

5 Crucial Songleading Techniques for New Thought Services

By Erin McGaughan, Music Director at [Seattle Unity](#)
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With thanks to [Karen Drucker](#), [David Roth](#), [Daniel Nahmod](#), [Thom Lich](#), [Christopher Fritzsche](#), [Thaddeus Spae](#), [Becky Thatcher](#), [Richard Mekdecj](#), [Penelope Williams](#), [Sydney Lehman](#), [Amy Steinberg](#), [Craig Benelli](#), [Laura Berman](#), [Kelly Gerling](#), [Annie Christensen](#), [Rev. Karen Lindvig](#), [Rev. John McLean](#), [Rev. Daley Worley](#), and the late [Rev. Sky St. John](#).

A great musician friend was debating with me over the value of singalongs in church services. “People don’t want to sing,” he said. “They want to listen to great stuff and be inspired.”

In response, I gave him the full court press. I explained how group singing [promotes social bonding](#), reinforces the minister’s message, [synchronizes physiology](#), breath, heartbeat and [brainwave patterns](#), and how it lifts up the whole congregation toward a [unified spiritual experience](#) in shared song.

“Yeah, but usually they’re not that good.” He speaks from years of experience touring in New Thought churches all over the country. “Usually, they’re just....dorky.”

I understood his point. In this paper I’ll suggest five specific mastery areas that songleaders can practice to dramatically improve singalong value. Of course there are many more than five techniques, but these are leveraged – that is, mastering these five enfolds mastery of dozens of others. They also reveal crucial underlying, and sometimes uncomfortable, truths about the developing worship leader.

I draw these techniques from 15+ years’ experience serving in New Thought churches in the northwest region, as well as focused research and input from songleading masters including Karen Drucker, David Roth, Daniel Nahmod, Thom Lich, Christopher Fritzsche, Thaddeus Spae, Amy Steinberg, Becky Thatcher, Richard Mekdecj, Penelope Williams, Sydney Lehman, Rev. Daley Worley, and the late Rev. Sky St. John.

I encourage readers to see the linked examples within the text, since the video and audio samples go far beyond what my text can convey.

All these techniques depend on understanding what congregants are thinking and feeling at a given moment, that is: empathy with the people we serve. Musical skills alone don’t alert us when congregants are confused, or tell us why they’re reluctant, what excites them, what comforts them, and what allows them to expose themselves. For this we need the social and emotional skills of communication.

The Big Five

Eye contact

Body freedom

Cultural fit

Lyric feeding

Arc



Eye Contact. Contemporary neuroscience reveals large concentrations of brain activity devoted to what is called “[The Social Brain](#)”, and especially to our observation of eye focus. Eye contact is primary to our perception of emotion, attention, authenticity, and most importantly, relationship. The voice may be gorgeous, but shifty eyes, hidden eyes, tense eyes, immobile eyes, glazed or unfocused eyes, all tell us deeper truths about the status and state of the leader. Eyes sing louder than throats.

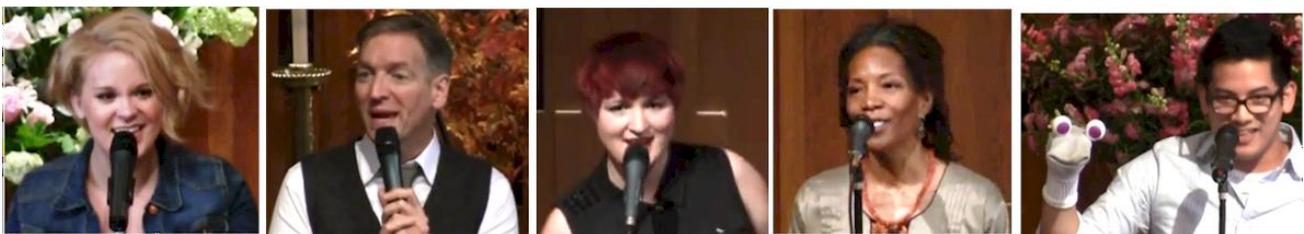
[Rev. Cassandra Hunsucker](#) is a professional worship trainer who says simply “Keep your eyes open or you’ll miss your cues.” It’s a practical directive, but beyond that, it’s also about finding connection to the congregation, as well as to the band, the other singers onstage, and the present moment itself.

