

Onward, Christian praise teams: Reinventing the choir

by [Anderson M. Rearick III](#) in the [November 14, 2001](#) issue

I've seen a lot of religious improvements come and go. I remember the "last day" emphasis in teen camp sermons. I was around for the concept of "sancta-nasium," when the church sanctuary was combined with a teen-centered gymnasium. (And learned that one has not truly praised the Lord until one has done so in repentance at the foul line.) Now another trend is proliferating like dandelions upon the lawns of worship.

Those of you in the backwaters—who have not yet a CD player in your surround-a-sound system or who are still using a piano to support Christmas and Easter cantatas—may need to sit down to hear this. The church choir is passé. Yes, in pursuit of greater inclusivity, we will now be led by praise teams.

But, you may respond, the traditional church choir was inclusive. After all, it included anyone who wanted to sing, from the tone-deaf bass who grumbled his monotone to the screeching soprano whose high C shattered glass.

Not good enough. Instead of separating singers from congregation, praise singers present themselves as part of the congregation. They do not wear robes to hide variances in personal dress, but dress like the rest of us—only a little better. And no more hiding in the far confines of the choir loft like a chorus of distant angels. Praise teams stand at the front edge of the platform, inspiring us all with their handheld mikes as they beam out at us, members of the herd of sheepish believers.

We sheep stumble along trying to find and read and sing the words printed in our bulletins. Or, if the bulletin does not have enough space for all the songs, words are projected overhead. This is even more inclusive, since we don't have to look down and thus are not distracted from focusing our full attention on the team's performance. Of course, we can't see the words when the projector light is too dim or out of focus, or when the operator of the overhead projector hasn't changed the words and we are three or four stanzas behind the singing. Often, since we have no

notes to go with the words, “all we like sheep go astray.” Fortunately, the gifted members of our praise team go right on without us.

Praise teams do not need to have their performance marked in the bulletin as a special presentation. They do not sing “an anthem” as a ministry to the congregation. Instead, they involve the entire assembly in every song. Be ready. This may “include” 18 reprises of “God Is Good,” with a spontaneous sermon on God’s good, good goodness thrown in by the team leader. No one will feel left out.

Some worshipers have an especially keen awareness of just how inclusive each praise service is. They are the ones who find it difficult to stand through chorus after chorus. A friend of mine who suffers from early rheumatoid arthritis dutifully remains standing, her knuckles white from gripping the pew in front of her, until the team leader feels God’s directions and lets everyone sit down. Another friend recalls the balancing act she practiced each sabbath when, while standing in heels on an inclined floor with a two-year-old on her hip, she waited to be granted permission to sit. Both women felt the need to demonstrate a willing and submissive spirit in response to the team’s example.

Of course, the teams are often composed of young believers who have endless stamina. For the rest, a shared sigh of thankfulness rises from the body of Christ when the team leader is finally moved to say, “You may be seated.”

The words of the songs are also designed to be inclusive. Obtuse imagery, once the staple of choirs in America, has disappeared. Don’t expect to sing anything like:

Could we with ink the ocean fill, and were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill, and every man a scribe by trade
To write the love of God above, would drain the ocean dry.
Nor could the scroll contain the whole, though stretched from sky to sky.

Such lyrics are being replaced by clear and accessible language such as “I love you, Lord, love you, love you, love you.” Anyone who has worked with children knows that repetition is the way to get ideas across. Furthermore, complicated abstract images no longer strain Christian contemplation:

O Morning Star, how fair and bright
thou beamest forth in truth and light,
O Sovereign meek and lowly!
Thou Root of Jesse, David's son,
My Lord and Master, thou has won
My heart to serve thee solely!

Being told 20 or 30 times that "God is an awesome God" is far more effective for the modern praisegiver than comparing the Almighty to some distant star, or trying to figure out the significance of scriptural quotes. Worship team leaders are constantly endeavoring to find better ways to express God's infinite nature in language. That must be why "I" and "we" come up so often, as in: "I love you, Lord," and "We praise his name."

In fact, one scholar found that the vocabulary in an average praise worship session, including "the," "an" and "a," totals only 20 different words. Clearly the praise teams are masters of the pithy phrase.

Baby boomers have created this worship, and it seems to suit them. Disregarding stuffy language and obtuse abstract thinking, they worship God by following the best and best-looking. The modern praise team encourages worshipers to join together in gazing up at them rather than down upon hymnals stuffed with archaic poetry and erudite scriptural quotations.

It's all to our benefit. After all, if a member of the congregation is filled with jealousy, and thus a carnal heart, the discipline of standing through 15 choruses of "Thank you, Jesus" will chastise the flesh. And although the words may sometimes be a mystery, no one should worry. The lyrics are so simple and short that memorization is automatic. And so I say, "Praise the Lord!," "Thank you, Jesus!" and "Awesome is as awesome does."