

Why Sing Global Songs?

A Leader Reader by Beverly Howard

Introduction

Friends, this is the joyful feast of the people of God!
They will come from east and west,
and from north and south,
and sit at table in the kingdom of God.

Whenever I hear this invitation to share the Communion feast, I envision the Table continuously expanding to accommodate the faithful streaming from east, west, north, and south. While that could make for a very crowded Table, our Host makes room!

Likewise, when unexpected guests arrive in our homes at mealtime, the hospitable host rearranges the table and adds additional place settings. Similar actions occur over time with congregational song. Hymnals contain a spiritual feast, replete with psalms, hymns ancient and new, and spiritual songs. As the Spirit inspires new word- and tunesmiths, hymnal committees “make room at the table” and add to the church’s song.

Measured in “hymnal standard time,” congregational songs from the global community are relative newcomers. *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (1990) includes selections from other cultures such as “Here, O Lord, Your Servants Gather,” “When a Poor One,” and “Sing with Hearts.” When the 1990 hymnal first appeared, some Presbyterians were startled to find hymns printed in languages other than English! Congregations reacted in various ways, from fully embracing new texts and tunes to rejecting them outright. Some congregations found middle ground, incorporating songs representing the global church in worship on Pentecost or World Communion Sunday.

Prayer

Dear God,
You are close to us—
closer than hands or feet,
closer than our breathing.
You are the God who has promised to
Stay with us in covenants that cannot be
broken.
We thank you for Jesus Christ, our Lord,
and for his institution of the New Covenant.
Stand by us
in our times of bewilderment,
in our times of despondency,
in our times of panic.
Place our feet on solid ground and
Help us to believe that you will lead us each day.
Amen.

—Robert D. Young, *Let Us Pray: Reformed Prayers for Christian Worship*, Martha S. Gilliss, editor (Westminster John Knox Press, 2002) 99.

Why Songs from Other Cultures?

It requires work to learn, teach, and lead congregational songs from other cultures, so why should we sing them in worship? We certainly sing *about* singing with the world. We sing texts exhorting “all people on earth,” or “all creatures,” or “the world,” or “the church” to join together in singing praise to God. Consider our legacy in these eighteenth-century psalm paraphrases by Isaac Watts:

From all that dwell below the skies
Let the Creator's praise arise.
Let the Redeemer's Name be sung
Through every land, in every tongue.

—*Presbyterian Hymnal* #229

Every Christmas we lustily sing:
Joy to the world! The Saviour reigns:
Let us our songs employ;
While fields, and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
Repeat the sounding joy.

—*Presbyterian Hymnal* #40

From “Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun” (*Presbyterian Hymnal* #423), we frequently sing this common Watts text for World Communion:

People and realms of every tongue
Dwell on his love with sweetest song,
And infant voices shall proclaim
Their early blessings on His name.

I Can't Sing that High!

Do you ever get frustrated because there are notes to a song or hymn that are just too high or too low? There actually is no hard-and-fast rule regarding singing range for tune writers. However, Americans now sing within a narrower range than we once did because of lack of practice. When we sing regularly, our range extends considerably, though not indefinitely, of course. The hymn range does not matter much for those who are able to sing harmony. They just find the range that fits them.

Most tunes do not go lower than the A below middle C, nor do they go higher than the E an octave above middle C. Previous generations felt comfortable singing as high as F or an occasional G an octave above middle C. When we speak loudly, we usually push down and speak in a lower pitch than we would using our “normal” speaking voice. This makes our singing less flexible unless we sing regularly. Aging voices that don't regularly sing also lose their ability to sing the outer ranges.

By singing world congregational songs in our local churches, we move from singing about singing with the world to actual singing with the world! That could transform our worship.

How We Are Changed

Michael Hawn, noted practitioner and scholar in global song, suggests that if “you choose to sing and pray locally with a global vision, your worship may never be the same.”¹ What will singing global congregational song locally actually do to us?

We worship with new, rich images of God, Christ, and Spirit.

D. T. Niles, Sri Lankan evangelist, said, “The gospel came to us as a potted plant. We have to break the pot and set the plant in our own soil.”² When the gospel does take root in another culture, songs and liturgical practices vary, offering unique imagery.

“Carol Our Christmas,” a New Zealand carol, reminds us that the incarnation was a cosmic event, not bounded by northern European customs. Singing this carol with New Zealanders, we welcome the Christ child in the season of the southern hemisphere.

Carol our Christmas, an upside-down Christmas:
snow is not falling and trees are not bare.³

The seventeenth-century Huron carol “'Twas in the Moon of Wintertime” (*Presbyterian Hymnal* #61) depicts the Christ child's birth in a “lodge of broken bark,” wrapped in a “ragged robe of rabbit skin.”

The Chinese hymn “Holy Spirit, You're Like the Wind” is a sung prayer using several images of the Spirit: wind, spring, fire, sword. A particularly vivid image is the line “Holy Spirit, you're like the oil that lights houses with glowing lamps.”⁴

Although these hymns were not “birthed in our culture,” we can sing them because “they teach us something of the richness in God.”⁵

We worship with new sounds, instruments, and rhythms.

The gospel has taken root in cultures that embrace different musical practices. Much of the global church's song is monophonic and is not accompanied by piano, organ, or praise band. Singing in unison unifies and strengthens our voice. Using appropriate indigenous

instruments such as African drums, beaded gourds, maracas, flutes, tambourines, or finger cymbals adds new dimensions to our sound.

We view the gospel through the lens of Christians living, working, and praying in other parts of the world.

The gospel has taken root in cultures where people experience poverty and limited freedom. In singing their song, we stand with them in their struggles. Paradoxically, their texts express a faith, hope, and generosity that both humbles and inspires!

“When a Poor One” (*Presbyterian Hymnal* #407) envisions a world where the poor share with strangers, the thirsty give water, and the weak strengthen others. Consider the truth and faith beautifully expressed in the Communion hymn “Sheaves of Summer” (*Presbyterian Hymnal* #518).

We are sharing the same communion meal,
We are wheat by the same great Sower sown;
Like a millstone, life grinds us down with sorrow
and pain,
But God makes us new people bound by love.⁶

From east and west, north and south, we all come to the Table eager to share our songs at the Feast. When we sing with the world, we catch a glimpse of a Table where there will be no “other,” a Table where there will be no divisions, and a Table where we will all sing a more profound Alleluia!

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. C. Michael Hawn, Halle, Halle: *We Sing the World Round* (Garland, TX: Chorister’s Guild, 1999), 4.
2. Ibid.
3. Shirley Erena Murray, *In Every Corner Sing: The Hymns of Shirley Erena Murray* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Company, 1992), #2.
4. Wei-fan Wang, “Holy Spirit, You’re Like the Wind,” in *Global Praise 3*, ed. S T Kimbrough, Jr. (New York: General Board of Global Ministries, 2004), #107.
5. Presbyterian Hymnal Project, “The New Collection of Presbyterian Hymns and Songs,” Theological Vision Statement, <http://www.presbyterianhymnal.org/TheologicalVision.asp> (accessed March 10, 2011).
6. Cesáreo Gabaráin, “Sheaves of Summer,” in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), #518.