

How to perform world songs

A word about performance; many of these songs, especially those from Africa, work best sung a cappella, enabling the singers to listen to each other and to experiment with singing in harmony, something that African congregations do instinctively - we in the West have lost the confidence to do it, but the skill can be rediscovered and encouraged. Many African songs have a call and response format - the leader can set the tempo, mood and style, and can encourage the congregation to respond with enthusiasm and vitality.

As many of the songs are very short e.g. *Halle, Halle* from the Caribbean or the beautiful *Santo, Santo* from Argentina, you won't need to give the congregation or the choir the written notes - instead encourage the practice of learning by listening. This can be a wonderfully liberating experience for Western Christians, who are often convinced that they cannot sing without a book or a sheet of music in their hands. Children love to sing rhythmic African songs by rote - you might use the children as a model, encouraging the adults to "loosen up" a little!

In the preface to *Come, All You People* (www.ionabooks.com), the first of three collections of short songs published by Wild Goose (the other

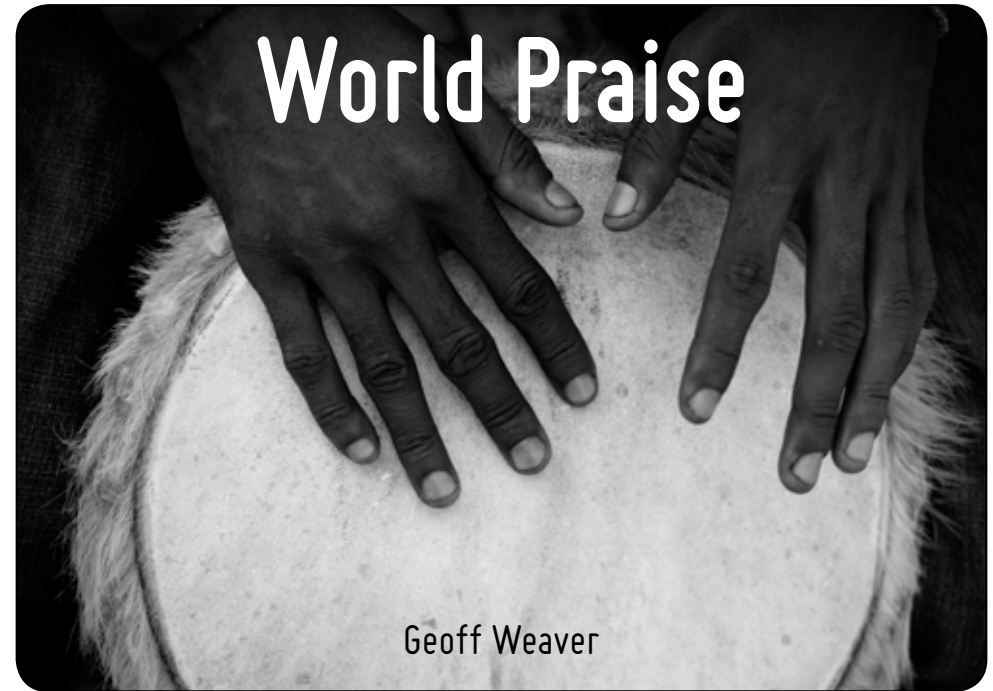
two are *There Is One Among Us* and *We Walk His Way*) John Bell gives very helpful advice on how to teach and how to incorporate these short songs into worship. They are not hymns, which tend to be more substantial musically and theologically - but they can be very powerful agents in building a community - and in touching hearts as, perhaps for the first time, we catch a glimpse of God's world through the eyes of fellow Christians from other parts of the globe.

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World Praise



Geoff Weaver

*“O’er heathen lands afar thick
darkness broodeth yet.
Arise, O morning star, arise and
never set.”*

So sang our Victorian forebears lustily as they sent successive waves of missionaries to the farthest corners of the earth, charging them with the task of bringing the light of the Gospel to those who dwelt in darkness. And with them, inevitably, the missionaries took not only the Gospel but all its Western cultural trappings - the Authorized Version of the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, Hymns Ancient and Modern - and an insistence upon Western dress and manners, which were thought to be the only way in which civilized Christian men and women should dress and behave.

Snow in Africa?

There were a few enlightened missionaries who recognized the richness of the cultures and traditions that they encountered, but for most who went, for example, to Africa, drums and traditional chants were taboo, because they were thought to represent the powers of darkness. New converts were required to pray in Elizabethan English and to sing hymns which spoke of English rural life, which must have been rather bemusing to African villagers. It was not unusual to find them singing Christmas songs which spoke of the “bleak midwinter”. In other words, in order to embrace the new faith, it was also necessary to set aside all the trappings of one’s own culture, all that had formed generations before, and to put on a new and strange cultural cloak

which somehow denied the goodness and richness of much of what had gone before.

