

Jesus, Justice, Prayer, Peace, Song!

A New Vision for Music Ministry at FCUCC

Rev. Dr. Kimberleigh Buchanan, Senior Minister

August 2018

I played faith before I preached it. As a Southern Baptist teenage girl, my religious community couldn't imagine that I might be called to preach. There was no encouragement to interpret Scripture, no mentoring by pastors. I did, however, have my flute and a hymnal. In preparation for many an offertory, I would pore over hymn texts then create medleys of their tunes. I interpreted the texts both musically and by creating odd combinations of hymns in the medleys. For example, in one arrangement, a medley of Christmas carols began with "I Wonder as I Wander" and ended with "The Old Rugged Cross." Using the means at my disposal—my flute, some hymns, and the liturgical season—I "preached" a sermon on the incarnation.

Vocationally, I am in a different place now. Through wise professors and mentors and a congregation that nurtured my gifts for ministry and preaching, I was able to claim my call. I am blessed to have served nearly two decades as a congregational minister.

Though I do most of my proclaiming these days from a pulpit using words and stories, my belief in the power of music to form people in faith—sometimes in ways deeper than the preached word—has never waned. Music is a primary means by which individuals and communities of faith encounter the divine. Music truly is the language of the soul.

Because I believe in the power of music to communicate spiritual truths and to help individuals and communities connect with the divine, I feel it imperative that the congregation's musical life be vibrant and uplifting. Anything less not only is a missed opportunity in the community's worship life, it impedes the community's growth in faith and mission in the world.

At FCUCC, we live out our musical life together in five areas: (1) congregational singing, (2) musical groups, (3) instrumental music, (4) "recreational" music, and (5) music in the wider community. Here's my vision for growth in each area.

Congregational Singing

After a recent worship service that involved a lot of congregational singing, an attendee wrote: *"Having a majority of the service require our active participation [that is, through singing] ramps up our understanding of and appreciation for the message being delivered and makes us feel a closer connection to the church and its people."* Singing isn't just something a community does; singing *creates* community.

a. Hymns

One of the reasons I accepted the call to First Congregational was its commitment to the Church (universal's) long and rich history of hymnody. It was in poring over hymns as a

teenager that my faith and theology were formed. The faith of Christians for centuries has been formed by these same texts and tunes. When we sing hymns, we honor our forebears in faith. When we teach hymns to our children, we ensure that our faith will continue on into the future. While creating new songs for a new age also is important, a community of Jesus' followers that wants to remain vibrant also will continue singing the hymns of the faith.

Elements of Vibrant Hymn-Singing

Connection with the Scripture text or worship theme. Ideally, everything in a worship service “makes the word flesh,” which means that every element of a worship service further interprets the Scripture text or worship theme for the day (singing “Come, O Long Expected-Jesus” during Advent, for example).

Language in the hymn texts that helps congregants connect. Updating archaic language (“thees” and “thous”) and inclusivising language around issues of gender, race, and physical ability is crucial to making hymns accessible to all congregants and guests to worship. Taking care with language also helps us to sing our theological commitment to the inclusivity of God’s love.

Singable hymn tunes. Congregations are capable of singing complex hymn tunes, even those with wide ranges. That said, the more singable a tune, the more likely congregants will be to sing it. (Characteristics of a “singable” tune—not too many wide interval leaps, good “scannage” with words and music, and in a comfortable range for most singers.)

A variety of musical styles. This diversity can include hymn tunes from diverse ethnic and cultural traditions, ancient and contemporary hymns, acapella and accompanied singing, and singing that’s accompanied by a variety of instruments (organ, piano, guitars, solo instruments).

Accompaniment that supports congregational singing. The organist and/or pianist who plays to support and encourage congregational singing: (a) plays at a volume that allows the congregation to hear itself sing; (b) plays parts on all but the last stanza; (c) interprets the texts of hymns in the accompaniment; and (d) “breathes” with the congregation (that is, doesn’t rush through phrase endings).

