

Calling all peoples to worship in their heart language

By:

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For 20 years already, the Vagla people in Ghana had had the New Testament in their own language. They had pastors from their own tribe and worship music borrowed from other cultures. But few Vagla could read, and their churches grew very slowly.

In 1997, ethnomusicologist [Paul Neeley](#) co-led a workshop to help [Vagla Christians develop their own Scripture songs](#). One of the literate people read a Bible passage. Neeley recalls that the gathered men and women “waited expectantly,” till an old woman began “hesitantly...but with growing confidence” to sing the words she’d just heard.

She sang, “[He who is carrying a heavy load and is getting tired, bring it to Jesus.](#)” Within minutes, people were on their feet—improvising choruses, shaking gourd rattles, beating drums, and dancing in circles.

Song after new song poured out under starlight. An ensemble of men playing antelope horns put [John 3:16 to music](#). Neeley says that to him it sounded like a traffic jam but to the Vagla people, it was “one of the sweetest sounds on earth.”

He and his colleagues improvised a studio and recorded two hour-long cassettes of Vagla Scripture and songs. Singing and dancing Scripture in their own cultural forms encouraged church growth and literacy, because people wanted to learn to read the book that sparked their new music.

The growing field of ethnodoxology overflows with similar stories of what happens when people are encouraged to worship God in their heart language. The field now has its own organization, International Council of Ethnodoxologists, and Neeley is editor of the [EthnoDoxology journal](#).

Ethnodoxology = peoples + praise

The term *ethnodoxology* is related to and newer than the term *ethnomusicology*. Ethnomusicology, the history and science of music in diverse cultures, is an academic field of study that can help missionaries be culturally sensitive.

By contrast, [ethnodoxology](#) studies how different cultures worship God. It includes all the arts (such as dance, drama, video, visuals) as well as how people participate in preaching, the Eucharist, the offering, and so on. It goes beyond worship as an event because it studies how worship shapes or is shaped by life as lived within a cultural or ethnic group.

Ethnodoxologists describe worship roadblocks that are headbangingly obvious to one set of people, yet invisible to another. [Robin Harris](#), who spent 10 years as a missionary in Russia, recalls talking with composer [Konstantin Zhigulin](#) about his first reactions to music sung in an evangelical church.

“I was horrified. It was awful...no attention given to the Russian understanding of how to use words, no sense of the literary use of words,” Zhigulin said. Gradually he came to see the worship as “simply a lack of understanding on the part of the people who brought us the gospel.”

In 2003 Harris and Neeley founded [International Council of Ethnodoxologists](#) (ICE) to promote culturally appropriate worship. The ICE network uses email, online forums, retreats, and conferences to link more than 200 people and [30 organizations](#) in 50 countries.



Heart language

Ethnodoxologists totally get how the Great Commission relates to Pentecost. When they go out to train people in Christ's way of life, they know those converts will speak in different languages as the Spirit prompts them. As Baptist preacher John Piper famously says, "Mission is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exist because worship doesn't."

A key ethnodoxology concept is that we all have a heart language, the mother tongue in which we first learned to express love, joy, sorrow, and need. Heart language is rich in nuance, humor, gesture, and inflection. It's the words you naturally dream in, the genres and images you use to change minds.

"When my husband and I moved to Siberia about 15 years ago, the believers among the Sakha indigenous group were not using their own music, stories, and proverbs in the church. They were mostly using translated Russian songs and a few American songs. We began encouraging them to write their own music using their own styles," Harris says.

Recently a group of Sakha Christians held a [festival for new songs](#). They set the first three chapters of Genesis to a heroic epic song poem form called [olonkho](#), a genre that UNESCO declared "a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity."

They also published a songbook that includes other genres (one for praise, another for humorous tongue twisters) never used before in a Christian context. Harris says producers hope to show "non-believers that Christianity is not just a Russian or 'foreign' religion."

Respect local choices

As coordinator of [Heart Sounds International](#), [Frank Fortunato](#) makes audio and video recordings of Christian heart music in restricted parts of the world. "The older people that invite us are more connected with their traditional, indigenous, more vernacular sounds and preferences. Younger people that invite us to do a recording project are often more urban and more connected with Westernized sounds and instruments," he says.

Fortunato and his teams go in looking for "unique cultural riches" and "heart sounds, historical sounds." They've found, however, that urban, educated people often enjoy fusing forms, ideas, and instruments from the global community. So rather than try to freeze ethnic genres and practices in time as somehow more authentic, they define "indigenous" as all that originates *in* or is native *to* a country or region.

"We allow the local people to make the decisions. If electronic instruments are there and their preference is for a more Westernized, drumbeat-driven project, we are very happy to do that," he says.

Often simply asking about heart language reconnects younger musicians with genres they loved as children. In Mongolia, for example, Fortunato has recorded [Christian musicians in Mongolia](#) who blend urban and traditional music, electric guitars and throat singing.

