

“Speak to One Another with Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs”: Song Leading and Narrative in the Church of Christ.

My paternal grandfather and my maternal great grandfather were Church of Christ song leaders in small rural congregations in Arkansas. Both of these men died before I was born, but I grew up knowing that their role as song leaders---their capacity to lead a congregation in praises to God---was central to who they were both in our immediate family and in the larger church community. Amy Shuman suggests in her work *Other People's Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy* that for a tale to be heard, our mind must have a place to situate what we are hearing. Otherwise the tale may move past us unheeded (2005:13). Likewise the narratives we grow up with often leave us with a heightened awareness for the importance of what may appear to others as mundane events.

Growing up in the Church of Christ, I have always been struck by the beautiful and sometimes austere nature of acapella singing. With images firmly planted in the corporal and visual realm of the day-to-day, the narratives work double time to address humanity even as they speak to illusive and ineffable concepts such as eternal life and inner peace. Songs tell of the weariness of earthly living, God as a kind of refuge and mothering figure, and a hoped-for home in the golden streets of heaven. After all, we can only see the otherworld with the eyes given to us in this one.

Members of the Church of Christ believe that the *Bible* is the only infallible word of God. Other writings are human-made and subject to the limitations of human understanding. Songs found in the songbooks on the backs of pews (or sometimes these

days projected onto an overhead projector) may contain scriptures and be based on interpretations of Biblical themes, but the songs themselves were written by flawed humans. Yet singing these songs as a congregation is one of the most important ways members worship together, entering into what Mircea Eliade might call an a heriphony, or a border crossing between the sacred and the secular (1957:25).

At the same time singing acts as a vehicle, moving melody out of the mouth and the mind toward God, the song service also serves as a major intersection, a hub if you will, where a multitude of narratives about very earthly things like family and personal history come together. Song leaders and churchgoers alike are quick to mention their favorite songs, linking the melodies to the memory of a parent, a child, or their own wedding. Other songs may reference memories of funerals and people and events lost to memory. Thus as the mind moves toward God in worship so does it also reach back to earthly life. Bess Lomax Hawes noted in her early work about the American lullaby that the songs we sing to rock children to sleep are not really about sleep at all, at least not on the surface level. They do however serve to reference cultural ideas about sleep, which also channel our perceptions about the relationship between mother and child (1974). So while songs help singers engage in worship, existing both on a spiritual and physical plane, they may also help worshippers index their own personal lives and oscillate between the present, past, and eternal world, linking stories about faith with stories about the day-to-day life of being a human in a world full of other humans.

The song leader stands at this intersection of narratives and both influences, and is influenced by, them. I grew up knowing that the larger church community tells stories about song leaders, but what, I wondered, do the song leaders say about themselves and

their role? In the beginning of 2007 I began attending Church of Christ congregations in the Bowling Green, Kentucky, area, observing and speaking with song leaders. Their stories provide the basis for this paper.

The Church of Christ Community

Before delving into a direct discussion of the songs as narrative and the song leader as communal storyteller, it is important to begin with a very brief discussion of the larger metanarrative of the Church of Christ. Churches of Christ, or churches of Christ (note change of capitalization) as some people prefer, often view themselves as the direct doctrinal descendents of early churches founded in the days after Jesus' death. American religious historian David Edwin Harrell Jr.'s recent work *The Churches of Christ in the Twentieth Century: Homer Hailey's Personal Journey of Faith*, examines the history of the church, stating, "The more proximate origins of the twentieth-century Churches of Christ, however, lay in the dynamic and democratic religious ethos of early nineteenth-century America" (2000:xi). Harrell, a member of the Church of Christ himself and an occasional minister, connects the Church of Christ with the American Restoration Movement and its desire to return to a simpler and purer form of faith void of all unnecessary rituals or unbiblical rules and regulations. First taking root with rural white folks in Kentucky and West Virginia, the movement spread throughout the south. Quoting from early church documents, Harrell explains, "The movement's central plea was 'to speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent'" (4). By 1906 there were over one million members in this group calling themselves either Christian Churches or Churches of Christ (5).

Today there are millions of people all over the world who worship in Church of Christ congregations in both urban and rural areas. Although Churches of Christ remain largely white, there are predominantly African American and Hispanic Church of Christ congregations and in some cases churches are multiracial. Congregations vary greatly from one another and making blanket statements about the larger church community would be at best problematic and at worst horribly inaccurate. Yet there are a few generalizations about the worship service that typically hold true: weekly partaking of the Lord's Supper, baptism as a means to salvation, only men can take on leadership roles in the church (which means you will never find women song leaders), and the singing is always a cappella. Song leader Jack Howell of the West End Church of Christ in Bowling Green provided several scriptures that outlined this belief on a capella singing.

