

# MUSIC MINISTRY MATTERS

## No. 15 - Christianity, Community, and the Holy Spirit: A Church Musician's Perspective

Worship, in my view as a Christian, is central to the walk of faith. There are two equally important types of worship, personal and corporate. Both have been essential in my life and career as a church musician. Personal (or private) worship in the form of prayer, reflection, and study has been essential to keeping me grounded in a challenging often stressful profession. Our subject for today, however, is corporate worship, and specifically what I view as one of its most elemental components, “community”.

The subject of “community” has always been central to my concept of music ministry. As an undergraduate in the 1960s, I was a passionate supporter of ecumenism. While baptized an Episcopalian, my career as a choral conductor/Minister of Music necessitated serving or interacting with Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Catholics. It struck me how incredibly much we Christians share, and, in most cases, how insignificant the things are which divide us. The words of Paul in Galatians come to mind: “There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>1</sup> It is my firm conviction that song is one of the most powerful vehicle for the Holy Spirit to achieve that “oneness”. While community, as it relates to worship, has been defined in different ways, for me *its ultimate goal must be oneness in Christ*.

People are attracted to one church or another for various reasons: fine preaching, great music, an impressive building, a theology that matches their conservative or liberal world view, emphases on prayer or missions . . . the list goes on. In my own experience, however, a universal need across all denominations and belief systems is the need for *community*. In a *New York Times* guest essay, Rabbi David Wolpe writes powerfully about the need for community:

After 26 years in the rabbinate, as I approach retirement, I have come to several realizations. All of us are wounded and broken in one way or another. . . This is what binds together a faith community. No religious tradition, certainly not my own, looks at an individual and says, ‘There. You are perfect.’ It is humility and sadness and striving that raises us.<sup>2</sup>

The importance of community as an essential element of what we think of as church goes back to the very foundation of the Christian faith in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

As we all know, Jesus was a Jew, born of a Jewish mother. As one would expect then, the earliest Christians, based in Jerusalem, viewed themselves still as Jews, but Jews who believed the Messiah had come. They continued to worship in local synagogues, no doubt emphasizing the celebration of the eucharist, but otherwise changing little. Common among them, however, was a firm belief in the working of a Holy Spirit



<sup>1</sup> Galatians 3:28 (NRSV)

<sup>2</sup> David Wolpe, “As a Rabbi, I’ve Had a Privileged View of the Human Condition”. In *The New York Times*. (July 2, 2023).

that “spoke directly to them and that the messages had divine authority.”<sup>3</sup> Radical change was inevitable for Christian believers, of course, after the Roman Emperor Nero blamed Christians for setting the Great Fire of Rome in 64 ad.<sup>4</sup> Christians were prohibited from staging large gatherings or meeting in public facilities such as synagogues.

Pauline Christianity, based out of Antioch in Greece rather than Jerusalem and under of the guidance of the Apostle Paul among others, changed Christianity’s focus from the conversion of Jews to conversion of gentiles or non-Jews.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, worship practices were no longer needed to be bound to those of the synagogue. Thus, the “house church” was born. It would characterize Christianity for its first three centuries. Small house churches sprang up wherever Christianity gained a foothold and became a center of community life. Untethered to rigid doctrine, teaching and open discussion of the developing faith were common to their makeup. Openness and inclusiveness was another key ingredient of much house worship. “Extending hospitality to the strange “brother” played an extraordinary role.” House churches were structured as new and open families. It was in the house church that the tradition of addressing fellow Christians as “brother” and “sister” originated.<sup>6</sup> *The house church represented the essence of Christian faith, where believers from diverse backgrounds could pray, sing, and share ideas in a community of faith.* Worship in house churches is well documented in New Testament scripture. Acts 5:42 tells us that “every day in the temple and at home” the apostles preached of Jesus’ Messiahship. In Acts 12:11-17, Peter visits the “house of Mary” where he encounters a large prayer gathering. Likewise, in Acts 16 Paul and Silas visit a similar gathering in the house of Lydia and “encouraged the brothers and sisters there.”<sup>7</sup>

