

Sing a new song: John Bell on music and congregations

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*John L. Bell can't keep from singing. When the CENTURY staff recently met with him, he even taught us a song. Bell is a member of the Wild Goose Resource Group, based in Scotland, which is devoted to helping congregations discover and create "new forms of relevant and participative worship."*

*A minister in the Church of Scotland, a fellow of the Royal School of Church Music and a member of the Iona Community, Bell is a songwriter and song collector who gives workshops throughout the United Kingdom and the United States. He has edited collections of songs and hymns from the world church (distributed by GIA Publications and Iona Books) and written The Singing Thing: A Case for Congregational Singing. He is a past convenor of the Church of Scotland's Panel on Worship and currently directs the committee revising that church's hymnal.*

*We talked with Bell about the importance of congregational singing and the place of song and music in the life of the church.*

**You are very passionate about the importance of congregational singing. It seems significant that the church is about the only setting left in our culture in which people sing together.**

Yes, the culture of music has gradually moved away from a participative mode. In the 1970s everybody sang songs of the Beatles, Joan Baez and Bob Dylan. Since then we've moved toward a performance mode. When new pop songs come out they are accompanied by a video. The presumption is not that you'll sing the chorus but that you'll watch the performer.

The church should be proud of being countercultural; we believe that music is a community activity and that all God's children can and should sing.

**Why is congregational singing so important to the life of the church?**

First, because everyone can join in doing it. That sense of being a corporate body comes out in the song of the church more than anything else. We are doing

something together for God.

Congregational singing is an identity-shaping activity. In the past it was identity-shaping in the sense that Methodists just sang songs by John Wesley and maybe two or three others, while the Presbyterians (in my country at least) would sing only the Psalms, and the Baptists would sing something more lively. We defined our communities by the songs that we sang.

I think we now are in an era in which communities can be reshaped by what we sing. Are we sectarian, denomination-bound Christians or are we universal Christians? The song of the church will tell us that. It will also tell us whether we are male-dominated or whether the body of Christ is made in God's image as much through its female members as its male members. A great deal of our singing has had images of soldiers and warriors, but never of midwives. God blesses midwives in the Bible, but we've never sung, "Midwives of God arise."

The church's song also reminds the world that voices are meant to do other than just talk. A repeated phrase in the Psalms is: Sing to God a new song. The expectation is that this directive applies to everyone, not just the choir or the temple musicians. And in the book of Revelation we read that in heaven the saints and angels are singing a new song. Part of the job of the church is both to be faithful to God's command and to anticipate heaven.

**Since you've mentioned the "new song," we have to ask about how you deal with the tension between singing the traditional songs and singing the new ones.**

On one hand you have antique collectors who believe that nothing written after Bach is worth bothering about. And on the other hand you have people who are suspicious of anything not created in the past three or four years. That kind of polarity divides the church according to aesthetic taste, and the church was never meant to be divided on that basis.

It's important to recognize that the church has always had different kinds of music. For the past 400 years church music has been shaped by the organ. Now, I love the organ; it's my favorite instrument. But when the monks sang plainchant, they weren't using the organ. When people set music to folk tunes as Luther did after the Reformation, they weren't primarily thinking of organ music. When Ira Sankey wrote gospel music in 19th-century America, he didn't have the organ in mind. But in parts

of the church there has been a subconscious effort to try to make everything sound the same, with a resulting loss of integrity.

Since the 1950s, people have been writing music for accompaniment on the guitar. They sometimes say: this is the way all church music should be. Such a stance is as arrogant about the dominance of the guitar as others are about the organ.

**One of your critiques of contemporary Christian music is that it emphasizes only one aspect of human experience.**

You can look at much new songwriting that has come out of Australia, Europe and the U.S. since the 1960s and not get a sense that Christ was incarnate. The songs talk a lot about enthroning Jesus in our praises. You never get a Christ who argues, who's angry, who deals with women, who heals people. You never get the full story of faith. In the end these songs are debilitating to faith.

**Someone once said that congregations that only sing one style of music want only one kind of person.**

And if you have only one kind of person, you are able to see only one kind of God.

I recall meeting a musician from El Salvador, William Ramírez, and asking him to teach me a song from his country. He gave me the text in Spanish, which I had translated into English so I could try to fit the English text to the Hispanic tune. When I looked at the words I saw that they were far too political—all about corrupt judges and corrupt courts. Then I discovered it was Psalm 94.

