

Context and Liturgical Renewal: An Approach from Cuba

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Abstract: This article aims to share the experience of the renewal of congregational singing in Cuban churches since the 1960s as a testimony to the links that exist between liturgical renewal and theological renewal with a special focus on the dialogue between culture and social reality, particularly in light of the Cuban Revolution of 1959, as constitutive of this renewal.

Keywords: liturgical renewal; Cuban Protestantism; theology and culture

1. Introduction

Liturgical song is part of how the church expresses its faith. Song responds to the needs of ritual as a liturgical language, while reflecting a cultural and theological identity. In that sense, liturgical song shares contextual traits with theology, as well as with the natural world that surrounds the church, all as historically situated expressions. This article aims to share the experience of the renewal of liturgical song in Cuban churches. Here we wish to demonstrate the links between liturgical renewal and theological renewal as well as cultural dialogue and the social realities that that renewal entails.

In the Cuban case, we examine this experience of renewal in a group of churches that belong to what is called historical Protestantism (Reformed, Baptist, and Episcopal) and are associated with the Cuban and Latin American ecumenical movements. In this case, we must consider the impact of a series of events that have occurred since the 1960s. Nationally, the triumph of the Cuban revolution on 1 January 1959, and the socio-cultural transformation that was brought about in the country as a result, also contributed to these experiences of renewal.

2. The International Context

The development of liturgical music in Latin America since the 1960s was influenced by several factors.

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) furthered an important liturgical renewal process that shed light on the relationship between faith and culture. It helped fulfill the need to celebrate mass in vernacular languages, and to better facilitate people's participation in liturgy. The document *Sacrosanctum Concilium* from Vatican II put into writing that the participation of those gathered in worship should be full, active, and conscious. The Council facilitated rich liturgical musical creation experiences in several countries. These new songs are characterized by their simple and poetic language and their biblical inspiration. They are also marked by their relevance to their communities' social and historical realities, as well as their incorporation of native musical genres. They are an expression of a spirituality that is more in tune with the needs and lived experiences of the people.

In Cuba's case, the Catholic Church has grown significantly in its musical worship repertory. The choir book *Cuba Sings its Faith (Cuba canta su fe)*¹ now has several editions. Some notable composers of this generation of Catholic composers include, among others, Perla Moré, Tony Rubí, Alfredo Morales, Roger Hernández, and Jorge Catasús. Other initiatives, like the 'Perla Moré' Festival, have continued to promote new music creation. These are events in which composers from churches that are not Catholic also participate.



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Since its inception, the international ecumenical movement situated in the World Council of Churches (WCC) has not only fostered exchanges in churches and organizations related to missionary work, theological reflection, and unity in service, it has also enabled diverse liturgical traditions to connect, making the creation and celebration of ecumenical liturgies possible. In this way, churches have shared experiences and resources that enrich their liturgical practices and musical repertory.

Since its foundation in Amsterdam in 1948, the WCC has defined itself as a movement that has appealed to its churches and member organizations to make concrete commitments in the face of humanity's realities and outcries.

If Christians and Christian congregations everywhere don't consecrate themselves to the Lord of the Church in a renewed effort to strive together where they live, to be witnesses and servants to one another, among people, we will have gotten together in vain as a World Council. . . We must learn to speak boldly in Christ's name, both to those in power and to the people, to combat terror, cruelty, racial discrimination, to defend the oppressed, prisoners, and refugees. In all parts we must make of the church a voice for the voiceless, and a home where all men feel at home.²

This foreshadowing connects ecumenical vocation, religious faith, and the search for justice and peace, and marks the liturgical musical creation that these spaces generate. In March of 1988, through a WCC initiative, close to fifty Latin-American musicians engaged with their churches came together in the Latin American Biblical Seminary in San José, Costa Rica. Other church representatives from the rest of the world were also present. It was a space to reflect and share experiences and resources related to liturgical musical renewal from Christian Latin American communities.³

As part of this event and in his presentation about "the sounds of liturgy", Jaci Maraschin⁴ spoke about liturgical music as a sound that is life-affirming amid many symbols of death. The social and political context in Latin America, characterized by poverty and inequality, is the landscape where churches must proclaim liberation and justice. Maraschin understands that liturgical renewal experiences, and their new musical expressions, should give an account of a new technology that responds to new realities in the historical context. Sustaining the impossibility of change in liturgy and its forms of expression is the reflection of an obsolete theology, divorced from the Bible and society.

The Biblical God is not static; but acts and relates to the history of human beings and the world. God sides with the poor and the oppressed against the oppressors and the rich. . . The sounds of liturgy should be true to society. Music that is top-down, imposed by authorities, without any deep relationship to the lives of those making music and singing cannot be true to society. . . Church worship tries to symbolically anticipate the day that justice and peace are found. This is not to make us forget that justice and peace have still not been found, but to nourish us with the hope for and the struggle toward that. The words of liturgy are the words of the Gospel. They are spoken into a world distorted by injustice and oppression. How will these words intervene in society? (Maraschin 1988, pp. 38–39)

The connection that should exist between liturgical song and life; the historical reality of the worshipping community; and the gamble that worship will transform the world in the quest for justice and peace are essential elements in the new song that came out of this period in churches in the Latin American ecumenical movement. These considerations also provoke a reflection regarding the relationship between faith and culture since liturgy is the expression of both.

