

Teaching Music in Your Church

James W. Tackett—for ACAFest / Lipscomb University—July 2009

I find myself in a peculiar position, but not a unique one. I am a publisher of church music. My particular product, The Paperless Hymnal[®], came about because of a need at my own congregation. We were given the money to install a projection system and our elders asked that we start projecting lyrics during our song services. I reminded them of the several ways we had experimented with music presentation during our services and had quickly left behind printing only the lyrics to our songs. We had noticed a drop in quality and quantity of singing when we printed only the lyrics. It made no sense to me that projecting only the lyrics would produce a different result.

One nearby congregation had been projecting lyrics for several years and had already found it necessary, in their thinking, to install a praise team to make up for the lack of harmony. I've visited that congregation many times and noticed that whenever they sang from the songbook, the volume and participation increased considerably.

To satisfy our congregation's desire to embrace 21st century technology and supply music for our congregation, we developed a crude form of what is now The Paperless Hymnal product. It is because of that product that I have faced much encouragement and much cynicism, the latter usually in the form of

criticism from those involved in church music who do not think that music being made available to those in the pew is important. If I were not involved in church music to the degree that I am, I most likely would not have noticed this opposition. But I have this habit of Googling myself and The Paperless Hymnal to keep abreast of what is being said about us. I figure that if someone went to the time and trouble to point out the deficiencies of what I am doing, I should probably consider their point of view. I might learn something.

The overriding sentiment of the "lyrics only" advocates boil down to the simple perception, whether real or not, that most of the people in the pew do not read music – so why bother with it.

As a church music educator, this set me to thinking. Can we apply this same reasoning to other aspects in our worship? If most of our people did not understand what the emblems of the Lord's Supper are about, do we set them aside? I have to admit that I don't understand the full depth of God's grace or His love for us, and I doubt that many, or any of us do. Does that mean we stop preaching about God's grace and love? How can we be sure God really hears us when we pray? Do we stop praying? Of course not. We don't stop because of where we are in our understanding of these things. We teach what God has

told us and trust Him to hold up His end of the bargain when we can't hold up our own end.

If most of our people could not read, do we take the Bibles off the back of the pews? By the way, the church has faced that problem in the past and found a way to correct it. It was called Sunday school. It started in England during the industrial revolution. The demand for cheap labor forced young children onto the machine lines in factories and mills, usually for 12 hours a day. Sunday was the only day not spent working. Several philanthropists provided money to churches to start teaching these children to read, write and do math. They also used that time to teach them music and some of our older hymns came from the British Sunday school tradition. Of course the Bible was the reader that was used and the songs they sang taught young minds of God and Christ. So you see – their answer was not “ignore” or “forget” – it was to “educate”.

I believe we are facing an era of deficiency in music education in our public school system. Because of the political demand for standardized fill-in-the-blank test, the arts at first seem a waste of time. Research has proven that wrong, but since when have politicians started listening to reason?

Young people of today, unless they are attending a private school or are fortunate enough to grow up attending school in a district that values the arts, have been deprived of

an education to form skills of creative thinking. But they can reproduce information!

During the 20th century, churches have relied on our public school systems to teach music to our children. This is especially true of the churches of Christ, where we don't have training unions and volunteer choir programs. With the little teaching that our schools did provide to all children, we added to that a continual immersion in congregational singing and familiarity with music from our songbooks. People my age were encouraged to sing parts and were taught by example by members of our family and congregation, since it was one of the five acts of worship.

Today, however, we can enter many of our buildings on a Sunday morning to find no printed or displayed music and very little part-singing from the congregation. Did we convert that many people from outside our fellowship who didn't grow up learning to sing? No. We didn't pass on to these last generations the knowledge. Shame on us! We became complacent, thinking that the command to “sing” was sufficient.

By the very fact that you are here, I assume that you probably feel music education in the church is important and you are here to learn. Well, I don't have all the answers, but I think I have some ideas worth considering.

Unfortunately, there is no “one teaching method” that fits all needs. We must realize that there are several different levels in music knowledge

and skill that people are interested in attaining or even need to acquire to meet our needs in the church. It's somewhat like a person's desire to gain knowledge about automobiles.

❶ Some people want to know everything about cars and even build or rebuild them.

❷ Some people want to know how to maintain them and maybe do a little work on them.

❸ Some people only want to drive them.

❹ Some people just want to ride in them, relying on others to do the driving.

All of these folks to this point are able to use a car for its intended purpose.

