

Our worship music:

the challenge of the praise chorus

In many parts of the North American church today worship is in crisis. Kenneth R. Hull suggests this crisis is often related to the question of musical style, and the labels identifying the conflict tend to employ pairs of opposing terms: “contemporary vs. traditional,” “hymn vs. praise chorus,” or perhaps “praise and worship music.” We also hear about “worship wars” or “music wars.” Though you may attend a church where such conflict is not openly in evidence, you may be touched by this musical style crisis.

Most denominations have been affected by church members’ abandoning their home congregations in search of a worship style they find more personally satisfying. Even where there is no open warfare, there may be some guerrilla action taking place.

Why has the rise of the praise chorus become such a divisive issue? What is it about the praise chorus style that seems to evoke extreme responses in people? In my home city, a large evangelical church, with a significant student population, has recently split in two over the question of musical style. There was much hurt and misunderstanding on both sides of the disagreement.

The title of this article, “The Challenge of the Praise Chorus,” is not meant to imply a negative bias toward praise and worship music. Rather, it is meant to situate the issue within the larger history and practice of Christian worship beyond this particular time and place. I believe praise choruses have a place in the worship life of the church, though perhaps a smaller place than many of its proponents envisage.

Christian relationship as worship

We live in a time when the Sunday morning worship hour is under a lot of pressure. Not so long ago, the Sunday morning service was only one of several weekly services. Many churches offered Sunday evening worship, a mid-week service, and early-morning Eucharists. But, for most congregations these days, the Sunday morning service is the only opportunity for worship. At the same time, congregants now have greater expectations of the worship

hour. Churches now want to include all age groups in services that will speak to all personality types. We want our worship to include vertical, horizontal, and outreach dimensions. We want worship to be transparent and engaging enough to attract new members, and to allow us to express the fullness of our faith and to inspire and nurture us. We want to come away from worship services feeling like we’ve recharged our spiritual batteries for the week. And we’d like to accomplish all of these expectations in sixty minutes or less. In addition, there may be groups within the church that consider Sunday worship the ideal time to educate, evangelize, promote and publicize their activities. These additional expectations are all good things in themselves, but they compete with the comparatively short worship time available.

In a frenzied ‘climate’ like this, it is easy to lose sight of what is essential to the worship of God. There are countless definitions of Christian worship, but they all have this in common: that worship is a place of encounter with the Divine, a place where God and God’s creatures attend to their relationship with each other. All of the activities of worship are intended to assist us to enter more fully into the living relationship that exists between us and our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Relationship is the fundamental dynamic, the matrix, in which worship takes place.

Christian worship is inescapably relational in another sense. It is only through God’s Spirit working in us, animating, and directing our worship, that we can worship in spirit and in truth. We not only relate to God as the object of our worship, but it is only

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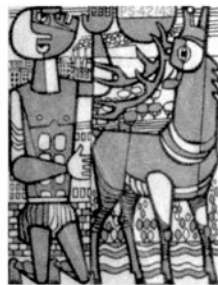
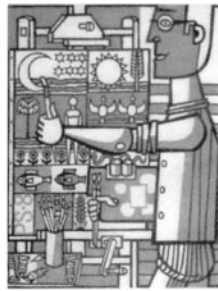
Liturgy Canada music edition

The central piece of this edition of *Liturgy Canada* is Ken Hull's compelling article, The Challenge of the Praise Chorus. Ken presents a balanced and nuanced view of issues that surround the conversations about "traditional" and "contemporary" music in worship. As one who struggles regularly with some level of tension around issues of music in worship, I found his piece both thought-provoking and enlightening.

I have also included my own piece encouraging the production of a comprehensive resource to supplement *Common Praise*, the present hymnal of the Anglican Church of Canada. Just as Ken's article invites us to explore a variety of music in worship, I am concerned with the limited homogeneity of bound hymnals (and especially *Common Praise*).

While the unique liturgical overtones that surround music in worship might at first seem esoteric at best or irrelevant in other circles, congregations are often defined by the use of music in worship and this issue of *Liturgy Canada* is, I hope, an important voice in the chorus.

David Fletcher



Henk Krijger
(Senggih)
1914-1979

Two-colour linocut
prints on parchment
9"×12", 1973

(Clockwise from top
left) Psalm 148,
Psalm 8, Psalm 5,
Psalm 91, Psalm 139,
Psalm 42/43

Time-tested songs of praise

Designing an issue of *Liturgy Canada* is always a challenge if for no other reason than that authors tend to think text only and seldom provide visuals. It has been my pleasure for the entire life of *Liturgy Canada* to present the author's thoughts in responsible, i.e. readable typography and to illuminate the pages as best I can.

Design is most effective if the designer is familiar with the topic: it's not about making pretty pages, but about communicating as effectively as possible. That leaves me a bit stumped and ignorant since I have no experience of the praise chorus movement. The reason is that I have worshiped at St Thomas, Huron Street, Toronto, for the past thirty years and, as many read-

ers know, the music tradition there is impeccably orthodox with a mixture of traditional and contemporary music from Palestrina to Proulx, from Mozart to Messaen; the use of The Hymn Book (1938); and Anglican plainsong.

What I miss in Ken Hull's article is any reference to the greatest songs of praise and worship we know, the Psalms. In an earlier life I enjoyed singing the Genevan Psalms of the Reformation. The Anglican tradition uses the Psalms differently, but they are surely a major component of our worship life. (See also David Fletcher's article on page 11).

