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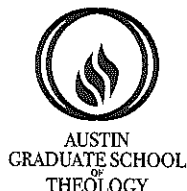
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Our Musical Preferences Do Matter: *Appropriate Music in the Assembly*

Allan & Patricia Burke McNicol

Imagine a dimly lit stage; musicians are tuning their instruments and guitars. They check the volume controls on the amps. The drummer makes sure that everything in the trap set is in good working order. The pianist arranges the music so all the segues will go smoothly. The lead singer and back-up vocalists check their microphones.

A crowd gathers and the band begins a twenty-minute set that can be described as rhythmically energized, upbeat, and intended to evoke enthusiasm. The leader sings, provides verbal interludes and transitions, and prompts the audience to higher levels of energy and emotion.¹

You may recognize the description is not of a club or a rock concert; it is a *worship* service. In most major cities there are countless assemblies (Pentecostal, Baptist, Episcopalian, and non-denominational) where this description accurately expresses reality. Substitute a praise team for instrumentalists and one can include some Churches of Christ in this description. What is clear is that many worship assemblies have adapted

¹Compare a similar description by Milburn Price, "The Impact of Popular Culture on Congregational Song," *The Hymn* 44 (1993): 11.

themselves to a model of worship analogous to attendance at a performance. Leaders are on "stage" and the congregation is the "audience." In the interest of consumer-friendly evangelism, Christian assemblies are becoming interchangeable with assemblies in the wider culture.

This essay will not directly address the issue of how friendly the church should be with the dominant culture when communicating its message.² Rather, our focus will be on the function of music in a Christian assembly. We wish to offer the following thesis. Christian faith has developed its own expressions of music that function effectively as vehicles of transcendence supporting the church as an alternative culture to that of the surrounding fallen creation. These recognizable expressions may be traced historically with a degree of precision. At present this important heritage is in danger on two fronts. First, from neglect; second, many churches, fearful of losing younger generations, are embracing forms of Christian hymnody adapted to music styles of popular entertainment culture. Consequently, the heritage is dismissed and, if the trend continues, future generations will be diminished.

To join our heritage with the entertainment culture is like mixing oil and water. One form of music may be expressive of transcendence, while the other is more commonly associated with personal gratification.³ In contrast,

²This issue has been dealt with by numerous books and essays. See, for example, two works by Michael R. Weed, "The Twilight of the Gods: Pluralism, Morality, and the Church," *ICS Faculty Bulletin* 3 (October 1982): 5-16; "The Secularization of the Church: From Transcendence to Technique," *ICS Faculty Bulletin* 6 (Fall 1985): 69-85.

³Although this is not the burden of our article, many in Churches of Christ (*a cappella*) seem unaware in their acceptance of this Trojan horse. Modern popular music (especially rock), because of its appeal to emotions and sensibilities, cannot be separated from instrumentation—especially percussion. This was anathema to the ancient church. Some vocal groups in Churches of Christ have shown amazing ingenuity in presenting versions of this music in religious dress by substituting the human voice for instrumental backing. But it is a lost cause. If the church utilizes these forms of music for its hymnody, instruments will eventually appear to accompany it. The music itself demands no less.

we suggest that from the earliest days to the present Christian leaders have identified certain features of music as being crucial for its use in worship. By drawing attention to this heritage we wish to suggest a place to start in the difficult task of choosing music appropriate for use in Christian worship.

Procedurally we will sketch the main features of the music used widely in the ancient church, the period of Latin influence (400–1400), the European Reformation, and the modern era (with an emphasis on the emergence of the Restoration Movement).⁴

Music in the Ancient Church

One thing that can be said about music in the ancient church is that it was not dictated by the culture. Everett Ferguson states succinctly, “(early) Christian music was vocal and monodic.”⁵ Without question it was the direct antithesis to the winsome melodies coming from the flute or tambourines accompanying the worship of Isis or Cybele up the street.

Indeed, the Latin word *musica* seldom appears in discussions of worship in early Christian literature.⁶ This may well provide the clue that will lead to insight. In the ancient world music was considered to have an almost magical power either to soothe the gods or drive away demonic powers. In this capacity it was linked with the offering of sacrifices.⁷

Whether at the temple in Jerusalem or in the numerous sanctuaries of the Greco-Roman world, music in a religious context could not be

⁴To deal in any reasonable detail with this issue would demand volumes. Nevertheless, we must start somewhere; and if we sensitize some to the reality that the Christian community has been able to make judgments that certain forms and structures of music are more suitable for the assembly than others, then we will consider our effort worthwhile.

