Music as Information and Dialogue: An Ethnographic Study of a Christian Congregation
Serving a Largely Gay and Lesbian (GLBT) Membership

Author Note

W. Bernard (Bill) Lukenbill
Professor Emeritus
School of Information,
University of Texas at Austin

Abstract

Music is important in most Christian churches. It is used for many purposes such as supporting belief systems, encouraging proper behaviors, and offering care and comfort. In this discussion, I present an ethnographic, naturalistic study of a largely GLBT (gay lesbian, bisexual, transgender) congregation and how music is used to support the theology and social needs of the church. The discussion will offer a historical as well as a contemporary overview of the use of music as used in the Metropolitan Community Church Austin (a member of the United Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches ((UFMMC)) and how it has evolved since the church's founding as an independent congregation in 1976. I conclude by offering an explanation for this evolution based on social, political, personal, and administrative situations as they have changed over the 36 years since the founding of the church.

Music as Information and Dialogue: An Ethnographic Study of a Christian Congregation
Serving a Largely Gay and Lesbian (GLBT) Membership

Introduction

Scientists believe that music is “older than civilization, [fostering] communication, wellness and bonding across all cultures.... Psychologist Robin Dunbar of Oxford University suggests that music “evolved to strengthen the emotional bonds in small groups of hominids.” (Zimmer, 2010).

Music in most Christian traditions plays similar roles. It is used for many purposes such as to support spiritual growth and to provide comfort for individuals. But above all, it is used to support and reinforce the values and doctrine of the particular church body.

In this presentation I present a naturalistic, field study of a church serving a largely gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender (GLBT) membership that faces unique problems not often encountered by churches.

This local church is a member of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC) with international headquarters now located in Sarasota, Florida, having relocated from Los Angeles, California. This local congregation, now named the Metropolitan Community Church, Austin at Freedom Oaks is considered one of the larger churches in this Fellowship with over 500 registered members and a larger service population of over 600.

Its membership is drawn from persons with past affiliations with traditional or mainline churches and from persons who have had very little Christian background. This particular congregation reflects the area in which it is located, drawing membership largely from former Baptist and other mainline church as well as the Roman Catholic Church. In addition to this, this congregation often must deal with people who come to it shamed and guilt ridden by stagnation

MUSIC AS INFORMATION AND DIALOGUE

forced on them by a large segment of Christianity and the general population that until recently in Texas and other states criminalized those who were sexually active (*Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 558 (2003); Carpenter, (2012). It also must minister to persons suffering from drug and alcohol abuse, physical and mental abuse, HIV-AIDS, and feelings of abandonment.

Along with other means, this church has consistently used music to address issues facing the church. These have ranged from doctrine, membership expectations, spiritual support, and personal comfort.

I will review some of the findings of an earlier study that I researched concerning music in this congregation from its founding in 1976 to 2005 (Lukenbill, 2005). I will then offer an update, as the entire pastoral leadership has changed as well as much of the membership since the previous study.

The music program has changed due to the church growth that has brought in musical talents including those with operatic voices, musical theater backgrounds, and praise singers. The congregation has become increasingly diverse, and over the years music directors have come and gone. Church members have also been active in expressing their musical preferences and service formats.

In this discussion I use a standard dictionary definition for *information*:

“Information is the communication and reception of organized knowledge or structured messages containing ideas intended to inform, influence behaviors and attitudes”

(*Webster’s Tenth New Collegiate Dictionary* (1999, p. 599).

I also use *diversity* to mean accepting and recognizing differences among people; and *pluralism* to mean accepting the legitimacy of specific traditional practices held by persons and

groups within a wider common culture. Diversity and pluralism are two of the core values of this congregation which calls itself “The Church without Walls.”

We cannot discuss the church music programs as information without considering music in its wider meanings. Corbitt (1998) states that church music today is becoming more inclusive and relying less on Western, European music. Today, he says, this is reflected in a broader use of church music including Latin chants, New Age Music, Southern hymnology, and African-American gospel music.

