

# New harmonies: Music and identity at four congregations

by [Steve Thorngate](#) in the [November 29, 2011](#) issue



Above photo © Christian Sawicki. Below photo courtesy James Lumsden / First Church of Christ (Pittsfield, Massachusetts). Bottom photo courtesy Mark Bowman / United Church of Rogers Park (Chicago, Illinois).

How many kinds of music are there? Most teenagers could come up with four or five. An aficionado might list dozens. But ask a church worship committee and you may hear that there are only two types, traditional and contemporary. Those terms don't tell you much. Which tradition, at what time? Contemporary to whom and where?

Decades after the first time an organ console was unplugged to make way for a guitar amp, the worship wars rage on. Nine years after Tom Long, in *Beyond the Worship Wars*, prescribed excellence across a range of musical styles, worship planners still find themselves talking about the relative merits of exactly two. There's either the densely theological hymn by Wesley or Luther (gobs of words

sung over gobs of chords) or the vapid pop-rock song by some cool young person (maybe five words over three chords).

It's a stark difference, and it doesn't offer battleground churches a great set of options. A worship service should be cohesive, aesthetically pleasing and broadly inclusive. Worship that juxtaposes hymns with praise choruses is often a jarring, bipolar experience. And congregations that segregate by musical taste, creating separate services according to style, end up reducing diversity to an abstraction, reflected only on the membership roll.

Fortunately, these options are false ones. Church music is wonderfully diverse. Centuries of hymnody don't constitute a single style; neither, for that matter, do decades of praise choruses. And in which category would we put new classical hymns, old gospel hymns, black spirituals, Taizé chants or the folkie liturgical music borrowed from late-20th-century American Catholics? Then there's the minor matter of music from parts of the world that aren't dominated by white people. This wealth of music—and the fact that neither the organ people nor the praise-band people own it—offers rich possibilities for defusing the worship wars.

Obviously, many churches already draw from this variety, hymnal supplements in hand. And my depiction of the worship-warring factions is hyperbolic. Still, the organizing principle of traditional versus contemporary persists. Music that's hard to classify in either of those camps tends to get lumped together as a third, everything-in-between category. Reducing music to three categories is barely better than reducing it to two.

The way out of the worship wars, at least on the musical front, may be simply to think outside the two- or three-position toggle switch. A number of good ideas on this subject have been floating around in recent years, such as the notion of church music that's simultaneously "ancient and future." That's a helpful thought for framing the conversation, if not an altogether concrete one for getting the bulletins made.

More tangibly, some churches are creating cohesive, inclusive, excellent music in a way that goes far beyond the old dichotomy or trichotomy. At the risk of offering another reductive typology, I'd place such congregations and leaders into two rough categories: some revel in eclecticism, drawing from not one or two or three but many styles of music, with no clear favorite; others have developed a singular

approach and sound that is so distinctive that it renders the terms *traditional* and *contemporary* irrelevant.

ONE CONGREGATION with a unique approach and sound is House of Mercy in St. Paul, Minnesota. A sense of lightly ironic whimsy infuses the worship at House of Mercy. The announcements are delivered by pastors Debbie Blue and Russell Rathbun in a sort of awkward duo comedy routine, and the children file out to a faux-pompous original march tune ("For ye are youngsters, true and free!"). The congregation, part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, isn't winking or insincere at its core. But it is filled with people—some young, some less so than when the church began in 1996—who are skeptical of conventional church. Churchy elements tend to be reimagined, slyly subverted, held half-smirkingly at arm's length.

The most prominent example is the music. Congregational singing is led by a country-gospel band with a mostly (though not slavishly) old-fashioned sound. The House of Mercy Band's repertoire includes the real gems of the Americana hymnbook; it also features some odder, less gracefully aged specimens ("You Can Talk to Jesus on the Royal Telephone"). Serious or silly, the songs are played with energy, aplomb and straight faces. That's about it: there's minimal liturgical service music, and the piano and organ rarely get used.

