

In Every Corner Sing!

Congregational Song in a Global Mission Context

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Somewhere in my history, church music became part of my life. It began, I'm sure, with the songs I heard as a babe in arms – my mother singing “Jesus Loves Me” while she gently rocked, and my father assuring me that “It Is No Secret What God Can Do.” This love was nurtured by the pianist in the congregation where I grew up. We had only an old upright piano, and she was not a virtuoso, but she played with her heart as much as with her hands. Her passion for congregational song must have been contagious. The hymns I learned formed a foundation for my faith in God's presence among us – among all of us, and it was just a matter of time before I incorporated the Psalter into my praise. It was there that I was convinced that God speaks to all of us. The Psalms, that ancient Hebrew collection of praises and laments, give us instantly a cross-cultural experience, bringing together Jewish tradition and our own. Through the Psalms we are made aware that there is a vast world beyond our own backyards:

O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth.
The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice.

And for those of us who can't carry a tune in a bucket:

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth!

Or, as that faithful Scotsman William Kethe in the sixteenth century taught us to sing:

All people that on earth do dwell,
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice;
Him serve with fear, his praise forth-tell,
Come ye before him and rejoice.

I'm reminded of that beautiful and all-inclusive reflection by the great metaphysical poet George Herbert:

Let all the world in every corner sing,
My God and King!

In my book, he got it right!

Cultural diversity in the church, in the words of Ruth Duck, is “a great blessing which brings rich gifts of song, of visual arts, of dance, of exuberance, of quietness, of many ways to praise God and to open our hearts and minds and doors.”¹ Cultural diversity is one of the side effects of our international mission efforts.

Growing up in a small, country Baptist church, I had a larger-than-normal dose of

evangelism. We faithfully took up our Annie Armstrong and Lottie Moon offerings every year and prayed for the missionaries around the globe. We even sang about their work for the Lord and the kingdom:

From Greenland's icy mountains,
From India's coral strand,
Where Afric's sunny fountains
Roll down their golden sand,
From many an ancient river,
From many a palmy plain,
They call us to deliver
Their land from error's chain.

Then there was the song we young boys sang as members of the Royal Ambassadors about the mission work of the church, and where we stood:

I am a stranger here,
Within a foreign land,
My home is far away,
Upon the golden strand.

We sang about God's love for everybody, but didn't really have any comprehension of people outside of our community:

Jesus loves the little children
All the children of the world:
Red and yellow, black and white,
They are precious in his sight,
Jesus loves the little children of the world.

Black and white, yes, but to my rural, domestic, boyish imagination, I could not picture red and yellow children. In faith and naïve acceptance, I knew that if we sang about them in church, they must be real – probably living on the other side of the rainbow!

The idea of a “multicultural” church and world was as foreign to me as the paradise with gates of pearl and streets of gold I heard preached on those early Sunday mornings. Didn't everybody eat fried chicken after church every week like me, according to my own schedule? The “preaching service” was held on the second and fourth Sunday of the month, and the time varied according to seasons and schedules of the dairy farmers – sometimes 10:00, sometimes 11:30, but most often when a majority of the folks had gathered in the pews. I guess I thought that the world, like our congregation, revolved around our segregated but mutually respectful community, and the word “multicultural” was not in my elementary vocabulary.

When thinking in terms of being a “multicultural church,” many of our congregations have difficulty seeing themselves as being diverse enough in their own membership to be considered “global” in any sense of the word. Most of the faces we see are

so much like our own, mirroring not only race and national origin, but the less obvious attributes of economic and social status, lifestyle, and even political persuasion.

In the broadest and most inclusive sense, being multicultural is not limited to an acknowledgement of those who share our pews, sing the same hymns, and speak the same liturgy as we do every Sunday. Rather, it calls us to become united with Christ and one another beyond our own sanctuaries, finding sisters and brothers we never expected to have and being joined with them in spirit as faithful children of the same faithful God.

