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## Singing the Story of Advent and Christmas: How Congregational Song Makes Diverse Theologies Incarnate

Hilary Seraph Donaldson<sup>1</sup>

This article explores Advent song from diverse liturgical and cultural contexts, and analyzes how singing congregational song from diverse perspectives is vital to sharing in the theologies of our brothers and sisters in Christ. The musical witness of the church across the whole inhabited earth is rich in song that illustrates this journey; yet at Christmastime especially, churches in the Anglo-Canadian context tend to gravitate toward time-honoured, nostalgic carols to express the theology of Advent. As I will argue, however, what we sing matters a great deal in how we understand the Advent mystery and the God toward whom we journey. In exploring these songs, I suggest we might move toward a metaphor for worship as “wood between the worlds,” referencing the mysterious forest depicted by theologian and children’s author C.S. Lewis in his novel *The Magician’s Nephew*. Through this culturally decentring framework, I illustrate the unique perspective that global congregational song can lend to embodying a festive season with a prophetic edge.

The liturgical journey toward Bethlehem has many songs along the way. Mary’s prophetic canticle frames the coming story of birth with defiant and apocalyptic words of justice and promise:

*My soul magnifies the Lord,  
And my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.*

The angels’ joyful song to the marginalized shepherds points the way to the stable:

*Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among those whom God favours.*

Simeon’s faithful song of praise affirms that a great revelation has taken place, and our story will never be the same:

*Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,  
according to your word,  
for my eyes have seen your salvation.*

Generations later, as we re-tell and re-live this story, we have introduced songs of our own, including lullabies which we sing to the infant Christ:

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*Silent night! Holy night!  
All is calm, all is bright  
Round yon' virgin mother and child,  
Holy infant so tender and mild,  
Sleep in heavenly peace.*

This Advent journey is filled with arresting images and populated by interesting characters; it is a powerful and surprising story of divine theophany amid livestock and feeding troughs. Advent and Christmas, for better or worse, are also the liturgical seasons perhaps most bound up with seasons and rituals from outside the church: the compelling and nuanced story of incarnation which opens the Christian year jockeys for attention with Black Friday, family traditions, Christmas blockbusters, and holiday cheer. Christmas rituals, whether they occur inside or outside the church, make this season one of powerful emotions and nostalgia. Accordingly, the re-enacting of Christmas rituals carries deep emotional weight for many of us. Congregational song plays powerfully into the nostalgia of this season, particularly with carols sung inside and outside of the liturgy. Many of us, for example, have deep nostalgic associations with Christmas carols written or popularized in the Victorian era, such as “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” “Angels We Have Heard on High,” and “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” The translations of John Mason Neale (“Of the Father’s Love Begotten,” “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”) and Catherine Winkworth (“Comfort, Comfort You, My People,” “From Heaven High I Come to Earth”) are richly evocative during the Advent season. For many of us, the singing of hymns and carols such as these is synonymous with the arrival of the Christ-child.

I serve as a pastoral musician in an urban Toronto church, and I have consulted for congregations and worship leaders across Canada and beyond. One of the central aspects of my ministry is to create a space for diverse expressions of worship, to push at the borders of what our worshipping communities consider canonic music for praise and prayer. From this perspective, I have found that even in churches with an enthusiasm for global expressions of praise, we tend to gravitate toward Anglo-European hymns and carols to express our Advent and Christmas worship. This is largely due, I suggest, to the deeply nostalgic character of how we understand the Christmas season. It is also a tendency which goes further than simply wishing to repeat certain “old favourite” carols, to assumptions about what musical forms are suitable for worship at certain times of the year.