It is instructive to note that the Greek word for church, *ekklesia*, refers to a gathering of people called together (ie. a community), not a building.<sup>8</sup> The seeds for much of what Christian worship would become were planted in the first three centuries of house worship. The First Apology of Justin Martyr provides this famous description:

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things, Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying, Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given. . .<sup>9</sup>

Note, please, the emphasis on the pronoun “we”. The recollections of Justin, those of his contemporaries, and references to worship in the New Testament all emphasize the corporate and communal nature of worship in the early church. The need for house churches disappeared with the *Edict of Milan* which legalized Christianity in the Holy Roman Empire. An orgy of church building commenced which would continue through the Middle Ages.

But the concept of the house church, a venue for small intimate gatherings of believers, often outside the mainstream of denominational Christianity and victimized for being so, reappears throughout the history of the western church. It was common following the Protestant Reformation for new sects, especially those

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, Vol. 1: “The First Five Centuries”. (New York: Harper & Bros, 1937), pp61-62.

<sup>4</sup> Note: Christianity was legalized by Rome with the *Edict of Milan* during the reign of Constantine in 313.

<sup>5</sup> Note: Judaic Christianity would gradually disappear replaced by its Pauline relative.

<sup>6</sup> Gerard Lohfink, *Jesus and the Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith*, Tr. J. P. Galvin. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982/1984), p107.

<sup>7</sup> See Mark D. Ellison, “The Setting and Sacrament of the Christian Community”, <https://rsc.byu.edu/go-ye-all-world/setting-sacrament-christian-community>. Scriptural translation source: NRSV.

<sup>8</sup> Note: The word church with its familiar definition as a “house of the Lord” descends from the Old English, *circe*.

<sup>9</sup> John Kaye, *The First Apology of Justin Martyr Addressed to the Emperor Antonius Pius*, (Edinburgh, John Grant, 1913), pp91-92.

identified as “dissenters”, to begin their journey worshipping in the homes of believers. The history of African-American worship provides, I believe, powerful examples of the house church concept. In the ante-bellum South, the clandestine nighttime brush arbor meetings of the “invisible institution” gave slaves a much-needed time to fellowship and worship utilizing the preaching and singing traditions of their own culture. Following the Civil War, the African-American church as an institution never lost the sense of community it inherited its brush arbor past. It would be indispensable in helping blacks weather the pain of Jim Crow and the challenges of the Civil Rights movement. While larger “old-line” African-American churches became essential anchors for the minority community, blacks continued to embrace the smaller “house church” concept. As the Pentecostal movement took flight in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, many a gathering of Blacks seeking a freer approach to worship started meeting in living rooms before moving to storefronts when the numbers attending could no longer be accommodated.

In our own time, house churches are common in Iran and Communist China where Christianity is a minority faith frequently discriminated against. In the United States since the 1960s there has been a growing “house church” movement. “While most of the participants in this renewal have remained in the Roman Catholic and mainstream Protestant churches, many have left them to form small informal house churches.”<sup>10</sup> More recently, programs established by mega churches to offer opportunities for small group worship and study have led many to break away and establish independent worshipping bodies using the house church model. All of these examples of house church worship, from the First Century to the present, share one critical component: the need to experience a deeper fellowship and “oneness in Christ” as a community of believers.

*How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity.*

[Psalm 133, NRSV]

The *Pocket Oxford English Dictionary* defines community as “a group of people sharing a religion, race, or profession”, but, as it relates to organized religion, the concept of community has far deeper and multi-faceted connotations. For many, it simply means a welcome gathering of friends. To aspire to be a “friendly church” is certainly a worthy goal, but is that *all* that is meant by community? Taken to its extreme, would that mean that congregations should be populated only by those with whom we feel comfortable, those sharing the same beliefs or social status? Donald McGavran (1897 – 1990) put forward a “Homogeneous Unit Theory” (HUT) which underpinned the late 20<sup>th</sup> century church growth movement. “People like to become Christian”, McGavran wrote, “without crossing racial, linguistic, or class boundaries.”<sup>11</sup> The Willowcreek and Saddleback megachurches incorporated McGavran’s rationale intentionally targeting a specific demographic within their surrounding communities. I might summarize the rationale as, “*Since we cannot meet the needs of everyone, we will excel at meeting the needs of this one select group (which not coincidentally tends to look, act, and think like us).*”

