

How can we keep from singing?

By [L. Gail Irwin](#)

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I started singing in church choirs when I was a teenager. There I learned to read music and find acceptance among the grown up singers. It was my church's choir director who helped me find my spiritual voice again after a car accident that fractured my larynx. I went on to study vocal music, compose hymn lyrics and sing in choirs at my college, seminary and several churches over the years.

There is a special kind of relationship that forms among choir members. Something about those rehearsals, with their jokes, irritations and prayer rituals, creates a spiritual bond that can't be replicated anywhere else. ([Here's a great movie](#) to watch about the importance of singing together.)

But my view of the traditional church choir has changed over the years. One time, I watched a song leader, without any written words, notes or accompaniment, teach a room full of people to sing a simple hymn in parts. The effect was electrifying. I have sung improvisational jazz in groups, never sure exactly what note might come out next, or who it will come from. I have even been to a "tunnel hum", standing shoulder to shoulder with wanna-be druids and aging hippies, humming placidly until we all found a common, harmonic drone. I've learned there are a lot of different ways to make sound together, but what really makes it groove is when everyone is engaged in the making of it!

One of the changes we're seeing in churches today is the decline of the church choir. Church choirs, including some of those large, contemporary ones, [are on the wane](#). Choral directors, pipe organs and sheet music are costly in a church that may not even have enough money to pay the pastor.

Since many people like me learned how to read music by singing hymns, we may be losing a vital place for music education, as well as the potential for those unique spiritual friendships built in the choir loft.

Some churches are holding fast to their choral traditions, and I am hopeful that, if they are flexible and resilient, people who love music will return to find the joy in

group singing. Other churches are expanding their idea of sacred singing to include choral flash mobs [like this one](#), Taize worship, “[threshold choirs](#)” that sing to the terminally ill, or simply a renewed emphasis on [robust congregational singing](#).

Without music, worship will lose its vitality and without that one place in society where people gather to sing, our communities will lose some of the glue that binds them together.

How does your church make music these days? Are you listening to others make music, or are you finding a way to chime in? Do you think sacred music is a luxury or a necessity?

*Originally posted at [From Death to Life](#)*