

THE SINGING CHURCH: AN ANALYSIS OF VOCAL DEVIATIONS IN CONGREGATIONAL SINGING - A STUDY OF HKBP CONGREGATIONAL SINGING TECHNIQUES

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the policies of the Huria Kristen Batak Protestan (HKBP) Church regarding congregational singing practices during Sunday worship and to evaluate their implementation in order to identify an ideal model for improving the quality of congregational singing techniques. The primary issue addressed in this research is the prevalence of technical errors in congregational singing, such as inaccurate rhythm, poor intonation, unclear articulation, and uncontrolled vocal dynamics. These errors tend to occur repeatedly and systematically, which is suspected to be the result of oral tradition transmission without structured musical training. The research employs a descriptive qualitative method using a case study approach conducted in three HKBP church regions in North Sumatra: Tarutung, Pematangsiantar, and Medan. Data collection techniques include observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The findings indicate that although the HKBP possesses a rich legacy of church music, the implementation of policies related to congregational singing training remains uneven and lacks structure. Vocal technique training has not yet become an integral part of church programs, and congregational singing ability is largely shaped by worship habits without adequate pedagogical intervention. Oral tradition plays a significant role but is not sufficiently supported by formal musical approaches. Based on these findings, this study proposes an ideal model for developing congregational singing techniques that incorporates theological, musical, and inculturative aspects—taking into account the characteristics of Batak music and Christian spiritual values. This research is expected to make a meaningful contribution to enhancing the quality of worship in the HKBP context, particularly in the area of congregational singing as an expression of faith and a vital element of liturgy.

Keywords: *HKBP Church, congregational singing, vocal technique, oral tradition*

INTRODUCTION

Music and congregational singing play a central role in the liturgy of the Huria Kristen Batak Protestant Church (HKBP). The church's musical tradition represents a synthesis of Batak cultural elements and the Lutheran hymnody heritage from Germany, introduced by missionaries over 180 years ago. Despite this rich musical history, the quality of congregational singing during worship services remains a persistent technical challenge. Observations of various HKBP services reveal that many congregants perform hymns with incorrect vocal techniques, imprecise intonation and rhythm, and unclear articulation of lyrics. This issue is not incidental but has become a generational pattern, passed down over time. Most congregants learn to sing informally, through routine participation in worship from a young age, without formal musical training or guidance. Consequently, singing standards are often based on habit rather than accurate musical understanding. As Kodály (1974) explains, music learning that relies solely on habitual practice without theoretical foundation results in inconsistent quality and limited potential for development. There is also a cultural assumption that Batak people possess a natural singing talent. However, in the context of hymnody, which demands serenity, vocal control, and spiritual expressiveness, raw vocal strength alone is insufficient. Uncontrolled or excessively loud singing can disrupt the solemnity of worship. While some Batak individuals may indeed have strong voices, technical control is essential for achieving the refinement and spiritual depth required in hymn performance. Erwin W. Lutzer (1998) emphasizes that church music should not only be pleasing to the ear but also reflect holiness and the depth of faith.

Within HKBP worship, music is not merely an accessory; it serves as a medium for spiritual reflection and theological engagement. Liturgical music enhances the meaning of worship and deepens congregants' spiritual experiences. Therefore, maintaining high-quality congregational singing is essential for facilitating meaningful and devout worship. Despite being a major church institution, HKBP has yet to implement comprehensive music training programs for its members. Existing training initiatives often depend on individual talent and do not systematically reach the entire congregation, resulting in disparities in singing quality and potentially diminishing the spiritual value of worship. Attention to the quality of congregational music and singing is particularly important in HKBP services. The church has a unique and rich musical tradition, combining Batak cultural elements with Christian values. Ensuring that congregants sing correctly and proficiently—including proper vocal technique, harmony, articulation, and understanding of lyrical meaning—is essential for preserving the integrity of worship. High-quality, expressive singing can lead to a profound and devout worship experience, whereas poor-quality singing can detract from spiritual engagement.