In one of the first written Latin American works related to Christian worship, Carmelo Álvarez⁵ speaks of the needed interaction between worship and culture to work toward a contextual liturgy. For worship to be an authentic expression of faith in Jesus Christ, it should look to culture, which is the fixture of the concrete human condition. The result

of this interaction between faith and culture is autochthonous worship. Liturgy will be Christian as long as it is embodied in the culture. God's humanization through Jesus Christ is the theological criterion that guides the embodiment of liturgy, a process that is part of what some authors call "faith enculturation".

In short, worship dramatizes interactions between faith and culture.

Worship will thus be the celebration of women and men immersed in history, with concrete cultural experiences. Out of those, from a worship point of view, we celebrate a search for authenticity. . . . When the church engages with cultural context (economic, political, and social) it has taken the first step toward a truly domestic worship. . . . because there is no such thing as a finished culture, much less an abstract universal faith. (Álvarez 1986, p. 72)

In the context of community, considering the relationship between faith and culture is an exercise that leads to critical edits of the church's liturgical repertory. In a text published at the beginning of the 1970s, Pablo Sosa⁶ addresses the need to renew hymnody in the Southern Cone of Latin America. After analyzing the most-used hymns in the Protestant churches of the region, Sosa concludes that most of the hymns came from European countries and also display, in their poetry and theology, elements that no longer responded to the needs and the socio-cultural reality of Christian congregations in the second half of the twentieth century (Cf. Sosa 1972, pp. 95–103).

At the same time, Sosa identifies an absence of contemporary hymns and a lack of autochthonous hymns written by authors of the region. From there, he emphasizes not only the need to promote the creation of new songs out of the Latin American reality, but that there must also be more clarity on what those hymns would look like in order to contribute to defining a truly Latin American identity in Protestant hymnody. In particular, some song elements to consider are songs' faithfulness to the local reality; their musical and poetic potential to enrich the wider body of universal hymnody beyond Latin America; the authentic use of autochthonous musical styles; and the development of a poetic consciousness that can be expressed not only in meditations and sermons, but also in hymns.

The *misas criollas* (creole masses)⁷ that were written from the 1970s onward in Latin America are a clear example of the need to put celebration of Christian faith in dialogue with people's contextual realities and experiences. The author of the Nicaraguan *Misa Campesina* (Peasant's Mass), Carlos Mejía Godoy, for instance, says that his intention was to create a mass that would reflect the language and vital context of the peasants in their country⁸ on the one hand and, on the other, a new theology where God is understood to be a God that is close to the people, who shares in their struggles for a dignified and just life. This orientation can be noted in the chorus of the Credo from that Mass:

*You are the poor folks' God,
the simple and human God,
one that sweats in the streets,
the sun-wrinkled God.
That's why I speak to you
just like my people do,
because you are the worker God,
Christ the laborer.*⁹

Since its founding meeting in 1982¹⁰, the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI) has promoted new musical creation for liturgy for its events and programming in service of churches and the regional ecumenical movement. Beginning in the 1990s, the Latin American Liturgy Network¹¹ was organized to coordinate people, institutions, and projects on the continent focused on renewing liturgy. The work of the Network has focused as much on liturgical training as on creation and exchange of liturgical resources, as well as support for realizing ecumenical events. Since this period, new Latin American and Caribbean hymnody has also been present worldwide in hymnal and songbook publications. Worship

books developed to accompany the World Council of Churches' meetings, for instance, in the last decades have included a significant number of Latin American songs. They also included musicians and composers from the region as part of the production of these materials.

Ecumenical organizations and theological training institutions in Latin America have consistently promoted new musical liturgical creation, incorporating this content in their programs, events, and curricular designs. The Superior Institute of Theology in San Leopoldo, Brazil belongs to the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference of that country. They organized graduate courses in liturgy and created the Liturgical Resource Centre to stimulate studies geared toward these themes and the circulation of self-produced materials, among them new worship songs. *TEAR—Liturgia em Revista* (Liturgy in Review) has been one of the most salient communications produced from this Centre¹².

The Theological Community of Mexico also organized graduate courses in Liturgy and Music. In the last few years, in coordination with the Create Network (*la Red Create*), that institution has also convened several Christian Worship Symposiums, bringing Latin American liturgists and composers together. These symposiums have focused on specific, current themes that are expanded upon for liturgical contexts, and they create resources with those themes that churches can use. Against this backdrop of the Latin American experience, let us narrow our focus and examine post-revolution liturgical renewal in song in the Cuban context.

3. The Cuban Experience

It was a big challenge for Cuban churches to interpret and take on the socio-political and cultural changes that the 1959 revolution brought about. Protestant churches bore the structural, theological, missiological and liturgical stamp of their mother congregations in the United States. Although some contributions were made in the field of theological reflection (limited to a few Protestant pastors and theologians who tried to relate their faith to the new historical moment they were living through), churches were struggling amid difficulties because of internal fears and prejudices, along with the challenges of a society in transformation. All of this led to a gradual reconfiguring of the church's fundamental purpose in a socialist context, a context that was hostile to all kinds of religious expression for many decades.

It was not until 1984 when, in the context of a meeting of leaders in Protestant Cuban churches¹³ in the Theological Ecumenical Seminary (*Seminario Evangélico de Teología*) in Matanzas, the liturgical repercussions of missionary heritage in churches were evaluated in a systematic and critical way. Until then, churches had been isolated from the culture and idiosyncrasies of the Cuban people.¹⁴ Without a doubt, one of the barriers to a full enculturation¹⁵ of Christian faith in the reality and history of our country was a model of worship that responded to Anglo Saxon rather than Caribbean culture.

