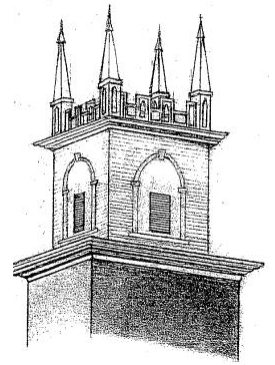


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Message from the Pastor

“To Sing is to Pray Twice”

An important element of our church service is congregational singing. During the month of September, we sang ten different hymns with Stu’s piano accompaniment, plus the opportunity for folk music led by Molly and Bruce Douglas. At our hymn sing last month, the congregation and I chose thirteen hymns embracing a wide range of styles. For this experience, we may have omitted a verse or two here or there in the interest of giving everyone a chance to sing their favorite. Usually, what we sing is right from the hymnal. After attending a funeral service in our church last spring, one of my Catholic friends quipped, “I forgot that you folks sing ALL the verses.” Let me expand on that point.

A monumental turning point in history happened with the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century—the consequences still impact the many divisions within Christianity to this day. In addition to Lutherans and the Calvinists [ancestors of the Congregational tradition] changing the language of the service from Latin to the language of the people, the new traditions favored congregational psalm singing and hymn singing as a way deepening the one’s faith experience and reflecting on a prayerful message. One hymn we all know from this time is “All People That on Earth Do Dwell,” from the *Genevan Psalter* of 1551. We need to sing all the verses to get the entire message. Another favorite that we sing at this time of year, “We Gather Together” dates from the 17th century. We don’t sing for background accompaniment or mere ornamentation to the service.

Within the two Catholic churches my family attended during my childhood, we did not have a choir. The organist and or the soloist sang at most two verses of a hymn. Changes came in the wake of Vatican II with folk masses, with contemporary music accompanied by guitar. Some people liked it, and some people didn’t. In my adult experience as a cantor in a Catholic Church, the number of verses depended on the preference of the priest with a high sign to stop when he was ready to start Mass. At the conclusion of Mass, the priest would usually stand on the altar for one verse and then start to process out. Many people would immediately follow out the door regardless of whether we were in the middle of a verse. From my perspective, watching from the altar towards the congregation, this did not feel like a respectful gesture. Part of this proclivity undoubtedly came from a long-standing habit where the music was incidental to the focus on the priest. One memorable exception to this behavior remains a vivid memory.

On the Sunday that followed September 11, 2001, we as a nation were still shocked and stunned. Before Mass started, the organist said to me, “Do you know the first verse of God Bless America?” Of course, I did. He said, “After the second verse of the closing hymn, I want you to sing it.” I agreed. True to the habit, as the priest processed down the aisle at the beginning of the second verse, the people followed on the way out the door. When the church had partially emptied, I started to sing “God Bless America.” People turned around, got back into their pews, and sang out with gusto. That moment brought people comfort and solidarity. The organist and I took a severe scolding for our unauthorized gesture. For this one departure, I remain unrepentant.

In the Pittsford Congregational Church, we keep three hymnals in every pew: the venerable *Pilgrim Hymnal*, *Praise!* and *The New Century Hymnal*. The *Pilgrim* has many of the old chestnuts that we have come to expect,

but to find “Amazing Grace” or “How Great Thou Art,” one has to go to *Praise! The New Century* has a more eclectic range with occasionally disconcerting changes to the lyrics. Each week hymns are chosen in accordance with the lectionary readings, with suggestions coming from Vanderbilt University’s lectionary page from which our readings are selected. Some hymns I do not know; others are not in our hymnal, but I continue to learn new hymns every season.

Many of our hymns were written as poetry even before they were set to music. For example, John Newton (1725–1807), a former slaver, wrote “Amazing Grace,” after a gradual conversion experience from the moral evil of slavery. Set to music about twenty-five years after Newton’s death, it remains one of our most requested hymns, especially at funerals. Gospel and country music also reflects our church tradition. Fanny Crosby, blind since birth, heard a friend, Phoebe Knapp, play a melody from which she soon penned “Blessed Assurance,” another perennial favorite.

And as such, these hymns reflect the language of their time. With few exceptions, I believe it diminishes the integrity of the poet to “update” the words. Yes, I stick out my neck on this opinion because there is generational dissent on this note. Sing a new song; write a completely new verse, but don’t make arbitrary changes.

A fellow minister recently said to me, “I would never allow ‘In the Garden’ in my church.” I gently remonstrated to my friend with, “It is not about you. It is about the congregation, and if there are hymns that bring them great comfort, we sing them.”

We have a strong tradition of singing in our church. Thank you, Stu, for setting the tone with a prelude and postlude. And the latter for me is such a respectful gesture about the conclusion of the service rather than people walking out during singing.

My closing thoughts: the joy of singing words and music that evokes something deep within us, reinforced by the voices we hear joining with us. Among my favorite lines:

Swift to its close ebbs out life’s little day,
Earth’s joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all I see—
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.

With shared blessings,

Michael F. Dwyer, Pastor