For those reasons I have chosen to illustrate this issue with six images of the Psalms by my dear departed friend, Henk Krijger. While I don't think they are out of sync, they are contrapuntal.

Willem

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PRAISE CHORUS

(Continued from page 1)

through God's action in us as the subjects of worship that we are able to worship at all. To worship is to attend to the relationship in which we live, and move, and have our being. To be created in God's image means to be created for worship. It is our highest calling as Christians. It is—or should be—central to our communal life.

Christian worship, focused on relationship with God, carries with it a number of indirect benefits. Community formation, evangelism, pastoral care, education—all grow out of authentic worship. Community is formed as we pray and sing together with a common purpose and self-understanding; we learn more about God and God's love for, and engagement with, creation as we attend to scripture reading and the sermon; evangelism takes place as the community opens itself before God in expectation of encounter with the Divine.

Community formation, education, evangelism, and pastoral care are all good things, but they are not themselves worship, only its companions. They flourish in their relationship to the central activity of worship. Nevertheless, one or more of these elements of Christian life can easily become the main focus, displacing the primacy of our relationship with God as the aim of our worship. Once this displacement happens, worship begins to die. We begin to make decisions about what worship activities to include in the liturgy not based on asking, "Will this assist the congregation to enter more fully into relationship with God?" but, rather, "Will this attract newcomers and be enjoyable or good for community formation?"

When we make indirect benefits of worship our primary focus, then strength-

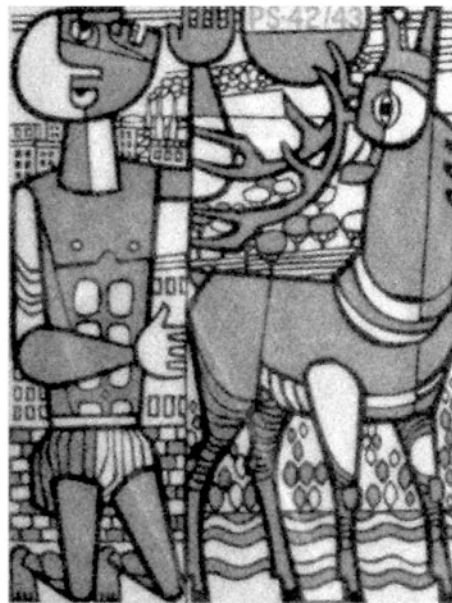
ening our relationship with God, the true reason for worship, becomes secondary. In effect, we deny that we are God's creatures, dependent on our relationship with God, dependent on our need to worship. Our worship is not only an expression of our individual and true nature, it forms us into the people God desires us to be. When we focus on secondary activities, as important as they may be, over worship, the implication is that we don't need to worship God in order to become more fully God's people. In this context, as laudable as evangelism, education, pastoral care, and community formation are, they can become idols that displace the true object of our worship.

Taste and style

The current tension surrounding the music used in worship is often framed in terms of "taste" or "style," as a conflict between two groups

who happen not to like the same things, who prefer to worship in different ways. Choosing the terms "taste" and "style" to characterize this issue already carries a strong message about the nature of the conflict. These terms imply that the conflict is about personal preference rather than substantial theological differences. Taste is something elusive: "There's no accounting for taste" we often hear, implying that one person's taste or preference is unpredictable and no better than another's. "Style" carries similar connotations, and is often considered as secondary in importance to "content." Characterizing the conflict as one of style implies that if we agree upon the content of worship, surely style doesn't matter. Approaching the issue

Issues around music in worship are not fundamentally about style but about meaning.



As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God.

in this way also reflects the biases of our current culture, which seeks to avoid all value judgements, in order to affirm all positions as equally valid.

But this approach to the question overlooks at least two important considerations. First, worship not only expresses our relationship with God, it also forms that relationship. How we worship affects our understanding of who God is and who we are. Second, musically speaking, there is no separation between style and content. In spoken language, the sounds refer to things: objects, concepts, actions, and so on. But music doesn't allow for this kind of distinction. Music does not refer directly to realities beyond itself. In music, there are sounds and their relation to one other, the duration of sound, pitch, timbre, dynamics, and flow. The way musical sounds relate to one another is both the style and the content.

The "content" of music has dimensions other than what we call style: its structure, its genre, its performance, and so on. But all style is part of the musical "content." You cannot change the style of a piece of music, or of the music used in worship, without changing what it means.

Music does carry meaning, not just by virtue of the personal or collective associations we make with it, but primarily in its sounds and structure. When combined

Notice

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We regret any inconvenience to our members.

with words, music colours and shapes how we understand a text. When it stands alone, its gestures and contours still carry an expressive potential that is capable of cultural and theological interpretation. Issues around music in worship are not fundamentally about style but about meaning.

It is no more appropriate, then, to discuss the issue of music in worship in terms of taste or style than it would be to discuss the theology of a service of worship or a sermon in the same way. If, for instance, we heard someone say, “I find the pastor’s views on the importance of forgiveness to be in bad taste,” or, “I don’t like the style of her theology of the Lord’s Supper,” we would recognize these as frivolous com-

Although it is possible to include praise choruses as one of many styles within worship without creating tension or conflict, it is not an easy task.

ments that trivialize the importance of the issue they purport to evaluate. Judgements about music in worship based on taste and style are just as inappropriate, and their intent is the same: to dismiss the issue out of hand as unimportant.