❺ A few people just want to admire cars from outside of them. They stay at home a lot and just watch the procession on the street in front of their homes as others pass by, going from place to place quickly.

People can feel much the same about music.

❶ There are people who want to know everything about music and create their own. These must prepare themselves with a thorough education to develop their talent for music.

Providing an education to those who fall into the first category is assigned to music departments of colleges and universities. There is also training at several singing schools that do a fairly good job of starting a person down this track of education.

❷ There are people who want to know enough about music to do a bit of arranging and understand enough to participate in producing music in some form or to teach basic music.

Helping those in this second category is not outside the realm for a congregation but is probably outside the practical assets found in a given congregation. Again, a minor degree in music or a singing school education is of benefit here.

Now, dropping down to category five and to those who only want to listen and not participate in singing. There isn't a lot you can do for those in the fifth category ❺ except to encourage them.

So, that leaves the third and fourth categories, people whose music education can be provided by a church.

❸ There are people who want to know music enough to sight read a new song and their voice part.

❹ There are those, who for one reason or another, either feel they cannot learn music and may actually not have the talent to read music – but they still love to sing and follow others.

For years I couldn't see the difference in educating the two groups, but there turns out to be a big difference. I used to think that I had to teach both groups the basics of music but have found that trying to teach the fourth category music is like force-feeding babies something that they will spit out anyway. But if I only teach

songs to both groups, the third category folks are left hungry for more and are not satisfied. So there isn't any one method that will fill both groups needs.

I have been involved with singing schools for over 40 years. It is just within my nature to educate others about music and would like to see everyone in the church able to sight-read music. But I have given up at my congregation trying to interest others in reading music beyond those whom I have taught in the past. Yet – many in category four still like to sing and want to learn some new songs. I have learned that in order to teach them new songs you must teach them the melody first and then the other voice parts if any want to learn them. Basically they memorize music the same way children learn songs.

Therefore, a comprehensive congregational music program needs to be seven fold, as I see it.

(1) Teach new songs by teaching people to sing their parts. This is basically what Keith Lancaster is doing in his "Praise and Harmony" workshops.

I would push for a dedicated time to teach new songs. Prepare handouts of songs that are to be learned and distribute them ahead of time. If possible, prepare a CD with either individuals singing the parts and/or a piano playing the songs. If possible, have one version of the song with all parts, one with just the soprano, one with the alto, one with the tenor and one with the bass. Or

you can buy Keith's Praise and Harmony series books and CDs and hand them out or have people purchase them.

During the new song session, you should have parts sit together and make sure that those who can read their part are dispersed among those who need to follow. Don't allow all the good singers to sit together, forcing those who cannot read music to bore themselves in another group. Spend some time on each individual part so that everyone is comfortable singing their part.

Toward the end of the session – spend a little time in taking requests. But, don't allow this to become a time of just singing favorites. This isn't something new; it is what we did when I was a youth.

Along these same lines, hire Keith to conduct a Praise and Harmony session with your congregation, promote it to the community and other congregations in the area.

(2) Teach a music class on the basics of music. This class should cover everything a person needs to know to pick up a song and sing their part. I have a good book that you can look at, use and copy for free at: www.paperlesshymnal.com.

Let me warn you here. A formal music education usually does not prepare one to teach in a congregational environment. Most higher education is based on instrumental music. Congregational a capella music should be taught differently to be effective. Though

knowledge of the lines and spaces (absolute pitches) is good and is necessary to understand keys, etc. - humans do not sing absolute pitches unless you have perfect pitch. We sing relative pitches. That is where shaped notes come in. I know they are hard for instrumentalist and those with music degrees to stomach and are hee-hawed in most institutions, but that is because they serve no purpose in playing an instrument. Instruments play absolute pitches.

In talking about shaped notes, I am not talking about Sacred Harp. I am talking about the shapes that are already displayed in most of our song books like "Songs of Faith and Praise" and "Praise for the Lord", "Songs of the Church", "Sacred Selections", and on the screen with The Paperless Hymnal files, in Keith's books and on Keith's slides.

Almost everyone can sing the major diatonic scale and what shaped notes do is put shapes to the pitches of scales. It's been proven that people can be taught to sight read quicker and better by using shaped notes than by spending the time necessary to teach them otherwise.

(3) Encourage individuals to expand their knowledge about church music by attending one of the singing schools in the brotherhood and there are several good ones. I have a list of schools in the resource section of this handout.

