

**Shorts Songs and Missional Ecclesiology**  
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Music and Ritual: Contemporary Perspectives  
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Mission is the reason for the church's existence. This is the core of a missional ecclesiology, that we as the Body of Christ are called to participate in the saving work of Christ. As members of the *ecclesia militans*, we actively await the coming of God's kingdom. We do not wait passively but actively, our daily lives and our common worship all defined by the understanding of the Church as Christ's visible and active presence in the world. Embracing a missional ecclesiology means that every aspect of Christian life including our corporate worship must empower us for Christ's service. However, in today's postmodern culture, worship centering on the Modern philosophical ideal of discourse may not be best able to form Presbyterians in this way. This paper will explore the current postmodern cultural context, the importance of missional ecclesiology for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), and how short songs, as a genre of ritual, can teach missional theology within a postmodern communicative model. In particular, it will seek to show that in today's postmodern culture, which favors sight and sound bytes over discourse for the transmission of information, short songs of the Iona Community can be usefully employed during the sending rites in the *Book of Common Worship* for the dissemination of sound missional theology.

Neil Postman, in his 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, reports that the average length of any network news story is forty-five seconds. In another place he cites the slogan of the New York City radio station WNIS: "Give us twenty-two minutes and we'll give you the world."<sup>1</sup> Postman's book is a scathing critique of current American culture, which has moved beyond Modern thought into postmodernism and in so doing has eroded the once unquestioned legitimacy of rational discourse. Postman illustrates his point by examining trends in mass media since the 1950s, focusing on the sight and sound bytes which came to dominate network news broadcasts by the mid 1980s. In the twenty years since Postman's book was published, the advent of new types of communication – paging, texting, instant messaging, Facebook, Twitter – has given rise to generations of Americans who

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1 (Postman 103, 113). Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public discourse in the age of show business*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985.

communicate primarily in short forms. Rational discourse, one of the hallmarks of Modern thought<sup>2</sup>, can no longer be seen as a normative means of expressing or receiving ideas. It has been largely replaced by a sight and sound byte, postmodern culture. What are the implications of this postmodern model of communication for the Church's worship? The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) comes from a tradition of liturgical discourse, of preaching, of Modern thought at its peak and systematic theology at its best. Words, lots of them, have been the mainstay of Presbyterian worship for centuries. Consequently, as American culture has shifted away from a discursive communicative model into a postmodern and non-discursive one, membership in the Presbyterian Church (and other other mainline protestant churches) has decreased significantly. Worship is the Church's grateful response to God and should be at harmony with its members' natural mode of communicative expression. Postmodern American society, which has moved towards a model of communication based upon short forms, could be estranged from worship that focuses on the lengthy and cerebral. In other words, those whom Presbyterians reared in an age of Modernism evangelize and thus bring into the worshiping community could experience a denial of their natural mode of communicative expression by finding themselves situated in a Christian denomination which has traditionally been centered around discourse. Moreover, even some "already" believers, many of whom have grown up primarily influenced by postmodern thought, may not be best able to receive communication presented in a discursive way. That is, the use of preaching or meaningfully dense hymns may no longer be the best way to engender theological understanding among the assembly. When considering how to form postmodern congregants in a sense of missional ecclesiology, then, short forms of communication, (i.e. sung liturgical sound bytes), will likely be better for its disseminating a missional theology.