3.1. The Beginnings of Liturgical Renewal in Cuba

Liturgical renewal experiences in the 1970s and 1980s were well already underway when the meeting in 1984 occurred. They are marked by the ethical and humanist contributions of the Cuban revolution, especially those expressed culturally and musically. For example, the New Cuban *trova* movement (*Nueva Trova* was a musical movement of singers and song writers who emerged in the late 1960s in Cuba) had an influence on the work of many of the Christian singer-songwriters of the era (Cf. López 1998, pp. 87–88). During this era, the Cultural Office of Worker-Student Baptist Coordination of Cuba (COEBAC) produced valuable liturgical resources as material for their core group meetings and for use in their yearly camps on "Christian Social Responsibility". Notably, the singer-songwriter José Aurelio Paz worked in this organization.¹⁶ An illustration of these cultural influences can be found in the 1979 COEBAC publication of a Christian poetry anthology by diverse ecumenical authors, who expressed how to live into their faith in the context of revolution and the search for social justice. The Reformed Presbyterian Church of Cárdenas had

previously published the ten-line stanzas of Francisco Eladio Hernández, that expressed the Christian faith experience in tune with the beauty of Cuban nature. These poems were later set to music by sisters Ofelia and Julia Rojas, also members of the Presbyterian Church. In the same way, the Student Christian Movement (SCM) and the Latin American Union of Ecumenical Youth (LAUEY) made ecumenical liturgies and developed materials for their activities and for the churches that participated.

The work of North American missionary Lois Kroehler, from the Reformed Presbyterian Church, had a big impact on the liturgical life of the ecumenical movements in the 1980s and 1990s. Lois worked with the Department of Church Renewal¹⁷ in the Cuban Ecumenical Council¹⁸. She organized musical and devotional workshops; translated and composed hymns; and spoke at various festivals of New Christian Song that expressed the ethical predicament in the context of revolution and the social justice fight. In 1989, Lois edited the hymnal *The Whole Church Sings*¹⁹, the first compendium of liturgical songs that struck a balance between traditional hymnody and new Latin American and Caribbean songs, as well as songs from other parts of the world.

Pieces from Heber Romero's Creole Liturgy (*Liturgia Criolla*, 1980)²⁰ also marked a musical, liturgical, compositional trend of the 1980s and the following years. The Creole Liturgy was circulated by many Ecumenical and Catholic churches and has been well-received by communities of faith inside the country and beyond. *The Cuban Mass*, composed by Clara Luz Ajo and Pedro Triana (1983), from the Episcopal church, has also been well-circulated and accepted in Protestant and Ecumenical contexts nationally and internationally. In the same period, Baptists in the West celebrated the musical and choral works of Samuel Hernández, Orestes Aguilera, Alfredo Chacón, and David Figueredo.

In the mid 1980s, vocal and musical groups from different churches that blurred the borders between local and denominational spaces started appearing, representing concrete expressions of artistic creation, brotherly spirit, and ecumenical life. Among them were the groups *Proyecciones*, *Pueblo de Dios*, *Ebenezer*, *Vida*, *Kairos*²¹, *Voz Joven*, *Jerusalén*, and *el Coro Shalom*.

At the initiative of Orestes Aguilera Estrada, this work in fostering Cuban expressions in Christian song was continued by the Baptist Church of Luyanó which has held the "Meeting of Cuban Christian Composers" since 1985. It was a space where important examples of Christian musical creation were presented for more than 15 years. This initiative has been restarted by the Kairos Centre in Matanzas as the Christian Song Festival.²² Each year, this event gathers Christian composers and, for some time now, has included homages to musical creatives from our churches.

3.2. From the 1990s to Now

The 1990s signaled a new chapter in ecumenical life in Cuba and in the field of liturgical observance. The effects of the special period on religious life are well known.²³ Here, we will name only two: considerable growth in church membership along with general participation in religious practices, and a greater presence in society through the means of religious expression. These shifts allowed a growing acceptance by the Cuban population of religious phenomena as part of the people's culture, which in turn provoked a growing interest in the knowledge and study of these themes.

Alongside this growth and the blooming of religious life in Cuba, in the first years of the 1990s, the Liturgical Network of the CLAI organized several Arts and Liturgy workshops. The space opened up by these workshops enabled a group of Protestant Cuban leaders to begin a process of liturgical training that included learning new songs and sharing new ideas to renew worship. They also began to work on a more integrated way of looking at liturgy, including its history, content, resources, and languages, as well as theological and ecumenical foundations, with an emphasis on the Cuban context. It did not take long for these experiences in Cuban churches to multiply. People involved in ecumenical movements and Protestant denominations made great use of these spaces and began to work with churches from a more worship-oriented perspective.

Some of these leaders participated in liturgical training programs in diverse ecumenical centers like the Ecumenical Theological Seminary (SET, Matanzas), the “Kairos” Centre (Matanzas), the “B.G. Lavastida” Christian Centre for Service and Continuing Education (Santiago de Cuba), the “Martin Luther King Jr” Memorial Centre (Havana), and the Christian Centre for Reflection and Dialogue (Cárdenas). These institutions have fostered interest in the liturgical renewal of autochthonous Cuban ecumenical identity by offering workshops and lectures, and by producing materials for churches and ecumenical movements. The work of liturgists such as Lois Kroehler and others of the Cuban ecumenical movement put forward by the Conference of Caribbean Churches (CCC) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) had already paved the way for a stage in which to consolidate the Cuban ecumenical experience. In 1994, the Church Renewal Program (from the Cuban Council of Churches) established the Award for Cuban Culture and Christian Engagement.

