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August 19, 2020

Safe Singing at Dawson During COVID

Because of the biblical testimony, Dawson has always held group singing as a high priority. These groups currently include our multi-generational congregation, as well as many choral and instrumental groups.

Gathering Is Appropriate

Our approach during this season begins with the foundational belief that the best place for people to be during times of uncertainty and unrest is physically with their family of faith. We also believe that singing and making music together is an essential, biblical expression of faith that becomes even more important in times of turbulence. Therefore, in light of this commitment, we're seeking to answer the question of how can we do this in a way that mitigates the risk for those gathered.

Our Approach Is Safe

Our summary statement on music-making in rehearsal and leading in worship during this season is as follows: "In keeping with Alabama's statewide mandate, please wear a face mask when you are not able to maintain six feet of distance from those outside your household, like when you are coming, going, or moving around in rehearsals and services. If you have any symptoms of illness, do not attend. Many will also choose to wear a mask during rehearsals or services. Enhanced facility cleaning, expanded air filtration, increased venue size, and other mitigation strategies have been implemented to provide a safe environment for music-making."

Sing in a Big Space for a Little While

The Centers for Disease Control characterize the transmission of COVID-19 as "between people who are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet), through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. COVID-19 may be spread by people who are not showing symptoms."¹ Eliminating contact with respiratory droplets from other people seems to be key for staying healthy.

In light of this, returning to rehearsal rooms in the typical fashion is not possible, since large numbers of people singing very close together does not allow for enough distance for droplets

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/how-covid-spreads.html>

to fall to the ground. Lucinda Halstead, president-elect of the Performing Arts Medical Association, echoes the risk of singing as we have always done it. "It's not safe for people to simply return to the choir room and pick things up."²

However, she also affirms that group singing can still happen with "creative approaches to rehearsing and performing safely" given priority, offering the example of a "choir in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, was singing in weekly streamed services by spreading out in an empty church."³ Her point? Singing is safe if healthy people spread out in a big space for a little while.

CDC and WHO both consider contact with respiratory droplets to be the concerning source of transmission, and that reducing contact also reduces risk. It is also clear that based "on current evidence, the singing itself does not seem to be the issue. What has happened, in the midst of the tragedy and uncertainty of recent weeks, is a classic case of correlation being mistaken for causation; of hastily drawn opinions becoming established fact; of an industry being silenced on a false premise."⁴

Value Social Distancing

If singing is not the actual issue, it is worth asking why there have been outbreaks within singing communities. This, it seems, is due to the gregarious and intimate relationship that music-making creates. It is a culture that takes discipline to eliminate. "It should be questioned whether social behaviour is not the actual origin of the infection. If particularly sociable people greet other choir members with hugs and kisses, have a lively conversation during the break, have dinner in a convivial atmosphere after the rehearsal or drink a wine with each other before saying goodbye heartily, it can be assumed that this social behaviour is more critical in the case of an infection than the singing itself. The musicians we asked have confirmed that the social behaviour described above is not unusual from their experience."⁵ The safety of the group making music together will be greater as the social interaction of the group becomes less.

Singing is safe with consistent and mandatory social distancing. The research is clear on this. But how far must singers be separated from one another?

Drs. Christian J. Kähler and Rainer Hain of the Institute of Fluid Mechanics and Aerodynamics at University of the Bundeswehr Munich answer this exact question by studying the way that air moves around the mouth when singing in a controlled setting. Their process and findings are compelling.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/09/arts/music/choirs-singing-coronavirus-safe.html?smid=em-share>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/09/arts/music/choirs-singing-coronavirus-safe.html?smid=em-share>

⁴ <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/5-june/comment/opinion/it-is-time-to-sing-again>

⁵ https://www.unibw.de/lrt7-en/making_music_during_the_sars-cov-2_pandemic.pdf,

The experiments clearly show that air is only set in motion in the immediate vicinity of the mouth when singing. In the case of the professional singer, the experiments showed that at a distance of around 0.5 m [19 inches], almost no air movement can be detected, regardless of how loud the sound was and what pitch was sung. It is therefore unlikely that the virus could spread beyond this limit via the air flow created during singing. Amateur musicians who do not use the diaphragmatic breathing most commonly used by professionals when singing, but rather the natural chest breathing, do not get beyond this range either.⁶

Non-professionals and untrained singers move less air than professional, trained singers, but none move air more than 1.5 feet. The researchers continue by offering an example for the non-clinician to consider.