Unaccompanied singing. In recent conversations about music at FCUCC, many people (at least 10) commented on how moving it is when the congregation sings acapella. At the risk of over-analyzing a sacred experience, I attribute the meaningfulness of acapella communal singing to several factors.

- a] Without the distraction of other instruments, we’re able to hear each other.
- b] Hearing each other, it’s natural to begin blending our voices together.
- c] Blending our voices together, we are drawn to begin harmonizing.
- d] Once we begin harmonizing, that inarticulable “something” happens; we lose our separateness and have a felt experience of being *one*.

b. **Other Worship Music**

The Judeo-Christian worship tradition began as almost completely sung services. Nearly every element in the service was sung—prayers, responses, confessions, communions. In addition to hymn singing, vibrant congregations in the 21st century also sing prayers, responses, confessions, and communions. This category includes the rich and ample store of songs and chants from the Taize community in France.

c. **Sing a new song!**

In Psalm 96, the psalmist entreats the faithful to “sing a new song to God.” As our relationship with God deepens and expands, it makes sense that we will need new songs to express our faith—new images, new tunes, new styles, and new descriptions that capture what it means to be alive and following Jesus in the 21st century.

Singing new songs takes many forms, including...

Singing old hymns that are new to us. In a congregation of people who come from so many faith traditions, every hymn we sing is going to be new to someone. Learning “old favorites” of others that are brand new to us helps us get to know our fellow community members better. These “new old” hymns also invite us to see God in new ways.

Singing newly-written hymns. World events constantly call for new hymns to be written. At our prayer service in the days following the Parkland school shooting in February, we sang a hymn written by Presbyterian minister, Carolyn Gillette Winfrey, specifically for that purpose. Rev. Winfrey and many other contemporary hymn writers regularly produce hymns that offer a direct connection to current events. When new texts are sung with old, familiar tunes, the effect is especially meaningful.

Singing new songs—new lyrics, new tunes, new styles. In the progressive Christian music world, there is a large movement to write and disseminate songs with lyrics and music that reflect a more expansive understanding of faith in the 21st century than traditional hymnody or praise music (Convergence Music Project, convergencemp.com). The musical style of many of these new songs is written to connect with folks who have not grown up singing hymns. Many of these songs fall into the category of “other worship music,” that is, they are more meditative, similar to the sung prayer tradition of the Taize community.

Singing songs of cultures other than our primary culture. If you want to know another person’s culture, sing her or his songs. At FCUCC, we do all we can to live our commitment to honoring the beautiful diversity of humanity. One way to celebrate this vast, God-given and God-blessed diversity is to sing each other’s songs. Regularly singing hymns and songs from other countries and communities—Caribbean, Latinx, Celtic, Hebrew, Native American, African, to name a few—introduces us to God’s children who live in other cultures. Cultural diversity might also extend to different styles of music—classical, baroque, jazz, the blues, bluegrass, or country, for example.

Musical Groups

One of the main tasks of Christian community is to help members identify their individual spiritual gifts then use those gifts to build up the body of Christ, both within the congregation and in the world. Musical groups within the congregation provide a way for those blessed with musical gifts to use those gifts.

FCUCC provides opportunities for participation in several musical groups.

a. Sanctuary Choir

For the choir. At my last church, we often called the Choir a “church within a church.” It wasn’t an exclusive group, but the choir was a spiritual community within the larger church community. I suspect that’s because the choir spent so much time together in weekly rehearsals and regularly prayed--and partied--together. Also, singing is itself a spiritual practice. As St. Augustine said centuries ago, “The one who sings prays twice.”

In addition to creating a space that nurtures community, singing in choir also gives choir members the opportunity to hone their individual musical gifts and then to join with others who are doing the same. When learning and working together to create a beautiful musical experience, the sense of accomplishment is deep. One of the insights that emerged from conversation with choir members a few weeks ago was the recognition that the most meaningful choir experiences often happened with longer pieces, or pieces that took them out of the choir loft (“I Believe,” a song from Rent, “Godspell,” e.g.).

