

Shared songs with new meaning

My colleague's Black church was taking a break from anti-racism work with White churches. So we decided to sing together.

by [Melissa Florer-Bixler](#) in the [November 2025](#) issue
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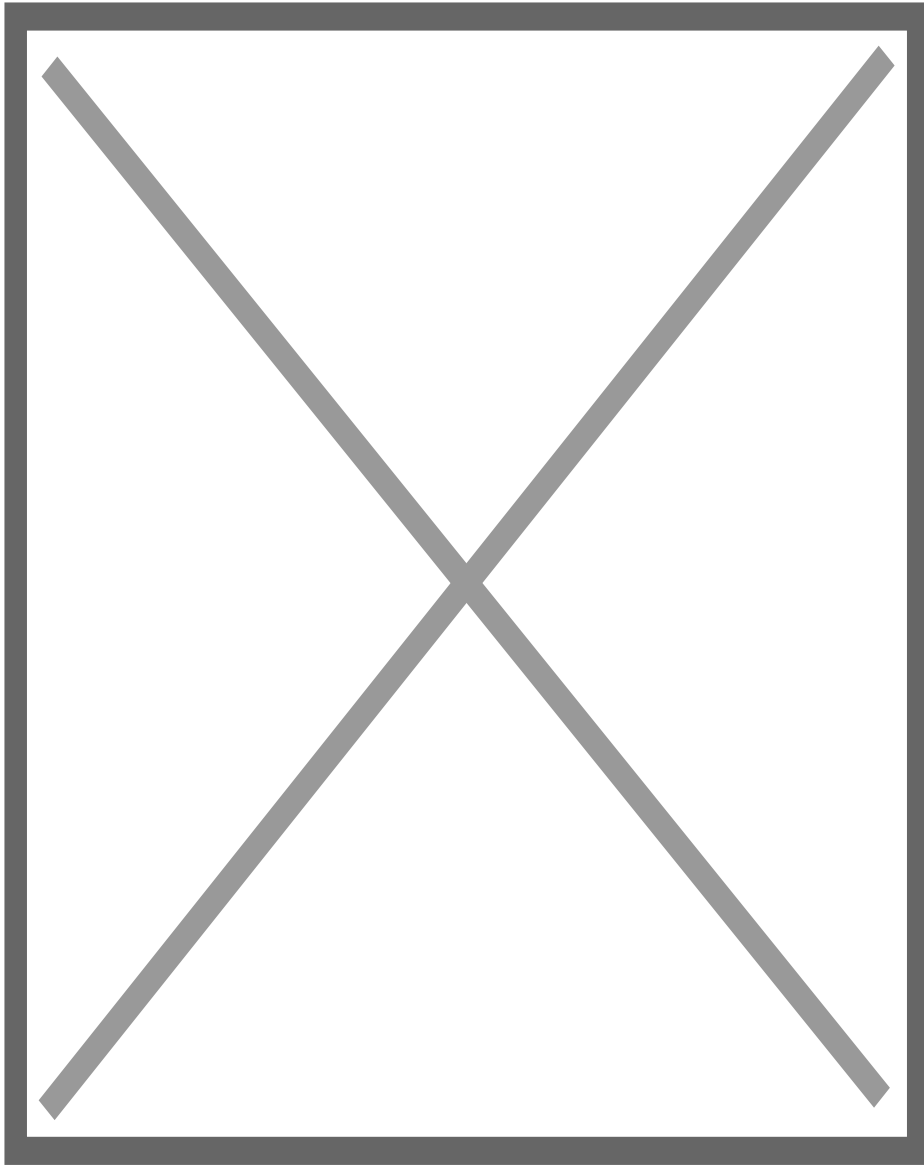


Illustration by Jamiel Law

A few years ago, I came across a book called *Worship Across the Racial Divide*. Its chapter titles were arresting: “African Americans as the Icon of ‘True Worship,’” “The Naïve Experience of Worship in Multiracial Churches,” “‘Have You Seen Our Gospel Choir?’ Conspicuous Color in Multiracial Worship.”

