

## Article

# Publishing Privileges the Published: An Analysis of Gender, Class, and Race in the Hymnological Feedback Loop

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**Abstract:** Hymnal curation processes have for centuries maintained restrictive feedback loops: material that has been published elsewhere continues to be published, and new material—particularly when it offers something unique—is evaluated against the criteria of what has gone before. This results in hymnals that tend to over-represent the work of white male contributors from a Euro-American perspective and limits the amount of material by women, people of color, and contributors from around the world. Since the mid-to-late twentieth century, when some denominations have sought to diversify their worship music collections, change has come slowly. Contemporary hymnody and contemporary worship music are predominantly written by men, and additions of global song have relied on a narrow swath of scholars and publications. To understand some of the power imbalances embedded in church music publishing, we use *Voices Together*, the 2020 Mennonite hymnal for which we were committee members, as a case study. We explore how this new collection came to include only about 45 newly published songs out of the total of 749 songs, and we analyze statistics related to gender and global song. An intersectional approach allows us to examine how musical actors are marginalized in multiple ways, considering prejudice against class, race, and gender. Understanding how current collections are informed by previously published collections, and consequently how the demographics of contributors have shifted over time, explains how publishing privileges the published and offers insight needed to begin to rectify this problem.



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## 1. Introduction

In 2020, MennoMedia published *Voices Together*, the new denominational hymnal for Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA (*Voices Together* 2020). The process of compiling and editing this collection was facilitated by a 13-person committee, which included the present authors as well as other music scholars, musicians, pastors, theologians, and songwriters who spanned a 40-year age difference.<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of the process, the committee circulated surveys to Mennonite communities to learn about their “heart songs”—songs that are meaningful and beloved for a variety of reasons. The surveys revealed that the musical cultures across these two denominations included old and new styles from North America and around the world. Through these surveys and other research, the committee learned that more than 20 spoken languages are used in North American Mennonite worship, and far more than 20 musical languages are used and deeply valued. In compiling the collection, the committee sought both to preserve beloved old and new styles and to introduce new-to-Mennonite songs that would feed the musical and theological needs and desires of the denominations. In this article, we interrogate some of the forces guiding the collection-building processes as the committee sought to serve two diverse denominations and represent a worldwide Mennonite church. We are especially

interested in the curious circularity in congregational song repertoire created by a deep reliance on republication, along with some of its hidden causes and unintended effects.

In what follows, we explore often invisible aspects of musical inclusivity that are present well beyond the Mennonite church: barriers in hymnal publishing faced by composers and text writers based on gender, race/ethnicity, and geographic location. We believe that equity in the opportunities of musical creation is an ethical issue, described by Andrew McGraw as a commonly stated belief in “musical interaction as a diagram of an idealized society” (McGraw 2023, p. 11). We agree with McGraw’s caution that this statement can be reductive, such as by implying that equitable musical opportunity automatically reflects or creates an idealized society. Accordingly, in this article, we do not intend to argue that a just musical structure will necessarily create a just community. Instead, we make the more modest assertion that equitable opportunities to create music are an important foundation for just music-making. We are especially paying attention to the ethical dimensions of who is allowed (implicitly and explicitly) to write and publish music for congregational singing. We argue that song leaders and other gatekeepers—especially hymnal committees, collection editors, and publishers—should be aware of who participates in writing congregational song and who is most often published. We propose that the structures of hymnal publishing, as well as implicit values placed on traditional Western hymn writing<sup>2</sup>, unfairly benefit white male text authors and tune composers while discouraging other musicians from participating in enlivening the singing life of the Church.

This article contributes to larger discourses about diversity and justice in Christian congregational song. We analyze musical diversity in Mennonite hymnals with the assumption that diversity is valuable for Christian communities (for more on that topic, see Marti 2012; Van Opstal 2016; Whitla 2020). Our argument is related, though distinct, from analyses of how textual metaphors or choices of language represent or exclude people from worship experiences (see Budwey 2022; Johnson and Tice 2022; Graber 2020b; Procter-Smith 1990). This article is not a practical manual for how to introduce new songs or how to lead a community toward musical diversity—those important resources exist elsewhere (for example, Bell 2001; Weidler et al. 2017; The Hymn Society n.d.). Instead, we intend to expose some usually concealed or ignored statistics and patterns related to writers of Christian congregational music so that scholars and church musicians have a starting place for analyzing their own contexts. We join the conversation on congregational song that proposes transformation to patterns of worship, realizing that such changes can cause controversy and offense but agreeing with Becca Whitla that a deep and startling affront is needed to prompt us to reimagine how our congregational singing practices can be more liberating (Whitla 2020, p. 13).

To understand some of the opportunity imbalances embedded in church music publishing, we use the *Voices Together* hymnal as a case study. We examine how musical contributors are marginalized in multiple ways, considering prejudice against class and race (as they relate to values afforded to contemporary worship music and global music) in addition to gender. Understanding how current collections are informed by previously published collections—and consequently how the demographics of contributors have shifted over time—explains how publishing privileges the published and limits other voices and offers insight needed to begin to rectify this problem.<sup>3</sup> After a brief explanation of Mennonite music, we examine gender and global song statistics in *Voices Together*, considering how this representation has changed over time and what it tells us about musical value systems. We end with an analysis of the musical and cultural values that have restricted female and racialized contributors and, therefore, limited the musical diversity of North American hymnody.

### *Challenges in Expanding Musical Diversity in Mennonite Hymnals*

*Voices Together* was published to support English language congregational song in Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada, denominations that together include around 100,000 members in 2023.<sup>4</sup> Mennonites around the world claim a theological

history along with other Anabaptist groups that grew out of the Radical Reformation in Europe in the 16th century when they were persecuted for their belief in adult baptism and their commitment to pacifism. Today, Mennonite communities are growing, especially in Africa, Asia, and Latin America; two-thirds of present-day Mennonites live in those three regions. In 2022, membership in the Mennonite World Conference was made up of congregations from 59 countries, with a total of 1.45 million baptized believers ([About MWC n.d.](#)).

Despite this global identity, an understanding of “Mennonite music” in North America tends to be informed by European Mennonite traditions of four-part singing ([McCabe Juhnke 2018](#); [Dueck 2013](#)). Although hymn-singing is upheld as the most Mennonite musical activity in many contexts, concerted efforts have been made to expand shared understandings of Mennonite music. The songbooks for Mennonite World Conference gatherings, developed by Europeans or North Americans, demonstrate a broadening of the types of music valued as Mennonite music: for the first 50 years of gatherings (beginning in 1925 and occurring roughly once every six years), these songbooks only included music from the Euro–American canon. The first Mennonite World Conference meeting held outside Europe or North America was in Brazil in 1972, and that songbook also only included European/Euro–American music ([Previous Assemblies n.d.](#); [Boldt and Musselman 1972](#)). The first representation of global music was found in the 1978 collection for the gathering in Wichita, KS ([Hiebert and Wyse 1978](#)). Since then, Mennonite World Conference songbooks have all included songs from around the world. An in-depth exploration of what spurred changes to these songbooks is beyond the scope of this article. However, we note here that their contents directly affected the small but growing body of global song in North American Mennonite hymnals.

As Mennonite song leaders, we (still today) often hear praise for Mennonite music as a tradition of a capella four-part singing, yet we know that this style—both implicitly and explicitly associated with Western art music—is only one of many forms of Mennonite music. In North America alone, more than two dozen languages are used in Mennonite worship, and musical styles across Mennonite congregations are influenced by popular, folk, classical, jazz, and more ([Graber 2020a](#)). In developing a new hymnal for Mennonites in North America, the committee knew it would be important to represent this broad range of ways that Mennonites express their faith through music—and the scope of songwriters and theologians who help shape this expression—both in North America and around the world.

Although the *Voices Together* committee decided that the collection should be about half new material (that is, new to most Mennonites), in the end, it only included around 45 songs with text, tune, or both newly published. In contrast, the rest of the “new” material came from previously published sources.<sup>5</sup> Reusing around 50% of the material from previous collections is in line with how Mennonites (and, from anecdotal evidence, other denominations) have created hymnals in the past. The finished collection includes 759 songs, 467 (about 60%) of which have at least one component from a predecessor: *The Mennonite Hymnal* (1969), *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (1992), or the two supplements *Sing the Journey* (2005) and *Sing the Story* (2007).<sup>6</sup>

To source additional material for *Voices Together*, committee members screened single-author hymn collections, recently published hymnals of other denominations, music for choirs, global songbooks, and the Christian Copyright Licensing International Top 100 lists, among other sources. We also looked beyond published and recorded material by opening an online submissions portal where we received approximately 2200 submissions (most of which had never been published) and consulted groups on specific themes, like Spanish language resources, beloved songs from camps, and interfaith resources.<sup>7</sup> In the face of these efforts, the strikingly low number of 45 newly published songs is a testament to the power that prior publishing has in the cycle of hymnal collection construction.

