

CONGREGATIONAL SINGING – why is it so poor?

Wherever I speak and am introduced as a “Welshman”, I am invariably asked, “Do you sing?” The Welsh are noted for their congregational singing, possibly due to the many fine hymns that have come out of Wales. However, it is a mistake to think that Welshmen are born with an innate ability to sing that others do not have.

I was teaching at a YWAM school in Chennai, India. There were about 40 students present but I was especially struck with the singing of 3 young Indian men. They were all from Nagaland in the north of India, where Welsh missionaries had worked at the start of the C20th. They told me they had learned to sing with such lovely harmony because their missionary teachers had done so. They sang just as well as any young Welsh men that I have heard.

I believe the difference is that Welsh boys never grew up with an embarrassment in singing, because they saw their fathers and others singing out loudly in the church services. Even today, Welsh men sing out without inhibition at rugby international matches – and they even sing hymns! We sing and we harmonise because we were taught to do so by the example of others – and that means that any other men (and women) can do the same!

The finest singing I have heard since coming to Canada – and I have not heard much – was at a pastors’ rally in Toronto in ~1980. There were many hundreds of men present, who sang out with great energy – and some harmony – the great hymns of our faith. Of course, they had few inhibitions because they are used to leading out from their pulpits each Sunday.

A second reason why congregational singing is so poor has to do with the accompaniment. When will accompanists understand that their task is to accompany the congregation (or soloist) and not to lead them. That means playing at a pace comfortable to the singer(s), allowing for breathing space and clear expression of all the words. I have noticed that many pianists do not sing along – if they did they might find out how difficult it is to sing all the words and breath regularly in the singing.

Too often we rush through songs/choruses/hymns as most congregants have little desire to sing with gusto. Come on, Canada, you can sing better than this! Maybe we should have time set apart to teach us how to sing praises to the Lord.