Many people in our congregations seem to intuitively understand this attempt at trivializing the issue. A central reason why the question of musical style in worship is so divisive is precisely because people sense that a great deal more than “personal preference” is at stake. It’s not just a question of tolerating diverse personal preferences but of the fundamental issue of who we understand God to be, and what our relationship with God is. When we make fundamental changes to the way we worship God, we also implicitly change our view of who God is, and who we, as creatures of God are. We cannot worship God together without music, prayer, ritual, ceremony, and the other elements which express communal faith.

Contemporary, traditional, and blended “Blended worship” is another term frequently encountered in the discussion of the music of worship. The term is often attributed to Robert Webber, who has

written several books with titles containing the phrase. The term has caused some confusion, because its intended meaning is actually narrower than the phrase itself suggests.

The music of the English-speaking church has been a blend of different styles since at least the middle of the 19th century, when Lutheran chorales, along with Greek and Latin hymns from the early centuries of the Church, were first translated for use in hymn books. These compositions stand alongside the metrical psalms, evangelical hymnody, and Victorian part-songs of more recent times. Since then, our hymn books have been further enriched by the addition of shape-note hymnody, gospel hymns, folk-song melodies, music

from Taizé and Iona, and non-Western hymns from various cultures. Traditional hymnody is a diverse repertoire of material from many centuries and all continents, and includes contemporary texts and

tunes, which have appeared in particular abundance over the past 30 years.

The music usually referred to as “contemporary” in the current conversation is, as the term indicates, recent in origin, but the term also denotes its popular style. In contrast to traditional music, “contemporary” music in worship is often uniform in musical style. The problems that can arise around the blending of musical styles are not about the blending of styles per se—different musical styles have been blended in worship for a very long time. Rather, the phrase “blended worship” has been coined to describe, on the one hand, the specific use within a single service of praise choruses and so-called “contemporary” music with, on the other hand, a variety of traditional hymn styles, including recently composed texts and tunes in the traditional style.

What is it about the praise chorus style that seems to so passionately polarize opinion? Why do people have such strong reactions to this style, one way or the other? Why are some threatened or repelled by this music while others are caught up and enamoured of it?

Let us consider this question under three headings: text, musical style, and

the structure of traditional and alternative worship.

The texts of praise choruses

In a recent essay, Cornelius Plantinga contrasted the wide range of subjects addressed in traditional contemporary hymnody with the single focus of praise choruses. His survey of recent traditional hymnody found numerous texts about the Trinity, the suffering of God, sin and grace, creation, social justice, and global aware-

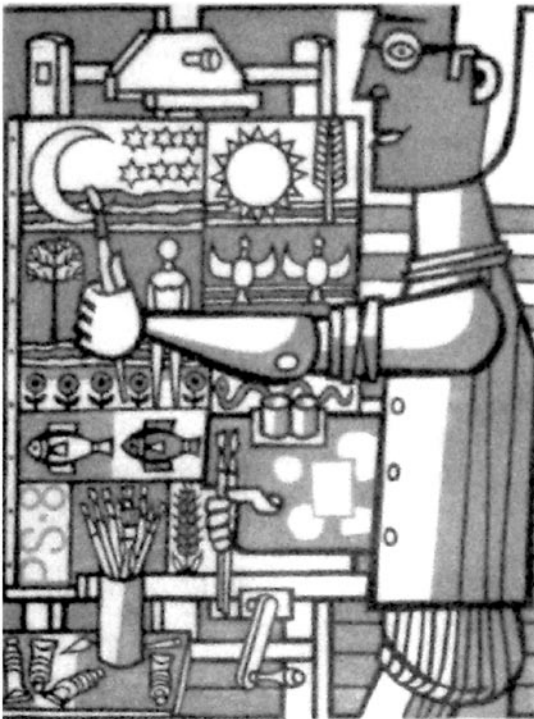


*Give ear to my words,
O Lord; give heed to my
groaning.*

*Harken to the sound of
my cry, my King and
my God, for to thee do I
pray.*

*O Lord, in the morning
thou dost hear my voice;
in the morning I prepare
a sacrifice for thee, and
watch.*

ness. His examination of an admittedly limited number of praise choruses, by contrast, suggested that they predominantly had a single focus—praising the attributes of God the Father or of Jesus, without the emphasis on the other theological aspects present in more traditional hymns. Plantinga also found that in most of these choruses God’s attributes were praised apart from God’s acts: “More than half the time, it’s not at all clear from inside a song why God is so praiseworthy...”²¹



When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and stars which thou hast established ... the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea ... how majestic is thy name in all the earth!

Another pervasive characteristic of the praise chorus texts that I am familiar with puts the experience of the author or singer, especially his or her emotional experience, at the forefront, rather than the praise of God. Here is the refrain from a popular song by Rick Founds:

Lord, I lift your name on high,
 Lord, I love to sing your praises.
 I'm so glad you're in my life,
 I'm so glad you came to save us.²

Texts like this suggest that the primary subject of many praise choruses is not God but the singer him/herself. When I sing about the attributes of God detached from the image of God as the actor in creation, when I sing about my feelings about God, I emphasize my experience of God, not the Divine Other with whom I am in relationship.

