

# Forming Faithful Disciples

## The Song of the Assembly

David Eicher

The process of faith formation is often referred to as a “journey.” This particular metaphor can be useful to us on many levels. We’ve all been on a journey, whether it has been an actual physical journey or a journey of the heart and spirit. Most journeys involve some preparation. Preparing for physical journeys usually requires things like purchasing tickets, filling the gas tank, buying provisions and packing the suitcases. But what about the journey of faith? What preparations do we make and what provisions do we pack? I want to suggest that some of the provisions for the faith journey are the songs we sing. I want to explore how the songs of the assembled body of Christ help us become more faithful disciples—how they help us live out our baptismal calling. (I use the term “assembly” throughout this article to refer to the community assembled around Word and sacrament, regardless of the size of that community.)

The preface of the *Book of Common Worship* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) begins with these words:

Worship is at the very heart of the church’s life. All that the church is and does is rooted in its worship. The community of faith, gathered

in response to God’s call, is formed in its worship. Worship is the principal influence that shapes our faith, and is the most visible way we express the faith.

In worship, through Word and Sacrament, the church is sustained by the presence of Christ. Joined in worship to the One who is the source of its life, the church is empowered to serve God in the world.

Because of the centrality of worship in the church’s life, the continuing reform of worship is of primary importance in maintaining the integrity of the people of God. In an age dominated by individualism and secularism, it is particularly important to embrace forms of worship that are firmly rooted in the faith and foster a strong communal sense of being united with God, with the community of faith in every time and place, and with a broken world in need of God’s healing touch. In other words, the concern for the reform of worship is, above everything else, a concern for the renewal of the church.<sup>1</sup>

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If a visitor to your worship were asked to describe the faith of your church, what words would they use? Would that faith be expressed in ways that focus on the individual or on the assembled body? And how about the sung word? What faith is being formed by what is sung? Does it express the faith of the assembly? Does it assist in transforming worshipers into more faithful disciples? What is expressed in your song?

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“Worship is the principal influence that shapes our faith, and is the most visible way we express our faith.” Is that really true? In our own churches, is worship the principal influence over budget? over mission? over education? over the personality of staff and leadership? If a visitor to your worship were asked to describe the faith of your church, what words would he or she use? Would that faith be expressed in ways that focus on the individual or on the assembled body? And how about the sung Word? What faith is being formed by what is sung? Does it express the faith of the assembly? Does it assist in transforming worshipers into more faithful disciples? What is expressed in your song?

Faith formation implies change and growth. That’s why the metaphor of a journey can be useful. Those on a journey know that everything they see and do changes who they are. It might be an incremental change or a monumental one, but there is change. One way to talk about the changes in a journey of faith is to explore the concept of transformation. It’s even biblical!

Paul’s letter to the Romans includes this passage in chapter 12:1-2:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Here is the same text in William Barclay’s translation:

Brothers, I call upon you, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies to him, a living, consecrated sacrifice, well-pleasing to God—for that is the only kind of worship which is truly spiritual. And do not shape your lives to meet the fleeting fashions of this world; but be transformed from it, by the renewal of your mind, until the very essence of your being is altered, so that, in your own life, you may prove that the will of God is good and well-pleasing and perfect.<sup>2</sup>

Transformation. Let’s think about that word a bit and its relation to what we sing. According to *Nelson’s Complete Concordance*<sup>3</sup> for the Revised

Standard Version of the Bible, this is the only place in the Bible where the word is used. Transform is defined by *Webster’s American Family Dictionary* as “to change in form, appearance, or structure; metamorphose. To change in condition, nature, or character; convert.”<sup>4</sup> When talking about forming faithful disciples, we are talking about the process of transformation.

“Be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” We are being asked to be a willing and intentional participant in our transformation until the “very essence of our being is altered.” The goal is to change our lives from one that is self-centered to one that is Christ-centered. Now that requires some re-orienting! If we are to become re-oriented and turn away from self-centeredness to Christ-centeredness, then our music must help us do so. We live in a culture of fast, now, and, “it’s all about you.” Sometimes our worship, and the songs we sing, become like the rest of our lives—junk food, sound bites, throw yesterdays away for what is new today! “It’s all about me!” If we are to be formed into faithful disciples, then music, along with all the other components of our worship, must help get the focus off of “fast,” off of “now,” off of “me.”

Where does our transformation begin? The apostle Paul says to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. We must begin the transformation process with a thought, with a realization and a confession of the need to change, with a desire to change the “essence of our being.” We’ve got to get ourselves in a place that enables us, encourages us, and inspires us to re-orient our lives. The “just me and Jesus” philosophy may be the place from which we start, but more is required if we are to be transformed “so that, in our own life, we may prove that the will of God is good and well-pleasing and perfect.”

