

## Centennial of Hymn Society Focuses on Global Music

*The Wired Word* for the Week of July 31, 2022

### In the News

After a three-year hiatus due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada finally met together in Washington, D.C., for their 100-year anniversary celebration earlier this month. Using the theme, "Sing the World God Imagines," lecturers and panelists explored the power of hymns to impact faith communities as well as the broader society.

The 300+ delegates who came from around the world represented some of the more than 50 denominations that make up the society. They spoke and sang in as many as six languages, accompanied by organ, brass instruments and the djembe, a West African drum. Several dozen more participated virtually, introducing unfamiliar songs from their cultures and composers, and reimagining traditional hymns with different rhythms, tunes and lyrics.

"I have had the pleasure of watching this community grow to embrace and to celebrate the way the gospel can be preached and sung and prayed in many tongues and rhythms, calling forth an array of gifts much like the first-century church," said conference preacher Cynthia A. Wilson, a United Methodist musician.

A special focus of this year's gathering was concern about the ongoing effects of colonialism on the texts and tunes used in Christian worship. Participants noted that Western influences often play a larger role than the work of indigenous lyricists and composers in the choice of worship styles and repertoire.

"We're still in the process of decolonizing what we are singing," said Gerardo Oberman, a leader of Reformed Churches in Argentina. "We are still trying to find our own voice or trying to find our own rhythms. Because there's a little bit of a disconnect between what we sing in our homes, what we sing on the streets, and what we sing in our churches."

Iowan C. Michael Hawn, professor emeritus of church music at Southern Methodist University's Perkins School of Theology, acknowledged that Western music can dominate, but asserted that local pastors and church musicians often find ways to make such music their own. He gave as an example the traditional hymn, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" being sung in Yoruba ... in a style that reflects they've Africanized it, and so it's not a simple transplant; it's a reconstruction, a certain kind of hybridity."

In his recent piece for *The New Yorker*, [The Songs That Made Church a Home](#), staff writer Vinson Cunningham observed: "I think of the *Lead Me, Guide Me* [hymnal, which was the first hymnal commissioned for use by African-American Catholics] as one of the most resplendent flowerings of the Second Vatican Council, with its imperative for the church to move beyond a Eurocentric aesthetic model and begin to embrace the many styles and tongues inherent in a

worldwide faith. ... the first black Catholic hymnal was necessarily eclectic and ecumenical. *Lead Me, Guide Me* put spirituals like 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot' into close quarters with high-church Protestant anthems such as 'All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name' and frank, racial-pride songs like James Weldon Johnson's 'Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing,' often called the black national anthem."

The [Global Ethnodoxology Network \(GEN\)](#) similarly emphasizes the importance of indigenous leaders and artists contextualizing the Christian message in their own cultures, using "grass-roots, local composition and production of artistry that is culturally relevant, biblically sound, and emotionally resonant" (ethnomusicologist Katherine Morehouse).

GEN defines the term "ethnodoxology," which was coined by [Dave Hall, founder of Worship from the Nations](#), as "peoples + praise."

On its website, GEN posts as its vision: "a future in which communities of Jesus followers in every culture engage with God and the world through their own artistic expressions." Elsewhere on the site, GEN states: "The global church exhibits an astounding array of worship patterns, demonstrating the enormity of God's creativity and the diversity of the Body of Christ."

In what many mission organizations may experience as a radical shift away from a colonization mindset, GEN emphasizes: "We embrace a 'Find it -- Encourage it' model of arts engagement rather than a 'Bring it -- Teach it' model."

"And now, as we prepare to go forth, may the spirit of God blow among us to bring forth new songs," said Executive Director J. Michael McMahon at the close of the Hymn Society centennial, "songs of faith, songs of healing, songs of transformation, songs of peace, songs of a world remade."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Marking Its Centennial, Hymn Society Continues Push for More Diverse Music. \*Religion News Service\*](#)

[Global Ethnodoxology Network. \*worldofworship.org\*](#)

[Global Christian Worship. \*Globalworship.tumblr.com\*](#)

[Global Song. \*The Hymn Society\*](#)

### **Applying the News Story**

After God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, Moses and his sister Miriam led the people in praising God. The women joined Miriam in celebrating with tambourines and dancing ([Exodus 15:1-21](#)).

When David brought the ark of the covenant of the Lord to the city of David, the celebration was marked by acrobats, dancers and robed singers raising "loud sounds of joy on musical instruments, on harps and lyres and cymbals," as well as trumpets, directed by Chenaniah, who "understood" the music ([1 Chronicles 15:16-29](#)). David made musical instruments for 4,000

musicians to offer praises to the Lord in the work of the house of the Lord ([1 Chronicles 23:5](#); [1 Chronicles 25:1-8](#).)