In contrast, consider one of the great hymns of faith, Isaac Watts’s *When I survey the Wondrous Cross*. This deeply moving text touches repeatedly upon the subjective experience of the worshipper, but note how the feelings of the singer are engaged. Sometimes they are portrayed as actions: “I...pour contempt on all my pride.” More often they are invoked indirectly: “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all,” the focus being on the worshipper’s obligations to God not just his subjective feelings.

In traditional contemporary hymnody, the feeling or action of the singer is a response to the picture being painted of Christ on the cross. This picture is portrayed as though the singer or worshipper were present. It is not the description of a historical event, so much as it is an imaginative recreation. The subjective element of the text is anchored throughout to the objective truths recreated in the imagination. Christ, the “Other,” is presented as a real person to whom we respond, rather than an ill-defined, unnamed Other—as is often the case in the praise chorus repertoire where absence allows the worshipper to focus primarily upon his or her individual feelings.

The music of hymns and praise choruses

The music of praise songs and traditional hymnody differ from one other in at least three other fundamental ways.

First: traditional hymnody is primarily a written tradition; praise and worship songs are primarily a recorded tradition. Although commercial recordings of traditional hymns are readily available, the basis for most hymn performances is the written score. The printed notation of hymns, usually on a pair of staves, in four parts, with text placed either between the staves of music or separate from, but adjacent to, the printed music permits a wide variety of performance practices. Most hymns allow for singing in unison or in four parts,

“How we worship affects our understanding of who God is and who we are.”

accompanied or unaccompanied, with a variety of tempos and dynamic levels. Many hymn texts have acquired a standard tune, but the texts remain separable from the tunes. Many texts have not acquired a single, standard tune but may be sung to various tunes. Although the music affects how the text is understood, the text is primary, and the music is a vehicle for the text.

Praise choruses reverse this textual principle. Although printed music is available for praise music, recordings tend to be prescriptive of how a performance sounds. Recordings serve as the model for performance. Printed scores are an adjunct to recording, providing information about harmonies and words. The range of praise performances is much smaller, since recording defines with much greater precision the written score with a range of nuances including tempo, timbre, and vocal inflections. Performances focus on reproducing the sound and feeling of a recording.

An example of this fundamental difference in musical culture became clear to me the first time I asked a student to bring me “the music” for a piece we had been talking about in class. If you ask a classical musician for “the music” for a piece, they normally hand you a printed score. If you

ask a folk musician, they will probably reply that they don't have the music because they learned the piece by ear. When the student came to my office with the music, she handed me a CD. This is what she understood "the music" to be. I told her that it wasn't a recording I was looking for, and she responded with, "Oh, you mean the printed music!"

What I am suggesting is that the praise chorus culture does not fall within either side of the familiar dichotomy: written tradition vs. oral/aural tradition. In the written tradition, music is transmitted through a printed score which specifies most of what the composer considers the essential elements of a performance. These elements typically include pitch, rhythm,

The praise chorus style is especially prone to becoming the focus of idolatry...

instrumentation, relative dynamics, and tempo. In the oral/aural tradition, music is transmitted from person to person or from group to group in actual performance. Over time and distance, performances may vary considerably, so much so that distinct versions of what began as the same original piece of music arise.

Praise and worship music belong to a third tradition which I would define as a "recorded tradition." Recorded tradition shares elements of both the written and oral traditions as well as elements uniquely its own. The recorded performance functions like a 'live' performance does in the oral/aural tradition. But because there is usually a single, definitive recorded performance, this recorded version of a piece has a greater prescriptive force than a written score. Repeated listening to the recorded performance can convey precise information not only about pitch, rhythm and instrumentation, but also about tempo, dynamics, vocal timbre, and inflection. In addition, subtle nuances of pitch and rhythm which are not captured in the written tradition are discernable. The written score provides instructions for performance, but live performance models only one possible performance. The recorded tradition creates a model which 'live' performances can attempt to precisely recreate.

The second way in which music of

praise songs and traditional hymnody differ from one other is that traditional hymnody is fundamentally vocal in conception, while praise and worship music is predominantly instrumental in character.

Traditional hymnody is usually sung to the accompaniment of an organ or other keyboard instrument. Most of the repertoire can be sung unaccompanied, and often in unison, without loss of musical coherence. The role of the organ is essentially to double the vocal lines, except when alternate harmonizations are provided to create variety or to illustrate the text in a particular way. The musical score of the hymn is the vocal part and is complete in itself.

In praise choruses, the vocal line is typically dependent upon instrumental accompaniment. The instrumental music generally sets up the song with an introduction, and is heard continuously, while the vocal line

may be incomplete without instrumental accompaniment, and is unlikely to be sung unaccompanied. Because of this, singing a praise chorus has a sense of being "carried along," completed, and contained by the instrumental music unlike in traditional hymns. In praise choruses, we add our voices to an instrumental musical foundation which establishes and sustains the expressive character of the song.

The third way in which music of praise songs and traditional hymnody differ is that the traditional hymn is a self-contained object whose boundaries are defined mainly by its text, whereas the praise chorus has porous boundaries which are defined mainly by its music and accompaniment.

A traditional hymn is a closed unit with clear boundaries marking beginning and ending, and with clear sectional divisions. The singing of each stanza is usually punctuated by a brief silence, and the conclusion of the hymn punctuated by a somewhat longer silence. Stanzas or partial stanzas of hymns are not repeated, and the music ends when the text does.

