THE HYMNBOOK WITHOUT A BACK COVER: CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP AND THE ONGOING SONG OF THE CHURCH

By Jay Dryland, DWS

The church is a singing people. Christians have sung in house churches and cathedrals, parish churches and big-tent revivals, auditoriums and community halls. They sing words written long before they were born and sing songs that are newly written. The songs may change but the practice of singing remains.

Matt Boswell offers an image that helps name this ongoing practice of congregational song. Reflecting on the difference between the carefully curated songs of a printed hymnal and the seemingly limitless repertoire now available to the local church, Boswell comments that "the hymnal of the church has no back cover."[1] The image works because it holds together songs already sung by the church and songs still being written. A hymnbook without a back cover leaves room for another page to be added. This article asks how those songs belong to a church that is already singing.

This becomes more complicated in the age of Contemporary Worship Music (CWM). The term itself needs some definition. Christians have always sung songs that were contemporary to them, belonging to their own time, but CWM now describes more than music that has recently been written. Jonathan Ottaway describes a recognizable worship ecosystem shaped by popular musical styles, instruments, technologies, specialized leadership, and an expectation of musical flow.[2] Sarah Kathleen Johnson and Anneli Loepp Thiessen go further, arguing that CWM functions as an ecumenical liturgical movement whose practices cross denominational boundaries.[3] The church has always sung contemporary song. What is fairly recent is the emergence of CWM as a recognizable liturgical movement.

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[1] "Curating Your Church's Songbook | Episode 02," with Matt Boswell, Ben Haley, and David Ames, Doxology & Theology, August 3, 2026, YouTube video, at 13:27–13:35, https://youtu.be/QdOcJvXVGro.
[2] Jonathan Ottaway, "Musical Flow: Important Techniques," in *Flow: The Ancient Way to Do Contemporary Worship*, ed. Lester Ruth (Abingdon Press, 2020), 53–54; Lester Ruth and Swee Hong Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship: Understanding the Ideas That Reshaped the Protestant Church* (Baker Academic, 2021), 291–92.
[3] Sarah Kathleen Johnson and Anneli Loepp Thiessen, "Contemporary Worship Music as an Ecumenical Liturgical Movement," *Worship* 97 (2023): 209.

Every congregation eventually decides which songs remain in its repertoire. Constance Cherry calls the body of songs approved and used by a worshipping community its "canon of song."[4] That canon may be printed in a book, projected onto screens, stored in planning software, or assembled from several of these places. Whatever the form, repeated use gives certain songs a particular authority. They become part of the language through which a congregation learns the Christian story and gives voice to its life before God.[5] An open hymnbook still needs careful attention.

This article considers what it means to keep that hymnbook open faithfully. Why does the contemporary nature of congregational song deserve attention? Where do contemporary songs come from? What is congregational singing actually for? How does a church distinguish any well-written song of Christian faith from one that a gathered congregation can actually sing? What happens when a song becomes part of a church's life over time? Out of these questions come four practical questions that ministry educators and worship leaders can bring to any song a congregation is considering. What does a song enable the people to do? Can this congregation actually inhabit it? Does it serve the action of worship? What does it add to the congregation's canon of song? The place to begin is the biblical language of a new song.

New Song and Living Tradition

The biblical use of "new song" provides a natural place to begin. The Psalms make the movement clear. Psa 40:3 says, "He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God" (CSB). Psalm 98 begins, "Sing a new song to the LORD, for he has performed wonders" (Psa 98:1 CSB). Psalm 33 joins new song to the Lord's faithful word and creative power, while Revelation 5 places a new song in the presence of the Lamb. In these texts, newness does not begin as an artistic command. God has acted, and the people of God find themselves with something to sing.

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[4] Constance M. Cherry, *The Music Architect: Blueprints for Engaging Worshipers in Song* (Baker Academic, 2016), 103.
[5] Cherry, *Music Architect*, 99, 105.

