

The Place of Music in the Worshipping Community

Thousands of years of experience and practice have left the church in no doubt as to the essential place of music in the life of Christian community. Christianity is a singing and musical faith. From the most remote jungle village to the cathedral at the centre of the largest bustling city, musicians, singers and congregation join as one to share in song. It is “song” which these pages seek to offer reflection on, recognizing at the outset, the place for dance and instrumental music in worship. It is song which not only offers praise to the triune God, but allows us to voice our lament and propels us forward together as disciples. Music:

“... is a phenomenon connected to the work of God because it invites us to touch what is deepest in our souls, and to release within us a divine force. Music opens doors to a deepening and broadening understanding ... in the connection is found the revelation, a realization of something not grasped before. Such ‘seeing’ offers revelations about human living and divine relationships that can effect changes in our choices, our activities and our convictions. Music allows us to see ... beyond to what lurks in the crevices of the human-divine experience.”¹

Hymns and songs in fact ‘do theology’. According to British hymn writer and United Reformed Church minister, Brian Wren: “The words of familiar songs help shape a congregation’s theology, and music summons them in a time of need.”² Aidan Kavanaugh argued that “worship is not just one source of theology among others, but the ‘ontological condition’ of theology, the context in which the originating Word is best heard and performed in the faith of the church.”³

From our Reformed and Evangelical Heritage

For several centuries after the time of Christ and the first apostles, congregational singing was an integral part of Sunday worship – in both the Eastern and Western expressions of the Christian church. The Middle Ages (circa 10th to 12th centuries) saw the decline of congregational song; it almost vanishing from corporate Sunday worship. Yet “ordinary people still sang, however, in the street, on pilgrimage, at liturgical dramas, and on other occasions.”⁴

Protestantism can be grateful for the recovery and reinvigoration afforded congregational song as a result of the Reformation. In the early Reformation years of the 16th century, hymn singing was viewed with great suspicion in such countries as England. The congregation’s role was that of spectator, while the church choir sang hymns, in Latin. Enter Martin Luther (1483-1546 AD), who in Germany encouraged simple melodies (often folk in origin) to be used in worship – with new lyrics, often from his own pen. Luther’s contribution was complemented by that of the French reformer John Calvin. The early Calvinist tradition forbade any texts other than the Psalms and a few canticles to be sung. To this day, the Psalms have an important music place within worship in Reformed churches.

It can be safely said, that through sheer weight of lyrical output, and influence extending over four centuries, no greater contributions have been made to the educative, formative

¹ James MacMillan, “God, Theology and Music” in *Composing Music for Worship*, S. Darlington, and A. Kreider, (Canterbury Press: Norwich, 2004), 48

² Brian Wren, *Praying Twice – the Music and Words of Congregational Song*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 91

³ Aidan Kavanaugh, *The Shape of Baptism- the Rite of Christian Initiation* (New York: Pueblo Pub. Co., 1978), xii; as Deverell, 8 – as cited in Garry J. Deverell,

“Uniting in Worship? Proposals Towards a Liturgical Ecumenics”, *Uniting Church Studies*, March 2005, 8

⁴ Wren, 49

and nurturing power of congregational song than those of England's Isaac Watts (1674 – 1748 AD) and Charles Wesley (1707-1788 AD)

Watts is viewed as the 'father' of the English hymn; building on the renewal begun by Luther and Calvin before him. Watts changed the direction of hymn-singing. He not only encouraged the church to move away from its exclusive insistence on psalms, but he wrote (akin to Luther two centuries previously) new words to familiar tunes and metres.

Richard D Dinwiddie makes the somewhat provocative declaration that the greatest influence on the British Evangelical revival of the 18th century and the accompanying rise of the Methodist movement may have been the outcome, not so much from the teaching and leadership of John Wesley, but rather – through the hymnody of his brother Charles. This is a portfolio 9000 pieces strong! Dinwiddie notes: "For the past two centuries, those hymns have been a dynamic, effective force wherever the Methodist church has taken root. The two brothers changed to a radical degree the course of hymnody and hymn singing in their day, and they significantly influenced its development to the present."⁵ So strong was the musical influence of Charles Wesley that it is frequently said that the early 'Methodists' sang their creed.

Music's discipling role

If we regard worship as the "core" function and goal of the worshipping community, we must certainly claim the close secondary function, that of joining with God in God's mission - as disciples of the serving, crucified yet risen Jesus Christ.

Worship and discipleship are inseparable. This is so basic to Christianity, yet sometimes we overlook it. Jesus not only implores his disciples: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind". He instantly follows it with the command, "and your neighbour as yourself."⁶ This inextricable connection between faith and discipleship must be evidenced in the worshipping life of the people of God, of music is an integral part. God's worshipping people are called to both echo and advance this reality.

