

THE
CENTER FOR
CONGREGATIONAL
SONG



SING!

Crafting Songs and Hymns

A Collection of
Short Essays to
Inspire and Challenge
Church Musicians

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As you read through this collection of short essays, I hope you find the author's words thought-provoking, inspiring, and useful. Whether you are a hymnwriter or songwriter yourself, someone who is passionate about the craft of composing or writing, or someone who just happened upon this resource, what you will find are a variety of voices and opinions from a variety of sources, traditions, and experiences. The authors represent over nine different denominations, six countries of origin, three generations, and over three-hundred and fifty years of cumulative ministry experience.

This is the first resource created by The Center for Congregational Song and is representative of some of the guiding stances that guide all of our work:

- We celebrate the width and depth of variety in the church's song throughout history, recognizing that each genre, like each culture or each person, brings unique gifts and challenges to the church
- We celebrate the width and depth of instrumentation that is available to lead the church's song, recognizing that how instruments are played and/or used can enhance or detract from the congregation's song
- There has never been a time in the church's history when new songs were not being written
- There has never been a time in the church's history when new and old songs were not being critiqued and criticized
- Collaboration and teamwork honors each other's different gifts and therefore makes everyone stronger by building up partnerships, strengthening relationships, and amplifying each other's ministries
- We seek conversation partners who have strong, thoughtful convictions, and who approach their work with humility and collegiality.

Each of the authors in this collection embody these guiding stances. Each essay will have a unique voice and perspective, some of which approach topics in very different ways. We celebrate those differences and believe that by offering a resource with a variety of perspectives that come from wisdom and humility we can begin a healthy and holistic conversation about the church's song.

Soli Deo Gloria!

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Jorge Lockward is a native of the Dominican Republic, who currently lives and works in New York City. He served as committee member of the Spanish-language United Methodist hymnal, *Mil Voces para Celebrar*, and has served as consultant on Global Music for several other denominational hymnals. As songleader, Jorge was part of the songleading team for the Ninth Assembly of the Word Council of Churches in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

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SONGS OLD, SONGS NEW - John L. Bell

Among the many significant texts which the Revised Common Lectionary does not offer for public digestion is one of particular interest to church musicians.

It is found in the seldom opened book of Ezra 3:10-13. It describes what happened when the Israelite exiles came back to Jerusalem and gathered the clans to witness the laying of the foundation stone of the new temple. The priests doubled as trumpeters, the people sang responsively, and the vast crowd responded with a great shout.

Then comes the fun part:

But many of the priests and Levites and heads of families,
old people who had seen the first house on its foundations,
wept with a loud voice when they saw this house,
though many shouted aloud with joy.

People could not distinguish the joyful shout from the sound of weeping. (NRSV)

Whether it is a new hymn or a new hymnal, the change of worship time, the removal of one pew or every pew, the engagement of lay people in leading worship, always, always there are some who applaud and some who lament with equal volume.

Particularly in the music of the church, emotions have run high enough to make the term 'worship wars' a new buzz word in the liturgical lexicon. But when one analyses the enthusiasm and the disquiet which a new development in church music entails, there are some basic realities which should not be by-passed.

The first is that far from 'tradition' being a bastion against change, the only thing which is constant in tradition is that it changes. Many of us have been to historical theme parks to see how people lived and worked in previous centuries. But the church and its worship are not theme parks. They do not pickle the past in formalin [formaldehyde]. They are not a hermetically-sealed zone which we enter once a week to do as our forebears did.

We may extol the Methodist, the Presbyterian, the Episcopal tradition in which we grew up. But it will bear little resemblance to what was initiated by John Wesley, John Knox, or Bishop Seabury. We meet in comfortable buildings, where we listen to homilies which are up to a third as long as the sermons of the founding fathers. We mostly sing accompanied and will have changed hymnals at least three times in the last 60 years, and our diet of hymns and songs has not only broken out of the straightjackets of former approved canons, but bears witness to sometimes a fusion and sometimes a schism of styles.

In the United Kingdom, if not in the USA, as recently as the 1960s many congregations had two hymnals—the denominational book and Moody and Sankey. These sometimes would be used at different services in the same church and had

their devotees, who had no hesitation in criticising the elitism or the mundanity of other people's preferred music.

Having said this, we also have to appreciate that the reasons for applauding or deriding an old or new tradition has more to do with emotion than reason. For some people the sentimental association that an old hymn in a timeworn book has, seems to the aficionado to be an infinitely deeper reality than the seeming insubstantial and banal lyrics of a praise song digitally projected on a screen.

But to the teenager who did not grow up singing hymns round the piano and committing religious texts to memory, to the young adult whose preferred musical genre is as far from Victorian hymnody as Mars is from Venus, there seems to be little of nourishment in a five stanza hymn in formalised language.

Are we at an impasse?

Perhaps yes, perhaps no. Certainly no progress will be made if we remain with our different cultural citadels extolling our valued repertoire and belittling any other.

What is required—as so often in other areas of tension in the church—is to move into an open space where, rather than criticise or be defensive, we can do the radical thing of contexting the conversation in an exploration of the purposes of music within the church.

Here are some fundamental question people from different cultural traditions should be exploring together:

1. Why do we have music in worship? Is it to praise God or to make people feel happy or are there other reasons?
2. If the psalms, which Jesus sang, are representative of the range of subject-matter and emotions which God approves, how much of that range does our preferred type of music include?
3. How do we ensure that what we choose for the congregation to sing is appropriate for any occasion, as distinct from fond favourites or what the musicians prefer to accompany?
4. When and how do those who choose and lead songs and hymn reflect on their effectiveness?

I write this with some conviction. Years ago, I was asked to help an Episcopal priest deal with a worship skirmish. The church had a robed choir of elderly people and anthem aficionados who sang in the morning, a rock-cum-praise band who played at night, and two country-and-western crooners who led worship in a church plant based in a school hall.

Each grouping knew nothing of the others but suspected them highly. I asked the priest to organise a Sunday afternoon meeting. I suggested it begin with best quality coffee served in real cups and equally high-quality chocolate cookies.

After half an hour, I invited them to go into mixed groups and talk about why we made music in church. It was the first time any of them had discussed that neutral question, and it had positive lasting effects.

WHY NEW CONGREGATIONAL SONGS? - Jorge Lockward

Cambia, todo cambia (Change, everything changes). Violeta Parra
There is nothing new under the sun. Qohelet 1:9

Before exploring the tangled spectrum of *old* and *new* it may be helpful to probe the nature of *song*. In other words, to ask the question: What is a song?

I would propose (for the purposes of this brief reflection) that the core of a song's identity is to be found in the experience of those who sing it. To define *song* by what it does for those who sing it is not to limit its identity to a utilitarian paradigm. It is rather, I believe, to honor the depth of its ecological intention—its deep desire to connect, to engage, to become alive in vibration, affect, and thought. A song needs the singer and the singer needs the song. Without each other they cannot reach a fullness of being.

And, similar to the question “If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” we could ask “Is a song that no one is singing still a song?” Or, closer to the spirit of The Center for Congregational Song, “Is a song that is not deeply owned by a community still a *song* for that community?”

The prerequisite exchange between song and singer germinates in the soil of life, at the crossroads of what is real and at hand. The power and effectiveness of their encounter is contingent on the honesty of their common ground, the authenticity of their meeting place. And because “everything changes,” as Violeta Parra reminds us, this meeting place of song and singer is in constant flux. This flux is the relentless call for a new song for new expressions capable of engaging and addressing new realities. By virtue of its essential intention to become alive in the present and reflect it to the singer, a song needs to be new if it is to be true to its nature.

“What about tradition?” some would ask. “Is there no value in engaging tradition?” Of course there is! However, I have found that quite often when *tradition* is invoked, what is really meant is *history*.

An example from the Wesleyan heritage could help unveil this distinction. What is at the essence of the Wesleyan singing tradition? The obvious answer would seemingly be found in the thousands of hymns the Wesley brothers collected, wrote, translated, and edited for the early Methodist communities. I would suggest, however, that these important historical artifacts are only a window through which we can discern the depth of the tradition that gave them birth.

Looking through the window provided by history, we may discern the intentions and motivations behind this singing tradition. These intentions and motivations, I would argue, form the essence of *tradition*. At the core of the Wesleyan singing tradition there is a desire for a profoundly lyrical engagement of a lived theology in ways that can reach and inflame the hearts of the masses. If, as I suggest, tradition is to be found not in the historical artifacts but rather in the

intentions and motivations that birthed them, it follows that while singing the original Wesleyan hymns is a laudable engagement in history and can be a window into the tradition, a faithful engagement of the tradition would require that we tirelessly engage the task of finding, writing, teaching, and engaging vehicles that invite profoundly lyrical engagement of a lived theology in ways that can reach and inflame the hearts of the masses **today**. Qohelet's dictum, "*There is nothing new under the sun,*" comes to mind. Tradition, understood in this light, becomes yet another reason, charge, and mandate for new congregational songs.