(4) Start a singing organization at your church or in your community. If you start a congregational group,

open it up for everyone who likes to sing and who wants to improve their singing. This can give your congregation a core of people on whom you can count to sing out and encourage others. Challenge them with the new songs first and they can help others in the assemblies. If you start a community group, invite singers from other congregations. Challenge them with new material and a desire for better singing. This way the music education program at your church can have a profound effect on other congregations in the area. It will also provide you with a core group who can sing for funerals or other events when your congregation needs to provide singing. Invite outside leaders who can additionally challenge your group. Pay a local voice teacher to train the group in proper voice techniques.

(5) Train young men to be song leaders. Encourage them to become leaders by sending them to singing schools, participating in LTC, leading on Sunday evenings, etc. Have your best song leader teach them the techniques they should know as a song leader. Encourage youth singing groups and provide them occasions to perform for the congregation.

(6) Have singing services with emphasis on the songs. Discuss the authors and the stories behind the creation of the songs. Take a subject and sing songs on that subject and read the scriptures that inspired the songs. Work into these sessions some history of singing and worship.

Sing examples of period music.

(7) This might be the most important thing your congregation can do to help your singing in the long run. It involves educating your children.

Music is an integral part of a child's life. Music is what children do. It is not an addendum to be used or tossed aside. For a child, music and movement are inseparable. Before our culture teaches us to "stop moving," children will move to music.

Music offers a short cut to learning. Facts and concepts put to music are quickly moved into long-term memory. (How did most of us learn our ABC's and the books of the Bible?) For this reason, music should be utilized as much as possible in teaching children about God and His Word.

While the Bible class venue is poorly suited to learning music theory, it is an excellent place in which to teach the elements of music. Music appreciation can be piggybacked onto any use of music in the class. Here are some examples of utilizing children's Bible class songs to help children appreciate music. Some may even be of help with adults, where appropriate.

Rhythm - Children pat their thighs or clap to the rhythm of the song or pretend to be clock pendulums while singing.

Pitch - Children march up the steps as the pitch of a song rises and back down when it moves downward. Pitch can be used in storytelling. Use

a low voice when describing David as little, close to the ground. Use a high voice when describing Goliath as tall, way up high.

Melodic Contour - As children sing a song they can draw with their fingers the melodic pattern of the song.

Tempo - Demonstrate that most fast music makes us feel happy while some slow music makes us feel sad. Some slow music helps us go to sleep or think about God.

Articulation - Some music almost hops. Encourage the children to hop as they sing "Ho, Ho, Ho Hosanna." They can also experience diaphragmic breathing by placing their hands on their diaphragms as they sing this song.

Duration - As the children sing "God Is So Good," let them hear the long notes. Use a song like "Jesus Loves Me" for them hear the short notes.

Volume - Some music is quiet and soft like "Whisper A Prayer." Some music is loud and joyful.

Rests - Children move to the rhythm of "God Is So Good." At the end of the first line, there is a rest. Children stop their movement and breathe during the rest.

Music is the teacher's best friend. While children are singing, they are totally engaged in the class activity. While they are moving with the music, they are using up energy that will help them sit still later in the class. Learning, engaging in the lesson, and being able to sit and listen - what else offers

so much to the teacher and to the students?

These are concepts taught in the Women in Church Music classes at the Singing School at ACU . We even offer certification in that area of study.

Now you might ask, when do we start teaching our children music? My answer is “Now.” No matter the age. Children who are five years of age can be taught music easier than those who are six. Four year olds are easier to teach than five year olds. Threes, easier to teach than fours. Whenever children start singing, start teaching.

Consider this – what is the hardest thing a baby must learn, they all learn it and are never taught it. We’re talking about language. They have an insatiable appetite to learn. In fact, that is their main task in life after birth and they do it no matter how bad the teachers are around them.

There are several things we should consider about children and learning. They start to learn before they are born. All of their senses are developed but are not all used until birth. Babies start to hear and feel starting at about 18 weeks. By the time of their birth, they can recognize the voices that have stimulated them for the previous nine months. The music that they hear during that time is the music they will want to participate in for the rest of their lives.

I’ve found several books to be fascinating about child development and learning. If you are the primary care giver for children of any age, I know material in these books will give

you insights into providing an environment in which a child can learn skills that may otherwise escape them for years.

HOW TO TEACH YOUR BABY TO READ

Researchers at the Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania found that they could teach brain damaged babies to read and not only just read, but read better than children in normal circumstances.