In our public praise however, we have so sought to embrace the first of the two Great Commandments ("love the Lord your God ...") that we have forgotten about the second ("Love your neighbour as you love yourself"). In fact, we have failed to give the "space" for acknowledging that each of us in some way carries pain - individual or communal.

Martin Tel suggests that "far too often we try to paint a happy face on God."⁷ Worship which is simply 'happy faced' runs the danger of leading the community of faith down a one-way musical street – a street adorned with worship which is untruthful; worship which fails to declare the whole truth of God; worship which fails to declare the whole truth of the human condition. Where in this "happy-faced" worship, is there the place – and music can so often best give voice to this – which allows room for lament, for intercession, for connecting with a broken world, for connecting with folk whose relationships are disintegrating, for sending people out in Christian service – to name but a few instances?

Music as prayer

In a broad sense, the role of music in liturgy is to help people pray. Music, however is more than an accessory or catalyst for prayer.

⁵ Richard D. Dinwiddie, "Two brothers who changed the course of church singing" in *Christianity Today*, (Vol. 28, No. 13, Carol Stream: Christianity Today Inc, 1984), 30

⁶ Matthew 22:37, 39

⁷ Martin Tel, "Truthfulness in Church Worship in *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, (Vol. XIX, No. 1, New series, 1998), 34

Congregational song *is*, or at least has the promise, of *being* prayer - a prayer language in its own right, or as Wren expresses it, "Congregational song helps us express a believing response in a self-committing way."⁸ For Wren, the prayer that is congregational song is a creedal thing – including praise, thanksgiving, lament, trust and commitment as well as statements of belief.

Praising and celebrating God's grace

We can never be reminded too often that our chief calling, not only in worship, but also in the totality of life is to glorify God. The contribution of the Pentecostal churches has been extensive in helping the wider church grasp this.

Through the songwriting of John Wimber and colleague-musicians, the Vineyard Community in the late 1980s in California, USA pointed us to the place of song in worship as direct prayer language to God. Christians began in fresh ways to address God in the first person; with worship songs less *about* God, but now song as prayer offered directly *to* God.

Much of this contemporary song harks back in its lyrical origins, to the Reformation's predilection towards song that was derived from the Psalms. However, in the use of direct "I", "me" and "we" and "us" language, a great pitfall lies lurking in the wings – namely the trap of subjectivity. Kenneth Hull contends that "More than half the time, it's not clear from inside a song *why* God is so praiseworthy ... they spend much more time speaking about the experience of the singer, especially his or emotional experience, than in actually praising God."⁹ Hull explains that the primary subject of many praise choruses is not God at all, but the singer themselves!

God's worshipping people are well-advised to take up the advice of Terri McLean who calls for worship music which is God-centred and people-related. McLean notes:

"A great deal of new worship music is really about 'me', and this fact is hidden under other God-talk. At first glance these are nice songs about my commitment to God. They witness to my faith. They say what I will do. Upon closer examination, however, they may not proclaim anything about God but rather proclaim a great deal about me. ... in a responsible theological economy, good worship music should be the other way around – God-centred and people-related!"¹⁰

How easy it is for McLean's advice to be turned on its head!

Lament and confession – naming the human condition

John Bell notes how in our everyday lives we "... sing or croon to muse over the troubled side of life, its disappointments, frustrations and pain. And that in itself can be therapeutic."¹¹ There is a much-overdue place for this in our worship lives. A sorely ignored aspect of our worship song is the song of lament. Despite significant portions of the Psalms and prophets being devoted to the cry of lament, it is something sadly lacking in much of our worship in these early years of the 21st century.

How often are the psalms of lament read in our churches? These ancient words offer us a prayer language for our times; they offer a prayer language which we of ourselves might not dare offer to God. Bell emphasizes how "Sometimes we will never be able to

⁸ Wren, 90

⁹ Kenneth R. Hull, "The Challenge of the Praise Chorus", *The Hymn*, (Hymn Society of the USA and Canada: July 2004), 9

¹⁰ Terri B. McLean, *New Harmonies*. (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1998), 15

¹¹ John L. Bell, *The Singing Thing*, Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2000, 22

sing Hallelujah unless we have cried out 'How long?' and 'How long?' and 'Why have you turned your back on me, O Lord?' , offering us the assurance that comes in knowing that such things can be said by us and are heard by God."¹²

Uniting in Worship 2 gives an example of a simple sung lament on p. 200 – as part of the alternative form of the Gathering in the **Service of the Lord's Day: Second Service**.