In his landmark study of the state of congregational song at the end of the twentieth century, C. Michael Hawn identified seven “streams of song” which run through contemporary corporate worship. As Hawn insists, expressing our sung praise using music from a variety of streams goes beyond surface matters of musical style to deep questions of how the diverse Christian assembly understands and expresses its theology:

Streams have a source, and each of the... seven streams of song come from particular sources of faith – a particular expression of piety. [...] Few, if any, will navigate all of these streams with equal confidence. We all have our primary sources of piety and preferences for expressing this piety in song. Yet, the people

of God who gather in the common assembly we call Christian worship may enrich their prayer by expanding the number of streams from which they draw.<sup>2</sup>

Advent and Christmas carols such as the examples named above are the precursors to what Hawn calls Protestant Contemporary Classical Hymnody. It found renewed currency in the “hymnic explosion” of Great Britain in the 1960s<sup>3</sup> and, while a widely varied form, this body of song is primarily characterized by “metrical paraphrases of the Psalms, hymns for the Christian year and sacraments, prophetic hymns on justice themes such as inclusion, peace, and ecology, [and] hymns on ministry.”<sup>4</sup> Integral to this style is the rhetorical development of an idea which is developed across several stanzas of the same poetic meter. It is a literary, often quite erudite form grounded in the idea that worship music has an exhortative purpose, to convince the singer of something through stirring rational argument. This approach comes through, for example, in “From Heaven High I Come to Earth.” Martin Luther’s text is grounded in scripture and has an explicitly didactic purpose. The first two stanzas explain the Biblical story heralding the child born in Bethlehem, echoing the angels’ annunciation to the shepherds:

*From heaven high I come to earth;  
I bring good tidings of great mirth;  
this mirth is such a wondrous thing  
that I must tell you all and sing...*

There is a change in perspective midway through so that the singer is implicated in the story: The words “Give heed, my heart, lift up thine eyes! / Who is it in yon manger lies?” places the singer in the presence of Christ. The initial reference to “my heart” is developed in the conclusion of the hymn where the singer exhorts Christ to make a bed “Within my heart, that it may be /A quiet chamber kept for Thee.” In Luther’s famous Advent hymn, then, the correct response to witnessing the divine revelation of the incarnation is to prepare a place in one’s heart for Christ and, like the angels, to sing praises to the triune God. Luther’s well-known tune supports the opening idea of the text in pitch symbolism familiar to the Western common-practice idiom: the tune begins up high and gradually makes its way down the octave, coming to “earth” from “heaven high.” Symbolism such as this has delighted liturgical musicians for generations, particularly J.S. Bach, who wrote many chorale preludes on Luther’s tune and set it three times in the Christmas Oratorio alone. These literate references and musical symbols are a core aesthetic of hymnody in this tradition, and in singing them we are trained to value this mode of expressing our praise.

The ascendance of this stream of song in our expression of the Christmas story was brought home to me during a recent workshop I conducted at a theological college in Canada. I invited attendants to list their favourite music to sing during Advent and Christmas, and compiled the responses in front of them. Secretly, I was dividing their responses into three loose categories: “Worship choruses and sung meditations,” “Songs (verse and chorus),” and

<sup>2</sup> C. Michael Hawn, “Streams of Song: An Overview of Congregational Song in the Twenty-First Century,” *The Hymn* 61, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 19–20.

<sup>3</sup> c.f. Erik Routley, *A Panorama of Christian Hymnody*, rev. ed. (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> C. Michael Hawn, *One Bread, One Body: Exploring Cultural Diversity in Worship* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2003).

“Stanzad hymnody and carols.” The first category would include much of the music of the Taizé and Iona communities, songs from the African continent, and some African-American choruses, among others. The second would include Christian Contemporary song, songs in a folk style, and some Latin American repertoire. The attendants’ responses, however, overwhelmingly fell into the third category. This exercise was admittedly unscientific, but it illustrated an important point: there is a canon of worship music we particularly enjoy during Advent, and it is characterized by a particular genre of worship song, the stanza-based hymn or carol. I would suggest that even in singing a wide range of song from within this canon, we inevitably miss part of the picture.

In the season of Advent, congregational song has an especially poignant role to play in illustrating and revealing the theologies of the season. To sing the story of Advent is to breathe it in and send it out, to mutually incarnate the Word in a season which remembers the Word Incarnate. What we sing during Advent—and whose voices we privilege in the process—matters a great deal, as what we sing shapes how we understand this nativity story. Scripture reminds us again and again that Christ was born amid the poor, the marginalized, and the least, and it is these marginalized people who first proclaimed his arrival. In this essential story of our faith, the central characters are those most decentralized by society. This reality invites us to consider who is or has been made “other” in our own Anglo-North American mainline context, who we perceive explicitly or implicitly as outside a given community. This will differ from place to place and from congregation to congregation. Through the examples that follow, I will explore how song styles and cultures which may fall outside of the experience of mainline churches can illuminate the story of divine Incarnation in surprising and transformative ways.