⁵Everett Ferguson, “Music” in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (ed. Everett Ferguson; 2nd ed.; New York: Garland, 1997), 788.

⁶Ferguson, “Music,” 788.

⁷J. Quasten, *Music and Worship in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (trans. Boniface Ramsey; Washington: National Association of Pastoral Musicians, 1983), 1–50.

disentangled from the offering of sacrifices—usually to give pleasure to the gods. In a community where the sacrificial system had been obliterated by Jesus' once-and-for-all sacrifice, music was destined to play a far different role in worship. It is important to note that the music offered by trained singers accompanied by instrumentalists (as in the Jerusalem temple) was rejected by early Christians as a vain attempt to influence or control the divine.⁸

In contrast, early Christian singing may be described as a heart-felt recitation of confession and praise in an expressive lyrical mode.⁹ In dominant

⁸Here it may be appropriate to say a brief word about the absence of instrumental music in ancient Christian worship. Traditionally for Churches of Christ, operating out of the Reformed/Restoration tradition, the issue as to whether or not one used instruments of music in worship has been treated as a question of the interpretation of scripture (i.e., a hermeneutical issue). This discussion centered on whether a particular practice in worship can be based in scripture. A common principle set forth was that a course of action was excluded in worship if it were not authorized by a text or validated by a practice warranted by the NT. But in the ancient church reflection about the music in worship did not directly revolve around matters of scriptural interpretation. Rather the focus of the role of music lay elsewhere. As with the Jewish synagogue, the Christian assembly made a clear break from the temple service with its mixture of animal sacrifices offered in tandem with instrumental music. In both synagogue and the Christian assembly music offered by human lips was the norm. (Indeed, the connection of instruments of music and sacrifice was so vital to temple worship that when John in Revelation 5 described anachronistically worship in the heavenly sanctuary in terms of the theology of Isaiah 6, the music came from the cithara.) Although most Jews going to the synagogue in the first century would not be opposed to what took place in the temple, in keeping with the wider cultural spiritualization of worship, they conceived that their vocal music was the offering of spiritual sacrifices. Christianity quickly broke with temple worship whether Jewish or pagan altogether. In their assemblies Christians offered to God vocally "the sacrifice of praise, that is the tribute of lips" (Heb 13:15 NEB). This was the conceptual milieu that accounts for the absence of instrumental music in the worship of the ancient church. Moreover, as with synagogue worship, there is little evidence that the psalms (sung in the temple) were actually sung in Christian worship. People of the ancient church would be astonished with some today who wish to revitalize worship by imitating how the psalms were sung in the temple. They would be appalled to walk into some modern worship centers featuring drums and cymbals, knowing that the music they knew, produced by flutes, drums, and tambourines, appealed directly to the emotions, not the conscious heart.

⁹This dovetails closely with the many references in the literature from the

Semitic cultures such as greater Syria, Christian singing would have a musical cadence which would be pleasing auditorily to the participants but would probably strike the modern person as very unadorned, somewhat akin to the cantillation of a synagogue lector.¹⁰ In the Greco-Roman world where Christianity spread, singing was also important. But here again the musical quality was simple and instructive. It was simple in expressions of praise to God and Christ. It was instructive in that its verbal expression encouraged others in the faith. Its unadorned style differed greatly from the traditional Greek hymn of the pagans with its strict meter and emphasis on stressed and unstressed syllables.¹¹