There is also a place for confession to be encased in congregational song. Repeatedly in our worship, God's forgiveness in Christ is celebrated in song – from the grandest "Doxology" to the catchiest praise chorus. Troeger comments:

"Congregational singing is a witness to our belief that worship is based not on the adequacy of our efforts, but on the saving, gracious character of the One we praise. God who forgives sins certainly forgives wrong notes! ... Our music is a sign that the saving grace of Christ is freeing us to do what we were created to do – to give ourselves with complete abandonment to God."¹³

How often though, do we put our confessional words in song, in the context of song – 'telling like it is' before God, who is grace? Any discussion of the place of congregational song is not only naming, but also addressing the human condition must give attention to the healing role of music in the worshipping community.

Nathan Corbitt offers these sobering thoughts: "... one of the reasons so many leave the church is because in their seasons of pain and grief they find no consolation in the church ... many churches are so focused on joyful praise and outreach evangelism, hurting members of the congregation are left without a healer."¹⁴ In 1996 in Dunblane, Scotland, 16 school children and their teacher were senselessly massacred at the hands of a gunman. In an attempt to offer words to those overwhelmed with grief, pain and confusion, Iona's John Bell and Graham Maule provided this song:

*We cannot measure how you heal
or answer every sufferer's prayer,
yet we believe your grace responds
where faith and doubt unite to care.
Your hands, though bloodied on the cross,
survive to hold and heal and warn,
to carry all through death and life
and cradle children yet unborn¹⁵*

Called into intercession and community

Congregational song is in many ways *the* communal activity – humanly speaking during a time of worship. Some branches of the Christian church will join together in prayer communal prayer responses or collective responses amid scripture readings; perhaps affirmations of faith or creeds – however, and I would suggest this is especially normative among churches who primarily use music which originated in churches of a Pentecostal persuasion – the act of singing together is *the* 'community joining together' time as it worships. Robert Gribben agrees, saying: "Music is an essential part of a shared activity. When people gather to sing they in fact form themselves into a

¹² Bell, 26-27

¹³ Thomas H. Troeger, "For God Risk Everything: Reconstructing a Theology of Church Music", in *Reformed Liturgy and Music*, (33:3), 6

¹⁴ Nathan J. Corbitt, *The Sound of the Harvest – Music's Mission in Church and Culture*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 162

¹⁵ John L. Bell and Graham Maule, "We Cannot Measure How You Heal", in *Common Ground* (Edinburg: St Andrew Press, 2003), No. 138

fellowship, a koinonia ... enabled to join together in unity with the single object of praising God.”¹⁶

Intercession forms a vital part of this opening to God. In these “Prayers of the People”, we hand our prayers – our praises and our pain over to Christ, the great High Priest, who – in the words of Torrance,

“... takes what is ours (our broken lives and unworthy prayers), sanctifies them, offers them without spot or blemish to the Father, and gives them back to us ... He takes our prayers and makes them his prayers, and we know our prayers are heard ‘for Jesus’ sake. Christian worship is, therefore, our participation through the Spirit in the Son’s communion with the Father, in his vicarious life of worship and intercession”¹⁷

In many, perhaps most worship services, we miss the opportunity to sing our intercession – in part because for those selecting contemporary worship song, the ‘pickings’ are comparatively sparse. Many a worship-leader will at best, revert to the Taizé Community’s *O Lord, hear my prayer* as a response amid spoken intercessions.

Prophecy, proclamation and justice-making

Congregational song has a justice-making role. Terri McLean maintains that we have assigned the music the role of ‘truth bearer’: “We have assigned music the important task of bearing the truths we hold dear, and of celebrating that which is important and central to many. Potential exists for congregational song to have a prophetic voice – to speak out, to warn and cajole”.¹⁸ Much study has been made of the transformative role of music in the racial struggle movements in the United States and South Africa, over recent decades and past centuries.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann notes the number of psalms which major on protest or complaint. In bemoaning the ‘praise’ fascination in so much of the modern church’s worship he comments: “... at least it is clear that a church that goes on singing ‘happy songs’ in the face of raw reality is doing something very different from what the Bible itself does.”¹⁹

A catechetical role

Congregational song can play an important catechetical role. The adult who as a child sang *The wise man built his house upon the rock*, or *Silver and gold have I none*, was not only singing scripture – albeit paraphrased, but in fact internalising it; just as centuries earlier amid the Wesleyan Revival, Christians across England and North America would sing and re-sing the catechetically-inclined songs of Charles Wesley. This has vital importance in the church’s ministry with children. A marvellous opportunity exists for music-leaders working with children to times of worship to teach the faith. John

Bell’s comment is a supportive one:

“When the (Wild Goose Resource Group) asks people to recount what for them has been a significant worship experience, only one in a hundred ever mention a sermon –and those who do are usually preachers. More commonly people will talk about a song, a silence, a symbolic action ... and yet clergy commonly hold that it is the sermon or homily which primarily informs people’s thinking about

¹⁶ Robert Gribben, “Music in Worship: the Set Liturgies”, *Occasional Paper of the Uniting Church in Victoria Committee on Church Music*, (1981), 3

¹⁷ James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 15

¹⁸ McLean, 14

¹⁹ Walter Brueggemann: *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984], 51-52

God. This is arrogant presumption ... for when the most memorable line of the most rhetorically astute sermon has been forgotten, people will remember the words of *Abide with Me*, or *Love Divine, All Loves Excelling* or *Majesty*.²⁰

Long ago, the psalmist challenged his people: "... We will tell to the coming generation, the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders he has done ..."²¹ Let us see congregational song as having a distinctive role in making this a reality.

