

Maximizing Information and Communication Technology for Effective Congregational Singing in Christian Churches

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Abstract

Congregational singing of hymns and choruses is an integral part of any corporate Christian worship in the church. Even congregational music is the most accused single item in most weekly corporate church worship experience. Due to various challenges of ministry in this era, there is need to promote good congregational music in this post-modern age, through the use of mobile technology devices, In spite of huge above of technology in this post-modern era, there are a lot of good and profitable use to which the church can put technology, in which the promotion of effective congregational singing is a major one.

INTRODUCTION:

The study and use of hymns, psalms and spiritual songs (which is the essence of congregational music) in the life of the Christians Church is as old as the birth of the Church itself. Jesus sang a hymn with the early disciples after they partook in the Lord's Supper (Mark 14:26). Apostle Paul also encouraged believers to sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs regularly according to Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19. (Holy Bible, NIV (2014: Col.3:16; Ephesian 4:19).But there is a strong need for the Christian Hymnody to change

with time. We cannot put new wine in an old wine skin, so there is need for newness, taking the resources available and the characteristics of the time into consideration. The Church as a member of a society cannot pretend not to be affected by the presence of postmodernism, but irrespective of what changes are around us the Church must still continue to function as a viable entity, and carry out its ministry effectively. This paper seeks to look into the need for the Church to take advantage of the resources and equipment around her to effectively continue to study and use hymns in a more dynamic and creative way, more than any earlier era has enjoyed. In essence, congregational music consists of songs which are used in corporate Christian worship context, jointly sung by the entire congregation in time.

Christianity without music, especially in the corporate worship sense, is an inconceivable thought. The singing and study of congregational music has been part of Christian faith as early as the birth of Christianity itself. Congregational music will continue to be part of Christian faith till eternity. The book of Revelation Chapter four makes it clear that the activity that goes on in heaven is the worship of Yahweh God and that will definitely be our duty when we get to heaven. Congregational music-making is a vital and vibrant practice within Christian communities worldwide. It reflects, informs and articulates convictions and concerns that are irreducibly local even as it flows along global networks.

Congregational song can unify communities of faith across geographical and cultural boundaries; however, it can also be used to mark divisions between Christians of different denominations, cultural backgrounds and social classes, and to negotiate or articulate difference in relation to religious outsiders. We therefore cannot understand the meanings, uses, and influences of congregational music within Christianity without exploring both its local contexts and its translocal, transnational, and global circulation. (Inglais et al: 2016).

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDIES

In this post-modern era, there are a lot of changes, one which is the approach to ways by which things are done and carried out, the church as an integral part of the society is inclusive. We are in an age of computer and various ICT (Information and Communication Technology) equipment. Many things have been affected by the coming of information technology devices. The church being an integral part of the society cannot pretend not to recognize the impact of computer age, even on the church and on the way the church carry out its activities.

According to Oladejo, (2005:47) in his write-up on “IT and Communication Technologies,” it is implied that the use of information and communication technological equipments such as computer, e-mail, fax, video conferencing removes space and time barriers, opening up new possibilities for teaching-learning activities and any other form of communication.”

Today, there is a popular use of flat screens and projectors to pass information to worshippers during regular corporate worship services for the projection of message, announcements and hymn texts/lyrics etc. in most churches, especially in the metropolis. But with the introduction of electronic mobile communication equipments, meaningful worship could be experienced anywhere at any time at the fingertip of the user (s) personally or cooperatively. This is what the church today should promote due to its portable nature and in this age of busyness. The writer of this paper feels that the church should move forward in the use of these mobile devices to promote meaningful worship anywhere and at anytime. We have smart phones, iPADS, iPhones, iPods, laptops to promote the use and singing of congregational music beyond the four-wall of the church building, for this postmodern generation.