I must pause here to acknowledge the entangled and symbiotic nature of the old/new continuum. In this continuum, context is more important than chronology. A chronologically "old song" can certainly behave as a "new song" when it is able to engage the unfolding realities of existence. Likewise, a chronologically "new song" can effectively function as an "old song" when it is unable to capture and interact with what is at hand.

There is, nonetheless, an advantage that chronologically newer songs have over older ones. They have an increased capacity to surprise and unhinge us from the false sense of power and control that chronologically older songs can lull us into by virtue of their familiarity.

A few Sundays ago, we introduced the Setswana song "Reamo leboga/We give our thanks," along with Andrew Donaldson's textual improvisations, at the Church of the Village in New York City. The song is meant to serve as our sung response for the offertory during the fall season. Already in choir rehearsal, I could sense the transition from *teaching* to *owning* was not going to be hard. With every repetition, the choir got deeper into the song, engaging voice, gesture, and soul, slowly but surely transforming the song into common prayer. Introducing the song to the assembly went well, but it was not without incident. The congregation struggled in learning the song. At one point I had to move into the center aisle in order to be closer to the congregation. This allowed me to aid in planting the seed.

Then, the harvesting started! After the second Sunday, I overheard one of our clergy casually humming the tune. After the third Sunday, an email came from someone asking for more information on the song. And then, in a glorious moment after the end of choir rehearsal, a choir member sang the call: "We give..." and the whole choir responded in harmony: "...our hands to you." The new song had taken root and the fruits were being harvested. The time will come when we will give this fruitful tree a rest and engage a different song that may meet and surprise us in the journey. But for this season, we will continue to be blessed for daring a new song.

We need new songs in order to express the new things that God is doing among us. We need new songs to become a new community. We need new songs because we need to be surprised and unhinged. We need new songs because tradition demands it. We need new songs because we desperately need to pray.

May it be so. Amen.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD TEXT GOOD? – Adam Tice

When my grandmother died, I inherited a beautiful dresser made by my great-great-great-grandfather Jacob Knagy in 1876. Beyond its functionality and basic visual appeal, people who know anything about wood-working get very excited about it. They pull open the drawers and marvel at the hand-carved dovetails, which line up perfectly. They touch the wood and comment on its durability. They look at the underside and back and see that nothing was skimped on it the crafting process.

Most of those details are lost on me as a layperson until they are pointed out, but they all contribute to a perfectly crafted piece of art. Unlike the cheaper snap-together-yourself furniture that populates most of my house, this piece has lasted 141 years. The detail and care applied to it at its creation gave it the potential to endure for generations, while I will be lucky if my \$20 bookshelves hold up a decade under all of my hymnals.

There are elements of any craft that infuse a work with durability and aesthetic appeal—and writing songs and hymns is as much craft as it is art. Many of the elements of our craft would be lost on the average singer, or would seem unimportant. But there is a strong analogy between a perfectly tight dovetail and a perfect rhyme (or smooth rhythmic accents, or proper grammar, or . . .)

An essential element in good crafting is a good design. For hymns and songs, this means creating a pattern that suits the material and sticking to it. If multiple stanzas are used, they should all follow exactly the same pattern of metrical accents and rhymes. A dotted slur in the musical score shows where a writer has cheated the metrical pattern and, predictably, those are the places where congregations stumble when singing. Even when traditional elements like rhyme are not employed, other organizing features should take their place. Repetition or alliteration can also serve as guideposts through a text, providing singers with the sense of structure needed to internalize a song's message over time.

Approaching the work of lyricwriting as a craft does not mean leaving aside artistry; it means applying skill and hard work to the art. In my experience, honing a text to "tighten the dovetails" always pays off in the end. That process generally requires the help of other skilled crafters who can help me spot the loose connections. (This is certainly an aspirational process; I don't expect to achieve perfection!) This need for hard work applies to the best lyricwriters in general. I recommend that congregational songwriters familiarize themselves with Stephen Sondheim's books *Finishing the Hat* and *Look, I Made a Hat*, in which he describes the painstaking work of crafting musical theater lyrics. Hip-hop and rap may provide the best analog for the level of craft required for writing good congregational song. Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton: An American Musical* reveals how meter and rhyme can convey character, narrative, and meaning.

I would guess that Jacob Knagy would be surprised to learn that many of his pieces are still around and highly valued. Few hymn and songwriters produce works that endure for decades, much less centuries. But when a well-crafted piece of art finds a home with people who love it and care for it, it can serve its purpose long beyond the life of its creator.

VERTICAL & HORIZONTAL WORSHIP: WHY WE NEED BOTH – Gloria Gaither

As a community of believers we have a rich reservoir of literature that chronicles our history with God and expresses for our corporate retelling the certainties of Holy Scripture and personal experiences in the application of that scripture to life. Through the ages two earmarks of the Christian have been *joy* and *rest*. Joyful song has always been a way for God's people to send their gratitude back to God for his amazing provision and love and to rest in his promises as they go out to live their daily lives.

Each generation has had its styles of expression. Certain instrumentations and chord structures, rhythms and meters have enjoyed favor for a time and then given way to new emphases. But across the generations and spectrum of stylistic preferences, great songs remain. And they remain not so much for their musical style as for the truth expressed in the text, truth so cardinal that it is proven again and again by each new generation.

This historical chain of experience gives new dimension as each new generation rediscovers for itself the power of scripturally true principles, knowing their tie of faith to those who have sung here before.

The two kinds of songs that we sing as a body of believers reflect the promise found in Revelation (Rev. 12:11) that we would overcome the obstacles of any age by the "blood of the Lamb and the Word of [our] testimony." This explains the power we find in hymns—those songs that extol and express praise for the qualities of God and the work that Jesus did for us on the cross.

In general, we could think of hymns as those songs of praise and worship we send up to God identifying for all to hear his attributes and thanking him for his amazing intervention in our world and in our lives. In other words, we sing of the incarnation: God who was before anything existed, the Cause and Source of all things, God of grandeur, power and infinite glory chose to become one of us and to walk with us—Immanuel! Hymns are God-centered and call our attention upward. They are lofty in message and lift us above the earthy. They remind us of our original glory that preceded any original sin and remind us of God's intention to see that glory restored in us. The exchange in hymns, then, is vertical—connecting us to God and seeking to hear his voice speaking to our hearts in return.

Hymns are firmly rooted in God's Word and, since they are intended to be sung corporately by the fellowship of believers, pull us above our petty differences by reminding us of God's dream for us—that we would be one.

Because hymns are intended to reflect the qualities of God, they must have poetry that is beautiful, reverent, simple, accurate, and pure. The theme of a hymn should be focused and at the same time universal and not sectarian in its truth, drawing together and then upward all the divergent believers to oneness in him.

There is no more distilled form of writing than the song lyric, and there is no more condensed form of lyricwriting than hymnwriting. The thought must be

scripturally sound, purely true and without embellishment. This requires that every word count—every verb, every noun, every conjunction, every adverb, or adjective accurate—the perfect choice to convey true meaning so that there is no misunderstanding. Every skill of the poet’s art must be called into play in hymnwriting so that the clarity and beauty, creativity and purity reflect the Maker himself in its expression.

It is equally imperative that the singer or recording artist not take liberties with the words of a hymn. It is not acceptable to embellish or be careless by changing an *at* to *in* or *Father* to *fathers* or an *and* to a *but*. Such changes can totally change the meaning and the theology and violate the integrity of the scripture from which the hymn was taken.

The other kind of song that we need to sing together is the gospel song. Many a great gospel song has also survived that test of many generations of experience and often we even hear these called *hymns* because that have proven to be so true to our shared experience. These songs are “horizontal.” By that I mean that they are “the word of our testimony”—each of us telling someone else what God has done in our lives. These songs are our story. We don’t read the words of Jesus very long before we hear him telling us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give shelter to the homeless and “thus fulfill the law of love.”

It is our deep belief that we should balance hymns and personal testimony songs in our gathering together. We *do* overcome by the “blood of the Lamb” and by “the word of our testimony.” Nothing is as powerful when some cynic shoves us into a corner of “theological nip-picking” than taking two steps away from the belligerent finger-pointing to simply say, “I only know: once I was blind but now I see.”

