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Challenges and Possibilities for Music and the Arts in Mission

CHRIST PLAYS IN TEN THOUSAND PLACES

Roberta R. King



What are the challenges and possibilities for employing culturally appropriate arts for kingdom purposes in the twenty-first century? In the late twentieth century, the initial groundwork for communicating the Gospel through music and the arts became an emerging approach to cross-cultural work. Setting Scripture to song in culturally relevant musical styles, contextualizing the Gospel appropriate for oral societies, and multicultural worship found a place within worship and witness of the worldwide Church. Recognized as a valid arena for effective ministry, the work is off to a running start. Yet, once culturally appropriate art forms have been identified, recognized, and accepted within a Christian community, what is the overall strategy for continued implementation

of the arts in mission? How can the arts play transformational roles in worship, evangelism, discipleship, and leadership development? This article poses five challenges for incorporating music and the arts into the ministries of the church, mission organizations, educational institutions, and mission-training programs. They serve as a response to the *missio deo* as cited

in the psalms to “declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples” (Ps. 96:3) so that “all nations will come and worship before him” (Ps. 86:9).

Challenge 1: “Think Global, Act Local”

Globalization raises issues of culture contact. What happens to cultural music and related arts when people





"Crowds gather to witness the 100th anniversary of the first Adventist missionaries' arrival in PNG. What are the heart musics of PNG?"

meet and interact with one another? New configurations and fusions of music are emerging as a reflection of interactive cultural exchanges. Ethnomusicologists note that ". . . there are no completely isolated musical communities any longer; something connects all musical production and permits music to be simultaneously global and local: global in its production, distribution, and consumption by audiences, while local in its performance aesthetic and situatedness in a coherent cultural milieu" (Wade 2004:129). In light of this, it is important to consider and ask how people are making music and arts meaningful and useful in their lives. Are churches and missions seeking to make the Good News understandable within specific cultural contexts and multi-cultural congregations? Or are we simply employing music and art without any relevant cultural grounding and thus missing out on significantly impacting a people's perception of and devotion to Jesus Christ. Our approach must be strategically intentional.

Challenge 2: Pursue Authenticity and Meaningful Communication

Authenticity strives for "faithfulness to one's essential nature" (Wade 2004:142). It fosters meaningful



"Nyarafolo-Senufo believers in Côte d'Ivoire, West Africa in the process of studying the Scriptures and composing an oral translation for their people."

development of a community's expressive arts in ways that allow people to remain connected to their families and life situations. They are not forced to leave their societies, rather they can remain connected and influential within them. Theologically, it allows Christ to dwell among a people (Jn 1:14) within their particular cultural context, wherein he can be fully embraced without forcing foreign cultural patterns upon people. This facilitates meaningful communication of the Gospel and applies to all groupings of people, including modern, postmodern, tribal societies, and differing generations. Thus, a major challenge is to identify and work within peoples' heart musics, "those musical systems that a person learns as a child, youth, and/or as an adult and that most fully express his or her emotions" (see www.worldofworship.org).

Challenge 3: Develop Comprehensive Artistic Translations of the Gospel

As Andrew Walls notes, the Christian faith is infinitely translatable, including non-written modes (Walls 1996:26-42). It is very encouraging to see newly composed worship songs arising from among the nations. Yet, we have just barely begun to translate the Scriptures and the Christian faith into culturally



"A Classical Arab Music Ensemble with Muslim Sheik and Orthodox Priest in Beirut, Lebanon, draws together both Muslims and Christians in celebration of the 'Annunciation.'"

appropriate musical and artistic forms. Two areas that require specific attention are those of orality and church planting. More than seventy percent of the world's population does not read. Chronological Bible storying and setting the Scriptures to song requires systematic development of songs for oral communication of the Gospel (see King 1999). For example, the Bible Society in Ghana is working on a full oral translation of the New Testament based on Ghanaian music systems. Second, songs and their use in the life of the church invite a systematic approach to multiple stages in the church planting and development process (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Composing Songs and Church Planting

(Adapted from King 1999:151-155)

The topics of newly composed songs should address various needs located within the different stages of the church-planting continuum. For example, unreached peoples need songs that help them become acquainted with Jesus Christ, while established churches need songs that take them deeper in their walk with the Lord and foster theological growth.

Challenge 4: Expand the Role of Music and the Arts in Mission and



"Doctor of Missiology students in Ethnomusicology at Fuller Seminary of varying heritages learn about the Hawaiian Ukulele, and its role in building community within society."

Ministry

The functions and uses of music vary from culture to culture. The challenge before us is to not only adapt or create new musical styles for worship and witness but to research the music culture of a people, especially in relation to how music functions and is used within a people's context. This implies considering new ways to incorporate song into worship and witness. In Kampala, Uganda, worship leaders are working on composing songs for elements of the Anglican liturgy that are usually read, such as the Gloria. On the other hand, an unexplored musical role is embedded in the eoko Maasai song form, a call-and-response format that facilitates education, dialogue and dealing with controversial topics.

Challenge 5: Explore Larger Global Issues: Peace, Justice, and Interfaith Relations

Finally, in an interconnected, post-9/11 world, there are new calls for seeking justice for the 'other.' Indeed, in the same Psalm that calls us to "Sing to the Lord a new song all the earth" (Ps. 96:1), the psalmist speaks of how the Lord will judge the peoples with equity and in righteousness (Ps 96:10, 13). World religions are no longer located only in the country of their origin.

For further reading:

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Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

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Wade, Bonnie C. Thinking Musically: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

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Studies in the Transmission of Faith. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996.

Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others are now living in local communities worldwide. The study of cultural music and the arts (the discipline of ethnomusicology) provides new platforms for expanding ministry and vision. In the arena of peace building, for example, scholars are realizing that the arts can access the imagination in ways that interfaith dialogue perhaps does not (see Lederach 2005). That is, music and the arts afford people spaces for rising above violence and imagining possibilities for living together in spite of their differences. In my most recent research, funded through the Luce Foundation, we are exploring "Songs of Peace and Reconciliation among Muslims and Christians." We are discovering that by bringing together musicians and musicologists, both Muslims and Christians, from the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and North America, that engaging in respectful performance with one another provides opportunity to explore our human longings to know God/Allah. Further, we are learning that common music and art traditions provide multiple opportunities to honor and respect one another, and to listen to each other. For the Christian witness and worshiper, such musical involvement creates spaces to practice living Christ-like in a

pluralistic world.

What, then, are the implications of these challenges for the church and her mission? On the most basic level, local churches around the world should intentionally welcome and embrace cultural art forms, giving voice to the peoples within their congregations. Second, mission organizations will benefit greatly by making room for artists and ethnomusicologists to play significant roles on their mission teams. They need to provide space for them to work creatively toward meaningful reflection on God and his work within a people's particular cultural context. The goal is to foster allegiance and commitment to Jesus Christ through culturally appropriate arts. Finally, educational institutions can no longer afford to view music and the arts as peripheral sub-disciplines without theological and missional implications. Integrating the study of cultural music and art into the curriculum expands the impact of the church in a global world. For, no people or society is without its own unique expressive music and art, vehicles that offer a profound means wherein "Christ plays in ten thousand places" (Gerard Manly Hopkins in Peterson 2005:108) ●