In addition, Christian music festivals reached new heights and were organized in many public spaces and churches. The Youth Christian Association (ACJ) saw a resurgence of its work in the first few years of the 1990s, which translated into many meetings between young writers and musicians. The work of the ACJ brought about the first Christmas concerts celebrated in theatres in the capital. All over the country, musical groups also started expanding.²⁴

Thus, a new generation of Christian composers were added to those referred to above. Among them, from the Reformed Presbyterian Church came Pedro Jiménez, Lysbeth Riera, Alison Infante, Mairolet Vega, Joel Ruiz, and Mirielis Negrín. From the United Evangelical Church (of the Lutheran tradition) came Marta Romero, author of several masses out of Santiago de Cuba. From the Baptist churches came Jorge Sixto Sisagé, Yusín Pons, Amós López, and Samuel Aguilera. From the Pentecostal tradition; David Monduy, Ebenezer Castillo, Otoniel Aguilera, Taimara Blanco, Manuel D. Aguilar, Ezequiel Villa and Eduardo González. From the Adventist church came Pedro Monteagudo, and from the Quaker Friends, Eirena Escalona.

The public masses during the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1998 and the Protestant services in diverse plazas in the country during the 1999 Evangelical Cuban Celebration were a demonstration of the level of maturity reached in autochthonous Christian faith celebrations. The Cuban public was shown the artistic and creative capacities of churches. The ecumenical spirit that should always come with every Christian worship service was also strengthened. Since these events, Cuban churches have continued to celebrate and hold functions in public space, showcasing the richness of autochthonous liturgical languages; not just in terms of music but also language that is corporeal, poetic, visual, spatial, symbolic, affective, and verbal.

The Liturgical Renewal Program from the Cuban Council of Churches has been working to revitalize the arts as vehicles for faith expression in Christian worship over the last twenty years. Accordingly, the New Gospel Cuban Hymnal (*Nuevo Himmario Evangélico Cubano*) published a series of theatre pieces written by Cubans as a resource for celebrating special days in the church. They also published an Anthology of Christian-Inspired Poetry, a national endeavor. This program also began organizing various meetings for Christian creatives in 2005, paving the way for close to 300 people to meet in the city of Las Tunas in October of 2007, at which more than 25 Christian denominations were present, to participate in the activities of the National Forum on Christian Art.

The Forum was a meeting place to exchange experiences and artistic resources. Workshops, panels, concerts, visual arts exhibits, poetry readings, theatre and dance groups, rap jams, *trova*, and pantomime, among other forms of expression, showed the huge creative richness of Christians dedicated to the renewal of the mission and spirituality of their churches through art. Art was seen as an efficient vehicle for evangelizing, communicating, participating, and serving.

4. Trends in Protestant Cuban Hymnody

There are three significant trends in recent liturgical music in Protestant contexts in Cuba: (1) reference to social and cultural environments; this allusion to context also includes the wide scope of ecology; (2) a theology more in line with the lives, needs, and historical reality of the people, along with a theology committed to human emancipation, overcoming all forms of discrimination and violence; and (3) the reflection of an ecumenical spirituality, with emphasis on Christian unity and its importance for the witness to and service of churches in society. In general, these tendencies are not isolated solely to songs, but they come together in the configuration of the message of each musical piece.

Autochthonous musical genres used in the creation of these songs, like the *guajira*, *son*, *guaracha*, *bolero*, and *cha cha cha*, among others, not only make direct reference to cultural identity, but also establish ways of expressing new theological, social, and pastoral thinking. On the other hand, the fact that they are national musical genres contributes to a sense of unity and belonging. In other words, the church can feel that it sings from its own being, from its roots. Singing as Cuban churches brings people together and helps people in mutual recognition beyond denominational differences.

Guajira is one of the most popularly used genres because of its elegance and nobility, while its three-in-one structure makes melodies easy to learn and memorize. A similar thing happens with *guaracha*, because of its most contagious, joyful rhythm. The simplicity of its musical beginnings and its short phrases make it another genre well-suited to community singing. *Son*, on the other hand, can be more difficult to learn because of its set melodic meter with its out-of-time rhythm and its syncopation. Even so, it is an often-used genre because of its moving and enthusiastic rhythm.

Below are some examples of these types of songs, beginning in the 1980s. Note the way that the previously identified qualities are manifest in them.

In his song “Indigenizing Praise” (*Indigenización de la adoración*), José Aurelio Paz moves away from the liturgical musical inheritance brought by United States missionaries, highlighting the need to praise God from the cultural identity of those assembled that celebrate their faith. This song maintains that praising God is borne of a cultural, theological identity. Furthermore, community worship manifests joy and movements of the body that come from Caribbean culture, which is effectively conveyed by making use of the musical genre of *son montuno*.

Why can I not praise with my ‘son’?

If it’s my Cuban music and I like it better?

*Who was it that told the folks who learned from the North
that you praise with a piano and not a cowbell?*

*And they say that if there’s no piano, it should be done with a clavichord
although one who enters a church might think it’s a vigil.²⁵*

The author refers to use of the piano and clavichord, which are imported musical instruments. While it is commendable to use sounds and styles that are part of the musical traditions of other churches and contexts, that does not mean that those should be predominant or absolute. Using autochthonous instruments is another way of resisting foreign cultural imposition and of remembering that all persons and their ways of worshipping are equal in the eyes of God, creator of all things.

