the message of the Song.
- B. Songs can be sung spontaneously – even without instruments.
- C. A steady rhythm.
- D. The words fit the notes. Don't crush too many words into too few notes.

This month we emphasise simplicity and predictability

E. SIMPLICITY.

Nursery rhymes, lullabies and folk songs are so simple that even little children easily sing them. Think of some that are still rooted in the back of your memory: "The Farmer's in his den" ... "Twinkle, twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are" ... "Thula Mntwana" ... "Puff the magic dragon lives by the sea" ... "Jan Pierewiet" ... "Sarie Marais" ... "Asimbonanga ofana naye".

Many country and western songs have a simple structure that make group sing-along participation easy. "The Yellow Rose of Texas" ... "She'll be coming round the mountain when she comes" ...

Some hymns, and some contemporary worship songs, are so complicated that choirs and worship-groups need time to practice them before they are sung on Sunday. And when they

are sung, the congregation struggles to sing along with them. They're easy on the ear, but difficult on the lips.

It is the simple hymn-tunes and song-tunes that are easy to sing. The tune and the rhythm grab the ordinary people in the average congregation and lift them into the united joy of singing the lyrics for our Lord Jesus!

Let the people sing!

F. Songs written for congregational singing (not Performance)

Terry Dempsey is a successful South African songwriter who has authored a book *The Key to Successful Songwriting* (Angela: 1985). I read it eagerly, hoping it would guide my own songwriting, which is geared to congregational singability. But I was disappointed: it became obvious that he was fixated on performance songs. He made no mention of sing-along Songs. It was as if they did not exist. Some of his Performance songs might be singable by the crowd – e.g. *Love is a beautiful Song*.

But most are not. His goal is the record company, play-time on radio/TV, and number one hit rankings, earning him lifetime royalties. My goal is the congregation singing the Word songs to each other (Colossians 3:16), pleasing to God.

Many contemporary worship songs are written for a professional performer. They are initially promoted by a big-name performer, and mediated through recordings to the public. The blurb promises "a Worship experience" (not Worship singing). A worship leader hears it and likes it. Her/his band+vocals practice it, and then they introduce it to the congregation on Sunday. The congregation enjoys it ... enjoys it ... but that's where it ends. Take away the band+vocals on the platform, and the people in the congregation can't sing it.

Professionals love musical riffs and interludes. Congregations don't. They tend to sing when they shouldn't, then stop

singing to avoid embarrassment. For congregational singing, be suspicious of songs that have these special effects.

Some songs were not intentionally, purposefully written for the congregation.

Yes, there are exceptions. There are times when a professionally recorded performance song can be quickly learned by the congregation of unprofessionals. That is, if it is simple, with a steady rhythm and a catchy tune. Those are the songs to include your service song-list.

But better still, choose songs that were intentionally, purposefully written for congregational singing.

Here are some suggestions – you'll be surprised how easily the congregation can sing along with enthusiasm. "Be still and know that I am God" ... "God forgave my sin in Jesus' name" ... "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty" ... "Ten Thousand Reasons" ... "We believe in Hebrews thirteen eight" ... "All to Jesus I surrender" ... "Search me O God" ... "O let the Son of God enfold you" ... "In Christ Alone".

The bottom line: If you choose a hymn or song from a professional source – a CD, a video-clip, the Internet, or sung by a professional artiste – be aware: It may not be suitable for the congregation. But if it passes the simplicity and singability tests, then ...

"Let the people sing!"

More common denominators for

super congregational singing – Hugh Wetmore



Worship conversation with Hugh

Hugh Wetmore is a songwriter and student of worship trends. He invites you to join the worship conversation by commenting on his monthly column.

With a passionate longing to hear congregations sing with enthusiasm, we identified two factors last month that identify “super singable songs”:

- Enthusiasm for the message of the song.
- Songs can be sung spontaneously – just one person can trigger a song. Even without instruments.

Now add to these: rhythm and don't crush the words

Rhythm

Everyone values rhythm – play a good song and even 3-year-old children will move to its rhythm. Watch any music program on TV, and the musicians in the studio will tap their feet, move their arms, and jerk their heads – enjoying the rhythm.

To get the congregation of non-professionals singing, avoid complicated rhythms. Choose songs with an easy beat. KISS = “Keep it Simple, Stupid!” The simpler the rhythm, the easier it is to sing with relaxed enthusiasm.

Notice how some songs begin with an accented beat, and others begin with an unaccented beat ... or even a few unaccented beats. Pundits have given these rhythms technical names:

Trochaic: long short – ^ – ^
as in 'JESus LOVer OF my SOUL'

Iambic: short long ^ – ^ –
as in 'The LORD'S my SHEPherd'

Dactyllic: long short short – ^ ^ – ^ ^
as in 'my LIFE is in YOU, Lord, my STRENGTH ...'

Anapaestic: short short long ^ ^ – ^ ^ –
as in 'Let us BREAK bread toGETher, we are ONE. '

Songs that are consistent in their chosen rhythm accents are more singable than songs that mix the rhythm accents.

Ideally, the spoken rhythm of accented and unaccented beats should match the musical rhythm of accented and unaccented beats. If these accents match well, the singing will flow easily. Try not to choose songs where there is a serious mismatch between spoken words and their musical rhythm. (A skilled wordsmith can rewrite the words to fit.)

If this is too technical for you, don't give up. Feel the rhythm – if it feels steadily consistent, and fits the words, go for it. If it doesn't, forget it.

Don't crush at the turnstiles

The recent tragedy at the FNB Stadium happened because too many people tried to get through too small a space too quickly. If we squash too many words or syllables into too small a musical space, our singing will be disastrous too.

Ideally, one note is a turnstile just big enough for one syllable. Sometimes a song will give plenty of elbow room when it provides multiple notes for one syllable – as does the swaying song *Amen*. But avoid songs that squeeze multiple syllables, or words, into one note.

Have you noticed that most congregations seldom manage to sing all the words in the opening line of Christiansen's *May we be*

a shining light to the nations? That's 11 syllables crushed into the space of only nine actual notes. (He tries to wriggle out of his crushing dilemma by using semi-quavers instead of quavers.) But when we come to sing the last stanza, every word fits snugly into those same notes: "May Your Kingdom come to the nations ...". Now suddenly we are fitting nine syllables into nine notes – and it goes so much better. Amend this song by dropping the "May we" words, and start the verses with "Be a ...". Then the singing will zing!

Similarly, Paul Oakley's 1995 beautiful song, *Jesus, Lover of my soul*, tries to squash too many words through the turnstiles of the congregation's lips ('as if You should do things my way'). I've not yet heard it sung smoothly from beginning to end. I've [listened](#) to it again on and realised afresh how the inconsistent slow-fast rhythm makes it difficult for congregational singing. Leave such songs to platform performers.

I close with an example of a song that meets all the above criteria:

[10 000 Reasons](#) has been called the best worship song ever. Maybe that's over the top, but your congregation will easily sing it with enthusiasm!

Be encouraged as you get your congregation singing!