As the committee screened other published collections, we became keenly aware of a lack of diversity in congregational song repertoire published in North America. Although

varieties abounded in the genre, style, musical difficulty, and a range of theological, topical, and poetic distinctives in textual content, we noticed that the *people* who have published congregational songs in North America are not so heterogeneous. The prevalence of white male hymn writers from earlier eras in North America and Europe was expected. However, we were somewhat surprised to find a similar composition of contributors to material published and recorded in recent decades. By and large, contemporary worship music and contemporary hymnody published in North America continues to be written by white men, and global song relies on a narrow swath of scholars and publications (Lim 2016; Glynias Moore 2018). The committee's desire to counteract that homogeneity stemmed from two goals for the *Voices Together* collection: (1) to represent the diversity of Mennonite people and their singing traditions throughout history and around the world and (2) to resource North American English-speaking Mennonites to be able to sing their connections to that diversity. Attending to this diversity at the levels of musical and textual content is critical. However, we propose here that structural issues such as gender and race of composers and text writers are another important issue of equity that is often ignored.

Paying attention to structural issues includes attending to questions of who is published and which songs are chosen to be sung in worship. Even when resources from more diverse contributors and contexts are available, the present authors have observed many communities that continue to sing familiar songs. For Mennonite communities, the realities of forced migration, religious discrimination, and diasporic identity have meant that singing older heart songs has served as cultural preservation and connection with an increasingly distant heritage. However, we suggest that the desire for songs that connect to this European ethnic heritage should be balanced by caring for present-day ethnic diversity in Mennonite communities. Although there is nothing wrong with singing well-known songs, the over-reliance on the comfortable and already-known can lead to a false sense that conventional and recognizable equates to quality and virtue (we return to this later through a discussion of implicit bias and Western art music superiority). When communities and hymnal committees allow the publishing feedback loop to grow through an overemphasis on tradition, they can be oblivious to the need and benefits of a fuller range of congregational song.

## 2. Gender Representation in *Voices Together*

As we will explore in this section, our case study shows that hymns published in Mennonite collections are predominantly written by white men. This prevalence parallels trends in other published song collections and points to the enduring legacies of unequal gendered expectations. In the past, in Mennonite communities and beyond, men were the public leaders in congregations (preachers, song leaders, church administrators, and more). Women's contributions overall, and especially in worship, were limited to a few possible roles, such as hymn text writers, and even there, they were in the minority (for more on women's leadership in the Mennonite church, see Albrecht and Stephens 2020; Penner 2019; Wenger 2021).

In Mennonite contexts today, women are vastly underrepresented in the domain of congregational song writing, even as they can be ordained, serve in all levels of denominational leadership, and make up a significant portion of church music programs. In fact, women are *overrepresented* as writers of spoken worship resources included in *Voices Together*, which led Sarah Johnson (2022) to analyze the value placed on spoken worship leading in Mennonite contexts.<sup>8</sup> She argues that in the Mennonite church, spoken worship leading has become "women's work". This often concealed and emotional labor is rarely compensated either through public recognition or financial payment and has been devalued as a contribution to worship leadership. We contrast that here to the more highly valued forms of leadership, including congregational song composition. Although women are expected and welcomed into (less valued) spoken worship leading roles, long histories of exclusion from (more highly valued) songwriting roles are still evident in our hymnals.

It was only several years into the process of compiling *Voices Together* that the committee began to seriously consider the balance of various aspects of the collection, including the balance of contributors' gender.<sup>9</sup> We found ourselves looking at very little gender diversity, with incredibly low percentages of female contributors and only one self-identified genderqueer contributor. Although an analysis of representation beyond the gender binary is a vital consideration, the present article focuses on the contents of *Voices Together*, which was written primarily by men and women. We had naively thought that in today's cultural climate—where women are ordained and make up a significant portion of church and music leadership, and because we had hosted an open submissions process, we should have naturally had a more equitable gender balance.

However, hymnal collection-building processes tend to work against gender diversity since hymns have historically been written predominantly by men. With 50% or higher carryover from previous hymnals in a succession dating back over a century, *Voices Together* would have needed to have almost every one of its new songs written by women to add up to equal contribution. Furthermore, each of the published collections the committee was examining—recent hymnals, CCLI lists, global songbooks, etc.—were steeped in the same issue we were facing: they were pulling their material from a homogenous group with low representation of women, creating a feedback loop like those we encounter in contexts such as the CCLI Top 100, country music awards, and scholarly citation practices (Loepp Thiessen 2022; Watson 2020; Ahmed 2014; Smith 2017). With the low representation of women both in existing Mennonite collections and in the main sources for new material, we learned that it would be a significant amount of work to increase the representation of women in *Voices Together*.

In addition to the logistics of publishing practices and the history of gendered roles, Western systems of musical value affect selection processes by imposing frameworks for what congregational song ought to sound like. As authors, we identify that too often in our *Voices Together* screening process, as in broader Western musical practice, our committee conflated an aesthetic conformity to Western musical standards with an assumption about inherent quality. Although congregants (and hymnal committee members) may have individual aesthetic preferences, those who have sung from hymnals all their lives are able to learn a new congregational song easily when it conforms to expected phrase lengths, rhythms, harmonies, and voice leading. This feeling of familiarity can lead to the interpretation that a song is well-written for worship. However, this perception of high compositional quality is not inherent but is rather shaped by our musical expectations. This familiarity emerges from centuries of highly educated European and European-American people—usually men—writing, studying, and disseminating music.<sup>10</sup> This homogenous history translates to strict (though often unspoken) ideas about genre and musical rules and has controlled expectations about standardization, predictability, and uniformity. This circularity reinforces the assumption that Western art music is superior and is one facet of what Whitla describes as *musicocoloniality*, a process that has placed hymnody (especially from the Victorian era) on a pedestal above other forms of music for worship (Whitla 2020, p. 112).

Furthermore, we can recognize a history of gendering hymnody and Western art music more generally as masculine since at least the nineteenth century, demonstrated in references to music's "power" and to composers as "great masters" (Whitla 2020, pp. 113–14; McClary 1991). Even as far back as the middle ages, women hymn writers' eventual success was commended as an overcoming of their gender and an act of exhibiting masculine characteristics (Wootton 2010, p. 30). Marcia Citron's landmark (Citron 1993) study on the lack of female composers in the Western art music canon identifies societal expectations that often subtly kept women from being recognized as composers. For example, large works were valued over shorter pieces of music written for smaller ensembles, and women were encouraged toward the latter genres (if encouraged at all). Western culture itself has come to be associated with masculine traits; in the history of colonization, Western popular and scholarly writings portrayed other cultures as less mature, more in tune with body,

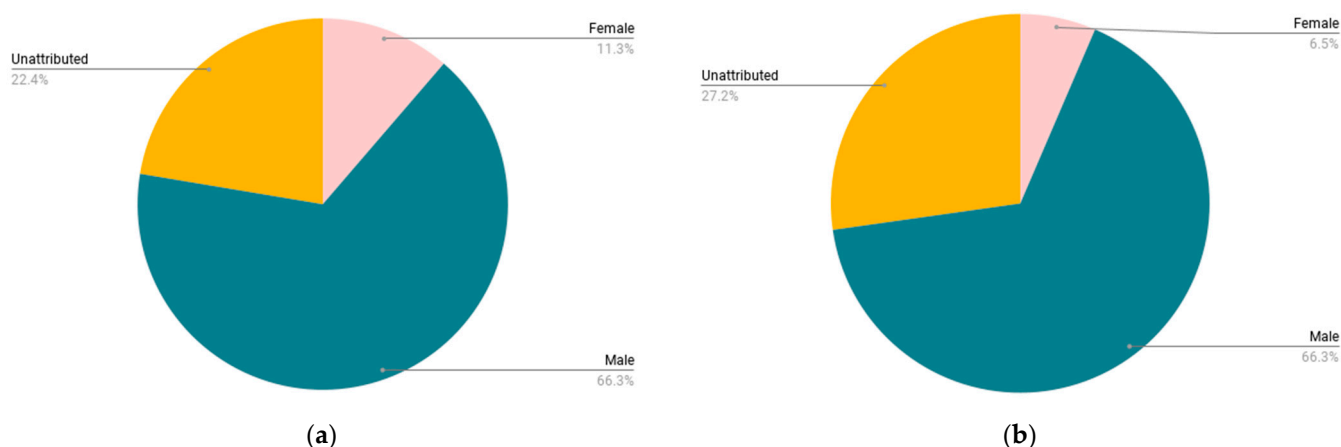


nature, and emotion—all elements associated with femininity (for more, see [Bederman 1995](#)). Or, as Whitla notes of Victorian England, discourse denigrating some songs as overly sentimental or emotional “belies a snobbery against popular music styles and in favor of serious, rugged, majestic, ‘dignified’ tunes . . . It also exposes a classist and gendered bias against stereotypically feminine qualities of the more popular styles and toward the more masculinist approaches of later composers” ([Whitla 2020](#), p. 110). Other scholars have analyzed many aspects of gender and power in music, including studies on music education, musical instruments, and class and propriety ([Green 1997](#); [Doubleday 2008](#); [Bull 2019](#)). They have found that a variety of explicit and implicit messages tell women how they are expected to participate in music. Absence is a powerful message in this sense: when women do not see themselves in musical performances and publications, they are led to believe they do not belong in those worlds.

