



Affinity Groups

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Tunings: A Column by Peggy D. Bennett, PhD: Mary Helen Richards Lectureship Recipient 2009-2010, Professor of Music Education at Oberlin College Conservatory of Music, and founding member of Music EdVentures, Inc.

Note: In the 1980s, Mary Helen Richards asked me to write a column for the bi-monthly ETM Newsletter. At that time, I named the column Tunings and wrote on a variety of topics. So, when I received the honor of this year's Mary Helen Richards lectureship, I decided it may be a good time to resurrect Tunings and publish it in the MEI newsletter.

Recently, I was reading an article about Community Music settings around the world and was struck by a description of these groups. "Affinity group" was the phrase used to describe the spirit that brings folks together for a common intent or value. I, of course, thought about our MEI group.

For 20 years, our Music EdVentures members have gathered annually to sing, play, and learn. *But why?* As I looked around the sessions at the 2009 MEI Conference in Portland, I wondered what causes us to continue making these commitments to each other and to the kind of work we do. Then, I was reminded of the "affinity group" notion. And, I think that has a lot to do with what holds (literally and figuratively) us together.

Whenever I teach my music students about the various methodologies for elementary music education, I often state that very few people know about and use the SongWorks approach. Invariably, someone then asks, "Why?" My response includes listing several "paths not taken." Rather than sensing a list of

lost opportunities for how we have developed, I feel affection for the simplicity and authenticity we have maintained for all these years.

Because we no longer offer courses in the SongWorks approach, because we do not have a nationally visible and active organization for recruiting teachers, because we do not have an array of print materials to sell, because we do not have a stable of members who are conference presenters to advertise our work, because we have no commercial materials or structures with pedagogical allure and wide distribution, because we are a population in which many leaders are nearing retirement or just retired, and because we have no specific vision of how our organization will develop or grow in the next five to ten years, we gather because we have *affinity* for each other and what we do.

Our members have such long-term affinity that much of how we think and what choices we make remains unspoken in our conference presentations; explaining and informing seems so unnecessary, because we believe we have a common foundation, a common attitude, a common understanding. Linking this notion to dictionary definitions, we have a community of interest; we feel a kinship, a likeness, with others present; and the force that attracts us causes us to “enter into and remain in chemical [social, emotional, intellectual, pedagogical, musical] combination.”

So, as we look at our personal and organizational missions with regard to our “work,” whether that is in a classroom or in the greater community, perhaps we can feel a great degree of solace and serenity. We are an *affinity* group, and at this point, I can think of no better way to describe *why* we are than that.

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