Ethnodoxology: Joining God in Every Culture

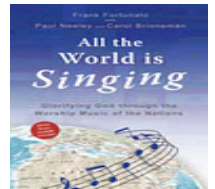
Psalm 117 is short: "Praise the Lord, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples. For great is his love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord."

You might think of Psalm 117 as ethnodoxology in a nutshell. Like the psalmist, ethnodoxologists know there are as [many God-given ways to worship](#) as there are languages and cultures.

The [International Council of Ethnodoxologists](#) (ICE) network often surprises people with stories of how the gospel and culture intertwine and how God is already at work in every culture.

Music a universal language?

You may wipe away tears of worshipful awe while hearing a mass choir sing Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus." ICE members who've shared the famous chorus in other countries find that it's not universally appreciated.



- [Senufo people in Ivory Coast](#) said it sounded “like crying music.”
- It reminded Maasai people in Kenya of noisy jet engines.
- Tibetans said it was “not steady.” They wondered how a song with so many high and low pitches and loud and soft volumes could be considered fine art.

“Music is a universal phenomenon but not a universal language. In other words, our response to music is learned and not intrinsic,” says ICE founder [Robin Harris](#), an ethnomusicologist who’s been a missionary in North America, Siberia, and Russia.

Back when American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote, “Music is the universal language of mankind,” many Europeans and North Americans believed in [cultural evolutionism](#). They thought all cultures progress on the same path but at different speeds. Some 19th century missionaries saw themselves as bringing the gospel from civilized countries to primitive cultures.

They didn’t understand that in music, for example, some cultures value complex rhythms more than elaborate melodies or rich harmonies. Some cultures care most about words, others about the group experience of moving together in a tone cluster, and still others about how well the music evokes emotion or helps people endure physical challenges.

Robin Harris explains, “If foreign music is used for evangelism or in the church, it may strongly stamp Christianity as being a foreign religion. In using culturally appropriate music systems of the local context, we’re tapping into a communication system that’s already recognized, appreciated, and understood.”

God in every culture

Barbara Kingsolver’s novel *The Poisonwood Bible* (about Baptist missionaries in the Belgian Congo) and the film *The Mission* (about Spanish Jesuits in South America) memorably portray people who couldn’t tell the difference between the gospel message and their own cultural preferences.

“We tend to judge one another’s way of worshiping, because we think the other way is unspiritual,” Harris says.

She’s fascinated by the [case study of a failed merger](#) between white and black Baptist congregations in South Carolina. If you’ve ever described a church as too stiff, not reverent, repetitious, an empty ritual, or overly emotional, then you understand what sank that merger.

Ethnodoxology recognizes God as already present in a culture.

“No people are without God. They may not know him, and they may not serve him, but he is still in their midst. Most basic expressions of life and faith are God-given. We may not use them properly or honor him with them as they were intended to do. But that does not mean they are inherently ungodly or unbiblical,” writes [Gavriel Gefen](#), a Messianic Jew who chaired the 2008 [World Christian Gathering of Indigenous People](#) in Jerusalem.

Gefen explains that Christians go off course when they see the gospel as a “potted plant” of faith to pass on intact instead of a seed planted in the soil of a unique culture.

Contextual worship and beyond

Ethnodoxology affirms practicing faith within a cultural context. Still, Harris and [Frank Fortunato](#), ICE vice president, advise balancing contextual worship with the other principles—transcultural, cross cultural, counter cultural—in the [Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture](#).

Transcultural worship reminds Christians that they belong to a common culture of baptism, sharing meals, and forgiveness.

Cross cultural worship builds bridges that embody shared identity in Christ, such as using songs, languages, or visual arts from other communities.

God often uses the arts to cross cultures. Russian composer [Konstantin Zhitulins](#) says it was Hieronymus Bosch’s painting “Christ Carrying the Cross” that first urged him to think about God. Chinese artist [He Qi](#) says he became a Christian because of seeing [Raphael’s “Madonna paintings](#). [Overseas Ministries Study Center](#) near Yale University invites artists-in-residence from other countries to help North Americans experience the gospel through fresh eyes.

Counter cultural worship may be the hardest sell. It requires asking “what is contrary to the gospel in a given culture. Every culture, in North America and overseas, has aspects that need to be challenged,” Harris says. It means [countering the natural tendency to prefer your own way](#) of doing things (your context) in favor of living with and sharing leadership with worshipers from other cultures.

Vicariously experience worship in other cultures

This is fun to do in a computer lab, where you can have several people looking at the same websites at the same time.

If you can't access a video or audio clip through the browser you are using, then try another browser, maybe [AOL](#), [Firefox](#), or [Safari](#).

