

## CONTEXTUALIZATION AND HYMNS

"Contextualization" in regard to church music means that indigenous churches all over the world will be and are singing in their own music systems. Most of these musical languages do not have measured rhythm or the major and minor scales familiar to us. Some have no harmony or harmony that sounds strange to us. The important aspect of this trend is that these groups are singing new songs to the Lord, songs never before heard. They are created out of new life in Christ and are not old songs adapted from their old traditions nor are they old songs of Western churches. For many this option presents itself for the first time. The remarkable thing is that the trend is worldwide, not simply a phase in the development of one people's worship style.

In the 1980's "Asia Theological News" reported that during the first international festival of Quechua-Quichua Evangelical Music, a declaration was written whereby churches were encouraged to use their cultural heritage in musical worship and evangelism. At the same time, Chinese Youth Workers meeting in a seminar, concluded that future youth ministries in the Chinese Church should be more contextualized toward local culture. In Africa seven west African countries voted to abandon Western type hymns in favor of those composed by indigenous composers. Recordings of hymns composed by the Kiowas and other American Indians began to appear on the market in the 1980's. Even the traditional arts of Bali became media for praising God. Moreover, names of ethnomusicologists from third world countries began to appear on membership lists of the Society for Ethnomusicology and other learned societies.

Definitive articles and books on music are no longer written by just Europeans and North Americans. Those missionized a generation ago have come of age and are telling us they want to be themselves.

Within the last decade I have heard impassioned speeches by government ministers of Papua New Guinea, Cameroon and the Solomon Islands who uphold the local music systems and plea for protection of these oral traditions which the foreigners in their midst have subdued or supplanted.

A wave of Christian church leaders and indigenous composers are being educated in the West who resist Western church music for its irrelevancy to the hundreds of indigenous cultures who have turned to Christianity but who need their vernacular language and new songs in their own music system in order to grow spiritually and to worship spontaneously. Translating Christian texts while retaining the music of Western hymns and songs is not the answer. In that practice, music remains an import. In the words of one Cameroon pastor (Reverend Jean-Claude Ndamba), "Just like language, the mission churches must start using native music for their worship. Just like language, missionaries must help the natives to appreciate their own music. They cannot do it by themselves now because they were told by missionaries and the colonial power that their music was not good. So it is through missionaries that they will also learn that their music IS good for their worship."

Some Christian field workers heralded this trend in ethno-hymnody many years ago, as part and parcel of the needs of the culturally whole person as he embraced Christianity in a setting remote from Western civilization.

Around 1953 a shy, petite girl from Tacoma graduated from Moody with a degree in Christian Ed. and with an unquenchable desire to translate the New Testament for a people who had never heard God's Word. Her name was Darlene Bee and she became one of Wycliffe Bible Translators foremost linguists.

While a student at Moody Bible Institute, Darlene saw a film in which a New Guinea tribesman asked for someone to come live with his people and learn their language. She never forgot this man's plea. In 1958, as a Wycliffe translator, she was assigned for three months to a New Guinea tribe to investigate a unique tonal language, Usarufa. Unknown to her at the onset, this was the language of the New Guinea tribesmen she saw on film some five years before. A long term assignment as translator to the Usarufas ensued, an assignment she held until her death in 1972, when she was returning to that assignment from a summer in New Zealand where she headed the Summer Institute of Linguistics. At the time of the fatal air crash that took her life, Vida Chenoweth was her partner.

Vida came to Bible translation with strong dedication too, having come into the knowledge of God's plan right in the midst of her career as a concert artist in New York. In their concern for the developing church, both girls were anxious that the self-expression of the people be free as possible of any demands that they must speak, sing, or worship imitating the ways of foreigners.

As a musician, Vida became extremely interested in the way Usarufas express themselves musically and wrote a detailed account of their music practices in The Usarufas and Their Music. Darlene wrote a scholarly text on linguistics Neo Tagmemics.

During most of the seven years the two girls worked together they were isolated from their own culture entirely, except for one another. Many hours were spent in examining not only the practices of the tribal people but the practices of Christian evangelization. "Contextualization" was sought before the term was current.

In 1967 Darlene wrote a response to hymn writing for other cultures which has not been previously published but which stands today as a sound threshold in the trend toward ethnic hymnody which missions throughout the world seek today.

In 1967 Darlene Bee wrote:

I would like to call attention to a recent proposal made with reference to hymn writing. The proposal is as follows: "I think it would be interesting to give people three alternatives and see which appeals to them most:

1. Hymns using indigenous tunes.
2. Hymns using Western tunes.
3. Hymns with brand-new tunes patterned after the indigenous music but different from any existing tune used in the tribe."

I have three serious objections to this proposal. Are we to infer from "see which appeals to them most. . ." that the most appealing alternative is the proper or preferred alternative for any given group? (I trust there is no idea of generalization beyond a given group.) What valid evidence can be drawn from a knowledge of what is appealing? Certainly a dynamic hymnody will have to 'appeal' to the people for whom it is intended, but we all know that utter nonsense can be highly appealing. It may appeal to man's social drive for status or it may appeal to his biological drive for rhythmic satisfaction, but these are hardly the drives to which a meaningful hymnody should seek to appeal. Would not the proposition be better stated, "which alternative is the most dynamic, the most edifying, the most meaningful"?

My second objection has to do with the implication that each of the three alternatives have equal theoretical justification. That they represent no more than differences of opinions between missionaries and/or missionary organizations. Do we believe that vernacular versus non-vernacular Scriptures is merely a difference of opinion? If we are convinced of the validity of our efforts to produce Scripture in

the language of the people using them then how can we deny them hymns in their musical vernacular! The same arguments used for the language of speech apply equally to the language of music.

My final objection has to do with the practical problem of implementing the proposal. To give the proposal a fair trial each alternative must be applied with equal care. However, the application of the third alternative (the only one with any justification) requires an analysis of the music system similar to an analysis of the language. This requires a musician with theoretical training in the structure of music, in ethnomusicology and in composition.

Competence in the performance or teaching of music in the Western tradition no more qualifies one for the task of music analysis than competence in speaking or teaching English qualifies one for language analysis. To apply the third alternative requires a specialist. Are we then to throw up our hands and muddle along with second, third or fourth best? I think not! There are competent musicians who have only to be made known of our need. Let us not be satisfied with anything less than the very best for our people in their musical expression of their Christian faith.