## Incarnation

The incarnation of Christ is a complex symbol with implications that permeate all aspects of the Christian faith. Hymns such as “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence” convey its majesty and mystery with lyrics recalling the angelic hymn of Isaiah 6:

*At his feet the six-winged seraph,  
cherubim with sleepless eye  
veil their faces to his presence,  
as with ceaseless voice they cry:  
“Alleluia, alleluia!  
Alleluia, Lord Most High!”*

It is fitting that we take the opportunity to use splendid language such as this to sing our understanding of the mystery of the incarnation. But what possibilities might be offered by drawing on streams of song that bring our attention toward the gathered people as well?

## He Came Down<sup>5</sup>

*He came down that we may have love;*

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<sup>5</sup> See the Appendix for links to recordings and background information of this and the following songs.

*he came down that we may have love;  
he came down that we may have love;  
hallelujah forevermore.  
Leader: Why did he come?  
He came down that we may have light...<sup>6</sup>*

The Cameroonian chorus “He Came Down” was popularized for Western churches in the transcription by the Scottish song enlivener John L. Bell:

Bell was at an international meeting in Germany in 1986 when a group of Presbyterians from Cameroon formed a circle and broke into a singing dance. While moving counterclockwise, they beckoned with their hands, as if to call Christ into their midst.<sup>7</sup>

The song’s transparent musical structure and memorable melody built on a simple upward-climbing sequence make it easy for communities to learn completely by rote. This makes it a wonderful choice for leaders who wish to explore singing “off the page” as part of worship in Advent. In each repetition, the operative word changes, reflecting the many facets of Jesus’s ministry. In some ways, this simple chorus fills a similar function as the popular Advent hymn by Brian Wren, “Hope is a Star.” Through successive stanzas, Wren’s hymn explores each of the four Advent themes explored in some liturgical traditions: hope, peace, joy, and love. The recent hymnal *Glory to God* of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. suggests “light” as the second verse, calling to mind the pre-existent reality of Christ named in John chapter 1. In keeping with the improvisatory nature of many songs like this, communities might adapt the song to their use and incorporate new verses. Many African choruses are in a call-and-response format, or feature a leader who cantors or “lines out” the upcoming text at the end of the repetition, signalling to the congregation that the lyrics are about to change. This chorus is a variation on this idea, in that the cantor asks a question at the end of each line: “Why did he come?” As poet and hymnologist Carl Daw points out, “assigning the answers to the congregation rather than to the leader is a notable affirmation of the corporate wisdom of God’s people.”<sup>8</sup> This four-voice song can be accompanied by as little as a drum, or might be embellished by shakers, rhythm sticks, or piano—any instrument that supports the essentially rhythmic drive of the song.

The appearance of many songs such as this one in denominational hymnals of the last twenty-five years attests to increasing interest in singing the witness of the global church.<sup>9</sup> However, for church musicians trained in a Western classical idiom, by comparison to other hymns in a hymnal the score of a simple song like “He Came Down” can suggest that there is “not much to it.” It is a simple song built on a simple lyrical scheme; Carl Daw describes it as “anamnetic: it is not meant to impart new knowledge but to evoke memory and

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<sup>6</sup> Cameroonian traditional; arr. © 1986 Iona Community, admin. GIA Publications; appears in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Augsburg Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2006), #252.

<sup>7</sup> Carl P. Daw, Jr., *Glory to God: A Companion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 143.

<sup>8</sup> Carl Daw, *Glory to God: Hymns, Psalms, & Spiritual Songs* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 137.