The boundaries for the praise chorus are less clearly defined. In performance, the music is usually continuous, not only between stanzas, but sometimes also with an instrumental extension at the end, or

with the repetition of a partial stanza. This extension may then lead directly into the next song.

Traditional and alternative worship

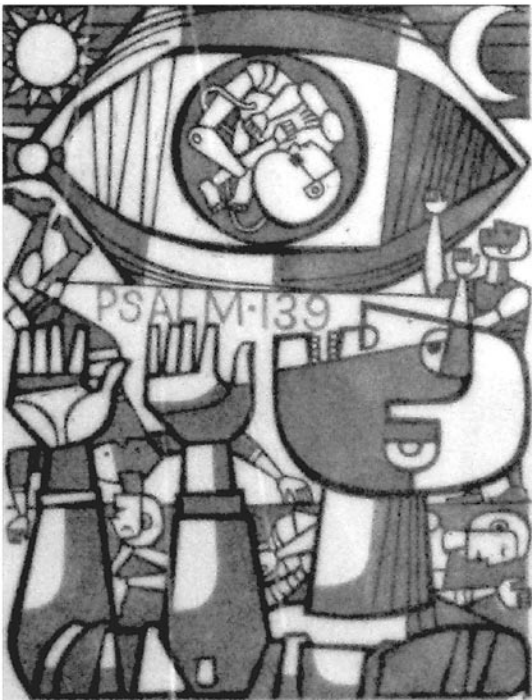
Traditional hymnody and praise choruses are each associated with a pattern of worship. Examining these patterns is helpful in the effort to understand what sets the two musical styles apart from each other.

Traditional music for worship in the Western Christian Tradition consists of a variety of elements relating to readings,



For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions; and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and a buckler.

prayers, songs, sermon, and Eucharistic sharing. These elements are arranged in a liturgical sequence of some kind. In some traditions, this sequence is fixed, set out in a ritual, a book of worship, a prayer book, or another liturgical volume. At the other extreme are traditions with no fixed expectation about the order of the elements of worship, which may change from week to week. Both approaches seek to arrange the sequence in a way that makes sense to the gathered community. Authentic worship



For thou didst form my inward parts, thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise thee for thou art fearful and wonderful. Wonderful are thy works!

is never a random series of activities, but rather a progression that aims to create a coherent whole. Whether fixed or free, the underlying structure of traditional Western Christian worship outlines a series of actions with a specific direction in mind.

A typical outline of a non-eucharistic service might be: gathering, hearing the word, reflecting on the word, offering ourselves, praying for the world, sending out in service.

The meaning worshippers find in such a worship experience arises not only from the various elements of worship but from the way those activities are juxtaposed with one another. A hymn may comment on the reading just proclaimed. Two readings may give different perspectives to a similar theme. A sermon may interpret one or more of the readings.

When we speak of the “flow” of such a liturgy, we refer to the movement from one element to another.

Each element retains its individual character and the boundaries between the elements remain clear. Well-organized liturgy means that worship arises not from the elements alone but from the interconnections forged in the context of the gathered community.

Contemporary or “alternative” worship typically consists of two main phases: 20 or 30 minutes of singing (the “praise” element of worship) followed by a sermon of indeterminate length. There may be thematic links between the two principal parts of the service. One aim of the worship planners (liturgists) is to arrange the succession of songs in a seamless flow, which may be accomplished by the choice of music and instrumental transitions between songs so the music is continuous. Spoken transition may connect elements of worship, possibly with instrumental music playing in the background. The ideal is a seamless flow in which the boundaries between the components is blurred. This ideal is supported by the absence of boundaries within the songs themselves.

In praise worship, the organizing principle for the sequence of songs is affective: The aim is to create an emotional experience for the worshipper. Brian McLaren, founding pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church near Washington, D.C., has dubbed this experience “The Feeling.”³

Worshippers readily identify this feeling as “intimacy with God” or “being in the presence of God.”

Differing structures or constructs for worship invite a variety of participation from worshippers. The “seamless flow” style of singing erases clear boundaries as much as possible, eliciting a merging of the worshipper with the music. Singers are invited to “go with the flow” in worship, to be carried forward from one emotional high to another. Such a style of participation invites the relinquishing of control in favour of identifying completely with the movement of the music. The “boundary space” created by the juxtaposition of worship elements facilitates the experience of a worshipper maintaining a boundary

Traditional hymnody is primarily a written tradition; praise and worship songs are primarily a recorded tradition.

between him or herself and the actions of worship. This is not a detachment or separation, but rather a space within which the worshipper may experience a variety of responses to the worship. These responses may range from complete identification to a contemplative reflection upon what is taking place within the worship of the community.

The many differences between traditional and alternative worship styles suggest further reasons why combining music associated with two worship styles may be so difficult. In particular, including praise choruses within traditional worship presents inherent contradictions.

A traditional hymn is a self-contained musical unit, made up of discrete stanzas (or “verses”) of equal length. The hymn can be included as one of the songs in a sequence of praise songs, especially if it is performed in a praise chorus style. The challenge for the worship leaders is to create transitions that incorporate the hymn into a flow or thematic continuity of music.