The key is to understand how a baby learns and what their limitations are. Babies cannot differentiate between words on a printed page until about 2 1/2 years of age. So up until that time, words must be presented to them one at a time and large enough for them to clearly see.

HOW TO TEACH YOUR BABY MATH

This same group’s research branched out to include math. The results? Babies can learn to add, subtract, multiply and divide before they can talk.

Again, the key is to understand how a baby learns and what their limitations are. A baby can’t tell the difference between a vertical line on a piece of paper and one that is curved into some shape, but they can tell the difference between one dot, two dots, or a hundred dots if the dots are big enough.

NOW TO GIVE YOUR BABY ENCYCLOPEDIA KNOWLEDGE

You've seen the smart little kids on TV who seem to know more about a subject than you do. Well, it isn't that they are so smart as it is that they started learning those facts early. The earlier you learn, the more permanent the information.

As connections are formed in the brain, information learned during the young years becomes hard wired in the brain. Take for example one's accent – especially someone like Hugh Laurie, the lead actor in the TV series "House". He was born in Oxford, England and has a beautiful British accent when he speaks "naturally". His accent is British because his language skills were hard wired into his brain when he learned to speak. The way Hugh forms his vowels were set when he learned to speak and will be with him for the rest of his life. There is a speech therapist on staff to help him with his "American" speech for this TV character.

The same thing happens with information learned when we are very young. That information becomes a part of us. Consider what Solomon said in Proverbs 22:6, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." I can remember my son one Sunday morning, not getting up and refusing to go to church with us. We allowed him to stay home, making him

promise that he would stay in the house until we returned. The next Sunday morning he was up and ready to go, more so than usual. The difference was, this time he was getting up to go for himself and not us. It was in his nature to go to church, a habit formed years earlier.

Children naturally learn how to sing: to hear a melody and set of words and verbalize it. The younger they start trying, the better. They hear a set of pitches and try to match them. With some practice, they eventually succeed. In nearly all cases, they haven't memorized individual pitches for each word of the song, but they have memorized the relationship between the pitches.

Lines on paper and spots on lines don't mean anything to a young child, just as numerical notation doesn't mean anything to them. Those spots on the lines are examples of absolute pitches anyway and very few people can reproduce them without some external help, like a piano, to get them started. But since small children hear the relationship between pitches, we should teach them a method to read those relationships. Folks, that's what shaped notes are all about. The sooner the child is introduced to shaped notes, the sooner they will be reading music.

Training Children to Read Music

(1) As soon as the child shows an interest in singing, teach them the

shapes without stems and without the staff. Start out with Do (the isosceles triangle). Always sound it first and move to the next pitch, Re (the bowl). And so forth through the scale over a period of time. Do not drill them, but only work with them for a minute or two. Do this two or three times a day. Make it fun and interactive. This whole procedure can be found in the resources I provide on my web site.

(2) At about 2 1/2 years of age, start showing them regular music notation with just the melody or the part they are singing. Always accompany any songs you have them sing with the music with shaped notes and they will learn to read music in spite of their teachers. Just as you would move your finger along the print of a sentence to show the child which word is being sounded, you should do that with the notes on the staff. Even if the music is in conventional notation, they will get used to some notes being higher than others, they just won't know how much higher.

Children learn from exposure to stimulus. If they are not exposed, don't be surprised when they aren't stimulated or show interest. If we only teach our children songs and don't teach them any theory, then later don't expose them to any printed music, then don't expect them to read music or enthusiastically enjoy the excitement of reading music.

We need to keep in mind that the whole point of music education, as far as the church is concerned, is to

equip those in the pew for singing.

That is a lot said about education, but there is one more thought I want to present and it is directed mainly at our larger congregations. I believe that hiring a worship or music minister should mean hiring a music educator. For some reason, once a full time worship minister is in place, emphasis becomes directed toward "music" and not "singing". There is a huge difference and I don't see this as a mundane point. What usually occurs is the shift of attention, from the pew to the rostrum. After all, this person has to call attention to the contributions he is making to the worship service to keep his job.

Up until recently, an education in worship ministry wasn't available at our universities. You had to major in Bible and minor in music and neither really focused on the ministry. However, several of our church affiliated universities now offer a major in Worship Ministry, and music is not left out. But there is still a lack of training in music education as it relates to congregational singing.

Even though none of the summer singing school programs expressly train students in music education, the classes are conducted in such a way that they are easily adapted to the congregational setting. They are aimed at the average pew occupant. It isn't unusual for an individual who majored in music to attend our school in Abilene for the expressed purpose of acclimating themselves to teaching in their congregation back home.