In contrast, for the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, community signified far more than a gathering of people with a common interest, social standing, or lifestyle. He paraphrased Martin Luther’s commentary on Psalm 133 writing, “The Kingdom is to be in the midst of your enemies, and he who will not suffer this does not want to be of the Kingdom of Christ.”<sup>12</sup> For Bonhoeffer, true community was not simply a gathering of likeminded friends, but one of diversity where differences were tempered through the working of the Holy Spirit. A Christian community he felt should be reflective of the world around us, not “a fantasy ideal, but a divine reality.”<sup>13</sup>

Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are

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<sup>10</sup> Charles E. Hummel, “The Church at Home: the House Church Movement” in *Christianity Today*, January, 1986.

<sup>11</sup> Robb Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening: Sing a New Song in the Postmodern Church*. (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2002) p105

<sup>12</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, tr. J. W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), pp17-18.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp25-27.

fortunate, with ourselves. By sheer grace, God will not permit us to live even for a brief period in a dream world.<sup>14</sup>

Jesus modeled this in his ministry to the disenfranchised, and what we know of the first century church suggests it aspired to follow His example. The point that Bonhoeffer was making, I think, is that if real discipleship is to take place the church must reflect the diversity of the society around it when believers of many stripes are bound together. Only then can the real work of loving, caring, compromising, and sacrificing which goes into ministry take place.

### *Community, the Holy Spirit, and Congregational Singing*

Understand please that the unity – the “oneness in Christ” – of which I write is not merely a sociological construct. It is an experiential, some even might say ‘mystical’, aspect of vital, engaged worship. *It is essential and not an optional nicety.* Achieving it runs counter, however, to humanity’s ages-long quest for individual self-sufficiency, a willingness to abandon at least temporarily our need for personal autonomy to fully embrace worship as a community of Christ. Father Arne Panula (1946-2017), late director of the Catholic Information Service, differentiated between community in the secular sense and it applies to worship.

We aren’t meant to be atomized creatures. We want to share our beliefs, our feelings, our thoughts, our hopes. This is especially true of our deepest, most cherished convictions – our beliefs about what is most important. Being in St. Peter’s Square, whether for Mass or anything else, is so very different from hearing the Beatles in Central Park. Both are obviously venues for large numbers of people, united by something. But in St. Peter’s Square, what’s uniting people is a hub, and not just any hub, but one that transcends the merely human. When people feel transcendence, they want to share it with others, they want *be* with others.<sup>15</sup>

The experience of ‘communal transcendence’ of which Father Arne speaks must not be seen as exclusive to Roman Catholicism. It is, I believe, absolutely essential to vital and engaged worship in all traditions – Catholic or Protestant, liturgical or non-liturgical, liberal or conservative. Achieving that sense of transcendence requires the active intervention of the Holy Spirit.

*Yes, I believe in the Holy Spirit!* I am neither a Pentecostal nor a charismatic (though I have the utmost respect for what those traditions have contributed to church music in the United States). That being said, I believe passionately in the working of the Comforter. The Baptist pastor/theologian J. D. Greear shared a similar perspective writing, “Too often, discussion about the Holy Spirit runs on two tracks: the conservative track and the charismatic track. Secondary issues create a quagmire, and both sides miss the most important thing: that the Spirit of God wants to have fellowship with us.”<sup>16</sup> To achieve vital, engaged worship across an entire faith community requires the movement of the Holy Spirit.