This form of music pluralism invites change; and change can be challenging and disturbing to the life of a church. In their desire to become pluralistic, Corbitt warns churches against “spectator worship, commercialization and secularization” (Corbitt, 1998, p. 42). By “spectator worship” he means relying too heavily on professional-level talent and less on congregational talents.

The Beginning of an International Church

The United Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC) was founded in 1968 in Los Angeles by the Rev. Troy D. Perry who was a former Pentecostal minister. Although its primary founding mission was to serve gay and lesbian persons who felt rejected by their churches, the Fellowship always claimed that it was an open church accepting all who come without regard to sexual orientation (Perry and Swicegood, 1992). It now has 222 congregations in 37 countries (UFMCC, “Who We Are,” n.d.). One of its early core values was social justice; and the church leaders were involved in many protest movements beginning in the 1960s. The local church has also continued these social protests based on issues that affect the membership.

Figure 1. Metropolitan Community Church of Austin, in a protest march against violence. .

Published by permission.

The original UFMCC church organizers came from a variety of Christian churches and because of this they seem to have adopted approaches to ritual and governances that were familiar to them and inclusive in purpose. Each local congregation is free to adopt its own style of service. The primary exception is that all churches must celebrate communion at Sunday services and church feast days. Although free to choose, most congregations seem to have selected a form of worship that reflects the Lutheran, Episcopal, and Roman Catholic Eucharist. Ministers, for the most part, wear vestments that reflect the high church calendar.

Individual churches belonging to the Fellowship are not independent or congregational in organization. Each individual church must follow the by-laws and rules of the Fellowship. This is important in that the by-laws clearly state that the senior pastor determines the form of worship, and this includes music.

A major influence on the music heard in local churches is a 1981 ruling from the Fellowship mandating that all churches use inclusive language in worship. This mandate meant that patriarchal words and phrases such as Lord and other such terms were to be avoided in public prayers, communion services, sermons, and biblical readings. A theological defense for this is currently provided by the Cathedral of Sunshine in Fort Lauderdale, Florida:

“The principle which guides the life and practice of the church cannot be ‘what do most people find comfortable,’ but rather, ‘what is God’s will and purpose?’ The reason we need to use inclusive language is not because we want to keep a particular group happy, but because it is necessary to promote justice, reconciliation and love, the agenda to which we Christians have been called”

(Cathedral of Sunshine. “Inclusive language,” n.d.).

Because this regulation applied to music, the Fellowship embarked on a program of music reform to help local churches implement inclusive language. This eventually led to the publishing of “Hymns of the church” in the 1980s (Metropolitan Community Church, Austin. Archives collection). Although this hymnal is rarely used today, it did have a tremendous influence on the music culture within the Fellowship. This hymnal included rewritten hymns that excluded masculine and patriarchal terms. New hymns were commissioned to reflect inclusion language. For example, “The Lord’s prayer” became: “The prayer that Jesus taught us.” The opening line was sung or read as “Our Creator whom we are a part of” An example of a commissioned hymn reads:

“Our God is not a woman, Our God is not a man; Our God is both and neither, our God is
I Who Am. From all the roles that bind us, our God has set us Free.

What freedom does God give us?

The freedom just to be”

(Metropolitan Community Church, Austin. Archives, Historical Resource File).

Music at MCC Austin at Freedom Oaks

Beginning of the Local Church

The local church was founded in 1976 as an independent church called Austin Community Church. After a period of growth and meeting requirements of the Fellowship, it applied for membership and was granted a charter in 1978.

Early Music Traditions and Conflicts

Archival evidence including church bulletins and board minutes, and interviews indicate the early music program was informal, relying largely on congregational singing. The first pianist was not a trained musician and could not read music, but played by ear only. Typical hymns used reflected American Protestant hymnology such as “Faith of Our Fathers,” “I Love to Tell the Story,” “I Need Thee Every Hour,” and “Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus” (Metropolitan Community Church, Austin. Archives, Historical Resource File).

The archival record also indicates that there were some levels of dissatisfaction with music and church order even in its early days. Apparently this dissatisfaction was taken to the board by some members of the congregation who requested a change in church services. The board at that time (and still continues today) reinforced the Fellowship’s by-laws that empower the senior pastor to decide church worship. An evangelical, Protestant approach seems to have continued. In 1978-79 a small group of members left the church and formed a short-lived congregation based on the Episcopal Church Order of Worship (Metropolitan Community Church, Austin. Archives, Historical Resource File).