<sup>9</sup> c.f. Hilary Seraph Donaldson, “Toward a Musical Praxis of Justice: A Survey of Global and Indigenous Canadian Song in the Hymnals of the Anglican, Presbyterian, and United Churches of Canada through their History.” *The Hymn* 63, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2012), 20–28.

thankfulness.”<sup>10</sup> However, to best understand the function of songs such as this we must be attuned to how we understand worship, and more specifically, how we understand time in worship. Hawn examines this idea in *One Bread, One Body: Exploring Cultural Diversity in Worship*. Extending the work of anthropologist Edward T. Hall, Hawn argues that Western communities function on a monochronic understanding of time; that is, time is linear, and flows from one point to another along a continuum. It tends to be understood as a kind of commodity, which can be spent, wasted, lost, and saved. This kind of thinking shapes who we are, and is reflected in hymnody like the Martin Luther example above; it is a linear, logical, exegetical form in which one thought leads rhetorically to another until the entire thought chain is expressed. Since it is structured this way, we would never sing the stanzas out of order. By contrast, many African communities espouse a polychronic understanding of time, in which time is relational or cyclical as opposed to linear. In a polychronic sensibility, being with others in the community is never a waste of time, and, as Hawn explains, “building community is as important as gaining information and insight from the sermon.”<sup>11</sup> Hawn also explains how this concept of time engenders worship music in the cyclic structure of “He Came Down:”

[Cyclic musical structures] are open-ended and built around repetition, unlike traditional linear hymns. [This] quality allows the assembly to sing them until the whole community is participating. (...) Because cyclic songs are primarily aural and do not require hymnals, singers tend to internalize the words and music quickly and often respond physically to the repetition. Music making then becomes not only aural but also a visible expression of community when the people move together as they sing.”<sup>12</sup>

As Hawn suggests, an integral part of music such as this is the experience of being in community, of singing, listening, drumming, clapping, and moving together. During the Advent season, this song could be used in place of an offertory hymn or doxology, and sung by all the people as the offering is brought forward; some cultures dance the offering forward, and this song allows space to do so. In this incarnational season, “He Came Down” is a song in which we embody praise with all our being, and employing it at the time of offering can remind us how our blessings become manifest by spiritual gifts of all kinds. Many congregations will not be used to expressing themselves in this way, and some will be familiar with some aspects but not others. As a practicing church musician, I incorporate some teaching and preparation of song repertoire into worship on a regular basis. Before the flow of worship begins, I say a few words about a new song which will appear in the service, and prepare the congregation by helping them to sing through it. If it is reappearing for a second or third time, I might introduce another new element like dancing or a language other than English. I typically prepare my choir ahead of time to sing the four-part harmony, but I also encourage the congregation to sing and make up harmonies; a bass line like this one of essentially three notes is an accessible starting place. I find that this approach means that when the time comes for this new song within the order of service, it already feels like a

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<sup>10</sup> Daw, *Companion*, 143.

<sup>11</sup> Hawn, *One Bread*, 21.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

familiar friend. I have found that by instilling a practice of learning each week, you foster the notion that learning together in community can be an act of worship in itself.

The notion of polychronic time is also helpful for performance practice of a song such as this in worship. There is a temptation to remain married to the score, for singers to want to begin at the top and sing each verse once until they reach the end. This is a heritage of our monochronic sensibility of time, and our penchant for linear, argument-based hymnody. Try to get choir and congregation alike “off the page” and listening for aural cues rather than only reading along. Editions of this song typically feature a written-out leader line, such that the leader or cantor can call for the next verse as the previous one is ending. With a little practice and trust between leader and group, this can lead to a playful dynamic of song in which the leader guides the group in singing new words, singing softly, coming back more strongly, and repeating certain sections for emphasis. When I first tried this approach with a choir, there was some frustration from singers at the idea that they needed to listen for information at the same time as they were singing. With a little practice and more familiarity, however, this skill has become second nature to them. Furthermore, is this not a profound idea about worship more broadly, that when we gather we listen for the possibility of the unexpected in our midst?