What we are looking at in Bible authority, we based these off the scriptures. Like Ephesians 5:19 says "speak to one another with Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart." And then in Colossians 3:16, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." And so when we look at this as our scriptural authority for not using instruments, our voices become the instrument and the a cappella, giving you the four different ranges.... you are making a melody with your voices (Howell 2007).

The emphasis in Howell's explanation is on the human voice and its capacity to join with others in song. Ralph Brewer of the Alvaton Church of Christ, a congregation of approximately one hundred and fifty people, explains what he calls "the silence principle." He noted that when people go to a restaurant they don't tell the waitress what they *don't* want. So it is with God and singing. God did not *tell* the churches to use instruments, so they don't.

In *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place*, Kent Ryden tells us that landscape is a palimpsest, both a geographical place and a mental location layered with meaning derived from countless human stories (1993). These stories fade into one another making it sometimes impossible to see where one ends and another begins. The act of song leading is layered with meaning and stories in much the same way. When a song leader comes to the front of the congregation to lead singing he is surrounded by a web of narratives that link the songs, the song leader's personal life, and the individual church members' stories to larger metanarratives about community, faith, family, and God. Likewise when the congregation joins together in song each week, a new narrative is spun from the old. With each singing the web expands. This palimpsest of narratives overlapping in song can be understood first in terms of the congregational aesthetics of song leading and the ways in which these aesthetics reinforce the larger community.

The Occupational Lore of Song Leading

In speaking with multiple Church of Christ song leaders in the Bowling Green area, I have learned that most have a fairly clear aesthetic when it comes to song leading

understood through what folklorists typically call occupational lore. Such narratives contain those stories that define what makes for a good song leader and why, and the telling of these stories among song leaders may reinforce or challenge the community aesthetic. This aesthetic varies greatly from congregation to congregation even within the town of Bowling Green, Kentucky, making each congregation unique. Ideas about what constitutes tradition and whether or not a congregation chooses to perform this idea of tradition are at the heart of this aesthetic. For example, many some song leaders' belief that the "old songs," those southern four-part harmony compositions made popular during the singing schools in the early 1900s, are more pleasing and perhaps even more spiritually meaningful than their newer counterparts. Despite some commonalities, individual preferences vary even within congregations. Song leaders strive to lead a variety of songs that will span generational gaps and appeal to all church members, but suggest, however, that such a task can be very difficult especially in larger congregations. Individual members often have strong opinions about certain songs or types of songs and regularly express these concerns to the song leaders. Timothy Tangherlini notes in the preface to his occupational lore study entitled *Talking Trauma: A Candid Look at Paramedics Through Their Tradition of Tell-Telling*, that "Stories are not told by faceless members of a group; rather, individuals—each with his or her own unique personality, experiences, and narrating style---create what is generally referred to as tradition" (1998: xxii). We can see how songs leaders gauge and influence tradition as they attempt to please a congregation of individual members.

In the song leaders' individual narratives we can see more clearly this idea of tradition being created. For example, it is often believed that an accomplished song leader

knows how to keep the congregation together and not allow the song to slow down or drag. As Jack Howell told me,

You know the big thing as a song leader, you are setting the pace. And if they are dragging, you are letting them drag it. And there are some, some songs that when you are singing that invitation song “Almost Persuaded?” and they are singing [slows down voice] Al-most- Per-sua-ded--- you are going to sleep! ...Tempo has more so to do with, than anything in getting, you know, at a pitch to where people can sing it too. If you’ve got it too high, people can’t reach that range, and if you’ve got it too low, people can’t reach that range either. You need a range where the people can sing with you and the song leader is responsible for doing that (Howell 2007).

Some song leaders prefer to use their hand to keep time in much the same way an orchestra leader would do, a motion typically called “beating out the songs.” Other song leaders may simply walk to the front of the congregation and begin to sing, employing no hand motions at all. Jack Howell argued that “beating out the songs” is necessary. Aaron Dobbins on the other hand believes that such a thing is overrated and only leads singing this way because his church requests it.

