

The gifts of global music in Mennonite Church USA

North American Mennonites speak at least twenty-six different languages in worship, and music in these congregations is just as diverse. In this article, authors give perspectives about music across Mennonite Church USA. Katie Graber discusses singing and cultural appropriation, Byron Pellecer describes the diversity among Hispanic Mennonite congregations, Keshia Littlebear-Cetrone explains the importance of keeping Cheyenne language and culture alive in worship, and Saejin Lee reflects on the challenges and obligations of being a multicultural community.

Katie Graber

I am a member of Columbus (Ohio) Mennonite Church and am part of Voices Together: Mennonite Worship and Song Committee, which is preparing a new collection of resources for Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada.

For most of my life, I have attended predominantly white, English-speaking Mennonite churches that sing from hymnals published by the denomination. Since joining the Voices Together committee in 2016, however, I have experienced much more of the diversity in Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada. I have visited congregations that worship in English, Spanish, Korean, Chin, Cheyenne, Mandarin, Cantonese, Lao, Amharic, French, German, Lingala, and Indonesian.¹ I heard a cappella singing, and singing accompanied with piano, keyboard, guitar, drums, and recordings. I heard songs influenced by traditions from around the world, and European and North American hymns translated into many languages.

The diversity of Mennonite singing today bears witness to both a history of colonization and an embrace of many cultural heritages. Like the church's 1992 *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, the new *Voices Together* collection (to be released in 2020) will contain songs in many languages and musical styles. For Mennonites of European origin living in Canada and the US,

1 In addition to travel funded by MennoMedia, I also made visits to ten congregations with committee members Bradley Kauffman and Darryl Neustaedter Barg through a Vital Worship Grant from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, Grand Rapids, Michigan, with funds provided by Lilly Endowment Inc.

singing music from another culture can be a way to participate in the global church. At the same time, people from a dominant culture must be

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careful about cultural appropriation and perpetuating stereotypes.

In approaching music from a culture other than one's own, we can learn from theologian Richard Rohr's emphasis on the importance of non-dual thinking: being able to find deeper meaning as we hold together conflicting notions. Consider, for example, the orthodox Christian confession that God is three-in-one, and the conviction that Jesus is fully human and fully divine; these are

not rational truths but spiritual truths. Likewise, believing that the spark of the divine is present in every human blurs the boundaries between "us" and "them" but also places value on individuality and difference. If we can accept opposing ideas like these, we can also acknowledge the truth of these contradictory statements:

- Ignoring music of another culture is disrespectful, but singing its songs is also inauthentic and potentially stereotypes that culture's people.
- Singing a song from a different culture is a way to learn about and respect that culture, but it is also an act of appropriation.
- When I connect with a song from another culture, it is profoundly mine but also still profoundly not mine.

These oppositions cannot be resolved. If I sing a song often enough, it will still never be mine without also being not mine. Sometimes it feels easier to avoid these issues entirely, but it is important to engage these paradoxes.

Furthermore, if we want to respect, pray for, and pray with people of other cultures, music cannot be the end of the engagement. Songs are related to social contexts and power dynamics that we must also recognize. Liturgist and activist Sandra Maria Van Opstal argues that multicultural worship that seeks reconciliation and justice must embody hospitality, solidarity, and mutuality.² That is, in the same way that it is absurd to

2 Sandra Maria Van Opstal, *The Next Worship: Glorifying God in a Diverse World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2016).

sing of God's love if we do not seek to embody it, it is absurd to sing a song from an immigrant group if we are not standing with and learning from them. We must connect music to refugee relief and peace work. We must acknowledge whose ancestral land we occupy before we sing a Native American song. We must build real relationships with a sister church or through community connections, and then celebrate those relationships through singing. Our worship practices should influence our everyday lives, and the way we inhabit the world should engage the gifts of the global church.

Byron Pellecer

I am an associate conference minister in Western District Conference of Mennonite Church USA, and I can testify that Hispanic congregations display a wealth of worship styles. I have preached in and attended worship in congregations whose music is Caribbean style, hymn driven, or "contemporary Christian"—as in megachurches. The spectrum ranges from charismatic to more contemplative in style, content, and tempo. In most Hispanic congregations, one can find a worship team leading with guitar, drums, keyboard, and bass guitar. Also common are mini choirs, dancing groups, and small and big bands. Some instruments are folkloric—handmade—drums and turtle shells. In all cases, I have seen devotion and passion as congregations worship.

The richness in their multicultural and multiracial expressions is a joy to behold. Singing ranges from monolingual to bilingual to trilingual. For most Hispanic congregations, wearing formal attire to worship services is important though not necessarily required. In some cases, attire reflects their cultures and places of origin. Often people play tambourines and dance joyfully, and one hears loud expressions of joy. Someone in the pews might shout praises to God or speak a simple "Hallelujah" or a "Thank you, Jesus," followed by a congregational "Amen."

Regardless of musical style, tempo, or resources used during worship, Hispanic congregations are serious and reverent in their approach to worship. The sanctuary is a holy place where worshippers experience God's presence.


The variety of cultures and styles one sees among Hispanic congregations is a gift. Imagine for a moment worshiping God with merengue or salsa or bachata music. Or imagine worshiping God with Mexican regional music or mariachi or tango. And now, let us worship with hymns and sing in a four-part harmony. Aren't these worship styles examples of a gift?

Receiving this diversity as a gift may call for effort. Creating, promoting, and implementing cultural competencies requires many resources. We may face the temptation to impose one culture or expression on the others. To acknowledge as a gift and to respect the many cultural expressions available to the church will require our commitment and our work.