***Eyes sing louder
than throats.***

We increase the potential of that connection by simplifying singalong lyrics enough that we need no printed lyrics at all. Congregant heads come up out of the bulletin or hymnal. No more video-game faces staring at the non-human focus of projected text, on what Portland Unity music director Sydney Lehman calls the “community hypnotizing screen.”

And importantly, in order to sing off-book, the song leader has to truly know the songs well, and sing them as Rev. Sky St. John said “*By heart*”. We read this heart-connection in the movement and focus of the eyes.

Good house lighting is also important, so the singer actually sees the congregants. When congregants feel seen by the songleader, the church service becomes better than TV; it becomes ‘live’. Congregants also read the relationships they see in how the singers look at the band, ministry, and other singers on the platform. Advanced leaders can even persuade congregants to look at each other during singalongs, too, building community awareness. The service becomes a more shared, more real experience.



Eye contact can be a challenge for singers who were theatrically trained to look just over the heads of a crowd, or who regularly close their eyes as a way of connecting to an inner source. This is one way that songleading is fundamentally different from soloing, and takes a different kind of practice.

Body freedom. [Amy Cuddy](#) and other body language experts have shown us how we can usually detect group leaders by body language alone. This is because physical ease is a fundamental signal of health, emotional state and social status. Furthermore, mobility, openness, balance, coordination, and strength are far more important than body type itself in reflecting the well-being associated with leaders.



Most importantly, though, body freedom is highly contagious. A stiff songleader, even one who sings beautifully, gets a stiff response.

Due to what contemporary brain science calls [mirror neurons](#), the human capacity for visual imitation, mimicry and mirroring is extremely well developed, and functions faster than language or sound. An example is in the Simple Simon game, where the leader says “Simon says touch your nose” but the leader actually *touches* his/her ears. Most followers touch their ears, too, even when they are on guard for a trick. We speak ‘body’ before we speak English.

If the underlying truth is that the songleader is anxious or physically inhibited, good singing doesn’t matter. The result will be inhibited congregants. Some specifics to observe:

***We speak ‘body’
before we speak
English.***

- 1) Arms free, elbows light
- 2) Chest open
- 3) Thighs and hips mobile
- 4) Movement in time with beat
- 5) Confident bi-lateral gesture

Students of yoga, chakra theory, and other psychophysical arts understand that physical engagement dramatically affects our openness to spiritual experience, but even non-mystical researchers have shown conclusively how breath and [blood flow affect mood, learning capacity and memory](#). Do we want our church service to be a whole body experience, or a head/shoulders experience only?

We can promote whole-body thinking by first removing visual obstacles including large floor monitors and music stands (which are literal black rectangles over our ‘censored’ bits). We come out from behind podiums, keyboards, and guitars, exposing a head-to-toe visual silhouette. Handheld mics are nice in allowing us to roam the stage, but our congregants can’t roam, so we may gain more by using mic stands and modeling real hand-clapping and full bi-lateral movement.

Songleaders who can lead group movement, especially over-the-head hand-clapping, will get an added benefit. Congregants at the back of room, where participation is typically weaker, get the greatest visual reinforcement of the tribal strength of the group, as they can see the greatest number of arms raised in synchronous movement.

Many singalongs have room for mudra and movement prayer that can add meaning, too, while bonding the group and increasing blood flow: Shanti Norman's "[I Am that I Am](#)", and Karen Drucker's "[I Send My Love](#)", as well as "[Face of God](#)" are good examples.

Skilled songleaders phrase their invitations with consideration for the range of a congregation's abilities, whether that's as Mile Hi Music Director Thom Lich says it "Let it flow through you in any way that feels good to you, whatever is comfortable for you, it's all good!" or a more formal statement like Rev. John McLean's "We invite you to stand as you are able and join us."