We need both hymns and gospel songs because every vertical commitment will eventually demand a horizontal living out in relationship with those around us. It is imperative that we know what God says in his living word and when we gather to worship express our gratitude for all he is, rising above our smallness to embrace his glory. We also need to live out what he says in this word, drawing from the great storehouse of his freely offered resources to embrace a hurting world by being what he has called us to be. The vertical. The horizontal. The hymns of praise and great scriptural truth that have withstood the test of experience must be combined with the word of our personal testimony sharing our stories of God at work through us and in us to conform us to the likeness of his Son. We need to teach both to our children. Don’t worry that they might not totally understand all the words. Do you? Do I? But hymns and spiritual songs that are worth their salt are pieces of portable theology and they will throw our children a lifeline when experience is pulling them under for the third time. As with scripture, the meaning of profoundly true songs will become clear when life gets their attention.

The “praise and worship” versus “gospel songs” argument should never come up! We need to sing the songs that have outlived us. We need to sing the songs as new and fresh as this morning’s experience with our neighbor or our children. We need the songs that remind us that we have a history with God. We need the songs that sing our testimony as personal as the e-mail of encouragement we just received from a fellow believer.

All must be biblical, beautiful, true, powerful, and, yes, personal. Let’s encourage each other daily, singing hymns and spiritual songs. Let us never lose our joy and in the chaos of the world live at rest in him who is the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end.

THEOLOGY & LANGUAGE IN OUR SONG – Bryan Sirchio

Well-known composer John Bell from the Iona Community once said, “when we teach our children to sing, we are preparing them for their death beds.” Yes, that at first that sounds a bit morose and heavy! But his point is well taken. The words of the songs we learn as children are among the last things to leave our minds, hearts, and souls at the end of life. Many of us have had the experience of being with a person with Alzheimer’s or dementia who may no longer be able to remember a family member’s name and yet who can still remember the words to a hymn and sing along with those gathered around the bed as the end of life approaches. Musical intelligence and the words we sing are among the last things to leave us in life. Somehow texts put to music get into our beings in a way that words alone do not. They are there within us to draw from, almost like a bank account, long after we lose access to just about all other forms of information our brains have stored.

Author Brian McLaren also once noted in a presentation that the words we sing in the context of worship play a unique role in *forming* us spiritually. They convey and underscore truths and theologies and messages we believe the Holy Spirit would have us embrace throughout our lifetimes both as individuals and as communities. They remind us of what is most central and foundational in our faith and lives. They reach those mysterious and deep places within us that only music and art can reach. They move us, teach us, encourage us, transform us. And songs are always with us because they are within our very beings. They connect us to the things we most need to be reminded of at the exact moments we need them most.

The problem however, according to Brian McLaren, is that the songs we sing also have the power to spiritually *malform* us. And so this is why being intentional about the words of hymns and other spiritual songs that feed the spirits of communities and individuals over time is so important. We want to make sure we are using and honoring the power of music and text in ways that serve our deepest goals and commitments as people of the biblical story. Just as life-giving, biblically grounded, justice loving, healing, peace-making, truth telling lyrics can help form and sustain us as we attempt to live as people of deep spiritual integrity, so can unhealthy theologies—exclusive, fear based, violent, triumphalist, imperialistic, or overly sentimental lyrics (and that was not an exhaustive list!) cause us to actually reinforce messages that work against our well-being and witness.

Of course, the challenge then is to decide which messages are truly biblical and life-giving and which are not. How will we go about establishing the criteria according to which a hymn text is reflecting “good” or “not-so-good” theology? This is one of the great challenges and opportunities before the church at this point in our history. Ultimately this is a robust conversation we need to be framing and hosting in respectful, loving, open-minded, and open-hearted ways rather than a list of rules according to which we will narrowly judge the content of hymn texts.

But the simple truth is that our words have power. Sung words are even more profoundly transformational both in the moment and through the years. We need to choose our hymn and worship song texts and theologies with deep intention. And this whole question is what led me to write the book, *The Six Marks of Progressive Christian Worship Music*, and to found the Convergence Music Project—an online source of new music for worship that has been theologically curated and evaluated to be truly life-giving and reflective of our deepest and most current attempts to be faithful to the central messages of scripture and spiritual truth.

BILINGUAL SONG - Maria Monteiro

Is there a need for us to sing bilingually? I believe so, and here are a few reasons why I consider this a necessary practice:

First, singing bilingually—if not multilingually—acknowledges, communicates, and celebrates the fact that many communities are not monolingual. Singing bilingually helps us represent our communities more accurately.

Second, singing bilingually is a concrete way to express hospitality. Accents may be thick and pronunciations may be questionable, but if the intent is to say “you are welcome in this place,” the message will be understood clearly. A community may use these previously unknown words and sounds as a conduit to bridge gaps and connect lives.

Third, singing bilingually can be an exercise in empathy. It gives us a small taste of the slow and complex process of learning to speak in a language other than our own, and serves as a reminder for us to be more understanding and patient with those who cannot handle our language satisfactorily. It may also teach us to celebrate the wonder of human verbal communication.

Fourth, singing bilingually fosters solidarity. For bilingual communities who hold separate meetings according to language preferences, a shared repertoire promotes unity: the members of both groups know each other’s songs. In addition, a bilingual song reminds members of a monolingual congregation that theirs is a church that includes people who speak other languages and that God speaks them all.

When writing songs in two or more languages, consider the following:

1. *Each language is of equal value.* In a bilingual song, both languages should have an equivalent standing. The text in one language does not have to be an absolutely literal translation of the text in the other, but a bilingual song should convey the same message in both languages, preferably with equal strength and beauty.
2. *All versions in all languages should fit the melody.* In a bilingual or multilingual song, the pairing of text and tune should be as smooth and natural as possible. Attention should be paid to the natural pattern of accented and unaccented syllables in the text, no matter the language, and the melody should enhance rather than obscure the spirit of the poem.
3. *Simplicity is key.* In a bilingual song, clear, concise verses work best and are less intimidating to people who may try to sing it with limited knowledge of one of the languages involved.

4. *Repetition helps.* In a bilingual song, repeated phrases or refrains are helpful, since they give the congregation an opportunity to practice saying the same words again and again; if the rest of the song feels a bit out of reach, everyone has a chance to meet at the refrain.

Languages are gateways to new worlds. A bilingual song invites us to consider unknown places, peoples, and cultures. In other words, singing bilingually contributes to our awareness of a world beyond our own. It pushes the borders of our hearts and minds further away, making room for a more expansive spiritual landscape.

ON THE BEAUTY & FITTINGNESS OF MELODIES – Carlos Colón

God saw all that He had made, and it was very good. Genesis 1:31

No one can sense more deeply than you artists, ingenious creators of beauty that you are, something of the pathos with which God at the dawn of creation looked upon the work of his hands. *Letter of His Holiness John Paul II to Artists*

What in a melody gives delight to singers and listeners? What renders a melody fit for congregational singing?

We rejoice when our music just works, when others also rejoice with us, and when the church we love is inspired and edified by our work. We take delight in that blessed moment when we write a melody and it makes an immediate connection with people.

I want us to start by reflecting on what makes a melody beautiful; I will also argue that, in the case of sacred music, we also have to consider what is fitting and appropriate.

We bear the imprint of our Creator, so we can also develop the ability to evaluate the quality of our creative output. In the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament, the word that we translate in English as *good* is rendered in Greek as the word *kalon*. It can also be translated as *beautiful*. To be sure, God created this beauty *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. We participate in creation by being innovative people with the raw material God created.

To paraphrase a definition of beauty by Thomas Aquinas, I propose that a beautiful melody is one which gives pleasure to our ears and souls. I will work here against the popular notion that beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. Or, the music industry standard that tells us that melodies need to be catchy, simple, and memorable. To be fair, those ideals have a place; but we must aim higher, because our work as composers is to help people pray to God, and to behold the beauty of Jesus Christ.

In church music, melodies work in close association with text and liturgy. Even when they have a radiant beauty of their own, melodies also need to possess beauty in relationship to the text. Here, words like *captivating* and *memorable* may enter the conversation. But, again, the word *fittingness* can take us in a deeper direction.

