

Music that changes

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#) in the [December 10, 2014](#) issue



Tripp Hudgins, center, and other musicians rehearse for the service at All Souls Episcopal Church in Berkeley. Photo by Jocelyn Bergen

As I settled into the pew at All Souls Episcopal Church in Berkeley, California, my eyes turned to the crayons strategically placed in the seats as an invitation for the adults to color their bulletin along with the children. I had a strange kid-at-a-birthday-party feeling. I studied the order of worship and realized that the service would mix the expected and the whimsical.

We sang the hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty” during the procession. During the Gospel acclamation, however, the choir picked up stringed instruments and led us in a spiritual to which we clapped—which created a different sort of resonance and reverence for the Gospel reading. Throughout the hour, banjos and the organ frolicked together in a way that comforted and surprised me.

As new forms of congregations arise, new musical forms are developing. The walls that separate the secular and sacred, the intellect and emotions, and the contemporary and traditional are being deconstructed.

[Tripp Hudgins](#), an American Baptist pastor and a musician at All Souls Episcopal, explained that All Souls previously had a choir that was getting older and dwindling in numbers. It consisted of a dozen faithful people who couldn’t quite do what they hoped to do. At the same time, the congregation had an “Angel Band” which occasionally played in worship. The band began playing every week, going back to old-time music and drawing upon the folk revival that in Berkeley never ended. Then

the band members stepped into the loft to learn the choir music. As they did, they were able to carefully tear down the sacred and secular divide.

Hudgins admits that the process wasn't always easy. "We all have a spiritual soundtrack. There is music of spiritual significance that can bring us into worship," he noted. "People from the choir era struggle when choral music is not there. That's their music. That's what they pray to. For them, the banjo is secular."

But another generation has a different soundtrack. Its sacred music might consist of mountain music and songs by Mumford & Sons. Hudgins lights up with excitement as he talks about surprising people in worship with music that sits at the intersection of sacred and secular.

Bryan Sirchio, a UCC pastor, musician, and author, sees music as being at the heart of congregational change. He wants to develop more meaningful praise music—a theologically sound "heart music."

"In the kinds of churches that have grown in vitality, music has been a big key," Sirchio said. If we ignore music, then we "throw away the opportunity to do spiritual formation, build community, and sing our faith."

At some services, he said, it's often clear that a hymn has been chosen on the basis of its theological content rather than on the capacity of the congregation to sing it—and the congregation gives up before the final chorus. In another service, the words of the praise music songs might undercut the liberal theology expressed in the rest of the service. Sirchio tries to tackle the dissonance in a positive way: "What do we want our music to do? What are we longing to find?"

Sirchio, author of *The Six Marks of Progressive Christian Worship Music*, wants music that reflects the fullness of human experience, including the struggle for justice; inclusive language for humanity and God; songs that reflect the personal and the communal, while containing emotional authenticity; fresh images, language, and ideas. Sirchio is forming a publishing company that will be a catalog of songs that speak "the heart language of the people," with emotional resonance and intellectual depth.

Neither Hudgins nor Sirchio is trashing the hymnbooks. Instead, they are seeking to engage with hymns in a different manner. David Gambrell, a hymnodist who contributed to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) hymnal *Glory to God*, thinks that

hymnal has been appreciated because it's a "big tent book." Within it one can find "classic hymns rubbing elbows with global refrains, gospel favorites, praise choruses, old spirituals, and new types of song that defy categorization."

Gambrell highlighted many of the musical expressions that I experienced at All Souls. For instance, he pointed out how people can sing classic hymns with different instrumentation.

"The pastors, musicians, and congregations I talk to seem to be finally moving beyond the labels of 'contemporary' and 'traditional.' Instead, people seem more interested in finding the right song for the scripture and service, regardless of style."

Communities of faith are deconstructing the musical silos in which we too often find ourselves trapped. A new, eclectic, vibrant spiritual soundtrack of faith is being created.