Gradually, though, perceptions began to change. Vincent Donovan, on being sent as a missionary to the Masai tribe in East Africa, had to rethink radically his understanding of mission as he came to realise that the Holy Spirit had been active there long before he arrived, and that God had blessed that culture, as every culture, and that as a matter of course God was revered and worshipped as the source of all life. Donovan saw his task as leading the people into a deeper understanding of who God was and how he had been revealed in Christ.

An exchange of gifts

After World War 2, prophetic mission leaders in the West, such as Max Warren and John V. Taylor of the Church Missionary Society, began to talk in a new way about partnership in mission, and about the possibility of an exchange of gifts, whereby African and Asian Christians might have something to teach us about Christian discipleship, which they often lived out in situations which were dangerous and life-threatening.

Once given the freedom to lead their people, great indigenous Christian leaders began to emerge from Africa and India, leaders who had been nourished by their own history and cultures, whose fulfilment they saw in Christ. From the 1960s, as the Western churches declined in numbers and influence, the churches of Africa, Asia and Latin America

began to expand rapidly. In Britain in the 1960s and 1970s we had our first experience of listening to African evangelists who spoke with great fervour and, for the first time for many of us, we heard African songs and chants which gave worship a tremendous vitality and excitement.



Publications

The process of introducing African song to British Christians was begun by the Scottish Presbyterian minister Tom Colvin, who served as a missionary in Malawi and Ghana. He encouraged the development of indigenous song, often writing Christians words to traditional melodies. *Kneels at the Feet of His Friends* is a good example (available in the United Methodist Hymnal amongst others - see www.hymnary.org/hymn/UMH/432). Colvin was a member of the Iona community, which has continued to play a leading part in the dissemination of "global songs" (to use Michael Hawn's phrase), initially in its two collections *Many and Great* (1990) and *Sent by the Lord* (1991) and in most of its subsequent anthologies of songs (see www.ionabooks.com).

In 1974 the World Council of Churches published a new songbook *Cantate Domino* which contained many global songs. For its Assembly in Vancouver in 1983 the WCC appointed musical amateurs who were drawn from around the world. Figures such as Simeio Monteiro from Brazil, Pablo Sosa from Argentina and George Mzdana from South Africa brought their own songs to the gathering and helped to give an authenticity to the cultural diversity of the conference.

In 1995 *Thuma Mina* was published by the Protestant Churches and Missions in Germany, another key publication which introduced a wide range of new material. The Lutheran

World Federation has also taken global song very seriously; particularly significant were three volumes of South African freedom songs, published by the Swedish Lutheran Church in 1984 during the apartheid era. These songs, including such favourites as *Siyahamba*, undoubtedly helped towards a greater awareness

of apartheid in Europe, and enabled Christians here to sing in solidarity with their fellows in South Africa.

My own interest and involvement in global song came out of my years working for the Church Mission Society, six years in Hong Kong as a mission partner and eight years on the staff of the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham. In Selly Oak we were part of a very diverse, international community; Christians came from all over the world, told their stories and sang their songs to us. Again and again I was moved by the fervour and passion of their singing; these songs went to the very heart of who these people were and what they believed. More than that, there was such freedom in their singing. An African friend of mine said to me "We Africans find it so hard to understand how you British can stand still and sing", and I recall being welcomed in Kenya some years ago by a group of church musicians, singing and moving so powerfully that it was impossible not to be drawn into the dance.

In the mid-1990s David Peacock and I edited and published two volumes of global songs under the title *World Praise*. This is now out of print (a few used copies available on Amazon www.amazon.com) although a number of the songs were subsequently included in *Sing Glory* (pub. Kevin Mayhew - words copies available from www.kevinmayhew.com). *World Praise 2* (pub. Jubilate) is available from Lifeway Stores www.lifewaystores.com).

In 2008 I edited a new publication for the RSCM, *In Every Corner Sing* (pub. RSCM www.rscm.com). This publication, which has the advantage of permission to photocopy freely, aims to be multi-purpose, many of the songs suitable for congregational singing, but with some arrangements for singing groups and choirs. We decided to include those songs which have become favourites over the past

twenty years, such as *Siyahamba* and *Mayenziwe* from South Africa, which have such a powerful simplicity and depth. There are a number of less familiar and very beautiful songs which Christians from different parts of the world have shared with me. If you have not yet discovered how global songs can enrich your worship, here is a good place to start, with songs that are accessible and can often be taught by rote.

Why is it important that we sing the songs of fellow Christians from other parts of the world?

Michael Hawn, the author of an excellent book on the subject, *Gathering into One*; praying and singing globally (available from Amazon books www.amazon.com) gives a clear answer to this question. It is not, he says, a sort of ethno-tourism akin to "having fun in the sun in Mexico", but it is more about showing solidarity and in a small way entering into the experiences of those Christians who sing these songs. Hawn asks that we "listen to those who are at present invisible to us and honour what they have made and chosen to sing in the name of Jesus".