Music holds significant importance in HKBP, especially during worship services. Nearly every Sunday service features music and singing as central components, with hymns performed collectively. However, a striking reality is that many congregants have never formally studied hymns. Most learn through daily experiences or habitual church attendance from childhood. This results in singing practices that, while culturally ingrained, often lack theoretical grounding, leading to suboptimal performance that does not fully align with the character of proper hymnody. Considering HKBP's 164-year history, congregants ideally should possess strong hymn-singing skills, particularly in German Lutheran-style hymns, which were introduced by the founding missionaries. Based on the researcher's observations of HKBP worship services, it is common to hear congregants sing hymns incorrectly. These errors are rarely recognized by the singers themselves, as they do not perceive them as mistakes. Consequently, such issues remain unaddressed, perpetuating longstanding technical deficiencies in congregational singing.

An internal perception within Batak society holds that Batak people are renowned for their singing ability. In practice, however, when listened to closely, congregational singing often sounds loud but lacks refinement, especially in the context of hymnal or sacred music. Upon closer examination, many technical inaccuracies in vocal performance are evident. Such errors in singing, particularly in basic vocal technique, appear to have persisted within the HKBP institution and have not been treated as a matter of concern. While this may be viewed as a weakness, it is also possible that the issue reflects unintentional oversight rather than deliberate neglect. In reality, there is a mix of individuals who can sing well and those who cannot. Various challenges are associated with congregational singing, which should be a critical and sacred component of worship. A particularly striking problem is the prevalence of fundamental technical errors, including inaccurate rhythm, melodic deviations, unclear articulation, and neglect of dynamic expression, which should ideally enrich the spiritual experience. These errors are not isolated incidents but appear to be systemic, recurring patterns passed down through generations. It is likely that these mistakes are historical in origin, perpetuated because the church has not actively addressed them through training, guidance, or sustained liturgical music education.

HKBP's musical tradition is rich and distinctive, rooted in Batak cultural influences and the Lutheran hymnal legacy introduced by German missionaries. However, in practice, this valuable heritage is not always preserved through adequate pedagogical approaches. Most congregants learn to sing not through formal instruction or structured rehearsals but through habitual participation in worship from a young age. This experiential learning, lacking theoretical explanation, produces singing practices based on imitation and habit rather than informed musical understanding. Consequently, many singing errors are not recognized by congregants as deviations or mistakes. Over time, these errors have become part of a "collective habit," normalized and rarely challenged because they do not appear to disrupt worship.

There is also a common belief among the Batak community that its people possess innate singing talent. While there is some truth to this, as many Batak individuals have strong and naturally musical voices, such raw vocal power alone is insufficient in church music, particularly in hymnal performance, which requires serenity, balance, and sacred interpretation. Loud, uncontrolled singing can disrupt the solemnity of worship. Many congregants sing enthusiastically but often neglect aspects such as precise rhythm, correct intonation, and clear articulation of lyrics. This diminishes the spiritual quality of the singing itself. Hymns, intended to guide congregants into a profound worship experience, can instead sound loud, rushed, or uncoordinated, undermining a key element of worship. This raises important questions for HKBP, which serves a large congregation of approximately 6.5 million members: Is the church aware of this decline in spiritual quality? Does it recognize it as a problem, and does it have solutions to improve congregational singing and musical standards? This issue deserves serious attention from HKBP as a church institution with a history spanning more than a century. At 164 years old, HKBP should ideally have an established

and structured music training system to progressively enhance congregational singing. Yet, in practice, the church has not fully integrated liturgical music education into pastoral care, formal education, or informal programs. Often, the church relies on a few talented individuals to lead singing, without providing collective training for the congregation. This results in disparities in singing quality, with only a small portion of congregants able to perform hymns correctly and proficiently. This study also seeks to identify an ideal model that can serve as a guide for congregational singing. Such a model is expected to provide an effective and efficient framework for improving congregational singing quality. Therefore, one of the objectives of this research is to analyze HKBP's policies regarding congregational singing during Sunday worship. The study aims to describe existing policies, evaluate their implementation, and ultimately propose a model to better guide congregants in singing accurately and meaningfully throughout weekly worship services.

METHOD

A. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach with descriptive-analytical methods, supplemented by quantitative data as a tertiary support. The research is designed to explore and provide an in-depth description of common errors in congregational singing practices at HKBP churches, with quantitative data serving as supportive evidence from interviews conducted with congregants across the selected church resorts. Through the qualitative approach, the study aims to capture the direct experiences of congregants in singing and to examine various factors influencing the quality of these practices (Sugiyono, 2019). This approach allows the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of recurring errors, including issues related to rhythm, pitch, articulation, dynamic interpretation, and local singing habits.