Transformation requires that we move out from the relationship of “me and Jesus” to a life that Jesus modeled for us. That life shows us a path of healing, teaching, releasing captives, overthrowing oppressive systems, spending time with those most unlike us, lifting up the poor, comforting the downtrodden, and so much more. The pattern of life as modeled by Jesus shows times of introspection and renewal always leading to action.

Marcus Borg, in his book *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*, speaks about a “politically engaged spirituality,” a term he credits to William Sloane Coffin. Borg says:

This phrase [politically engaged spirituality] combines the two transformations, personal and political, at the center of the Christian vision of life as we see it in the Bible and in Jesus. If we emphasize only one, we miss half of the biblical message, half of the gospel. The strength of much of conservative Christianity is that it has emphasized the first, personal transformation. Its weakness is that it has often neglected the Kingdom of God. The strength of much of liberal Christianity has been that it has often emphasized the second. Its weakness is that it has often neglected being born again. A politically engaged spirituality affirms both spiritual transformation and political transformation. The message of Jesus, and the Bible as a whole, is about both. What we see in Jesus and the Bible answers our deepest personal longing, to be born again, and the world's greatest need, the Kingdom of God.<sup>5</sup>

If worship is about forming faithful disciples, transforming us from who we are now to what we are called to be, how does the music of the assembly prepare and enable us to be transformed?

Celtic Christianity uses the metaphor of “thin places.” Thin places are places where the veil is momentarily lifted and we behold God. Places where we experience the One “in whom we live and move and have our being.” These “thin places” literally can be geographical places like our church buildings, a retreat spot, a place of pilgrimage, or a mountaintop. But the idea of “thin places” refers to much more. They can be any place our hearts are opened. Marcus Borg says that worship can become a thin place:

Worship is about creating a sense of the sacred, a thin place. The diverse forms of Christian worship do this in different ways. At one end of the spectrum, the enthusiasm of Pentecostal worship can become a thin place by mediating an almost palpable sense of the presence of the Spirit. At the other end of the spectrum, Quaker silence serves the same purpose. In liturgical and sacramental forms of worship, the use of sacred words and rituals creates a sense of another world.<sup>6</sup>

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He goes on to say:

The primary purpose of participatory music—congregational singing—is to provide a thin place. More Protestants report being moved by hymn singing than by any other element in the service. We sing to God, and our hearts are opened.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, music is only one part of worship that offers the opportunity for those thin places, and we know that when all the elements of worship work together, we increase the chances of our hearts being opened, the veil lifting higher and our vision becoming even clearer.

Musicians are particularly fond of pointing out sociological studies on the issue of learning and retention. The highlight of those studies for musicians is when it is pointed out that singing increases retention. In other words, what we sing goes deeper into the mind and more often can be brought to the surface easily. Many stories are told of Alzheimer's patients who, when all other forms of communication have ceased, can continue to sing songs and hymns of their childhood with perfect melody and all texts complete.

Mary Louise Bringle, chair of the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song, writes:

One of the most significant features of hymnody is its ability to shape the imagination. A good tune softens the soil of the unconscious, enabling words and ideas from a text to take root. We subsequently catch ourselves singing or humming or whistling those words to ourselves as we go about our daily tasks. Such melodically-planted images gradually become part of our way of seeing and being in the world; the more deeply they inhabit us, the more likely we are to work to make them into reality in the world outside. Thus, I do not

think it is an exaggeration to affirm that we are graciously empowered and emboldened to “sing a new world into being.”<sup>8</sup>

What kind of songs are we putting into the musical files of the assembly? I’d like to think that in my own mind’s filing system, there will be lots of music stored away from childhood. My parents certainly did everything they could to fill those files. I grew up in the Church of the Brethren, a nonliturgical tradition, but one that had a great tradition of singing in four parts, particularly the gospel hymnody of Fanny Crosby and the like. Every year at the annual conference of the church they would print pages of hymn texts in the conference booklet, many with no music. My non-Church of the Brethren friends would marvel that 1,000 people could look at a set of words and sing in four-part harmony! We could because we learned the parts from childhood.

During my childhood and youth, my family made many automobile trips. When the miles began to get long and we were getting bored, my parents would begin singing hymns. We’d all join in on whatever part would fit our voices. My fondest memories are when my voice changed and I was able to sing the tenor parts. Then my sister would sing soprano, Mother would cover the alto, and Dad would be the bass. The goal of the exercise was to see how much of the hymn we could sing from memory. We’d try to get through all the stanzas if possible, although sometimes we would consult the hymnal we always carried in the car. We’d do this for miles on end. Surely these were formational times for me in my journey of faith.