In the songs of their Cuban Mass, Clara Luz Ajo and Pero Triana put on display the challenges that humanity faced at the time—in the early 1980s—along with the search for justice and peace. This work uses traditional Cuban dance and musical forms throughout, and the poetry evokes the Cuban countryside, the struggles of the people, and Christian hope for justice and equity in Cuba. The use of the term humanity stems from song’s desire toward the whole *oikumene*, the inhabited Earth, and connects gratitude for our daily bread to the churches’ participation in God’s works of justice unfolding in the world. As well as being very Cuban, the use of the *guajira* genre instills a profoundness and a solemnity in the song’s message.

*Thank you, Lord, for the bread you give us,
fruit of the labour that some have abundantly
and others crave.
Father, we are sure that your justice will mean
that there'll be bread for all in a new humanity²⁶.*

One of the most prolific composers in the 1970s and 1980s was Lois Kroehler. Her musical work included children's music, liturgical church music, occasional national and international events, choral works, hymn translations of diverse backgrounds, and setting poetry to music. Her songs not only found inspiration from the Bible but also from "newspaper pieces, sermons, biblical studies, religious events, and personal and political happenings" (Kroehler 2019, p. 4). Lois' creative work and her spirit of service to the church continue to inspire the next generation of composers and liturgists in Cuba, especially ecumenically.

We share the text from one of her songs inspired by Acts 2, entitled "Give Us Your Spirit". It is a prayer to bring the church together in unity.

*Give us your Spirit, oh God.
Give us your wind and move us.
Give us your fire to be heat and light.
Give us your word to speak.
Dreams to dream, visions to see,
To prophecy, to communicate.
So that we may understand,
so that we may be one.
We may be one. (Idem, p. 263)*

The Creole Liturgy, written by Heber Romero, is one of the most important liturgical musical pieces from the period of the early 1980s. Its reception and use in the church, the publication of his songs in several national and international hymnals, and the many musical versions recorded by several contemporary authors attest to its far-reaching influence. The poetic yet simple language of Romero's piece deepened the expression of Cuban contextual theological thoughts in discourse with diverse human predicaments. Also, he adapted congregational singing for the Cuban context with easily learnable melodies, making use of regional musical genres.

Here, we use the text of the song "When o'er the Hills Morning Light Is Breaking" (*Al despuntar en la loma el día*), where God's praise is inspired by the beauty of the natural world and particularities of life when the sun rises over the Cuban countryside.

*When o'er the hills morning light is breaking,
once more your glory is born.
Filled with your joy all the fields are waking
and growing grass greets the morn.
A different day now is dawning
and yet, with fear, I am torn;
but you're the same God each morning;
as the day dawns, I'm reborn,

On the horizon the sun is blending
with hues of green coffee fields,
and from the bush there's birdsong wending
till it a new life reveals.
The air with fragrance is swelling,
a sweet aroma I smell.
My song the heavens are telling:
"God indeed does all things well!"*

*I want to be like a brook that's flowing;
 O how refreshing, such grace!
 Or like the sound of soft wind blowing—
 your thoughts through palm groves I'd trace.
 I hear the rooster that's crowing,
 the thrilling birdsong takes wing!
 My voice ascends and is flowing.
 How I sing, God, how I sing! (Gutiérrez-Achón 1999)*

In the same vein, other musical works like the hymn “Cuban Praise” (*Alabanza Cubana*) have come out more recently. Here is the second verse and the chorus.

*You created all life, you sustain all beings.
 My eyes can see amazing marvels.
 You feed birds, give rain and heat.
 You inspire with your moon, illuminate with your sun.*

*All creation sing praise from your hands
 because hope is saved in your providence
 And Christ, I want to join in the harmony
 that finds it's way to you in a good Cuban way.²⁷*

Without a doubt, one of the most widespread Cuban Christian songs is “The Lord Now Sends Us Forth” (*Llamado soy de Dios*), written by Pedro Infante y José Aguiar, from the Pentecostal tradition. It is a missionary song borne from the heat of ecumenical experience that expresses, in clear theology and simple language, the permanent invitation for churches to work toward fellowship, justice, and peace. The song is designed in the genre of ‘coros’: short, easily learnable compositions that have been popular since the 1940s in Latin America.

*The Lord now sends us forth prepared to serve and give
 To make of all the earth a better place to live
 The angels are not sent into our world of pain
 To do what we were meant to do in Jesus' name;
 It falls to you and me and all in Christ made free.
 Help us, O Lord we pray, to do your will today.²⁸*

From the generation of composers that started writing liturgical songs beginning in the 1990s, we must note the work of Pedro Jiménez, Lysbeth Riera, Amós López, Alison Infante and Samuel Aguilera. This generation is characterized by new research into poetic and theological language and the use of Cuban and Latin American musical styles. They show through their creation the influence of the first generation of composers that preceded them, both in the context of the Cuban church and the ecumenical movement in Latin America. Below are a few examples.

To begin, “Gracias, Padre y Creador” (Thank you, God and Creator) is a very Cuban song written by Lysbeth Riera, from the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Cuba. It is a thanksgiving to God for not only the beauty of God’s creation, but also for the creative project that is produced in our own lives through God’s grace and love.