Two specific rehearsal techniques can help songleaders developing body freedom: the Speak-thru and the Dance-thru. In a Speak-thru, the singer rehearses by speaking the lyric as though in passionate conversation. Most humans use hand movement spontaneously when we try to explain a strong feeling to someone else. 'Dead hands' or 'puppet hands' can reveal an underlying truth, if the singer doesn't really believe the lyric content. At that point, the singer must dig deep into the meaning of the lyric.

The Dance-thru is simply that; the singer rehearses dancing throughout the song, as if in a music video, to discover where the rhythm and vibe goes, and it may take repeated plays to 'get into it'. It feels silly to some, but like stretching out a balloon, it increases the range of the actual performance later. Plus, it's biblically supported: Christian worship leader [Jeff Deyo](#) cites many lines from Psalms and 2 Samuel that command passionate praise even to the point of appearing foolish.



One more powerful improvement technique is taking video of the services. My profound thanks go to [Kelly Gerling](#), a congregant in my church who regularly records our services and posts bits on YouTube. It is often very uncomfortable to see myself making mistakes – oh, so very many mistakes – but watching our service videos has become an invaluable tool in my own development as a worship leader.

Cultural fit. Cultural fit can involve anything from the doctrinal correctness of lyrics, to clothing and manner of the singers, energy and volume levels, orchestration, visuals, and much more. But by looking first at **choice of song**, we target the heart of the “dorkiness” problem that my musician friend spoke of. We also find clues about why songs like the Malotte [Lord’s Prayer](#) and the [Peace Song](#) are still great singalong choices for some churches, despite their uncomfortably wide melodic ranges and sometimes corny sound. Simply put, some people just like that sort of thing. Our job is to know if that’s our people.

Advertisers [prove over and over](#) that music style is a major form of “[market signaling](#)”, and immediately tells listeners about the social norm of the target group, its general age range, political tendencies, and personality types. A large study by Rentfrow and Gosling, summarized [here](#) and printed in full [here](#), shows strong predictive links between various musical genres and the demographic/psychological profiles of listeners.

Some people just like that sort of thing.

Whether it’s R&B, classical, or country, a church’s range of music styles profoundly affects [who is comfortable in the service](#), especially in singalongs. Are we targeting baby-boomers, millennials, suburban professionals, children, teens, urban hipsters, or traditionalists? Choosing songs in appropriate styles radically improves participation. This is true even when the song itself is of dubious compositional quality or lyrical merit.

This is not to say that style is more important than content, any more than the taste of food is more important than the nutritive value. However, [knowing your tasters well](#) makes it much easier to cook for them successfully.

See these examples of singalongs from radically differing church cultures. Start with this hymn [from Westside Church of Christ](#) in Salem VA. Now [here’s one from Harlem Church of Christ](#). And [here’s a contemporary charismatic song](#) from Kim Walker-Smith, a leader in the “prophetic worship” movement. And here’s one from a [Catholic mass at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton](#). Though each is a perfect fit for its context, it’s fairly easy to imagine who might feel “dorky” in these various environments.



But many New Thought churches serve an ethnically and generationally mixed congregation, and want to widen that diversity even more, without losing cohesion. We could play a smorgasbord – one rock tune, then a jazz piece, then a hymn – but then are we forever asking some portion of the congregation to suffer through songs they don't like, just to get to one that suits them? Should we instead pick one demographic and serve it consistently?

Here, two key strategies for improving cultural fit are Set-up and Re-mix.

Set-up relies on the power of narrative. Our musical comfort zone is a story we tell about ourselves, about our identity and flexibility. For example, my congregation is mostly white, female, with average age in the 50's. So when the minister asked if I could use Let's Get It Started by the Black Eyed Peas as a singalong, it was something like a dare. In my introduction, I frontloaded the piece by saying "Alright, church, when you go home today, and they ask you what you sang in services, you're gonna say 'I sang the Black Eyes Peas – I sang *hip-hop*, because that's just how I roll.'" By rewarding the group beforehand for their flexibility, I increased that flexibility, and the song was a hit.