*Listen to "Something Got a Hold of Me" by the [House of Mercy Band](#):*

Rathbun, who cofounded House of Mercy with Blue and another pastor, remembers envisioning the music at House of Mercy as "a bit more eclectic" than it turned out to be. "Our liturgy is made up of elements from many traditions, and we saw the music reflecting that. But the country-gospel thing immediately seemed to work so well."

It does work well. The songs are catchy and easy to sing. And the genre offers a distinctive and unified sound while lending itself to joyful high moments as well as tender low ones.

Most significantly, the old-time-gospel angle subverts the terms of the worship wars altogether. "It's a tradition of sacred music that's outside the experience of most of the people," Rathbun observes of the country-gospel repertoire. "So there are not these battles over whether we play 'our music' or 'their music.'"

The approach does, however, throw a bone to any closet worship warriors of either persuasion: the songs are old hymns, accompanied by guitars and drums. And this isn't a newfangled mashup, like those praise choruses that drag chestnut hymn texts through the modern-rock mire. On the contrary, a country band is more faithful to the origins of a lot of classic American hymnody than a church organ is.

House of Mercy's close identification with country-gospel music has been a happy accident. Rathbun maintains that the church doesn't conceive of music as an outreach tool, but over the years music has "attracted a lot more people than it turned away." This happens through the band's worship leadership, through concerts the church hosts and through a weekly guest artist slot in worship, in which guest musicians perform a song or two, sometimes departing from the House style, oftentimes not. The guest musician feature enables the church to support the local arts community (see "[Artists in worship](#)"), as well as to invite churchgoers to share their gifts while keeping the consistent sound of the band intact. "Occasionally people have expressed a desire to join the band," notes Rathbun, "but not very often."

A more significant issue is the repertoire's limited thematic vocabulary. That isn't always a problem. House of Mercy isn't a letter-of-the-lectionary kind of place; it doesn't need a theme song for every minor feast day. But when I visited shortly before Christmas, the only song that came off very well was the bluegrass standard "Beautiful Star of Bethlehem." The band tried a few carols, but it proved hard for a country band to know what to do with a European carol's stately style and constant chord changes. Rathbun is aware that "if people ever want a little traditional hymnody," it's at Christmas. "Sometimes we do [carols] a capella. It never really works that well."

Rathbun points out, however, that high holiday hymns tend toward "power-and-glory types of messages"—whereas "we're more of an up-from-the-bottom-but-still-stumbling kind of church." So he appreciates that so much country-gospel music "is about suffering and longing and hope."

It's also frequently about pie-in-the-sky escapism, holier-than-thou piety and blood-and-guts atonement. But House of Mercy has a high tolerance for contradiction—and a striking honesty about the imperfect theologies of faithful people.

A lot of these hymns "on some levels do run contrary to our theology," admits Rathbun. "But we approach them with a sort of second naïveté. We don't shy away from their themes; we just put it out there." Sometimes these themes push up against others in the service. "This can cause people to ask questions like, 'What the hell's going on here?'" says Rathbun. "Which is a high value for us at House of Mercy."

Another high value of this congregation is great music. House of Mercy's worship music is an example of doing one unique thing and doing it well.

THAT'S ALSO THE CASE at Grace Chicago, another young church filled with youngish adults. This Reformed Church in America congregation, started in 2002, planned its musical niche from the start. On a small budget, the church prioritized hiring a half-time musician with a distinct vision: clarinetist and composer James Falzone, who is immersed in Chicago's vibrant scene of forward-thinking jazz and classical music.

"We tried to get beyond the worship wars," explains Pastor Bob Reid, "by having a great musician do a lot that's original and fresh."

Falzone draws from a wide swath of Christian tradition, shaping the source material to his sensibilities. He reharmonizes (or simply rewrites) melodies, reconfigures song forms and adds or omits bridges. "Hymns were traditionally a liquid thing," Falzone points out. "Only recently do we have this idea that this text has to be sung with this melody." But his approach is "not about making the music more complex. It's about making it more appropriate for the ensemble."