Andreas Kramarz makes this explicit when he describes the biblical new song as "a response to and a reflection of the 'new things' that God has brought about."[6] Such newness does not require an entirely new melody or text.[7] A familiar song can become new as God's saving work is heard again by a living people. A fresh composition still has a place, but novelty is not what makes a song faithful. The new song begins with what God has done and with people who find themselves singing because of it.

Harold Best adds another helpful distinction. Reflecting on Psa 96:1, he argues that a song can be literally new only once; after that, it is repeated. Best writes, "We can sing a truly new song only once,"[8] and then describes singing even the thousandth repetition as though it were the first. This means that newness cannot belong only to newly composed material. An old song can be sung newly, while a newly written song can already sound tired. The church needs new songs, but it also needs to learn how to sing older songs with fresh attention.

Musician, songwriter and pastor Bob Kauflin makes a similar point from within the contemporary worship world. He traces singing through the biblical story and asks why Christians sing. Scripture contains a multitude of references to singing and repeated commands to sing, but Kauflin's bigger point is that God's saving work gives the people of God something to sing about.[9] This keeps contemporary congregational singing connected to a much older pattern. God acts. The people witness what God has done. A new song is sung.

This movement can be seen in the early church. Ralph Martin claims that "the Christian Church was born in song."[10] It was not born with a blank songbook. The Psalter remained central and, as Martin notes, was read "with Christian eyes."[11] Israel's songs were heard through the death and resurrection of Jesus, while new confessional language also emerged around incarnation, exaltation, creation and redemption. New songs were already taking shape around Christ.[12]

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[6] Andreas Kramarz, "A Call for Universal Harmony: The 'New Song' in Scripture, Patristic Commentary, and Liturgy," *Antiphon* 26, no. 2 (2022): 117, https://doi.org/10.1353/atp.2022.0021.
[7] Kramarz, "Call for Universal Harmony," 129.
[8] Harold M. Best, *Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts* (InterVarsity Press, 2003), 145–46.
[9] Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God* (Crossway Books, 2008), 98–99.
[10] Ralph P. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church*, rev. ed. (Eerdmans, 1974), 39.
[11] Martin, *Worship in the Early Church*, 42.
[12] Martin, *Worship in the Early Church*, 42–52.

The Reformation makes the pattern visible in another setting. Martin Luther is closely associated with the rise of congregational song in the life of the church. His concern was much more than a sixteenth-century attempt to update the music. Luther gave music unusually high theological weight because of its relationship to the Word. In his 1538 preface to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae iucundae*, he writes, "Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise."[13] He then explains that language joined to song allows the church to proclaim the Word of God through music.[14] For Luther, melody could carry the Word into memory and into the mouths of the people. The gospel gives the church something worth singing. Westermeyer summarizes the movement: "In Christ God has won the victory. Those who know it are compelled to sing."[15]

That conviction shaped Luther's practice. As a songwriter, he did not draw from only one musical source. Luther worked with Gregorian chant, historic hymns and German sacred song, psalm and canticle paraphrase, polyphonic choral music, and newly composed hymns and tunes. Some material was retained, some translated or adapted, and some newly written. This resembles what Christian songwriters continue to do today. They work with scripture, the church's songs, the musical language around them, and new words and melodies. Luther's practice is sometimes reduced to the claim that he simply borrowed popular tavern tunes, but recent historical work cautions against that simplification. He drew from many sources so that the gospel could be heard and sung by the people.[16]

Isaac Watts (1674–1748), an English minister, belongs in this same story. English-speaking Protestants had long sung metrical versions of the Psalms, but Watts pushed congregational singing toward explicit Christian confession. His 1719 paraphrase of Psalm 72 begins, "Jesus shall reign where'er the sun,"[17] allowing the psalm's royal hope to speak openly in the language of Christ. Watts also helped move English congregational song toward the lived voice of the Christian worshiper. Rather than only putting David's words into metre, Watts gave the biblical song a