One of the principal tools we have in striving for community and oneness in Christ, one which I believe is the most powerful vehicle through which the Holy Spirit can move, is congregational singing. This fact has been attested to by many of the greatest theologians of the Christian faith, and yet, too often, we give short shrift to the songs of the people: St. Augustine (354-430 AD) talked of the importance of hymns in his sermon on Psalm 72 this way:

Hymns are praises of God accompanied with singing: hymns are songs containing the praise of God. If there be praise, and it be not of God, it is no hymn : if there be praise, and God's praise, and it be not sung, it is no hymn. It must needs then, if it be a hymn, have these three things, both praise, and that of God, and singing.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Eberstadt, “Religious, Not Spiritual: Why Christianity Requires Community: A Conversation with Fr. Arne Panula”. St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology. <https://stpaulcenter.com/religious-not-spiritual-why-christianity-requires-community/>

<sup>16</sup> J. Pollock Michell, Interview with Dr. J. D. Greear, Pastor of the Summit Church in North Carolina: “The Most Important Thing About the Holy Spirit,” in *Christianity Today*. January 5, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms. Volume 3.* T.; Scratton, tr. (Oxford, UK: J. H. Parker, 1849), p466.

St. Basil the Great (329 – 379 AD) made reference to congregational singing in his "Homily on the First Psalm":

Who indeed can still consider as an enemy him with whom he has uttered the same prayer to God? So that psalmody, bringing about choral singing, a bond, as it were, toward unity, and joining THE PEOPLE into a harmonious union of one choir, produces also the greatest of blessings, charity.<sup>18</sup>

It is no surprise that singing by the people, as opposed to ensembles of trained clergy, were an important goal of the Protestant Reformation. Though they disagreed radically on issues of form and content, both Martin Luther and John Calvin believed passionately in the power of and need for congregational song. John Wesley, in his *Directions for Singing* (1761) perhaps best understood congregational singing in the modern sense. The following two excerpts exemplify his thinking:

III. Sing All. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up and you will find a blessing.

VII. Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to this attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your Heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve of here, and reward when he cometh in the clouds of heaven.<sup>19</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) spoke fervently of the importance of song as a spiritual exercise in his book, *Life Together* (1939):

The new song is sung first in the heart. Otherwise, it cannot be sung at all. The heart sings because it is overflowing with Christ. That is why all singing in the church is a *spiritual* performance. . . Where the heart is not singing, there is no melody; there is only the dreadful medley of human self-praise. Where the singing is not to the Lord, it is singing to the honor of the self or the music, and the new song becomes a song to idols.<sup>20</sup>

*It is the voice of the church that is heard in singing together. It is not you that sings, it is the church that is singing, and you, as a member of the church, may share in its song.*<sup>21</sup>

Two decades later, the theologian Karl Barth (1886 – 1968) said this about the place of singing in communal worship:

The praise of God which constitutes the community and its assemblies seeks to bind and commit and therefore to be expressed, to well up and be sung in concert. The Christian community sings. It is not a choral society. Its singing is not a concert. But from inner, material necessity it sings. Singing is the highest form of human expression. It is to such supreme expression that the vox humana is devoted in the ministry of the Christian community...<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> St. Basil the Great (329- 379), *Exegetic Homilies*, tr. Agnes Clare Way, (Washington D.C.: Catholic University, 1967), p152.

<sup>19</sup> John Wesley, "Directions for Singing," quoted in *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* ed. Franz Hildebrandt, Oliver A. Beckerlegge and Frank Baker, vol. 7, *The Works of John Wesley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p765

<sup>20</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Tr. J. W. Doberstein. (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), p58.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p61.

<sup>22</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume IV: The Doctrine of Reconciliation. Brownley and Torrance, editors. (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, 1962) p866.

What we can and must say quite confidently is that the community which does not sing is not the community... The praise of God which finds its concrete culmination in the singing of the community is one of the indispensable basic forms of the ministry of the community.<sup>23</sup>

## *Conclusion*

From the earliest times a component of active, engaged Christian worship has been “community” – a joining together of rich, poor, pious and still questioning, not limited to gender or ethnicity; indeed, a cross-section of humanity – joined together despite differences for one purpose: to come into God’s presence and worship Him! To envision such a unity would be naïve at best without the work of the Holy Spirit. As Robert E. Webber so powerfully wrote, “Worship is a verb!” Every element of Christian worship demands our total engagement: from prayer, to sermon, to partaking of the eucharist, to song. We are not spectators but participants.

