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## **Ideas from Hal Hopson's *100 Plus Ways to Improve Hymnsinging\****

### **Introduction**

#### **Some General Comments**

Hymns are powerful agents in the spiritual formation of those who sing them; and because they are repeated over and over, they store theological concepts deep in our memory banks. For these two reasons, especially, the hymns we choose for a congregation to sing become very significant. By analyzing every hymn to be sung, as to its musical, literary and theological value, we can be more assured that a specific hymn choice will be one, as someone has said, "In which the congregation will grow into rather than out of."

Below are eight overarching thoughts to consider in developing a singing congregation and one that better understands what it is singing.

1. Be convinced that the most important choir in the church is the congregation itself. The singing of a hymn unites the congregation in its one voice in a way achieved by no other means. Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed it this way: "It is the voice of the church that is heard in singing together. It is not you that sings. It is the church that is

singing, and you, as a member of the church, may share its song.”

2. Believe that with proper preparation, patience, and persistence a singing congregation can be developed.
3. Make use of every opportunity in special classes, church school, church newsletters, worship bulletins, choir rehearsals and in the worship service itself, to educate the congregation to a deeper understanding of the hymns it sings. This applies to both text and music.
4. Be perceived as a musician who is a musical advocate for the congregation. This suggests that the musician takes the congregation seriously in determining what hymns they know and love.
5. Accept the diversity of musical tastes within the congregation as a challenge and as an impetus for personal growth in understanding various musical genres. This suggests that the hymns we choose for the congregation to sing will represent many styles, and that they will be accompanied by the instrument or instruments most indigenous to the unique style of a given hymn.
6. Establish a spirit of cooperation and goodwill with church staff members, particularly the clergy. It is important that musicians be “team players” and view their ministry as a part of a much greater whole.
7. Be alert to current resources in the area of hymnsinging such as books and periodicals on hymnology and worship, supplemental hymnals, global songs and songs of various genres that have integrity in both text and music.
8. Be active in professional organizations and attend conferences that focus on enriching congregational singing.

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35. Develop a course of study on hymnology for the congregation. St. Paul gave some words of advice to the young church at Corinth regarding their congregational singing that we would do well to heed, “Sing praise with the

spirit, but sing praise with the mind also.” This is precisely the rationale for offering our congregations opportunities to learn more about what they sing.

The course of study should be flexible in both its content and length. It could be offered in one session of multiple sessions, over several weeks to various groups and ages, and at various times convenient to the congregation. Here are some suggestions:

--As an ad hoc church school class lasting several weeks.

--As a combined church school class. This has proved to be particularly successful as a summer educational experience.

--As a fifteen-minute class offered several weeks in conjunction with weekly pot-luck church dinners. This format lends itself for studies in seasonal hymns, especially those of Advent and Lent.

--As a class, presented in the context of a religious Arts Festival which culminates in a festival of Hymns. See No. 40 for more information in this regard.

Classes on hymnology can easily become dry and fact-driven. Encourage participation by singing, as well as having discussion. For example, when discussing the nature of hymntunes, the hymntune *Hyfrydol* can be introduced by telling the class that the tune was written by a nineteen-year-old Welshman. He worked all day in a textile factory at a loom powered by a footpedal. Knowing this, the class can be more engaged in singing this great tune, sensing the movement of pedaling the loom which is inherent in the melody. A suggested outline for a hymnology course is as follows:

--Introduction – give goals of the course and a preview of the topics to be discussed.

--The Words of Hymns – the origin, content, poetic considerations such as meter and rhyme, and theological impact of the text.

--The Music of Hymns – their melodies, meters, rhythms, harmonies and form.

--The History of Congregational Song: a historical survey of these periods: Songs of the Old Testament, Songs of the New Testament, Greek Hymnody of the early Church. Latin Hymnody of the Middle Ages, Hymns of the Lutheran Reformation, Metrical Psalmody of the Calvinists, Eighteenth Century British Hymnody (Watts and Wesley), Nineteenth Century British and American Hymnody, Twentieth and Twenty-first Century British and American Hymnody.

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### **The Selection of Hymns to Be Sung**

42. Encourage the clergy to provide a long range schedule of scriptures and sermon topics to the musician; Following a prescribed lectionary is recommended. Hymn texts need to reflect and enlighten the scriptures that are read in the service, relate to the emphasis of the sermon and support any basic theme of the service, all within the integrity of the Church Year. The following point is one of the most significant to be made in the hymn selection process. Clergy need to be reminded that for church musicians to make full use of their creativity and resources, there needs to be several weeks of lead time in planning, ordering and learning hymn related music, be it organ chorale preludes, choir stanzas, concertatos, instrumental accompaniments, etc.
43. Have regularly scheduled planning sessions with appropriate staff members. This assumes that the selection of hymns is a shared responsibility. It may be helpful in some situations for the church musicians to

provide several hymn choices from which the hymns to be sung are chosen.