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[13] Martin Luther, "Preface to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae iucundae*" (1538), in *Liturgy and Hymns*, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold, vol. 53 of *Luther's Works* (Fortress Press, 1965), 323.
[14] Luther, "Preface to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae iucundae*," 323–24.
[15] Paul Westermeyer, *Te Deum: The Church and Music* (Fortress Press, 1998), 147.
[16] For Luther's reception and reshaping of inherited musical forms, and for the caution against reducing his practice to "tavern tunes," see Westermeyer, *Te Deum*, 144–49.
[17] *The United Methodist Hymnal* (The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), no. 157, stanza 1; Westermeyer, *Te Deum*, 203.

voice shaped by Christian confession and the experience of life in Christ. That more personal voice would become even more pronounced in the hymns of Charles Wesley.[18]

Charles Wesley (1707–1788), an Anglican priest and hymn writer of the Methodist revival, worked differently again. His hymns joined doctrine to the experience of grace in language ordinary people could sing. "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," for example, proclaims that Christ "breaks the power of canceled sin" and "sets the prisoner free."[19] Watts and Wesley both gave older Christian faith a voice that people in their own time could sing. Westermeyer also notes Wesley's concern that continual alteration could keep a congregation from actually learning its songs.[20] Music should be robust, but it should remain "friendly to the people."[21] New song expressions need time to connect to the hearts of the people who sing them.

Recent projects show the same movement in different ways. Poor Bishop Hooper's EveryPsalm project gave new musical form to all 150 Psalms. Indelible Grace pairs historic hymn texts with new tunes and arrangements. Liturgical Folk draws from historic liturgical and devotional language while writing within a contemporary folk style.[22] These projects complicate any easy division between "contemporary" and "traditional." Biblical texts, familiar hymns, older prayers and new musical forms can all become material for contemporary congregational song.

The modern contemporary worship movement still needs to be described on its own terms. Ruth and Lim show that Contemporary Praise and Worship emerged from several theological, cultural, and missional streams. Its advocates often argued for current language, popular musical forms, cultural accessibility, extended singing, and new patterns of worship leadership. These developments changed the shape of worship in many churches, even though they took place within a much older Christian practice. The church has always sung in the present tense. During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries extended contemporary singing, specialized

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[18] David W. Music, *Studies in the Hymnody of Isaac Watts* (Brill, 2022), 59, 262–63.
[19] *The United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 57, stanza 4.
[20] Westermeyer, *Te Deum*, 213–14.
[21] Westermeyer, *Te Deum*, 214.
[22] Poor Bishop Hooper, "EveryPsalm," accessed November 12, 2026, https://www.poorbishophooper.com/projects; Indelible Grace Music, "Who We Are," accessed November 12, 2026, https://igracemusic.com/; Liturgical Folk, "An Introduction," accessed November 12, 2026, https://www.liturgicalfolk.com/.

musical leadership, modern production, and a shared repertoire across denominations increasingly became associated with the word worship itself.[23]

Across these different periods, the church has adapted, reformed, and composed songs for worship. The songs themselves can be separated by time, culture and musical styles, yet Christians continue to sing them as part of one song tradition. Musical style alone cannot explain that continuity. The stronger centre is the One who sings in the midst of the congregation.

Christ the Singing Saviour

Psalm 22 begins with the cry, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Psa 22:1 CSB). It does not stop there. Suffering moves toward deliverance, and deliverance toward public testimony: "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters; I will praise you in the assembly" (Psa 22:22 CSB). Hebrews places those words on the lips of Jesus: "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters; I will sing hymns to you in the congregation" (Heb 2:12 CSB). The word translated "congregation" is *ekklēsia*, the gathered assembly, the church. The movement is surprising. The one who suffers is also the one who sings in the midst of the church and gathers others into praise.