My guess is that most of you could recount stories of times when what you were singing marked an event for all time. I remember singing “Just As I Am, Without One Plea” when I made a decision to be baptized and join the church at the age of 13. I remember singing “Let There Be Peace on Earth” with a group on a trip to a guard tower on the border between what was then East and West Germany. I remember singing “We Shall Overcome” as a college student in the 1970s as we protested the endless war in Vietnam and as we struggled to have African-American students brought into full participation on the campus.

All these events were marked for me by the singing of the “assembly.” Yes, it would be meaningful to sing “We Shall Overcome” to myself (and I sometimes find it going through my head,

particularly when the church is embroiled in yet another battle!), but how much more transforming it was to sing it with several hundred college students, including my African-American friends, seeking to change the political system.

If our participation increases our retention, then how critical it is for the assembly to be the primary voice. It may be quite moving to hear someone else sing it, and it might even be formative. But to sink it into the deep recesses of the mind so it can be brought forward later requires participation. When choices are made for the assembly’s music, shouldn’t we sometimes ask, “Is this something we hope they will be singing if Alzheimer’s takes away all other capacity for communication?”

Let’s look for a moment at that collection of individuals who, in the act of joining voices in song, are transformed into the assembly. In a previous church position, the director of vocal music and I would meet with prospective new members. She would tell them of the choral groups important in our church life. I heard the speech for more than 20 years, and part of it never changed. She always began with something like, “I want to tell you about the vocal choirs in our church. Let me begin with the most important one, the primary choir. That is the congregation. All our other vocal choirs are simply auxiliary choirs that sing things the congregation doesn’t have the time to rehearse.” This speech never failed to raise the eyebrows of the prospective new members, but then I would see their backs straighten and their heads held a little higher as they realized they were being called to add their voices to the song of the assembly, the primary choir.

This should not be new to us. We know that vocal assent is most often more powerful than silent assent. The difficulty is in helping the assembly find its voice. In many of our traditions, silent assent is much more comfortable. It’s somehow a little safer. When I add my voice to the song, those

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words, that music, becomes mine as well. That's a little dangerous, isn't it? What if the hymn says something like these words of the hymn writer Fred Pratt Green from 1969:

From every ailment flesh endures  
Our bodies clamor to be freed;  
Yet in our hearts we would confess  
That wholeness is our deepest need.<sup>9</sup>

What if it challenges us to do something about environmental issues or justice issues or . . . (fill in an issue that challenges your assembly)? And I don't believe that it is only this kind of gritty, challenging text that gives us pause. Sometimes it's the texts of great praise and worship of the Holy One that aren't quite what we are ready for. But isn't it precisely at those times that we find ourselves participating in the witness of a larger body of believers? Those songs enable "my" song, "my" words, to become "our" song, "our" words. And just then the formative power of the Word might be glimpsed and caught. In that moment it is possible that the focus shifts from "me" to "Christ" as the center of life. Then worship becomes real and the liturgy has the power to re-orient our lives.

This journey we are on, this thing we call discipleship, needs the correcting hand of the assembly to keep us on course. Left to our own devices, we are able to sing only the songs that bring us comfort and support. We can choose what songs we will sing and what songs we will hear. In the body of the assembly, we are given songs to sing that we may not like, or that we find difficult, or those we don't feel like singing. There is a power in the song of the assembly that can't be measured, but it is far greater than the weak voices that constitute this primary choir.

By the renewal of our minds, we can be changed until the very core of our being is altered, transformed. Our liturgies, spoken, sung, and enacted, have that power. In the assembly we can be re-oriented to a Christ-centered way of being. This is part of the process of forming faithful disciples.

Those involved in choosing the music that will be sung by our gathered assemblies must always be asking these difficult questions, and we must be willing to enter into discussions about what it means to be a faithful disciple. Sometimes we'll get it wrong, but if we are open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, then we'll try again and again and keep asking the

questions. After all, this is a journey and a process of formation. It won't happen overnight. It begins at our baptism and will be finished when our baptism is complete in death. In the meantime, we sing, trusting God to form us into more faithful disciples.

## Notes

1. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 1.
2. William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series, The Letter to the Romans*, Rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1975), 155.
3. John W. Ellison, *Nelson's Complete Concordance of the Revised Standard Version Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1957).
4. *Webster's American Family Dictionary* (New York: Random House, 1988).
5. Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 146.
6. *Ibid.*, 157.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Mary Louise Bringle, *In Wind and Wonder* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2007), 122.
9. Fred Pratt Green, "O Christ the Healer" (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing, 1969), stanza 2.