The Grace Consort has what might be called a chamber folk sound, with strong jazz and contemporary classical elements. Falzone plays wind instruments and keyboards and is joined by a vocalist, percussionist and guitarist—all paid professionals. (Having professional caliber musicians was another priority from the start.) Seated center stage, the group plays during much of the service, offering interludes and backdrops—Falzone compares this music to a film score—along with leading the singing. It's all very polished and effective, presenting an uncommonly cohesive worship experience defined largely by its distinctive music.

*Listen to "Jesus Lord of Life and Glory" by the [Grace Chicago Consort](#):*

"We care about aesthetics," stresses Reid. "We believe that whatever we're doing we should do as well as we possibly can."

"If Jesus wasn't a physical being," adds Falzone, "then form and sound and taste and sight wouldn't matter as much for worship; we could just meditate or something. The incarnation suggests that God cares deeply about beauty."

This aesthetic focus has tended to come with a parallel emphasis on particularity: Falzone doesn't ape various styles in a scattershot appeal to people's tastes. Instead, Grace's music is defined by his specific affinities, creatively adapted to a church context.

One impressive innovation is Falzone's use of a shambling kind of improvisation as background to confession. "It feels broken," he says of the music. The seasoned performer has had a harder time, however, with unintentional imperfection: when a postlude fell apart, he "wanted to run out of the room."

Others present may have appreciated the humanizing moment. Though Grace's music is impressive, some churchgoers have found it inaccessible. The leaders are aware of the issue. "We've listened to our people and tried to discern why it's been difficult for some of them to worship," says Reid.

One lesson is the value of the simple and familiar: "We have come to appreciate the need for more comfort food. It's like preaching: having preached on a text 18 times, there's the danger of bringing the thing that's most interesting to you. But it's not always what people need to hear."

Falzone has responded by using more spirituals and drawing from other emotionally immediate traditions; he's also been trying to allude subtly to familiar styles. Recently the ensemble even played a U2 song—though not a straight cover but a subdued version with organ, acoustic guitar and African talking drum. While it might not have been the highlight of the musicians' morning, Reid recalls that "people were exuberant."

Instrumental timbres make a difference, too. Falzone was struck when an arrangement that got a lackluster response one week earned compliments after he added a simple tambourine. And he's grown attentive to individual instruments' popular connotations: while a cello might register as aloof, "a Rhodes [electric] piano feels a lot more at home for our people."

Playing more piano and less clarinet is one way that Falzone is trying to separate his work at Grace from his performing career. When he plays the clarinet—"an extension of my body"—he's "always trying to express something." Falzone and the ensemble have been working to make sure Sunday morning isn't too much like Saturday night at the avant-garde jazz club.

It's easy, offers Reid, to "slip into what feels like a performance of great music. But it has to be fundamentally about what ministers to people deeply." The church's love of excellence, he says, can also create a problem: aestheticism can exclude people. And not only in worship: "People will say, 'I don't want to bring a dish to the potluck, because I'm not a foodie and it won't be good enough.'"

This tension between accessibility and aesthetic value looms large at Grace also because of the several musicians (of varying abilities) sitting among the young urbanites in the pews. Grace remains committed to the fixed ensemble approach, but Falzone has been experimenting with ways of getting people involved. Churchgoers have played as substitutes; Falzone's pushing himself to use them also to augment the ensemble from time to time. He's collaborating with a songwriter from the congregation on an original hymn—something he hopes to try with others. And he's doing more a capella songs.

Grace is also creating a choir, no audition required. That's a day in the life of many small churches, where inclusiveness often trumps aesthetic standards. At Grace, the move is an intentional corrective to the opposite tendency.

"There's no precedent at Grace," says Falzone, which has allowed him and Reid to cultivate something fresh and particular. "It's a great thing," he maintains. "But it's also led to some mistakes."



HOUSE OF MERCY AND GRACE CHICAGO have

each made a distinctive, unified sound a significant part of their identities. But both are start-up churches that fashioned their identity more or less from scratch. What about churches that are not young, weren't begun by their current leaders and have had a conventional music program? For such churches, eclecticism is often the key to worship peace.