## Heaven’s Christmas Tree

*I have heard of a tree, a great Christmas tree,  
it was fixed in yon Bethlehem’s stall;  
the blessings of heaven for you and for me,  
a Christmas present for all.<sup>13</sup>*

The author of “Heaven’s Christmas Tree,” the African American Charles Albert Tindley, was an American Methodist preacher and gospel music composer. He was born in 1851 to a free mother and a slave father. Though he never had access to a formal education, Tindley not only taught himself to read and write, but acquired a high level of theological education through correspondence courses and following along the reading lists of students whom he met. When he was eventually ordained as a Methodist minister, he returned as pastor to a church where he had previously served as the janitor. Eventually he grew the church he headed, in Philadelphia, from some 200 parishioners to a membership of over 12,000 in the 1920s. He wrote some 45 hymns, generally to accompany his own sermons.<sup>14</sup>

“Heaven’s Christmas Tree” was written to accompany a famous sermon of Tindley’s by the same title. During this Advent and Christmas season, the Church not only walks the road to Bethlehem, but looks ahead to the road to the cross, in a poignant intermingling of imagery of life and death. Liturgical scholar Laurence Hull Stookey reminds us of this proleptic aspect of Advent, that just as we celebrate Christ’s birth, we look to his resurrection and to his return in glory:

<sup>13</sup> Charles Albert Tindley, printed in *African American Heritage Hymnal* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2001), #205.

<sup>14</sup> James Abbingtion, introduction to “Beams of Heaven: Hymns of Charles Albert Tindley (1851--1933),” reprinted in *Let the Church Sing On! Reflections on Black Sacred Music* (Chicago: GIA Publications 2009), 47-48.

...Advent concerns the future of the Risen One... [it] is the celebration of the promise that Christ will bring an end to all that is contrary to the ways of God; the resurrection of Jesus is the first sign of this destruction of the powers of death, the inauguration and anticipation of what is yet to come in fullness.<sup>15</sup>

Congregational song, as Stookey also affirms, is powerful in its capacity to hold past and future events in balance. Lyrics that achieve this are a common enough feature of hymnody we may not even notice it as we sing: "O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; / Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today."

Tindley's hymn draws astutely on the nostalgia of the season of Christmas alluded to above, but turns this image on its head to make a profound theological statement. His opening stanza invites the singer to picture what is perhaps the most iconic image of Christmas for Westerners: a festive tree hung with tinsel and lights. Each verse of the hymn continues this rhetorical device of hypotyposis, which is a vivid, evocative depiction of all aspects of a singular image, not unlike Isaac Watts' call to "see, from his head, his hands, his feet" in "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." It is the chorus which reveals the true intent of the lyrics, as Tindley connects the Christmas tree imagery to the "tree" of the cross:

*There is a package for me on that tree;  
A precious token that someone loves me.  
Oh yes, I can see on Calvary's Tree,  
That there is a package for me.*

Through this juxtaposition – a tree adorned with gifts, a tree hung with the body of Christ – Tindley reminds us of the "gift" God in Christ offers through his divine sacrifice. This is an arresting and even uncomfortable image. "Heaven's Christmas Tree" predates another, more famous song which borrows a similar image for its impact: Abel Meeropol's "Strange Fruit," performed most famously by Billie Holiday, whose lyrics protest the lynchings and hangings of black people in the pre-civil rights American South:

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit,  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,  
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.*

As in Meeropol's song, Tindley employs a disturbing image to remind us of a profound truth: Christ came into a world filled with danger, and was vulnerable. In the wake of disproportionate police violence and ongoing institutional racism directed toward people of colour, this image has become less a relic from a lamentable historical era and more the present state of social injustice in our own time. It is likely not a song we would sing without context or preamble, but it offers the possibility for a space of acknowledgment and examination of our complicity in current events. Even as we take joy in the image of Christ's birth in a stable, we are asked to remember how we are called to protect and care for the vulnerable in our midst. This hymn could be broken up and intercalated with portions of a

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<sup>15</sup> Laurence Hull Stookey, "Advent: The End and the Beginning," Chap. 6 in *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).

sermon, to explore and contextualize its imagery as part of an Advent-season sermon. Or, consider the impact this hymn could have if used adjacent to a familiar, nostalgic carol such as “Away in a Manger” or “O Holy Night,” songs which sustain our romantic image of the “tender and mild” infant in the manger. This hymn precedes others in a similar tradition such as Daniel Charles Damon’s “like a child” and Shirley Erena Murray’s “Star Child” and “Child of Joy and Peace;” their prophetic words challenge us to re-examine our postcard images of the child born in a stable.