Changes and Adaptations

In the late 1980s and early 1990s the church slowly moved into a more formal high church order. The clergy and acolytes (called communion servers) wore appropriate vestments;

MUSIC AS INFORMATION AND DIALOGUE

the choir was robed and often took part in the processional. By this time, the music program was under the direction of a paid, professionally trained musician. The music then and now often reflects the religious or educational background of the musical director and the senior pastor.

For example, one music director who held a theological degree and had experience as a music minister in a Southern Baptist church, introduced music that came from a Southern Baptist tradition. A later music director was from the Roman Catholic tradition and he introduced a more formalized church music. For example, offerings included the “Ave Maria” and “Mass for the Angles” in Latin (arr. Jalsevac) (Metropolitan Community Church, Austin. Archives, Historical Resource File).

During this same period, praise music was also used; and the use of praise music has become common in recent years. The current music director is a young, professionally trained director with a Master’s degree in choral directing. His religious background is Pentecostal, and along with standard hymns and anthems, he has introduced more gospel and African-American music. He has also encouraged the clapping of hands during some musical pieces. When the choir presents African-American gospel music they often swing to the cadence of the music.

During the early to mid-2000s a praise band existed and played at an evening service designed to appeal to members that appreciated a more charismatic approach to worship. After only a few years the band disbanded and the service was discontinued. Although this service existed prior to the band’s formation, the current minister explained that the service had become so dependent on the band and without the band there was little need to continue the service (Rev. Karen Thompson, statement, 2012). Until recently, there was a coordinator of praise music who performed and she was much involved with the overall music program.

Although not always easily done, over the years MCCA Austin has consistently sought to present an inclusive service, incorporating music into the overall program. Today MCC Austin's website states:

"Every service is complemented by music. The talented members of our music program ensure that worshipers experience a variety of sacred music appropriate to the season or the theme of the service" (Metropolitan Community Church, Austin "Worship at MCCAustin," n.d.).

Music as Information and Dialogue

The previous discussion has centered on the cultural dynamics of church worship that strives for inclusiveness, diversity, and pluralism in an environment composed of members from various backgrounds all of whom hold individual expectations concerning worship. Within this context I shall now consider more closely the information aspects of music within MCC Austin.

My theoretical analysis relies on social constructionism and essentialism. In simple terms constructionism occur when individuals or organizations, or even whole societies construct a reality that satisfies their own needs for identify and stability.

R. Stephen Warner (1995) defines essentialism as a constructivist concept and asserts that homosexual orientation is not learned behavior, but it is innate to the individual and it cannot be changed nor altered. Further, Warner holds that essentialist theory sees GLBT as persons who cannot be held responsible for their conditions. Essentialist theology similarly suggests that homosexuality is beyond human control, being in the hands of God. This concept suggests that sexuality is but one of the many gifts from God. Warner argues that the essentialist theology frees individuals from concerns about God's acceptance of them, helps to insulate them against shame and guilt, and allows them to concentrate their efforts on building better lives (pp. 95-101).

MUSIC AS INFORMATION AND DIALOGUE

In this analysis I also rely on discourse theory. Discourse theory is “a rational reconstructing of new concepts based on historical evidence and ... and sequences that are shaped and reshaped by political struggles” (Torfing, 1999). I use discourse theory in music as recorded behaviors that inform reason and promotes objective analysis. Discourse theory allows common values and behavior expectations to be displayed, discussed, and better understood.

Along with music as documented dialog, my observations and analysis suggest that the music at MCC Austin is constructionist and essentialist, and exhibits elements of liberation theology. Within these concepts, the music presents a well articulated body of information to the congregation. These theoretical and theological concepts suggest to me that the music program of MCC, Austin fits well into my definition of information stated earlier: “information is systematically organized and presented in ways that influence attitudes and behaviors.”

