

# CARPETING AND SINGING

I wish to explore with you the importance of singing in the American church, and the killing effect carpeting has on that singing.

There are two facets to singing: there is the singing of trained voices in the choir and there is the singing by untrained voices in the congregation. The members of the choir, a group of professionals, semiprofessionals and enthusiasts, spend many hours rehearsing their particular contribution to the service. They come to the service confident in themselves, both individually and as a trained group. Theirs is the confidence of a trained team, prepared for their event.

The members of the congregation are not professional singers, they do not practice together and they may not even be enthusiasts. They are a random collection of individuals who need all the help they can get to encourage them to sing together with confidence and zest. When the congregation joins their voices in the great hymns of the church, corporate worship is at its best. Even for congregations with a prescribed liturgy, hymns are preeminently the part of worship in which the congregation takes the most direct part. The importance of the full participation of the congregation in hymn singing must always be encouraged, for in a large portion of each service, the people in the pews, untrained and insecure, are the musicians of the church.

Singing is not simply entertainment. It is proclamation of the Word. A second and equally important dimension of congregational song is its power to unite all into one body. Each person—young and old, male and female—is included in the work of singing praise. Anyone who has experienced vital, enthusiastic congregational song would agree that it is one of the glories of the Church.

Unfortunately, carpeting under the feet of singers deflates, emasculates, deadens and in all ways diminishes their will to sing and tends to isolate them one from another. The simple fact is that no one can sing well on carpeted floors. We have all experienced the service wherein the singing is a mere murmuring by a few, with most others standing mute or doing a soundless lip-sync to the words. To cover this feeble response, the organist often plays too loudly. This kind of lackluster, spiritless response is usually found in a fully carpeted church. The wall-to-wall carpeting was installed for reasons such as ease of maintenance, economy of installation, prevention of noise, or because of the mistaken notion that God's house should have carpeting like a person's

house, as if the church were God's living room. Unfortunately, carpet in God's house will destroy all possibility of strong congregational proclamation of God's word through song.

We all know that we have never ever seen or heard of a concert hall with a carpeted stage. Even the most insensitive and venal of carpet salesmen would not suggest carpeting the stage of a concert hall. The reasons are obvious. Musicians on a carpeted stage are not able to hear themselves, would not be able to hear the other musicians and could not be heard well by the audience. Most architects, acoustic consultants and clergy now understand and agree that choir members are musicians and cannot function on a carpeted floor. However, most fail to recognize that the congregation functions also as musicians of the church. The congregation at worship is not an audience. All theologians agree about this basic premise upon which the theology of corporate worship is built. The congregation is an active participant in worship and this participation is primarily through song. The congregation needs the same hard, sound reflecting floors that choirs and orchestras need. The untrained voices in the congregation cannot bloom in conditions that professionals reject.

The precise physics of the sound absorbency of carpeting is a topic for engineers. The discussion of decibels, coefficients of absorption and acuity of aural receptors is not our concern. Even though we may not know the physics of the problem, we know its effect on music and musicians. Everyone knows that

singing in a tiled shower room is a wonderful, rewarding experience. This results from the sound of our voice being reflected back to us by the hard floor, walls and ceiling. These reinforcing reflections enrich our perception of our own voice and gives us confidence to increase our output. This general enrichment and reinforcement encourages even the timid to sing.

For the person in the pew, the floor is the primary sound reflecting surface in close proximity. A hard floor pops your sound right back to you. A soft, carpeted floor absorbs your sound and the sound of those around you. You may encounter a carpet seller who will tell you that since the people stand on the floor, their body and clothes absorb the sound, not the carpet. This is nonsense and no more true for the congregation than musicians on stage. Carpeting kills congregational singing by preventing sound reflection. The will to sing dies when singers cannot hear themselves and cannot hear others around them. Carpeting under foot makes a person feel alone in church. If worship in church is indeed a corporate activity, then the space where people worship should not function in any way to make them feel alone.

Singing is a joyful noise. Singing is the exuberant expression of the congregation. Singing is the public proclamation of the tenets of your religion. If you want to bring singing into your church—throw out the carpeting.

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