Many small & rural churches struggle finding an organist or musicians to help lead singing; others are experimenting with CDs or digital hymnals; others are learning to sing unaccompanied; some have given up. What help is available?

I was talking recently to a friend about music in her rural village church, which a few years ago only happened on alternate Sundays. A much loved but ailing American Organ provided accompaniment for a congregation, usually in single figures, who could barely be heard singing. The thought of replacing the organ caused great concern, but after lengthy and passionate discussion, the decision was taken to buy a digital keyboard which offered excellent piano and organ sounds at the press of a button, and had the capability of enlivening and expanding the music provision.

I was surprised to learn how much difference that initial decision made. Having a new instrument had spurred a small group of singers to gather on Saturday mornings to familiarize themselves with what they would be singing on the Sunday. Now, six years later, the group is still going, having grown in number and improved in confidence and ability.

Various people have come forward to lead the vocalists, arrange music and play instruments. Gradually more ambitious programmes of music for special occasions such as Rogationtide, Harvest Festival and Carols by Candlelight have emerged. The church also took advantage of a music workshop from myself and invited other churches to participate. Saturday mornings have become a hub of activity as flower arrangers, singers, instrumentalists and others all prepare for Sunday morning worship. There is an atmosphere of joyful anticipation and excitement about what can be achieved by working together, a valuable meeting point in the village.

Congregational singing has increased in enthusiasm as the worship has become more attractive, and the music repertoire has grown enormously and now includes a mixture of traditional, modern, Taizé and Celtic music. Up to a dozen instrumentalists can be called on to play for particular occasions, often bringing relatives and friends. Many of them do not worship regularly but feel inspired by participating in church music. This increased activity has widened the range of contacts within the local community, more than doubled the size of the congregation for Sunday worship, doubled it again for special occasions, and doubled it yet again for the Christmas Carol service! It has also promoted the development of other aspects of church life such as Messy Church and a Housegroup. All this is remarkable considering that there was a suggestion not so long ago that the church might need to close!
My friend modestly says that ‘it was all just waiting to happen’, but what she doesn’t say is that it actually needed someone with a bit of vision and motivation to start the ball rolling, and this happened through the music.

Music is actually a very powerful and transformative medium and touches some very fundamental areas of our lives:

- It is probably the main way in which the spiritual is mediated for us in worship, lifting and inspiring us, and helping us to express our deepest feelings.
- When we sing together we proclaim our identity as one Body, and the sense of community created can have a tremendous impact - think of the way in which music provided a powerful voice of hope and solidarity amongst the oppressed in South Africa during the years of apartheid.
- Music is also a key marker of different cultures in our society. Music matters to people these days, and the young in particular use it to mark out their cultural territory. But this can be true of other age groups and cultures too. If we’re concerned to reach out to the wider community, music has got to be near the top of the agenda.

Well, that’s far too idealistic you say – you haven’t been to my church! However, ‘without vision, the people perish’ says Proverbs 29:18 in the King James, and it’s a vision I believe can be applied to any situation because it deals with some simple but profound interactions at a spiritual and corporate level.

What could that vision entail? Here are some thoughts to consider:

- All genuine worship is sparked by the Holy Spirit, without whom worship becomes just a poor entertainment, so calling on the Spirit in prayer is a really important starting point.
- The 10th Beatitude states: ‘Blessed are they who expect nothing, they shall not be disappointed’! When was the last time you received some teaching about worship explaining why it is that we come together, and what’s meant to be happening?
- Congregational singing is an area in desperate need of encouragement because so many have had it ground into them that they can’t sing. In contrast, increasing numbers of churches are discovering the advantages of the ‘animateur’, or song leader, someone who comes to the front, and with some simple hand gestures indicates how the tune goes, and in the process infuses confidence and belief into the congregation. It’s a model John Bell from the Iona Community has promoted for many years and it’s extremely effective (1). Is there someone in the congregation who, with a bit of confidence and training, could fulfill that role? You don’t even need an instrument!
- How about refreshing the repertoire? John has compiled three little books of short liturgical songs that are very useful for populating the liturgy with gathering songs, alleluias, prayer chants, and simple communion settings. In addition, a hymnbook like ‘Hymns old and new – one church, one faith, one Lord’ (2), or the RSCM supplement ‘Sing Praise’ (3), could open up a rich vein of fresh and singable hymns, songs and psalm settings in varying styles. There is also much beautiful congregational music by Bernadette Farrell and other ‘Thomas More’ composers from Decani Music (4).
- What about musical accompaniment? Speaking as an organist, the organ has its uses, but may not be the most appropriate accompaniment for congregational singing these days. Stylistically, it’s not a very adaptable instrument compared with the piano, and it’s often not played well. It’s also quite difficult to encourage people to sing whilst playing an instrument with your back to them, and sitting behind a pillar!
- In some places, digital aids may be appropriate, but whoever chooses the selection or operates the system still needs to have some musical and spiritual sensitivity, and it can never be the same as a human presence.
Although singing is an important part of worship, sometimes it can be divisive or exclusive. Is it possible to worship without music? Look at other possibilities such as fresh liturgical words, symbol, simple drama, or improving the worship environment. Alternatively, explore other ways of using recorded music to create atmosphere, or provide space for reflection.

Get some help from outside – is there someone who could share a vision for music and worship and could help turn a situation around (5). It may cost a bit of money, but across a deanery or group of churches it could be manageable and well worth the cost. In the meantime, could you share some musical resources with neighbouring churches?

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Further resources:

Wild Goose Publications
The Singing Thing
The Singing Thing Too
There is one among us

Kevin Mayhew Publishing
Hymns Old and New

Sing Praise
Decani Music