Reggie Kidd centres Christian worship around this image of the Singing Saviour. Reading Psalm 22 through Hebrews, he writes that "the psalm begins as a solo, but it ends as a chorale."[24] Jesus is more than the subject of Christian song. Hebrews portrays him as one who sings in the midst of his brothers and sisters. The people's praise is gathered up into the praise of the Son, the Singing Saviour.

Being gathered into the praise of the Son gives Christian congregational song a centre stronger than any repertoire or style. The church has never developed or preserved one musical language, and no church culture possesses the official worship sound. Kidd captures this when he writes, "Every group brings its own voice, but no group brings the official voice."[25] Christian song does not need one agreed upon form in order to remain Christian. Christ calls forth his song from cultures touched by the gospel, while remaining the centre by which those voices are heard and joined.[26]

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[23] Ruth and Lim, *History of Contemporary Praise & Worship*, 1–3, 291–92.
[24] Reggie M. Kidd, *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (Baker Books, 2005), 125.
[25] Kidd, *With One Voice*, 126.
[26] Kidd, *With One Voice*, 127.

For contemporary worship, every generation can begin to mistake its own musical language for something more universal. A current generation may assume that worship is more authentic because the music feels intimate and culturally familiar. An earlier generation may treat its own forms as though they are the sound of worship. Both forget that they entered a song already underway. Edith Humphrey expands this idea by observing that Jesus himself practised both thanksgiving and lament.[27] Christ's own song is wide enough to hold grief and hope. Congregational singing should be able to do the same. Contemporary worship can give people immediate language for love, gratitude and desire before God. This is the gift of CWM while still making room for lived experiences that include sorrow, waiting, doubt and loss, through a lens of the cross and resurrection.

This Christological centre also keeps music within the life of the whole assembly. Gordon Lathrop writes that "the music is for the sake of the meeting and its central purposes" and that the community's music is intended to "sing Jesus Christ."[28] Music serves the meeting of God's people around Word and sacrament, prayer and sending. Congregational singing gives the gathered church a voice with which to respond to Jesus Christ who has already drawn near.

Songs can now be heard within this larger picture. They need to speak truthfully of God, give the congregation language it can actually sing, make room for the breadth of Christian life, and serve the gathering rather than point to itself. So then, what is the purpose of congregational song?

The Purposes of Congregational Song

Why do Christians sing together? Music is powerful, people enjoy it, and the church has always sung, but those observations do not explain what singing is doing in Christian worship. If the Singing Saviour gathers the church into his praise, singing together becomes part of how the church receives, speaks and lives the gospel.

Constance Cherry provides a starting point: "The role of music in worship is to facilitate the proclamation and celebration of the story of God."[29] Music helps the church do things in worship. It can carry proclamation, give common words to prayer, and help a congregation remember and respond to the story it has heard. So what is the song helping the congregation do?

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[27] Edith M. Humphrey, *Grand Entrance: Worship on Earth as in Heaven* (Brazos Press, 2011), 198.
[28] Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Fortress Press, 1993), 112, 113.
[29] Cherry, *Music Architect*, 39.

The New Testament gives song a definitive communal character. Col 3:16 connects the indwelling word of Christ with teaching and admonishing one another "in all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" (CSB). Eph 5:19 also describes Christians speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Congregational song is more than an individual heart directing musical affection upward to God. It is one of the ways the word of Christ dwells in the body. The people of God sing to God, but they also sing with, for, and to one another.

Kauflin argues that singing gives expression to the Spirit's work in believers, helps the word of Christ dwell richly within them, and helps them remember what they sing.[30] There is pastoral weight in this. Music can join truth to memory and affection in a way that spoken language sometimes does not. A congregation may forget much of a sermon while humming a line of song for years. What people sing can stay with them, which is one reason song selection deserves theological attention.