A good set-up uses what we know about [cognitive priming](#) as a learning tool. For instance, my congregation enjoys gospel and songs with African American associations. So they responded well when told that the song "[Guide My Feet](#)" was from the 'escape song' tradition, and that we'd be playing it in a [2nd Line New Orleans](#) style. This brings me to the next strategy: Re-mix.

Re-mix allows us to bend and update a song's style, structure, or lyric to freshen it for our services. Many traditional gospel pieces require only a minor lyric fix, if any, to work perfectly for our New Thought congregations. "[Woke Up This Morning With Mind](#)", "[Somebody's Knockin'](#)", and "[Jacob's Ladder](#)" are good examples. Re-mix gives us permission to take beloved, but crusty, hymnal pieces and shift rhythm, add colortones, or shift chord progressions to suit our congregation's ears.



Here are two examples: "[I am the Radiant Light of God](#)" and "[I am Free I am Unlimited](#)", both from a day when the theme was 'The History of Unity'.

But most songs will eventually need retiring over time. Songleader Thaddeus Spae warns, "Be aware that just because it's in the official hymnal doesn't make a terrible song less terrible. Stilted, archaic, horrifyingly arranged music doesn't inspire anybody to sing."

Songleaders and music directors can use an inviting Set-up and skillful Re-mix to give a song the best chance of success, but if we can still see the anxiety of "otherness" in our congregants' eyes, especially the younger ones, the song may be past its usefulness.

Lyric feeding. Lyric feeding is when the song leader speaks or sings the upcoming lyric just before the crowd has to sing it. It's a pivotal skill because when a singer learns to do this for the first time, he/she shifts perspective and intention in a fundamental way. The leader is no longer primarily concerned with his/her own voice quality or embellishments (which more often confuse learners). Now the leader focuses on helping the congregation, providing exactly as much as they need, at the exact right moment.

Watching a novice leader attempt this for the first time was eye opening. The song was Karen Drucker's "[God is My Source](#)". This has a lyric "swap-out": as the song develops, we swap in the word Love, or Peace, or Joy. The lyric feeding happens easily, at the end of a verse, and yet my novice songleader managed to forget to give this new lyric cue, over and over. He forgot he was driving, only remembering again when he himself didn't know which lyric to sing next. He was singing *with* them wonderfully, but needed to get his brain *ahead* of them and supply the cue they needed.

Much of leadership in any field is about status perception, and crowds are expert observers of leadership competence level. Does this leader know where to go? Here are some examples of great lyric-feeding: Rickie Byars Beckwith's [Chant Connection](#) from Agapelive.com's excellent streaming archives; Karen Drucker leading "[I'm So Grateful](#)"; and Hezekiah Walker leading "[Every Praise](#)." The lyric feeding establishes a 'live' connection, and allows the leader to earn authority.

Call/response is a very easy form of lyric feeding that almost any singer can start with. It easily focuses attention (as [school teachers know](#)) because it taps into well-developed language and dialog centers of the brain. The most basic form is direct imitation (repeat-after-me), but call/response also has added empowerment value because it often involves the leader dropping away while the congregation rises.



Santa Rosa CSL Music Director Christopher Fritzsche explains, "Sometimes with chants I'll say in the middle of it, 'let's hear you!!' and let them sing a verse by themselves with me and the band continuing to accompany – again they seem to get more of a sense of themselves as this giant 'choir' without my voice amplified over them, then I tell them how beautiful they sound, and it seems to encourage them."

While not all songs require lyric feeding, mastering the technique puts song leaders into an awareness of the congregants' needs, moment by moment. This is a radical shift in thinking, which both Daniel Nahmod and Karen Drucker distilled like this: "It's not about me." This can be an exhausting kind of service at first, but it builds solid leadership habits: paying close attention to the present moment, while simultaneously looking ahead and communicating clearly.

***It's not
about me.***

Arc. Dramatic arc is the primary narrative structure in Western culture. Arc describes the emotional and energetic journey from one state of mind to another. So, just like a novelist or filmmaker must understand how audiences respond to pacing – exposition, build, and release – we need to understand our congregants’ journey. Songleader Becker Thatcher calls this the “ripening” through the beginning, middle, and end of our singalongs, and therefore through the course of the service.