*Thank you, Father and Creator of the shack and cane,
 of the colour that appears when the sun brings its light.
 And on the hilltop the wind whistles, laughs, and cries out.*

*Thank you, Father and Creator when the happy rooster sings,
 announcing, with his soul, that in you we have life.
 In you, peace and joy, in you the bliss of forgiveness.*

*Our God, thank you, forever, Lord of the flowers,
of the green savanna and of our hearts.
Thank you for the beauty you've made in my Cuba,
land of sweet beauty, the mockingbird, and of the palm tree.
With clave, bongos and maracas, with a tres and my guitar,
Let's sing an alleluya, alleluya, alleluya.*²⁹

In the next example, "Confession" (*Confesión*), Pedro Jiménez gives us an everyday prayer that expresses, in poetic, candid language, a new perspective on personal life in light of the ethical rigor of the gospel. Now a little more meditative and measured, the *guajira* rhythm again is a perfect channel to communicate an experiential theology that highlights the unbreakable bond between practical custom and faith.

*Lord, forgive our need.
Forgive, the searching of your people, Lord.*

*For the smile she was kept inside lips yesterday.
For the encouraging word that never got to my mouth.
For not offering a look to encourage to the disoriented.
For snuffing out the hope of a tired soul. For each hand that daily does not help the
neighbour*³⁰.

In the spirit of Psalm 133, the joy of coming together as a community to celebrate hope and faith in God continues to inspire new musical pieces. Amós López' "To Praise the Lord" (*Para adorar al Señor*) affirms that liturgical celebration is not only a joyful, intimate experience, but that it also expresses the church's identity and vocation as God's people. The *guaracha* is a lively contagious genre that helps us feel and share this essential aspect of faith.

/We've Come Together to Praise the Lord/

*Sharing friendship (to praise the Lord).
Celebrating unity (to praise the Lord).
Enjoying communion (to praise the Lord).
The day has broken (to praise the Lord).*

*We are people in prayer (to praise the Lord).
In sincerity and vocation (to praise the Lord).
The hug I give you (to praise the Lord).
Is my offering of love (to praise the Lord)*³¹.

In a similar spirit of the joy of community faith celebration, the song "Let's make a song" (*Hagamos una canción*) by Alison Infante invites us to live in fraternal Christianity as a sign of hope and inspiration to serve those most in need. Songs like this one inspire and promote the diaconal mission of the church in times of crisis and uncertainty.

*Let's make a song that fills us with joy,
let its beautiful melody spring up from the heart
and tell of the joy and blessing the new day brings,
and invite us to celebrate in harmony together.*

*Brother, let us sing this song.
Let us join hands as one today.
Brother let us sing this song.
Open your arms to a better world.*

*Let us make a song that fills us with hope,
let the heat of that praise keep the naked warm,
pour into us all the love for the one who in need
to whom you promised bread and to always be at their side.*

*Let us make a song to make life spring up.
 God, who invites us in, will give blessings.
 Those who plant seeds with love, hand in hand.
 the seed that will be born in the wake of the plough.³²*

Samuel Aguilera wrote his “Pilgrim Family” (*Familia Peregrina*) to express the church’s mission through concrete gestures of love and compassion and become a song of hope. In this case, the ballad genre is touching and catchy and helps strengthen faith that better times are ahead.

*A pilgrim family with a mission.
 Traveling sister of joy and pain.
 Yelling full-voiced the hope of new conversion.
 Your church is an outreached hand.*

*It’s senseless, without committed action
 To practice love from your core.
 Creation is so diverse
 Because we are a shared house.*

*United in Christ, the path leading to God,
 Like salt that, when it dissolves adds flavour.
 Like nourishing bread and refreshing water
 We are people who strengthen the journey.*

*With love from the Father uniting us.
 With martyr’s wounds like the Son.
 Reborn in the body that dies and lives again
 In the holy power from the Spirit.*

Finally, we want to share two songs from the youngest generation of Cuban Christian composers.

Day Broke

*Day broke and the tomb was empty.
 Day broke and you weren’t behind the rock.
 You told three women to give us your word.
 You stood there, among the dead.*

*The sky opened and hope came with the light.
 Day broke and you are the king of salvation.
 Your arrival was announced on holy lips.
 The “for ever” of your love awoke.*

*Give us strength to insist on your teachings.
 In your words let us live our faith.
 Let nothing quiet our joy.
 If we practice love well, we are resurrected.*

*Resurrecting is living in confidence today.
 Knowing there’s a mission is resurrecting.
 More than “saying” it is “doing” that shakes the palm trees.
 Without tire, declaring that the Saviour lives today.³³*

Come to the Table

*Come to the table, the meeting place
Where the family is together today
To bring and also receive
The bread and wine Jesus gives us.*

*It is beautiful to have a place
Where we can all get together.
To sow equity and peace.
We feel it as we break the bread.*

*Today we unite as living people.
You and I are born from different fountains.
There is one mission, one meaning.
We are building the reign of love.*

*And in leaving we bring to our community
The good news that hope brings,
Broad justice that frees,
A tender smile that teaches love
And the bread and wine that Jesus gives us.³⁴*

Like the previous examples, these songs use Cuban musical forms and simple language to express a grassroots theology of hope, justice, and unity.

To summarize, the period from the decade of the 1990s until now has been characterized by (1) a noted increase in the church's artistic potential, which coincides with a national religious awakening along with more cultural professionals present in congregations; (2) a greater liturgical exchange between churches in ecumenical workshops, celebrations, and diverse artistic festivals; and (3) a greater reach in liturgical training for church leaders.