For the congregation.

Theme. As another means of “making the Word flesh” in worship, choral music should reflect the theme of the worship service, focal Scripture text, and/or liturgical season. This requires close work between Pastor and Music Director.

Language. If the Word is to be made flesh in choral music, then the words must be understood. Clear diction—including precise consonants and vowels—is crucial. Adequate volume also is necessary, either through vocal production or amplification.

Additionally, the language used in choral pieces will reflect the congregation’s commitment to inclusiveness, particularly in language for human beings and for God. Occasionally, this will require adapting anthems’ lyrics.

Style. Our congregation’s commitment to celebrating the diversity of the human community will be reflected in choral anthems. The choir will sing the music of a variety of composers in a variety of musical styles. Diversity of style also will include both accompanied and unaccompanied anthems.

Thoughtful musicianship. In addition to effective diction, the other elements of musicianship will be thoughtfully engaged—pitch, dynamics, clear entrances and cut-offs, and effective communication of the emotional content of the anthem.

b. Adult Handbell Choir

If you're looking for a metaphor for Christian community, you need go no further than the handbell choir. Everyone has their note to ring. If everyone shows up and plays their part, a beautiful musical experience happens. If some folks don't show up or if one of the bells plays more loudly than the others, the experience is incomplete and less beautiful.

As we grow into the next phase of our musical life at FCUCC, I encourage us to reflect deeply on what kind of support we might give to this vital ministry so that it remains a meaningful and vibrant part of our church's life. I also encourage us to purchase a three octave set of Malmark Handbells. Schulmerich bells are harder to maintain. Also, adding a third octave to an older set can be tricky in terms of timbre and tuning. Purchasing a new three octave set of Malmark bells would (1) make it easier to do a higher quality of music (very little music is written for two octaves) and (2) give us a set of bells with lower maintenance expectations. Were we to purchase a new set of handbells, our current handbells could be used for a youth handbell choir (as an intermediate step between the chimes choirs and the adult handbell choir).

c. Chimes Choirs

When I arrived at FCUCC in February, the most vibrant ministries with children and youth were the chimes choirs. The children love playing chimes. It's astonishing to observe the children in a rehearsal—so intent, so joyful, working so hard. In whatever ways our children and youth ministries grow, it is vital that our chimes choirs grow with them.

One of the most exciting things about having so many children and youth involved in chimes is that these choirs feed into the adult choir. With all the handbell and chimes choirs we have in place right now, we are well-positioned to continue having a handbell ministry that flourishes well into the future. It is important that we continue supporting all our handbell and chimes choirs.

d. Children's Choir

At this point, we don't have a children's choir. In chimes, the children are learning music and they do sometimes sing while they play. I would like to see a children's choir grow either out of or alongside the chimes choir.

e. Youth Choir

This is another dream. Again, good groundwork is being laid with the chimes and handbell ministry.

Instrumental Music

Sometimes the most effective means of “making the Word flesh,” is to offer music *without* words. In our recent community conversation on music, it was clear that instrumental music in our worship services helps people connect with the divine in ways nothing else can. This year’s Good Friday concert was mentioned several times as being particularly meaningful.

Inviting instrumental soloists to participate in worship is a practice we’ll want to continue. One way to expand that ministry would be to create opportunities for instrumental ensembles to participate.

Organ music. In conversations with congregants, I have learned that there is a wide divergence of opinion about organ music at FCUCC. For some, organ music helps them connect with the divine. For others, organ music impedes their experience of worship.

This is probably the issue that has kept me up at night the most as I’ve reflected on re-visioning our music program. What role shall the organ play in our music ministry?

A few thoughts...

- 1) The Viscount electronic organ we have is very high quality. In the wider community people have told me, “That’s the church with that great pipe organ!” It’s not a pipe organ, but it’s such a good instrument that it sounds like one.