The simple and unadorned quality of early Christian music is worthy of note. The technical word for a formal Greek hymn, *paian*, does not even occur in the New Testament. The New Testament prefers to refer to a Christian song as a *psalmos* (psalm). Originally functioning as the superscription for the book of Psalms in the Greek Bible (LXX), by the time of the New Testament, a *psalmos* became a synonym along with hymns and spiritual songs for a freely composed religious composition.¹² Not until the

early church to Christian singing being responsorial. Procedurally, a leader may recite perhaps a *sursum corda* or read a composition and the congregation would respond in a lyrical cadence. Ferguson, "Music," 788, gives a number of handy references. This is also confirmed by the appearance of an abundance of short praise formulae, doxologies and eulogies in the New Testament that appear to be drawn directly from the songs of the assembly (cf. Luke 2:14; 1 Tim 1:17; 6:16; Rom 1:25; 9:5; Eph 1:3; 2 Cor 2:14; 8:15; 9:15). In addition, the New Testament contains various other responsorial utterances such as *amen*, *halleluia*, and *maranatha*. All of this is evidence for the widespread presence of verbal expressions of thankfulness for God's gift of Christ in early Christian assemblies.

¹⁰Many of the songs of Qumran or the *Odes of Solomon* (probably second-century works of a Christian-Jewish provenance) are grounds for support that the length of early Christian hymns could extend to multiple stanzas. The Christ hymns of Phil 2:6–11 and Col 1:15–20 are examples of movement in this direction.

¹¹Martin Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM, 1983), 78–80.

¹²Martin Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul*, 78–80. Cf. Col 3:16; Eph 5:18–20; 1 Cor 14:26. These references do not refer to the psalms of the Psalter although

third century did Christian hymnic composition begin to reflect some interconnection with the forms of Greek metrical poetry which were structured into stanzas, each employing the same meters and numbers.¹³ Only at this time did hymns, roughly as we know them today, emerge. Examples would be the famous *Phos Hilaron* ("Gladsome Light") or Clement of Alexandria's *Shepherd of Eager (Tender) Youth*.

It is critical to note that in both its form and content early Christian music was an expression of an alternative culture in whose assemblies offerings of praise connected its members to the Lord of the universe. The new communities necessitated a new way of worship to break with the old forms of musical expression in the culture—especially the connection between music and sacrifices. By selectively utilizing certain conventions of ancient music, early Christian music in and of itself did not develop any new musical structure. The focus of Christian song was not on structure but on the praise of Christ and the edification of fellow believers. More developed musical structures embodying a focus on transcendence would follow.

The Period of Latin Influence (400–1400)

By the early fourth century, the church began to be influenced by the musical forms of the Greco-Roman culture. Nevertheless, the cantillation and chant-like procedures, embedded in Christianity from its Semitic origins, were still widely utilized and began to find expression in a form of music known as plainsong. Plainsong would be the dominant form of music in the church for the next one thousand years.

Plainsong hymns consist of a single unaccompanied (*a cappella*)

some early Christian songs may have been influenced by the structure of the Book of Psalms. We emphasize that the Psalter's connection with the times of sacrifice probably militated against this usage. Rather, the Psalter was read and expounded as scripture anticipating the events of Christ and the new era.

¹³Edward Foley, *Foundations of Christian Music: The Music of Pre-Constantinian Christianity* (Nottingham: Grove, 1992), 80–84.

melodic line with no discernible meter. It allows freedom of rhythm to fit the words of a text. It is thought that early plainsong melodies were influenced by the music of the synagogue and the Christian Hebrew music with which it would have had close connections.¹⁴ Although its sound is foreign to the ears of the average Christian today, it has re-emerged through numerous recordings made in European monasteries and convents. The uncomplicated quality of plainsong stands in stark contrast to rock music with its pounding rhythms and to movie music with its lush complicated orchestration. The genius of plainsong was to support and express the impact of the word in liturgy and to create for the worshipper a reality that transcended the hardship, pain, and loss so common in daily medieval life. Its most famous form is Gregorian chant.¹⁵ Routley considers that chant expresses perfectly the ethos of medieval worship which was designed to separate the spirit from many of the de-humanizing aspects of daily medieval life.¹⁶ The music outside the church was often rooted in questionable bodily movement.¹⁷

Gregorian chant is one of the treasures of Western civilization *and is considered the source of music in the West*. Examples can even be found in hymnals in use among Churches of Christ.¹⁸ One of the most famous examples of medieval chant is the Easter sequence *Victimae Paschali Laudes*.

¹⁴Egon Wellesz, "Early Christian Music," *The New Oxford History of Music*, Vol. 2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 2.