There has been an increasing amount of discussion around missional ecclesiology in the Presbyterian Church recently. Drawing on the idea that "the life of the Church is one, and that its

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<sup>2</sup> For a good (although a bit dated) overview of Modern philosophy, see Russell, Bertrand. *A History of Western Philosophy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1945. pp. 491-495.

worship, witness, and service are inseparable<sup>3</sup>,” writers like Paul Hooker have helped clarify missional ecclesiology in terms of liturgy<sup>4</sup>, especially centering on the Church's two fundamental liturgical actions – proclaiming the Word and celebrating the Sacraments. However, little attention has yet been paid to the ways in which those parts of worship which Robert Taft terms “soft” could change to better emphasize ecclesial mission. “Soft” parts of the liturgy are malleable elements attached to the fundamental actions of worship and are the means by which the Church comments upon those actions. That is, the gathering rites, the rites between the sermon and eucharistic prayer, and the sending rites. These all function as liturgical commentary upon the fundamental actions of proclaiming the Word and celebrating the Sacraments. When talking of missional ecclesiology, Hooker uses the term “sent” church<sup>5</sup> to sum up the meaning of that ecclesiology. Liturgists who hear Hooker's terminology should make an immediate connection then with one of Taft's “soft” spots: the sending rites. The PC(USA)'s current Directory for Worship says that the sending is the liturgical act of “bearing and following the Word into the world<sup>6</sup>.” More than any other part of worship, sending rites are a crucial liturgical commentary on the actions of the liturgy pointing toward a missional ecclesiology, to the understanding of the Church not just as receivers of the Word but as bearers of it. The current sending rites in the *Book of Common Worship* are to be commended for including liturgical texts that echo themes of mission<sup>7</sup>. However, these rites need to be further altered in order to better engender a sense of the importance of being a “sent” Church. In a postmodern world and increasingly postmodern Church, using short songs can be effective in that regard.

Proponents of rational thought and discourse could be suspicious of short songs' ability to

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3 (BOO) *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part II: Book of Order 2009-2011*. Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2009. This quote comes from the preface to the Directory for Worship and can be found in the pages preceding W.10000.

4 (Hooker) Hooker, Paul. “What is Missional Ecclesiology?” Published online at <http://www.pcusa.org/formofgovernment/pdfs/what-is-missional-ecclesiology-1008.pdf>. Written as a member of the task force for the proposed changes to the PC(USA) Form of Government.

5 (Hooker 8)

6 (BOO W-3.3700)

7 For a more thorough discussion of the sending rites as missional (and eschatological), see my paper “Rethinking Our Sending Rites,” available at <http://www.jonathanhehn.com/>.

disseminate sound theology. It is true that short songs cannot put across meaning in the same way that discursive thought does. But song, as a type of ritual action, carries meaning in another way, a symbolic way. Researchers in the field of ritual have done much in the last century to prove that ritual in general, not even specifically song, indeed mediates meaning in a powerful way. Some, like anthropologist Victor Turner, have described how ritual actions function primarily as symbols to help communities negotiate and enforce social meaning. Others like Ronald Grimes have emphasized how ritual actions are symbols that emerge as a creator of meaning and not just a disseminator of it. Judith Kubicki draws on these ideas and on symbolic models by Polanyi, Chauvet, and others to show how song is this type of ritual symbol. As such, songs both negotiate existing meanings and create new ones. Texts of songs, because they are already part of the symbol system of language, contain a meaning even apart from their musical settings. Regardless of the fact that language as a type of symbol cannot contain a single, fixed meaning (as Nathan Mitchell is want to point out<sup>8</sup>), texts nonetheless carry some sort of preexisting meaning. Likewise, the musical setting of a song carries with it an existing symbolic meaning, even if that meaning is multi-faceted and subjectively experienced. In the singing of a song, the interplay of these preexisting meanings gives rise to a new set of meanings, speaking to Grime's emphasis on the ability of ritual to create meaning for itself<sup>9</sup>. Polanyi and Chauvet have articulated the way in which the meanings of a symbol in general do not stem from the thing signified nor from the user of the symbol, but rather exist within the actual doing of the symbol.

The work of Mary Douglas is also important for understanding song particularly as an embodied ritual symbol<sup>10</sup>. According to Douglas, all ritual symbol is based in the body. In her book *Purity and Danger*, Douglas shows the profound linkage between the human body and the way in which we symbolize. The body is both the creator of and recipient of ritual and its symbolic meanings. Song can be said to be an embodied activity *par excellence*, involving many parts of the body simultaneously

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8 Foley, Edward. "Music in Ritual: A Pre-Theological Investigation." Washington: Pastoral Press, 1984.