We all agree that a fitting melody can help illuminate a text. This is the case with the great hymns and songs of our faith. The best melodies convey the spirit of the text, or the liturgical moment at hand. And, in our Christian tradition, there is also an end implied: we sing our prayers with the intent of glorifying God and of being transported to the presence of God. Furthermore, we expect that this experience will have a transformative effect on our souls. If we took ten minutes to look for five examples, we all could come up with powerful examples that would illustrate this wonderful marriage, a perfect fit, between texts and melodies. For

now, just to stir our imaginations a bit, think about the hymn “Let all mortal flesh keep silence” before or during communion. Also, “Come, thou Fount of every blessing”; “Holy, holy, holy”; or, “Fairest Lord Jesus” at the beginning of a college chapel service. It would be difficult to find more fitting melodies and words. I choose these particular songs because I have used them in many completely different settings. And the beauty of these hymns moves across cultures, ages, and style preferences. Recently, we sang “I want Jesus to walk with me” at different points during a prayer service lamenting racial hatred. The haunting melody and powerful text were beyond fitting, given the moment at hand. I also use songs like the Argentinian spiritual song “Santo, santo, santo, mi corazón te adora.” Its simplicity, heartfelt sincerity, and marriage with the text, make it a very welcoming melody for prayer services. The beauty of this song also stems from using close intervals and text painting, through directional rises and accents, in the original Spanish.

Of course, there are limits to what is fitting. And, we must accept our differences. For example, my job enables me to visit different traditions and cultures. I love to sing “Lift high the cross” with my high-liturgy oriented friends; but it would probably not fit well in a free-church environment.

In tandem with inspired beauty, we need to also use the tools of our craft. For example, we can see if there is a natural symmetry in the small phrases; an overall form. Simple guidelines like antecedent and consequent devices can help us. But thinking in four measure phrases is always a good rule of thumb on our craft. Of course, this and other rules need not be canonized. Have you ever noticed that “Fairest Lord Jesus” is only fifteen measures long? Now, one could argue an elision device in the last three measures, which results in symmetry. Rigidity is not necessary, but symmetry is always a worthy pursuit.

Finally, and with the help of St. Gregory of Nyssa, let us consider his analogy on the tools of a sculptor, as he considers the effect of the Psalms on our souls:

Anything undertaken with a purpose has a certain natural, necessary order which brings about the end one strives after. Similarly, a sculptor’s goal is to conform stone to some kind of image. He does not immediately begin from a completed form, but his art of fashioning stone must proceed with order and care, otherwise he could accomplish nothing. The grosser parts of useless stone must first be stripped away to bring out the intended form, and so the sculptor laboriously prunes away those parts of stone. Once they are removed, the remaining stone begins to take on the form of a living subject on which the artisan exerts his talent. The sculptor next removes the rough parts of the stone with more subtle, precise instruments and then imposes upon the stone the likeness of the model’s form. He polishes and smooths the stone’s

surface, actions which will enhance his work. Similarly, when earthly inclinations have turned our human nature to stone, God's chiseling us to his divine likeness proceeds to a certain method and order to complete his goal. . . .

The divine sculptor cuts away superficial material and begins to form his subject matter to the likeness of his final goal by removing anything which hinders the representation. Thus, by more subtle teachings of his intentions, the divine sculptor scrapes and polishes our minds and then forms Christ in us according to the pattern of virtue. We had Christ's image from the very beginning and are now restored to this state. . . .

According to the example just mentioned, many instruments are needed to skillfully create a piece of sculpture (Such instruments differ with respect to their form. One has a curved blade, another is two-fold, while yet other knives are semi-circular in shape. The artisan uses these instruments and others like them at the appropriate time). Hence, our true stewards are the psalms which resemble sculptor's tools and skillfully fashion our souls to God's likeness. Each instrument is used according to the need at hand. (St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On The Inscriptions of The Psalms*, [Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 2004])

I take great comfort from the quote above. There is much to learn, and much to imagine as we emulate our "Immortal, invisible, God only wise." God works in us in a myriad of ways to sculpt our souls into the likeness of Jesus Christ. In the Psalms, our ancient songbook, we have an arsenal of prayers for almost every major emotion and situation in our lives. Likewise, through training and careful reflection, we can also aspire to write beautiful melodies that will help us and others reflect the light of Christ to this world.

In closing, a beautiful, fitting melody in tandem with an inspiring text, can enable us to transcend into the realms of worship, and rejoice and rest in the presence of God. May God help us to serve the church through our songwriting, as we all pursue our ultimate vocation: to be holy because God is holy and to attend the voice of the Good Shepherd, who beckons us to follow.

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WHAT MAKES FOR A COMPELLING TEXT/TUNE PAIRING? – Ken Nafziger

As they say on talk shows, “Good question, Brian!” It is a good one, though not an easy one, and answers may well lie in the “ear of the be-hearer.” But here’s what I hear.

At the tea/reception in honor of my retirement last spring, I was invited to lead my faculty and staff colleagues in some singing. As you know, it’s difficult to find hymns that everyone can sing from memory these days, so I asked us all to sing “Amazing grace.” We sang the first stanza in unison, then as a four-part canon, and then the “Through many dangers, toils, and snares” stanza, slowly and with rich, improvised harmonies. As I introduced the singing of this stanza, I said, “Maybe the reason this is as near a universal hymn as any is because for each of us, it is autobiographical.”

The awareness that we’ve, at one time or another, or at many times, all gone from blindness to seeing and from not knowing to knowing is universal. A pentatonic tune from some anonymous soul’s heart plus a history/story that encompasses slavery and freedom on several levels makes our hearts sing and weep and our spirits resonate. So, on that occasion, when we sang the concluding phrase of the stanza, “and grace will lead me home,” our voices and our hearts and our bodies reverberated with the miracles of grace and home and faith.

So, Brian, from this short story of mine, I’m guessing that you might think that to answer your question would be like a dog chasing its tail! One can go around and around discussing the marriage between tune and text, not finding any point at which to stop! I’m thinking that this endless chase might have to do with a conflict of messages that logic (the head) might send us and those that are more affective (from the heart). Logic suggests that if you have this and this and this, it will be a successful text/tune marriage; the heart says, not so fast!

Having made several hymnals, here are a few things I’ve learned about the marriages of texts and tunes:

1. A great text with a tune of average or poor quality does **not** usually become a great hymn. The text in this instance will most certainly reach the head, but its weaker partner (music) will not likely take the hymn into the heart. The strongest marriages tend to be fine texts that are born into the recesses of the heart by the music, because the melodies or fragments of those melodies tend to stick in the memory longer than the words by themselves. In this instance, if the words are desired for worship, they may be better served by just reading them rather than weighing them down with music that doesn’t support the words.
2. A text that lends itself to being sung well most likely has one or more images that work their way into both heart and mind. Paired with a supporting tune,

the text is internalized, and begs to be sung again and again, e.g., Harry Emerson Fosdick's 1930 text, "God of grace, and God of glory." The text is given real wings when sung as a mighty stride to the 1905 Welsh tune, CWM RHONDDA (John Hughes).

3. Psalm 90 is filled with rich imagery, and no hymn tune quite captures those images as does Michael Joncas' "On eagle's wings." If one thinks about the tune from the point of view of someone teaching about how to write a good hymn melody, this one defies some of the logical considerations, e.g., the wide leaps in the refrain, or the first note of the melody being the leading tone of the song's key. But it works, and is an example of a hymn that if one were to make logical judgments about the tune, it most likely should not work. But work it does, to the point of being one of a very few newer hymns that folks from most every denomination can sing together. "On eagle's wings" has become a heart song in the years since its appearance in the late twentieth century.
4. One might think, on first glance, that theology gained in hymnsinging comes via the text. Not necessarily so! It's my observation that texts that are heavy with theological language and concepts tend not to be very singable. On the other hand, I've come to believe that the primary theology that's gained through hymns comes in the act of a congregation singing hymns together. We shape our views about God, about God's work, about God's body on earth, and about God's people through the hymns that enter the recesses of the heart. They shape our theological understandings. Those of us who choose hymns for worship need to exercise care for the balance of what we sing, so that our congregations are offered a fuller view of God, of God's work, of God's body here on earth, and of God's people.
5. A tune adds a landscape to a text. The tune, when well combined with text, adds to what the words alone cannot say. The created affective landscape is perhaps as powerful, or maybe more powerful, than the text (especially the text) or the music by itself. It's the illogic of one plus one equaling at least three or more. It's very important to sing the hymns, not just to hear them played on the piano. To gauge the fit of text and tune, hymns need to be sung, to feel how the words feel on the tongue, and how they flow with the pulse and accents of a metrical song.
6. And finally, there is a significant anomaly to be pointed out here. In the early days of John Calvin's reforms, only psalms could be sung, and all 150 Psalms were versified for singing. At the outset, they used only a small number of tunes, so that a significant number of psalms could be sung to the same tune.

