

Tensions Over Worship Music within SDAism: A Global Church Wrestles with both Inter-generational and Inter-cultural Issues

Ronald Lawson

SDAs were born in mid-C19th America, and their church music originally reflected both their roots and beliefs (the evangelical hymns of the time leavened with a large number expressing their belief that Christ's return was imminent) and their humble origins (unpretentious buildings and musical instruments). As their missionaries carried their message abroad, they taught the congregations they established there to sing translations of their hymns, often without instrumental support, for they saw local instruments, and especially drums, as associated with animistic spirit worship.

When Adventists founded schools, their curricula included music, which was regarded as a useful tool in evangelistic outreach. However, their commitment to education gradually resulted in rising standards and accreditation, and thus also upward social mobility and the embrace of higher musical culture, especially in their colleges in the US and the rest of the developed world. Indeed, because Ellen White, the Adventist prophet, had rejected sports and related competition, which are used by so many other colleges and universities in the US to establish an identity, gain publicity, attract students and raise funds, Adventist colleges there instead used music—choirs, orchestras, bands, and large high-quality organs—for these purposes. This peaked between the close of World War II and about 1990. The GI Act funneled many former military band directors into Adventist colleges, which trained music teachers for Adventist academies, where music programs also blossomed. Five American colleges qualified to be members of the National Association of Schools of Music, which sets a high entry standard.

The mood among members of music faculties at this time is exemplified by this quotation from a retrospective article by one member:

In 1968, when the new [Pacific Union College] church first opened its doors... A choir was expected to sing each Sabbath. College groups and visiting choirs from other schools and community groups were an integral part of worship. The 80- or 100-voice choir provided anthems and hymns for the church services. We musicians had visions of an increasingly sophisticated church body that would foster the arts. There were even plans to establish a national-level Adventist musical group in the Washington, D.C., area that would rival The Mormon Tabernacle Choir. We thought we were coming of age (Kempster).

Meanwhile, Adventist hymnals, the first of which printed words only, had gradually improved over time from simple words, tunes and harmonies to more established hymns and evangelical songs. However, in 1985, a new hymnal, the first since 1941, set a new standard with a good collection of quality hymns.

However, with the passage of time and the emergence of “Praise” and “Christian Contemporary” music rooted in popular culture, this resulted demand, initially from college students, for the new music and for changes, often associated with conflict, within college-based congregations, which then spread to other congregations in many parts of the Developed World. This was to curtail the use of the new hymnal. Meanwhile, music departments in academies had begun contracting in the 1970s as a result of a shortage of funds, and by the 1990s college administrators had felt obliged to respond to the demand among students for competitive sports, often cutting lines in music departments in order to fund the hiring sports coaches. Concurrently, the end of colonialism and the emergence of cultural nationalism in the Developing World has resulted in similar conflicts and changes. Differing tastes make it difficult to cater to everyone, while many Adventists, including the current President of the world church, are inclined to see the conflicts in theological terms. This paper focuses especially on the changes that have taken place in Adventist colleges and universities in the Developed World over the past three decades, for these became the bellwethers of change.

Research Methods

To date, I have completed interviews with 23 informants with long-term involvement in worship decisions at 13 Adventist colleges and universities in the US, Canada, Australia, and Europe; I have done a search of the publications of the International Adventist Musicians Association.

Changes

The initial changes appeared first in campus services catering only to students which were often student-led, such as “Friday Night Vespers” and chapel and dorm worships during the week. Hymns were replaced initially by choruses and camp-fire songs, and then gradually “Praise Songs” heard on Christian radio stations, and ultimately “Christian rock” featuring microphoned singers, bands with guitars, synthesizers, drum-sets and heavy rhythm. In some colleges students took the initiative to create their own worship services featuring their music, drama, and content relevant to them; in others pastors set out on a similar path, motivated by a wish to attract students to worship services, where their absence had become notable.

