


Music and the older adult

Stories and resources

Beverly Suderman-Gladwell

Abner was a resident in the nursing home where I was the chaplain. He lived with deep forgetfulness due to dementia. He had little visible response to anyone other than his wife. As I led my weekly hymn sing, I expected him to sit there quietly, as he did whenever I spoke to him. As I began to sing a familiar hymn along with a few of the regulars, a most beautiful high tenor voice began to harmonize with us. It was Abner.



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He sang and sang. His wife later told me that he had sung in male quartets for decades. Abner still barely responded verbally to anyone but his wife, but music became the connection between the two of us.

Jahkusha was mentally alert and physically strong, but a serious stroke had taken away her ability to move one side of her body along with her ability to speak. She could say only a phrase or

two: “Yes, lady” was usually all she could manage. But, when we sang together in worship, Jahkusha’s voice rang out loud and clear. The part of her brain that housed music was unaffected by the stroke. When we sang, we were in perfect harmony.

David was dying. It was Christmas Day, and his daughter had been keeping vigil for days. His breathing was irregular, with long pauses between each breath. That Christmas morning I slipped into his room after our worship service. We sat together in silence at his bed. Then I offered to sing. I’m no soloist, but my years in the nursing home had taught me that it was no use being embarrassed about singing alone. So I sang “Amazing Grace.” Halfway through the first verse, David stopped breathing again, as he had so many times. I kept singing through the second verse and then the third. No new breath. I paused and looked across the bed at his daughter. She motioned to keep singing. Fourth verse, no

breath. David had finally been able to die. His daughter and I wept—and rejoiced—together.

Below I offer resources for music and the older person. These are largely based on my experiences as a nursing home and retirement home chaplain. Some of these resources are websites or books; others are ideas that worked for me; others are things I have seen other congregations try—or think they should try. My goal is to provide ideas and resources to spark creative thinking about how to use music in various settings. Let's begin at the end—the end of life.

Using music in palliative care

Singing to people in their last days and hours can make a meaningful connection. Sometimes I knew which songs were favorites and sang those; other times, as in David's story, I sang hymns that were generally well known. Don't be afraid to sing. Don't be afraid to sing alone. Don't worry about the quality of your voice. Sing out if the person is hard of

hearing. Sing even if the person is not responding in any way that you can see. My training in palliative care taught me that the sense of hearing is generally the last sense to disappear, so even in one's dying moments, it can be meaningful to have someone there to sing or speak gently or recite well-known Scripture.

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Involve the people gathered around the bedside to sing with you. If you know that family will be there, consider bringing a few hymn books with you. Alternately, sing only the first verse of the hymn and repeat it several times; many

people will know the first verse of many hymns by heart. Have a list of hymns suitable for the bedside taped to the inside cover of your Bible; it is astonishing what one cannot remember when faced with the need to find a hymn and equally astonishing how many hymns one can sing by memory with just a simple list of titles on hand. Because you likely know the people you are visiting, you have the advantage of knowing what kind of music they enjoy. Use that knowledge as you prepare for a visit.

If you are visiting a person who is hard of hearing, consider using a voice amplifier of some sort. These are excellent devices for a congrega-

tion to purchase for a pastor or the elders or deacons. Two options I have used are the Pocket Talker, which consists of a headset for the hard of hearing person and a microphone for the speaker, and a personal amplifier.¹ The former is most useful in one-on-one conversations. The latter can be used in one-on-one settings or in groups of up to thirty people. I used a personal amplifier extensively in my work at the nursing home; it saved my voice and made it so much easier for those with hearing loss to be a part of the conversation. It takes a little getting used to having one's voice amplified out the door and down the hall; reminding oneself that this is not about the caregiver but instead for the benefit of those being visited helps to get past the discomfort.

Consider investing in musical resources such as CDs or other formats that are specifically designed for use at the end of life. An amazing resource is MusicCare by Room 217.² These CDs are recorded at a tempo to match the rhythm of a heartbeat at rest and promote calmness. They cover a wide range of musical styles and can be purchased in sets or individually. People love this music. I cannot recommend them highly enough.

You can also look for CDs of well-known hymns. MennoMedia has CDs or digital files of music from *Voices Together*, *Sing the Story*, and *Sing the Journey* hymn books.³ The heart songs of previous English-speaking generations can also be found in collections like those of the Mennonite Hour Singers.⁴ If your congregation sings in other languages, you'll want to look for musical resources in those languages as well.

Using music in the nursing home setting

If you've been asked to lead a service in a nursing home or retirement setting, here are some considerations:

1. Speak slowly and with amplification whenever possible. Do be careful about singing through the microphone though—that can overwhelm your congregation. Check to see if you can turn down or mute your microphone during a hymn.

1 See, for example, the Williams Sound Pocket Talker Ultra with Single Minibud and Headset and WinBridge portable voice amplifiers.

2 See <https://shop.musiccare.org/>.

3 See <https://www.mennomedia.org/search-list/?category=MUS>.

4 See <http://sacredchoralmusic.net/mennonitehoursingers.html>.

2. Use familiar hymns, but don't be afraid to introduce a new song if it suits your theme. So much wonderful music exists online, and with a simple speaker attached to your device, you'll be able to share it with your group.
3. Be open to using songs your audience might have learned as children, including action songs. A song like "He's got the whole world in his hands" can get many people involved, whether or not they can sing. It's energizing!
4. Hymn books can be a help but can also be a huge hindrance—people can't find the page, or they drop the book, or the print is too small. There are other options: singing just the first verse of a hymn and repeating that several times, projecting the words on a screen if that technology is available, or creating a one page handout with the hymns and a Scripture reading in large font that people can take home.⁵
5. Ask the program or recreation staff if they have simple rhythm instruments like shakers or tambourines you could use. Using rhythm instruments allows people to participate who otherwise can't. You will need to work with the staff of the home regarding any safety concerns.

