

Wesley's Directions for Singing*

While reviewing the experience and choral instructions gained by The Chancel Choir during the Composer Weekend with Joel Raney, John Wesley's directions for congregational singing of hymns came to mind. On first look, they may seem odd and even humorous today. However, given some history and insight, we can see purposeful instruction for congregational singing centuries later. For this reason, the history is presented prior to Wesley's singing directions.

John Wesley's *Directions for Singing*, were first included in the 1761 publication *Select Hymns*, a hymnbook for early Methodists.

HOW OUR TRADITIONAL HYMNS STARTED

The hymns we call traditional were almost all new in John Wesley's day. The Methodist movement was happening outside of church walls. Usually only the preacher had a copy of the hymnbook with these new songs. They would sing one line out at a time, and then the gathered crowd would repeat what they heard.

- When you break them down, Directions I & II emphasize uniformity across the Methodist movement. As Methodism began as a revival outside church walls. Wesley carefully chose certain hymns (many of them from his brother, Charles) to define the worship experience of the movement. It would be important for everyone across the movement to learn the same words and tunes to the same songs so they could easily join in at any Methodist gathering.
[I assume "sing them exactly as printed here..." found in Direction II was instruction for the preachers who would be singing the lines from a hymnbook for the congregations. A. Miller]
- Direction III focuses on the importance of everyone's participation, even the ones who think they have no musical ability. The point of all singing is that worship is the work of all of us together. Community is formed in the experience.
- Directions IV, V, & VI offer practical directions for how to sing united in community. Be bold, but not so bold that you make it about you. Be modest, but not so modest that someone standing next to you can't hear you at all. Keep an upbeat pace to the music. (There may have been people who thought singing as slowly as possible was more worshipful.)
- The final direction clears up the purpose for having directions and music. It's all about glorifying God.

WESLEY'S DIRECTIONS FOR SINGING

- *Directions for Singing. That this part of Divine Worship may be the more acceptable to God, as well as the more profitable to yourself and others, be careful to observe the following directions.*

- I. Learn these Tunes before you learn any others; afterwards learn as many as you please.
- II. Sing them exactly as they are printed here, without altering or mending them at all; and if you have learned to sing them otherwise, unlearn it as soon as you can.
- III. Sing All. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up and you will find a blessing.
- IV. Sing lustily and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sung the songs of Satan.
- V. Sing modestly. Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony; but strive to unite your voices together, so as to make one clear melodious sound.
- VI. Sing in Time: whatever time is sung, be sure to keep with it. Do not run before nor stay behind it; but attend closely to the leading voices, and move therewith as exactly as you can. And take care you sing not too slow. This drawling way naturally steals on all who are lazy; and it is high time to drive it out from among us, and sing all our tunes just as quick as we did at first.
- VII. Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to this attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your Heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve of here, and reward when he cometh in the clouds of heaven.

* Copied and adapted from “Wesley's Directions for Singing” by [Charlie Baber](#). September 19, 2017. [Wesley's Directions for Singing - United Methodist Insight \(um-insight.net\)](#)