Case 1

When students at Pacific Union College created their own service, attendance rose immediately, ultimately reaching 700. After a chaplain asked if they would be able to fit into Adventist churches anywhere following graduation, they ultimately voted to return to the Sanctuary, where students would organize a second, later, contemporary service. A new pastor, objecting to the separate services, returned to a single service that blended traditional and contemporary music, but this left most attending dissatisfied. This was eventually replaced by segregated services: the “Majestic Service,” at 10.00 a.m., features choir, processional, orchestra and/or other college music groups, and pipe organ: it was described to me as a “cathedral-type service.” The second service, at 12.15 p.m., “The Gathering”, features contemporary music and never uses the organ. Both services attract an attendance of about 450, but their demographics differ greatly.

Case 2

The pastor of the church at Andrews University, an influential campus because it is also the home of the Adventist Seminary, changed his second service from traditional to contemporary in musical content in the early 1990s. However, he faced a crisis when one-third of his congregation threatened to create their own traditional service in a local Lutheran church. He responded by creating a task force of theologians, musicians, and students from praise bands to explore options. The outcome was to leave the first service traditional but to try to please everyone with a blended second service with both organ and at least one hymn and praise band with carefully chosen contemporary songs screened to omit those with “shallow words” and “unsingable melodies.” Drumsets were banned, but ethnic drums, synthesizer rhythm were permitted if used sparingly. Student attendance was initially high, but because the blended service had limited appeal, many have recently been drained off to a new student-led rock service where both back-to-back services are jammed. Black students have also created a full gospel service in a chapel, which is also jammed and features a huge choir, full drums, a piano, and synthesizers.

Data

Of the 13 colleges/universities surveyed, 10 have made major changes in worship music in at least one service. Two others (LLU and CaUC) have made less dramatic changes, and one (UC) has changed very little; one (Sligo) has returned to two traditional services, abandoning a blended model used for several years. Initial changes took place between 1981 (Avondale) and 2004 (SAU, LLUC). The reason given for all changes was always an attempt to improve low student attendance.

The initiative to make the initial changes was taken by the pastor in six cases, by students in four, and by the pastor and a committee in two.

Currently, six colleges have two contrasting services, three offer multiple choices (AU and WWU because students added their own alternatives, LSUC because faculty sponsor a small liturgical service), and two have only traditional services. Three have no traditional service but only blended services (CaUC) or a choice between blended and contemporary (Avondale, SWAU).

The use of screens to display the words of songs and hymns has become almost universal, leaving congregations without the option to sing in harmony, something that was common in earlier decades. Only three services do not use screens, but use hymnals and distributed music sheets, and two of these have very small attendance (LSUC liturgical, SWAU Evensong); the presence of hymnals makes their use optional when hymns are sung, and hymn numbers are typically then listed in programs and/or announced; however they are not widely utilized when the words appear on screens. Praise teams and bands are the norm at blended and contemporary services. They are absent only from the most traditional (“Cathedral-like” and liturgical) services (at AU, Kettering, PUC, WWU, LSUC, and most services at LLUC).

However, the style of music does not indicate which services will draw the largest attendance, or even the most students. The largest service is almost without exception the final service—that which allows students to sleep in. Where a traditional service is the final service (WWU and Kettering), that attracts the largest attendance. Timing, not style of music, is key. The musical taste of current students differs from that of the baby boomers who pioneered contemporary services: they appreciate acoustic music and want more instrumental and musical variety. Indeed, a survey of those attending the church at Andrews University found numerous requests for choir music and hymns. They may enjoy contemporary music at student services during the week, but often report that they think the organ and hymns are better suited for Sabbath worship. In many cases student attendance at the services designed for them has declined: they do not want a show, but to be involved, and so also often opt for small student-led services.

The fine organs in these sanctuaries lead the music in only the traditional services; they are also used to a lesser degree in blended services. They are typically absent from Praise and contemporary services. That is, they are, on the whole, used less.