In order to prove that the air in front of the mouth is hardly moved at all, one can hold a burning candle in front of the mouth, then sing or speak and at the same time slowly and calmly remove the flame from the mouth. As soon as the flame stops flickering, the distance is determined at which the flow movement is also negligible.⁷

They conclude that "experiments have shown that even these sounds do not cause the air to be swirled much further than 1 m [39.37 inches]," but go as far as to recommend that "a safety distance of at least 1.5 m [~5 feet] must be maintained in a choir. This is necessary to provide effective protection against droplet infection even if other people cough without following the hygiene label (cough into the crook of your arm and turn away from other people)." They also recommend, as do the CDC and WHO, that when choristers are not singing they wear "a mouth and nose protector or even better a particle-filtering breathing mask."⁸

Their conservative recommendation for distancing for singing is less than 5 feet. The current governmental standard for social distancing is 6 feet, which both satisfies and exceeds their recommendation. This is Dawson's practice as well.

Use Data to Decide

Statements calling for "no indoor group or ensemble singing"⁹ are met with a call for explanation and evidence, evidenced by the recent statement from the Texas Choral Director's Association.

The report released without references to research or sources asserts in the first statement that "no indoor singing should occur." Evidence is not provided to support

⁶ https://www.unibw.de/lrt7-en/making_music_during_the_sars-cov-2_pandemic.pdf, pg. 2.

⁷ https://www.unibw.de/lrt7-en/making_music_during_the_sars-cov-2_pandemic.pdf,

⁸ https://www.unibw.de/lrt7-en/making_music_during_the_sars-cov-2_pandemic.pdf,

⁹ https://nafme.org/wp-content/files/2020/06/NAfME_NFHS-Guidance-for-Fall-2020.pdf

this assertion. Furthermore, it has come to our attention that this report was distributed to school administrators and is now being used as evidence to suspend choral music education in some schools.¹⁰

Because many of the groups surrounding group singing are academic and deal with children and adolescents, the recommendation for no indoor singing may be related more to the social behavior of the participant than the safety of the actual singing. Researchers from the University of the Bundeswehr Munich agree. While they acknowledge that emotion and bias can creep into choosing a prudent approach, they conclude that group singing should continue.

Ultimately, we do not believe that all vocal performance should stop until herd immunity is achieved through vaccination or naturally or until a cure for COVID-19 is discovered.¹¹

In summary, based on the current recommendations from the CDC and WHO, in light of the research about appropriate distancing and airflow impact, and in keeping with governmental guidance, when done using social distancing in a way that reduces the contamination of a participant with respiratory droplets, singing indoors is safe.

There are things that can be done to make it even safer, however, as well as promote appropriate distancing among group members. This includes excluding at-risk singers, increasing ventilation, cleaning air through UV lights, eliminating shared supplies, using a large rehearsal space, and requiring masks while participants are moving into place.

Stay Home If You Are in a Vulnerable Category

Participants who are in a vulnerable category should not participate in group singing experiences, not because of the "singing," but because of the "group." Isolation regardless of the alternative activity is preferred. "Since the early days of the outbreak, advanced age has been identified as a risk factor for both hospitalization and mortality. The specific underlying conditions of obesity and diabetes/metabolic syndrome have been correlated with worse outcomes."¹²

The University of the Bundeswehr researchers also offer specific guidance to churches.

Choirs in faith-based and community-based ensembles with members who have health conditions as previously identified, as well as members of color or advanced age,

¹⁰ https://www.tcda.net/articles/tcda-response-to-nafme-document?fbclid=IwAR3Krvu5IWiy5SDsctE7QVD_frSYOspTsVPFnobvUXh9EO1crxYbnbPG5Q

¹¹ https://www.unibw.de/lrt7-en/making_music_during_the_sars-cov-2_pandemic.pdf,

¹² https://www.unibw.de/lrt7-en/making_music_during_the_sars-cov-2_pandemic.pdf,

should appreciate the statistically higher rate of COVID-19 fatalities when calculating their risk to benefit ratio.¹³

Potential group singing participants at Dawson are asked to self-identify and voluntarily not participate if vulnerable.

Increase Ventilation

In addition to excluding potential vulnerable participants, increased ventilation is important. The CDC recommends ensuring "ventilation systems operate properly and increase circulation of outdoor air as much as possible, for example by opening windows and doors."¹⁴ In Dawson's Sanctuary and Chapel, this is accomplished through the HVAC fan constantly running, as well as increased outside airflow through open doors at entry. This is also recommended by the American Choral Director's Association (ACDA) in their advice that "rehearsal spaces should have window ventilation and/or significant air exchange via HVAC."¹⁵

While ventilation and outside air are important, equally so is the cleaning of recirculated air. Even with Dawson's increased ventilation, enhanced cleaning of air is already in place, which is also recommended by the ACDA, suggesting that "[a]dvanced techniques for air filtration or sterilization should be considered when ventilation is not adequate."¹⁶ Dawson's ventilation is adequate, yet we have added enhanced air cleaning as well.