The dedication of Solomon's temple featured a similar array of instrumentalists and vocalists praising and thanking God in unison for his goodness and steadfast love ([2 Chronicles 5:11-14](#)).

Many of the psalms describe corporate worship that was [centered on God](#) as the source of deliverance, protection, provision and [joy](#). [Psalm 68:24-27, 32](#) called for "solemn processions ... into the sanctuary" and urged the "kingdoms of the earth" to sing praises to the Lord. In addition to the instruments mentioned in previous texts in this section, strings and pipes are included in the list of musical instruments praising the Lord found in [Psalm 150](#).

There were times when public and personal worship focused on grief and petition, as in [Job's lament](#). And in [Psalm 101:1](#), the psalmist indicates that the theme of his song to the Lord was loyalty and justice.

In [1 Corinthians 14:26](#), Paul taught that when the people of God gather, different people could contribute to the worship experience: some with hymns, others with lessons or revelations, a message in another tongue, or an interpretation of such a message. The purpose of it all was to build up the community of faith.

Let's not lose the significance of listening to God speaking to us in languages that are not our own. If we open our ears to listen, we may be surprised by the power of the gospel message when we hear it conveyed in other linguistic, musical and artistic forms.

Congregations that employ many individuals, of different ages, genders, ethnicities, races and classes in the reading of scripture or other aspects of worship, are often amazed that the gospel comes alive in new and startling ways.

### **The Big Questions**

1. How important is it to the building up of faith to have music that tells our story, not just God's meta-story?
2. When, if ever, have music or other elements of worship made you feel excluded or outside of the family of God? What was it about that experience that impacted you that way? How did you react?
3. Describe the most inclusive, welcoming worship you have ever experienced. Do you think other people whose life stories differ from yours experienced that time of worship the same way you did? Why or why not?
4. How important is it that worship incorporates older, traditional hymn texts, tunes and styles? How important is it that worship includes new music, lyrics and presentation? How many spiritual blessings are we missing by the neglect or purging of legacy hymns? By our resistance to new compositions by current hymn writers within our own culture and across the globe?

5. Who should decide what music is used in worship? On what basis should a hymn be included or excluded? What theological principles should guide the creation of worship experiences that honor participants from diverse communities?

### **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

#### **Zephaniah 3:17-18**

*"The LORD, your God, is in your midst,  
a warrior who gives victory;  
he will rejoice over you with gladness;  
he will renew you in his love;  
he will exult over you with loud singing  
as on a day of festival."*

(For context, read [Zephaniah 3:14-20](#).)

The prophet Zephaniah encouraged the people of God to sing songs of rejoicing after God gave them victory over their enemies and saved the lame and the outcast. When they sing, they will not raise their voices alone, however, for God will also be singing loudly, festival songs of exultation!

In [Revelation 14:1-3](#), the writer describes hearing "a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders."

**Questions:** What do you imagine the voice of God singing over God's people sounds like? What do you imagine might be the content of the song God sings over his people? How does it make you feel to know that God sings over us?

#### **John 4:21-24**

*Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."* (For context, read [John 4:19-26](#).)

While traveling through Samaria, Jesus' disciples went off to find food, leaving him behind at Jacob's well where he could rest. When a local woman came to draw water in the heat of the day, Jesus struck up a conversation with her, beginning with the most mundane request for a drink of water.

You never can tell where a conversation might take you. In this case, small talk about water led to discussing the woman's deep spiritual need (for living water) and relationship challenges (she had had four husbands and was living with her fifth).

When Jesus' perception hit a little too close for comfort, the woman changed the subject, first by complimenting Jesus, and then by asking a "culture wars" type of theological question about the correct place to worship God (vv. 19-20).

As he often did, Jesus challenged the inquirer's assumptions as to what was important. He wasn't about to take sides on what was essentially an insignificant question to God. "The hour is coming when you will worship the Father *neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem*," he said. *Where* you worship is much less important than *whom* you worship, *what kind of worshiper you are*, and *how* you worship.

**Questions:** Why does God seek true worshipers who will worship him in spirit and truth? What does worshiping in spirit and truth look like? What is the opposite of true worship? If true worship doesn't depend on external things such as location or belonging to a particular group, on what does true worship depend?

### **Colossians 3:16**

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.* (For context, read [Colossians 3:12-17](#).)

In this passage, Paul instructs the Colossian believers to practice Christlike virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness and love. Since they were called in one body in Christ, their relationships were to be characterized by harmony, peace and thankfulness.