## The Magnificat

It is significant that one of the most sustained prophetic declarations by a woman in the Bible is set in the form of a song. Eastern and Western church traditions alike have used this text through centuries as part of their daily prayers, and it is featured during Advent in each year of the Revised Common Lectionary. The canticle’s bold language which speaks of scattering the proud, bringing low the powerful, and lifting the lowly has made it a favourite choice for metrical paraphrase. Timothy Dudley-Smith’s “Tell Out, My Soul” and Miriam Therese Winter’s “My Soul Gives Glory to My God” are two popular examples. Dudley-Smith’s text, with its stirring imperative declarations opening each line, foregrounds the greatness of God’s name and God’s might, as shown by the merciful deeds of subduing powers and dominions and lifting the humble high. Winter’s is more introspective, a reflection between the singer and her soul on the mercy imparted by love and the dismissal of selfish hearts. These contrasts show how theologically distinctive two paraphrases of the same passage can be.

## Magnificat (Taizé Community)

*Magnificat, magnificat  
magnificat anima mea Dominum...*<sup>16</sup>

The Taizé Community has been built up on the outskirts of the very small French town from which it takes its name. It is an international ecumenical Christian community, founded in 1940 by a Swiss monk named Brother Roger (Frère Roger). When the Second World War began, Brother Roger felt called to aid Jewish refugees, offering them a place of safety in spite of the great danger involved. Today, the core community of Taizé is a brotherhood of over one hundred monks, who have taken vows of poverty and given their lives and talents over to the continuation of the community. Jacques Berthier’s canon setting of the first line of the Magnificat pares the canticle down to an essential message, which is in a sense how Taizé Community members have come to understand their corporate worship: distilled down to a “common prayer” characterized by song and silence. Different people experience the simple repeated *chants* of Taizé in different ways. The songs can be experienced as ritual action that is internalized through repetition, somewhat like the Roman Catholic spiritual discipline of praying the rosary, or a mode of prayer evoking St. Augustine, “those who sing, pray twice,” or as a kind of mantra whose reverberations may reveal God in a new and unexpected way. One of the central ways in which the liturgical theology of the Taizé Community comes through in their daily prayer is the way in which song becomes common ground for the

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Berthier, © 1979 Les presses de Taizé (admin. GIA Publications).

worship experience. These songs are simple and readily learned by rote, and so open a space for diverse ages and abilities to come together in song.

One of the ways this Magnificat canon can bring out the idea of common prayer in worship is by allowing children to be leaders of the song. This is especially poignant in that Mary was a young girl who prophesied boldly in response to God's call. If we create space in worship for children's voices to be heard, it can have a profound effect on how they in turn see themselves within the community. Consider using it at a time in worship other than as a children's choir performance; it could be used as a call to worship, gospel acclamation, or prayer response. Young singers might demonstrate the melody first, with the congregation joining afterwards; this embodies the notion that children are leaders within their own community and not only present to be formed by adults or to be "cute." There are several countermelodies available for this song, some of them fitting the tenor/bass range well; I like to position young singers in the middle of a group of adult singers or choristers so they have the experience of being surrounded by the musical sound. As Mary spoke boldly in the presence of her sister Elizabeth, simple and accessible choruses like this one allow communities to find common prayer together in song.

## Canticle of the Turning

*My heart shall sing of the day you bring  
let the fires of your justice burn;  
wipe away all tears for the dawn draws near,  
and the world is about to turn.<sup>17</sup>*

Rory Cooney's rousing anthem has become a popular congregational paraphrase of the Song of Mary and appears in a number of hymnals. The piece is set to the rollicking Irish folk tune STAR OF THE COUNTY DOWN, a kind of less-domesticated sibling of KINGSFOLD. In Cooney's setting, the piece also gets momentum by its dexterous closely-paired rhyme scheme ("my soul cries out with a joyful shout;" "my heart shall sing of the day you bring") and the breathless scriptural references. As Daw points out, much of the persuasive impact of the text comes through in "the breadth of Scripture it incorporates," from "the disruptive power of the Christian message to 'turn the world upside down'" and echoes of Revelation 21:4, Isaiah 40:31, many Psalms.<sup>18</sup>