Here’s one example of arced structure, for a slow chant leading into meditation:

- 1) brief calm set-up; leader sings melody solo,
- 2) crowd and backup singers join, all unison; band fills in,
- 3) backups stack in harmonies,
- 4) cut volume, all unison again; finish with simple ritard (slowing to stop).

---At the end of this singalong, the congregation is likely to be ready for prayer or meditation.

Here’s another example, for an energizing tune:

- 1) encouraging set-up; leader sings melody solo,
- 2) all join in harmonies; clap hands,
- 3) build energy with embellishments,
- 4) a cappella break, with overhead claps
- 5) modulation up to 3-time tag.

---At the end of this singalong, the congregation is more likely to be energized and ready to hear new ideas.



To use a sports metaphor, arc is “moving the ball”. For example, a platform assistant gives announcements, then passes the ball to the songleader, who will pass to the minister, but first needs to *move* the congregation across cognitive territory. Where does this song take us? Within the song itself, we might go anywhere, but the more pivotal questions are “Where are they when I get them? And where do they need to be when I hand them off?”

Arc requires paying attention.

Examining arc can reveal an uncomfortable underlying truth if we aren’t really very connected to the congregants’ experience, or if we aren’t connected to the needs of the minister we’re passing to, or to the flow of the service as a whole. Arc requires paying attention.

We can support a strong arc by looking consciously at how congregants handle a song’s melody range, phrase length, memorability, energetic profile, and the placement of the song in context. Songs can build energy or calm it, focus or disperse it. However, as carefully as we might plan, we can’t completely dictate our congregation’s responses. As Daniel Nahmod writes,

“Leading a worship song is for one thing: To facilitate a sacred experience in the room. That’s it. Not to CREATE a sacred experience -- that’s not possible, not for anyone else but yourself. But to FACILITATE. To create the space for it, and allow any who will enter to enter. And to allow those who would decline the invitation to decline it. With nothing at all on the line. And, in a way, with EVERYTHING on the line. If that makes sense.”

Summary

A songleader who masters the Big Five areas of songleading answers these crucial questions:

- 1) Eye contact – Am I establishing good connection with the congregants?
- 2) Body Freedom – Am I modeling appropriate commitment?
- 3) Cultural fit – Do I know who they are and what they like?
- 4) Lyric feeding – Am I giving them what they need, when they need it?
- 5) Arc – Am I taking them somewhere meaningful for the service?

A great singing voice and a fabulous band are very helpful, but not required for a satisfying singalong or chant experience.

Below are excerpts from input generously given by experienced songleaders in the New Thought community. I encourage readers to learn more about them by following their links in the acknowledgments at the top of this article.

On the invitation to sing:

“Saying to the congregation something like: ‘I invite you to join me in the music. Let it flow through you in any way that feels good to you. Sing along, move to the music, whatever is comfortable for you, it’s all good!’ This gives the people who are on the fence permission to jump up and join in, and allows the introverts to be ok just sitting and singing, and the rest to just listen, it’s all good and it’s all GOD!” – *Thom Lich, Assistant Music Director at Mile Hi Church*

On simplicity of the song:

“Chants are so popular now because they’re simple, easy to learn and deliver, and they ripen as you sing them more and more... comfort zones expand, hearts open, people forget their fears and let the music do its work of deepening the message and allowing Spirit to move in and through.” – *Becky Thatcher, soloist and service leader*



“In a 'performance' piece, repetition leads to boredom. In a worship song, repetition of a simple and powerful refrain (with the right intention, the right words, the right melody, and the right key!) can summon deeper and deeper feeling. A prayer song should be allowed to breathe, and develop, and deepen, and repeat. When to stop repeating? That’s the leader’s job... to discern not when HE/SHE is done... but when the ROOM is done. And then to stop, without fanfare, without drama, and without self-aggrandizement.” – *Daniel Nahmod, singer/composer and service leader*