¹⁵Gregorian chant takes its name from Pope Gregory I (died 604). Gregory authorized the collection and standardization of chant melodies in order to combat perceived abuses and a secularization which, even then, was creeping into the liturgy. Gregory also established a school which both preserved and spread these melodies throughout Europe.

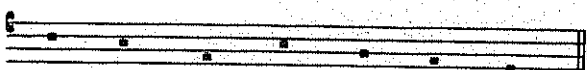
¹⁶Erik Routley, *The Music of Christian Hymns* (Chicago: GIA, 1981), 12.

¹⁷Routley, *The Music of Christian Hymns*, 12.

¹⁸Forrest M. McCann, ed., *Great Songs of the Church* (rev. ed.; Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 1986), 160, 246, and 247.



1. Vic - ti - mae Pas cha - li lau - des
Christ-ians to the Pas - chal Vic - tim



im - mo - lent Chri - sti - a ni
of - fer your thank - ful prais - es!



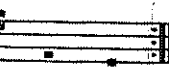
2. Ag - nus re - de - mit o ves
A Lamb the sheep re - dee - meth:
3. Mors et vi - ta du - el - lo
Death and life have con - ten - ded



Chris - tus in - no - cens Pa - tri
Christ who on - ly is sin - less
con - flix - e - re mi - ran - do
in that com - bat stu - pen - dous:



2. re - con - ci - li - a - vit pec - ca -
re - con - ci - leth sin - cers to the
3. dux vi - tae mor - tu - us reg - nat
The Prince of life who died reigns im -



to - res
Fa - ther.
vi - vus.
mor - tal.

Gregorian chant endured because it was an unsurpassed vehicle for evoking in both singer and listener a response that only can be described as

devotional. Medieval thinkers believed in the moral implications of music: so the song sung *a cappella* came directly from the heart of the worshippers, and the single melodic line expressed the unity of God's people. The unmetered aspect of chant created a quality that was able to bring one into the presence of transcendence with relative ease.

As the centuries passed, battles emerged over increasing embellishments in chant that could only be handled by professional musicians. Nevertheless, at its core, plainsong embodied the simplicity and purity of Christian devotion. For over half the history of Christianity it successfully differentiated Christian song from secular and pagan music.

The Reformation and Bach

Two primary streams of hymnody flowed out of the Reformation, one influenced by Luther and the other by Calvin. Both were to have implications for singing in churches of the Restoration Movement. Luther wished to refine worship by removing obstacles to the ordinary person's search for salvation. His liturgical reforms aimed to give the congregation its own special part in the service. Luther composed a repertoire of *chorales* for the people to sing. His gifts as both a theologian and a musician enabled him to convey profound scriptural teaching with simplicity and artistic grace.¹⁹ Because he loved medieval chant, Luther adapted many of the simple forms of plainsong melodies, putting them into meter and translating them into German. Luther's hymns were works of creativity or were drawn from the best traditions of vocal music (rather than from the taverns) that he knew.²⁰ His *chorales* were written with only a text and a melody and were intended to be sung by the congregation in unison without accompaniment.²¹

¹⁹Charl Schalk, "Martin Luther's Hymn's Today," *The Hymn* 34 (1983): 131-133.

²⁰Routley, *The Music of Christian Hymns*, 21-24.

²¹Erik Routley, *The Church and Music* (London: G. Duckworth, 1967),

The other major stream of hymnody within the Reformation found its source in Calvin. Because of his respect for the Spirit's inspiration of scripture, Calvin considered the Psalms as the norm for expressions of public praise and had them translated into the vernacular. This practice became characteristic of the Reformed Tradition and lasted well into the nineteenth century. Later, free paraphrases of the Psalms, such as those of Isaac Watts, would popularize this process.

Calvin's philosophy on music has three points of emphasis: (1) it should be simple;²² (2) it should be modest and dignified because it is offered to the Sovereign God; (3) it is best achieved as the product of the unaccompanied voice.²³

Like Luther, Calvin was interested in writing hymns that were singable. But the full flowering and culmination of the music of the Reformation and the origin of our roots of four-part singing in the church of later times came with J. S. Bach.

Bach's sacred and secular works were expressive of a world view in which all beauty is sacred because it has God as its Creator and Redeemer. Thus he sought to unite praise to God and aesthetic beauty. Bach probably did not compose hymn tunes himself, but he took tunes available in Europe and harmonized them into four parts. He gave them an expressive content through rich harmonic structure that has left an imprint on hymn-writing to the present time. Through such compositions as *O Sacred Head, Now*

120.