What can you do as a parent? Make sure your children have an education in music. I hope to expand the offerings that I have posted on my web site to teach children, so look at that site every once in a while.

Sing to your baby, play music around them that carries a message that you want to become a part of their makeup.

Have them take piano. This is one of the best instruments for learning the theory of music. Have them take violin lessons. This is the best instrument for ear training since it is non-fretted and they have to tune every note.

Find a vocal coach for them and the other children at church who really want to learn to sing.

Encourage them to participate in congregational and group singings.

As in individual, if you have no music training, one of the best places to start is at one of our summer singing schools. All of the schools are geared to present the beginner the basics of music, no matter what their age. It is not unusual for us to have students at Abilene who are in their seventies. Some are as young as ten. Take vocal lessons. Join a community chorus. Sing! Whenever!

If you are retired, use the extra free time you have (Ha!) to expand your knowledge and understanding of music. Join a community chorus, Sweet Adeline's, or a barbershop group.

So, let me summarize my points.

(1 & 2) The church is doing itself irreparable harm by not educating for the future and by taking printed and/or projected music away from those in the pew.

(3 & 4) Music training needs to start as soon as children start to sing and should continue throughout the persons desire to learn.

(5) The focus of music education should be on promoting better congregational singing and involvement.

(6) As individuals and parents, don't wait for others to educate us or our children.

Thanks to Thana Furr at The Singing School at ACU for much of the information about teaching children music.

Teaching Music in the Church—Resources

Books

BIG BOOK OF MUSIC GAMES

By Debra Olson Pressnall & Lorilee Malecha
The Big Book of Music Games
2400 Turner Avenue NW
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49544
ISBN 1-56822-673-X

FUNDAMENTALS OF CHURCH MUSIC THEORY

Download for free at:
www.paperlesshymnal.com

HOW TO TEACH YOUR BABY TO READ

By Glenn & Janet Doman
SquareOne Publishers
115 Herricks Road
Garden City Park, NY 11040
(877) 900-BOOK
www.squareonepublishers.com
ISBN 0-7570-0188-3 (hard back)
ISBN 0-7570-0185-8 (paper back)

HOW TO TEACH YOUR BABY MATH

By Glenn & Janet Doman
(Same info as above)
ISBN 0-7570-0189-0 (hard back)
ISBN 0-7570-0184-X (paper back)

HOW TO GIVE YOUR BABY ENCYCLOPEDIA KNOWLEDGE

By Glenn & Janet Doman and Susan Aisen
(Same info as above)
ISBN 0-7570-0190-4 (hard back)
ISBN 0-7570-0182-3 (paper back)

LEADING THE LORD'S WORSHIP

By Jack Boyd
Praise Press
PO Box 40304
Nashville, TN 37204
(800) 331-5991

MUSIC WITH THE BRAIN IN MIND

By Eric Jensen
Corwin Press
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, CA 91320
www.corwinpress.com
ISBN 978-1-890460-06-8

ARTS WITH THE BRAIN IN MIND

By Eric Jensen
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
1703 North Beauregard Street
Alexandria, VA 22311-1714
(800) 933-2723
www.ascd.org
ISBN 0-87120-514-9

TEACHING WITH THE BRAIN IN MIND

By Eric Jensen
(Same info as above)
ISBN 1-4166-0030-2

WHY MEN HATE GOING TO CHURCH

By David Morrow
Men for Church
Box 672316
Chugiak, AK 99567
www.menforchurch.com
ISBN-13: 9780785260387

Singing Schools

Foundation School of Church Music

Buda, TX
www.foundmusic.org

Four States Praise Camp

Canfield, AR
www.fourstates.org

Harding Summer Honor Choir

Searcy, AR
www.harding.edu/honorchoir

Haskell Singing School

Haskell, TX
(940) 864-3101

Singing School at Abilene Christian University

Abilene, TX
www.singingschool.org

Singing School at Wilberton, OK

Wilberton, OK
www.singingschool.net

Other Helps

General music resources

www.musick8.com
www.dotmusicresources.com

Lipscomb degree in Worship Ministry

<http://catalog.lipscomb.edu/Uploads/27983.pdf>

www.paperlesshymnal.com
Look in the free section

This material:

www.paperlesshymnal.com/tph/Articles/TeachingMusicInTheChurch.pdf

Teach Your Baby to Read Music:

www.paperlesshymnal.com/tph/Articles/TeachYourBabyToReadMusic.pdf