Do Not Share Supplies

Sharing supplies should be eliminated as well, and supplies that are shared should be cleaned thoroughly.¹⁷ Choir robes, because of the shared nature of their storage, are not recommended, either. "If the choir wears robes, consider not using them if doing so requires the shared use of small dressing areas. If robes are necessary, use brief appointment times or provide adequate waiting rooms to prevent the gathering of multiple singers in dressing spaces."¹⁸ Finally, sheet music should not be shared and will be provided as single-use packets or take home binders, also as recommended.¹⁹ All these are true at Dawson.

¹³ https://www.unibw.de/lrt7-en/making_music_during_the_sars-cov-2_pandemic.pdf,

¹⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/colleges-universities/considerations.html>

¹⁵ <https://acda.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ACDA-COVID-19-Committee-Report.pdf>, pg. 37-38.

¹⁶ <https://acda.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ACDA-COVID-19-Committee-Report.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://acda.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ACDA-COVID-19-Committee-Report.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://acda.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ACDA-COVID-19-Committee-Report.pdf>, pg. 80-81

¹⁹ <https://acda.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ACDA-COVID-19-Committee-Report.pdf>, pg. 80-81

Increase the Venue Size

A large gathering space seems to be essential to mitigating the risk of singing, with outdoors being the largest of all. The ACDA, University of the Bundeswehr researchers, and other professionals agree.

Consider a campus space (auditorium, gym, outdoors) that could be shared between musical ensembles on campus for socially distanced full ensemble rehearsals on specific days of the week/times when students are not engaged in sectional/small group work.²⁰

The size of the rooms is also important as already mentioned. If the rooms are sufficiently high, then a longer dwell time of the droplets above the persons will cause the droplets to evaporate if the humidity is not extremely high (this is ensured by fresh air supply). Even if the viruses would remain infectious without droplets, the risk of infection will be further reduced due to mixing in the upper air layers of the rooms, provided the ceiling height is sufficient. For safe music operation, therefore, not only the rules of distance and placement are important, but also the air conditioning and room size.²¹

A cheaper option is using nature to take services and rehearsals fully outdoors. This will be only a temporary fix in most places, because winter will bring its own challenges. And singing in the open air will fundamentally alter the effect: Sound waves will disperse instead of reverberating through an acoustically designed chamber. Whatever is lost in that experience for the congregation, there might be solace in remembering that the virus is dispersing into that air, as well. It's not a zero-risk scenario, but we have every reason to believe it is safer than the old way.²²

Making the indoors like the outdoors, or simply singing outside, is exactly Dawson's approach.

Wear a Mask When You're Too Close

The role of masks is to keep respiratory droplets contained in the mask itself, instead of falling on another person or surface. ChorusAmerica offers guidance for singers and masks:

Wear masks at all times, even during rehearsals, unless official restrictions are altered/eased. Otherwise, wear a mask to your seat/position. Remove the mask for singing. Replace for departing.²³

²⁰ <https://acda.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ACDA-COVID-19-Committee-Report.pdf>

²¹ https://www.unibw.de/lrt7-en/making_music_during_the_sars-cov-2_pandemic.pdf, pg. 5.

²² <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/06/choir-practice-during-pandemic/612868/>

²³ https://www.chorusamerica.org/sites/default/files/resources/COVIDRehearsalGuide_Seelig_Final.pdf

This approach of wearing a mask when there is the potential of not social distancing, like when moving around, is the current approach of Dawson in rehearsal and leading in worship during this season.

Distinguish the Church from a Scholastic Setting

Unlike a high school or college experience, music-making in a church environment is not compulsory and is done as an optional activity to the participant. While it is tempting to put all music-making in the same category, this would be a mistake. Recommendations from musical organizations are primarily for K-12 schools and collegiate environments, all of which are dealing with major space limitations, prescribed class lengths, course requirements, and often limited resources. This contrasts with Dawson which has access to extremely large spaces, excellent HVAC enhancements, virtually unlimited volunteers, and shorter rehearsal times. In short, scholastic recommendations must be translated, not transposed, to Dawson's context.

Safe Singing Is Still Safe

In light of the research cited above, Dawson confidently continues group singing and other music-making in our largest spaces. Our summary statement on music-making in rehearsal and leading in worship during this season is as follows: "In keeping with Alabama's statewide mandate, please wear a face mask when you are not able to maintain six feet of distance from those outside your household, like when you are coming, going, or moving around in rehearsals and services. If you have any symptoms of illness, do not attend. Many will also choose to wear a mask during rehearsals or services. Enhanced facility cleaning, expanded air filtration, increased venue size, and other mitigation strategies have been implemented to provide a safe environment for music-making."

Pray for Light for the Next Step

As Christians, we pray for light for the next step, faith for the ones that follow, and wisdom to choose at the fork in the road. While we are confident in our approach, we offer it with flexible humility, committed to doing the right thing as we discover the opportunity. If things change, we too will change. In the meantime, we move forward singing with expectant gratitude to a God who is already in the future working it out for his glory and our good.