Remarks on Singing

by the Rev. Leigh Anne Taylor
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sponsored by the Work Group on Return to In-Person Worship

In Section V of the Technical Assistance Manual (TAM), Attachment A, Healthy Church Team Requirements, you have by now encountered the bullet list of Strict Protocol Requirements. These include, among other things

- Stay home if you're sick
- Wear Face coverings
- Observe Strict physical distancing
- No coffee or fellowship time
- No handshakes
- No hymnals, bibles, materials in the pews
- No choirs.
- No in-person singing - including congregational singing.

Wait, Leigh Anne! What? No Choir? no congregational singing? Why?
I'm so glad you asked.
For the same reason that we are staying home if we're sick, wearing face coverings, observing strict physical distance, not serving food or shaking hands.
All of these activities increase the risk of spreading the Covid-19 virus and so does singing.

How does singing increase the risk of spreading the virus?
I'm so glad you asked!
Dr. George Moxley, a member of the Work Group, helped us understand that "Most of the time, a person gets infected by breathing tiny respiratory droplets of secretions from the respiratory system (lungs and nose) of someone who is infected."

Here's a graphic example of how that happens:
Imagine being outside, on a cold winter day. When you exhale, you can see the cloud that your breath makes suspended in the air in front of you. What you're seeing is "the tiny respiratory droplets of secretions from the respiratory system" or the aerosols that you are sending out into the air around you every time you exhale.

Now imagine the amount of breath it takes to blow out a single candle. You might even try it now to see how much effort it takes. Notice how much air you are sending out around you. Now, imagine it's your 30th birthday and you are blowing out the candles on your cake! Go ahead, take a deep breath and blow all 30 of those candles out! Keep blowing! Did you notice how much more air it took? Did you notice how much more physical energy you used to send the air out? Can you imagine how much further the air might have moved into the room?

The difference in the amount of air that it takes to blow out one candle versus 30 candles is one way to understand the difference between speaking and singing. When we sing (or shout or sneeze) we send out a lot more breath into the air around us. More breath means more aerosols. And we send that air out with a lot more propulsion. The more people in one room who are singing, and the longer the time those people engage in singing, the higher the probability that everyone there is breathing in someone else's aerosols. We're breathing each other's breath.

Now, if one of those singers is infected with Covid-19, the tiny particles that they sending out like a cloud around them into room, contain even smaller particles of the virus. In my mind they look something like Pig Pen, the character in the Charlie Brown cartoon, surrounded by a cloud of dust. Anyone sitting near the infected singer is at risk for infection with the virus. The more the infected person sings, the higher the risk. The longer time they spend together in the same room, the higher the risk.

But Leigh Anne, get real! People don't go to church if they're sick!
"Some people with infection have symptoms, but about four of every 10 infected people do not." The reality with Covid-19 is that we can make other people sick even if we are not experiencing symptoms.

But we're wearing masks! Doesn't that solve the problem?
Masks are good but they're not fool-proof. They do a good job catching our spit when we speak and they do inhibit aerosols, but masks do not prevent us from sending aerosols into the air around us. They leak. Experiment with your own mask and feel the warm air escaping around the sides.

Here's the situation that we want to avoid:
On March 10 this year, one singer who had been fighting cold-like symptoms for several days, attended a community choir practice at a church in Mt. Vernon, Washington. This was when America was on the cusp of the outbreak and before people started taking precautions. So at this choir practice, no one wore a mask, and everyone sat 6 to 10 inches apart. They shared refreshments and the choir practice lasted 90 minutes. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

A few days later, the singer with cold-like symptoms tested positive for Covid-19. Of the 61 people who attended the choir rehearsal, 52 became sick. Unfortunately, two of those who became sick died. The median age of those attending choir practice was 69 years of age. These choir members were ordinary people like you and me. This is the kind of situation that our safeguards are successful in preventing.

So, Leigh Anne, how are we supposed to worship if we can't sing?
This is an invitation to think deeply about the function of singing in worship
It's an invitation to creatively employ other arts to help fill that function.

It's an invitation into silence, into listening.
It's invitation to experiment with more contemplative forms of worship
It's an invitation to continue to experiment with technology in our services

No singing doesn't mean no music!
This is the season for stringed instruments and drums!
This is the season of dance!
This is the season of mime and American Sign Language.
This is a season of reclaiming the gift of singing at home!

This is a season of lament for having to give up the gift of singing.
And
This is a season of self-denial for the sake of one other's health.
Our survival may depend on it.