One reason for adopting a qualitative approach is its flexibility in describing complex phenomena, such as congregational singing techniques, which are heavily influenced by cultural context, church tradition, and congregants' habitual practices. Qualitative methods enable the identification of non-textual factors that contribute to singing practices, such as congregants' perceptions of specific hymns, familiarity with melodies or lyrics, and regional customs that may lead to modifications in hymn performance. This approach is particularly relevant because it focuses on understanding both individual and collective experiences in congregational singing, distinguishing it from quantitative approaches, which emphasize measurement and statistical analysis.

B. Data Source

The population targeted in this study comprises HKBP churches. Five HKBP churches in the Medan, Siantar, and Tarutung regions were selected as samples due to their rich congregational music traditions. The congregants involved in this study are those who actively participate in worship services and sing during church activities, which are central aspects of their spiritual life. Their active participation not only demonstrates their commitment to worship practices but also reflects their desire to engage with the church community and strengthen their faith identity through music. This study seeks to capture the perspectives and experiences of congregants within the context of church policies and training practices, which influence their singing abilities. Therefore, the selected population is expected to provide valuable insights into how these policies and training programs impact the development of congregational singing techniques. Additionally, the diversity of congregants' social, economic, and educational backgrounds is an important factor that will be analyzed to understand the dynamics of singing practices within the church. Consequently, this research focuses not only on vocal technique but also on understanding how the social and cultural context of congregants shapes their worship experiences through music. Furthermore, it examines how church policies and training practices can be adjusted to meet the needs of various groups within the church community.

C. Method of Data Collection

This study employs three primary data collection techniques: participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis.

1. Participatory Observation

Observations were conducted directly during worship services to capture congregational singing practices in their natural setting without intervention. The focus of observation included both technical and non-technical aspects of singing, such as rhythm accuracy, intonation, lyric articulation, dynamic interpretation, and the influence of local or regional habits. Through these observations, the researcher identified various errors that emerged spontaneously during singing, while also understanding their relationship to cultural context and the worship atmosphere (Creswell, 2014). The findings from these observations form the basis for formulating more effective and contextually appropriate church music training.

2. In-Depth Interviews

Structured interviews were conducted with three groups of informants: congregants, choir leaders, and church music instructors. The interviews aimed to explore the informants' understanding, experiences, and perspectives regarding congregational singing techniques and the factors influencing them. Results revealed that most congregants sing based on habit and tradition, without formal training, often struggling with rhythm, intonation, and dynamics. Choir leaders and music instructors highlighted limited time, resources, and the lack of continuous training programs as the main factors contributing to the low quality of congregational singing. These interviews provided a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and potential for developing church music.

3. Document Analysis

Document analysis involved examining hymn scores, congregational hymnbooks, and audio and video recordings of worship services. Hymn scores were used as the primary reference to evaluate the alignment between the original notation and congregational performance. Hymnbooks were analyzed for possible local adaptations or variations, while worship recordings were used to identify recurring technical errors. Document analysis was conducted systematically, guided by musical evaluation theory to ensure objectivity and accuracy. This approach enabled the researcher to identify gaps between theoretical knowledge and practical performance and to formulate relevant recommendations for improving congregational singing quality.

4. Data Validity and Reliability

Data validity and reliability were maintained through triangulation, integrating findings from observations, interviews, and document analysis. Triangulation was employed to verify research findings by comparing multiple sources and perspectives, reducing potential bias and enhancing the reliability of the results (Arikunto, 2002). Subjective interview data were validated through direct observation and document analysis, while observation findings were reinforced by technical standards found in scores and worship recordings. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of congregational singing errors and their underlying causes. Data triangulation ensured that the research results are valid, reliable, and can serve as a foundation for formulating recommendations to improve church music development and more effective congregational singing training.

D. Method of Data Analysis

The collected data will be analyzed using a descriptive approach to identify and describe patterns of errors in congregational singing based on several categories:

1. Rhythm Errors Analysis

Errors in rhythm will be analyzed by observing patterns such as:

- a. Accelerating the tempo in familiar sections.
- b. Slowing down at the end of phrases without an indicated *ritardando*.
- c. Altering the duration of long notes to short notes, or vice versa.

2. Pitch Errors Analysis

Pitch-related errors will be analyzed according to congregants' tendencies to:

- a. Lower high notes that are difficult to reach.
- b. Raise low notes unconsciously.