By teaching me that song he opened me to the witness in the Psalms of God's preferential option for the poor and of God's engagement in matters of social justice. Otherwise I would not have known that. I would have sung and read the Psalms as private spiritual nuggets and never have known they had a political and economic dimension.

What other gifts—theological and musical—might we receive from songs being sung in Japan or Peru or Zimbabwe?

If the church in the Northern Hemisphere does not in the next ten years use songs that come from Asia, South America and Africa, it'll be deemed racist. It will be seen as a case of musical apartheid. Most Christians in the world are black and poor. They're not white and affluent. If that's the body of Christ of which we are a

member, then we have to share the joy and the pain of fellow members.

**Do you have any stories of success in developing this kind of cross-cultural singing?**

Years ago I taught Catholic musicians in Texas songs from different parts of the world. About five years later, a director of music in the Catholic Diocese of Austin asked me to come hear some elementary school kids sing. They sang songs in Zulu, Yuribe, Swahili and Spanish. Afterward, one of the teachers told me that students' parents phone to ask: why is it that when there's something in the news about South Africa, my child sings a song from South Africa?

These children are growing up with an awareness of the world, and it's the song of the church which is making them aware of other cultures and of other people. Any school could do that—intertwine music with geography and history and religious studies.

**You've said that Christian singing should lead to Christian activity. Do you see evidence of that?**

You sing primarily to give a gift to God, but you also sing to shape discipleship. If a song is specific about what it means to be a disciple of Christ in the 21st century, it should lead to a change in the way we behave.

My frustration is that the church's singing is full of churchy words. We don't have songs with a word like *economics* in them, or a word like *kitchen*. A substantial amount of biblical witness tells us God is interested in economics. We know that much of Jesus' time was spent in kitchens. But we are disenfranchised from singing about some realities in his and our lives.

This explains why some people find the Celtic tradition very attractive. The poems and prayers that have been passed down through centuries in the Celtic tradition are about milking the cow and taking eggs from the hen and going on a journey. They witness to the fact that God is not circumscribed by the walls of religious sanctuaries and that God is concerned with the processes and activities of daily life. We need to emulate that holistic approach rather than be locked into a Victorian moral and ecclesial mentality.

## **What would you do if you went into a congregation as a pastor or music director and the congregation just didn't sing?**

People have to acknowledge that the church is a singing community—that singing is part of the charter of the church. And then people have to have a good experience of singing.

I can't work miracles, but here's what I did in one church in Belfast that didn't sing well. I said, Well, friends, we're going to begin with singing "Amazing Grace" and we're going to sing it the way our forebears would want us to sing—unaccompanied. On verse one, I'll sing to give you the key. On verse two, we'll all sing. On verse three, we'll harmonize—just do it whenever you like. And verse four we'll sing in canon. People were beginning to palpitate at the thought of singing without the organ. But we sang it, and it was lovely. And people discovered their voices.

Most musicians have been trained to deal with instruments and choirs, but not to deal with a congregation. They use technical terms that intimidate people who don't have a musical vocabulary. I never say "tenors" or "basses." I say, "all the men here," "all the women here." I try to be as naive as possible. That's hard for musicians.

Most musicians feel that their professional status is undermined if they are not at the organ or working with the choir. These people have to be encouraged to see that musicianship is a matter of finding the appropriate tune, the appropriate way of expressing the tune, the appropriate way of articulating the text but also the appropriate way of working with the congregation.

## **Any other pointers on selecting music and involving the congregation?**

One thing to do is ask whether a song is meant for a congregation to sing or for a choir or for a band. A lot of contemporary music is really meant for a small group to sing.

And then we have to ask how different songs can best be articulated. "Amazing Grace" is a soul song—it's a personal testimony. So why not have one person sing verse one, to take us into this intimate relationship, and then let people join in verse two.

Also, you can ask whether it is a verse-and-chorus song. If it is, don't all sing the verses. Have somebody sing the verses and the congregation sing the chorus. Is it a folk tune? Forget the organ. Is it a syncopated tune? Forget the organ. Just look for the diversity and think about how it is articulated—that allows it to be a good experience for people.

Of course, you have also to keep in mind where the song fits in the flow of the liturgy. Is it a song that helps the community to gather? Does it celebrate or comment on the gospel? In that case, let the preacher be aware that he or she does not have to say what the song has already said.

You can intersperse a reading of a Gospel passage or a psalm with a short song. The songs of Taizé can be used as a response during a prayer. Where does it say that every church service has to have five hymns and they all have to be five stanzas long?