

## Future of Congregational Singing

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### **Assumptions/Assertions**

1. Making music, and more specifically making music using our voices, is a core human characteristic.
2. Singing in groups is an ancient human activity that has ancient roots in the Judeo-Christian story. Singing together as a people of faith has served a variety of functions and happened in a variety of ways, but singing together has never stopped in our thousands of years as a faith group.
3. Historical and current theological arguments with Christianity supporting the importance of and even necessity of singing together are overwhelming.
4. Current scientific evidence showing what singing in groups does to our bodies physiologically has, so far, reinforced the wisdom of the church that singing together is essential to our journey as a people.
5. There has never been a time in the church's history when new songs were not being written. \*
6. There has never been a time in the church's history when new and old songs were not being critiqued and criticized. \*
7. The church's song has always been intentionally curated and inevitably winnowed and because of those processes, some songs endure and others do not. \*
8. The church's song has always included those that prove timeless as well as those that are useful only for a particular time and place. \*
9. Due to our ability to travel quickly internationally and the dawn of the internet, we live in a time of unprecedented growth and/or change. The closest historical parallel to today's rapid changes due to technological advances would be the years following the invention of the printing press (mid to late 1400s).
10. While the church's song is always changing, the church's song will never stop.

*\*Taken from the "[Guiding Assumptions](#)" of The Center for Congregational Song*

### **From Majority to Plurality**

#### *The Institution*

The church within the Roman Empire centralized its institution in Rome within the first few hundred years of its existence. Over hundreds of years, the majority church's identity became (or some would argue was even established so that it) conflated with Western European culture, systems, and theology. This conflation of church identity with Western European identity was reinforced and forced upon others across the globe through the colonial system formed and used from the 15<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The church in the United States and across the globe today is a result of and/or suffers from the negative consequences of that history. The conflation of white European culture, systems, and theology has been maintained and reinforced because there is still a majority church, the Roman Catholic Church, which most estimates currently place at having 50 to 51% of the world's Christians. While there is a majority, minority voices can rarely wield enough power to quickly effect significant

change in the church. However, within the next 2 to 3 decades, Christianity is on course to move into an age where no denomination or single tradition holds a global majority. And, due to the internet and globalization, many if not most locales will follow or are following that same trend.

### *Our Song*

One of the indications that this change from majority to plurality is happening is our song. Over the last 50 years, hymnals and song repertoires across the globe have become:

- More denominationally diverse, regardless of which denomination or tradition is creating/determining the collection
- More racially/culturally diverse
- More musically diverse, including almost every genre of music currently available to us

The result of these changes is that hymnals, collections, and/or aural repertoires of many communities are quickly moving toward a place where a majority tradition, culture, or genre cannot be identified within their congregational song. When widening the viewpoint away from individual congregations to a community of congregations (say, a city or metropolis), it is becoming increasingly more difficult to predict what a majority of those congregations would sing. Rather, it is increasingly important to recognize that the Christian song repertoire within a particular location can only be defined by pluralities instead of majorities.

## **The Ecumenical Age**

### *The Tough Road Ahead*

The move from majority to plurality (through a variety of metrics, though most importantly in the denominational makeup of world-wide Christian identity) will trigger massive change in how the church's institutions relate to each other, how Christians identify and/or understand themselves, and how we think theologically and practically as a global Christian community. This will prove to be a painful transition because it will take the dismantling of old systems and theologies tied so closely to white European centrality and the colonial system. These systems and theologies will fight back and try to preserve themselves.

### *Our Song Can Lead The Way*

The church's song is already well ahead of most other structures and systems in encouraging ecumenical dialogue, cooperation, and the dismantling of colonial systems. Church musicians, having been so intensely formed by this changing repertoire, are uniquely situated to help lead the way into the Ecumenical Age. Roman Catholic hymnals and song repertoires are uniquely Roman Catholic and yet incorporate an extremely large amount of non-Roman Catholic literature, which is one example of how our song is already modeling a way forward. By highlighting this to theologians and pastors, the church's song is already modeling how different cultural expressions (organ, a cappella, electric guitars, drums, etc...) can uniquely contribute to global expressions while learning from others that are different. We can move forward. By showing that for some congregations the best way forward is a hymnal, while for others the best way forward is a fully aural song repertoire, while for others the best way forward is a literate/aural mix, we can model the way forward.