

# Expanding our identity in worship

Sarah Augustine

Singing together has always been a primary pathway to connecting with the Creator for me. When I was a small child, music was a central way I spent free time together with my family. It was my first vocabulary for praise. My mother taught my siblings and me simple hymns, for which we improvised lyrics to meet our moods and games. Singing was a way of being together, accessible to anyone. I sang hymns in harmony with my

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sisters and brother to entertain company under the supervision of my mother and just for fun when the four of us were goofing around together.

In middle school and high school, I sang religious madrigals in choir—often complex pieces in Latin and Italian. Some of my earliest memories of participating in something larger than myself—in something holy—were standing still, surrounded by the voices of my

classmates, reaching for the divine. My voice was absorbed in the body of voices, and I was communicating the ineffable. I truly experienced the Spirit reaching back, and I felt surrounded by the Holy Spirit. I would take my insecurities and worries to these performances and open myself to the Spirit. Romans 8:26 comes to mind when I think about this experience: *We don't know what we should pray, but the Spirit itself pleads our case with unexpressed groanings.*<sup>1</sup> I experienced a kind of transformation in singing I can describe only as prayer.

Music is of central importance to Indigenous worship as well. Among many peoples, songs are transmitted by both nature and Elders during important milestones as a type of medicine. I have found this to be true in my identity as a Mennonite also. Music has power. And how we worship together matters.

As the co-founder of the Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery Coalition, I want to reflect here on how elements of our worship together

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1 This gloss is slightly altered from the Common English Bible translation.

reflect our vision of identity. What is invisible in our worship? What is visible? What do these things say about us as a people? Our society is in such a heightened state of flux, as together we experience Truth and Reconciliation and justice movements for Indigenous Peoples, climate change and the call for environmental justice, conflicts at national borders and advocacy for immigrants' rights, the so-called culture wars, Black Lives Matter and the cry for civil rights—just to name a few of the groanings for justice we face. Conflict is inherent in all calls for change, and so conflict surrounds us. Are church and worship a “safe space” where we find rest from the conflict that surrounds us or a staging ground where we struggle together to seek justice collectively? I ask these questions as descendant of the Pueblo (Tewa) people and as a Mennonite.

### **The Doctrine of Discovery and the coalition to dismantle it**

The Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery (DDofD) Coalition is a group of Anabaptist leaders who work together to mobilize the church to dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery. We proclaim an Anabaptist spirit of discipleship rooted in the call to love of neighbor, seeking right relationship and reconciliation through active nonviolence.

The Doctrine of Discovery is a theological, philosophical, and legal framework dating to the fifteenth century that historically gave Christian nations moral and legal rights to invade and seize Indigenous lands and dominate Indigenous Peoples. This pattern of oppression began with Papal bulls, or decrees. One of the most infamous is *Romanus Pontifex*, issued by Pope Nicholas V in 1455. *Romanus Pontifex* justified enslaving and seizing the land and possessions of anyone who was not Christian, setting the stage for colonization as well as the enslavement of African people by Europeans.<sup>2</sup> The Doctrine of Discovery is not simply a historical framework but also a current legal doctrine that determines land tenure in the United States and in nations around the globe today.

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah Augustine, *The Land Is Not Empty: Following Jesus in Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2021).

the domestic legal systems of countries around the globe. It is still practiced by Christians of various traditions around the globe as well, who systematically dispossess Indigenous Peoples of their ancestral lands and human rights. One example of the Doctrine of Discovery embedded in a Christian tradition and belief is the narrative that as God's people, we have been provided a "Promised Land" in North America as reward for obedience. Because the Doctrine of Discovery is a Christian doctrine, it is evidenced in many church narratives, images, and rituals. To effectively dismantle it, it is necessary to think about ways that we reproduce it from one generation to the next in our theology and ritual.

### **Voices from the margin in worship**

What is the purpose of addressing voices from the margins in worship? How does Mennonite worship as ritual, ceremony, or performance connect with power identity? To address these questions, I consulted with

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representatives from four congregations in the United States actively engaging in relationship with the DDofD Coalition. I selected these four congregations because they are diverse geographically (San Francisco, Tucson, Albuquerque, and Kansas City), while also diverse in composition (all congregations were a

mix of Mennonites by cradle or conviction), race (two congregations were made primarily of folks from the dominant culture, two were quite racially diverse), LBGTQ orientation, and age. I asked pastors and worship leaders to reflect on how their communities have been impacted by the struggle for racial justice and how that is evidenced in worship.

One theme that emerged as I spoke with folks in San Francisco, Tucson, Kansas City, and Albuquerque is that when we address voices from the margins in worship, we acknowledge the diversity of our congregations and our commitment to collective discernment. Inclusion in worship challenges us to acknowledge and reaffirm our commitment to active peacemaking. Passively reinforcing a homogenous identity, particularly for congregations made up primarily of folks from the dominant culture, affirms the narrative norm of erasure. Diversifying images and rituals in worship acknowledges the reality of a diverse society where privileges are not universally shared. The pastor with whom I spoke in Kansas City explained that expanding images, reading materials, and the objects in

the sanctuary challenges congregants to break the white-centered gaze by choosing to make racial diversity visible.