If we are to be good stewards of the resources we have, the organ *must* be used. And regardless of what other styles of music we might grow into in our worship life, the kind of organ we have—and the style of sanctuary we have—suggests that traditional organ repertoire be a staple of our services. From my perspective, that is non-negotiable.

- 2) As I’ve tried to hold together in my mind and heart the folks who love organ music alongside the folks who don’t, I’ve tried to imagine how all of us can be in the same worship service and all have meaningful worship experiences. Here’s where I’ve ended up.

While we have a beautiful and high-quality organ, the organ’s main “job” during a worship service is to support/undergird what’s going on with the rest of the service. Preludes are brief and meditative, as are Offertories. Postludes are brief and upbeat. Organ playing for congregational singing supports the singing through [a] clear introductions in which the melody is prominent, [b] part-playing, [c] lower volume, and [d] “breathing” for the congregation.

Because we do have such a magnificent instrument, though, if we are to be good stewards of it, it *must* be played as it was built to be played. Owning a Ferrari and only driving it to church on Sundays is to miss the point of owning a Ferrari.

To the end of our organ being played as it was built to be played, I think it important that it be played regularly in concert, whether by a staff musician or a

guest musician from the wider community. To have the instrument we have and not have it played in performance would be a missed opportunity.

Other musical groups

On occasion, there are opportunities for smaller vocal or instrumental ensembles to make offerings in worship—vocal ensembles, folk bands, etc. These occasional groups will provide a means both for congregants to use their musical gifts and to embody and celebrate the rich diversity of our community.

“Recreational” Music

At a recent church picnic, four of us brought instruments and had a brief sing-along. Our repertoire was not extensive—two songs, maybe? But even our two small offerings gathered a crowd. Singing really does bring people together. Cultivating community singing—even when we’re playing together—will help to strengthen our community. And it’ll be fun. 😊

Music in the Wider Community

I dream of FCUCC becoming a destination location for community song. Folk singer Pete Seeger believed world peace could be achieved if we could all just learn to sing together. Because of my own experiences of oneness in the midst of communal singing, I believe it, too. The Civil Rights Movement is a great example of the power of music to bring a community together and to empower communities to work for—and achieve—social justice. I am eager for FCUCC to become a place that nurtures communal singing.

How might we do that? Here are a few possibilities.

- 1) *Community sing-a-longs.* A colleague’s church had a sing-along of songs of the Civil Rights Movement this past April on the anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The event was very well attended. Other kinds of sing-alongs might also be possible—protest songs, Christmas songs, a Beatles sing-along...the sky’s the limit! The goal of these events would be simply to sing together. We could do it in Friendship Hall...or even at the park.
- 2) *Choir swaps.* Partner with a church in town and occasionally swap choirs on a Sunday. (Doing this with an African American church could be really fun!)
- 3) *Wider community choral events.* Perhaps we might sponsor a choir festival, inviting area congregations to send their musical groups to perform. A single piece that the choir sings together at the end could foster some unity in the community.
- 4) *Music, Art, Drama, Camp.* We’ve gotten a terrific start with MAD Camp this year. All of our campers to this point, though, have come from FCUCC. How might we build on this year’s successful camp and open it to the wider community?
- 5) *Monthly coffee houses with live music.*

- 6) *Annual songwriting “contest.”* I envision us setting a theme each year and inviting songwriters to make submissions. (Usually for these kinds of things, there’s an entrance fee.) This year, the theme might be refugees, for example. Songwriters would make their submissions. The top 8 or 10 would be invited to perform at a concert we would host. The concert could be a fund-raiser for a non-profit associated with the theme. We might even invite some of the folks to sing their songs in worship. (In a similar vein, we might also sponsor hymn-writing and anthem-writing contests.)
- 7) *Other musical concerts.* I think building on the excellent precedent we’ve already set with the Good Friday concert is important. Many people from the wider community attended that concert this year. We have a good opportunity to build on that success.
- 8) *Become a music venue?* Asheville already has a lot of very good listening venues, so I don’t know if this is practical or not. It might be worth pursuing, though.