This communal character of singing also helps distinguish congregational song from devotional song. A meaningful devotional song may serve private prayer or reflection very well. It may also be closely tied to the experience of a particular songwriter. That fact does not make the song any less faithful. The song may be doing different work. Congregational song asks whether a room of people gathered out of their own lived experiences can make the song their own. The words need to become the congregation's words rather than remain only the testimony or reflection of a particular songwriter. Melody and structure help determine whether the congregation can enter the song together, and the theology needs to be something the gathered church can truthfully sing. A good Christian song is not automatically a good congregational song. It depends on what kind of song it is and what the church is asking the song to do.

Jon Guerra provides a contemporary example. He has described much of his work as "devotional music," or "Monday morning prayer music,"[31] deliberately distinguishing it from music written primarily for Sunday congregational use. A song may be deeply Christian and spiritually nourishing without belonging in a congregation's worship repertoire. A church honours the song by asking it to do the work it was written to do.

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[30] Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, 102–4.

[31] Jon Guerra, official website, accessed November 12, 2026, https://www.jonguerramusic.com/.

Several guiding questions begin to surface. First, what does this song enable the people to do? The Psalms help widen the field. Psalm 130 begins, "Out of the depths I call to you, LORD!" (Psa 130:1 CSB) and then teaches the singer to wait for the Lord and trust his promise. Uncertainty, prayer and hope live together in one song. A congregation needs that kind of breadth. If nearly every song begins in celebration, the church may have little language when grief comes; if nearly every song centres on desire or aspiration, the people may hear little of what God has already given. Over time, the songs of a congregation need to give its people enough language for the life of faith.

Second, can this congregation actually inhabit the song? Range, repetition, and melodic difficulty are part of singability, but they are not the whole of it. Can the congregation hear where the melody is going? Can people enter after a song's introduction without already knowing the recording? Can the words be sung truthfully by the people? Congregations can learn difficult music. The concern is whether the music invites participation or slowly shifts the song from the people to the platform.

Lathrop's caution is important here. If music exists "for the sake of the meeting," then where a song is placed and what it is doing deserve attention.[32] A song may be a good song and still be misplaced. Lyrics confessing sin function differently from lyrics in a sending song. During communion, music can help the people receive and interpret the meal rather than simply fill the room as background music. The actions of worship give song a context, and song can deepen those actions when it serves them.

Third, does the song serve the action of worship, or is the action being made to fit around the song? Contemporary worship has developed genuine liturgical practices of its own, including extended musical sequences and expectations of flow, and those practices deserve to be taken seriously. A worship song-set can become so central that other worship actions begin to feel like interruptions to the songs being presented. Songs can serve worship well. The trouble begins when maintaining the musical experience starts to determine the larger pattern of Christian worship.

Best's account of corporate worship offers a related caution. He resists reducing worship to one activity or one artistic medium because the gathered church

[32] Lathrop, *Holy Things*, 112–13.

is already engaged in a much larger offering of life before God.[33] Kauflin makes a similar warning when he cautions worship leaders against allowing technology and musical surroundings to become "crucial and governing rather than secondary and serving."[34] Music can serve the gospel in faithful and powerful ways without needing to manufacture what belongs to God by promise and presence.

Fourth, what does this song add to the congregation's canon? Cherry argues that congregational songs form worshippers and that a congregation's canon should be considered theologically, musically, liturgically, and pastorally.[35] A new song does not earn its place simply because it is current or popular. Familiarity not enough of a reason to keep an older song either. Some songs give a congregation language it does not yet have, or help it sing something the church needs to hear again.

Congregational song is something the church does together. It helps the church hear and remember the gospel, respond to God and one another, serve the actions of worship, and form a shared language of faith over time.

Sources of Contemporary Congregational Song

Where do contemporary songs come from? Sometimes a Psalm provides the textual and theological foundation. A local congregation may be the setting in which a song is written. A songwriting collective may bring writers together, while folk or popular music provides a musical language. CCLI, YouTube, streaming platforms, conferences, and peer churches often function differently. They are ways songs are discovered and circulated. It is helpful to distinguish the source of a song from the channel through which a congregation finds it.