²²When considering the issue of simplicity one is reminded of the very atheological subject of women's fashion. A specific classic dress design may be described as the ultimate in simplicity. But this does not mean dowdy or "Plain-Jane." Correspondingly, we must not assume that simple music is uncultivated or ordinary. It is well known that the greatest hymns are masterpieces of simplicity even though much that passes today for simplicity is in the words of Fred Pratt Green "commonplace and trite."

²³Routley, *The Church and Music*, 125.

Wounded, or *Jesus, Priceless Treasure* we share not only his genius in combining theology and beauty but also his affirmation that Jesus is the beginning and end of faith.²⁴

Bach, influenced by Luther, thought that the congregational singing of the *chorale* should be the climax of his cantatas and passions. By establishing a rhythm of even measures, and by expressing the emotional meaning of a text through the use of four-part harmony, he has bequeathed to our era some of the most important characteristics of the modern hymn.²⁵

Four-part harmony did not begin with Bach. It was used earlier in devotional and domestic settings. But Bach's way of harmonizing a simple tune to enhance and facilitate spiritual responses based on the text became the accepted way of writing hymns. To Restoration Christians, who did not use instruments, Bach's use of four-part harmony and general aesthetic influence on hymnology was an invaluable legacy.

The Contemporary Era

Among the leaders of the Restoration Movement in the early nineteenth century, Alexander Campbell was without peer. His many accomplishments included the editing of a hymnal.²⁶ Campbell took pride in selecting the best hymns available in the Reformation. He especially preferred tunes composed by his famed contemporary Lowell Mason.²⁷ Referring to the hymnal Campbell wrote:

²⁴Jaroslav Pelikan, *Bach Among the Theologians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 26.

²⁵Routley, *The Music of Christian Hymns*, 68.

²⁶Alexander Campbell, ed., *The Christian Hymn Book—A Compilation of Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs* (1st ed. 1828; edition available to the author, Cincinnati: H. S. Bosworth, 1865).

²⁷Mason composed and harmonized some of the best-known tunes for classical hymns still in use to this day. Some examples are *Perez* (*Praise the Lord, Ye Heavens Above*), *Gerar* (*God Is the Fountain Whence*), and *Hamburg* (*When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*).

No volume, indeed (the *Christian Hymn Book*) ought to be studied with more care, and composed with more special regard to the sacred style, than this book of Christian worship.²⁸

Campbell set the standard for “simple but dignified worship” in churches of the Restoration Movement. This tradition became a guiding force in many other hymnals such as L. O. Sanderson’s collection, *Christian Hymns*, and was definitely a force behind E. L. Jorgenson’s *Great Songs of the Church*, with its treasury of traditional hymns and gospel songs, and *Great Songs of the Church* (Revised).²⁹

On the other hand, the expansion of Churches of Christ on the American frontier at the height of the period of nineteenth- and twentieth-century revivalism meant that wider cultural forces inevitably influenced our hymnody. Here we find distant roots of contemporary demands that church music be “user-friendly” with the culture. In the nineteenth century, paramount among innovations in Christian music on the frontier were camp meetings and gospel songs. These songs emerged from revivals that featured powerful preachers and soloists working together to arouse the emotions of audiences to respond to the invitation. These songs had a strongly individualistic character reflecting an intense personal faith. In the main, especially in the form of solos, these songs had more emotional impact when performed with instrumental accompaniment. They became accepted tools of evangelism—especially among instrumental churches of the

²⁸Alexander Campbell, *Millennial Harbinger New Series* 6 (Bethany: Alexander Campbell, 1842; repr., Joplin: College Press), 231.

²⁹The latter is especially worthy of note because of the mainly unheralded work of both F. M. McCann and music editor Jack Boyd. McCann and Boyd sought to include hymns from almost every Christian century encompassing both East and West, and through judicious translations, they made available to English-speaking Churches of Christ for the first time a number of significant hymns and tunes from other languages. In this collection, thoughtfully arranged in four part harmony for congregational singing, many of the finest hymns of the ecumenical community are now available for use by churches of the Restoration tradition.

