**MUSICAL & PASTORAL SKILLS NECESSARY FOR STRONG AND EFFECTIVE MUSIC TEACHING**

1. *Ability to maintain steady beat and accurate rhythm*

Steady rhythm is the framework on which people depend. We do not need to conduct congregational song because the steady pulse is our dependable guide. This point cannot be made too strongly. In fact, conducting the congregation as if they were a choir may work against you when teaching as many people don’t know what all those arm motions really mean. If needed, use a hand drum to keep a steady rhythmic pulse going.

Steady rhythm is the factor most responsible for confident congregational singing. People are most likely to sing out when they sense that the musical leader may be depended upon to meet and support their voices at every beat of the music.

Even when the music includes a flexibility of rhythm (such as “Victimae Paschale Laudes,” where rhythmic and then chant sections alternate), the leader must be aware of a strong, regular inner pulse and be able to establish and maintain it to assist the people.

Consider the varying challenges of:

• “Blest be the God of Israel” (THORNBURY) with its rapid harmonic rhythm (last ten measures) changing suddenly to slower half-note melodic notes.

• “As Jacob with travel was weary one day” (JACOB’S LADDER) with its dancing two-beat measure which cannot be too fast lest the people find it impossible to sing.

• “Come away to the skies” (MIDDLEBURY) has an almost identical tune and was most likely derived from this English tune.

• “Lift every voice and sing” (LIFT EVERY VOICE), which brings a two-beat design which is subdivided into triple meter.
We are born with a natural sense of rhythm, but we must learn the skill of maintaining it while other distractions are all around us. Practice singing with a metronome to test your own ability to maintain a steady tempo. Practice playing with a metronome to develop stability of rhythmic pulse.

2. Thorough knowledge of the material—music and text

One simply cannot teach to another person something that one does not know well and care about oneself. During any kind of teaching, for example, questions arise and interruptions prevent one from singing the composition through from beginning to end. The teacher must be aware of the scale degree on which each line begins and ends (particularly when teaching by rote) so that he or she can clearly supply it to those who are learning. Also, making eye contact with the congregation is critical when teaching them something new. It helps you to know where the problems are through watching their response as well as hearing it.

While one should not conduct a congregation with the same beat pattern used to conduct a choir, indicating the change in pitch with one’s hands in the air can be very helpful for a congregation learning something by rote. When they see a hand go up or down, people will follow that hand up or down. If it goes way up or down, it will help them remember a larger leap in interval.

3. An appearance of confidence

This is not the same as feeling confident! Few of us are able to stand before a group of people without some feeling of uneasiness. Sometimes it is an acute uneasiness. But even at these times, a good teacher will make every effort to minimize the nervousness which, when communicated to the learners, always detracts from their ability to be attentive to what is being taught. Confidence is usually increased in direct proportion to one’s sure knowledge of the material to be taught.

4. Genuine respect and affection for the people one is teaching

We have all seen teachers who seem to despise any who do not have the same abilities or knowledge they themselves possess. The ministry of teaching requires that we look deep into our own hearts to try to assess the attitudes we hold. Remember, the people you are teaching all have skills in areas you do not; teach the congregation in a way that you would want them to teach you a new skill.

Sometimes close friends or associates are able to help us look carefully at the unconscious feelings which are reflected in our teaching manner. If it is possible, arrange to videotape yourself in a teaching situation so you may see how your teaching appears to others.

5. The ability to identify errors

People are not helped to sing well when their singing of incorrect pitches or rhythms is allowed to continue. Even if they do not know what is wrong, they usually sense that there is lack of agreement (in pitch or rhythm) at a certain spot and will sing less heartily at that point for fear that others (who probably share their uneasiness) may stop singing altogether, leaving them singing alone.
Identification and analysis of the inaccuracy and insecurity is the leader’s role. If it is not done, people are prevented from experiencing the full satisfaction of singing confidently. Singing it to them using the hand signals mentioned above can help them overcome those insecure spots.

Speaking positively of people’s achievements in singing is essential to their progress because it influences their willingness to exert the effort that is required during the learning experience. Do not pretend that people have “gotten” the melody or the rhythm if they have not; at such a point the teacher should then help them to sing it correctly by re-teaching the insecure section. But when they do sing it correctly, let your praises be genuine and abundant.

6. The ability to conceive of and explain corrections which are needed.

Identification of the wrong pitch sung or the rhythm carelessly undertaken is the foundation of the leader’s directions for correction. Often we need not even mention what was wrong, but will save time and avoid needless intimidation of those who are learning by speaking immediately of what is required to make it right—which is, after all, our main goal.

The skillful teacher will include both naming the solution as succinctly as possible (“Sing this last note higher”) and demonstrating the correct way to sing it (again, singing or playing only the minimum surrounding musical material needed to clearly demonstrate the goal). It is far easier for learners to understand the correction needed when all extraneous material has been removed from the instruction.

Your demonstrating the proper way should always be followed by the people’s being invited to repeat what you have sung. If there is still discrepancy between what most of the people are singing and what you have demonstrated, sing it to them again and invite them to try again until they are able to sing it correctly.

If we are tempted to shy away from encouraging corrections, it is helpful to remember that we would be withholding the privilege and satisfaction of achievement from the singers if we did not show them how to improve. People of all ages are deeply proud of improvements they accomplish. Give them the opportunity to enjoy their musical victories.