

In unison: The church needs more than one style of music

From the Editors in the [July 12, 2003](#) issue

Joan Chittister says that singing is what makes her Benedictine community a community. The singing of the group effects the unity that it represents. But since religious experience and convictions are closely tied to certain forms of music, music can also divide people. The current worship wars pit those who prefer so-called traditional hymns (German chorales and the hymnody of Isaac Watts or Charles Wesley) against those who favor so-called contemporary Christian music (CCM for short)—praise choruses often projected on a screen or wall and sung repetitiously. It's a battle of the pipe organ against guitars and drums.

But the familiar terms of combat tend to be misleading and unhelpful. By “traditional” people usually mean music that has grown out of the Reformation tradition; they don't have in mind Gregorian chants or hymns from the Orthodox Church, which are certainly parts of the tradition. And by “contemporary” people usually mean praise songs that are especially popular in American evangelical churches; they don't have in mind music being produced by communities like Taizé in France or Iona in Scotland, which is also contemporary, or the music being written by other kinds of contemporary composers. And neither camp necessarily welcomes non-Western music, old or new.

Tom Long has argued persuasively in *Beyond the Worship Wars* that congregations experiencing renewal are eclectic in their musical style. They focus on participation rather than performance. They use music that empowers the congregation to meaningfully express its feelings and convictions.

In short, the church needs both the old and the new in music. Traditional music of whatever kind has stood the test of time. And much traditional hymnody has a magisterial quality, evoking a sense of awe toward God. It also has a catechetical dimension missing in much contemporary music—an important factor, given that many Christians get more of their theology from hymns than from sermons or education programs.

At the same time, church renewal movements often produce new kinds of hymns, and singing such music can be a source of renewal for other churches. Like theology, music needs to be relevant to context and deal with new issues such as environmental degradation, global citizenship and the inclusion of marginalized groups.

Hymns shouldn't be chosen on the basis of style alone: more salient criteria are how singable they are, what mood they evoke, what message they convey and how they fit into the flow of the liturgy.

The church needs more than one style of music. As the late Erik Routley put it, “Hymns are like people; they have personality and character. Congregations who sing only one kind of hymn like only one kind of person in their congregation. If they respond to new hymns with, ‘Why do we have to sing hymns like that?’ don't be surprised if they aren't more open to having new people attend their church as well.”