We’re All in This Together:

It only starts in the choir

I teach people how to sing, both as a voice teacher, sitting at the piano, and as a conductor, teaching from the podium. Singers often ask me, “Should I sing differently in a choir than as a soloist?” and I answer, “yes, indeed, most assuredly so.” It behooves Choral singers to modify their voices to blend into the group sound. One of the statements I make to help choral singers have success in finding a unified sound is, “Listen more loudly than you sing.” How does a choir get their unique sound? An interesting phenomenon is called “Chorusing.” One singer is a soloist, two sing a duet and you can differentiate between the two voices, but if you have 3 singers on a part, singing in unison, and making an effort to blend their voices, they will sound like a section, not 3 individual voices. It only takes 3.

Singing in unison is very powerful. Adding harmony can be even more powerful! I love a book by Stacy Horn “Imperfect Harmony, Finding Happiness Singing with Others.” She says, “…I’m most present when I’m singing, and I become superconscious of the voices surrounding me. In those moments I have that same high-definition appreciation of everything that’s going on. One second I’m in a room with separate individuals, and the next, everyone’s heart is beating as one, and I can also hear every voice, every sound…”
This doesn’t always apply, for instance, it’s hard for singers like me and Francois to join in with a choir. Our voices can always be heard because of the level of technical skill we’ve achieved. I tease the choir that I’ll help with some of the high notes, because, “with my back to the congregation, they’ll never know.” The joke is, of course, y’all will know, because my voice is distinctive, and you’ve come to recognize it from the hymn leading I do at the mic. That’s why I’m so glad I found my late life career as a choral conductor. It’s even better for me than choral singing!

Why does our choir come together? Who are these people who are willing to come to Wednesday late afternoon/early evening rehearsals (5:45-7:15. right? the supper hour for many) and get up at least 3 Sundays a month to come in early and practice, then sing in front of their friends and congregation? Who they are is FAMILY. They are fathers (happy Father’s Day to you fellas!) and mothers, daughters and sons. The choir is more than the sum of the individual members. We care for each other, we feed each other, both sustaining food and spiritually. Yes, everyone in the choir likes to sing. But the skill levels are as different as each person is, some tall, some short, some dark haired some light. Some of the choir members read music, some don’t. Some practice at home, some don’t. the results are in. We’re a choir! The master conductor Maestro Robert Shaw once said, “The
wonderful thing about the amateur chorus, is that nobody can buy its attendance at rehearsals, or the sweat, eyestrain and fatigue that go along with the glow; and nobody but the most purposeful and creative of musical minds—[composers] from Bach in both directions—can invite and sustain its devotion.” We try to delve into that wonderful music from the beginning of recorded time to the contemporary music that is so accessible to me through Unitarian Universalist Musician’s Network conferences and connections.

Singing a *cappella* music is wonderful, but has its pitfalls. Again, from Stacy’s book, “A *cappella* is to choral singing [with instrumental accompaniment] as skinny-dipping is to swimming. Vulnerable, exhilarating, and prone to revelations.” You have no one to pick you up when you falter. “No Matter how much you practice, no singer in the room can sing [a cappella] choral music on their own. You need each other.”

Sometimes, part of making music together is finding good instrumentalists like Kate and Chuck, and my cellist friend Marina and our wonderful congregants like Chris and Connie who play guitar and bass and bring great music to so many activities, also enhancing the choral sound. They are part of our team that we can hardly live without. Music is so much more interesting when there is variety, and for that reason the choir offers both accompanied and a *cappella* music for your listening pleasure.
Here at CVUUS changes are expected, as time passes and our choir members move away or move on due to changing voices or personal changes. Sometimes we have to say a final goodbye to one of our own. I know we are all thinking of Patty Sgrecci today, and all of today’s music is really sent out to her, in hopes that wherever she is, she is free of pain and sorrow, and she can hear us. I don’t think anyone ever really leaves the choir, they are always with us in our memories, we can sometimes even imagine hearing their voices ringing still in this resonant space.

What fun is it learning new music if there’s nobody to sing it to? You, the listeners, are every bit as important to us as we are to you! Without a congregation, our spiritual offerings would be hollow and empty. To gain fullness, the songs need to be presented, lovingly, and with care to make music, while showing our feelings about the subject material. Sometimes we look out at you, even making eye contact while we’re singing. Other times the words are so personal, we hold them close to our hearts.

I thank you dear folks in the congregation who listen to and appreciate the choir. You give us support, by appreciating our music, and financially with your pledges and special funding. Thank you. Each one of you might be a potential choir
member, so don’t be surprised if our singers (or the conductor) chats with you during coffee hour about whether you have a place singing in the choir. Or, do you know a community member who would benefit from making new friends, and finding a musical spiritual home? Or do you play an instrument and could join in our music making by accompanying? Or, take a solo opportunity like young Baxter Harrington did at the piano earlier this month. Music at CVUUS is an all-inclusive endeavor!

The choir folks are first and foremost members and friends of the congregation at CVUUS, and reach out to the community, the broader community in Addison County, the US, and greater community of humanity. In the end, we’re all in this life together. Trying to find a way through the maze of life is hard. We all need a team to pick us up when we fall, a group who gathers often and laughs. Music is the medium. We love to work and live in music. Music adds a blessed element to life, whether it’s listening or participating.

“Music critic Henry Krehbiel wrote, ‘To sing in a choir is the quickest, surest, and best way to become intimate with music, to get close to the seat of its emotional life, where its heart-throbs can be felt and heard…to hold communion with its gentle saints and glorious heroes’”
In conclusion, I hope you, the congregation, and you, the choir, are all transported by these anthems today, and take away a deep heart-felt reflection and spiritual fulfillment, where the listeners and the choir, quoting Stacy Horn again, enjoy “reveling in the warm glow of our voices, and the magic current of potential that comes to life whenever people are drawn together by the astonishing and irresistible power of a song.”