All of the above mentioned mobile devices have the capacity to use software on which any audio-visual materials could be stored or recorded electronically and used anywhere and at anytime, what a great blessing for this post-modern generation. Worshipping God through meaningful and effective congregational music is no longer limited to the corporate church worship centers, but could be experienced anywhere 24-7 (meaning twenty-four hours daily for seven days a week), in a much more better presentation than what the music ministry of any local church could offer. For example, some of this congregational music is recorded with a well-managed orchestral instrumental accompaniment and musical sound and acoustics (both vocal and instrumental) than what any music ministry of any church could offer in live presentation. Most churches do not even have good sound equipments or management; talk less of having orchestral equipments.

DEFINITION OF BASIC TERMS:

Church Music: According to Hustad, (1999:22) church music is a functional art created by human beings to serve the purpose of God particularly in the expression of its worship (Litourgia, Gr.), fellowship (Koinnnonia, Gr.) mission (Kerigma, Gr.), Christian education (Didache, Gr.) and pastoral care (Diakonia, Gr.).

Church: the called out ones – (*Ekllessia*, Gr.) specially called out people of God from the world, though still living in the world, according to Jesus' prayer in the gospel according to St. John Chapter 17. (NIV, 2014: John 17)

Congregation: is the gathering of believers in Christ who meets regularly for corporate Christian worship. "It is a group of people who are gathered together in a church to worship God, e.g. the congregation stood to sing the hymn." (Homby, 2010:305)

Music: “is sounds that are arranged in a way that is pleasant and exciting to listen to. People sing music or play it on instruments.” (Homby, 2010: 973)

Congregational Music: Is music used in the context of the congregation. It is more than just the singing of hymn, it also involves the singing of psalms and spiritual songs, according to the epistles of Apostle Paul mentioned earlier, Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19, respectively.(Auda, 2010: 3)

Postmodernism: Is preceded by modernism. Modernism was the development of modern industrial societies and the rapid growth of cities, followed then by the horror of world war I. Modernism also rejected the certainty of Enlightenment thinking, and many modernists rejected religious belief. According to Hannah, postmodernism could be likened to the opening lines of the novel ‘A Tale of Two Cities’ written by Charles Dickens’ in 1937, a description of turbulent revolutionary times in France and England. According to Dickens, “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom; it was the age of darkness. It was the spring of hope; it was the winter of despair. (Hannah, 2002: 1-2)

THE EFFECT OF POSTMODERNISM ON CHURCH MUSIC

The church and postmodernism can be said to be two opposites that could not meet if you look at the characteristics of each. Postmodernism tends to towards things that are non-spiritual, physical, scientific etc, while the church is a spiritual, holy entity. But the challenge is how to balance the two. Therefore the church today must make sure that it takes advantage of postmodernism and utilize its blessings, maximize its blessings to defeat its woes especially in the area of church music and congregational music specifically.

According to Hannah, in the expression given on how the church thrive in this postmodern era and its challenges, rightly expressed that,

Many in the social sciences alert us that we are living in times of upheaval, a time of transition from one system of values and assumptions to another. Some suggest that the unease will subside as we make our peace with the changes; others that we are entering a dark, glacial age and the destruction of civilization.

Comfortable or not, at least two things can be argued from all of this. First, this is a time of rapid and often disconcerting cultural and social change; the contrasts between the world of our grandparents. Second, no amount of wishful thinking will make the negative features of the postmodern world, or even the 'modern world, vanish as a bad dream or in the night. *The church will live to flourish in this era as it has in every other because its origins and powers are not of this world, but from heaven.* (Hannah, 2002: 3)

As rightly identified and expressed by Hannah above, church music in its uniqueness as an element of the church, a sacred institution, can and should remain undefiled in its interaction with postmodernism, and in any era whatsoever. The church is the light of the world and the darkness cannot comprehend or overcome it. The church should be able to keep its holy nature irrespective of the time and season it finds itself. (Holy Bible, RJV, John 1:5)

Millard Erickson (2001: 170-171) also adds that "postmodernism is both a popular and intellectual movement, a sociological characteristic of much contemporary western society and a sophisticated way of thinking." Therefore, the

church must be careful not to allow postmodernism to have a negative impact on her. Jesus in His prayer for the church in John 17:15-16 says although the church lives in the world, but they are not of the world as he was not also of the world as he was not also of the world verse 16 (Holy Bible, GIV, John 17: 15-16).