#### *Increasing the Representation of Women Composers in Voices Together*

To begin to understand the publishing feedback loop and these related biases, we turn now to a comparison of statistics of contributors’ gender in *Voices Together* and its predecessor, *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, and consider their relationship to changing roles of women in recent congregational music (see [Hadden Hobbs 1997](#); [Wootton 2010](#); [Phillips 2018](#)). We also explore expectations in musical composition and examine how women have been excluded from that historiography and have, therefore, been constrained in their roles as composers. We expand upon the realization that the *Voices Together* process, like many other hymnal processes, privileged already-published material (mostly by white men) despite the committee’s egalitarian intentions. We end this section with an exploration of how women’s voices can strengthen corporate worship and provide recommendations for encouraging diverse hymn writers based on our experiences as committee members working with newly written material.

When the committee began considering our aspirations for gender representation in *Voices Together*, it became clear that statistics on the state of gender representation in existing collections would be important. Committee members Anneli Loepp Thiessen and Cynthia Neufeld Smith did a variety of gender-based analyses of prior Mennonite collections to assess where we were coming from and to help us consider what realistic goals for our collection could be. Figure 1 shows the statistics related to the gender of text writers and tune composers in the most recent full-sized predecessor, *Hymnal: A Worship Book*:



**Figure 1.** (a) Percentage of female, male, and unattributed text writers in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. (b) Percentage of female, male, and unattributed tune writers in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*.

Loepp Thiessen and Neufeld Smith discovered that in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (1992), 11.3% of text writers were women, 66.3% were men, and 22.4% were unattributed. The number of female tune writers was even lower: 6.5% of tune writers in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* were women, 66.3% were men, and 27.2% were unattributed.<sup>11</sup>

The consistently higher representation of women as text writers over tune writers can be traced to the history of women writing hymn texts as a devotional practice. Limited in their ability to preach or speak publicly about their faith, women in the 19th and early 20th centuries turned to text writing as a form of witness. June Hadden Hobbs notes that “evangelical women usually could articulate and interpret spiritual experience only in print, a mode inferior to oral expression in the evangelical community,” and that hymn writing “seems to have been an almost secretive activity to give form to religious experience” (Hadden Hobbs 1997, p. 27). These “secretive” practices contributed to the practice of women writing texts, even when they were not empowered to write tunes. Unfortunately, even success as text writers faded for women during the “hymn explosion” of the 1950s. Janet Wootton (2010) notes that during this period, men found a new artistic voice as hymn writers, while women’s contributions dropped from around 25–30% of a typical collection in the 19th century to 10% or even 1% in the books of the hymn explosion during the mid-to-late 20th century. The representation of women text and tune writers in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* aligns with this reduction of women’s voices.

The numbers of women contributors from the 1992 Mennonite collection are higher than what we observed in some of our ecumenical counterparts, but they are not where we as committee members imagined the Church should be today (for example, see [Discipleship Ministries n.d.](#), “Hymns by Women” for the brief list of women contributors in the Methodist denominational hymnal and supplements). As the *Voices Together* collection came into focus in the first few years of our process, we saw that the number of female contributors had increased only slightly. To begin to rectify this imbalance, a small group of women committee members began to revisit material we had already screened to see if there were items by women that had been wrongfully passed over. We mean no personal slight in our observation that while the men on the committee were generally supportive, it was the women who put time and effort into dislodging the deep structural inequities in this way. Loepp Thiessen searched back through a de-anonymized submissions portal, knowing that this body of work was largely unpublished and, therefore, could include material that seemed unpolished or even unfinished. Since our first pass-through had been anonymized, we had not been able to attend to the gender of the contributor. Now, with full demographic information visible, we were able to see whether contributions by women warranted a second look. She gave a list of songs to several other committee members (including Graber) to re-screen with a focus on material that could be mentored toward inclusion. We knew that amateur Mennonite songwriters (and those from the broader Anabaptist community) would have submitted material there, and this population would likely be motivated to work with us to have their submissions published in the denominational collection. We wanted to make sure that material written by Anabaptist and other women had an equitable opportunity to be considered. Indeed, our unofficial subcommittee found several exceptional pieces that were peer-edited into inclusion in the collection.

Although there are legitimate reasons that songs may be unsuitable for a congregational worship collection (for a variety of musical, textual, or theological reasons), we discovered that a significant number of contributions by women had instead been passed over because of our normative assumptions—or implicit biases—about what constitutes “good” musical composition.<sup>12</sup> Often, committee evaluators avoided songs that seemed incomplete or deficient in comparison to expected norms of congregational song writing. However, when we discussed these items with contributors and explored possible revisions (an advantage that previously published material already had), we found that many “issues” were easily resolved.<sup>13</sup> In some instances, the committee asked contributors to edit pieces written for specific contexts to fit weekly corporate worship patterns more easily. Songs with “irregularities”, such as changing meters or verses that did not conform to poetic meter, were revised in consultation with the contributors—sometimes, the writers agreed that an element needed revision, and other times, we learned that the “deviations”

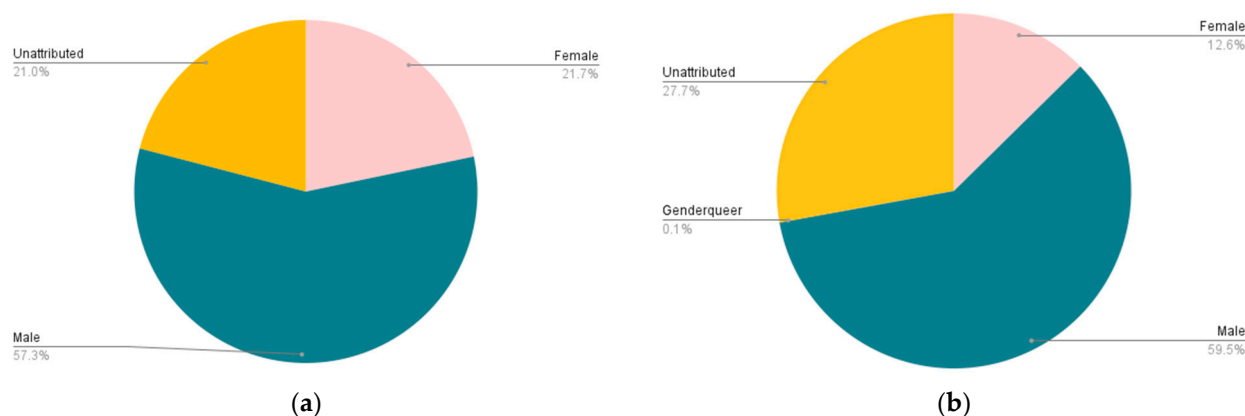
were intentional. Through such conversations, we were able to negotiate the boundaries of what congregational song ought to be.

To further amplify the voices of historical and contemporary women contributors to congregational songs, this small group of committee members also put effort into revising and inviting further submissions. In one case, Graber created an adaptation of a composition by Kassia, an eighth-century Byzantine-Greek composer and hymnographer who wrote dozens of liturgical poems and compositions. That arrangement, “God, Grant Us Mercy” (VT 142), features a repeated congregational refrain and verses intended to be sung by a soloist. To elevate the voices of historical Anabaptist women, the editorial committee put out a call for new submissions based on 16th-century texts. They invited Mennonite text writer Susan Naus Dengler to write a hymn text based on the writings of Annalein von Freiburg, a 16th-century Anabaptist martyr. Loepp Thiessen wrote an accessible tune and keyboard accompaniment for this rich text, and it became “Everlasting God, on You I Call” (VT 630).<sup>14</sup> The song “Kombo Na Yesu” (VT 648), written by Anabaptist songwriter Stockwell Massamba, needed to be transcribed and slightly shortened to be included in a congregational collection. Massamba taught the Lingala song to committee members when they visited her church in Los Angeles and worked with the *Voices Together* text committee (Adam Tice and Graber) to produce an English translation. These examples represent valued compositions, some of which have become beloved but which took both collaboration and refinement to be included.

With these experiences in mind, we suggest a multi-pronged approach to engaging the work of contemporary women composers in similar projects in the future:

- Sometimes, an inexperienced composer is working toward standard Western compositional practices. If that is the case, they should be given the editorial suggestions needed to strengthen their compositions to align with the conventions to which they aspire.
- Other times, inexperienced composers may contribute a song with one element stronger than the others. In such cases, committees should work with contributors to use the most effective elements, for example, by including their tune paired with a separate text or letting a chorus stand alone.
- In yet other cases, a woman or other underrepresented contributor may be intentionally developing a non-standard compositional style. That also should be valued, encouraged, and edited toward the contributor’s goals.

Through dedicated work by the committee, we were able to increase the number of women hymn writers in the final product to roughly double what they were in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, as presented in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** (a) Percentage of female, male, and unattributed text writers in *Voices Together*. (b) Percentage of female, male, and unattributed tune writers in *Voices Together*.



In *Voices Together*, 21.7% of the text writers are women, 57.3% are men, and 21% are unattributed. *Voices Together* has 12.6% of tune writers as women, 59.5% are men, 27.7% are unattributed, and 0.1% are genderqueer (which amounts to one hymn).