Many of the theological sources would be familiar to Luther, Watts and Wesley: scripture and liturgy, hymnody and theology, along with the lived experience of Christian communities. What has changed dramatically is the speed and scale at which songs now move. The sources can remain recognizably Christian even when the systems of distribution are very different.

The current landscape of contemporary worship music shows how often songwriting still begins with older material. It has already been discussed how Poor Bishop Hooper works directly with the Psalter. Indelible Grace retrieves historic

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[33] Best, *Unceasing Worship*, 59.
[34] Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, 59, quoted in Jonathan Ottaway, Adam Perez, and Lester Ruth, eds., *How Worship Became Music: A Historical Sourcebook* (Abingdon Press, 2026), 166.
[35] Cherry, *Music Architect*, 99, 103–7.

hymn texts. Liturgical Folk draws on liturgical and devotional language. CityAlight describes its work as writing biblically rich songs with simple melodies for the local church.[36] These ministries do not represent the whole contemporary field, but they show that new song can grow from material the church already knows.

The Porter's Gate offers a particularly clear example of contemporary song drawing from sources beyond the usual worship-set repertoire. Its *Work Songs* project gives congregations language for vocation itself. "Day by Day," for example, names the work of teachers, farmers, nurses, labourers, lawyers, and artists before turning those callings toward prayer for God's kingdom. Other projects bring lament, justice, creation, and historic Christian prayer into song. "The Breastplate of Saint Patrick" places the ancient prayer of Christ's surrounding presence into the pressures of work, family responsibility, exhaustion, and disappointment.[37] Here scripture, prayer, vocation, and lived experience become material a congregation can sing.

Local Christian experience can also become a source for song. In *How Worship Became Music*, Charles Fromm recalls John Higgins's desire for "songs that come from our life and our experience."[38] This came at a particular moment in the Jesus Movement, but the concern still speaks to contemporary songwriting. Churches need writers who can give faithful language to particular places, communities, seasons, and callings. Musical language is part of this as well. In the 1970s James Christensen wrote of making "the language of worship the language of life," while warning against experimentation detached from historical perspective.[39] People already understand the grammar, emotional cues, and forms of participation within the music around them, and that familiarity can help a congregation sing. Sounding new is never enough by itself. The music still should serve the gospel and the people who sing it.

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[36] Poor Bishop Hooper, "EveryPsalm"; Indelible Grace Music, "Who We Are"; Liturgical Folk, "An Introduction"; CityAlight, "About," accessed November 12, 2026, https://cityalight.com/about/.
[37] The Porter's Gate, "Lyrics," entries for "Day by Day" and "The Breastplate of Saint Patrick," accessed November 12, 2026, https://www.portersgateworship.com/lyrics.
[38] Charles E. Fromm, "Textual Communities and New Song in the Multimedia Age: The Routinization of Charisma in the Jesus Movement" (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2006), 176n7, excerpted in Ottaway, Perez, and Ruth, *How Worship Became Music*, 36.
[39] James L. Christensen, *Contemporary Worship Services: A Sourcebook* (Fleming H. Revell, 1971), 11–12, excerpted in Ottaway, Perez, and Ruth, *How Worship Became Music*, 24.

A major change in modern worship is how songs are shared. Streaming platforms, social media, digital planning tools, and global conferences allow a new song to move across the world almost instantly. CCLI's SongSelect, for example, combines searchable repertoire with lyrics, charts, transposition, and integration into planning and presentation workflows.[40] These tools shape what becomes easy to find, learn, and repeat.

David Bjorlin raises a concern when he argues that "the marketplace too often becomes one of the largest, if implicit, criteria for choosing congregational song."[41] Popular songs are not inherently a problem. Wide circulation can make excellent local songs available to the wider church and introduce congregations to voices they might not hear otherwise. The danger comes when availability begins to do the work of discernment. Popularity shows that when a song has currency, people like to sing it. It says much less about whether that song belongs in this congregation or what it will help this congregation sing.