And it works! These common tunes are sturdy and strong tunes paired with intentionally crafted versified psalms, in which the tune can be paired with a wide variety of texts, and the combination “works.”

So, Brian, it’s safe to say that for every one of these thoughts, exceptions are possible! In the end, logic isn’t much help. One needs to pay greater attention to affective considerations: what is the “meaning” of the text when sung to one tune or another? what landscape is created? what fire might be lit, or at least kindled, for those who will sing? It is not a matter of “I like this” or “I don’t like this.” Attentiveness to the singing of an entire hymn will suggest us whether or not if there is someone in our congregation, or some segment of our congregation, for whom this will be a welcome applicant to a congregation’s or a personal repertoire of “heart” songs.

BEST SONGWRITING PRACTICES – Ryan Flanigan

The most sensitive musical instrument is the human soul. The next is the human voice. One must purify the soul until it begins to sound. A composer is a musical instrument and, at the same time, a performer on that instrument. The instrument has to be in order to produce sound. One must start with that, not with the music. Through the music the composer can check whether his instrument is tuned and to what key it is tuned. ...We shouldn't grieve because of writing little and poorly, but because we pray little and poorly, and lukewarmly, and live in the wrong way. The criterion must be, everywhere and only, humility. Arvo Pärt, "From my Musical Diaries," St. Vladimir's Seminary (New York City), May 2014

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. Ephesians 5:15-21 (ESV)

United Adoration

In August 2017 seventeen songwriters gathered at All Saints Dallas for a liturgical songwriting retreat, a set-apart time of writing songs for the church. I hosted the retreat and directed our writing towards the mini-season of Allhallowtide, tackling themes of martyrdom, sainthood, death, and hope. We wrote twenty-five songs in twenty-four hours! Some of them are good—really good—and that's great, but that was not our primary reason for gathering. Our main goal was *to actually write* songs, which can be a difficult thing to do in today's frenetic world. My hope is that each songwriter walked away encouraged and inspired to continue writing.

August's retreat was my eighth in three years with United Adoration, a ministry that organizes liturgical songwriting retreats and resources the church with freshly written songs. I am a UA lead team member. Since September 2014 we have hosted fifteen retreats that have produced about 200 songs. More than that, deep healing is taking place at these retreats. Creative vocations are being confirmed. Dormant gifts are being revived. Discipline is being formed. Personally, the ministry of United Adoration has shaped and refined my songwriting practices and has given me a more hopeful vision for church music.

Five Best Practices

My approach to writing church music comes from the ground up rather than the top down, from the byway instead of the highway. I am a non-musically-educated

practitioner. I have learned mostly by watching, listening, and imitating a variety of leaders throughout my life, from Pentecostal music ministers to Catholic choir directors—traditional, contemporary, and everything between. I offer these best songwriting practices as one who loves the holy church, who believes in the need for new songs, and who for twenty years has been committed to the vocation of writing songs for the church.

1. *“Purify the soul.”* Most people could not articulate what makes a good song good, but they can feel it. Some songs come from the soul and connect the soul to other souls and to God. They are “in the bones” of a people and a place, enabling something beautiful and true to take residence deep down. These are good songs, and they come from a place of purity. By “purify the soul” I don’t think Arvo Pärt (quoted above) is referring to behavior so much as uninhibited connectedness to God, self, and others through prayer. Same with St. Paul. Good songs come from hearts that are animated by the Spirit and connected to God, self, and others through constant prayer. I’ll save “best praying practices” for the next guy.
2. *Make space to actually write.* The greatest obstacle for songwriters is not lack of inspiration, or even lack of time, but lack of vocational vision. I keep using the word *vocation* because songwriting is a *calling*, and those who have been called ought to take seriously the cultivation of their gift. If we have truly been called, then the people in our lives need our songs. For us songwriting is not merely recreational. It’s liturgical! Make space in your heart for your songwriting vocation. Time is the next biggest hurdle. Unless we create space in our busy lives to actually write, we won’t write. Put it on the calendar. I write every Monday. Set a goal. I aim to write one song a week. Annually, I attend a songwriting camp in Nashville, lead two or three United Adoration songwriting retreats, and help facilitate three songwriters feedback gatherings for Art House Dallas.
3. *Collaborate.* February 2015 birthed a surprising partnership that has made me a better songwriter. That’s when I met Fr. Nelson Koscheski, a retired priest and a budding poet. I began writing tunes for his poems. After a few months and half a dozen new hymns, I realized I am primarily a melodist, and that it’s perfectly okay to rely on others for lyrics. It’s historical, too. The idea of one person writing both tune and words is actually quite modern. A songwriter is usually stronger at one or the other. Not only has my partnership with Nelson clarified this for me, but it has also opened my eyes to the possibilities of intergenerational collaboration. Nelson can’t be the only seventy-five year old sitting on such a beautiful gift. I wonder what a simple call to poets and composers of all ages would yield in our churches. To date Nelson and I have co-written thirty-five songs.

4. *Creatio ex materia*. God creates *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), and God is the only one who can do this. We create *ex materia* (out of matter), using pre-existing materials or ideas given to us by God or handed down to us from the past. Nothing is completely new. No idea is entirely original. It's all borrowed. Once I got over my artistic pride, I found this reality to be quite liberating. It relieved me from the pressure of constant innovation. There's an old song yet to be written. There's a familiarity in a good melody, despite our inability to name what it sounds like. And there are buried treasures of lyrical content just waiting to surface in prayerbooks, anthologies, and hymnals the world over and back. If I have written 150 songs in the past three years, probably 135 of them are either verbatim or slightly modified versions of pre-existing texts from the Book of Common Prayer, The Psalter, The Hymnal, or Fr. Nelson. In this case I encourage songwriters to likewise think "inside the box."
5. *Expand your box*. We all live inside a box, and we can't think outside of it until we acknowledge it. In other words, we all inhabit a place filled with people who need us and whom we need. The goal, then, isn't to escape from our box, but rather to expand it. Serve your people where they are, but don't be afraid to let in a little light from the vast world of music outside your own. White churches can sing black spirituals. Black churches can sing Chris Tomlin songs. Asian and Hispanic churches can write their own songs in their own indigenous styles instead of singing awkwardly translated English songs. Two years ago I wrote a song with a black friend in response to the Charleston massacre. The only way I can describe it is mixed-gospel-psychedelic funk. And my mostly white church loves singing it. Last year I led a United Adoration songwriting retreat in San Diego with ten Spanish-speaking Anglicans drawing mainly from the Chilean Book of Common Prayer.

Finally, as Christian songwriters we have a tendency to think that music is a neutral vehicle for words. We need to dethrone this myth and begin to fund an imagination for music that engages the whole person, not just the mind, music that is beautiful, good, and true in itself. Put your ear to the ground and listen for that sound. Aim for your songs to engage the people in your community who are closest to the ground, who live the most down-to-earth lives. It's usually the children and retired folks. Then digest and regurgitate the words your community needs, applying sounds appropriately. At least that's what I try to do.

Over the past four years my own songwriting has evolved into what I call liturgical folk—a blend of Celtic mystic, American folk, and Southern gothic with historic Christian prayers, Texas Panhandle poetry, and social consciousness. The mission of liturgical folk is to make beautiful and believable sacred music for the sake of the world. I believe the church can once again be a credible artistic witness to the world, even to the degree that non-Christians will want to listen to our songs. There's an old song yet to be written, and the church needs to write it and sing it for the world to hear it.

GROUP WRITING & COMPOSING – Kimberly Williams

Written art, particularly in the form of music gives people a sense of belonging. When being intentional, this feeling of belonging can create a culture that values community and diversity in expression. The idea that one particular voice has all that it needs to serve many can often result in an expression that serves few. This type of writing tends to reproduce itself in similar patterns that fall flat as time and culture shift. When different creative voices mutually submit themselves to one another and to God, acting as one small part in a larger story, the writing has the ability to create culture for a diverse group of people. Culturally diverse collaborative writing is life-giving and fluid, transcending time and culture as different voices speak into its process. This is what makes group writing important for every community.

Group writing looks different in every context. My first writing community took place as an intern in Richmond, Virginia, with the Urban Songwriting Internship program. The songwriting internship brings five to seven writers and musicians of the Christian faith together for eight weeks of theological and musical training. The internship involves writing and critiquing for the community of Church Hill and is done in partnership with a ministry called Arrabon and the worshipping community East End Fellowship. From the past seven years of this internship program, over 100 songs have been written. These songs have created a common expression that binds the racially, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse worshipping community of East End Fellowship together. This then led to the development of Urban Doxology, a band of which I am a part. Urban Doxology is a ministry that offers experiences, trainings, and resources in worship and reconciliation. An “urban doxology” is defined as any liturgy, preaching, music and arts that crosses boundaries in ethnicity, race, and class that prepares God’s people for the city of God. Group writing has given us creative ways to lift up the voice of those who are forgotten as we lean more faithfully into being the people of God for the city of God.