Why does it matter that publishers and communities include women's compositional voices in their congregational song repertoire? In addition to a justice-oriented desire for equality, liturgical scholar Marjorie Proctor-Smith notes that "Women bring women's experiences of struggle and survival in a patriarchal church and culture to the task" (Proctor-Smith 1990, p. 117). Although she is specifically referring to the act of preaching, Proctor-Smith's suggestion surely applies to women's musical contributions. Women's experiences provide a unique and vitally important perspective on the Scriptures, the Church, and the world. Although not every song by a woman is (or should be) about "women's issues", they must be given the opportunity if we ever hope to hear that viewpoint. Similarly, contemporary worship songwriter Krissy Nordhoff suggests that: "Having a male and female in the same song—or diversity through other combinations of perspectives—gives us a clearer picture of God's view" (Nordhoff 2020, p. 138). Amplifying women's voices as part of a commitment to listening to all of God's people is a theological cause, as it more accurately represents the breadth of God's vision for the world.

Women's compositional voices also carry an artistic importance. In an article on women in art music in *The Guardian*, Susanna Eastburn writes: "If it's agreed that talent is not more prevalent in one gender than another, then this falling away of women is a terrible waste and loss of unique musical voices" (Eastburn 2017). In other words, we need female composers because to carry on without them would be a profound loss of talent. Furthermore, the lack of female names in a hymnal can contribute to a belief among women that they are not meant to be there. When girls and women cannot imagine themselves as published composers, they tend not to aspire to be published composers, another aspect of the feedback loop.

To build equitable opportunities for a diversity of composers, we must recognize implicit bias in our processes of collection building and publishing. The centuries-old impulse to identify music with masculine traits affects hymnal users' expectations about what music ought to be included. These expectations for congregational song have been set by a canon of highly refined contributions, largely written by men, which set the standard for what people think hymnal content should sound like. When congregants grow up with this type of music, they can predict the musical movement of a new song written in the same style—it seems easy, it feels "congregational" and familiar. Because of this exclusion, and because of the sonic expectations, many women's submissions were not at the perceived standard that was expected for a hymnal. When publishers and collection builders seek to identify implicit bias, however, they can work to push back against these systems of musical value.

### 3. Global Song and Gender Representation in *Voices Together*

Issues of gender become (unsurprisingly) more complicated when we look at repertoires written by people of color and people from around the world. In this section, we analyze statistics related to gender and global song and consider how implicit musical biases affected these contents in *Voices Together*. Systems of musical value that place high regard on art music have tended not only to elevate white European men as "great masters" but also to uphold their music as a marker of cultivation, class, and prestige (see Bull 2019). When white North American church musicians encounter global song that does not fit their existing value systems, they tend to emphasize a different set of values that connects a song's sound to another context or community. For instance, an African song will be more highly valued when it *sounds* "African". Through our analysis of *Voices Together* data, we found that valuing a song for these connections or contexts elevates a certain type of composer: songs that sound "African" are more often older "traditional" or "folk" songs that are unattributed, and thus, *Voices Together* intercultural songs are predominantly written not by men but by unattributed contributors. These opposing musical values placed

on global song establish additional conceptual burdens for composers outside of North America and Europe, as well as for African-American and Indigenous North American composers; they tend to be overlooked if they write in any style other than the traditional heritage of their geographical area.

The relationship of “global song” to the race of contributors is complicated. The *Voices Together* committee’s robust process for considering contributions by women was not paralleled when it came to the contributions of people of color, and, therefore, of course, women of color. The committee did not specifically tend to songs written by women of color the same way we addressed songs written by women, and the reliance on our default sources (published collections of traditional Western hymns) meant that our efforts primarily increased the number of white female contributors. We did not create a mechanism to track the racial/ethnic identity of contributors from our roughly 2200 submissions in the online portal, so we only know from unsystematic observations (based on the committee personally knowing many contributors) that very few submissions were written by people of color. Unlike our gender process, we did not have concrete data on the racial diversity of contributors (separate from a person’s geographical origin) in previous Mennonite collections or in *Voices Together* to serve as a point of comparison. Although *Voices Together* and previous committees’ process did include a deliberate effort to represent songs from around the world, the inclusion of global music is certainly not equivalent to racial diversity and equity in the balance of composers and text writers. Racialized people around the world write in Western traditions, and white Euro-North American people arrange global songs and compose in non-Western styles, blurring these lines. In this section, we focus on global song not to comment on these various intersecting identity markers but to interrogate overarching systems of musical power that unequally distribute musical value.

The definitions and terminology for global music are notoriously contentious and convoluted, and they have implications for how songs are received, published, and republished. Phrases like “world music” and “global song” usually refer to genres other than “Western art music”, which sets up an opposition between us and them.<sup>15</sup> That is, in Christian circles, unmarked terms like “hymn”, and “church music” tend to refer to European and Euro-American styles, while non-Western styles are marked and set apart. During the *Voices Together* process, we eventually settled on the term “intercultural worship” to describe songs and resources from diverse traditions to emphasize connections rather than oppositions. We understood the inadequacy of the phrase: no one song can be “intercultural” on its own; it is only intercultural if it is sung by someone from outside its tradition of origin, and if singers do not know or acknowledge a song’s origin, its intercultural identity is lost.<sup>16</sup> However, we used the term “intercultural worship” with the knowledge that the *Voices Together* collection would primarily be used by white, English-speaking North American Mennonites and other Christians; therefore, “intercultural” includes songs from traditions outside North America and Western Europe, songs from within North America (especially by Black and Indigenous peoples), and translations of Euro/North American songs into languages other than English.<sup>17</sup> We, the authors, continue to use this term here to situate ourselves as white English-speaking North American people. To us, African American, Indigenous, Greek, Latin, and many more cultures are beyond our personal experiences and must be approached with care. We aspire to continue the committee’s goals of inclusion and respect regarding this music.

The *Voices Together* committee sought to build on previous Mennonite collections’ attention to intercultural worship—global song and diverse music from North America—as one way to represent the diversity of Mennonite people and musical practices in worship. North American Mennonites were increasingly exposed to global song in the mid-to-late 20th century, as demonstrated by the growing numbers included in Mennonite World Conference songbooks (discussed above) and denominational hymnals. The 1969 *Mennonite Hymnal* was the first denominational collection to include global songs, with fewer than 10 out of a total of 653 songs. *Voices Together* committee member Cynthia Neufeld Smith

collected data on the three more recent Mennonite collections and found that 23 years later, *Hymnal: A Worship Book* included about 60 global songs out of 658 total. The following two supplements, *Sing the Journey* (2005) and *Sing the Story* (2007), have the highest percentage of global songs, with 31 out of 118 and 36 out of 124 songs, respectively. These numbers show a clear increase in percentages of global songs in denominational collections over the decades from the 1960s to the 2000s. Austin McCabe Juhnke (2018) provides an insightful analysis of this process, including an examination of ethnomusicologist Mary Oyer's involvement in the 1969 hymnal process and as music planner for the 1971 Mennonite Board of Mission Conference, and he problematizes the ongoing framing of "Mennonite music" as white European/Euro-North American. He also articulates how these publications and other musical activities (such as white Mennonite reception of Latino and African American Mennonite choirs) continued to position non-Western music as foreign rather than accepting and celebrating North American Mennonite diversity (McCabe Juhnke 2019).

The *Voices Together* Intercultural Worship Committee (chaired by Graber) worked to represent the diversity of Christian traditions around the world by compiling a repertoire of songs from every populated continent. To begin to resist stereotypes about global traditions (i.e., how each geographical area ought to sound), we sought to represent a diversity of traditional and contemporary musical styles, and we embraced hybrid traditions that have often been discounted as "inauthentic" in the past. The committee screened collections of global songs published in North America and beyond, and because we already understood some of the gaps in these sources, we also created a consultative process rooted in conversation with groups and individuals to facilitate dialogue about specific selections and broader questions of representation.<sup>18</sup> These efforts undertaken by the committee contributed to our goal of incorporating material that the communities of origin were actually singing. We intentionally included North American Mennonite groups who worship in languages other than English in these processes to recognize the diversity inherent to Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada. Our committee also sought to include material that represented the diversity of styles from communities around the world, which included traditional Western four-part hymns, contemporary worship music, folk songs, and hybrids of each of those categories. Still, we can see that while *Voices Together* includes some contemporary and fusion styles,<sup>19</sup> statistics around the gender of contributors show influence from implicit musical bias that tends to value "traditional"-sounding music from many regions.