Despite these exciting threads in the growth of Cuban cultural and contextual liturgical music since the 1990s, there are also some more recent trends in a different direction. When it comes to cultural and historical identity, some newer projects and creations lack originality in their form and content. There is also a notable absence of ethical, theological, social, and even ecumenical themes that could encourage a prophetic, unifying message of faith and life. Two of the factors that foster this lack of originality and identity in musical liturgical creation are mimetic attitudes that search for renewal by importing foreign Christian musical productions (that have an undeniable influence on the music industry and social media), and the growth of fundamentalist theologies, specifically in Evangelical church settings.

5. Final Thoughts

We know that this panoramic path, taken by some of the most well-known authors from the last few decades in the fields of musical liturgical creation in Protestant Cuba, shows how this collection of works expresses at least some of the tendencies that we have identified above: reference to the setting (social, cultural, ecological), the proposal of a theology more in line with lived experience, and the reflection of an ecumenical spirituality that promotes Christian unity and carrying out the mission.

When these songs speak of the "God of the poor", of a God who is the creator of everything beautiful in Cuba, and a God who calls them to build a fraternal world with him, they propose a theology that not only comes from a specific lived experience, but that also invites churches to participate in socially transformative processes. This vision, to seek "the full liberative justice", presents the new theological language that has been woven throughout Latin America and the Caribbean in the last decades.

A classic theological statement such as the resurrection is read anew here when it is understood as "love well exercised". We also find eco-theological and ecumenical implications in statements like creation is a "shared house". Finally, there are ecclesiological implications

in the idea that the church is a “meaningful and vocational” people, a collaborator in God’s worldwide mission.

Bearing in mind that for this work, we are analyzing liturgical musical creation in some Cuban Protestant churches, I think it is worth bearing in mind three principles when thinking about a musical composition, not only as a piece of art that can contribute to national culture, but also as a liturgical piece that enriches and refreshes congregational singing.

From a Protestant point of view, the first principle is that a piece should express our values and roots, along with aspects of our identity and history and all of this in discourse with the situation and context from which the song comes so that it can contribute to the task of reworking culture. The second is that a piece should be appropriate for church worship in song, in its musical characteristics and in its theological-liturgical message. Third, the song should express a distinctly Protestant identity, and here I refer to the heritage that the Reformation brought us in terms of the renewal of Christian worship. I will reaffirm it in these aspects:

Liturgical renewal is a natural consequence of theological renewal. A new way of feeling God, of reading the Bible and of being a church in the midst of a certain context entails a new liturgy that expresses those changes. One of the characteristics that we have emphasized in the analysis of recent liturgical music in our churches is the proposal of a theology based more on lived experience.

Liturgical renewal needs to be inspired by our cultural values: our music, our ways of speaking, our history, our creolization—*mestizaje*, our thoughts, and our ways of relating to one another and showing affection. Here, the musical works refer to the socio-cultural environment, which is another of the trends we have identified.

Liturgical renewal should push participation and inclusivity. Each age group and person has something to offer—their style, their gifts—so that each ceremony can be worship for the whole community (López 2005). A spirituality that promotes the unity of the church must take participation and inclusion into account.

When making liturgical music, a consideration of these elements is fundamental, not just because they are in tune with trends in Cuban Protestant hymnody in the period we have studied, but also because they refer to a common history and identity in a broader sense in evangelical churches. Each stage of musical liturgical creativity must show what is specifically novel and contextual without losing reference to its connection with a certain theological and ecclesiological heritage.

The challenge is to focus on our loyalty to our history, past and present. That is how liturgy will be essentially Christian and authentically Cuban.

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Notes

- ¹ Cf. Conference of Catholic Bishops of Cuba, *Cuba canta su fe*, Cantoral Nacional, Obra Nacional de la Buena Prensa, Mexico City, 1996.
- ² *World Council of Churches*. First Assembly (1948). Buenos Aires: La Aurora, pp. 12–13.
- ³ The presentations, works, liturgies, and songs shared in this meeting were published that same year by the Latin-American Biblical Seminary in the volume *Todas las voces*.
- ⁴ Priest in the Episcopal Church of Brazil. Poet, musician, writer, and professor. One of the main promoters of new liturgical music in Latin America. Was one of the editors of *Cantico Novo da Terra*, one of the first hymnals that gathers the new musical creations of the region. His texts propose the link needed between theology, society, and liturgical renewal.