The current MCCA statement about the music ministry reads:

“Psalm 95 tells us to "sing joyfully to the Lord." At MCC Austin at Freedom Oaks, we don't just sing joyfully, we make music passionately, artfully, inclusively, diversely, beautifully, with or without accompaniment, in solo and ensembles, and often!” (Metropolitan Community Church, Austin. “Carrying Forth Christ’s Mission in the World,” n.d.).

Figure 2. Exterior and interior views of Metropolitan Community Church Austin at Freedom Oaks. Published by permission.

MUSIC AS INFORMATION AND DIALOGUE

When asked about music conveying information, Mark Fielding, a former music director, stated that the music program under his direction did not seek to educate, provide information, to encourage conformity, nor to offer dogma. Instead, he insisted that it sought to affirm and to offer the congregation positive avenues to the broad array of spiritual experiments available in Christianity (Mark Fielding, interview, 2005).

Based on these statements, how can I defend my thesis that music at MCC Austin is a means of information dissemination and dialogue? The role of liberation theology in the historical development of MCC, Austin is one defense that I present. A general definition of liberation theory is:

“a religious movement especially among Roman Catholic clergy in Latin America that combines political philosophy usually of a Marxist orientation with a theology of salvation as liberation from injustice” (“Liberation Theology,” n.d.).

Liberalization theology coincides with the maturing of the UFMCC Fellowship as a national and international church, and its involvement in social issues, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. The violent actions perpetrated against UFMCC congregations around the world offers strong evidence for UFMCC’s embracing of liberation theology and social justice. These harassments include police intimidations (Chicago), and denying of parade permits (Florida) (Rev. Kenneth Martin, Statement, 2003; *New York Times*). The most visible of these included church bombings and arsons of 20 church buildings from 1968 - 1997.

The most horrendous of these was the fire-bombing of the New Orleans MCC congregation:

“This deadliest fire in the city's history took the lives of 32 people, including the MCC's pastor and assistant pastor along with about half of the congregation. The tragedy was

compounded when most of the churches in the city denied [Moderator Troy] Perry's request to use their buildings for memorial services for the victims, some of whose families refused to claim the bodies" (Attacks on LGBT churches and churches sympathetic to LGBT concerns horizontal rule, n.d.).

Archival evidence at MCC Austin shows that liberation theory and the feeling of oppression and perhaps physical threats formed a basis for some of its music. For example, the well-know liberation hymn" We Shall Overcome" along with hymns from the UFMCC hymnal was used frequently in the recent past. For example, "Great Creator God, You Call" was often used as the processional hymn. It has these liberation lines:

“Christ still calls to peace and justice, Health and wholeness, love and grace.

We are partners in that mission. Once We Were Not a People. God's people now are we
... A gay and lesbian people, a new community.

We once feared condemnation on earth and from above

Until God's grace and mercy showed us the way of love.

A church where all God's children can find a family.”

The "Call to Worship" often used followed this processional hymn ended with these words:

We give thanks for God's unique love and we refuse to be limited by the shame the world tries to impose on us. (Metropolitan Community Church, Austin. Archives. Historical Resource File).

This hymn and call to worship was used in a Lenten sermon titled “Shame. I Have a Right to Be Here!”

MUSIC AS INFORMATION AND DIALOGUE

This hymn also illustrates Warner's essentialism that God is an accepting and loving God to all people no matter their sexual orientation.

Apparently, this hymn and call to worship has not been used in several years. This may be due to series of new pastors. The current senior pastor was trained and served in the Presbyterian Church. She was ordained by MCC Austin after she was denied ordination in the Presbyterian Church. Although a social activist, her background is not steeped in the style of social protests that characterized ministers of earlier decades. Recently, she based a sermon series on the "Occupy" movement and another on "Radical Lent." Instead of social protests, she used radical and "occupy" to emphasize core biblical teachings. Since she became senior pastor there appears to be a return to more traditional Christian music. For example, services under her supervision have included hymns such as "Amazing Grace, My Chains Are Gone," "Trust and Obey," both used as preludes, "You Alone are Holy," for communion and "I Decided to Follow Jesus" and "Amazing Grace," sung as recessional hymns.