Restoration Movement.

Besides the gospel song, the use of shaped note music was popular in churches of the South. Much of this music was performed by the Stamps-Baxter Quartets and published and distributed by them. The music specialized in alto leads, bass runs, and harmonizations that imitated instrumental textures, all designed to give the singing energy and zest. This and similar forms of music became ubiquitous in Churches of Christ in the twentieth century. Today, the acceptance of this music has mutated into a fascination with and appreciation for the music which is widespread in popular entertainment culture.

With the advent of Christian radio and the emergence of huge marketing interests, more and more people expect songs sung in church to be in the same style as those popular in the surrounding culture. Since most of popular contemporary music is intrinsically connected with amplification and instrumentation, current practices inevitably mean that we must ask the question, sooner rather than later, will more and more Churches of Christ sanction instrumental accompaniment?³⁰

The battle between the use of traditional hymnody and “user-friendly” songs in the mode of popular contemporary music continues. At present there appears to be a disposition to blend these, producing various mutations of both kinds of music in Sunday services; but it is impossible to determine where all this will go. With advanced technology, new hymns are being introduced with great rapidity into our assemblies. However, by and large, because of poor arrangements, most congregations have been unable to sing

³⁰Our focus in this essay has centered on the need to distinguish music used for church from the music of popular culture. The influence of popular culture on church music is compounded by the widespread impact of charismatic worship. This essay does not discuss the role and function of the praise song in the assembly, which Allan J. McNicol treated earlier in “Contemporary Trends in Hymnody: Bane or Blessing in the Church?” *Christian Studies* 13 (1993): 39–46.

these hymns well.³¹

Conclusion

As we move well into the second decade of the “worship wars,” most congregations have accommodated a blend of traditional hymnody and popular entertainment music in their assemblies. Decisions on the choice of music for the assembly are commonly made on the basis of preferences in much the same way as a radio station, losing market share, shifts from one style of music to another. Attention is seldom given to critical questions such as “What does God require with respect to what we offer him in praise?” Or, “If God is One of absolute worth, shouldn’t we offer him not only our best manner of life but also our best quality of music?” And, “Is the best only a matter of personal preference, ‘as long as we are sincere’?” In this essay, we have argued that “the best” resides in our legacy of quality hymnody produced by outstanding poets and musicians among the people of God throughout the centuries.

As this essay has indicated, in the past, the church has been able to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate music for the assembly. We believe that with good effort we are capable of doing the same today. We will be impoverished if we replace our rich heritage with a constant diet of music shaped by the modern entertainment culture.

In conclusion, a word about our tradition of *a cappella* singing: it is not late-breaking news that the tradition is at risk. For it to be maintained with integrity, at least three basic areas must receive immediate attention.

³¹A point ought to be made about “contemporary” hymns. Contemporary music is usually connected by most people with praise songs or styles of music that are widespread in popular secular culture. Many marvelous hymns composed in recent years by authors such as Fred Pratt Green, Carl P. Daw, Jr., and Timothy Dudley-Smith are as theologically deep as those composed in other eras. Unfortunately, such compositions seldom make it into our assemblies, even though they are contemporary and are easily found in standard denominational hymnals.

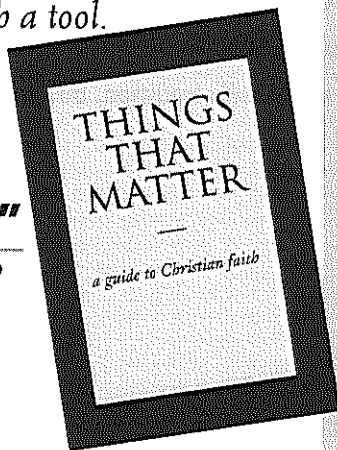
First, we must utilize an appropriate combination of unison singing (strength of plainsong) and fresh arrangements for four-part harmony, without which the clamor will come for instruments to supply the lacking texture in congregational praise. Second, the movement started in the last century to publish the best hymnody of the wider ecumenical community must be continued. Finally, church leaders must encourage gifted poets and musicians to compose hymns that exhibit the highest standards of literary and musical craftsmanship and encourage song leaders to lead them. We are not prepared to abandon our glorious *a cappella* tradition, but it is late in the day.

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