In foregrounding these revolutionary and apocalyptic resonances of the canticle, Cooney's setting evokes a very different vision of Mary than the meek and mild version of some carols; while in other songs Mary "treasures" and "ponders," here she fiercely prophesies. The direct text and rowdy tune lend this setting the quality of a Celtic ceilidh, and through it worship might take on the tone of a lively gathering of family and friends. This element could be amplified by dividing up the many verses among soloists or different groups in the congregation, and through a rhythmically driven accompaniment of piano, hand drum, and a melody instrument such as violin or penny whistle.

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<sup>17</sup> Rory Cooney, printed in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Augsburg Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2006), #723

<sup>18</sup> Daw, *Companion*, 100.

## Congregational Song as Wood-Between-the-Worlds

In examining these various expressions of Advent prayer and praise, it is not my intention to suggest that these songs are uniquely better suited for worship than the established repertoire in a given community (indeed, surely each one already forms part of the core repertoire in many communities). Nor do I wish to argue that long-established, favourite Christmas carols do not have a place in Advent worship, or that our continuing singing of them is due solely to childhood nostalgia and not because they are also excellent songs of the church, as many of them are. However, in this highly evocative season of the church year, I suggest it is important to be intentional in opening spaces for ideas and theologies which stretch our understanding of the story and of the God who invites us into it. Congregational song is especially important in this regard, because it is a deeply theologically formational aspect of worship and of the life of the church more generally. I agree with Michael Hawn's characterization that "in the historic dialogue between *lex credendi* [law of believing] and *lex orandi* [law of praying], there is ample precedent for saying not only that belief and prayer are related, but also that sung prayer shapes belief."<sup>19</sup> John Bell sums it up this way: "[W]hat we sing informs and indeed shapes what we believe. Singing is not a neutral exercise. It should carry a government health warning that it can affect minds."<sup>20</sup> What we sing molds who we are as a people, helps us find our identity within the body of Christ. In this way, like the season of Advent itself, congregational song is incarnational: in singing we embody the song, and in *what* we sing we create the body of assembled worshippers by virtue of what our song invites and what it excludes.

In conceiving and planning worship, however, it is easy to consider worship and especially musical style within an implicit field of familiarity, with our own song – whatever that song may be – at the centre and less familiar styles, cultural expressions, or worldviews at various degrees of distance at the periphery. Mennonite song enlivener Mary Oyer has used helpful language to reframe this thinking; she thinks of various expressions of congregational song as "sound pools." A sound pool, to paraphrase Oyer, is a given musical-cultural orientation, and each of us is likely most familiar with one or two main pools, but we can draw from others, and perhaps even perceive the ripple effects where one overruns and informs the other.

Oyer's sound pools are a helpful image, and one which forms a useful background to an image I envision for the approach to congregational song I suggest. I approach worship as a kind of "wood between the worlds," borrowing the image of the mysterious forest depicted by theologian and children's author C.S. Lewis in his novel *The Magician's Nephew*. This instalment in the *Chronicles of Narnia* features two young children from London, Digory and Polly. The pair surprise Digory's Uncle Andrew in his study; Andrew is a magician and gives the children magic rings that transport them to a mysterious forest, a secluded and tranquil wood. They arrive in the wood by emerging from a pool of water, a confusing and destabilizing experience at first:

"Uncle Andrew and his study vanished instantly. Then, for a moment, everything became muddled. The next thing Digory knew was that there was a soft green light

<sup>19</sup> C. Michael Hawn, ed., *New Songs of Celebration Render: Congregational Song in the Twenty-First Century* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2013), xxvii.

