

BOOK REVIEWS

WORSHIP ACROSS THE RACIAL DIVIDE: RELIGIOUS MUSIC AND THE MULTIRACIAL CONGREGATION By Gerardo Marti, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012, 280 pp. \$26.50.

As a music director in a 35-year-old cross-cultural church, I was thrilled to see a review of a new book on worship music that addressed the field of music I have been working in since 1972. A noted sociologist was offering his research to describe “the new imperative for racial and ethnic diversity in American churches and how worship music adds a significant complication to the demand for diversity.” (p. 23) I couldn’t agree more, I thought as the introduction laid out the premise for the book.

Professor Marti really drew my attention as he began outlining popular beliefs on achieving racial diversity through music. He lists theories of diverse worship approaches as “One Size Fits All (universal language),” “The Musical Buffet (ethnically targeted musical plurality),” and “Global Song (shared unity through world music).”

I smiled as I recognized methods we have used at my church—we are solidly in the “Musical Buffet” camp with modifications—and I also recognized “Global Song” theory in the scattering of denominational hymnals I’ve perused with Asian, South American, and African praise songs included. Marti insightfully critiques the various approaches he has witnessed and even advises Pedrito Maynard-Reid (IVP, *Diverse Worship*) to use a more accurate term for “traditional, orthodox worship.” I, too, have found that to be a limiting description of Euro-American hymnody. I also identified with the “Pluralist” approach from chapter six. The pluralists “are most explicit in adopting particular styles of music based on their notions of race” (p 137).

However, he seemed to lack the insight of one who *has lived through* the diversity mission as he made some rather shallow observations about churches working through diverse worship. For example he postulates that taking turns doing various styles in the service only reinforces distinctions between racial groups. So? The position taken in cross-cultural fellowships is indeed to celebrate differences, not ignore or sublimate them, and new members are taught to embrace new friendships across the racial aisle. Yet, he doesn’t touch on the obvious dominant-subdominant culture issue so effectively addressed by Sung Chan Rah in his book *The Next Evangelicalism*, and by Dr. Carl Ellis in his lectures. That issue is critical when creating an atmosphere of trust between dominant culture whites and minority African Americans, and is explicitly played out in musical selection and preference.

I appreciated the conclusion Marti makes that multiculturalists should not stereotype ethnic groups with overly generalized ethnic music, like lumping all Latin worshipers together or gospel music for all African Americans. He cites musicologists and black musicians, but doesn’t have his own story of a local church working to interact with the folks whose neighborhood

surrounds an isolated white church whose members drive in. There is no denying that the style of music in worship is a factor when a church seeks to communicate the gospel to real people with needs. People in poor neighborhoods in the south want love and they want to worship. And that is how I learned the classic gospel song, "There's a Leak in this Old Building."

When Professor Marti quotes a white worship leader as saying, "I just wish I could be black!" I was reminded of all the efforts my own church has made to sound blacker. And, as he points out in chapter five, pastors are often the ones challenging the musicians to sound more specifically black. I would like to know how long that worship leader has been working with African Americans, because longevity is a key component in multicultural trust and understanding. It is only natural for a person who is culturally ill-equipped to feel intimidated by "the other" in black music. Even as a pastor of an all-white church must take time to understand his people, so a musician must run the gauntlet of cultural assimilation personally. It takes time and patience. Wasn't it Hudson Taylor, the missionary to China, who dressed in Chinese clothes and wore his hair in a queue?

I found the chapter on leading multicultural worship to be very familiar; the stresses of making the worship authentic are real. I dare say few congregants realize that they want sensitive musicians to lead their worship, only to find that these same musicians are moody and thin-skinned. But the author's premise that style is secondary forces him to slant his observations in such a way to discourage musicians who are seeking to find fresh music other than commercial CCM or arrangements from publishers. It makes this reader wonder if this book is one more argument against change, like Bob Larsen's in the 1970s, Ken Myers' in the 90s, and Paul Jones's today.

In Chapter seven the author defines "racialized ritual inclusion." Yes, that term means that if you are going to attract members of an ethnic group, you must have visual leadership and representation up front every Sunday. Sigh. How many years have I carefully sought talent in the congregation, selecting a praise team of racial parity? Mr. Marti's term has a negative connotation, but a more layman's understanding of this practice is that people of color, as well as whites, actually do appreciate color on stage, and it is not only practical to attract new talent, but it is also reflective of justice and mercy in worship. It is common for whites to perceive one or two blacks to equal diversity, while for blacks it "ain't enough," at least until the point has been made.

The sociological insights of Gerardo Marti do shed light on working together in a choir, praise team, or band. I agree that the music of a local church provides an environment of cooperation that helps with racial unity. I don't even mind his saying that multicultural churches find different musical solutions. Of course we will do things differently in the southeast than they do in southern California where Marti did his research. The thing missing from Gerardo Marti's book on multicultural worship is personal musical investment—he hasn't done it himself. He visits, he interviews, he studies, but if I could advise Dr. Marti on a second edition of this book, I would suggest he join a multicultural church and spend at least 3-6 years involved in their music ministry. This would be considered a costly time investment by most whites, but demonstrate more genuine interest to blacks or Latinos.

The song selection for Sunday morning is one of *the most important* tasks our diverse worship leaders have. Aesthetically guiding the congregation to *find its own* heart language is the reason we need educated contemporary musicians graduating from our music schools with a passion for multicultural worship. Finding ways to motivate African American drummers, Caucasian guitarists, and singers of various backgrounds to unify their efforts week after week in worship is relational and musical.

I can recommend this book to worship leaders who are already involved in the narrow road of diverse worship. It is encouraging to read something so close to my own experience, and empathic to the challenges of a blended cultural environment. But if one feels that racial groups should remain separate—white, black, Asian, Latino—in our worship then please don't read this book. It will only give you more arguments against breaking down the walls for the most segregated hour in America.

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