- 5 Theologian, professor, and Puerto Rican pastor of the Church of Disciples of Christ. Has attended and advised various proceedings of the Latin-American ecumenical movement, especially the works of the Council of Latin-American Churches (CLAI).
- 6 Musician, choral conductor, and Methodist priest from Argentina. One of the most important contemporary protestant Latin American composers. An active participant in the regional and international ecumenical movement as facilitator of liturgical and musical experiences of renewal. Among many contributions, two that stand out are the editing of *Cancionero Abierto*, and the hymnbook *Canto y Fe en América Latina*.
- 7 The Argentinean *Misa Criolla* (Creole Mass), the *Misa Campesina* (Peasant's Mass), la Misa de la Tierra sin Males (The Mass of a Healthy Earth) (Brasil) and the Popular Salvadorean Mass are some of the most notable examples.
- 8 "I just wanted a Mass with country speak, in popular language, that was nature-oriented to honey, flowers, fruits, nicknames; basically, the Nicaraguan essence". Cf. Meneses, Vidaluz, "Interview with Carlos Mejía Godoy on the Nicaraguan Popular Mass and the Peasant's Mass" in *Xilotl. Revista Nicaragüense de Teología*, Managua, CIEETS, SBT y UPOLI, No. 22, Year 11, February 1999, pp. 71–91.
- 9 Published in the hymnal *Celebremos Juntos*, from the Biblical Latin American Seminary of Costa Rica in 1989.
- 10 In the introductory text of the songbook compiled at this founding meeting, they say that their main motivation is to "reflect the richness of Christian Latin American hymnody". This songbook has been compiled from previously published works since 1974 in Argentina, Brazil, Panama, Puerto Rico, Ecuador, Chile, Uruguay, Costa Rica, and Mexico. Cf. ed. Pablo Sosa, *Cancionero. Constituent Assembly of the Latin American Council of Churches*, Lima, 1982.
- 11 One event that marked and propelled the Network's work and their impact in Latin America and worldwide was the celebration of the Art and Liturgy Conference in Rio de Janeiro in February of 1993. Close to 80 people from 27 countries attended the meeting. "Latin American spirituality was debated and uncovered during the conference. Its context of fighting for life, dignity, and respect for cultural and social diversity on the continent". Cf. *Memoria del Seminario de Arte y Liturgia*, Rio de Janeiro, 15–28 February 1993.
- 12 "We want TEAR to be an instrument for the service of liturgical renewal in Brazilian and Latin American oikoumene. We intend to reach Christian communities, liturgical teams, and those who are dedicated to the cause of liturgical renewal. . . We want to contribute to the liturgical growth of our readers, encourage liturgical renewal experiences, share subsidies and liturgical songs, and offer information on events and resources of all kinds in the liturgical area". *TEAR—Liturgia em Revista*, Centro de Recursos Litúrgicos, Escuela Superior de Teología, Vol 1, No. 1, April 2000, p. 2.
- 13 Representatives of organizations that continued the work of US missionary groups also participated.
- 14 The statements, documents and presentations of this meeting were edited by Cuban Presbyterian Pastor Rafael Cepeda in a volume titled *La herencia misionera en Cuba* (Missionary Heritage in Cuba) published in 1986 for Department of Ecumenical Investigations (Departamento Ecueménico de Investigaciones (DEI) in Costa Rica.
- 15 Enculturation is the process by which Christian faith is embodied in the cultural values of a people in such a way that faith is expressed and lived in accordance with those values.
- 16 He was a member of the "Emmanuel" Baptist church in Ciego de Ávila and coordinator of the Cuban Council of Churches' Liturgical Renewal Program
- 17 Today, it is known as *Programa de Renovación Litúrgica* (Liturgical Renewal Program).
- 18 Today, it is known as *Consejo de Iglesias de Cuba* (Cuban Council of Churches).
- 19 This was followed by other national hymnals like *Cántale a Dios* (Centro Augusto Coto), *Cuba canta su fe* (Iglesia Católica), *Alabanza Cubana* (Convenciones Bautistas) y *Nuevo Himnario Evangélico Cubano* (Programa de Renovación Litúrgica del Consejo de Iglesias de Cuba).
- 20 Member of the "Los Pinos Nuevos" church in Santa Clara.
- 21 A group that became professional and contributed to the distribution of liturgical Cuban and Latin American repertory from those years.
- 22 The Kairos Centre for Art and Liturgy, founded in 1994, is an organization associated with the First Baptist Church of Matanzas. It has consistently maintained its work in promoting the creation of new musical pieces that are oriented to liturgy in the churches.
- 23 The disappearance of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of the socialist camp in Eastern Europe had significant impacts on the Cuban economy, largely based on its relations with that block of countries. This precipitated the "special period" in Cuba, a time of profound economic crisis that had repercussions in its social and political spheres, bringing with a reconfiguration of the Cuban socialist project.
- 24 Since then, the following groups have been working, to a greater or lesser extent: Arpa de David, Kerigma, Agua Viva, Vida en Abundancia, Gens Nova, Jehová Nissi, Shadai, Bios, Imagen; and most recently Vocal Monte Sión, Alabanza DC, la Peña Cristiana, Vida Nueva, Emanuel, and Joel Visión, among others.
- 25 Chorus and first verse of the song "Indigenización de la adoración". Cf. (Montoya 1986, p. 96).
- 26 First verse of the song "Celebremos y cantemos", from the Cuban Mass. Cf. López (2004).

- 27 Written by Yusín Pons and set to music by Kenia D. Lazo and Sergio D. Lazo. Cf. *Alabanza Cubana*, Asociación Convención Bautista de Cuba Occidental, Editorial La Buena Semilla, Colombia, 2005.
- 28 *Thuma Mina. Singing with our Partner Churches*. International Ecumenical Hymnbook, Association of Protestant Churches and Missions in Germany and Basel Mission, 1995. Translation: Gerhard Cartford, *Oramos Cantando We Pray in Song*, 2013.
- 29 Cf. López, Amós, editor, *Con todo el corazón. Nuevo Himnario Evangélico Cubano*.
- 30 See note 29 above.
- 31 *Worship booklet. VI General Assembly of the Latin American Council of Churches*, Havana, 22–26 May 2013, p. 66.
- 32 See note 29 above.
- 33 “Amaneció” is a song for Easter Sunday written by Glenda Martínez, from the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Cuba.
- 34 “Vamos a la mesa” is a song to celebrate Communion or Eucharist. It is by Abel Alejandro González, from the Fellowship of Baptist Churches in Cuba.

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