- c. Deviate during octave transitions.

3. Articulation Errors Analysis

In terms of articulation, the researcher will observe:

- a. Cutting phrases at inappropriate points for breath intake.
- b. Omitting rests or pauses that should be present.

4. Dynamics Interpretation Errors Analysis

Errors in the interpretation of dynamics will be analyzed with a focus on:

- a. Ignoring piano (p) or forte (f) markings.
- b. Neglecting changes in crescendo or decrescendo.

5. Regional/Local Habits Analysis

This analysis will examine unique patterns among congregants that may be influenced by cultural factors, such as:

- a. Adding ornamental notes (melismas) not indicated in the score.
- b. Modifying the melody according to local traditions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on questionnaires, interviews, and observations in several HKBP churches, this study identified various factors affecting the implementation of the “church that sings” concept, particularly regarding congregational vocal deviations and singing techniques during worship. Data analysis focused on three main aspects: congregants’ understanding of singing techniques, church policies on vocal training, and the challenges faced in improving congregational singing quality. The findings indicate that although music plays a central role in worship, training in congregational singing techniques has not been implemented optimally. Key constraints include a shortage of competent instructors, limited rehearsal time, and inadequate facilities and supporting policies. These findings highlight the need for a more systematic and sustainable approach to developing congregational singing skills.

A. Overview of Respondents

The respondents consisted of active HKBP congregants who regularly participate in worship and serve as choir members or song leaders in churches in Medan, Pematangsiantar, and Tarutung. Most respondents viewed music as an important element of worship, both as an expression of faith and as a means to create a reverent atmosphere. However, the majority indicated that formal training in singing techniques at their churches is very limited or unavailable. Many rely on natural singing experience without formal vocal training, which affects the overall quality of congregational singing. Interviews with church leaders revealed that limitations in human resources, time constraints, and congregants’ busy schedules are major obstacles to conducting structured vocal training.

B. Results of Singing Technique Understanding Assessment

Survey results showed that only about 40% of congregants possess a basic understanding of correct vocal techniques, while the remaining 60% reported limited knowledge of key aspects, such as diaphragmatic breathing, articulation, and intonation. Additionally, approximately 35% of congregants experienced difficulty maintaining stable intonation when singing in groups. These challenges are generally attributed to insufficient practice, limited musical understanding, and discrepancies between congregational singing and musical accompaniment. Interviews with song leaders reinforced these findings, emphasizing that the lack of technical guidance is a primary factor contributing to low vocal harmony quality among congregants. These conditions underscore the need for a more systematic learning strategy to improve congregants’ understanding of singing techniques.

C. Church Policy on Congregational Singing

Analysis revealed that, although congregational singing occupies a central position in HKBP liturgy and church life, policies regarding vocal technique training have not been fully implemented. Church music serves not only as a medium for worship but also as a tool for theological learning, spiritual strengthening, and the expression of cultural identity, particularly within the Batak church context. However, interviews with the HKBP Worship and Music Bureau revealed that there is currently no synodal policy formally regulating congregational vocal training.

Each church resort has the freedom to develop its own policies, resulting in uneven implementation of vocal training programs. Field findings indicate that 55% of respondents reported their churches do not have regular training programs, while 30% have programs with limited frequency and scope. The main challenges include limited instructors, funding, rehearsal time, and low congregant participation. Furthermore, some still hold the perception that singing during worship does not require specific techniques. Based on these findings, this study emphasizes the importance of formulating more focused and systematic church policies to develop congregational singing skills. Such policies should include ongoing training programs, capacity building for worship leaders, and the use of technology as a learning tool, thereby significantly enhancing both the quality of congregational singing and the spiritual experience during worship.

DISCUSSION

Based on the research findings, this discussion focuses on four main issues: the importance of congregational singing technique training, the ideal model for developing singing techniques in HKBP churches, challenges in implementing church music policies, and the potential integration of technology in congregational music learning. These four aspects are interrelated in efforts to enhance the quality of congregational singing as an integral part of liturgy and the spiritual experience of worship.