A narrative that does not appear to be common among song leaders is that of giving advice. Such stories are common in occupational lore situations, but song leaders suggest that such a narrative is a potentially offensive form of communication. Song leader Ralph Brewer explained,

I haven't had a lot of conversations exchanging ideas with song leaders. There are a variety of different styles of song leading, and each individual will have a different amount of training and background and experience...I think there is a tendency to think that if one song leader offers some advice to another one that it can be certainly taken wrong, and, you know, it's like 'I am a better song leader than you. Let me tell you how to do it,' you know. And that's not important. At least not to me (Brewer 2007).

So while song leaders have clear opinions concerning their individual styles, advice giving appears to be an untellable tale in the world of song leading. It is important to note that women play a large role in encouraging men into song leading positions, and it is possible that women, even though they cannot become song leaders themselves, may in fact be the primary dispensers of such song leading critiques. Such research remains to be done. One thing is clear, however, women play a major role in deciding up who becomes a song leader.

The Personal History Narrative

Three out of the four song leaders quoted in this paper grew up in the church and this, of course, played a large role in their exposure to Church of Christ a cappella singing styles. It should come as no surprise that when song leaders speak about how they became song leaders, women populate their narratives. Phil Henry and Ralph Brewer both said their mothers sang around the home while working, teaching the boys the words and melody to the songs long before they could ever read the words on the printed page.

In some cases, women encourage men into song leading roles in much more overt ways. Song leader Aaron Dobbins was fifteen years old at the time he moved to Bowling Green and began attending one of the larger churches in the city. Aaron states,

There was a lady I sat close to [during church] and she said, “You should lead singing. Have you ever thought about that?...she said, “You should do it.” She grabbed my hand and took me up to the song leading coordinator and said, “This guy here wants to lead singing...(Dobbins 2007)

Within a month he says he was leading. And he remembers well the first time he led:

I was excited. I was nervous. It was a Sunday morning. All I had to do was.... Lead the “Lily of the Valley.” It actually went really well because I had practiced it for hours probably. And so I did everything perfectly as far as technique and everything. It has not always gone that well ever since [laughs] (Dobbins 2007).

His personal experience narrative points to the nervousness with which he prepared for his new role as song leader, but he also calls attention to the fact that while song leading is a leadership role reserved for men, there are often women who encourage, or even force, men to enter these roles.

Elaine Lawless’s classic study, *God’s Peculiar People: Women’s Voices and Folk Tradition in a Pentecostal Church*, tells us that women use testifying as a way to gain a voice in an otherwise male dominated religious world (1988). In her work *Handmaidens*

of the Lord: Pentecostal Women Preachers and Traditional Religion, written about women who actually do manage to become preachers, she suggests that the women's ministry may take on the role of "mothering" a congregation. In the Church of Christ, women's voices are never raised in testimony and they certainly never become ministers.¹ It is deemed Biblically unacceptable. Singing in the home, during worship service with the congregation, and in Sunday school class is one of the only audible ways in which their voices enter into the aesthetics of the worship service. However their role as singers is paramount.

I am not suggesting that because women broker knowledge about singing and may act as the gate keepers of song leading styles, that they in some way share in the formal leadership and decision making process with men in the Church of Christ. However, in examining the aesthetics of congregational church song leading through the perspective of those who lead it, women are clearly at the forefront of the narratives men tell about how they conceptualize everything from how songs should sound to what songs have personal meaning and constitute tradition. When the song leader comes to the front to sing, he carries these narratives with him and they greatly influence the song leading aesthetic.

¹ In some churches women say amen in approval to the ministers lesson or may suggest certain songs during a song service. This depends on the individual congregation and the women and men in it. As stated earlier, it is very difficult to make blanket statements about the Church of Christ. But it should be understood that while it might be acceptable for a woman to say amen during a service, that is not the same thing as actually preaching the sermon. To provide another example, she might announce at the end of the service a particular church member is sick, but she would not be allowed to go to the front of the congregation and read the official church announcements. Similarly, women can not become elders or deacons in the Church of Christ, the major leadership positions within congregations.

Sandra Kay Dolby's 1975 landmark thesis, "The Personal Narrative As A Folklore Genre," reminds us that "The frame of reference that is inevitably a part of any personal narrative is the personal life history of the teller" (148). This narrative is not some kind of timeline: "Instead, scattered bits of information will make up a frame of reference that defines the general pattern of the teller's life to date and perhaps his plans for the future as well" (1975:148). Through song leaders' narratives we can grasp a sense of the Church of Christ homes in which they grew up and how the singing of songs played a role in who these men have become. It is the stories of these women I hope to address in subsequent research. This aesthetic of song leading then is not just a set of occupational rules passed down through song leaders. It is the intellectual property of the entire church. As these songs are passed down and led, they continue to grow as collective communal narratives, taking their place as a form of tradition in the church.