We live in a time of division in American society and in the church as well. Gallup polling indicates that for the first time that Americans belonging to a church, synagogue, or mosque are in the minority. A New York Times columnist recently reported that, “The big religious shifts of the past were the periodic “Great Awakenings” that beginning in the mid-1700s led to surges in religious attendance. This is the opposite: Some 40 million American adults once went to church but have stopped going, mostly in the last quarter-century.”<sup>24</sup> This decline has been in progress since the 1960s, a period encapsulated within my fifty-year career in music ministry.

I remember vividly a worship service in August 1974. It was the Sunday after Richard Nixon resigned from the presidency of the United States,<sup>25</sup> and there was palpable grief among the worshippers for the fate of our nation. That something like that could happen, I think, resulted in a loss of innocence, a wounding to our faith in government that to this day has yet to heal. Such was the scene when my choir rose to introduce a simple old American folk hymn. Melody and words were printed in the bulletin, and after singing it through, we invited the congregation to stand and join in.

1. The lone, wild bird in lofty flight  
is still with you, nor leaves your sight.  
And I am yours! I rest in you,  
Great Spirit, come, rest in me, too.

2. The ends of earth are in your hand,  
the sea's dark deep and far off land.  
And I am yours! I rest in you,  
Great Spirit, come, rest in me, too.

3. Each secret thought is known to you,  
the path I walk my whole life through;  
my days, my deeds, my hopes, my fears,  
my deepest joys, my silent tears.<sup>26</sup>

Keep in mind that the music for that Sunday morning had been planned long in advance, long before the events of the previous week. The hymn was new – untested in our church – a simple hymn of faith in God’s

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p867.

<sup>24</sup> Nicholas Kristof, “America Is Losing Religious Faith” in *The New York Times* (August 23, 2023).

<sup>25</sup> Note: Nixon’s resigned August 9, 1974 – a Thursday.

<sup>26</sup> Text, Henry Richard MacFadyen; Tune, PROSPECT, Traditional American Folk Melody, source: William Walker’s *Southern Harmony* (1835).

love and the strength which only comes from Him to persevere through the challenges of life. Nevertheless, it was the *right* hymn for the time. By the time worshippers reached the end of the first stanza they were singing confidently and at the final amen (Yes, were still singing amens at that time!) there were tears being shed throughout the sanctuary. Unforgettable! That was community in song!

My point is this: I can only explain what happened that morning – as with dozens of similar experiences throughout my career – as the movement of the Holy Spirit allowing God’s people to be united at a time of shared need, and that congregational singing was the glue which brought them together. Friends, we must not wait for a national or spiritual catastrophe for such a joining in song to occur! Our need to experience God’s presence is omni-present. Our need to feel united and one in Christ is ever with us, despite whatever differences there be among us. And perhaps our greatest need is to feel part of something greater than ourselves – one voice among many – the church. As I said at the beginning of this piece, there are two equally important types of worship, personal and corporate. To quote Bonhoeffer once more, “It is the voice of the church that is heard in singing together. *It is not you that sings, it is the church that is singing.*”<sup>27</sup>

I love the church. I believe that corporate worship, whatever the faith tradition, is essential to the health of our society. And I believe that effective, engaged congregational singing is intrinsic to corporate worship. My plea and heartfelt prayer is that the singing of the people be the central priority for this and coming generations of church musicians. If the current, tragic decline in church participation is to be stemmed, I am convinced that full engagement in congregational singing will play a role.

I will sing to the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praise **to** my God while I have being. [Psalm 104:33, NRSV]

*Best wishes and Peace,  
Stan McDaniel*

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I hope you enjoyed this fifteenth installment of “Music Ministry Matters”. If you did, I hope you will consider purchasing my book, *Servanthood of Song: Music, Ministry, and the Church in the United States*, to be published by Wipf & Stock Publishing Company/Cascade Books in 2024. Details will be posted on [www.stan-mcdaniel.com](http://www.stan-mcdaniel.com) as they become available.

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<sup>27</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Tr. J. W. Doberstein. (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), p61.