On encouraging the congregation:

“The truth is that most people are afraid of singing out loud...afraid that they will sing out of tune and be embarrassed, that they will sing in the wrong place, or be the only one singing when there is a stop in the music. Too many people have been told they are tone-deaf, and they should just hum while everyone else sings! Remember they are depending on you for support: the words, and the melody - so every time you think it's cool to do a wonderful Aretha Franklin lick and wow them with your great vocal gymnastics - you lose them.... they will think they need to do that and most people will just stop singing.” – *Karen Drucker, musician/speaker and service leader*

“People sing along because they feel safe to do so. They want to, but they don't want to look or sound foolish. A comfortable, intimate relationship between the leader and the group is vital. Church especially is often a place where singing is implied to be mandatory. Coercion = buzz kill. A good song leader can get people to open up without getting all 1984 on them. Thou Shalt Sing In Church isn't one of the big ten. Also, I Can't Hear You is officially a B52s lyric and off the table.” – *Thaddeus Spae, NW folk musician and highly experienced secular venue emcee and songleader*

On using bulletins or screens for lyrics:

“If you [use bulletins], you see a lot of people with their heads down reading the words, and to me it's kind of distracting to the whole idea of singing together and combining our energies...to me it's not so important that everyone gets every word exactly right, but rather that they FEEL the music more.” – *David Roth, singer/composer and experienced songleader*

“We've made a conscious choice at our Center to not use a screen with lyrics on it for singalongs. We feel that it makes people stare at the screen and doesn't really give them the opportunity to connect to one another and the song itself. So, I, as musical leader, will give the lyrics ahead of the verse as it's coming and that way people are on their toes and listening not only to me, but to the lyrics and the energy of the music...I think getting rid of the screen is the best kept secret, and it was the decision first of my co-pastors, Christy Snow and Renee Leboa.” – *Amy Steinberg, Music Director at Spiritual Living Center in Charlotte*

On knowing the song:

“In my church, I require that all our [vocalists] – including the soloist(s) – MEMORIZE THEIR MUSIC. When I was a child, and I learned something by memory, it was called, ‘knowing it by heart.’ Song leading is a heart-centered activity, and they must know the music by heart, so that they can focus all their attention on the congregation (their energy, alertness...etc.), and on feeling the movement of Spirit.” – *Rev. Sky St. John, late senior minister at Unity of Maui*

On introducing new songs:

“When I am introducing a new congregation song, we do it at other places in the service for 2-3 weeks preceding when it will actually show up as the congregation song. It might be the Gathering Song 3 weeks out, the Offertory Song 2 weeks out, and then the Opening Song 1 week out. This way, the late-comers and early-leavers are exposed to it, too.” – *Sydney Lehman, Music Director at Unity of Portland*

On using choir or praise team:

“If I am fortunate enough to be working with a choir on a given day, I can ask the congregation to sing along with the choir and that makes participation even easier. This also works great on the chorus of popular songs. One example: last Sunday we performed ‘What’s Goin’ On’ by Marvin Gaye. The lead singer sang ‘what’s going on’ and I answered, and the crowd just naturally started singing along with me. So at the end of the song we stretched out the chorus so that everyone could keep singing along with us! You can see the video of this on my FB page at: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=10200475283899495>” – *Rev. Dale Worley, Minister at Unity of Savannah*

“I prefer to have [team] singers be available to lead the community as well as the songleader. Keep it sacred and playful, not a secular jam, but a worship experience.... I believe in growing our music team and song leading is a great way to do this.” – *Penelope Williams, Music Director at Spiritual Living Center Atlanta*

On the spiritual value of group singing:

“The need for experiencing God in our Unity services has never been more timely. We may have all heard a soloist that, with a well-delivered and inspired song, has moved us to tears or to joy on a Sunday morning. This receiving of the experience of God is doubly powerful when the congregation itself creates and participates in the music, completing the cycle of giving and receiving.” – *Richard Mekdeci, singer/composer and experienced music director*- See also <http://www.unityworldwideministries.org/sound-connections-newsletter-august-september-2013>

