

ALLIANCE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

PREVIOUS MINISTRY EXPERIENCE CASE STUDY PAPER:  
CHURCH CONFLICT- WORSHIP (TRADITIONAL VS CONTEMPORARY )

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by  
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## **Abstract**

In today's church, the debate over traditional versus contemporary worship music remains a significant issue among church members. Despite the varying denominations and religious practices of these churches, trying to find a balance between traditional church music (which may appeal more to older church members) and contemporary church music (which may appeal to the younger generation), continues to be a challenge.

## **Introduction**

The question at hand is how can churches, despite their varying denominations, find a way to balance both traditional and contemporary worship. The subject that is presented in this paper does not only present the benefits of embracing both traditional and contemporary Church worship but addresses the conflicts and divisions that can result because of this. The subject of this particular study, a previous ministry context, St. Jude's Church, a Roman Catholic Church located in Inwood Heights in New York City, at one point, faced conflict within the church regarding worship music during services, youth, and young adult groups and several other church community functions. All decisions regarding music were approved by the board of church members but ultimately the Parish Priest was the final approving authority. How can one individual make a decision for the entire church community without a willingness to even hear or consider what church members and other members of the clergy had to say?

## **Background**

The previous worship ministry from St. Jude's Church consisted of a Choir Director and approximately 8-10 choir members, all adults, ranging in (approximate ages) from the late

thirties to early mid-fifties. This age makeup in and of itself will lead anyone to see how the choice in music presented during worship services would be more traditional rather than contemporary. That in and of itself presents a problem; a lack of representation of the younger church members. St. Jude's Church was led by a Parish Priest, whose name I will omit from this paper, a native of Spain. It was not secret that although the Parish Priest, he ruled with an iron fist and demonstrated arrogance in several ways. As previously stated, the Parish Priest was the final approving authority on all church matters and there were many concerns brought up throughout the previous years that he would not even take the time to entertain.

### **Case Presentation**

During the church year of 2007, while serving as a Choir member, several issues began to come to the surface that was causes of concern for many of the members. During one of our meetings, one of the choir members shared that she realized that although there were younger members attending services, mostly because they were with their parents, they noticed that they would not take part in the singing and worship songs. She stated quite frankly that they looked "bored". After she brought this to our attention, we began to notice this as well. During our weekly services, we all began to pay closer attention to the younger church members during the services and decided that this is a bigger issue.

Could the reason that the number of youth and young adults in our Parish was so low, be because of our worship music? This was a significant issue because the Catholic tradition is profoundly traditional. The structure of the Masses and the music that is played is literally "by the book"! Music is all laid out in Hymn books and Missals that are structured for every week of

the church calendar year. There was no room for modifications or changes; no room to “shake things up” and move towards a more contemporary approach to music.

After several meetings, where the choir members spoke candidly about the issue, the decision was made to approach the church Board about this. The Board consisted of several Parish Priests and Priests who also served the Parish and were well-known in the community. Although there was apprehension in approaching the Board, the hope of the Choir members was that the Choir Director would have the liberty to implement some contemporary worship songs into the Masses. The goal was not to eradicate the traditional Catholic worship songs that are the foundation of the faith, but to take steps toward drawing a younger generation of Parishioners. As Bryan Chapell states in his text, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape our Practice*, ““Always we are to be informed by tradition; never are we to be ruled by it”<sup>1</sup>. The traditions regarding worship songs during Catholic Masses should be honored and respected but it should not be the only manner in which one should be allowed to worship.

Once this issue was presented to the Board, which consisted of several meetings. The Board proposed to allow the Choir Director to present two “contemporary” worship songs for review. During this time, the Parish Priest clarified that implementing any kind of contemporary music would not occur in “his” church. As soon as the Parish Priest stated how he felt about the issue, several Board Members began to chime in and support his statement. I sat in awe during all of this. How can one individual make such a decision without considering those in his Parish that were serving the Parish community? It just did not seem fair or right to me. What was being proposed was not sacrilegious; it was something that the Choir members believed would allow the church to grow; attracting a younger audience that in turn will bring their friends, thus making the church a welcoming atmosphere that embraces both the old and the new.

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<sup>1</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009), 17.

In the text *Let Us Sing* by Lawrence Roff, the author states:

“Well-meaning people can become convinced that this “traditional” music should dominate their church’s worship because they can most genuinely enter into an attitude of worship through such music. There is nothing false or inauthentic in their worship. Nor is it necessarily wrong that their worship preferences reflect their cultural background. All worship styles reflect aspects of culture or else it would be impossible for believers in that culture to appreciate their worship. All believers will have worship preferences affected by their context and heritage. This is not wrong either. We only err when we fail to recognize that the cultural background affecting our preferences is not universal- and when we make our preferences rather than the gospel our worship guide”<sup>2</sup>.

It is vital that even the most traditional churches make every attempt to reimagine what worship can look like. Taking into consideration things such as age and the different cultural backgrounds that make up the body of Christ across all denominations.

As a result of the Parish Priest's decision, over the course of several months, four Choir Members chose to no longer serve in that Ministry and over time, left St. Jude’s Church and transitioned to other churches.

### **How Can the Church Address this Issue?**

After all of the information presented, the question then becomes, How can the Church address this issue? The answer seems relatively simple. Churches need to reflect on their Music Ministries and identify how they can begin to intentionally choose music that embraces both the traditional old songs that may speak more to the older generations and more contemporary music that speaks to the hearts and minds of the younger generations. In order for this to happen, everyone’s voice needs to be heard. The decisions should not just fall on one individual, regardless of his or her position within the Church. The Church is a community; everyone is a stakeholder; there is so much beauty that can come from being at a Church whose music appeals

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<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Roff, *Let Us Sing* (Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1991), 148-150.

to both the young and the old. Although it may seem risky, Churches need to trust that the music that they choose has the power to change lives with the power of the Holy Spirit.

### **Conclusion**

The experience at St. Jude's Church is just one example of the ongoing conflict plaguing churches, across all denominations, regarding worship. It is important to note that the argument for holding the traditions of music and worship in church has validity, churches also need to come to the realization that times have changed and churches do not look the way they did decades ago. Churches should reflect on their congregation and see how implementing contemporary music in churches that may be traditional, and perhaps, including traditional songs in contemporary churches could attract more members as they begin to embrace the beauty of both the old and the new.

### **Bibliography**

Roff, Lawrence *Let Us Sing*. Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1991.

Chapell, Bryan. *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009.