Placing a praise chorus within the structure of traditional worship is fraught with difficulty. The challenge is not so much transition as containment. The praise chorus (the worship band) may spill over its boundaries, repeat stanzas and

parts of stanzas, or insert an instrumental extension at the conclusion of musical settings—in short, resist its assigned place in the liturgy. The praise chorus can elicit a negative response from the worshipper who is unclear about the boundaries which have now changed from what is normally expected. Experience indicates that though it is not difficult to offer traditional hymns within a praise chorus context, the reverse, inserting praise choruses within traditional settings, creates difficult dynamics due to the fact that the musical essence of the praise chorus is tied to the style of performance.

Intimacy, narcissism and idolatry

There is a deep hunger for intimate rela-

Our basic stance as musicians, liturgists, and worship leaders should be to be both inclusive and discerning.

tionships in North America today. The human need to know and be known by others has become increasingly frustrated by a variety of cultural forces. These forces include dynamics related to global economics in which people are viewed and understand themselves to be economic units rather than persons. Technological changes have rapidly reshaped and limited human interaction in the last century and into the new millennium.

The rise of the praise chorus movement is an expression of this longing for intimacy: the human longing, to know and be known by God. The alternative worship movement and the praise chorus style appeal strongly to white middle-class North Americans, which is the cohort whose culture has been most strongly defined by recent cultural and social forces. Many lack a strong ethnic identity and community, with their accompanying cultural traditions, that other groups possess and which are needed to combat the alienating impact of contemporary culture. Given that this desire for relationship with God lies at the heart of Christian worship, the alternative worship movement has made an important contribution to the Church by reminding us of the centrality of the need for individual relationship and emotional

connection to the Divine.

Given the rapid depersonalization of individuals in our Western culture, it is no surprise that our society has found itself referred to as a ‘culture of narcissism.’ In such a culture, the primary focus is on the individual trying to forge a unique identity, focusing on the realization of physical and emotional needs being met, and on fully “actualizing” themselves. Relating to others’ needs and aspirations is not part of this narcissistic culture; the most important aspect of life becomes one’s “experiences,” one’s feelings, and one’s own interests.

In many ways, the “praise and worship” culture is an expression of this narcissistic world view. Its texts emphasize the singers’ feelings and experience. Even when the

texts are not explicitly about feelings, the music aims to create a particular emotional response from the worshipper. This evocation of emotion from the worshipper is accomplished through the use of

recordings as models and the reproduction of the sound and style of these recordings to create, what Brian McLaren calls, ‘The Feeling.’ The blurring of boundaries between song texts, the worshipper, and the music is intended to facilitate worshippers’ losing themselves in an emotional experience.

Narcissism and true intimacy, however, are incompatible notions. Narcissism may create a momentary feeling of intimacy, or oneness, between God and a person or between different people, whereas genuine relationships require seeing the other as distinct from oneself before true intimacy can occur.

Consider marriage, one of the most intimate of human relationships. If my spouse asks me, “Why do you love me?” and I reply that I love her because she is compassionate, or beautiful, or kind to children, or because she really commits herself to her beliefs, then I am appreciating her for who she is. If I reply, on the other hand, “I love you because I feel good when I’m around you,” then I’m not actually speaking about her or who she is. I’m answering in terms, simply, of her importance in fulfilling my needs. My response suggests that her existence is only

as important as her making me feel good. If this narcissistic answer is all that I can give her, then our relationship is in trouble, because I do not see her as separate from myself but as merely an extension of myself and my needs.

Similarly, worship that is shaped around my feelings, worship that is about perceiving in God only those things that evoke an emotional response in me, worship that sees God not as truly Other but simply as One who provides me with experiences



*Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord from the
heavens, praise him in
the heights!
Praise him, all his an-
gels, praise him, all his
host!
Praise him, sun and
moon, praise him, all
you shining stars! ...*

I want, does not foster a mature and intimate relationship. Genuine relationship, genuine intimacy, requires the presence of two distinct parties of the relationship.

Narcissistic elements are undoubtedly part of the early stages of a romantic relationship. We project our own idealized image of the perfect partner upon the other and this evokes wonderful feelings. We want to erase the boundaries between us, to merge with the other person completely. We call this infatuation, or “falling in love.” A mature relationship emerges only as I begin to see my partner for who she really is—the other unique individual who is beyond my own needs and desires. A mature relationship respects that each person has independent thoughts, feelings, values, and desires.

Assuming that praise choruses are aimed at inducing states of feeling that are like those we experience when falling in love—and the presentation of John Wimber’s model⁴ makes explicit such a goal—then we have to question how they can be called genuine acts of praise. Infatuation is more about merger with the beloved than about mature relationship. The essence of praise is that the individual is separate from the Divine, while called, at the same time, to be in an intimate relationship with the Divine.

Infatuation either matures or dies over time. But the powerful feelings associated with infatuation have the dangerous potential to draw us more towards the feeling than to the one/One who has inspired those feelings—the other/Other. The danger is that if we choose to focus upon the experience of emotions over genuine relationship, we will eventually move on to other relationships in an endless and circular attempt to recapture previously experienced feelings rather than growing into a mature relationship.