When worshipers meditate on the word of Christ often, considering how to implement his teachings in their own lives, corporate worship is enhanced, because each returns to the gathered community with new insights to share about how Christ's word connected to their own situation. One of the ways we are to teach and admonish each other is through psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.

**Questions:** What do you think your church is teaching people through its worship music and liturgy? Consider both the textual content and the way the music and liturgy are presented.

### **Romans 15:8-12**

*For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the ancestors and that the gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,*  
*"Therefore I will confess you among the gentiles*  
*and sing praises to your name";*  
*and again he says, "Rejoice, O gentiles, with his people";*  
*and again, "Praise the Lord, all you gentiles,*

*and let all the peoples praise him";  
and again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come,  
the one who rises to rule the gentiles;  
in him the gentiles shall hope."* (For context, read [Romans 15:5-13](#).)

In this passage, Paul envisions a harmonious fellowship of believers from diverse life experiences and cultures, who "with one voice" glorify God (vv. 5-6). In a community of faith made up of Jew and gentile, male and female, enslaved and free persons, rich and poor, it would be surprising indeed if there were no interpersonal conflicts or disagreements. But because Christ welcomes one and all to walk with him and to eat at his table (v. 7), we also are to welcome one another.

Here, Paul affirms that Christ's ministry was to the gentiles (uncircumcised, non-Jews) as well as to the circumcised (Jews). God has shown mercy to all, which is reason for praise to God. It is noteworthy that the Jews and non-Jews rejoice and praise God *together*, not just in separate enclaves.

**Questions:** Where have you seen examples of corporate worship experiences that have broken down walls that separate and divide people? What could your church do to create worship spaces that feel more inclusive for diverse groups of people?

### **For Further Discussion**

1. Discuss this, from Lim Swee Hong, a professor of sacred music at the University of Toronto: "In essence, not all non-Western congregational songs make their cut as global songs. Indeed, what is local may not be global. In many instances, globalization strips away what is local of the Global South to purvey Western (Anglo)-accessible global song. As a result, there is the constant concern about authenticity [in relation to] accessibility in performance practice in addressing this genre. ... Despite these hurdles, the use of global songs (non-Western songs or songs of the Others [who belong to minority groups]) in North America has helped open the parochial windows of local (Anglo) congregations, giving them a foretaste of global Christianity."

2. John Witvliet, the director of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, stresses, "Much as non-Western songs are fascinating to most Western congregations, they need to be discerningly used to avoid 'ethno-tourism' that may result in unfortunate cultural appropriation and showcasing the music without understanding its *Sitz im Leben* [sociological setting or context]."

How can you discover the *Sitz im Leben* of a hymn, from one's own tradition or from a country or culture not one's own?

3. "Extraordinary things are always hiding in places people never think to look," Jodi Picoult, best-selling American novelist, wrote. How might this apply to expressions of worship from other cultures?

4. Respond to this, from [The Theology of Hymns, for Better or Worse](#) by *The Wired Word* team member, Bill Tammeus, "We must be sensitive to messages hymns send by hearing them through the ears of others. The church has hymns that are mostly a great treasure. But the job of

pastors and music directors is to be aware that sometimes they can miscommunicate or throw our worship out of proper balance."

What hymns or spiritual songs have you found theologically problematic, and why?

5. Consider this, from TWW consultant James Gruetzner: "I belong to a congregation in a historically ethnic denomination: It was only after 98 years (1935) that English became the language at national conventions -- and ethnic congregations remained well into the late 1900s. There was no planned shift: The gradual changes just made sense at the time. Our current congregation has a Kinyarwanda-speaking group -- led by members of our congregation -- which uses our facilities for services in that language. (They participated in the installation of our current pastor.) We at times have a Spanish-speaking group (mariachi band) helping to lead our services. None of these developments have been due to efforts at 'diversity' or 'inclusion' or 'equity.' These are due to our sense that God calls us -- and them -- to various relationships at various times."

6. Describe a worship experience that reached you directly, using your own language and culture, even though it would not necessarily be understood by others outside of your experience or your culture. How might God use different methods to speak to different people?

### **Responding to the News**

As a follow-up to the Zephaniah 3:17 scripture section above, you might brainstorm together what might be in the song God sings over his people. See if you can write a lyric that fits this theme.

### **Prayer**

O God, who welcome us into your presence, may we welcome one another with the same grace and cheerful readiness. Help us to look forward with eager anticipation to the richness and wisdom we will gain from one another as we worship together, all offering our unique gifts to bless one another and build up the beloved community of faith. In Jesus' name. Amen.