#### *The Trouble with Equating "Global Song" and "Traditional Music"*

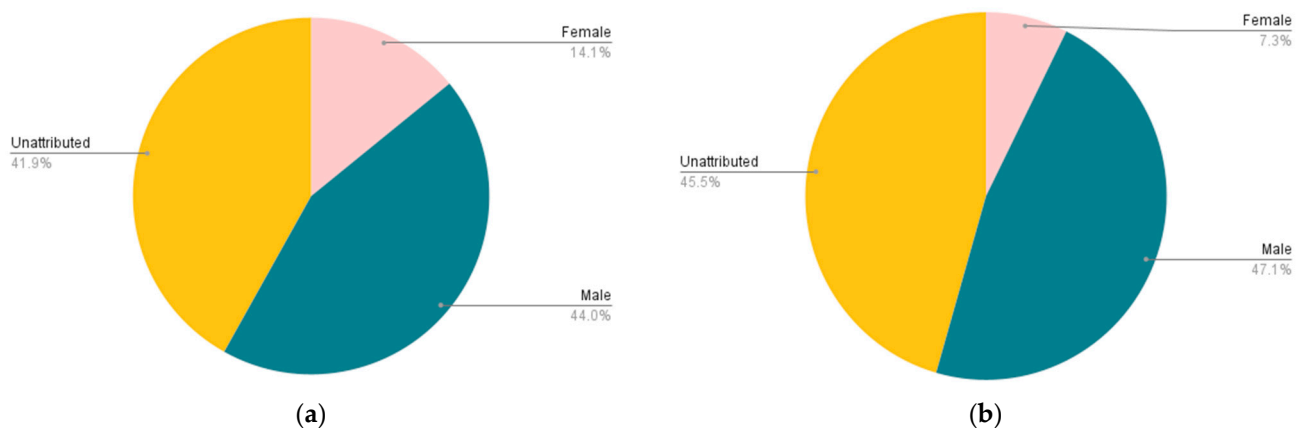
To further examine intersections of race, geographical origin, and gender, in this section, we analyze *Voices Together* "intercultural worship" songs in two different ways. First, we track the male, female, and unattributed contributors to three main categories used during the *Voices Together* collection-building process:

- Non-English songs in *Voices Together*, including songs originally written in languages other than English, as well as songs with added translations.<sup>20</sup> This list includes all non-English languages, including European languages like French, German, and Latin.
- Songs identified as important to African American traditions by our consultant group. This list includes not only songs by African American composers (in a variety of styles), but also several written by white Americans and Europeans.<sup>21</sup>
- Songs with connections to Indigenous communities. This includes songs written or received by Indigenous people, one song written by white people in collaboration with Indigenous people, and one song with a Navajo translation.<sup>22</sup>

Some songs in the first category (non-English) arise from Euro/American contexts and fit squarely in those musical traditions. However, we included this category in conversations during the *Voices Together* collection process because the multiple languages allow for intercultural worship to take place (for example, songs written by the Taizé community in France, which feature translations in many languages). This categorization also fostered

discussions about cultural differences within Euro–American Mennonite denominations and placed German-speaking communities in the same realm as immigrants from Africa, Asia, and Latin America (for more on the latter, see [Hinojosa 2014](#)). Later in this article, we remove this category to better examine the authorship and musical expectations of songs that emerged from outside of Europe or North America.

*Voices Together* includes 190 intercultural songs that fall into one or more of the overlapping categories above. When we recorded the gender of contributors (text and tune) of these intercultural songs and compared these data with the complete collection, we found that the striking difference was the number of unattributed songs. Specifically, the percentage of unattributed songs in the full collection (Figure 2, page 9) was much lower than the percentage of unattributed songs among intercultural songs (Figure 3, below), and far more intercultural songs were unattributed than were written by female contributors:



**Figure 3.** (a) Percentage of female, male, and unattributed text writers from intercultural contexts in *Voices Together* (190 songs). (b) Percentage of female, male, and unattributed tune writers from intercultural contexts in *Voices Together* (190 songs).

Of the text writers for intercultural songs in *Voices Together*, 14.1% were women, 44% were men, and 41.9% were unattributed. Of tune writers, 7.3% were women, 47.1% were men, and 45.5% were unattributed.

In *Voices Together*, unattributed texts and tunes are typically ascribed as “traditional;” for example, the music of “Jesus A, Nahetotaetanome (Jesus Lord, How Joyful)” (VT 8) is ascribed as “Plains Indian traditional (USA)”. Exceptions to this pattern include references to specific practices or genres (such as “African American spiritual”, “American folk hymn”, or “Greek liturgy”). Graber and project director Bradley Kauffman had several conversations about these terms and possible alternatives such as “folk”, “anonymous”, “unknown”, or simply “unattributed”. We recognized that each term was vague in its own way and that each has a particular history of usage that sometimes adds unintended implications.<sup>23</sup> With reservations, we settled on “traditional” (with some exceptions) because we expected it to be familiar to the audience of *Voices Together* and to imply a song’s history and cultural connections.

Unattributed or “traditional” songs have often come into North American published congregational repertoire through a history of scholars and musicians “collecting” songs—going out into the world and transcribing what they hear. Often, the transcribers have been white North American or European people entering an unfamiliar culture. These songs have been published as unattributed when communities of origin do not credit a single composer or do not know who the composer is. In some of these cases, a white Euro/North American arranger or transcriber has come to be known as the contributor of these songs. Although they are not the composer, they are attributed and thus receive more credit than the community process that maintained the song before its “discovery”. In the *Voices Together* process, we sought to use as few of these examples as possible. We looked

for songs with arrangers from the community of origin or with no named transcriber or arranger when appropriate.

In the first generations of bringing global song to North American congregations (and often, still today), there was a high regard for songs that represent a region's musical heritage, for example, African songs that sound stereotypically African, or Asian songs that sound stereotypically Asian. These songs continue to be republished both because they have become well known and loved and because they are valued for the way they sonically represent their context. Although Western classical music is often approached by scholars and practitioners as decontextualized works of art, global music is often valued precisely because of its context (Becker 1986). For example, communities that primarily sing traditional Western hymns may include an African American spiritual during Black History Month or a Spanish language song in connection to a story about a service project in a Spanish-speaking location. We do not suggest that these connections and uses are wrong or disrespectful, but when music is primarily valued for its context, the range of global music that is deemed valuable is reduced. When singers desire to hear the context (i.e., to hear the *difference*) in the sound, they are led to exclude many hybrid styles, such as contemporary worship music.

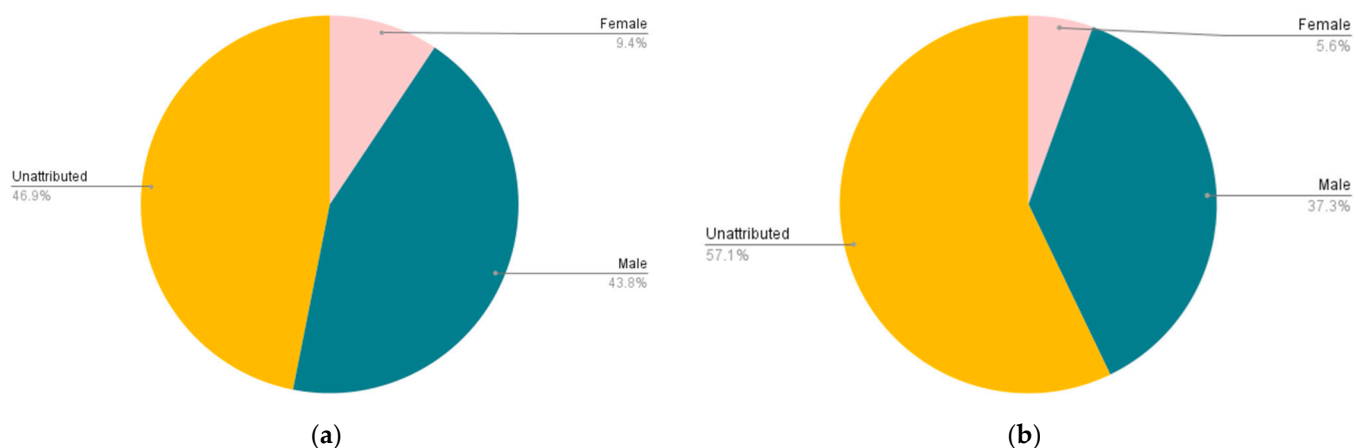
Conversely, while hymnal editors choose traditional-sounding music from around the world, they also present examples that most look and sound like familiar (Western classical) hymnody. For example, a song like "Siyahamba (We Are Marching)" is written in *Voices Together* in four-part harmony, with rhythms and harmonic structure that fit comfortably within Western classical expectations—but with enough African elements (in this case, syncopation and a brief echo by the inner voices that evokes call and response structure) to sound "authentic". Musical features such as unison singing (with no keyboard or guitar accompaniment), asymmetrical phrases, and non-Western scales and melodic contours are published in hymnals less often.<sup>24</sup> In the realm of global music, composers are working against an exoticism that values traditional-sounding (but not too unusual!) music over newer works by named composers that may be hybrid or contemporary in style.

The high number of unattributed texts and tunes among intercultural songs in *Voices Together* demonstrates continued high regard for these songs that come from "traditional" contexts. The percentage of unattributed tunes among the total number of songs is 27.7% (Figure 2b), while the percentage of unattributed tunes among intercultural songs is 45.5% (Figure 3b). Although the collection includes some more recent hybrid songs (with named composers), Figure 3b shows 87 unattributed tunes. We can see from this breakdown of geographical origin that they largely arise from outside Europe:

- African American—22 (17 listed as spirituals and 5 as traditional)
- Africa—22
- Europe—14 (including 3 Taize songs; while some Taize songs are ascribed to Jacques Berthier, many are credited to the community at large and thus labeled unattributed)
- Native American—8
- Latin America—8
- Asia—8
- Middle East—2 (both are Hebrew language)
- Caribbean—2
- Traditional Orthodox liturgy (Russia)—1

To obtain a better sense of the material that emerged from beyond a European/Euro-North American context and European Christian liturgical history, we drew some additional artificial lines: we removed 62 songs from those 190 that were only on the intercultural list because they included non-English languages. Figure 4 indicates that within the 128 remaining songs originating outside of Western European and Euro-North American musical traditions, the percentage of unattributed songs grew even more. These statistics further support our analysis that intercultural singing in predominantly white North American Christian communities heavily relies on "traditional" songs without named authors.