The ephemeral nature of much of the praise chorus repertoire may be a reflection of the same pattern. Most of the repertoire is in a constant state of change as pieces that have grown familiar are replaced by newer ones. Brian McLaren has noticed the similarity between the importance of emotional experience in alternative worship and the addictive potential of infatuation. His comments are worth quoting at length:

A problem is created when a person

becomes addicted to the euphoria of infatuation: When it begins to wear off, they lose interest in their partner and move on to another partner, seeking an encore infatuation experience—which, again, inevitably fades. Such persons mistake the inevitable fading euphoria with a malfunctioning relationship, so they regularly short-circuit the intended process (infatuation, bonding, commitment, responsibility, nurture, childrearing) by moving on to find another high....I wonder how many of us develop a kind of addiction to a spiritual feeling, a spiritual infatuation with God...? I know in my city, there are floating congregations of Christians who migrate from church to church; wherever the biggest bang is being felt is where they’ll be. They have Christian words for it—“the anointing,” perhaps, or “intimacy with God” or “being in the presence of God”—but sometimes I secretly wonder if they have become spiritual infatuation addicts.⁵

McLaren goes on to say, later in his essay, that this “spiritual infatuation” is a good and necessary thing, and an experience of genuine intimacy. I have argued that “The Feeling” is at best a first step that may mature into genuine intimacy, and at worst, becomes an obstacle to a genuine encounter with the Divine. But if the experience of infatuation is a natural way for genuinely intimate relationships to begin, dangerous though it might be, it suggests that infatuation has a legitimate place in our worship.

There is, however, a problem with this argument. In human relationships, feelings of infatuation are the result of encountering another person who seems to fulfill our deepest longings. Suddenly, or gradually, our feelings are at the centre of a budding relationship, in which, eventually, if the relationship is to be healthy, feelings make way for concern for the genuine needs of the other. In other words, our relationship matures beyond mere feelings. The intention, however, of alternative worship and its praise chorus music is to indefinitely create and sustain heightened feelings, thereby satisfying the longing for intimacy with God. Heightened emotion is what is aimed at. Feelings of closeness to and oneness and intimacy with God are then identified as “the presence of God.” The

problem with this approach is that once God becomes completely identified with a particular emotional experience, an idol has been created. The people Brian McLaren calls “spiritual infatuation addicts” have become ensnared by an idol forged from their longing for intimacy and shaped on the anvil of a narcissistic culture by blacksmiths wielding microphones and guitars.

Because of its particular characteristics and capabilities, the praise chorus style is especially prone to becoming the focus of idolatry for individuals seeking intimacy. This potential for idolatry, however, is also true of any musical style—Gregorian chant, gospel hymnody, four-part unaccompanied singing, Taizé music, etc. It is also true of other trappings of worship: a style of preaching, a particular service book, or a way of praying.

So, it would seem that to guard against the potential of worship becoming idolatrous, a diversity of musical styles, known as “blending,” is one way of inoculating ourselves against the insidious but natural human tendency to identify a particular experience of worship with the presence of God. How that blending is accomplished, and what its component styles will be, will vary from place to place.

Although it is possible to include praise choruses as one of many styles within worship without creating tension or conflict, it is not an easy task. Here are some suggestions as to how to effectively include praise choruses as one among many musical styles used in Sunday worship:

- 1) Use praise and worship music in liturgically appropriate ways within a strong liturgical structure. A strong liturgical context will help prevent the praise and worship ethos from taking over the worship. Let it be contextualized rather than contextualizing.
- 2) Use praise and worship music in one part of the liturgy, not several, and not at the beginning or the end of the service.
- 3) Minimize those aspects of the music which are more performance-oriented such as instrumental preludes, postludes, and interludes, by including the participation of the congregation as frequently as possible.

4) Avoid creating the expectation that praise choruses are a weekly feature of worship.

Our basic stance as musicians, liturgists, and worship leaders should be to be both inclusive and discerning. Every musical style has something distinctive to offer, and without careful scrutiny, no style should be deemed unsuitable for worship. The use of many musical styles can enrich and deepen our worship. But sound liturgical planning should not consider inclusivity itself as a *sine qua non* of effective contemporary worship.

Creating a blend of musical styles merely to offer variety leaves important questions unaddressed. We need to ask what each style has to offer, and whether its contribution is what is needed in this particular time and place. We need to ask, "Will the use of this music facilitate worshippers' encounter with God?" and, further, "What kind of relationship with God will this music foster?" Answering these questions requires a measure of critical discernment which asks not only how worshippers respond in the present moment but how they are being formed, over time, as the people of God moving toward a mature relationship with the Divine.

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Notes

1. Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., "Text, music and meaning in congregational song," *The Hymn* 53:1, (January 2002), 14-25.
2. Rick Founds, *Lord, I Lift Your Name On High* © 1989, Maranatha Music
3. Brian D. McLaren, "Missing the point: worship," in Brian D. McLaren and Tony Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point: How the Culture-Controlled the Church Neutered the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 212.
4. Wimber's 5-phase model: See Barry Liesch, *The New Worship: Straight Talk on Music and the Church*, expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), pp.54-58.
5. McLaren, *loc cit.*

Homogenous hymnody – an uneasy orthodoxy

In the book-bound culture of the Anglican tradition, David Fletcher notes that our hymnals have described an uneasy orthodoxy that attempts to meet a variety of worship needs and regulate the style and taste of the musical expression of the church.

Among the myriad challenges of copyrights and permissions, cultural sensitivity and musical sensibilities (not to mention matters of theology), the editors have one of the least enviable tasks in the church in trying to craft a resource that meets a wide variety of needs.