44. In the margin of a designated hymnal, enter the date when a particular hymn is sung. Research the worship bulletins for the last five years for this information and keep the information up to date each week. This gives some indication as to the familiarity of the hymn to the congregation at large.
45. In selecting hymns. In addition to the factors already mentioned, be cognizant of other important considerations which impact the hymn choices for a given service. Some of these are: musical style and period, general spirit of the hymn, key, familiarity of the tune, time signature, length of each stanza and the number of stanzas. Time signature is also to be considered; avoid singing several swinging hymns in a compound meter in the same service.
46. Make full use of the topical and scriptural indices in the hymnal, as well as book and other resources such as software programs that provide valuable help in hymn selection.
47. It would take some time, but try going through the entire hymnal, stanza by stanza, and make a topical index. Such a challenging task will afford many surprises in the use of some hymns in a context never thought of before.
48. Be aware of some of the praise songs that have become “classics” in that genre such as “Shine, Jesus Shine” (Graham Kendrick), “Give Thanks” (Henry Smith), “As the Deer” (Martin Nystrom), and “Shout to the Lord” (Darlene Zschech).
49. For the Sunday nearest July 4<sup>th</sup>, feature music by American hymn writers, composers and arrangers. Hymn choices must be related to the scriptures and focus of the service.

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## Children and Hymns

73. Have some training sessions for church school teachers to help them incorporate hymns into their lesson plans.
74. Have some sessions to teach several people who to play the autoharp to accompany hymnsinging for children in the church school and at informal gatherings.
75. Have young pianists and instrumentalists play hymns at informal church gatherings. Encourage children who take piano lessons to include simplified hymn arrangements with their other repertoire of pieces. Feature a “Hymn-Player-of-the-Week” in rehearsal by having a child play a hymn for the choir.
76. Develop hymn story dramatizations. These may be very simple or more elaborate with character parts written out. These dramatizations may be presented in a variety of gatherings of the congregation.

### RESOURCES:

*52 Hymn Stories Dramatized*, Kenneth W. Osbeck

*101 Hymn Stories*, Kregel Publications

The dramatization of hymns can be in the form of a short children’s musical sung to introduce a hymn in the worship.

One resource for Palm Sunday is:

*The Singing Bishop* (CGCA-200) by Hal H. Hopson, Choristers Guild.

## The Creative Use of the Choir in Hymnsinging

88. Have a specific hymnal assigned to each choir member. Breath marks and other pertinent information from the conductor can be helpful, and each time the hymn is sung, the information is already recorded.
89. Rehearse the choir on the hymns and any descant or choir stanza for the coming Sunday. With the denominational flux and mobility of choir members, do

not assume that all choir members are familiar with a given hymn.

90. Share one or two pertinent facts with the choir concerning the text or tune or one or more of the hymns for the coming Sunday.
91. Occasionally have a choir devotional based on a hymn, especially a hymn coming up the next Sunday.  
RESOURCE: *The One Year Book of Hymns* (365 devotional readings based on great hymns of the faith), compiled by Robert K. Brown and Mark R. Norton. Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois.
92. Use four-part hymns for teaching ensemble and vocal techniques as a part of the choir warmup. For example, use slow, sustained hymns to vocalize on mms and oos. Sing the text of the hymn with careful attention to pure vowels and well articulated consonants. Use faster hymns on a “doot” for flexibility.
93. Have the choir get into the habit of providing a strong support for the congregation at the beginning of each stanza. This is particularly true for more unfamiliar hymns.
94. Make full use of concertatos. Usually there is a creative part for the choir alone on one or more stanzas and a descant for the final stanza. An organ introduction, interludes and a reharmonization for the final stanza are included in most concertato settings. Often there are optional instrumental parts as well as a congregational part that can be copied in the worship bulletin. Concertatos can offer an opportunity for the congregation to learn and sing hymns that are not in the hymnal. This is particularly true of newer hymns.
95. Purchase various hymn supplements for use by the choir as a resource for anthems and service music.
96. Have the choir intersperse some of the Taizé refrains between hymn stanzas. For example, the Taizé “Jesus, Remember Me” and the hymn “Go to Dark Gethsemane” are both in Eb major and can be easily coupled together.

97. The last phrase of many hymns can be sung as an interlude or coda. Some examples are:  
“When Morning Gilds the Skies” (*Laudes Domini*), the last phrase, “may Jesus Christ be praised.”

“Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven” (*Lauda Anima*), the last phrase, “Alleluia! Alleluia! Praise with us the God of grace.”

“Rejoice, Ye Pure in Heart” (*Marion*). The last phrase: “Rejoice, rejoice! Rejoice, give thanks and sing.”

“All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name” (*Coronation*), the last phrase: “We’ll join the everlasting song, and crown him Lord of all.”

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