



Integrating Contemporary Chant into Your Celebrations

By Michael Stillwater

The use of chant in worship celebrations is gaining recognition and popularity in both traditional New Thought churches and centers across America, yet it has roots that reach across the world and deep into antiquity. As a practice of induction into meta-states of consciousness, chant has been utilized cross-culturally for centuries.

The variant threads of Gregorian chant from the Middle Ages, Kirtan and Bhajan from ancient India, Zikhr from the Islamic tradition, tribal chants of Indigenous Peoples, and the Taize ecumenical chants from France, all offer a rich tapestry of source material from which to draw.

The new field of contemporary chant weaves all these varieties, yet translates the power of this practice into a style which congregations can more easily access and feel connected to. By incorporating predominantly English lyrics, the meaning within the chant adds to the power of their repetition. Adding the rhythmic and harmonic stylings of folk and rock choruses popular in the 60's and 70's, contemporary chant allows anyone, regardless of their level of singing confidence, to derive the spiritual and emotional benefits of chanting in a congregational setting.

Nine Considerations for Integrating Contemporary Chant:

When selecting chants for your group, look for:

- 1) **Ease of use, or Singability.** The most interesting chant in the world will not be of use if your people aren't able to easily repeat the melody or words. Be caring. *On the other hand:*
- 2) **Melodic and Harmonic Interest:** An intriguing rhythm or melody can help create more enthusiasm than a particularly 'safe' or ho-hum melody or tempo. Be daring.
- 3) **Meaning of the Message:** Is there an affirmational or devotional truth contained in the chant which you want your congregation to 'breathe' into their soul? For that is what will happen! Chant is a tremendously powerful methodology of learning and assimilating essential ideas, so be aware of what you are chanting.
- 4) **Opening the Heart:** Does the chant serve to open the heart of the one who is chanting? Discover for yourself which chants work most effectively in this way.
- 5) **Chant Duration:** A chant repeated for three times can sound pleasing, and fits nicely into a tight service program, but doesn't deliver the benefit of sustaining a chant for several minutes. Whenever possible, considering all time factors integrated into your service, allow a longer chanting experience and notice the effects. Once you see the power inherent in this practice, you will more easily consider giving congregants this benefit.

6) **Vocal Access:** Key or pitch is an important distinction to be aware of. While the song leader may have the vocal capacity to lead the chant at a higher pitch, this may make group participation challenging. By lowering the key some steps below what you may normally use for your worship anthems, you will likely be surprised by the increased participation and power in congregation response.

7) **Inner Directed:** Lyrics projected on the screen are essential for songs with many lyrics, but simple chants do not necessarily require this visual aid. The very purpose of a chant is to go beyond the mind, into the heart, where the function is not to incorporate more words but fewer words, deepening connection with the vibration and energy of the chant. When repeating a peaceful chant, closing one's eyes may be more natural and beneficial than looking at a screen.

8) **Energy Building:** Once your congregation is comfortable with singing a chant, try to expand into multi-part chants or rounds. This works best when you have a few extra minutes to work with the group, but the results are worthy, energizing and elevating. You may invite a few other song leaders to join you in leading the multi-part chants.

9) **Postlude:** After sharing a chant, it is often natural and beneficial to remain in silence for a few minutes. This allows congregants to bathe in their inner quiet, experiencing the feeling generated by the chant.

After thirty-five years of creating, performing and teaching, I am a confirmed advocate for the effectiveness of contemporary chant in providing a doorway to direct spiritual experience through one's own heart and voice. I am encouraged by the growth of this phenomenon, and support churches develop their own contemporary chant repertoire and program.