Having said that, however, it must also be noted that bound hymnals are an expression of an age, and regardless of the considerations already mentioned, also represent a tangible expression of who we are as people of faith - in other words, a hymnal is an outward and visible sign of an inner and spiritual orthodoxy. When you go into a church, you can tell as much about the expressed faith and liturgical life from the hymnal in the pew as from the antependia and accoutrements of the sanctuary. When I walk into a church and see *The English Hymnal* I have a very different set of expectations than when I see *Mission Praise* in the book rack.

In 1938, the editorial preface of *The Book of Common Praise* (aka. the old blue hymn-book) recognized that the life-span of a hymn book should be no more than 25 years, and take into consideration the cultural expressions of the age. In 1971, the Anglican and United Church produced *The Hymnal* (the red book) which was once described to me as “the illegitimate offspring of a failed romance.” In 2001, *Common Praise* was published to meet the worship needs of the first half of the twenty-first century. In these latter two hymnals, there has been an erosion of what we would recognize as intrinsically Anglican, and with the alternatives to an authorized hymn book increasing, preserving a literate musical tradition will become increasingly difficult and exclusive.

Let me illustrate with two examples: in the music edition of *Common Praise* there is no sensitivity to poetic line. I recognize that choristers and part-singers appreciate having the text between the lines of the musical score, yet the lines themselves are mangled in order to make use of the least possible amount of space. In making this choice, the actual form of poetic expression is sacrificed to the expedience or economy of publishing; the alternative is to use a text-only pew edition that sacrifices musical expression (and from a musician’s perspective, limits the introduction of new material by not providing the melody line).

The second is the omission of any part of the Psalter (save only some generic refrains and tones with no guidelines for use, and some versified hymn settings). This is indeed a shame, when we compare *Common Praise* with *Voices United* (which includes a representative selection of Psalm settings). The liturgical use of Psalms in both the Eucharistic and Daily Office (including Sunday) lections is unsupported by the ‘official’ hymnal of the church, and by its omission, sends an unwritten message that discourages the liturgical use of the Psalms, which are a significant part of our worship tradition.

It is somewhat facile to simply say that other resources are available, especially when such comments are directed towards those for whom discernment, ability or access to resources may be limited. Many congregations will purchase one authorized resource, trusting that it will meet all their worship needs. It would seem to me

that a comprehensive musician’s handbook that provides direction to further resources, playing and accompaniment

A hymnal is an outward and visible sign of an inner and spiritual orthodoxy. ... Many congregations will purchase one authorized resource, trusting that it will meet all their worship needs.

suggestions, and comprehensive indexing of a variety of musical resources linked with lectionary and worship alternatives is an abundantly necessary and commendable supplement to *Common Praise* that will go a long way in preserving a more comprehensive orthodoxy than the present hymnal would describe.

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Communion in Christ

An executive summary of the liturgical/theological reflection

In reflecting on the proposed *Anglican Covenant*, Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Mission's (APLM) Council grounded its response in Paul's words to the Corinthians "Just as the body is one and has many members and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of the one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

Our basis for unity

The Church is already one because it is one with the Lord, belonging to Christ and participating in Christ's ministry and mission in the world. Our communion does not depend upon either juridical structures or doctrinal agreements. These, at best, may reflect our unity in Christ, but they do not effect it. In Baptism and Eucharist, God both brings about and reveals our participation in Christ. The intimate connection between Baptism, Eucharist and the ordination of bishops, deacons and priests has revealed that baptized divorced persons, gay men and lesbians as well as women may not be excluded as a class from any of the sacraments of the church, for they are full members of Christ.

We are concerned that misplaced anxiety about unity may drive us to forced uniformity, as though we had to fear communion in diversity. We appeal to our church to address our present divisions, drawing on the charisms that have shaped who we are, including the Anglican comprehensiveness expressed in the Elizabethan Settlement; the authority of scripture, tradition and reason; the integrity of each diocese and Province; and finding our unity in work for justice so that mission, rather than doctrine, gives outward expression to the unity found in Christ.

The proposed covenant

We believe that the proposed covenant is deeply flawed, as it attempts to bring about Church unity through enforced conformity. The unity of the church cannot be enforced, as unity is already given in Jesus Christ. It is one of the marks of the Church and an article of faith.

We do not believe that the Church should be one, but that it is one. The Covenant places certain persons in the role of being ultimate arbiters of what is and is not Anglican.

Theologically speaking, the sources of church unity have traditionally been understood as:

We are concerned that misplaced anxiety about unity may drive us to forced uniformity, as though we had to fear communion in diversity.

- The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
- The two dominical sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist
- Ongoing participation by Christ in these sacraments, constituting our communion with a bishop, who in turn is in communion with the see of Canterbury.
- A common liturgical source tradition (see the Prague Statement of the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation)

The doctrinal expression of our unity is contained in the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral, inasmuch as it describes the essential points of agreement for union with other churches.

Conclusion

We are called to the risk of bringing all of humanity into the Reign of God – especially those who are most unlike ourselves. To try to effect an artificial unity of the Body of Christ through doctrinal enforcement will only lead to yet another scandalous division in the Body of the Lord. It is also idolatrous, substituting a written agreement for the saving work of Christ on the cross and the living, catholic call of the Gospel to incarnate Christ's ministry in all places and in all times. In Baptism and Eucharist we will find unity – beyond any enforced conformity – which is the real basis for our Communion and our common life in Christ.

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