If you're visiting in a retirement or nursing home, here are some suggestions around music:

1. Create playlists of music to leave with the resident. You could involve some tech-savvy younger adults in creating these or purchase CDs like those listed above to leave with your congregant.
2. If your congregation records its worship services, watch part of a service with the resident and then sing together during the congregational singing.
3. As Jahkusha's story above illustrates, illnesses that affect speech might not affect the ability to sing. When in doubt, sing!

⁵ You must either use hymns in the public domain or secure copyright permission for this last option.

Using music in ministry to people with memory loss

Dementia can take away people's abilities to communicate through speech, but as Abner's story illustrates, the ability to sing or tap a rhythm often remains. Music can be an important tool in working with people with dementia or to older people with developmental delays. Here are some ideas:

1. If the person you're visiting is agitated and doesn't want to sit still, go for a walk with them and sing as you walk! Sing an up-tempo hymn ("Come, we that love the Lord" has a good pace for walking) or an upbeat song from their youth. You may look silly, but you will be ministering deeply to the person with dementia.
2. Come prepared with music on your device. Work with the family to create a playlist. Bring CDs or find music on YouTube, including videos of favorite hymns or songs.
3. Sing anything—it doesn't have to be religious. "If you're happy and you know it" is a song that brings a smile to many faces. Or try nursery rhymes, poetry, reciting Scripture, or singing Scripture songs they likely learned as children; many of these memorized pieces stick with a person regardless of their level of dementia.

Using music in pastoral care of older adults

Much of what is written above applies also in the use of music generally for pastoral care. Here are some additional thoughts:

1. Find out what music the older adults of your congregation like; this can be a fruitful theme for a pastoral care visit. You might even consider making this the theme of your visits for all your older adults for a season. Keep this information on file for later use, as knowing what music people appreciate will help you serve them when they're ill or dying.
2. Music for funerals is a fruitful topic. Ask your elders what they would like to have sung at their funeral. Ask why these songs matter to them. You will learn a lot from these conversations. Keep good notes and make them accessible to the pastors, deacons, or elders who follow you.

3. If your children are open to it, consider taking them along on pastoral visits to older people and then sing together as a group. You might even invite an entire Sunday school class along if there is space for a larger group.

Using music in intergenerational worship

Balancing musical interests and different styles in congregational worship is a topic that could occupy several articles. Here are some ideas to consider to minister to the older adults in the congregation during intergenerational worship:

1. Look for training sessions for your worship and music leaders on teaching new music and balancing it with familiar songs. MennoMedia has done an amazing job with the resources for the new *Voices Together* hymnal.⁶ Your area church or local Christian college might offer courses too.
2. Someone—the worship committee, pastor, or music committee chair—should keep track of what is sung each week and regularly take a look at what is missing and what is overrepresented or underrepresented. This could be a fruitful annual discussion item for the worship committee.
3. In order for the “heart songs” of all generations to be represented in worship, consider these ideas:
 - On the occasion of a congregant’s milestone birthday or other special occasion, have that person choose a favorite hymn for Sunday worship and accompany it with a prayer of blessing. The congregation I attend, Waterloo North Mennonite Church, celebrates its “Esteemed Elders” in morning worship as part of its rites of passage; those being celebrated choose the hymns for that service.
 - Include one heart song or a song more familiar to the older adults in each worship service.
 - Implement a regular hymn sing—either on Sunday mornings (perhaps on every fifth Sunday of the month) or as an evening event. Plan them on a

6 See <http://voicestogetherhymnal.org/resources/>.

theme. You can mix new and old, include music from past hymnals, provide background to hymns, and so on. People enjoy learning the story behind a hymn; it provides depth and meaning to the singing experience. In my experience, hymn sings work best when the leader has chosen the majority of the hymns; don't have it just be a "call out your favorite" event, though you might include an open call at the end of the service or have people submit favorite hymns several weeks in advance and create the hymn sing based on those suggestions. Holding a hymn sing using only the old hymnals stashed away in your storage or just older heart songs will be a walk down memory lane for the older folks and a peek into history for the younger ones.

4. Create an intergenerational choir for a specific event (Easter, Good Friday, Christmas Eve, Pentecost, etc.). Choose music that appeals to different groups and allow people to learn to appreciate other styles.
5. With the recent introduction of *Voices Together*, the question of what to do with old hymnals is once again relevant. Hymnals hold a special place in people's hearts, and it feels wrong to just throw them out or put them in storage. Here are a few suggestions:
 - Keep a few of each of your former hymn books in your church library.
 - Give old hymnals away to people in the church.
 - It turns out that the internet has lots of ideas for old books—everything from using individual pages to make origami figures to artwork that covers a whole wall.⁷ Consider hosting an art-making event using your old hymnals. Have a time of singing during the event.

⁷ See, for example, <https://bookriot.com/diy-crafts-with-old-books>.

Conclusion

Music speaks to us at every age and across ages. It is a gift that can help heal, enliven, soothe, comfort, entertain, and so much more. It is a gift that allows us to communicate with each other and with God. Our lives do indeed flow on in endless song. How can we keep from singing?

About the author

Rev. Beverly Suderman-Gladwell is semi-retired after twenty-four years of ministry, including sixteen years as a chaplain in a nursing home and retirement home setting. She lives in Waterloo, Ontario, and her musical roots were nurtured in her hometown of Winkler, Manitoba. She enjoys singing in a community choir and nurturing native plants in her garden, and she is looking forward to traveling with her husband after the pandemic subsides.