**Figure 4.** (a) Percentage of female, male, and unattributed text writers from intercultural communities in *Voices Together* (128 songs). (b) percentage of female, male, and unattributed tune writers from intercultural communities in *Voices Together* (128 songs).

Specifically, this analysis revealed that when we focused on non-European and non-Euro–American intercultural text writers, unattributed writers grew from 41.9 to 46.9%, while male contributors fell from 44 to 43%. Female contributors fell the furthest, from 14.1 to 9.4%. For tune writers, the unattributed numbers changed even more: unattributed composers grew from 45.5 to 57.1%, while male composers fell from 47.1 to 37.3%, and female contributors fell from 7.3 to 5.6%.

The publishing feedback loop is clear in these *Voices Together* contents. Of these 128 global songs in *Voices Together*, only 3 are newly published: “We, Your People, Sing Your Praises (Bon Bergere, ton peuple t’adore)” (VT 849), “Dooládó’ Shi Diyinda (What a Wonderful Savior)” (VT 562), and “Kombo na Yesu (The Name of Jesus)” (VT 648). These all have contributors with Mennonite connections, and it took additional effort from the committee and the contributors to transcribe and translate them. “We, Your People, Sing Your Praises (Bon Bergere, ton peuple t’adore)” is a new text, with English written by Rebecca Mosley and French by Josephine Munyeli. Mosley grew up in the United States and has lived in multiple locations in Africa in recent decades. She and her Rwandan colleague Munyeli are peace workers and wrote the text for a conference on reconciliation (Mosley and Mosley 2013). They set the text to a hymn tune that was written by an Italian composer and has become part of the oral tradition in East Africa. The *Voices Together* ascription summarizes, “Music: Salvatore Ferretti (Italy), as sung in East Africa, 20th–21st c.; harm. Mennonite Worship and Song Committee, 2019.” The harmonization by the *Voices Together* (Mennonite Worship and Song) committee refers to the transcription process, where we had to make decisions based on differing recordings. Both the text and tune of “Dooládó’ Shi Diyinda (What a Wonderful Savior)” were written by Navajo Anabaptist pastor Daniel Smiley, who worked with the *Voices Together* text committee to create an English translation. “Kombo na Yesu (The Name of Jesus)” was discussed above regarding additional labor by the committee to include female composers. As in that process, we spent further time and effort to include a few new and diverse musical practices. Also, similar to that process, we realized how constrained we were by the timeline of publication and by the large number of songs we were expected to carry over from previous Mennonite collections.

The high number of previously published unattributed songs among intercultural repertoire demonstrates the ongoing importance of “traditional” songs (as described in previous paragraphs) and songs whose authors have been erased through various transcription and publishing processes. The *Voices Together* committee received these songs primarily through the already-published canon of global church music, a body of music that structurally supports some problematic implications commonly described in ethnomusicological scholarship: (1) the disregard of vibrant current musical traditions, in this case

including contemporary worship music and other hybrid styles that do not easily fit into a geographical category, (2) white North Americans' imagining of the rest of the world as "timeless", quaint, or stuck in the past, indicated by our continued singing of older songs not currently sung in their community of origin, and (3) the image of Other cultures as nameless masses from which folk music naturally arises.<sup>25</sup> The *Voices Together* committee and process pushed back against these expectations by including some newly written intercultural songs in hybrid styles from North America; however, we still included many ecumenically well-known examples from around the world. These already-published songs tended to be older and more sonically indicative of their geographical musical heritages.

Although (predominantly white) women were becoming better represented in the *Voices Together* collection, and (predominantly non-North American) men of color were represented through intercultural selections, individuals who exist at the margins of multiple forms of oppression—here, women of color from anywhere around the world—were still largely missing (for more on intersectionality, see [Crenshaw 1991](#)). Our process aimed to diversify the musical representation within the category of "global song" and to rectify some of the above misperceptions; however, the final contents do not reflect our aims. We also know that, despite our commitment to represent diversity in global Christian music, the largest portion of contributions by people of color in general come from outside of North America, subtly upholding the message that North American Christianity is white.

When we consider the opposing biases outlined in the two previous sections together—that music ought to follow the rules of masculinized Western classical music *or* explicitly represent some imagined pure traditional culture from an Other location—we see that women are doubly left out of this picture. In addition to women struggling against biases about not being able to compose "great works", we also see female contributors being ignored because of biases of "global music" needing to arise from "the people" rather than one contextualized person (of any gender). Therefore, women of color in North America and racialized women around the world have both biases working against their creations being accepted and published.

We learned that more dedicated time and resources were necessary to develop mechanisms for facilitating diverse voices in a hymnal. Representation of the compositional voices of people of color, especially women, requires intentional effort and will not be a natural byproduct of publishing a hymnal in the 21st century. After looking back on the process and assessing the strides we made in amplifying the voices of white women and people around the world, we see that we could have increased diversity in additional ways with further financial investment and institutional flexibility.

#### 4. Discussion: Identifying and Challenging Implicit Bias in Song Selection

The findings above amplify the need to consider why North American hymnal editors and publishers have continued to reprint the same songs and seek out similar types of songs by the same kinds of creators. We propose a set of conclusions that explain these usually unquestioned practices, and offer ways to move forward with new frames and practices.

In addition to obvious issues of familiarity—retaining heart songs and being drawn to similar styles—we have sought to articulate the more subtle consequences of hierarchies of taste and biases about musical genre. North American society continues to cultivate ideas about the value of music according to socially produced and maintained values of race, class, and gender that have been reinscribed over centuries. Within societies where the power structure has been dominated by whiteness, patriarchy, and colonialism, it should come as no surprise that the music written by and often associated with upper-class white men has been the music we have taught and learned in music lessons, public music education, and post-secondary music schools since colonial times.<sup>26</sup> Indigenous, African American, non-Western, and popular expressions of music have been treated as secondary, less valuable, or as raw material for creating "truly American" symphonies or other works of art music ([Pisani 2005](#); [Browner 1997](#)). Although these trends are shifting in many levels of music education, we can still feel the effects of this deep history.

To put it bluntly, these systems and practiced habits continue to communicate to people in North America and beyond the implicit and explicit messages that Western classical music is the most sophisticated, beautiful, and worthy music for uplifting humanity and praising God. As a result, Christian congregational music that has been published and republished tends to follow expectations of Western classical music's common practices on harmonic progression, melodic contouring, phrase structures, and rhythmic regularity. As music theorist Philip Ewell points out in his acclaimed and controversial article "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame" (Ewell 2020), these Western musical systems are not rooted, natural categories but instead are perpetuated by the practices of primarily (or only) studying and valorizing music and music scholarship written by white European or Europeanized men. When music scholars articulate music-theoretical rules based on that body of music and scholarship, they are writing past and present composers who are women and racialized out of the story. Furthermore, they are creating self-fulfilling expectations about who ought to write music and what music ought to sound like.<sup>27</sup>

In Table 1, we reprint Ewell's articulation of these unspoken biases in North American classical music education (which he labels the "white racial frame"), and we present analogous statements related to hymnody.

**Table 1.** Philip Ewell's (2020) White Racial Frame in Music Theory applied to the hymnological feedback loop.

Ewell's White Racial Frame in Music Theory (from Ewell 2020)	Graber and Loepp Thiessen's White Racial Frame in Hymnody
The music and music theories of white persons represent the best, and in certain cases the only, framework for music theory.	Hymnody written by white people has historically made up our framework for evaluating the quality of congregational song.
Among these white persons, the music and music theories of whites from German-speaking lands of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early-twentieth centuries represent the pinnacle of music-theoretical thought.	Hymnody written by white people from German- (and English-) speaking lands of the 18th to early 20th centuries has been upheld as the pinnacle of congregational song output and the standard to which new compositions are held.
The institutions and structures of music theory have little or nothing to do with race or whiteness, and that to critically examine race and whiteness in music theory would be inappropriate or unfair.	Since hymnody is about worship, it has been considered inappropriate to examine race or whiteness in congregational song. Limitations of race and gender have been overlooked since what has mattered most is finding material that helps people worship God.
The best scholarship in music theory rises to the top of the field in meritocratic fashion, irrespective of the author's race.	The best hymnody is presumed to have risen to the top of the field in meritocratic fashion, irrespective of the author's race or gender.
The language of "diversity" and "inclusivity" and the actions it effects will rectify racial disparities, and therefore racial injustices, in music theory.	The inclusion of global song will rectify racial disparities, and therefore racial injustices, in church music. Because of this, it is unnecessary to interrogate the race and gender of songwriters further so long as global songs are included.

Since traditional Western hymnody has been so foundationally formed by classical music and its music theory, Ewell's convictions on music theory's white racial frame easily translate to congregational song. It is striking that the only caveat we had to add in the right-hand column was to the second statement: while Ewell notes that German music dominates the understanding of classical music in North America, English hymns from the nineteenth century (both from Great Britain and North America) have been highly influential in church music (see Whitla 2020).