When James Lumsden arrived at First Church of Christ in 2007, the small UCC congregation in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, exemplified, in Lumsden's words, "hypertraditional 1950s Reformed worship." He shook things up on his first Sunday by including a song by Scottish singer-songwriter Yvonne Lyon. "I haven't looked back once," he says. But he did move carefully.

Lumsden got existing leaders to commit to worship experimentation, and he stressed a both-and approach: "We added, rather than taking away." That way, "people who like traditional music do not feel that they have 'lost' anything." He met some resistance—"there was concern that sometimes I was pushing too fast"—but not a lot.

Of the four churches profiled here, First Church comes closest to a conventional "blended" approach. The church now has two regular ensembles: a choir and a rock band. But the music goes beyond the standard dualism of a hymn here and a chorus there. The choir sings classical anthems frequently but not exclusively; in the



summer it serves as the core of a larger gospel choir that also sings global music. And the band, Between the Banks, doesn't play much of the praise music you might expect.

Instead, the group focuses on what Lumsden calls "secular spiritual music" from the pop world. "New music needs to have a connection to people's real lives," he explains. Whereas Grace Chicago's ensemble has dabbled with U2 somewhat reluctantly, Between the Banks plays that group's music enthusiastically, along with music by Bruce Springsteen, Green Day and others. A guitarist and singer, Lumsden leads the band himself, with energy and skill.

Hearing familiar pop music at church can be a little off-putting. The songs often seem out of place, their spiritual themes rendered thin in the light of Christian worship. But Lumsden, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on the spirituality of rock music, argues that this music "connects real life with the spiritual journey." If you want worship to speak to spiritual seekers—unchurched or otherwise—that's a point worth considering. Collective Soul's 1993 hit "Shine" is no jewel of songcraft, but it is well known—and the church may be just the place to engage its questioning lyrics ("Show me where to look / Tell me, will love be there?").

The Between the Banks version of "Shine" is, like most of the band's repertoire, largely acoustic. Besides steering around the arena-rock showiness that praise bands can fall into, this approach contributes to the fairly seamless way that First Church mixes styles. The band prefaces "Shine" with "The Lone, Wild Bird," accompanied by solo recorder—a sparse treatment that highlights the antebellum hymn's folk roots, creating a natural prelude to a stripped-down rock song. And the hymn's text—"I am yours! I rest in you"—offers Christian solace in response to the longing of "Shine." The two disparate songs are truly blended, not just thrown into a room to take turns in pleasing some of the people some of the time.

This kind of creative worship planning lends cohesion to what could be a jarring experience. So does the fact that both the choir and the band have a strong eclectic streak, pulling out material from all over the stylistic (and literal) map to create an effect that's more collage than dualistic. Lumsden considers variety a basic issue of hospitality. Even at a small, mostly white church in the Berkshires, "on any given Sunday there are four or five musical cultures present. If you want to do intergenerational worship well—and I do—you have to appeal to head and heart, to tradition and innovation. And all of it has to be done with integrity and

skill"—especially considering "the high standards people are accustomed to all week long."

That last point is crucial. High-church partisans sometimes talk about worship as an aesthetic refuge from the shallow entertainments of the rabble. But as soon as you allow that aesthetic standards are relevant in high- and low-art contexts alike, it's clear that the ubiquity of media-connected gadgets makes it at least possible for people to be immersed in excellence like never before. "You can't fake it with music," says Lumsden. "It has to be good, and it has to connect with real life."

And as Lumsden points out, while music "is not the only art form in worship that can either welcome or exclude, it is the one we have the greatest control over"—certainly more than a worship space's physical appearance and function. "Music is our greatest opportunity to cultivate hospitality," he insists. "Will we embrace the best of the contemporary as well as of the past? Can we carefully blend styles so that the heart is engaged as much as the head?"

First Church pulls this off, creating an eclectically blended service that holds together while reflecting the belief that "diversity of good music matters," as Lumsden puts it. "Beauty allows us to see what is real," he says, "and it needs everyone's perspective to go deeper."