Johnson and Thiessen's account of CWM as an ecumenical liturgical movement helps bring CWM together. CWM crosses denominational and hymnal boundaries through shared songs and recognizable practices of musical and worship leadership.[42] This is a significant innovation in Christian worship. At the same time, many of the sources feeding contemporary song remain familiar: scripture, prayer, theology, local experience, and earlier Christian song. What is different is how rapidly music travels the globe in developing a much more homogenous musical culture. The church's practice of giving its faith a voice in the present is much older.

Reception, Endurance, and Tradition

Many new songs will eventually disappear over time. A song may serve one congregation or one season faithfully and then fade away. A song can also spread quickly in today's global digital culture. That says something about reach, but lasting use takes more time. A congregation repeats a song, remembers it, and eventually begins to carry it as part of its own musical heart and voice. Some songs last because people can sing them through ordinary days as well as grief, illness, joy, and death. They remain important after the moment that first made them popular has passed,

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[40] CCLI, "SongSelect," accessed November 12, 2026, https://ccli.com/ca/en/songselect.
[41] David Bjorlin, "Contemporary Worship Music and the Evangelical-Capitalist Resonance Machine," *Worship* 99 (2025): 28.
[42] Johnson and Thiessen, "Contemporary Worship Music," 209.

and another generation can still find words of faith in them. Cherry's canon of song gives this process some depth. A congregation's repertoire should sing where the church has been, who it is in the present, and where God is calling it.[43] Tradition holds past, present, and future together. Older and newer songs need time together before a church can know what it will continue to carry.

CityAlight expresses a beautiful posture toward this process. The ministry hopes its songs may serve the church and then, when their role has been played, make room for others.[44] Not every song needs to last. A song can serve a particular moment or season faithfully without needing to last forever.

Christian tradition finally endures because the gospel is larger than any repertoire. Every community brings its own voice, and Christ, the Singing Saviour, gathers those voices into praise.[45] Some songs remain in the church for generations. Others serve faithfully for a time and disappear. But the church's song continues because the Singing Saviour continues to gather his people into praise.

The Open Hymnbook

"The hymnal of the church has no back cover."[46] Boswell's image is a reminder that the church is still singing. Christians continue to read and sing the Psalms through the lens of Jesus Christ, sing songs learned from those who came before them, and write new songs for the life of the church now.

CWM belongs within this larger tradition of congregational song. God's people have always sung contemporary songs. Yet contemporary worship has become a unique liturgical movement with recognizable ways of combining musical worship, worship leadership, and a shared repertoire across churches.[47] This liturgical development does not separate CWM from the broader Christian worship tradition. It places a recent worship movement within a much longer history of congregational song. What is required is faithful discernment. Congregations sing songs they did not write and continue to add songs that speak to them in their moment. The concerns developed through this article are mostly practical. Does a song tell the truth? Can this congregation sing it? Does it serve the action of worship

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[43] Cherry, *Music Architect*, 115.
[44] CityAlight, "About."
[45] Kidd, *With One Voice*, 126–27.
[46] "Curating Your Church's Songbook," at 13:27–13:35.
[47] Johnson and Thiessen, "Contemporary Worship Music," 209; Ruth and Lim, *History of Contemporary Praise & Worship*, 291–92.

for which it is chosen? Does it give the church something it needs to sing, and can it live beyond the recording or moment that first made it compelling?

Those concerns leave room for the hymnbook to remain open without assuming every new song should last. Some songs will endure. Some will not. Congregational song does not depend on the survival of one musical form. Christ remains in the midst of the assembly and the Singing Saviour continues to collect the praise of God's people. The church has not finished singing, and Christ, the Singing Saviour, continues to hold its many voices together.

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