

Singing Hymns and Spiritual Songs Together Carrying the Songs of the Beloved Community to the Greater Community

The dust seems to have settled on the worship wars of the late 20th century. After the last 25 years little controversy is left between opposing factions regarding "what do we sing on Sunday morning?". Those who believe strongly in singing contemporary Christian songs and choruses are doing their thing and those who believe in singing more traditional hymns and spiritual songs are doing theirs. The debate over which style of worship song contributes best to congregational singing has subsided and churches appear to have settled on one or the other or a combination of both. For this we can be thankful!

At First Church we sing what best complements and enhances the theme of the day and try each week to touch on as many interesting musical styles as possible. It is a form of blended or "convergent" musical worship style, with music chosen for the strong message it carries and the ease in which the congregation can successfully participate. As Director of Music I readily admit to having a lifelong fervent love of hymnody. By now in my tenure at First Church that certainly is no secret.

I want to do two things in this article:

1. Clarify what a hymn or spiritual song actually is and isn't.
2. Set the stage for a wonderful Homecoming "All Church Hymn-Sing" this coming September

A hymn text is a poem written about a sacred topic with meter and rhyme. A hymn tune is a vocal melody with possible additional harmony. When a sacred poem is wedded to a singable melody, a hymn is the result. The hymn text can be given a single line melody or arranged for any designated combination of voices (SATB).

Hymns can have one or more stanzas. Each stanza is constructed, as closely as possible, with the same number of syllables per line. Care is taken to create accents which correspond in terms of placement in not just the first stanza but each of the stanzas. Syllabic count can be found under the title of the hymn (7.6.7.6 D).

Hymn writers create hymns with an understanding that they are a unique art form. Hymns are sung without rehearsal and must communicate on "first singing." Subsequent singing of a good hymn will intensify the hymn's message and relevance. For a hymn to last, relevance and applicability should last through the ages. "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" was meaningful when it was originally written in 1708 and yet brought worshippers to tears when sung after the events of 9-11.

Another genre of congregational song we use frequently in worship is "spiritual song." Its format is not as rigid as that of a hymn but is equally poignant and sing-able. Spiritual songs also have stanzas and rhyme but are flexible enough in form to be instantly extended to fit specific moods or occasions. "On the spot" extensions are not only possible but encouraged in spiritual songs. These songs are easily memorized because of inner repetition, which allows singers to sing "off the page." Their tunes are the kind of tune we end up humming while we work around the house or putter in the garden. These songs are the ones which people grew up singing and have become their "songs of the heart."

"If only the most beautiful singing birds in the forest sang... the woods would grow silent." (Helen Kemp)

John Horman, Director of Music