Several years ago, I was commissioned to write a hymn for the World Council of Churches in commemoration of their Decade to End Violence. The suggested tune was “Hymn to Joy” from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, since it had no association with a particular religion, denomination, or sect, but rather spoke to the whole world. In Schiller’s own words, “*Alle menschen werden brüder*,” “All mankind will be brothers,” or in the more inclusive language of our day and time, “All people will be one family.”

Let me share with you the first two verses of that hymn:

Brothers, sisters, raise the chorus – celebrate the life we share;
Hold the dream that lies before us: peace to people ev’rywhere.
Joy among us, love commanding, truth and hope drive night away!
Justice, born in understanding, leads to a more perfect day.

By our feasts, and by our fasting, one great longing we express:
For a concord everlasting, all to welcome, all to bless.
Garden, mosque, and Eastern temple, weathered church and gilded shrine,
Raise our pray’rs – both high and simple – from the mortal to divine.

At Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, we frequently display a magnificent banner which was created by Berta Irwin, a faithful alto in our Chancel Choir, for World Communion Sunday a few years ago. In swirling stripes and blocks and circles of color and texture, the banner depicts the diversity that is the world in which we live – so many differences, yet all bound together with threads sewn by a loving and caring hand. It’s impossible to view the banner and not be reminded of the small corner of creation we occupy, and how much beauty there is around us, if we will but see it. The question practically asks itself: Shouldn’t our worship, if it is to be true to the all-encompassing love and grace of God, be as rich and colorful as that banner?

There’s a special hopefulness in that old missionary hymn I grew up singing:

We’ve a story to tell to the nations,
That shall turn their hearts to the right;
A story of truth and mercy,
A story of peace and light.
For the darkness shall turn to dawning,
And the dawning to noon-day bright;
And Christ’s great kingdom shall come on earth,
The kingdom of love and light.

Yet we’ve too often seen our missionary efforts focused on what we can do for the

rest of the world and not on what the rest of the world can do for us. We put our “right” opinions, our “true” faith, our “traditional” worship and values in front of all we consider “wrong” with other cultures. We strive vehemently to change others without acknowledging our own weaknesses. We may have a story to tell to the nations, but we frequently have a hard time listening to their stories as well.

Who can forget that memorable scene in the classic movie, *The African Queen*, when Katharine Hepburn’s reverend brother could not relate in the least to his role as a missionary shepherd to his flock. His faithful sister pounded loudly on the harmonium and sang piercingly, “*Songs of praises, songs of praises, I will ever give to Thee*,” as the congregation fled from the revival tent to the beach where a trading ship had docked, anxious to sell their goods and favors for a few shiny trinkets. No hint of Berta’s banner here, but the tragedy this reflects in how worship relates to reality is not limited to a World War One epic on the movie screen.

Several years ago, while visiting friends in London, I accompanied them to the regular Thursday evening choir rehearsal in the Anglican parish where they worship. The choir was preparing for the following Sunday’s service – a Latin motet by Thomas Tallis, a few canticles set to ancient chants, a Victorian “chestnut” of an anthem, and three English hymns, all sung without expression at a tempo appropriate to cathedral acoustics. I began to imagine this music, coupled with their staid liturgy dating from the English Reformation with very little alteration, and was left as cold as the March winds blowing across Regent’s Park. The only banner I could picture for that impending service was one of sterile white swaths, overlapping in broad folds and stitched together with transparent thread. Doubtless it would be true to the tradition of that parish, but one would have to turn the clock back nearly five hundred years to find anything multicultural in their worship. Perhaps that explains why there were only thirteen singers in the choir!

To see how much cultural diversity there is in our congregational song today, I sat down with our current hymnbook and counted the texts and tunes which are not from our English-speaking heritage but have been imported from other places. As you might expect, the majority of “foreign” hymns came from Germany, in the true Lutheran tradition of the Reformation: 36 texts and 82 tunes. The runner-up was France (if you include Calvin’s Psalter) with 10 texts and 24 tunes. The areas where we have focused our missionary efforts over the years have contributed to our treasury of congregational song: Asian countries gave us 15 texts and 16 tunes; South America and the Caribbean added another 5 texts and 7 tunes; African nations, where so much of our efforts have been focused, are represented by only 1 text and tune. If you look back at those non-Anglican cultures that are part of our “American” heritage, there are 22 African-American texts and 26 tunes; and from the Native American tradition, 3 texts and 4 tunes. What this says to me is that we are slow to incorporate music and poetry into our worship which comes from those places where we, like Katharine Hepburn, play loudly and sing piercingly our own hymns and impose rather than blend our praise with theirs.