The book's author, sociologist Gerardo Martí, spent two years studying 12 racially integrated congregations in Southern California. The most common feature he found in these churches was a Black music leader or gospel choir, meant to attract those outside the White majority. While this model does foster cross-racial relationships within a music program, Martí found that it also reinforces stereotypes that essentialize race. Universally, his interviewees considered Black worshippers' experience to be more authentic than anyone else's. In addition, Black religious life influenced the music of the service but nothing else—not attire, service length, preaching style, or nonmusical leadership.

I read Martí's book with trepidation. Our majority-White congregation was about to spend a year exploring anti-racist worship practices, thanks to a grant from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship. For decades, our church had invested in anti-racist education, social action, and relationship building. We had not investigated our worship practice. How could we worship in a way that bore witness to God's transforming, barrier-breaking reign? What did we need to consider anew? After reading the book I probed other questions alongside these. Did the use of Black church music offer hope for a new world, or did it reinforce racism? What was at the root of the desire to foster a racially diverse church?

That year we interviewed and worshiped with intentionally multiracial churches whose pastors were people of color. We studied together. We tried new practices in worship. We partnered with one church to cohost vacation Bible school. But our primary relationship was with St. Ambrose Episcopal Church, a historically Black church in a historically Black part of our city.

I remember meeting with Jemonde Taylor, the church's rector, to propose the idea of a partnership. He explained that after working with majority-White churches, his congregation experienced "yoke fatigue." The churches that approached St. Ambrose for partnership were filled with well-meaning White people who wanted to undo their racism and find ways to be better allies. This most often took the form of study groups in which the Black church partner was the expert. St. Ambrose was intentionally taking time off from this demanding and emotionally exhausting endeavor.

I suggested something else. We would entrust our learning to experts who were compensated for their labor. Instead, we would sing together. I told him that our worship committee was suggesting a joint choir during Lent. Each week we would join St. Ambrose for choir practice, where we would learn songs significant to the life of their church. At the end, we would share a worship service together.

Then he made an additional suggestion. Perhaps St. Ambrose could learn something from our church, too. He shared about their interest in exploring music that breaks the norm of masculine language for God. Could we introduce music that offers more expansive imagery?

We agreed to the undertaking. We would exchange gifts: one week Raleigh Mennonite would teach a song to the St. Ambrose choir, and the next we would learn a song that was central to St. Ambrose's worship. On Sundays, in our separate worship services, each choir would introduce the congregation to the new song we learned.

During this time, I thought about Martí's finding that churches become multiracial through the auspicious incorporation of Black church music that disconnects it from its roots in liberation from enslavement and the long, slow march to freedom. They recontextualize it in a way that is not devoid of meaning but does produce a different kind of music. Martí helped me understand what might happen when a majority-White church incorporates music from cultures and experiences beyond its own.

Instead of rejecting this practice as inherently exoticizing, I began to see our church's incorporation of music from other cultures as holding us within a web of relationality and responsibility. We weren't involved in a translation project, trying to map a different experience onto our own. Sharing music gave us a new language of

praise, one that emanated from a previously established form of life.

Years before I approached Taylor about a shared choir, he had called me about the impending rezoning of a massive piece of property abutting his church's neighborhood. The \$2 billion development would skyrocket property taxes in the community, forcing Black homeowners to sell. And the increased sewage outflow would cause catastrophic flooding in buildings downstream, including the church and its neighbors. The next months were a blur of calls with city councilors, working to line people up for a press conference, and strategizing with a local environmental justice group. We worked together to secure a guarantee to address issues of water runoff.

Through a shared commitment to the other's flourishing, by showing up when our siblings in Christ were in trouble, we developed a new context and meaning for the songs our churches sang together. Later, whenever our choir sang one of the shared anthems, I would think, *This is a St. Ambrose song*. I remembered those songs as a gift that announced the redemption of all things.