Upholding hymnody as a reflection of a superior classical music has created connotations that have denigrated music considered "popular" and "traditional" (common examples including contemporary worship music and global song) for over a century. We can trace this legacy to colonial missions when new Christian converts around the world were explicitly told their traditional music was inappropriate for the Church. Missionaries taught Western hymns to replace traditional songs, which were not only associated with

other religious traditions but were described as “uncultured” or “barbaric”. A typical example of this unquestioned use of social-musical hierarchy is Richard Wallaschek’s 1893 book titled *Primitive Music: An Inquiry into the Origin and Development of Music, Songs, Instruments, Dances, and Pantomimes of Savage Races* (Wallaschek 1893). Even by the middle of the twentieth century, the denigration of popular styles and global song continued in Christian circles. Anna Nekola argues that while mid-twentieth-century conservative Christian discourse on rock music has often been treated as fringe, it actually had far-reaching effects of framing rock music and global music as harmful and even demonic. She quotes Frank Garlock, who made this connection explicit when he wrote in 1971 that “all one needs to do is make a trip to the places where rock ‘n’ roll has its roots (Africa, South America, and India) and observe the ceremonies which often go along with this kind of music—voodoo rituals, sex orgies, human sacrifice, and devil worship—to know the direction in which we as a nation are headed” (Garlock 1971; quoted in Nekola 2013, p. 414).<sup>28</sup>

Today, people argue against contemporary worship music’s spread around the world as a loss of culture (which sounds curiously like a new way to say “uncultured”). Of course, it is important to interrogate musical colonization in any form, and Western musical influence indeed has a worldwide reach. However, in some criticisms of the global flow of contemporary worship music, we can hear the patronizing implication that people cannot or should not choose their own music. In recent decades, therefore, this impulse against the globalization of popular styles has paradoxically led back to systems of musical value that esteem the older, “traditional” music that early colonizers rejected.

Contemporary worship music continues to be maligned by hymnal users, and only those songs with minimal syncopation and a simplified musical roadmap have typically been included in hymnals (i.e., verse/chorus instead of a journey through multiple iterations of verse, chorus, and bridge that relies on strong band leadership) (for more on the historic inclusion of contemporary worship music in Mennonite hymnals see Johnson and Loepp Thiessen 2023). This emphasis on written clarity demonstrates the privileging of written or notated forms of music learning over oral, which is a hallmark of Western classical music. Of course, as we have shown, quality is subjective; it is dependent on specific genres’ conventions that cannot be equally transferred between genres. In contrast, we assert that no one type of music is objectively the best for worshipping God. As April Stace Vega notes, “casting a negative judgment on CWM [contemporary worship music] on the basis that it does not live up to the same criteria that determine a good hymn simply does not tell us anything except that any given CWM song is not a hymn” (Stace Vega 2014, p. 444). They have different characteristics, and these differences are what make each effective in their own way.

Objections to contemporary worship music today can also be traced back over a century through comparisons to arguments against gospel music around 1900: in both time periods, people complain that the popular music of their day is repetitive and simple. The unspoken comparison is the complexity of Western classical harmonies and the intellectual content of the multiple verses of traditional hymns. Judith Becker analyzes discourses around the superiority of Western art music in depth, noting the common assumption “that Western art music is intrinsically interesting and complex, while other musical systems need their social context to command our serious attention” (Becker 1986, p. 341). The fallacies in this debate are evident when we note that Western classical melodies and rhythms are not usually very complex, and traditional hymnody, with its typical strophic AABA form, is quite repetitive. Furthermore, while some people complain about the simplicity of contemporary worship music, others complain that it is soloistic because of the wide melodic range or “unpredictable” rhythms (read: not standard to Western classical music). A recent letter to the editor in the Mennonite publication *Anabaptist World* lamented four-part singing as “a dying art form” and claimed that *Voices Together* has “too many unison hymns, many derived from Christian pop tunes with jaunty rhythms that are hard for even skilled readers unless they are familiar with the echo chamber of pop music” (Schlitz 2023). The author’s implication here is that singing harmonies is of a higher caliber than

pop-derived music—an art rather than an echo chamber. The reality is that evaluating one genre of music by another genre’s parameters is not useful for understanding or judging the worth of either.

In the years since *Voices Together* was released, we have frequently taught classes and workshops with song leaders who come with a range of concerns and obstacles. We often hear worship leaders express that their communities are resistant to singing non-Western music, contemporary worship music, and other music that they perceive does not live up to their expectations for what congregational song should sound like. Just as we have worked to interrogate our own biases, with time, we are able to work with others to help them understand the ways their biases are restricting their appreciation for a range of ways of worshiping God. One way to counter these dynamics is to engage in many kinds of music from around the world in worship, even when it feels unfamiliar or even uncomfortable. When Christians sing songs from other cultures, they have the opportunity to humbly attempt to embody the words and sounds of those who are different from them. When they become heart songs, singers are building affective relationships with the songs’ communities of origin.

## 5. Conclusions

When we consider the deep history of musical biases, we can see that hymnal collection building is influenced by factors well beyond the logistics that previously published songs are simply easier to find. Hymnal committees, choir directors, and other gatekeepers may not have malicious intent to keep out music that does not conform to Western patriarchal classical features, but our unconscious biases lead us toward compositions that fit comfortably. We may frame decision-making through the reality that “standardized” composition is more easily accessible in congregational singing, or we may be aesthetically drawn to music we have been taught is superior our whole lives. The first step to breaking down these barriers is to recognize the white racial frames (as described by Ewell) around our biases: if we say we should only be singing hymns, we are inevitably saying we should sing songs primarily written by white people or in the style of Western classical music. As Deb Bradley notes, “it’s a thin line between ‘I don’t like that music’ and ‘I don’t like those people’” (Bradley 2022).

These revelations indicate contradictions within the *Voices Together* process and our recommendations in this article: we want a diversity of voices—many genders, races, ethnicities, and musical styles—to be valued for their unique contributions, but we also want their contributions to hold up against the standards that have historically been set by men. The logistical constraints of our project meant that we were expected to work within a system with clear expectations of what “quality” material looked like, but we also named the tension of wanting to expand our expectations such that diverse women’s contributions could be valued as they were. This process made clear that surface-level calls for diversity would not bear fruit if the underlying structures that uphold patriarchal aesthetics and values were not also challenged, a process that we knew needed to go beyond examinations of gendered limitations.

For some communities, there could be ways to reclaim the hymnal as a vessel that can offer equity to songwriters and composers, equalizing the playing field so that all voices are valued while recognizing the colonial and patriarchal nature of the hymnal so we do not forget where we come from. For others, the future may demand songwriting collectives, free websites, and peer feedback processes.<sup>29</sup> We hope that the processes described here will help communities encounter new music with unfamiliar origins with open hands and hearts, aware of the biases that so quickly lead to judgments. In doing this, may we all be empowered to love and serve others in ways that more fully reflect the incredible diversity of the worldwide Church.



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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In addition to the authors, committee members included Bradley Kauffman (project director and general editor), Benjamin Bergey (music editor), Sarah Kathleen Johnson (worship resources editor), Adam Tice (text editor), Darryl Neustaedter Barg, Paul Dueck, Mike Erb, Emily Grimes, Tom Harder, SaeJin Lee, Cynthia Neufeld Smith, and Allan Rudy-Froese. For an analysis of power dynamics in the construction and usage of *Voices Together* see [Johnson \(2023\)](#).
- <sup>2</sup> We use the admittedly inadequate phrase “traditional Western hymnody” in this paper to describe hymnody that is typically written in four-part harmony, has several verses or stanzas, and is musically and poetically influenced by art music from Europe in the common practice era (1600–1900). Here, it is distinguished from expressions like contemporary worship music, Catholic folk, gospel traditions, and other newer forms. See [Hawn \(2015\)](#) for examples of recent expressions of congregational song.
- <sup>3</sup> Our analysis has interesting parallels to Andrew Mall’s exploration of the circulation of contemporary worship music. In both cases, economic forces are present but not the only capital involved; Mall writes, “Writers following the Bourdieuan tradition are concerned less with the accumulation of economic capital and more with the presence, power, and influence of symbolic capital within specific sociocultural contexts. Thus, concepts of ‘religious capital’ (Bourdieu 1991), ‘sacred capital’ (Urban 2003), ‘spiritual capital’ (Verter 2003), and ‘worship capital’ (Mall 2018b) all capture slightly different understandings of how religious institutions, leaders, and congregants manipulate and navigate power hierarchies in religious contexts through the acquisition and divestment of symbolic capital” ([Mall 2021](#), p. 130).
- <sup>4</sup> These numbers have been in flux for at least two decades; a close approximation from recent years can be found in the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online, under “Mennonite Church USA” and “Mennonite Church Canada” ([Mennonite Church USA n.d.](#); [Mennonite Church Canada n.d.](#)).
- <sup>5</sup> We prefer to leave this number as an approximation to reflect the difficulty of assessing “exclusive” or “new” publication—some songs in *Voices Together* previously existed as recordings or choral arrangements, and some may have been informally printed and circulated.
- <sup>6</sup> For more on *Voices Together*’s 759 songs and 310 worship resources (which include visual art and words for worship); see the *Voices Together* website (especially [Guide to Adopting Voices Together 2020](#)). This article will analyze statistics related to the songs; for more on non-musical worship resources; see [Johnson \(2020\)](#).
- <sup>7</sup> For more information on how songs and worship resources were chosen for inclusion in *Voices Together*, including a full list of these consulting groups, see ([How Songs Were Chosen for Voices Together 2020](#)). A submissions process is typical for many denominational hymnals and is often publicized among similar circles of hymn writers and composers. Significantly for this article, the *Voices Together* submission portal included space for the author/composer to state whether they identify as Anabaptist and their gender identity, but not their race/ethnicity.
- <sup>8</sup> In *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, 65% of single-author resources are written by women (24% of the total number of spoken resources in the collection, which is contrasted with 13% written by men). In *Voices Together*, by contrast, 53% of single-author resources are written by women (or 20% of the spoken resources, compared to the 18% written by men) ([Johnson 2022](#)).
- <sup>9</sup> Other balance considerations included theological perspectives and themes; style, length, and difficulty of music; languages and regions represented; and more.
- <sup>10</sup> Kyra Gaunt describes these circumstances in music and the discipline of ethnomusicology: “The monopoly of White, heteronormative privilege and bias is intangible; we do not see it and rarely acknowledge it. Bias shows up in the silent and persistent erasure of indifference to anti-Black racism and sexism in our culture” ([Gaunt 2022](#), p. 39). We will expand on these ideas later in this article, along with Philip [Ewell’s \(2020\)](#) incisive analysis of this phenomenon.
- <sup>11</sup> Notably, these numbers are comparable with other similar collections. An unpublished study of the *United Methodist Hymnal* (1989) and *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006) by Hannah Porter Denecke shows similar figures, though her approach was slightly different as she did not account for unattributed resources. She found that women composers represent 14% of the *United Methodist Hymnal*, and 13% of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (percentages that would surely be lower if unattributed resources were accounted for) ([Porter Denecke 2018](#)).