CONGREGATIONAL SINGING AND POST MODERNISM

For effectiveness of the church in its ministry in this postmodern age, the church cannot afford to continue to do things as in the old. The emphasis of this writer is how the church could take advantage of computerized/ICT equipments to strongly promote the use and the singing of congregational music in this era. Some also call postmodern era a post Christian era which means that the church should not think it could effectively reach this age through its traditional, old way of doing things, although the truth remains undiluted whichever means is used and in whatever era.

Congregational Singing: According to Alice Parker (1991:16) in quoting John Calvin, a major figure in the Reformation, “singing has a great strength and power to move and to set our hearts on fire in order that we may call upon God and praise Him with more vehement and more ardent zeal.” Good congregational singing is not as a result of having a good congregation, but good singing “forges good congregation.” The most important form of church music in the evangelical church is congregational singing, because this is when every member of the congregation actively participates in singing together at the same time, possibly with dancing, especially in an African context. This is the only means whereby every individual in the congregation contributes and participates in the service of worship. (Parker, 1991:12)

Good congregational singing should be spirit-filled and full of understanding. According to Apostle Paul in his first letter to the church in Corinth, chapter, I Corinthians 4: 15 “I will sing

with the Spirit and I will sing with the understanding also.” Paul is trying to tell us here that singing is a spiritual experience and at the same time a mental experience. According to William J. Reynolds, (1975:1) “Louis F. Benson refers to congregational song (or music) as a ‘spiritual gift,’ which each Christian brings to the sanctuary and contributes to a common song of spiritual fellowship.

As earlier mentioned, when we talk of congregational music or singing, it is more than just the hymn singing, it involves the singing of praise and worship choruses otherwise called ‘chorus medley.’ (Keynolds, 1975:21). As mentioned earlier in the two epistles of Paul (Eph. 5:19 & Col. 3:16 respectively), we are encouraged in the scriptures to sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Each are of unique genre

The psalms are the songs that are extracted from the biblical psalms, some of which may be chant-like in form, directly quoted from the Bible or paraphrased. A very good example of this is found in the *Baptist Hymn Book with Music* produced by the London psalms and Hymn Trust, No. 4 Southampton Row, W. C. I. in Great Britain. There are hymns from the beginning of the hymn book, but we have psalms that have been put to music from pages 873-931. These hymns are literal texts from the King James Version of the Bible, they are not paraphrased lyrics. (Baptist Hymn book with Music)

The hymns are scriptural, Christian texts put to music, mostly paraphrased, not exact text like the psalms. The hymns are highly poetic in nature. You cannot successfully write a hymn without the knowledge of poetry and literature and the use of figures of speech, mood and rhyming. Hymns are strophic and stanzaic (every hymn is written with stanzas, and each stanza is sung with the same tune attached. An example of hymns and hymnals are the Baptist Hymnals with varying editions (1956, 1975, 1991, 2008 and 2010). These are the editions we have in the Baptist churches worldwide till date. The improvement on the text interpretation quality. Sometimes, it

may be the corrected of some new popular worship songs that is lacking in the preceding edition. Also, it may be for a musical reason, for example, a change of key for the hymn “Holy, holy, holy” in the key of E Major, No. 1 in the Baptist Hymnal 1956 edition was changed to key D Major in the 1991 edition, which is a tone lower to the original key for the comfort of the congregation. The issue of key is very important in writing songs for a congregation, even for professional singers. You will not sing well when you are singing in a key that is too high for your voice, in addition, it can cause health problem, it can destroy your vocal cord etc. (Baptist Hymnal, 1956 & 1991 eds.)