### Land acknowledgement

A concrete step many congregations are taking to incorporate marginalized voices in worship is adopting a land acknowledgement statement. This is an intentional statement that acknowledges the First Peoples of the land where the congregation is geographically located. The Land Acknowledgment Guide created by the DDofD Coalition states, “Wherever we are, we are on Indigenous land. Any time settlers come together for

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a formal gathering, we have the opportunity to open with respect by acknowledging the land and Indigenous Peoples who have tended that land for many generations.”<sup>3</sup> When repeated regularly in worship, such statements of collective recognition put ongoing structural violence front and center, thereby resisting the cultural norm to erase the reality of injustice faced by the vulnerable among us. Not all congregations read their land acknowledgement statement in every

worship service, but all voice that it has had an impact on the life of their community. Each community I spoke with explained the process by which their congregation discerned, drafted, and adopted a statement. In each case, this was done collectively. The process itself sensitized communities to the issues facing Indigenous Peoples in their communities, whether or not Indigenous folks attend services. Collective engagement in naming Indigenous neighbors and recounting the history of Indigenous removal from the land equips congregants with understanding specific to their own community. This concretizes as actionable what might otherwise be a vague and abstract idea about injustice.

I asked pastors and worship leaders to describe the impact land acknowledgement statements have had on congregational identity. The Tucson folks named an awareness and reverence for land and for Indigenous neighbors. San Francisco reported investigation into Indigenous

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3 Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery Coalition, *Land Acknowledgment Guide* (2021), 2; <https://dofdmendo.org/land-acknowledgment/>.

neighbors has resulted in an ongoing relationship with Indigenous activists. They further reported that repetition of the statement Sunday after Sunday has “formed us as people committed to this Gospel work.” Kansas City stated that personal connection to an Indigenous member propelled the process to adopt a statement, and the wish to incorporate it into weekly candle lighting, seeking to ground it in action as well as words. The Albuquerque congregation adopted a land and watershed acknowledgement statement, acknowledging the sacred water itself and their dependence on it. As they stated, the weekly reading of the statement “makes us realize the American dream was based on land that did not belong to us.”

### **Singing in worship and *Voices Together***

I have found singing in worship to be a source of comfort and belonging. By singing with my community the songs I have known and loved throughout my life, I share experientially my sense of the sacred, while engaging mutually in the affirmation of a shared identity. This process of singing beloved songs together can also act as a barrier of exclusivity that prefers the familiar to forms of worship that are inclusive. This barrier that can feel like warm, insular comfort to insiders can be experienced as exclusion to those who are not from a traditional Mennonite background.

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What I have heard called “the New Hymnal,” *Voices Together*, strives to include familiar hymns sung easily in four-part harmony and a breadth of worship songs that stretch traditional identities. I am particularly moved by selections in the “Reconciling” section that name and deny systems of death.

“Come Now, O God” (143) reads, “come when our bed-rock of faith has been shaken, come when our deepest hopes are mistaken / come, break the systems of sin that enslave us; come,

though we wonder if you can still save us / come Emanuel.” This lyric challenges our faith in easy political ideals, challenges us to seek truth beyond the religion that we grew up with. “God, Give Me Time” (144) reads, “God, give me time to deal with the words that threaten and destroy; the easy words of politics that kill creation’s joy; the speeches that proliferate economies of greed; the thieves of children’s heritage, the poison in the

seed.” This is a challenge to grapple with injustice, even when it benefits us, including the “economies of greed” that include resource-extraction industries that displace, disease, and kill Indigenous and vulnerable peoples. “Touch the Earth Lightly” (145) calls on the God of the whole earth to deflect us, indicting, “We who endanger, who create hunger, agents

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of death for all creatures that live, who still foster clouds of disaster, God of our planet, forestall and forgive!” “Lord Jesus, Come and Overturn” (146) goes on, “Lord Jesus come and overturn the powers that corrupt and bind. Transform our temples with your love and claim our conscience with your mind / where mercy answers every need and great ones humbly serve the least.” “Forgive, Forgive Us, Holy God” (149) confesses, “Our blood is on each other’s hands, we die from hunger, lies and fear / Forgive us that our souls are numb to scenes of terror, screams of pain; that while we pray ‘Your kingdom come’ our world is still a battle plain / Forgive us that our household gods are self and safety, private need; forgive us all our fitful prayers, the token gift, the token deed.” These selections push us to move beyond our comfort zones by acknowledging our participation in systems of death and persuading us to choose life and the way of peace.

There are also selections calling us to action. “Peace to You” (168) reads, “Peace confounds the wealthy, peace lifts up the poor. Peace disrupts the mighty; peace is heaven’s door. Peace comes from the Spirit; peace comes like a breath. Peace reveals a new world; peace does not fear death.” The peace described here is not the absence of conflict; rather, it calls us to action without fear.

*Voices Together* greatly expands international selections, including those not only in German but also in Spanish, Swahili, Chin, and many other languages. The topical index demonstrates an entire Indigenous Communities Resources theme and Racial Justice and Economic Justice themes. A special favorite I was amazed to see is “Hey ney yana / I walk in beauty” (836), a traditional Ute song.

What may have been invisible in Mennonite worship traditionally, a preference for homogeneity and comfort, may be receding as the call for justice becomes more prominent in our worship together. As we incorporate into our worship commitments to mutual identity that actively seeks

justice, inclusion and repair, we expand our “safe space” to include the vulnerable and excluded. While not every congregation has composed and affirmed a land acknowledgement statement, nearly every congregation has accepted *Voices Together* into their community. *Voices Together* offers us the opportunity to expand our vision of who we are. My prayer is that we are ready to embrace this vision.

### **About the Author**

Sarah Augustine is cofounder and cochair of the Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery Coalition and executive director of the Dispute Resolution Center of Yakima and Kittitas Counties. Augustine, who is a Pueblo (Tewa) descendent, has written for numerous publications and academic journals and is the author of *The Land Is Not Empty: Following Jesus in Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery* (Herald, 2021).