9 For an accessible discussion of the ambiguity of communication regarding song, see the last chapter of Bell, John. *The Singing Thing*. Chicago: GIA Publications, 2000.

10 Perhaps the work of Karl Rahner might better explain the idea of embodiment specifically with regard to liturgy.

not only in the interpretation of the symbol but in the dynamic creation of it. So song is an embodied ritual symbol. The idea of song's symbolic capacity as an embodied action is reinforced by Polanyi's and Chauvet's idea that symbolic meaning results from doing (in the case of song, from singing). Furthermore, there is the recognition that texts and musical settings each endow the ritual action of singing with their own preexisting meanings, and that these meanings are combined, complicated, and impressed upon the symbolizer (the singer) through the doing of the song. Presbyterian theologians might be skeptical of this philosophy of ritual symbol because of the historic predilection toward Modern thought. Thanks to the work of thinkers like Douglas, Grimes, Turner, Polanyi and Chauvet, though, Presbyterians are realizing more and more how ritual actions such as song can mediate meaning even in the absence of discourse.

It is true that Presbyterians have always recognized the power of some ritual actions to symbolize. The documents of the Book of Confessions<sup>11</sup> all discuss sacraments as symbols using Augustinian terminology. The Second Helvetic Confession is especially clear on this point:

Therefore the signs acquire the names of things because they are mystical signs of sacred things, and because the signs and the things signified are sacramentally joined together<sup>12</sup>.

However, Presbyterians, especially since the Enlightenment, have allowed Modern discursive thought to overshadow the meaningful use of symbols even in the symbolic ritual actions of the sacraments. Intellectual understanding has traditionally been the measure by which one's "right" participation in those actions was judged. Singing has certainly only been shallowly understood or cursorily discussed in symbolic terms within Reformed circles of the last four centuries, and so its power to symbolize, to create meaning through and for the participants in the song, has yet to be realized. Today, in a postmodern society, discourse is no longer the primary way in which we come to understanding.

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11 These are the Nicene and Apostle's Creed, The Scots Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Second Helvetic Confession, Westminster Confession of Faith, Shorter Catechism, Larger Catechism, Theological Declaration of Barmen, Confession of 1967, and A Brief Statement of Faith – Presbyterian Church (U.S.A).

12 (BOC 5.180) *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I: Book of Confessions*. Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 1994.

Modern thought has given way to postmodern symbolization manifested in communication through short forms. Internet chats or texting exchanges are not just intended to convey small bits of information. They are used by many postmodern communicators to relay a complex range of meanings and accomplish this through symbolic means. Songs are no exception to this trend. Since the rise of postmodern thought, extensive and discursive musical forms have waned in popularity as shorter, simpler, and more affective forms have grown in popularity. Romantic symphonies by Brahms and Mahler have given way to minimalist suites by Phillip Glass and John Adams. Oratorios by Händel and Mendelssohn-Bartholdy have given way to song cycles by Timothy Hoekman and Ned Rorem. In the Christian communities, doctrinal hymns have given way to simple choruses and ostinatos. In some traditions anthems formerly extending the discourse of the sermon are giving way to pieces more connected to symbolic liturgical action. These trends do not mark a decline in the society's ability to understand. They simply mark a shift in the mode of understanding away from Modern discourse and towards postmodern symbolism. For that reason, short songs are a perfectly appropriate means of disseminating theology within worship.

