

# Sing!

How Worship Transforms  
Your Life, Family, and Church

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# HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is intended to be a straightforward and helpful read to individuals, but we have organized the book in such a way that it might inspire group discussion within whole churches. As it deals with a theme that depends on community, the ideal reading of this book is within a community of readers, or rather a community of singers (which we all are). To that end, here are a few thoughts on its use:

## **I. A 6-Week Churchwide Campaign**

*To help galvanize all church members in the call to be a singing church, culminating in an evening churchwide or citywide hymn sing*

## **II. In a Book Club or Group**

*Multiple groups at a church, or perhaps just those that gather on a special night of the week*

### **III. Among Leaders and Among Choirs and Music Groups**

*Pastors, staff, and lay leaders (at the end of this book, you will find “Bonus Tracks,” that are additional content geared toward leaders)*

P R E L U D E

# SING!

*Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD, let us  
shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us  
come before him with thanksgiving and extol  
him with music and song. (Ps. 95:1–2)*

We need to talk about singing.

Singing is why, in 2006, we moved from the most beautiful little emerald isle on Earth to a new and wonderful home in America. We came over from Northern Ireland to tour and to steward our hymn-writing, both throughout the US and worldwide. While most of our work has been musical—singing and playing—over the years we have gradually found ourselves talking more and more about singing. Not about up-front singing, but whole-church singing—congregational singing. That’s a kind of singing that we never tire of talking about—not just because as Irish people we like to

talk, but because as Christians we think this is something about which we *need* to talk.

Early on in our time touring, we began to hold leadership lunches as part of our stay in a particular city. These were basically conversations over food about church music, for pastors and music leaders in that city. Over time, we noticed the attendees would ask thoughtful questions about song style, song choice, songwriting, production, relationships, training, sound, and so on—but there was one question we were rarely, if ever, hearing as they reflected on their own churches:

“How did the congregation sing?”

The congregation’s singing did not appear to be a key factor, let alone the primary one, in determining how well the music in a worship service had gone. Hardly anyone asked us to talk about it.

Maybe you don’t much want to talk about it either.

Perhaps for you, singing is always a painful part of church life, because someone who once stood beside you is not there anymore, or because your struggles in the week seem to tighten your vocal chords on a Sunday.

Perhaps you simply don’t have much time to think about it, because you are a parent tumbling in fresh from the battle of trying to get the whole family out to church; under-slept, overly caffeinated, and singing with one eye on the screen and one on your children, longing for these sung truths to be the air blowing through their souls (we know this feeling very well).

Perhaps, though, you are starting to think about it because you're a student, and the increasing complexities of life and study and faith don't always seem to connect with what you sing on a Sunday.

Or perhaps you long to talk confidently about it, because you are a leader or pastor yearning for people to sing to their core the things you are teaching, but you're not sure how to navigate the maze of church music, or where you want your church's music to get to anyway.

Yet whatever you think about singing, the truth is that we are all invited into the same musical home. For the Church has been, is, and always should be and can be a joyfully singing Church. In a sense, singing is part of what we exist to do. The apostle Peter wrote to local churches that each of them was part of "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the excellences of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet. 2:9 *ESV*). Paul told the members of the church in Ephesus to be "speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit." He wanted them to "sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph. 5:19–20).

Though maybe misunderstood, regularly a bone of contention, and often under-practiced, congregational singing is one of the greatest and most beautiful tools we have been given to declare

God's "excellences," strengthening His Church and sharing His glory with the world.

The New Testament implies that our singing is important. It's been said that Christians are a singing people—but often, many of us are really more of a mouthing-along-with-the-words kind of people.

This book is about singing together as the church in a way that impacts all of your life. It is a conversation for the whole church, including you, whether your singing voice is a close friend to you or more of an awkward stranger. It explores something that is part of the worship life of every follower of Christ. There are many books helping us to grow and train in our Bible study and prayer and acts of service and evangelism, but not very many helping us to sing. Yet our singing deserves similar care, and is even (as we'll see) tied to the flourishing of these other things in our lives.

How did the congregation sing? Each of us is part of the answer to that in our own church, whether we are on stage or standing by our seat on the main floor. It's a harder and in some ways less comfortable question than all the other ones people tend to ask about the music in church. Yet Paul does not tell us to perform for one another, but to sing to one another. We need to ask, "How did the congregation sing?"

## LUTHER THE SINGER

Five hundred years ago, in the autumn of 1517, a German monk named Martin Luther began what became known as the “reformation” of the church through the preaching and the singing of the Word. You might understandably think of Luther primarily as a theologian, or preacher, but he was also a focused and prolific hymn-writer, who reinvigorated singing in what became known as the Protestant church. How the congregation sang was a key question for Luther; he believed that a truly biblical church would be one where every believer was actively participating in every part of the service, including the singing, celebrating this incredible gospel together:

Let God speak directly to His people through the Scriptures, and let His people respond with grateful songs of praise.<sup>1</sup>

Many of Luther’s enemies feared his hymns more than the man himself. Singing was at the heart of the Reformation—indeed, such was the conviction of the man who was in some ways Luther’s predecessor, the Bohemian Jan Huss, that he was martyred for (among other things) speaking the “heresy of congregational singing.”

Luther was passionate and serious about the art and practice of music and congregational singing—a passion that today in many churches has arguably lost its focus. The theologian Ligon Duncan has said, “There is no part of the worship life more in need

of reformation today than congregational singing.” But this reformation will not come by simply telling people to sing, any more than telling a child to eat something they don’t like makes much difference for very long. We need not only to know that we ought to sing as Christians, but to learn to love to sing as Christians.

### **THE FIVE GOALS OF THIS BOOK**

This book has been years in the making (partly due to a promise we made to a good friend that we wouldn’t write a book until Keith passed his fortieth birthday). Grown from our passion for congregational singing, it’s been formed in our traveling and playing and listening and discussing and learning and teaching. And in writing it, we have five key aims:

1. To discover why we sing and the overwhelming joy and holy privilege that comes with singing
2. To consider how singing impacts our hearts and minds and all of our lives
3. To cultivate a culture of family singing in our daily home life
4. To equip our churches for wholeheartedly singing to the Lord and one another as an expression of unity
5. To inspire us to see congregational singing as a radical witness to the world