A confession and absolution have been added to communion with an acknowledgement of sin and a promise to return to more righteous behaviors. The confessional and absolution was absent for almost two decades prior to her appointment. A "statement of assurance" delivered from the communion altar was used instead of a formal confession and absolution. Perhaps this statement by former pastor Kenneth Martin explains its absence for so many years: "The people who come to church have heard enough about sin and judgment. It's time that they heard about love for a change" (M. White, 1994, p.447, quoting Rev. Kenneth Martin).

The content of praise music seems to have changed with more references to being lost and finding new hope through Jesus and God. Within this wide frame of music, for the most part all musical selections are uplifting and supportive of God's acceptance and love. A hymn that

MUSIC AS INFORMATION AND DIALOGUE

have been used in recent time to celebrate the end of communion is “It Is Well with My Soul” replacing the hymn “Majesty.” (Metropolitan Community Church, Austin. Archives Historical Resources). Music used by the congregation does not appear to embrace lesbian and gay hymns that are composed by musicians who write beyond the traditions of this local church.

Music from well-know Broadway musicals have been introduced in recent years. This series takes place in the summer months. The musicals are used to illustrate spiritual and biblical themes as well as good human relationships found in the stories and music. This music encourages reflection and is uplifting and supportive of the goals of the church. The church has a number of trained musicians who can undertake this type of presentation, and professional singers and musicians from outside the church are also invited to be a part of these presentations. Recent selections have included *Pippin*, *My Fair Lady*, and *Wicked*. The 2012 summer program was based on the concept of redemption and featured *Les Miserables*, *Guys and Dolls*, *Carousel*, and *The Color Purple*.

As noted, the mandate for inclusive language coming from the Fellowship has had a direct influence on the music of local churches. To my mind, this illustrates the constructivism within the Fellowship and its churches. Music at MCC Austin as well of other MCC churches is used to communicate certain values and to ignore or lessen the force of other values such as sin and salvation.

In particular, the MCC Austin’s music program is designed to help members move away from viewing religious figures and situations in patriarchal terms such as the “Kingdom ” and Lord” and to not use God only in the masculine. The information and educational aspect of music selections help the congregation internalize and become more comfortable with inclusive

MUSIC AS INFORMATION AND DIALOGUE

language and the core values of the church. For the most part, music in recent years continues to avoid:

- With some exceptions, archaic words such as thee and thou.
- Music that has an adverse relationship to race, personality, and action.
- Music that has upsetting symbols such blood.
- Music that suggests to the congregation the feelings of vulnerability, wretchedness, and lost souls.
- Music that over-emphasizes salvation from sin.
- Musical themes that suggest militarism such as “Onward Christian Soldiers”
- Music that reminds the congregation of oppression, such as the tune from “Deutschland Uber Alles” with its Nazis connotations, as used in the hymn “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken.”
- Music with derogatory references, such as dark for evil and white for purity and good (Fielding Interview, 2005).

Generally speaking, inclusive language need not be used if its use interferes with the intent and musicality of the original music. This is especially true with classical music.

Another aspect of the music in this congregation that helps define it as information dissemination is that it is a central core of worship. It is carefully selected to compliment the overall themes of the services. It is carefully rehearsed and formatted, and presented by excellent musicians. In its delivery to the congregation, it is well articulated and specifically focused on religious experiences with information that is designed to enhance human behaviors and attitudes based on biblical understandings and core values of the church.

Fred, an unknown reviewer of the church's services posted the following on a business page. The review reflects well on the intended results of these well-crafted, information-designed presentations:

"The first time I attended MCC, I did so with reservations ... [after 30 years of years of worship in my church.] Much to my amazement, I was pleasantly surprised in their service. I immediately felt welcomed and instantly felt as if I had been attending this church forever. From the music and choir to the sermon and inclusiveness of the mass, I was overwhelmed with positive emotion elicited by everything and anything associated with the place.... When MCC says that they are a "Church without Walls," they mean exactly that. Words cannot express the comfort you will feel when attending service at MCC. My only suggestion is that you experience it yourself by attending; it will truly be life changing" (Frank. MCC Austin Review. 2009 statement from Frank").