Five colleges report that they continue to have strong choral programs (AU, PUC, UC, WAU, WWU), though their choirs now sing for Sabbath services far less frequently than in earlier decades. However, six reported a marked decline in the quality of their choral programs. Two specialized colleges/universities without academic music programs reported having strong church choirs, while two others foster them in addition to those from their college music departments.

While the initial changes sometimes created strong controversy, this has not really occurred once different options become available to fit the varying tastes. More members have expressed their displeasure by choosing to move to other congregations. This has been most dramatic at Australia's Avondale College Church, where students prefer their own radical Friday night service to the Praise service on Sabbath morning in the sanctuary (unless they are actually down to perform there), and many of the adults have moved to other congregations near to the college because of the absence of choice available to them there.

Reports of music at off-campus churches indicate that it differs greatly both ethnically and culturally, especially in communities where many Adventists are located. Most first-generation immigrant churches are traditional, singing hymns, sometimes with the help of both an electronic organ and a piano playing together. Their larger congregations also have choirs. Some Asian congregations have traditional indigenous language services for older members and contemporary English-language services for youth concurrently. Some new congregations formed by second- and third-generation Hispanics also use contemporary music.

African-American congregations vary, with some fostering choral ensembles and singing hymns with an organ, while others have embraced gospel choirs and songs.

Anglo churches also vary. Large congregations often have two services catering to different musical tastes. Praise bands have become the norm in some areas, as pastors who were attracted to them during their college days now foster them in their churches. Other congregations, especially those with a preponderance of older members, can be very traditional.

There is evidence, then, of some correlation between conservative theology and commitment to using the hymnal. During a recent visit to Australia, feeling alienated after attending different churches for five weeks in a row where I could not join in the singing because I did not know the songs sung and had found the words on screens did not help, I asked in Sydney for a church that used the hymnal, only to be told that there was only one, which had the reputation of being the most conservative theologically. However, the well-educated often also favor "cathedral-like" services (LLUC, Spencerville, Green Lake).

In areas with a concentration of Adventists—those surrounding Adventist universities and large hospitals and some urban areas such as greater Washington DC, each congregation tends to do its own thing, varying from "cathedral-like" classical music to Christian Rock. Collectively, they cater to the diversity of tastes among the Adventists there because people often choose to travel to a church that fits their particular needs. However, the rapid growth of one church in suburban Washington, at Spencerville, which is committed to a cathedral-like service, suggests

how many of the other churches there have adopted blended, praise, or contemporary formats.

However, where Adventists are few, so that all must attend a single church, there is more chance of dissatisfaction and conflict—and of choosing instead to watch the line-feed from the service at an Adventist center such as Loma Linda University Church. Since such feeds also offer the opportunity to send in tithes and offerings, this can result in a flow of funds from regions where Adventists are sparse and church organizations poor to regions where members are concentrated and administrations are flush with funds.

Pros And Cons

Strong academy and college choral programs earlier helped to create musically literate congregations, which enjoyed singing hymns in harmony. However, the use of Praise and contemporary songs, which are not designed for singing in harmony, and the use of screens that show words without music, is now producing musical illiteracy, so that congregations singing together in harmony is becoming rare. However, vestiges of the earlier pattern can surface: in September 2012 Walla Walla University Church hosted a “camp meeting” where screens were not employed, so that those present were obliged to use the hymnals in the pews. The organist reported his surprise to hear that a goodly number were singing in harmony.

Students now enter music departments with much less musical background, and many of those attracted to music courses as a result of participating in Praise Groups are musically illiterate, having learned the songs by rote. One choral director reported that some years ago, when he conducted a music festival drawing on the choral resources of all the academies in his region, they were able to present a credible performance of Vivaldi’s Gloria. However, now, with so many unable to read music and learning their parts by rote, such an accomplishment would be impossible.

On the other hand, the addition of music options has resulted in more students choosing to attend worship, as the recent experience of La Sierra University Church exemplifies. However, the phenomenon of several distinct services occurring in the same space and with the same senior pastor raises a question of to what extent these are collectively the same congregation.