UNITED CHURCH OF ROGERS PARK on Chicago's far north side has a fine pianist in music director Mark Bowman. But he didn't play much piano on the Sunday I visited. He did sing several brief solos to introduce songs, even though—as he acknowledged later—he has "a little trouble staying on pitch."



At this small United Methodist congregation, excellent

performance is not the main concern. Yet the church's music is, in its way, quite beautiful. A lot of that has to do with Bowman's leadership.

When Bowman arrived at the church in 2001, he needed some prodding to get out from behind the piano. "Standing out in front of people and singing—with my voice exposed—was scary," he recalls. He tried it, however, and today songleading is at the core of his ministry.

When Bowman leads a song, the congregation follows him readily and ably. Typically he splits the room up by location rather than vocal range. Assisted by other leaders he's trained, Bowman teaches music by rote and quickly produces rich, full part-singing—made all the fuller by the octave doublings of low and high voices. "If you hear something across the room that you like better," he tells the people, "sing that."

Bowman often hears from peers about congregations that "won't learn new music." But he thinks the real issue is that people "haven't been enabled to." Effective songleading doesn't always come naturally, so Bowman has developed seminars for area churches. "You can't just say, 'Listen to the organist play this hymn, and we're going to sing,'" he argues. "That's difficult even for me. You have to match your voice to another voice; that's how you learn to sing."

Before Bowman, United Church was an organ-and-choir church. It still has a choir that sings every week, which has "been integral to what we've done," Bowman says. "Part of my work is to help [choir members] see their role as worship leaders" and

not performers.

As for the organ, "I just use it when a hymn calls for it"—which isn't that often. While the grand old hymns are central to Bowman's background, these days he includes only one or two a month.

Instead, he programs a lot of music that is easy to learn and sing. This includes a wide assortment of newer liturgical music from the U.S. and the UK, and especially from elsewhere on the globe. He goes well beyond the non-Western material in most denominational hymnals, offering a steady and varied stream of new expressions. East Rogers Park is one of the most diverse neighborhoods in the U.S., and United Church has long reflected the neighborhood it serves. In a couple of minutes, Bowman gets all these very different people chiming in on a song few of them have heard before.

When approaching global music, Bowman tries to "put a little of the original cultural context there"—a percussion pattern here, a vocal technique there—"so people get a little feel." But he's no purist; he readily adapts music to Western voices and available instruments. He's also careful not to ask too much of people. African harmony is easy for American singers; African body movement, not so much. "And to do some intricate clapping rhythm?" He laughs. "No way."

Early on, Bowman thinks, he sometimes overdid it with the new music. "Folks started saying, 'We enjoy learning new music, but maybe we should go back and sing more of the music we've learned.'" He realized that his task is not just keeping things fresh; it's "helping people build a new repertoire at the base of their faith. It becomes their music"—a theological core for a shared life of faith.

United churchgoers also own the music through instrumental participation. For Bowman, including people in worship is a theological imperative. When he learns of an instrumentalist in the congregation, he simply says, "I'd love to have you play with us. Are you comfortable and ready to do that?" The Sunday I visited, someone distributed some percussion instruments indiscriminately, without objection from Bowman. This level of inclusiveness might lead to chaos at many churches. But at United I witnessed the well-trained songleaders holding things together, and the joy was palpable. "A significant goal of worship," maintains Bowman, "is to get people involved in ministry."

He's especially interested in getting the congregation to sing. That's "what worship is all about," he insists, and it's a practice that excludes no one. With singing at the fore, genre matters less. Bowman laments that "people get hung up on the worship wars—'we do the traditional music; we do the praise music.' That's not the issue. All forms of music have a legitimate place in worship, but neither a blaring organ nor a blaring praise band is conducive to leading singing."

Cohesive programming matters; so does the overall quality of material and execution. But in church music of any style, the values of excellence and inclusion ultimately can't be separated, because whatever one's aesthetic standards, the musical form itself is a participatory one.

"The question," says Bowman, "is this: How do you get the congregation to lift its voice in praise?"