Too often we rather one-sidedly sing,

*I love to tell the story,
T’will be my theme in glory,*

And neglect to sing its counterpart,

*Tell me the old, old story
Of unseen things above.*

We have often been so willing to *tell* but not to *hear*, to *dictate* and not to *understand differences*, to *impose unity* and not *appreciate diversity*. We have focused too readily on the confused tongues on the day of Pentecost and forgotten that the Holy Spirit engaged all that cacophony with the comprehension that united nations were speaking about the mighty power of God in their own languages.

Duke Ellington, the famous jazz musician of the last century, once said, “God listens to everything anybody says, because God understands all languages.” He may have been talking about the languages of music, from classical to jazz, but his words apply just as appropriately to the languages of speech.

All of the elements of worship can be described as either “textual,” “contextual,” or a subtle combination of the two. Among the textual portions may be included the hymns we sing, the prayers we pray, the Scripture we read, the liturgy we speak – those elements with which we most readily identify in terms of our culture and which are the most difficult when they appear foreign to us: a hymn sung in Spanish, a Psalm chanted in Hebrew or Latin, a reading from the Quran, a response in Gaelic or Greek – “What language shall we borrow?”

Easier for us to appreciate are the “contextual” elements of worship – visual art in the form of banners and drapes, international breads for World Communion Sunday, the plaintive sound of a Native American flute, colorful vestments and stoles, the stark rhythmic energy of African drums. And in the middle – an Iona *Kyrie*, a Taizé prayer sung with multi-language verses, a Celtic *alleluia*, a Jewish *shalom*, a procession with Swahili and English refrains – such elements as these combine seemingly incomprehensible texts which are mainly understood through their context, a conceptual interpretation of the alien tongues of a modern-day Pentecost. Surely, if our worship is to be as rich and broad and diverse as the world in which we live, it must draw from every “imagined corner” of this round earth on which “all people dwell.”

How can we accomplish this multicultural praise with the integrity that should characterize every worship experience in our congregations? For me, there are three commitments which must be made by worship leaders and congregations to ensure we achieve our goal. First, there is a commitment to fidelity. Whatever we do in worship must be faithful to the tenets of our faith, the traditions of our congregation, and the benefit of our praise of God. Second, there is a commitment to authenticity. Elements of worship imported from other cultures should appear as true to their sources as possible. As much as I hate to admit it, not all music worthy of worship finds its home on the organ bench. Sounds of global music – native instruments, special percussive effects, gospel keyboard, the movement of interpretive dance and processional, the brilliant colors of other traditions – are more than accoutrements. They are at the heart of their worship experience. And finally, there is a commitment to being genuine and deliberate in our worship – not isolating the obvious occasions in the church calendar when multicultural elements may appear patronizing, but incorporating them freely and frequently, with whatever education and explanation may be necessary to transfer the meaning they hold at home to our congregations half a world away.

Worship with the richness and variety of Berta's banner may well be our best vehicle for reclaiming the mystery of Pentecost and recognizing, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the unity in our diversity.

Perhaps no single verse in our English Bible exhorts us to venture into new vistas of ministry more than that New Testament commandment which Jesus gives to his disciples after the Resurrection, found in the scholarly-questionable closing verses of the Gospel of Mark: "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation." Or, as George Herbert challenged us:

Let all the world in every corner sing!

Note

1 Cynthia K Buccini, "Singing the Praises of a Multicultural Church," *Distinguished Alumni/ae Honored*. Boston University School of Theology *Focus* (Spring 2003), 2.