I have taken my experiences from Richmond and created a group called the “DC Writers Circle” that springs from The District Church, a worshipping community in the northwest region of Washington, D.C. Being an artist and worship leader in the nation’s capital during our current political climate has been challenging. I began to notice a similar need for culture-making. The DC Writers Circle serves as a way for the artists and lay leaders in our diverse community to have a prophetic voice to speak into culture and create a common language that unifies our city. We focus primarily on writing short stories, confessions, and songs.

In developing a writing group, you must first gather committed writers. You must also trust that they are already in your community waiting for the “ask” to be a part of something bigger than themselves. Once they are gathered, find the perfect balance of fluidity and structure. The DC Writers Circle consists of eight dedicated

writers. We learn, discuss, and critique as a group. We write in groups of two to three as well as small free writing exercises on our own. A typical writer circle will last two hours. Our time is divided into five sections: Gathering, Learning, Critiquing, Writing, and Sharing. Time for gathering helps writers develop a sense of trust and creative community. The time of learning allows us to define different forms of writing; it also shapes the topic that guides our writing section. Critiquing gives one or two writers in the group a chance to be encouraged but also fine-tune their work. This leads to a time of topical or guided writing that is shared with the group. The time for each of these sections fluctuates each week. All of their writing is presented during a community showcase that occurs every six months. This is modeled after the Urban Songwriting Internship concert held in Church Hill at the end of their eight-week intensive.

Group writing is a powerful artistic tool and when used correctly can shape both the people of God and culture. I encourage every community to create these spaces for their people.

THEOLOGICAL AND STYLISTIC GAPS/NEEDS IN HYMNALS – Joyce Borger

What theological (text) and stylistic (musical) gaps are in our hymnals? What needs to be written to fill in those gaps?

Not having done exhaustive research on this topic I can only speak to my own experience as editor of several hymnals including *Lift Up Your Hearts* and *Psalms for All Seasons*. But having had many a conversation with other hymnal editors I don't think our experience on those collections was all that unique. I am also writing this essay with an eye towards the future. Nothing can be done about the gaps in our current hymnals; they are a set canon for better or worse. But what about the next generation of hymnals or electronic song collections?

One additional note as I begin. For every category that I identify as a gap I am sure great congregational songs already exist. A gap suggests that there is a need for more not that none exist currently.

Soundtracks

The songs we sing and know deeply form part of our life's soundtrack. The Taizé chant "Nada de turbe/Nothing can trouble" (Jacques Berthier) played on repeat in my mind on 9/11, "How can I keep from singing" (Robert Lowry) comforted me when my mother was in ICU battling cancer. What songs do we want to give to this and future generations as soundtracks to their moments of lament and times of joy? What words of comfort, encouragement, or correction do we want embedded in their hearts and minds to become whisperings of the Holy Spirit 10, 20 even 50 years later? What is unique about our context that requires new texts and styles to express those laments and praises?

Scriptural

One of the best soundtracks we can provide is scripture itself. We need scripture songs that represent the full breadth and depth of scripture and not just the popular verses that are made into kitschy memes. We need songs that retell the old, old story but in a new way. Songs that capture our imagination. Songs that help us to see God's redemptive plan in scripture and in the world around us and go beyond simple moralistic lessons. Songs like the African American spiritual that are so clearly biblical yet have an immediate application without needing to be explicit. We need scripture texts that are more "Eugene Peterson-esq" that help us to hear scripture differently and provide new insights and understanding to familiar texts. And though the Psalm repertoire has greatly expanded in the last decade we can't stop writing congregational songs that put these texts in minds and hearts.

Pastoral

We need to find a way to name and express pastoral care issues in song that is biblically based, singable and pastorally sensitive. These may not become the top-10 congregational song but their pastoral impact is significant.

One key area of need is that of aging and songs for funerals. There are 74.1 million baby boomers in the United States, the oldest of which are now in their 70s. How are we going to give voice to the struggles of aging for both those who are experiencing diminishing abilities and those who love them? Mel Bringle's "When memory fades" is a great example of one such song.

Not to be callous but statistically there are going to be a growing number of funerals over the next three decades. What words of comfort will be sung at those services? Words of comfort while we release those who have lived long lives and were ready to die and words that comfort parents grieving the death of child, communities mourning lives taken through violence, and the lives that illness and disease have taken too soon. Our society has sanitized death, cleaned it up, put a veneer over its horror and pain. As a result, there are very few newly written songs especially in the praise and worship genre that help us grieve, to name our pain honestly and lament the loss of life.

Prophetic

I wish I could be an optimist and believe that the social discord experienced in our nations, particularly the United States, would dissipate. However, I think it is only going to get worse as feelings of scarcity and fear of losing power cause people to lash out against 'the other', build walls, and monopolize resources for their own benefit. In the midst of this growing desperation and fear we need prophetic songs that remind us of the truths of the gospel, that we are blessed to be a blessing, that God loves all people, and that scripture calls us to care for the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner in our midst.

Theological

There are many theological themes that could be plumbed more deeply but let me name a few that are at the forefront of my mind and may serve as an antidote to some of what ails us:

- Beauty: God is a God of beauty. We need to learn to see that beauty in nature and in the bustling city, in our own culture and the culture of our neighbors.
- Resurrection Hope: We were given Revelation not so we could know the exact date and time that Christ comes again but that we may have a vision for the end of story, that despite all that we face here on earth God will have the final word and all nations and tribes will come together, tears will be wiped away, and we will experience true shalom.

We can't lose sight of that vision for we are called to work to bring it about in small ways already today.

- **Baptismal Living:** We need to be reminded that our baptisms are not the culmination of our faith journey but mark its beginning and that joining in Christ's death and resurrection has implications for how we live each day.
- **Ethical implications of the Eucharist:** By participating in communion we are joining in the body and blood of Christ, by being one with Christ we are becoming one with each other. This has implications for how we live and treat each other calling us to relationships of solidarity and mutuality.

Style

One quick word about the style of these newly-written songs. We need a range of styles that fit the purpose of the song. We need short songs like those from Taizé so that texts can settle deep in our souls and we need new multi-stanza hymn texts that help explore theological themes and recount the gospel story. We need new tunes for the organ and the band, the orchestra, and the solo piano, but especially tunes that are able to cross genres in order to put the words in the hearts of as many people as possible.

Being a writer of congregational song is a serious calling for those willing to do the hard work of studying scripture and listening to the Holy Spirit. It is a priestly calling that should never be done in isolation but always in communication with others who can help you hone your craft as a musician, theologian, and poet. May God bless you as you follow God's call so that we in turn may be blessed.

SOME THOUGHTS ON CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MUSIC - Lim Swee Hong

In this brief reflection about Contemporary Christian Music (CCM), we first need to grapple with the fact that this music-making phenomenon is very diverse and in flux. It is impossible to have a term like CCM and expect it to have a definition acceptable to everyone. In this essay, we will need to get on the same page in terms of definition. These are my definitions; others may define these words differently.

Definitions

- *Contemporary Christian Music*: Refers to music that is performing-artist centered. For all intent and purposes, this genre showcases the ability of the artists and are not intended to be congregational song.
- *Worship Music*: This is the latest iteration of the contemporary worship song or the praise and worship genre. Though presented by an artist, the work is intended for congregational singing.
- *Scripture in Song*: This is the genre associated with the effort of contemporarization in the twentieth century. It is a musical practice akin to the metrical effort of psalmody by John Calvin and his contemporaries to make scripture singable that gave rise to the Genevan Psalter. The difference is that the whole Bible (in English) serves as the resource to create incipits for this effort.
- *Re-Tuned Hymns*: This is a genre associated with the recovery of the hymnsinging tradition where hymns are revitalized. Broadly speaking, it centers on grafting new tunes, contemporarizing paraphrases, and/or creating new musical renditions. This repertoire seems to position itself as the middle ground in the hymn and contemporary song spectrum.

Current State

With these definitions, we can see that contemporary worship music-making champions current cultural music norms as essential avenue for relevant meaning-making in the church. To that end the music-making phenomenon is ever evolving, often times shaped by socio-cultural forces. One need only hear the contemporary music-making of the 1980s (Vineyard, Maranatha, etc.) and compare it to the 2010s (third-generation Hillsong and its United series, Bethel Music and its youth-focused Jesus Culture, etc.) to sense the change. (See Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017).