Several characteristics of the short songs of the Iona Community make them particularly appropriate for use in Presbyterian worship today. First, short songs are designed to be sung by everyone. The songs of Iona are accessible to congregations, which has always been a primary concern of the Reformed tradition, even going back to Calvin and his French psalters<sup>13</sup>. John Bell says of the songs in his collection *Come All You People*:

[These songs] have been sung both by cathedral choirs and unkempt teenagers. They have also enabled people who believed they couldn't sing to catch hold of and keep a harmony line – whether that be the simple pentatonic Amen with which the book ends or, as numerous Greenbelt Festival-goers will attest, the more complex but highly enjoyable songs such as *Behold the Lamb of God (2)* or *From the rising of the sun*.

Both the texts and music of these songs have been developed such that congregations might participate

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13 Garside, Charles. "The origins of Calvin's theology of music" Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1979. Garside's extended article provides a good overview of Calvin's thoughts about church music and congregational song in particular.

in them easily and fully. Second, the texts of the Iona short songs are biblical or biblically based, standing firmly within the Reformed tradition of congregational singing. Especially when attempting to imbue theology through short symbolic forms, a judicious selection of text is crucial. The Reformed tradition teaches that Scripture is the source and measure against which all theology and praxis should be measured. The Westminster Confession of Faith begins with a discussion of Scripture, laying down this basic principle:

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture. . . and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed<sup>14</sup>.

So it is especially important for short texts intended to be used symbolically for the dissemination of theology to come directly from Scripture or to be based thereon. The songs of the Iona community certainly fit this criterion. Third, the songs of Iona often use music of the Other. The use of ethnocentric music or music modeled on folk song gives the gathered community an awareness of the Other even if the community is not diverse in and of itself. As has been said, even apart from the words, musical settings bring a preexisting range of meanings to the ritual symbol. These meanings are of course subjective and varied, but it can be said that, at the very least, singing music that is recognizably of the Other heightens the community's awareness thereof. If songs are to help the Church toward a sense of missional ecclesiology, then they must first and foremost help us become aware of the Other's existence. Even those musical idioms found among Iona Songs that are not drawn from a specific culture are built upon ethnocentric or folk models distinct from American and Presbyterian characteristic forms. Fourth, many of the texts from the Iona Community concern social justice and mission. Using texts such as these in combination with ethnocentric or folk music helps mediate the idea that in addition to recognizing the presence of the Other, we must reach out in Christ to him or her. Finally, these are songs that belong to the singers. Embodied ritual, again drawing on the premise of

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14 (BOC 6.0006)

Mary Douglas, is not simply perceived as sign but conceived as symbol. The singing of mission texts and Other-centered musics creates a bodily and subconscious awareness of our call to mission, of being “sent” to care for the Other. Putting these songs into the context of worship, especially the sending rites of the eucharistic service, makes clear that the Church gathered around Word and Sacrament is a church sent out to continue the work of Christ in the world. So the songs of the Iona Community can help foster a missional ecclesiology<sup>15</sup>, especially when sung during the Sending.

The current *Book of Common Worship* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) retains much of the sending rites from Calvin's *Forme of Prayers*<sup>16</sup>. The Sending in the Book of Common Worship is simple and follows the following outline:

[Post-communion Prayer]  
Hymn, Spiritual, Psalm, or the Canticle of Simeon.  
Charge  
Blessing  
Response: “Alleluia! Amen.”<sup>17</sup>

The post-communion prayer in the *Book of Common Worship* is actually not specified as part of the “Sending” rite, although this distinction is arbitrary from a historical perspective; prior to the modern idea of a four-fold ordo, historic liturgies (including Calvin's) simply considered the sending rites to be an extension and completion of the celebration of the Lord's Supper. There are four post-communion prayers in the *Book of Common Worship* for general use, each of which contains both a giving of thanks and call to mission, echoing Calvin's “Thanksgiving after the Supper<sup>18</sup>”. Because of their missional focus these prayers can be seen as really belonging to the sending rites. The Charge that follows also emphasizes mission. Charge number one (of three) is the clearest and most complete in this regard.