A Web of Narratives Spun Around a Song

I tend to think of the song leading event as a web. If you pull on one narrative thread the other threads insist on coming along too. My goal here is not to pull apart these narratives into distinct genre-like divisions. I am much more interested in how they fit together rather than how they can be pulled apart. At the center of all these coexisting narratives is the narrative found in the song itself. Physically located in either hymnals or perhaps even projected onto an overhead screen, these songs, whether composed decades ago or last year, are narratives of faith set to music. Songbooks found in Church of Christ congregations are typically published by Church of Christ publishing houses and it is always interesting to see what congregations have what songbook. The rural Mt. Zion

Church outside of Bowling Green uses a 1960s edition of *Sacred Selections for the Church*. In the Lost River congregation of five hundred plus members all the songs are projected on an overhead screen. There are upwards of three to five hundred songs contained in most hymnals used by the Church of Christ, but it does not mean that all of them will be sung by a given church congregation. The congregation's repertoire may in fact be rather small compared to the number of songs printed in the hymnal. The song leader, balanced in the web of surrounding narratives, plays a large role in which songs become the texts that, sung communally, become a part of the worship service.

As a tradition bearer, the song leader sings older songs that generations of men before him have led and he may also select and lead newer songs that generations of men after him will lead. His selection of songs helps to dictate what will remain in the traditional congregational repertoire for years to come. Henry Glassie declares that tradition is akin to perception of our "historical responsibilities" (1995: 406). Many of the song leaders feel they have a responsibility to sing both old and new songs to please a diverse and multigenerational congregation. Song leaders commonly suggest that the old songs tend to have, on average, more meaningful lyrics. Phil Howard mentioned that he likes the old songs because his mother sang them around the house growing up. Aaron Dobbins, who, at twenty two, was the youngest song leader interviewed during this research, noted that while he likes to sing the new songs, he feels the "old ones mean more." The songs themselves are somewhat stagnant texts until the song leader chooses to sing them during church. And these so-called "old songs" have been sung countless times, serving as a musical backdrop to many of the member's personal lives. These songs have become thick with meaning.

Song Leaders as Storytellers

I have addressed narratives that surround and sustain the song leader, but to fully understand the song service it is important to look at the ways in which song leaders create narratives when they choose and frame the songs during the worship service. Like ministers, song leaders typically stand at the front of the congregation, facing the members who in turn face them. Depending on the church service, a song leader may lead three to ten songs during a service and in between these songs he may wish to say a few words about why certain songs have been selected. Song leaders may choose the selections based on the minister's lesson for that week. In some cases song leaders are brave enough to allow church members to request songs on the spot. In only one case did a song leader say he felt that it was inappropriate for him to do any more than simply lead the songs. For other men there was time in between the songs to expound on any number of subjects from stories behind the song's composition to pointing out that there was a folklorist from Arkansas in their midst there to study the singing.

On one particular evening at the Delafield Church of Christ, a small congregation of less than fifty in Bowling Green, Kentucky, the song leader began the service by asking if there were any requests. An older woman at the front called out a few song numbers from where she sat in her pew. Once again, here is an example of a woman shaping the songs and the song service. The song leader, a middle aged man with a deep suntan, took a look at the songs she wanted to sing, let out a deep breath and laughingly said that he grew on a farm and when his father gave him chores to do he always picked the hardest one first. He said that was what he was going to do tonight and sing the

hardest song first. He then launched into a rather high-pitched version of a difficult four-part harmony song.

By speaking about his own history he brought to the singing a humor which somewhat absolved him of any mistakes he might make in leading the song. He also used his role as song leader to evoke ideas about family and work and farming, one of the major sources of income in western Kentucky. The image he evoked of a young man on a farm referenced a set of familiar images and stories, which he expected would be relevant to that congregation of mostly elderly people from rural western Kentucky. In framing the songs in such a way, the song leader also calls attention to a few of the ubiquitous narratives of human living that exist outside of Sunday worship service: work, family, and the fact that we are sometimes asked to do things we would rather not do. We know that religious songs have the capacity to bring church members closer to God, but as this song leader suggests, the way these songs are framed and presented may also remind church members of this earthly life and the land and people with whom we share it.