The *spiritual songs* are songs that are spontaneous in nature. They are usually shorter than hymns and psalms. Spiritual songs are commonly called *praise-worship choruses* or just simply choruses in some context. Some context prefers to refer to spiritual songs as *medley of choruses or songs* (because some prefer to use songs in place of choruses, and depending on the category of list of songs that are used per time, it could be called a *medley of thanksgiving songs, medley of warfare songs* etc. The term for ‘praise-worship’ or choruses is highly controversial. Even in the Yoruba worship context, the popular name is *orin idaraya*, which literally means ‘a warming-up song’ or songs just to exercise the body. Some have rejected this name due to mundane meaning it brings to mind, which is inappropriate for a spiritual worship. Some feel the best name is *orin emi*, which literally means “spiritual songs”. Originally, praise-worship came as part of charismatic renewal movement, which started in Azusa Street, USA, about 110 years ago. *Praise-Worship* is one of the musical elements of charismatic renewal movement. The literal charismatic meaning is *praise* (fast worship songs), while *worship* means (slow worship songs). Although, some critics have serious problem with the name, some says it should be ‘praise in worship’ and some think the name should be changed

entirely, because praise is not the only thing we do in worship. (Eskndge, 2008)

In congregational corporate worship context, the singing is and should be done by the entire congregation. This congregation, although ungraded, unorganized bodies of people are made up of “some eager, reluctant singers and some non- trained singers, these are the target group to involve, persuade, motivate in the congregational singing experience.” (Reynolds, 1975:2)

The experience with a congregation is different from a trained choir. Congregational singing is like a neighborhood football game, where anybody can participate regardless of age, sex, height, weight etc., unlike the choir singing, whereby some level of professionalism and training is required. (Reynolds, 1975:3)

Characteristics of Postmodernism: According to Dr. Mary Klages, Associate Professor, English Department, University of Colorado, Boulder,

Postmodernism is a complicated term, or set of ideas, one that has only emerged as an area of academic study since the mid-1980s. Postmodernism is hard to define because it is a concept that appears in a wide variety of discipline or areas of study, including art, architecture, *music*, film, literature, sociology, *communications*, fashions, and *technology* (these three words are italicized due to their relevance to this article). It’s hard to locate it temporarily or historically, because it’s not clear exactly when postmodernism begins. Perhaps the earliest way to start thinking about postmodernism is by thinking about modernism, the movement from which postmodernism seems to emerge. But while postmodernism seems very much like modernism in some ways, it also differs in some. Modernism, for example, tends to present a fragmented view of human subjectivity and history. Postmodernism, in contrast,

doesn't lament the idea of fragmentation, provisionality, or incoherence, but rather celebrates that. (Klages, 2015)

Also, Rev. Dr. IsaiasCartorce added that "while *modern* methods of thinking and understanding is through verbal and analytical (such as reading, writing, intelligence, analysis, clarity, explanation, logic, and linear thinking), *postmodern* is characterized as more symbolic and visual." The church should take a good advantage of these characteristics. (Cartoce, n. d.)

CONCLUSION

The writer seek to encourage the church in Nigeria irrespective of denominational differences to embrace this new idea without delay. I feel we are already getting late in this approach in Africa, most especially in Nigeria. In general, we have few individuals and very few churches who are already enjoying this blessing of maximizing congregational music in this postmodern era with the use of mobile technology devices, but the church needs to rise up to its responsibilities

According to Paul S. Jones,(2015) an Organist and music Director of the historic Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, PA, USA, who also serves as Director of Music and Worship for the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, in the post-modern, post-Christian age in which we live, however, we should not be surprised that worship and worship music in evangelical churches have followed the path of our culture. Under closer examination one finds that our value system, musical and otherwise, reflects society's primary philosophy (pragmatism) object of attention (ourselves), and occupation (our own amusement)

But, inspite of the challenges of postmodernism and its seemingly unchristian attributes and characteristics, the writer believes with John Hannah (200:13) that “the church of Christ will live and flourish in the era as it has in every other because its origins and power are not of this world, but from heaven”

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