Keshia Littlebear-Cetrone

I am Northern Cheyenne from Busby, Montana, belong to the White River Cheyenne Mennonite Church, and serve on the Mennonite Central Committee Central States board.

Long before the arrival of Christianity and long before our contact with Mennonites, Cheyenne people were blessed with songs from the Creator, a means of worship in all aspects of life. Our congregation believes it is important to continue to worship in Cheyenne, so we can hold



Long before our contact with Mennonites, Cheyenne people were blessed with songs from the Creator. Our congregation continues to worship in Cheyenne, so we can hold on to our culture against a dominant society that has tried to silence our language and stomp out our ways of life.

on to our culture against the pressures of a dominant society that has tried to silence our Cheyenne language and stomp out our ways of life. Our language is becoming extinct, as the number of fluent Cheyenne speakers is dwindling fast, and even fewer people can sing our worship songs. Worship in Cheyenne provides a way to teach our children songs in our language, as we give honor and praise to our Creator.

When Mennonites first came to the Cheyenne people, they brought their style of song and worship. With them came a piano and an organ. It can be argued that if the Mennonites had done things “correctly,” they would have left the piano and the organ and adopted

the use of the drum traditionally used by the Cheyenne people.

Instrumentation aside, the Mennonite missionaries and linguists that came did a great service for the Cheyenne people. They began the first work in Cheyenne language preservation. They introduced traditional Mennonite patterns of worship, and they kept traditional melodies while translating their German and English hymns into Cheyenne.

Meanwhile, Cheyenne Christians continued to receive songs from the Creator in their own language—with Indigenous melodies. For many years, these songs were not welcome in Sunday services of worship, but they were used in prayer meetings, family gatherings, wakes, and funerals. The Cheyenne in Oklahoma were the first to regularly use Cheyenne Indigenous songs in worship services. These were passed along orally, and some have been lost as those who knew them died. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that these songs began to be widely and regularly used, and efforts were made to record and transcribe them. These songs, along with the translated hymns, are what we use in our worship today.³

Cheyenne spiritual hymns are a gift to other Christians, because they serve as a reminder. They remind us of great strength and resilience. These songs of praise to our Creator have endured despite efforts to eradicate our language and our culture.

Saejin Lee

I am a member of Hively Avenue Mennonite Church and Voices Together: Mennonite Worship and Song Committee. I spent my early years in an intentional community founded by my parents in Hwacheon, South Korea. We worshiped together daily, singing a variety of hymns and Taizé songs and contemporary songs. The gatherings were fairly small, with a cappella singing and occasional piano accompaniment. Although the community was not Mennonite, in hindsight my parents would say they had an affinity for Anabaptist theology. Our family moved to Canada when I was six so my father could study at an Anabaptist college there. We attended a Presbyterian Korean immigrant congregation, as we felt most comfortable worshiping in our native culture. When we returned to Korea two years later, my parents and a few other families started an Anabaptist congregation. That congregation and the earlier intentional community were instrumental in fostering my love for worship, especially as children and women were so involved.

When I was fifteen, my family moved to Elkhart, Indiana, so my parents could study at Associated (now Anabaptist) Mennonite Biblical

3 *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992) includes two Cheyenne songs: “Jesus A, Nahetotaetanome” (#9), and “Ehane he’ama” (#78). The story of the transcription of these songs and the development of the Cheyenne hymnbook is told in more detail in David Graber, “The Cheyenne Hymns, the Hymnbook, and Plains Indian Culture,” *Mennonite Life* 61, no. 2 (June 2006), <https://ml.bethelks.edu/issue/vol-61-no-2/article/the-cheyenne-hymns-the-hymnbook-and-plains-indian/>.

Seminary. We began attending Hively Avenue Mennonite Church (where I still worship). This was the first congregation in which I experienced worship in another culture, and at first it was a difficult transition. The language was foreign and the style of worship was unfamiliar. I was culturally different from the people around me. Over time, though, I came to appreciate Hively's worship as life-giving. I began to feel I belonged, as others identified gifts that I would not have noticed in myself and encouraged me into leadership. In my role as a regular worship and song leader over the years, I have tried intentionally to make room for people who are not cradle Mennonites. For many years, Hively Avenue has connected to international students at AMBS, and recently more Latinx families have joined. Meanwhile, our worship style has remained more or less traditionally European American Mennonite. We are gradually making changes in our worship to reflect the diversity that is present in our church. It has been an exciting and difficult journey.

From a theological perspective, cultivating diversity is important because the Bible tells us that God's invitation to us is to participate in a community that is more than just people who look like us and experience worship as we do. We find inspiration in the story of Pentecost in the Acts of the Apostles, and in the vision of worship described in the book of Revelation, as people of many nations come together to worship God.

But not every congregation is called to become multicultural. I am leery because multiculturalism seems to be becoming the next fad in our churches, as if it were something that could be mastered in several weeks of Sunday school classes on the subject. There is no easy recipe for becoming a multicultural congregation. Becoming multicultural is a lifelong process of learning. It is awkward. It is frustrating. And it takes a lot of commitment, time, hard work, and prayer.

Yet it is precisely the awkward and frustrating exchanges that teach us something about what it means to be a community. Being in community with people from other contexts can deepen our theology and clarify our beliefs. Singing each other's songs, though difficult, enables us to engage each other in love. Whether or not our specific congregation is multicultural, we still ought to engage this work, because challenging experiences help us recognize that the reign of God is larger and more colorful than what we have been accustomed to in our communities of faith. After all, the God who is known to us as Trinity is innately communal, and community is the context in which God calls us to live our faith.