I have suggested that song leading is a palimpsest and a web of narratives. My own story is wound up in that web and I think it applicable to address here. I am a woman and proudly consider myself a feminist and a womanist. I'll never be able to become a song leader in the Church of Christ even if I wanted to. Such a role is off limits to me. But these stories of song leading are mine, too. In somewhat mythic storytelling fashion, family members were forever telling the story of my paternal grandfather and how he came to song leading. The way they would tell it is that when he converted to the Church of Christ, he gave up calling square dances in rural central Arkansas and took up song leading. An incredibly poor man with no education, he couldn't read, so my grandmother

would take the hymnal and read the lyrics to him. He would memorize the songs and then lead them each week at that small rural church. He would take the hymnal with him to the front of the church, but he never needed to look down at the words. Without my grandmother around, the hymnal was of little use. It was simply an aesthetic protocol he chose to employ. This is, of course, a kind of mythic story, and once again a woman stands in the background influencing the church in monumental ways. It is one of those narratives that has always made me want to hang pictures of my dead relatives in shrine-like fashion on the wall. But this story is not unique. Countless women have such stories about their female family members softly dictating the family culture of faith.

I think this small story is relevant in that it addresses the power of narrative as channeled through song. The narratives we seek out, whether they are academic or otherwise, are often deeply connected to who we are and where we have or have not been. We can seek to downplay them, but our own stories remain a major part of the narratives to which we are drawn. We make sense of the world, or perhaps realize that the world does not make sense, through the stories we know and create. Church songs talk about earthy life because it is all we humans know. Songs about God and heaven help churchgoers transcend, but they also help ground and connect people to the world and the fellow humans around us.

Sam Schrager notes in his work *The Trial Lawyer's Art* that when trial lawyers argue their case before the court they engage in "storytelling combat" wherein the most culturally believable narrative wins (2000). It's not just lawyers who engage in this kind of so-called "combat." We all do it everyday, over and over again. We take our daily life, the stories we inherited from our families, the stories society has handed us or perhaps

thrown onto us, and we/they battle it out. This process of making meaning of the world and engaging in decision-making in story form is certainly obvious in the ways in which humans personalize those larger religious narratives. Through songs we take big expansive ideas like God, heaven and forgiveness and make them applicable in the day-to-day world of sorrow, headaches, and unexpected joys.

The song leader facilitates this process, taking on the role of a kind of storyteller, and channeling the narratives of his own life as he leads and frames the songs that become the communal musical texts of the congregation. These songs exist as stories both inside and outside of the church service. As the song leader stands up in front of the congregation to lead the songs, he is held there by a web of narratives, a palimpsest of stories, that speak to family, work, women, men, community, and, of course, God.

References Cited

- Brewer, Ralph. Recorded Interview with Author. 24 April 2007
- Dobbins, Aaron. Recorded Interview with Author. 7 April 2007
- Dolby, Sandra. 1975. *The Personal Narrative as a Folklore Genre*. Ph.D. dissertation, Folklore Department, Indiana University at Bloomington.
- Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion: The Significance of Religious Myth, Symbolism, and Ritual within Life and Culture*. 1957. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc.
- Glassie, Henry. 1995. Tradition. *Journal of American Folklore* 108 (430): 395-412
- Harrell, David Edwin Jr. 2000. *The Churches of Christ in the Twentieth Century: Homer Hailey's Personal Journey of Faith*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press.
- Hawes, Bess Lomax. 1974. Folksongs and Function: Some Thoughts on the American Lullaby. *Journal of American Folklore* 87 (344): 140-148.
- Henry, Phil. Recorded Interview with Author. 09 April 2007.
- Holy Bible*. New International Version 1988. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Cooperation.
- Howell, Jack. Recorded interview with author. 25 April 2007
- Lawless, Elaine J. *God's Peculiar People: Women's Voices and Folk Tradition in a Pentecostal Church*. 1988. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky.
- Lawless, Elaine J. *Handmaidens of the Lord: Pentecostal Women Preachers and Traditional Religion*. 1989. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Ryden, Kent. *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place*. 1993. University of Iowa Press.

Schrager, Sam. 2000. *The Trial Lawyer's Art*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Shuman, Amy. 2005. *Other People's Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Tangherlini, Timothy R. 1998. *Talking Trauma: A Candid Look at Paramedics Through Their Tradition of Tale-Telling*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Other research for this paper comes from the author's multitude of field notes taken at various Church of Christ congregations in both west Kentucky and central and northwest Arkansas.