In keeping with this ethos, the theological content of worship music has also evolved. With its beginning of setting scripture to music, worship music is primarily centered on a personal salvific narrative leading to pietistic devotion as expressed in one's relationship with God, often more intentionally with Jesus as friend or Lord

at the expense of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. When specific roles of the individual Triune Godhead are solely attributed to Jesus, the CCLI review group of the United Methodist Church defines this as “Trinitarian collapse.” Such a phenomenon is rather widespread in this genre. Also prominent are the “blood” hymns of the Victorian era as they seem to have gained a new lease of life in the current music-making practice. Equally dominant is monarchial “King and kingdom” imagery. In the area of theological ethos, this genre of music is not on an even keel. The Director of Worship Resources for the United Methodist Church, Taylor Burton-Edwards, observed,

The majority of the contemporary/modern worship corpus reflected in the CCLI Top 100 list is generated by artists whose theological traditions are not generally Wesleyan-Arminian. Most could be described as charismatic, Pentecostal, Calvinist, or neo-Calvinist. These traditions have not fully shared and sometimes have taken positions opposite to our core commitments as United Methodists. (“CCLI 2015-2016 Top 100 Songs for United Methodist Congregations,” updated January 2017, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/ccli-2015-2016-top-100-songs-for-united-methodist-congregations>)

While emotional concepts of joy or mercy linked to redemption (salvation) and love, or grace to adoration (worship) proliferate in this genre, lament and concerns for justice seem neglected. Personal holiness and social concerns are not held in tandem even as they seem idiomatically “joined at the hip” in scripture. While the critique of this genre being individualistic may be valid in some instances, I think the lack of theological rigor and expansive language of the faith in the lyrics ought to be of greater concern to the church in the 21st century. Presently, patriarchy and masculinity continue to dominate the contemporary lyrical landscape at the expense of communal and gender inclusivity. The anonymous *you* that are in many of the songs certainly adds to the confusion as to who the song is being addressed to or addressed by. Equally ubiquitous are phrases that embody unhelpful associations or marginalize; examples of these include white as pure, “let the darkness fear,” etc.

While much more can be said about the theological spectrum in this genre, it is equally important to take a brief look at the music component of this genre. Here, we observe that many contemporary Christian songs have crossed over to become contemporary worship songs for many congregations. Given their popularity, churches have sought to use them in corporate worship. Unfortunately, in situations with impoverished leadership this has contributed to the silencing our congregation in worship. In addition, the inherent wide vocal range and performative artistry of contemporary Christian songs are proving to be profound obstacles to a typical worshiper. The studio-recorded music that typically serves as audio reference in

song selection sequences for worship is a mirage that readily defeats any aspiring congregation without a generous budget for its music ministry and skilled musicians.

The Way Forward

How then might the church proceed if it so chooses to adopt this genre of music? I propose that if congregation is seeking to deploy this music, it needs to understand its distinctive features and to adapt it to local conditions. For example, develop a plan for song selection that builds and strengthens congregational musical memory rather than having the time of corporate worship singing be a showcase of the worship team's ability to perform. Invest in the nurturing of persons involved in leading worship that they become aware for the need of active participation of the congregation, not just the select worship team, and learn ways of encouraging this ethos. Provide support for the worship team and enable them to have contemporary music training to improve their musicianship. Require worship leadership to have some Christian education in worship to understand the role of music-making in worship. Ensure that there is pastoral care and supervision of the worship team so as to engage them to be effective ministry leaders rather than rock stars.

In taking a broader view of Christian formation through worship, the solution is often less about adopting a particular musical genre but strengthening the process of corporate meaning-making. Congregations would be wise to conceive various avenues of music-making that draw on locally available resources in their midst. For example, choosing to write and present locally crafted songs for corporate worship would significantly increase ownership and facilitate meaning-making by the faith community. It is time for the church to re-think the creative process of congregational songwriting; possibly relocating the craft away from the effort of an individual to that of the community via the contribution of a select group of believers willing to labor on this art form. This group songwriting phenomenon may seem new to us but it is prevalent in many Global South faith communities. By doing so, I believe our congregations will fulfill the psalmist's call to "sing to the Lord a new song!" (Psalm 96:1)

Additional Readings

Ruth, Lester. "How 'Pop' Are the New Worship Songs: Investigating the Level of Popular Cultural Influence on Contemporary Worship Music." *Global Forum on Arts and Christian Faith*, 3:1 (2015), www.artsandchristianfaith.org.

_____. "Some Similarities and Differences between Historic Evangelical Hymns and Contemporary Worship Songs." *The Artistic Theologian*, 3 (2015): 68-86.

THE CHURCH'S SONG IN THE WORLD – Paul Vasile

...the salvation we have in Christ is not about making us more religious but more fully human, reconciling relationships, restoring human wholeness and well-being, and unlocking potential and creativity. Central to this process of humanization is a spirituality rooted in the Bible, worship and prayer, a spirituality of struggle both personal and social for those things that make for genuine peace. John W. de Gruchy, *Confessions of a Christian Humanist*, Fortress, 2006

It is urgent for church musicians, composers, and textwriters to burrow deeply into what is happening in our world. Rather than come to others with songs we think they need, we must be willing to listen carefully and deeply, ask thoughtful questions, and sit quietly while others speak their joys, needs, wounds, dreams and doubts. And we need to acknowledge ways that power, privilege, and prejudice prevent us from hearing with clarity and subtlety.

Cultivating humility, empathy, and solidarity through active listening may not immediately reveal melodies or texts that speak to the challenges, tragedies, and transitions of human life. But the practice grounds us in our shared humanity. From this foundation, we can begin to rediscover treasures in our hymnals and song traditions, as well as imagine and create songs that serve the well-being of the entire human family. For if the church exists to serve and heal the world, the songs of the church must serve the same end. As the church joins the struggle for justice, reconciliation, and peace in every place, music can and should support us in this holy, revolutionary work.

So, what kind of songs are needed for today's church to best intersect and witness to the world? The power of the question shifts when reframed: 'What songs does the world need to hear from today's church?' As I have listened to the communities I serve and the world the church inhabits over the past months, I would invite us to offer:

- Hymns of God's solidarity with marginalized, disenfranchised, and forgotten people, and songs that center God among the poor, indebted, and sick;
- Revival songs calling white Christians to repent from, resist, and dismantle racism, white supremacy, and societal structures that condone racial divisions and hierarchies;
- Canticles privileging women's voices, vision, and experiences, affirming dignity and freedom as a birthright;
- Work songs that inspire humanity to demolish walls and boundaries that exclude immigrants, migrants, aliens, and foreigners from society;
- Psalms for a Higher Power, with language expansive enough to embrace the challenges and experience of those seeking wholeness through recovery programs;

- Kyries tracing centuries of the church's betrayal of indigenous people, calling the church to repent of ways we continue to colonize, appropriate, and steal from countries, cultures, and vulnerable people around the globe;
- Paeans for a spectrum of gender identities and expressions, proclaiming gratitude for imaginative, life-giving expressions of gender and sexuality;
- Litanies for purifying water, air, and land, and prayers for lives threatened by rising sea levels and natural disasters caused by human activity;
- Doxologies expansive enough to hold those who do not claim our faith or any particular faith.

This list of songs can be imaginatively expressed through a range of musical styles, instruments, rhythms, tonalities, and song forms, all in service to the well-being of the wider human family. And as we continue to listen carefully, new songs will be discovered, rising out of fresh encounters with scripture and the life and teachings of Jesus. Rooted in sacred text and individual context, they will speak with boldness and urgency, even pushing beyond what the church has imagined or articulated in its theology.

This is a liminal space and a tender space, as voices are acknowledged, called forth and blessed. But it is also a powerful, prophetic space. As the church lives into its calling and song inspires and sustains our commitment to a loving, liberating Gospel, it may even become an agent of change and transformation, a seedbed of creativity offering a renewed vision of faith for our time.

DECOLONIZING THE WORSHIP MOVEMENT – Malcolm du Plessis

Worship is contextual as Jesus incarnates himself in us and therefore in our cultures. When the Israelites sang that the power of their God had resulted in the Egyptian cavalry being thrown into the Red Sea, after God had helped them pass through safely, it intensified their worship experience. Likewise, it is powerful when we sing songs that are born out of God's interventions in our current circumstances.