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15 One additional thing to consider is the historical precedence that short songs have in Presbyterian worship. John Bell outlines several popular Scottish examples in the preface to *Come All You People*. In the United States, the long-standing traditions of singing the *Gloria Patri* and the praise hymn commonly referred to as the “Doxology” are still observed in many parishes. More recently, liturgical texts like the Sanctus and Memorial Acclamation have been sung in short musical forms.

16 (Thompson 202, 208). Thompson, Bard. *Liturgies of the Western Church*. New York: World Publishing 1962. For the original French facsimile see Pidoux, Pierre, ed. *La Forme des Prières et Chants Ecclésiastiques* Genève 1542. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1959.

17 (BCW 76-78). *The Book of Common Worship*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.

18 (Thompson 203).

Go out into the world in peace;  
have courage  
hold on to what is good;  
return no one evil for evil;  
strengthen the fainthearted;  
support the weak, and help the suffering;  
honor all people;  
love and serve the Lord,  
rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Charge number two is much shorter but still clearly missional:

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

But if the worship of the church is to reflect a missional ecclesiology, all the elements of the sending must be centered around mission, not just the post-communion prayers and charge. For the liturgy in the *Book of Common Worship*, that means both the closing song and response to the Blessing need to somehow emphasize the importance of being “sent”. In a postmodern world this can be done best not through excessive verbiage but through compact and symbolic forms. Embodied symbols such as the short songs of the Iona Community symbolize a missional ecclesiology especially well because in their singing the community actually creates and mediates the symbol. The traditional response to the Blessing in the sending rites, “Alleluia! Amen,” does well to underscore our joyous response to a worshipful encounter with God. However, for a postmodern Church that needs to emphasize mission, this short song from Iona might function better:

Through our lives and by our prayer  
your Kingdom come.<sup>19</sup>

The musical idiom of this song, as shown in Appendix I, lends itself well to repetition. Especially if sung repeatedly as the people leave the service, this song could work powerfully to recount the necessity of bearing the Word into the world through our lived example and continued prayer. Another example of a benediction response is slightly longer and draws directly on Scripture, taking John 15:5 as the basis for its text. It is also found in Appendix I in its musical setting.

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19 (Bell 67). Bell, John L. *Come All You People: Shorter songs for worship*. Chicago: GIA Publications, 1994.

I am the vine and you are the branches,  
prun'd and prepar'd for all to see;  
chosen to bear the fruit of heaven  
if you remain and trust in me.<sup>20</sup>

A sung item before the Charge that helps engender a theology of mission could simply be the prescribed Canticle of Simeon, which certainly encompasses missional and eschatological themes<sup>21</sup>. However, a song like the following can symbolize in a joyful and more straightforward way the empowerment we receive in worship before being sent into the world. Its musical setting can be found in Appendix II.

Behold, I make all things new,  
beginning with you  
and starting from today.  
Behold, behold I make all things new,  
my promise is true,  
for I am Christ the way.<sup>22</sup>

Those who prefer a scriptural text or one with a different musical *Affekt* could also use the following, taken from John 6:69 and printed with music in Appendix II.

Lord, to whom shall we go?  
Yours are the words of eternal life.<sup>23</sup>

Mission is the reason for the church's existence; this is an ecclesiology that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) has made great efforts to recover after seeing a decline in membership during the last forty years. Embracing a missional ecclesiology means working for corporate worship that will better empower us for Christ's service. However, in today's postmodern culture, Presbyterian worship born out of Modern thought and centered on discourse may not be effective in that regard. Short songs are a genre of ritual that can symbolize missional ecclesiology well in a postmodern culture. Especially when used during the sending rites, the short songs from the Iona Community can and will form postmodern worshipers in a sense of mission, one that sends them into the world to take part in the saving work of Christ.

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20 (Bell 52).

21 Again, see "Rethinking Our Sending Rites," available at <http://www.jonathanhehn.com/>

22 (Bell 84).

23 (Bell 66).

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