<sup>20</sup> John L. Bell, *The Singing Thing: A Case for Congregational Song* (Glasgow: Wild Goose, 2000), 56.

coming down on him from above, and the darkness below. He didn't seem to be standing on anything, or sitting, or lying. Nothing appeared to be touching him. "I believe I'm in water," said Digory. "Or *under* water." This frightened him for a second, but almost at once he could feel that he was rushing upward. Then his head suddenly came out into the air and he found himself scrambling ashore, out on to smooth grassy ground at the edge of a pool."<sup>21</sup>

Digory and Polly discover many pools scattered throughout the wood, and come to realize that by jumping into one of the pools, they are taken to strange and new worlds very different from the earthly one they had left. They conclude that the wood is not a true world in itself but a "wood between the worlds." It is when they jump into the pool to return home, however, that their eyes are opened to a perspective they hadn't realized before:

[Digory and Polly] ...took hands, and said "One—Two—Three—Go." This time it worked. It is very hard to tell you what it felt like, for everything happened so quickly. At first there were bright lights moving about in a black sky; Digory always thinks these were stars and even swears he saw Jupiter quite close—close enough to see its moon. But almost at once there were rows and rows of roofs and chimney pots around them, and they could see St. Paul's [Cathedral] and knew they were looking at London.<sup>22</sup>

When Digory and Polly return to London after having been in the magical wood, they suddenly see a bird's eye view of their own home, and perceive it in a way they had never previously. They see the landscape of London at a remove from their typical standpoint, and understand that the streets that have been so familiar to them are situated within a wider environment and, even, a solar system. Their experience of their own context has been decentred as they have experienced entirely different ones, with the crossroads for all of them being the wood.

While it is unlikely Lewis had worship in mind when he penned this passage, I suggest there is a powerful metaphor for how we might think about worship and the role that culturally and theologically diverse congregational song plays within it. Imagine that the pools of water spread throughout the wood represent various musical contexts, like Oyer's sound pools. We come to worship saturated by our own cultural context, our theology, our stylistic biases. These biases are natural and make us who we are as people and communities of faith, but like Digory and Polly, we may not even be aware of the extent of our bias because we have never seen our own cultural landscape from above. In this analogy, worship is the liminal space where many sound pools can be drawn closer together and where we can experience through sung prayer the witness of our brothers and sisters in Christ across many contexts. We do not live in the wood, and following worship we return to our own world, but for a time we have been immersed in the many pools, and their ripple effects endure. Worshipping in this mode offers possibilities for encounter and understanding during the season of Advent which we might not realize by singing only our faithful canon of stanzad hymns and carols. Rather, I suggest it is by the prayerful and playful juxtaposition of familiar

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<sup>21</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (Harper Collins, 1955), 32.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

carols with diverse other voices that we open ourselves most fully to the narrative of God's surpassing love incarnate.

## Conclusion

Congregational song is a powerful shaper of our worshipping communities. During the season of Advent and Christmas, we celebrate, invite, invoke, and contemplate the nativity through prayer and song. Singing in worship is an act of incarnation that resonates deeply with the message of this liturgical season. I suggest that this season is thus an especially a poignant opportunity to enrich and inflect our longstanding favourite hymns and carols with selections from contexts which might not be as familiar, making worship a culturally decentring, liminal space for unexpected encounter with the Word made flesh.

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## Appendix

### He Came Down

Sources: [http://www.hymnary.org/text/he\\_came\\_down\\_that\\_we\\_may\\_have\\_love](http://www.hymnary.org/text/he_came_down_that_we_may_have_love)

Recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SpjCB5V6Juk>

### Heaven's Christmas Tree

Sources: [http://www.hymnary.org/text/i\\_have\\_heard\\_of\\_a\\_tree\\_a\\_great\\_christmas-1](http://www.hymnary.org/text/i_have_heard_of_a_tree_a_great_christmas-1)

### Magnificat (Taize)

Sources: [http://www.hymnary.org/text/magnificat\\_magnificat](http://www.hymnary.org/text/magnificat_magnificat)

Recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-6k6qTOMvE>

### Canticle of the Turning (My Souls Cries Out)

Sources: [http://www.hymnary.org/text/my\\_soul\\_cries\\_out\\_with\\_a\\_joyful\\_shout](http://www.hymnary.org/text/my_soul_cries_out_with_a_joyful_shout)

Recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9QeTmRCpW4>