- 12 We realize that musical expectation is an unwieldy subject with nuances related to genre, style, musical culture, and more, and we argue that hymnal publishers and committees need to be aware of how these preferences affect inclusion in collections.
- 13 An example of this additional work includes Graber writing a new text for a standalone tune in an irregular meter that was submitted by an Anabaptist woman. The final result appears in *Voices Together* as “Still My Soul” (VT 603).
- 14 To experience some of these songs and to learn more about them, see (Loepp Thiessen 2021).
- 15 Ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl notes that the term “world music” arose in academia in the 1960s “to mean a curriculum in which, theoretically, all the music in the world could be studied . . .—well, perhaps excluding Western art music, which usually doesn’t get into those books and courses because it has books and courses of its own. So music was divided into the West, and its ‘real’ music, and ‘the rest’, or world music” (Nettl 2010, p. 34). For another analysis of scholarly and commercial uses of these terms, see Taylor (1997). Becca Whitla (2020) gives a succinct summary in relation to church music (p. 17), and Marissa Glynias Moore’s (2018) dissertation is an in-depth study.
- 16 For example, “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus” is often received and sung as a Western folk tune. It is ascribed in *Voices Together* as “Indian traditional”, though more recent scholarship indicates it was written by Simon Kara Marak, a missionary and pastor from Assam, India (Hawn 2020). Another example is “Way Maker” by Nigerian songwriter and worship leader Sinach, which has often been detached from its intercultural origins (Loepp Thiessen 2023).
- 17 In the blog post “Why and how should we sing interculturally?” Graber (2020c) explains to a presumed white Mennonite readership why *Voices Together* includes non-Western and non-English material. The *Voices Together* Worship Leader Edition (Johnson 2020) includes related essays, “Worship and Culture” (#28) and “Worship in Multiple Languages” (#29).
- 18 For a partial list of collections reviewed by the *Voices Together* Intercultural Committee, see (Graber 2020c). For more on gatekeeping processes in the North American singing of global congregational song, see (Lim 2016; Glynias Moore 2018). A testament to the recognition of this need for intercultural engagement in North American hymnody came in the form of a Vital Worship Grant from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, with funds provided by Lilly Endowment, Inc., that allowed several committee members to visit ten Mennonite congregations across the U.S. and Canada that worship in languages other than English.
- 19 For example, the contemporary worship song “Tú estás aquí (My God is Here)” (VT 67), written by Michael Rodríguez (Puerto Rico) and Jesús Adrián Romero (Mexico) in Spanish, is included along with the traditional-sounding El Salvadoran song “Santo, santo, santo (Holy, Holy Holy)” (VT 102) by Guillermo Cuellar with sesquialtera 6/8–3/4 meter changes and the unattributed Guatemalan traditional song La paz de la tierra (The Peace of the Earth Be with You) (VT 838).
- 20 For example, the 22 songs in German: some were written in German in past centuries but are now better known in English, e.g., “Heilig, heilig, heilig (Holy, Holy, Holy)” (VT 137) written in 1826; some have been beloved in German-speaking Mennonite communities in North America into the 21st century, e.g., “Gott ist die Liebe (I Know God Loves Me)” (VT 158). Some German songs were recently written in Germany, e.g., “Herr, füll mich neu (Fill Me Anew)” (VT 739) written in 2004, and one contemporary worship song was included with German because it also appears in a German Mennonite hymnal in South America, “Here I Am to Worship (Ich will dich anbeten)” (VT 227).
- 21 For example, “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms” (VT 160).
- 22 For example, “There’s a River of Life” by Indigenous songwriter Jonathan Maracle (VT 24); “Creation is a Song” (VT 181) by white Mennonite songwriters Doug Krehbiel and Jude Krehbiel; and Navajo language was added to “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus” because a Mennonite contact indicated that it is often sung in Navajo communities.
- 23 For example, “folk” has a history associated with Johann Gottfried Herder and the development of evolutionary thinking and biological racism, and “unknown” implies the question “unknown to whom?”.
- 24 Examples of these musical features include “Jesus A Nahetotaetanome (Jesus Lord, How Joyful)” (VT 8), which is unison a capella with a wide, falling vocal range and an irregular meter that follows the Cheyenne text, and “Ngayong nagdadapit hapon (When Twilight Comes)” (VT 501) with phrase lengths of 8, 6, and 4 measures.
- 25 Nettl (2010) explains how numbers 2 and 3 are connected, writing that two assumptions are often present (and sometimes debated) in music scholarship: “(1) all peoples have a distinct music, or (2) all music is part of a single development leading to—well, is it Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, or high-tech?” (Nettl 2010, p. 41). If both are believed to be true, then the implication is that each peoples’ distinct music is on an evolutionary path toward Western art music.
- 26 For an extended exploration of the value we place on music, see (Cheng 2020). He writes, “Western art music has long served ambitions to colonize land, educate ‘noble savages’, edify children, and, increasingly today, rehabilitate prisoners” (p. 11).
- 27 These nuanced ways of understanding and endorsing the Western classical canon have also proved a barrier for women to enter the compositional style: Anneli recalls a piano lesson in which she was working on a Baroque piano piece by a woman. The instructor consistently observed places where the composer had gotten it “wrong” because she did not follow the classical signposts of her male counterparts. A better way to explain her music, in fact, is that her composition had not been analyzed and integrated in centuries of studies that explained how compositions should work.
- 28 A fuller quotation of Nekola’s description of Garlock and his contemporary Bob Larson makes these connections even more evident. She writes: “For both Larson and Garlock, rock ‘n’ roll’s ‘heathen’ roots were dangerous for two key reasons: the rhythm

was connected to illegitimate religious practices, and the rhythm inspired the body to act without reason and in fulfillment of demonic desire. For example, Larson explained to his readers that the dangerous beat of rock 'n' roll came directly from 'heathen tribal and voodoo rites': 'The native dances to incessant, pulsating, syncopated rhythms until he enters a state of hypnotic monotony and loses active control over his conscious mind. The throb of the beat from the drums brings his minds to a state when the voodoo, which Christian missionaries know to be a demon, can enter him. This power then takes control of the dancer, usually resulting in sexual atrocities.' (Larson 1970, p. 130). Similarly, Garlock claimed that: 'All one needs to do is make a trip to the places where rock 'n' roll has its roots (Africa, South America, and India) and observe the ceremonies which often go along with this kind of music—voodoo rituals, sex orgies, human sacrifice, and devil worship—to know the direction in which we as a nation are headed.' (Garlock 1971, p. 22)." (Nekola 2013, p. 414).

- <sup>29</sup> The authors are working on projects like these, including the Anabaptist Worship Network ([Anabaptist Worship Network n.d.](https://www.anabaptistworship.net/)), which hosted a songwriting retreat supported by the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship, with funds provided by the Lilly Endowment Inc. Several of the songs from the retreat are now available online on the Together in Worship website ([Together in Worship n.d.](https://www.togetherinworship.net/)), having been refined through peer feedback, and recorded and notated in order to be easily accessible to congregations. You can find examples here: <https://togetherinworship.net/Browse/10368>, accessed on 4 October 2023.

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