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Answering in Unison

How Six Congregations Supported the Called

The Alban Institute has been interested for some time in the connections that exist between active participation in a congregation and what people do in the world. Specifically, we wanted to know how participation in a congregation assists people in discerning what they are called to do and how to do it, how it helps people cope with barriers to fulfilling a perceived call or to recognize that it is time to end a particular vocation and follow the call of a new one.

To better understand these connections, we recently invited individuals from all walks of life to reflect on what their own participation in a congregation has meant to them on their vocational journey, then present their thoughts in a brief essay. In the following pages we present six of these essays, which reflect a diversity of experience with regard to how – and how much – congregational participation affected vocation.

Their stories are tales of fear overcome, of self-doubt being pushed to the sidelines in the face of powerful callings; of the power of congregations to shape children and youth into leaders; of the lines between secular and sacred being erased, with greater fulfillment in the world the result; of congregational support and companionship that was there in both good times and bad; and of a deepening of faith and connection through the answering of the calls that came.

These stories, presented on the following pages, are, of course, the unique stories of the people who have told them, but they are also windows into the desires of other members of other congregations—desires for fellowship, for purpose, for meaning. They are also examples of what is possible when people come together as a community to love God and one another.

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To Make a Joyful Noise

By Frances Sink

Oh make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; Come into his presence with singing. —PSALM 100: 1-4

When I stand before our congregation as a lay leader, as a soloist, or as a choir member on Sunday mornings, I am mindful of how much the church has taught me about my own voice in worship and in service. And Monday through Friday, as I sit in my psychotherapy office supporting adults and whole families in healing and reclaiming their voices, I am aware that through my own journey in faith I am better able to listen and encourage others.

To say that God works in mysterious ways is an understatement of how, at age 43, I began singing at my church. Less mysterious, however, is how the congregational life at the Unitarian Church in Westport, Connecticut, offered me inspiration, safety, and fellow travelers on my journey, and above all taught me the power of selfless love and praise in meeting life's challenges.

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Ten years ago I was in a time of transition and questioning about the foundation and goals of my life. It began then, persistently and unfailingly, on Sunday mornings, as individuals turned to me after the worship service to say, “You have such a beautiful voice. Do you sing? Why aren’t you in the choir? I love singing beside you.” The comments continued in an embarrassing profusion for many weeks. Although I had sung in church choirs in my youth, I had left performance behind years earlier. Further, unbeknownst to those offering encouragement, I had allowed speaking anxiety, which I had battled for years professionally, to become a symbol of personal de-feat and a barrier to invitations to speak, much less sing, before an audience.

After many Sunday mornings and with much trepidation, I finally took the step to ask about joining one of the choirs. You could say the rest is history, but here began the lessons I was to learn. The first of these was that the church community, the fellowship of groups, provides a sense of belonging and opportunities for self-expression. For me, joining the choir was the first step toward re-claiming my joy of worship through musical expression. A year or so into my choir singing, a gifted and enthusiastic voice teacher, a member of the church, began offering Saturday group classes for beginning singers. The lesson I learned from this was that the church is a safe place with plenty of support to take small steps in an unexplored area of potential talent. These classes found a following and, over time, a group of us cheered, clapped, and cried our ways out of our shells. We singers were then encouraged to perform in the occasional Saturday Night Cabarets at the church. From this I learned that the fellowship of the church supports you at all points on your journey, including the beginning, stumbling, and risking phase, not just in reaching your goal. Inevitably, the music director asked some of us if we would sing in duets or trios in worship services, bringing yet another lesson into my experience: that at church you will step up in unexpected ways to give back to a loving community. Finally came solo opportunities. By this point I was studying voice and committed to taking risks, but still quite anxious inside. My lesson from this step on my journey? Share your gifts in praise and thanksgiving.

“Share your gifts in praise and thanksgiving.” As that calming clarity came to me, anxiety truly faded. The truth of selfless giving and the power of praise resonated in me. If singing could be about praise and not about the ego, then I could find no reason to say “No.”

During all this time, the singing in church was also working as a powerful life metaphor influencing the values expressed in my psychotherapy practice. As I took risks in my own life in the service of love, praise, and truth, I found a new capacity to help others find that message, that true “voice” seeking expression within themselves.

This story has its coda. Although in the beginning I was willing to stand in front of people only to learn to sing, not to speak, the barriers to speaking also came down. As I gained the clarity that all good work is an act of praise, my public voice became clearer and stronger. Through my church life I found not only growth of faith but new freedom to speak personally and professionally with passion, conviction, and the life-affirming message of praise and thanksgiving for all that we are given.

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