1. The Importance of Singing Technique Training for HKBP Congregants

Congregational singing in HKBP worship serves theological, spiritual, and communal functions, making technical singing proficiency crucial to supporting the meaning of worship. Proper singing techniques—including diaphragmatic breathing, articulation, intonation, and resonance—help maintain vocal stability, clarity of lyrics, and harmony in collective singing (McKinney, 1994). Singing technique training is not intended to showcase individual vocal ability but rather to strengthen the delivery of theological messages and foster communal participation in worship (Ammer, 2004). In the HKBP context, where congregational singing is central to the liturgy and deeply imbued with Batak cultural values, mastering vocal techniques enables congregants to fully appreciate the meaning of the lyrics and maintain musical unity during services. The findings indicate that systematic vocal training can increase congregants' confidence, improve harmonic quality, and encourage active participation in worship, thereby allowing congregational singing to function more effectively as a medium for faith formation and spiritual development.

2. Ideal Model for Developing Congregational Singing Techniques in HKBP Churches

An ideal model for developing congregational singing techniques should be grounded in a theological foundation that views singing as a response of faith and an active form of participation in the liturgy. Development of singing techniques should address not only technical aspects but also the spiritual and theological understanding of congregational music. Technically, this development includes training in breath control, articulation, pitch management, dynamics, and musical expression. These skills should be taught gradually and contextually to suit the characteristics of HKBP congregants. Successful implementation of this model requires clear organizational structures, systematic and ongoing training programs, and active involvement of church leaders. Additionally, the regeneration and training of church music ministers are essential to ensure the sustainability of music ministry quality. Cultural contextualization is also an integral part of the ideal model, allowing Batak musical elements to be incorporated thoughtfully into church singing without compromising theological integrity.

3. Church Music Training Patterns

Effective church music training includes instruction in basic vocal techniques, music theory and notation, knowledge of church music history and theology, and collective singing practice. An andragogical approach is important for adult congregants, taking into account their prior experiences, motivations, and learning needs (Frecknall-Hughes, 2017). Inclusive and collaborative training not only enhances musical skills but also strengthens the sense of community and congregational ownership of the music ministry. Supported by appropriate church policies, music training can serve as a tool for faith formation and holistic liturgical strengthening.

4. Challenges in Implementing Church Music Policies

The study found that implementing church music policies faces several key challenges, including a shortage of competent instructors, limited supporting facilities, congregants' time constraints, and diverse musical backgrounds and generational preferences. Additionally, music is still sometimes viewed as a supplementary

element in worship rather than a strategic priority, further hindering development. These challenges are compounded by budget limitations and the lack of written policies that systematically govern congregational singing training. To address these issues, churches need to develop sustainable strategies, including enhancing the capacity of music ministers, providing adequate facilities and funding, and scheduling flexible and contextually relevant training programs.

5. Integration of Technology in Congregational Music Learning

The integration of digital technology offers strategic opportunities for developing congregational singing techniques, especially given time and resource limitations. The use of vocal training apps, video tutorials, online classes, and rehearsal recordings allows congregants to learn independently and continuously. Technology-based learning not only increases access and flexibility but also enhances the quality of congregational singing and the worship experience. Therefore, technology should be regarded as an effective complement to face-to-face training in church music development.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that congregational singing techniques in HKBP worship services still face several challenges, particularly regarding vocal training and church policies, which have not yet been fully optimized to support the improvement of congregational singing quality. Music in HKBP worship is not merely an aesthetic element; it also holds profound spiritual significance, capable of enhancing congregants' engagement in the liturgy. While some congregants possess a basic understanding of singing techniques, there remains a significant need for more structured and systematic training programs. One of the main findings of this study is that many congregants lack a foundational understanding of basic vocal techniques, such as diaphragmatic breathing, articulation, and intonation. This lack of knowledge affects the quality of congregational singing, often resulting in performances that are less harmonious and lacking in expressive depth, which diminishes the spiritual experience of worship.

Furthermore, church policies related to vocal training have not been fully or consistently implemented across HKBP churches. Although there is awareness of the importance of congregational singing in worship, the implementation of training programs faces various challenges, including a shortage of competent music instructors, insufficient supporting facilities such as adequate rehearsal spaces, and limited time for congregants to participate in regular training. Beyond technical singing challenges, the study also found that church music policies have not yet fully supported the development of congregational vocal techniques. Many churches do not have systematic and structured vocal training programs, resulting in congregants often relying solely on personal experience in singing without deeper guidance or instruction. Even churches that have implemented training programs continue to face obstacles related to the frequency of training, the lack of expert instructors, and limited access to effective learning materials. Therefore, more effective strategies are needed to enhance the quality of congregational singing in HKBP worship services.

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