Conclusion

I will conclude by saying that MCC Austin at Freedom Oaks is not much different from congregational life in other denominations where music and service order are important. The difference lies in its origin, its perceived status as serving an oppressed people as well as victims of violence and abuse; and the need of the members of the congregation to gain self-respect and to bond with others in a spirit of family with shared values. From my review, the music at MCC Austin appears to be cyclic based on external circumstances, internal spiritual needs of the congregation, the music and service preferences of church leadership, music tastes and musical talents found with the congregation. Music as information and education at MCC Austin appears to be always striving to meet the goals of the church and respond to new challenges.

References

- “Attacks on LGBT churches and churches sympathetic to LGBT concerns horizontal rule.” (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_arsn.htm.
- Carpenter, D. (2012). *Flagrant conduct: The story of Lawrence v. Texas*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Corbitt, J. N. (1998). *The sounds of the harvest: Music's mission in the church and culture*. Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Books.
- Fielding, Mark (2005). Interview.
- Frank. (n.d.). “MCC Austin review. 2009 statement from Frank.” Retrieved from <http://www.yelp.com/biz/metropolitan-community-church-of-austin-austin>.
- Cathedral of Sunshine. “Inclusive language.” (n.d). Retrieved from http://sunshinecathedral.org/?page_id=2063.
- Lawrence v. Texas, 539 U.S. 558 (2003).
- “Liberation theology.” (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/liberation%20theology>.
- Lukenbill. W. B. (2005). “Pluralism and diversity: Music as discourse and information in a gay and lesbian congregation.” In Thumma, Scott and Gray, Edward R. (Eds.). *Gay religion* (pp. 167-180). New York: Altamire Press,
- Metropolitan Community Church Austin. (1976-2012). Archives Historical Resources, Bulletins and Newsletters and Board file sets.
- _____. “Carrying forth Christ’s mission in the world.” (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.mccaustin.com/ministries.html>.
- _____. “Worship at MCC, Austin.” (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://mccaustin.com/services.html>.

Parade bars gay church, stirring Key West. (1995, December 28). *New York Times* pp. 9N, 10L.

Perry, T. D., & Swicegood, T. (1992). *Don't be afraid anymore: The story of Reverend Troy & the Metropolitan Community Churches*. New York: St. Martin.

Thompson, Karen (2012). Statement.

Torring, J. (1999). *New theories of discourse: Laclau, Mouffe, and Žižek*. Oxford, UK; Malden, MA.: Blackwell Publishers.

UFMCC. (n.d). "Who we are." (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://mccchurch.org>.

Warner, R. S. (1995). "The Metropolitan Community Churches and the gay agenda: The power of Pentecostalism and essentialism." In *Religion and the social order, sex, lies and sanctity: Religion and deviance in contemporary North America*. G. Bromley, M. J. Neitz, and M.S. Goldman (Eds.) (pp. 81-108). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Webster's tenth new collegiate dictionary. (1999). Springfield MA.: Merriam-Webster.

White, M. 1994. *Stranger at the gate: To be gay and Christian in America*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Zimmer, Carl (2010 December). "Bonding—or is it just "Auditory Cheesecake?" *Discovery*. Retrieved from <http://discovermagazine.com/2010/dec/21-music-wooing-mothering-bonding-enjoyment/?searchterm=Music%20zimmer>

Biographical Statement

W. Bernard Lukenbill (Bill) is a professor emeritus in the School of Information at the University of Texas in Austin, Texas. He began his career as a high school librarian in Texas. He graduated with a BS in Education degree from the University of North Texas. His MLS degree is from the University of Oklahoma, and his PhD. is from Indiana University. In addition to serving as a high school librarian he was a reference librarian at Austin College in Sherman, Texas. His teaching career in higher education began in the College of Education at Louisiana Tech University in Ruston, Louisiana. He also served on the faculty of the University of Maryland, College Park. Since 1976 he has been on the faculty of the University of Texas. He retired in 2010. He has published widely in the professional and academic press. His research has involves cultural and social issues as they impact information studies. He is listed in *Who's Who in America* and other biographical resources. He has presented his research widely in the United States and internationally.