

Voices together

The work of including resources related to Indigenous communities

Katie Graber

When *Hymnal: A Worship Book* was published in 1992,¹ it contained both familiar and new songs.² The new worship and song collection, *Voices Together*, also includes songs from past and present, and from around the world in a variety of languages and musical styles.³ One of many streams of content the committee cared for is Indigenous languages and voices. We incorporated worship resources such as prayers emerging from Indigenous Christian contexts and readings that address the history of colonialism and movement toward reconciliation, such as a territorial acknowledgment.⁴ *Voices Together* also includes Indigenous song: tunes, texts, and translations. These worship elements are an important aspect of recognizing the diversity of Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada, and of acknowledging our Christian and colonial history in North America.

In the late 1800s, scholars in the United States and Canada began to “collect” and “preserve” songs and traditions of Indigenous groups. While there were some noble reasons for these projects, they were also very much tied up with power and control. For example, the US government funded research on songs, linguistics, and kinship systems at the same time they were prohibiting rituals, disallowing Indigenous languages

1 A previous version of this article appeared on the Menno Snapshots blog as part of a series on *Voices Together*. It is reprinted here with permission. See <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/menno-snapshots/voices-together-the-work-of-including-indigenous-voices-perspectives-and-ways-of-worship-in-the-new-mennonite-worship-and-song-collection/>.

2 *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press; Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press; Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992).

3 *Voices Together* (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2020).

4 For examples in *Voices Together*, see the Topics and Uses in Worship Index under the entry “Indigenous Communities: Resources Related to.” For examples beyond *Voices Together*, see the Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery Coalition’s worship resources at <https://dofdmennonite.org/land-acknowledgement/>, and resources from KAIROS, an ecumenical group in Canada, at <https://www.kairoscanada.org/territorial-acknowledgment>.

in schools, and allotting land to intentionally break up tribal units. These goals and outcomes cannot be disentangled from one another. Today, there are initiatives to return ritual objects and human remains to their

The *Voices Together* committee sought to be intentional and respectful about including songs from Indigenous communities.

rightful locations and communities, but in the midst of these efforts, sacred songs cannot simply be taken home. There are histories of elders being reluctant, or even refusing, to teach songs to ethnomusicologists because they understood this reality. Digitized recordings from the 1890s and beyond attest both to this collecting and to the gaps where

songs were not given.⁵ In Canada, a national Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established in 2008 to document the impacts of Indian Residential Schools funded by the federal government and operated by churches for the purpose of stripping Indigenous children of their language and culture, an act of “cultural genocide.” Many church bodies, including Anabaptist Church Leaders, have formally apologized for their involvement.⁶ The 2015 final report includes ninety-four calls to action, including calls specifically for churches.⁷ This is one small step in an ongoing and multifaceted journey between Indigenous peoples and Settlers in Canada. As central practices in the faith and life of Mennonite communities, worship and music must be considered in relation to this history and the work of reconciliation.

In light of this context, the *Voices Together* committee sought to be intentional and respectful about including songs from Indigenous communities. We worked to engage Indigenous Mennonite people and congregations to learn more about their worship practices and how they would like their music to be represented in a denominational publication. For example, a Vital Worship Grant allowed several committee members to travel

5 See, for example, the Library of Congress collection Omaha Indian Music at <https://www.loc.gov/collections/omaha-indian-music/articles-and-essays/omaha-indian-music-album-booklet/omaha-indian-music/>.

6 See, for example, the March 2014 statement of Anabaptist church leaders from Edmonton, Alberta, at https://mccanada.ca/sites/mccanada.ca/files/media/ontario/documents/statement_of_anabaptist_church_leaders_to_the_trc_march_30_2014.pdf.

7 *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (public domain, 2015), 139–317; https://web.archive.org/web/20200430162813/http://www.trc.ca/assets/pdf/Honouring_the_Truth_Reconciling_for_the_Future_July_23_2015.pdf.

to White River Cheyenne Mennonite Church to hear about their history and participate in worship.⁸ We also consulted Cheyenne and Navajo songbooks used by Mennonite congregations, as well as ecumenical worship resources. Additionally, we had personal, phone, or video meetings with Steve Heinrichs from MC Canada Indigenous-Settler Relations,⁹ Mennonite pastors who have Indigenous constituents, and representatives of other denominations (including the United Church of Canada and Anglican Church of Canada) who have engaged similar questions of how Settlers should or shouldn't sing and worship with Indigenous communities.

In addition to important questions about ethics and representation, the committee also considered whether a tune and text is accessible to non-Indigenous singers. If a song's rhythms appear difficult, or if the range is wide, some congregations may be reticent to try it. We hope that singers have the grace to try new songs with open minds, knowing that each song is meaningful to someone else and has the potential to be meaningful to them as well. Our goal was to create a worship and song collection that allows people to raise their voices together and meet one another as creations of God—and therefore to be bound to work for peace and justice with and for one another. In this way, perhaps, we can experience a divine presence that is larger than any of our individual and group identities.

About the author

Katie Graber is an ethnomusicologist who studies race and ethnicity in a variety of contexts, including Mennonite music, American music, and European opera. She teaches classes on Western music history and world music at the Ohio State University and leads singing at her church in Columbus, Ohio. Katie co-directs the Anabaptist Worship Network and chaired the intercultural worship committee for the *Voices Together* project.

8 For a video from White River Cheyenne Mennonite Church, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yml4k8umI>. See also Keshia Littlebear-Cetrone's contribution to the article "The gifts of global music in Mennonite Church USA," *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 19, no. 2 (Fall 2018): 45–50, <https://press.palni.org/ojs/index.php/vision/article/view/73/41>.

9 See <https://mennonitechurch.ca/indigenous>.