The voice of discipleship, commitment and mission

Down the centuries, congregational song is inspiring, forming and being part of the sending-out of God's people in mission, flowing on from a renewed faith-relationship through Jesus Christ. Our congregational song, now more than ever, needs to connect with mission of God in Jesus. The call, as always, is for song which celebrates the incarnate Christ; the Christ who, by God's Spirit, is already there amid a hurting, seeking world. Troeger even suggests that our church song is in itself, an experience of discipleship:

"Our music is a way of praying for the generosity of spirit that brings the abundant life of discipleship ... a way of risking all for Christ. To stand and sing in the community of faith is to begin to find the strength to stand for justice and compassion in the brutal world."²¹

Enhancing the sacraments

The statement has been made that in addition to selecting music for praise, worship-leaders and musicians will find a place for the music of discipleship and mission. A similar comment needs to be made concerning the use of music with the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. Now, it is salutary to acknowledge that in these sacraments, any 'enhancing' is the work of the Holy Spirit; be it through the water and laying-on of hands at Baptism or the breaking and sharing of bread and wine at Communion. However, much more could be made of music in these contexts. Especially in the Eucharist, there is ample opportunity (and this is commonplace in Catholic and many Anglican churches) for congregational response.

Uniting in Worship 2 adds to the repertoire of Communion music settings²², providing a suite of traditional-text responses to a music setting influenced by contemporary 'praise and worship' styles.

Looking out for opportunities

In a (perhaps) bygone era, the concept of the "four-hymn sandwich" was very much in vogue; the idea being that the hymn was often not much more than "filler" – padding, liturgical "time out" between the prayers, the sermon/homily and the sacraments. The call to those selecting song is to be vigilant towards fresh opportunities for the use of congregational song. This may simply be a case of allowing the words of a sung prayer of confession to *be* the prayer of confession in a service; the words of a missional "sending out" song to *be* the word of mission that concludes a time of worship.

²⁰ Bell, 56

²¹ Troeger, 6

²² Uniting Church in Australia. National Working Group on Worship. *Uniting in Worship 2*. (Sydney: Uniting Church Press, 2005)

When these opportunities are grasped, song becomes more than the “bread” or casing around the liturgical sandwich – it becomes a significant part of the food which forms and nourishes God’s people in their worship, witness and service of the triune God.

An important consideration, I believe, is the need for music ministers and preachers to be considerably ‘expansive’ in the music resources from which they draw their song selections. A congregation which hopes to see music’s formative, educative and nurturing potential grow into a faith and life-shaping reality within people’s lives must budget for the purchase of a wide range of print and electronic music resources. It is unwise for a congregation to rely solely on *Together in Song*, solely on yearly music collections from Hillsong, the latest Chris Tomlin or Matt Redman offerings, the *All Together* song collections or the frequent collections from the Iona Community – to name just four sources commonly accessed across the Uniting Church. *Together in Song*, in fact, is a collection that comes with the full endorsement of the National Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, and clearly ensures that the highs and lows of the human condition can be named in worship.

It is time for the church to be eclectic and searching with their congregational song; to seize the liturgical opportunities – as suggested by the Biblical scriptures to be opened that day, and as suggested by an openness to God’s loving, healing and creative Spirit. An ever growing array of websites are available, offering pointers and music suggestions to assist the preacher and worship-leader in their preparations.

Congregational song is, by sheer definition, music which is sung. A further chapter could easily be devoted to other forms of music in worship.

Instrumental music, for example, is a worship tool in its own right:

- the most exhilarating Bach prelude cascading in praise from a cathedral’s pipe organ,
- the plaintive melody of a solitary flute, trumpet or clarinet accompanying the mournful psalm of lament
- the arpeggios of an acoustic guitar serving as musical backdrop as God’s people gather in Eucharistic communion around the Table of our Lord.
- the soundtrack from a popular song of the day – used to match (or even counterpoint) some projected visuals

Let’s also remember the place of dance and creative movement – to musical accompaniment.

I offer a hope, a longing and a prayer - that God’s worshipping people might find hope, strength, praise and delight in the songs they raise collectively and individually to God – worshipping their Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier in spirit and in truth.

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