Worship is transcultural as Jesus transcends our cultures. (A heads up, as will be explained in the paragraphs ahead, *transcultural* does not mean *Western* or *Anglo*.)

Worship is counter-cultural as Jesus challenges our cultures.

Worship is cross-cultural as the gospel is relevant to all cultures. Even before the death of Jesus technically opened the way for every nation to participate in God's redemptive plan, Isaiah 56:3, 6-7 prophesied: "Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.' . . . foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, . . . these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations."

Sadly, the current trend is for worship songs to be exported from Anglo cultures to rest of world. Globalization has infiltrated the church, and wherever you go in the world you are mostly going to hear adaptations of Anglo songs. Sometimes worship songs are altered and sections are replaced or modified, not too dissimilar from how international food franchises adapt their core items from country to country.

Mostly songs are being imitated. When new songs are written in non-western contexts, they are being written in the prevailing western idiom, often performed with an uncomfortably forced American or British accent.

The net result of all of this is that worship songs are hardly ever indigenized anymore. There are less and less songs written in the style of a local culture. Therefore, there is not much opportunity for the genre to be internationalized.

In the Old Testament, worship was rooted in one culture and place and the operative word was *come*. In the New Testament, worship straddles many cultures and places, and the operative word should be *go*. Accordingly, I would like to build a case for the internationalization and the decolonization of worship music. In order to do so, we need to review the realities of spiritual colonization, spiritual imperialism, globalization, westernization, Anglicization and isomorphism.

Not much lasts forever. The Bible tells us that there will be no more tears, pain, death or mourning in heaven. Spiritual gifts will no longer be necessary. Neither will be ministry pursuits. Even marriage does not make it into the afterlife.

But the Bible lists a few things that will last into eternity: faith, hope, love, God's kingdom rule and God's words. One of the surprises is language, national, cultural, and tribal identity as per Revelation 7:9: "I looked again. I saw a huge crowd, too huge to count. Everyone was there - all nations and tribes, all races and languages" (*The Message*). The reason—the eternal retention of cultural identity testifies forever to the reach of the gospel into all nations and the faithfulness of God to give his son the nations as his inheritance. What more appropriate way to celebrate the completed mission of Christ than an eternal worship mash-up that fuses every culture, tribe, and language in a worship expression that celebrates the reach of the gospel into every nook and cranny of this world!

Therefore, what more appropriate medium to express our worship on earth, to intercede for the completion of the mission of Christ, and to prophesy the ultimate proliferation of the gospel into every unreached people group, than a worship idiom that coalesces the sounds of believers from every culture, tribe, and language that this gospel has penetrated. How wonderful if more of us could find a new resolve to fight for a place of dignity for the worship expressions of our respective cultures in the worldwide worship movement!

God has chosen to reveal himself by incarnating himself, firstly in his son, but now in us, in and through our feebleness, our humanness, our idiosyncrasies, our cultures, and our stories. And one of the stories that we need to tell is that the gospel is relevant to every culture. May God help us to begin to tell that story in our worship songs.

Incarnation is basically "content meeting form". The gospel is not an ethereal conceptual message. It is an enfleshed reality. We are not robotic copycats of a message. We are the message. Therefore, form matters. Therefore, our worship music should reflect our cultures and, potentially, the mishmash of cultures that have responded to the gospel. As Marshall McLuhan, the father of communications, put it: "the medium is the message".

The million-dollar question is "what message is being told by the medium and culture of contemporary worship?" I would like to make a few observations:

1. Globalization, spiritual colonization, and isomorphism are acceptable and inevitable.
2. Celebrity and brand leveraging are legitimate catalyzing agents for the spread of the gospel.
3. High-tech production and fashion give us credibility

Let's look at these three observations in more detail.

Firstly, I would like to propose that spiritual colonization has impoverished and not enriched kingdom life. Jesus sends us out to disciple nations. Somewhere, in church history, discipling and colonizing got a little blurred.

Colonization is the sending out of a group of settlers to a nation to establish control over it, leveraging God-given blessings for the interests of the sending agency, superimposing language, culture, and other realities on the settlement, leaving behind a trail of sadness.

Modern-day brand leveraging runs the same risks as colonization. An overly cultivated desire within a ministry community to influence the church worldwide with its homegrown resources can have consequences similar to colonialism. Bear in mind that the only people that upset Jesus enough for him to threaten with a whip were the “resourcing agents” that made it easy for worshipers to purchase their sacrifice animals on site. Jesus’ antidote to the enterprise of religion was summed up in his retort that his father’s house was meant to be a house of prayer for all nations. Just like John the Baptist had predicted, in this comment he “raised every valley and brought down every mountain and hill, and created a level playing field where all had dignity and a vital role.”

I would like to propose that the antidote to the current overly cultivated desire amongst a few ministries to “resource the church worldwide with their songs” is still the same today as it was in Jesus’s time – for us to be reminded that the house of God is international, a commonwealth of communities where each group has something valid and vital to contribute, including “a song to share”.

Discipling is different from colonizing. It is less about influencing and more about serving. Yes, there are truths to be taught, but they are communicated in such a way that they can be absorbed via the local culture. When the Bible is translated it is repurposed via local idiom. Discipling should not repeat the mistakes of the colonial missionary movement of days gone by. Servant hearted ministry results in the blessing of the nations, just as was God’s original intent with Abraham.

Imagine a Christianity where every culture is represented with dignity. Imagine if our worship told the story of the reach of the gospel into every group of people. God’s way, in nature and in the kingdom, is cross-pollination. May this dynamic become the way of the worship movement.

We can argue that the internet spawned globalization, making it easier for certain cultures to get the gospel out in new and creative ways. However, the converse is also true. The internet can also open the opportunity for a two-way exchange. This should be a priority—sensitivity in the kingdom. We should not be following the trend of the day. We should be emulating the dynamics of heaven where every culture and language has a place.

Secondly, celebrity and brand leveraging are vogue and have taken us off course. The sadness is not that we have veered from the plot. The sadness is that we do not even know that this has happened. We are becoming a culture where leveraging opportunity is becoming the norm, including in the worship music arena.

The kingdom is not about leveraging. It is the polar opposite. It is about laying down our rights and our privileges. Jesus did not consider equality with God something to be leveraged, but he laid it all down – and that is what made him so attractive to us. It was not his power that made him so compelling. It was his humility.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross. Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:3-11 (NIV)

Unfortunately, we live in a world where leveraging has become the norm, including in the church. May God be gracious to us!

Thirdly, high-tech production and fashion are redefining discipleship. How you are “attained”, in the Christian life, determines the ingredients necessary for you to be “maintained”.

Statistics are not on our side at this point in history. It is becoming increasingly unlikely that a Christ-follower, who came to faith in a production culture, will be able to endure the difficult seasons in his or her Christian walk without continued sensational presentations to keep them going. For the most part, the rules of production and discipleship are incompatible. The one requires that you die daily and that you live vulnerably. The other insists on 24/7 positivity and the appearance of success. Just like with show business, the ministry business can be driven by outward displays that are not necessarily accurate nor believable.

If you only look at us, you might well miss the brightness. We carry this precious message around in the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives. That’s to prevent anyone from confusing God’s incomparable power with us. As it is, there’s not much chance of that. You know for yourselves that we’re not much to look at. We’ve been surrounded and battered by troubles, but we’re not demoralized; we’re not sure what to do, but we know that God knows what to do; we’ve been spiritually terrorized, but God hasn’t left our side; we’ve been thrown down, but we haven’t broken. What they did to Jesus, they do to us—trial and torture, mockery and murder; what Jesus did among them, he does in us—he lives! Our lives are at constant risk for Jesus’ sake, which makes Jesus’ life all the more evident in us. 2 Corinthians 4:7-11a (*The Message*)

Once again, imagining worship music through the lens of the cultures of the world has the potential to give us a huge and helpful chiropractic adjustment.

I am hoping that these thoughts help give birth to a new vision for the decolonization of our contemporary worship movement.

As we near the end of this age, we are experiencing an increased hostility and mistrust between the cultures of this world. How amazing it would be if we were able to develop a prophetic worship culture in the church that included multitudinous cultures and languages. I saw how this fostered healing in my native South Africa. I am convinced it could make a huge impact globally.

As an example, take a look at the simple, childlike power of what is happening in Jerusalem with the cross pollination of Hawaiian, Jewish, and Arabic cultures.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2QMOh4d29Ok&feature=youtu.be>

Twenty years ago the rock 'n roll band was new in Christianity. It is now ubiquitous. Who knows what could happen in the next twenty years if we grab a hold of this idea?

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