Summary: Music Vision for FCUCC

I envision music ministry at FCUCC becoming a primary means of (1) building community within the congregation and (2) helping us connect with the wider Asheville community. Because music engages all of who we are—mind, body, spirit, and emotions—and because of its unique ability to bring people together and connect us to each other and to the Something More, it can be a primary means of living our mission to be Christ’s body in the world. In the words of a congregant about her dreams for music ministry at FCUCC: *May it “bring energy, joy, inspiration, and hope to our congregation and our wider community through music that supports and enhances the teachings of Jesus and the life of the church. (Surely unity and transformation will follow?)”*

Next Steps...

What I am envisioning for FCUCC’s music ministry won’t happen overnight. Here’s a suggested list of “first steps” to making the vision a reality.

- 1) *A conceptual shift from music as performance by those with special gifts and training to music as a spiritual practice in which the whole congregation participates.* There was a time in our culture when people regularly sang together. In the early part of the last century, Sears and Roebuck sold pianos at reasonable rates because nearly every family wanted one. Before TV or radio, families and communities often gathered around the piano to sing. Singing was something communities did together.

Over the last century—with the advent of TV, radio, and now digital music there’s been a cultural shift to consuming music rather than participating in it. We have come to see music more as performance—something we leave to the professionals—than as a communal spiritual practice.

The conceptual shift I’m suggesting is from leaving music only to those who are musically skilled to understanding that music is a spiritual practice in which we all—as a community—engage. This doesn’t negate or downplay the gifts of performers. It’s simply an invitation to think of music as a communal spiritual practice.

- 2) *Two musicians: a Music Director with training in choral and community singing and a skilled Accompanist (organ and piano).* Expanding our understanding of music ministry to include both performance of the skilled few and participation of the entire congregation will be facilitated by a greater emphasis on vocal music, particularly as it relates to vocal ensembles and congregational singing.

There is, of course, a long tradition of the Organist/Choir Master role, where a single musician both plays the organ or piano and leads the choir. That's the way the position has been structured for at least the last twelve years at FCUCC (except for one brief interim period). The challenge of having a single position is that the two tasks—playing organ/piano and conducting the choir—often need to be engaged concurrently. Because the Organist/Choir Master only has one set of hands, he or she has no choice but to make compromises either in conducting or playing.

So, while the job can be done by a single person, expanding both instrumental and vocal music at FCUCC—particularly in the area of congregational and community singing—will happen more effectively with two music positions.

For that reason, I propose that we move from the single staff model we currently have to a two staff model. The music ministry I'm imagining is more extensive—both within the congregation and, especially, in the wider community. That larger vision will be more readily achievable with a Music Director and a separate Accompanist/Organist.

- 3) *The Music Director will work closely with the Senior Minister.* As Pastor, my primary job is to keep the community's vision in front of it. The primary means we have of keeping the church's vision in front of the congregation is through Sunday morning worship. The most meaningful worship services—that is, the ones best able to keep the church vision and mission in front of it—are those that focus on a single theme. As Pastor and preacher, I select the theme for each worship service, drawn most often from the Scripture text for the day and the liturgical season. If the music selected is to reflect the chosen theme, Music Director and Pastor must work together closely.

Conclusion

A big part of the reason I came to FCUCC was your love of music. In the conversations I've had with the congregation, the choir, and with a few members of the handbell choir, that love has been confirmed over and over again. And, as a congregation, you can sing! Some of the acapella singing we've done over the last couple of months has moved me deeply.

If I were to sum up my vision for our music ministry, I would say it's an invitation to understand music not simply as one aspect of our life as a community, but as a primary means of living our mission in the world. As the language of the soul, music provides a unique means of experiencing the divine. It also brings people together as few other things can. If we continue growing and deepening our music ministry at FCUCC, we will be well on our way to acting the world into wellbeing in Jesus' name. Won't you join the song?

With a grateful heart,
Kim