Listen to heart music clips from around the world at

- [ICE](#)
- Heart Sounds International, samples from “[Sounds of Global Worship II](#)” CD
- Heart Sounds International suggested [world music links](#)
- Heart Sounds International [projects page](#), choose a country, then click “hear music” (link is on the left side of the page)
- Calvin Institute of Christian Worship global [multimedia](#) and [slideshows](#) (choose a continent)

Watch heart music and dance clips from around the world at

- [Heart Sounds International](#) music video clips
- Calvin Institute of Christian Worship global [slideshows](#) (choose a continent)
- [Missionary blog in Panama](#)
- [Wycliffe arts consultants](#)

Follow links to visual worship arts from around the world at

- [Artists in Christian Testimony](#)
- [Calvin Institute of Christian Worship](#) (scroll down to organizations and institutes)
- [International Arts Movement](#)
- [ICE](#)
- [Japan Christians in the Arts Network](#)
- [Operation Mobilization Artslink](#)
- [Overseas Ministries Study Center](#)
- [Stoneworks: Forming Artists to Reform Culture](#)

Get fresh ethnodoxology links every month when you [sign up](#) for the free International Council of Ethnodoxologists monthly ezine, distributed through Google Groups.

Visit worship in another culture

Attend worship in a church that has a different culture—ethnic, socioeconomic, theological, language—than yours. Before you go, print out a copy of the [Worship Abroad handbook](#). Use it to record your impressions. The handbook is also available in [French](#), [German](#), [Korean](#) and [Spanish](#).

Sponsor a global music sing-along

Choose music new to your congregation. This might be from [African American Heritage Hymnal](#), the [Iona Community](#), [Sound the Bamboo](#) (indigenous Asian hymns), or the [Taize](#) Community. Check out [global music resources](#) at Calvin Institute of Christian Worship.

If your group is better at learning new songs by hearing them rather than by reading musical notation, then choose a recording. Listen to it together and use a call-and-response method to sing it together.

You might end the sing-along by offering the [benediction in many languages](#).

Discuss hidden assumptions

Start with one of these interactive ideas:

- If you've assumed that all African or all Latino music is basically alike, then contrast melodic "[God Is Holy](#)" from the Gambia with a [Sudanese Dinka](#) chant. Compare the sound of Peruvian Christian [Kerygma Cantu](#) on panpipes to [Guatemalan Mayan Christians](#) on marimbas or [sacred choral music in Argentina](#).
- Perhaps you've experienced Christian worship that annoyed or even horrified you. Have someone read aloud this experience of [Bruce "Bruchko" Olson](#), a missionary living with the Motilone people in Colombia. The excerpt is on this [Wycliffe webpage](#). (Pause the video and scroll down to "Night of the Tiger.")
- Have people fill out and discuss ICE's "[What Is Your Heart Music?](#)" [questionnaire](#). Use [The Importance of Heart Music - handouts.pdf](#) or [The Importance of Heart Music.ppt](#) PowerPoint (reformatted version of the handout) to guide the conversation.

Or begin a discussion with one these questions:

- If you dance in church the same way you would at a party, does that mean you have integrated your faith and life...or that you are being sacrilegious, inappropriate, or disrespectful...or something else?
- Picture a church where someone is upfront, facing the congregation, singing with all their heart. Now imagine yourself chiming in. You're singing just as loudly, with the same notes but different rhythm. Are you emotionally unstable...demonstrating your lack of musical skill...affirming your common identity as brothers and sisters in Christ...responding in praise to God...unspeakably rude...?
- Share categories of experience that you understand now but couldn't wrap your mind around the first time. These terms may get the stories flowing (or reveal your age)—Twitter, lectionary, iPod, intergenerational worship, praise band, blog, email, liturgical dance, fax, floppy disk, Christian rock, color television, God's grace, sliced bread (just kidding).

Share stories of discomfort that resulted from a language or cultural misunderstanding

Open with a few examples below to trigger memories.

A Spanish-speaking pastor from one country, while visiting another Spanish-speaking country, said how much he enjoyed their papayas. Turns out papaya is slang for prostitute there.

A North American sponsor tried to learn a little Farsi to welcome an Iranian refugee family at the airport. Later they explained how confusing it was to be greeted with "You are camel! You are camel!"

Some languages have whole categories or concepts that others lack.

Chinese is a tonal language, so translating a hymn from English to Chinese may result in a song that says what you didn't intend. Many Vietnamese Catholics have a [vocal prayer technique](#) "that has no correlation in American speech. This musical sound is not a song or a chant."

Apologizing for a small error with "Oh, stupid me," is fine in the U.S. but will cause shocked stares in Honduras, where "stúpido" has a far stronger meaning. A generic "that was delicious" might not be much of a compliment among [Camsá people in Colombia](#). Their language has 20 ways to say *delicious*, depending on the shape of the food.

Describe an embarrassing moment when you tried using another language or were talking with someone whose English is not the best. When that kerfluffle happened, what did you first think...but perhaps later change your mind about?

Apply another culture's worship insights

Samba, an Afro Brazilian social dance music form, is heart music for some Brazilians. Others reject it as too “low class” or too linked to “lewd behavior.” Read bit more about using the [samba style for Christian music](#) and watch a [Christian samba music video](#).

Watch this brief [Wycliffe video](#) about whether or not to use indigenous African music and dance in Christian worship.

What ideas do these examples trigger for your congregation about worship elements that you have embraced or rejected for cultural reasons? Which cultural genres or practices are impossible to redeem for use in Christian worship?

Read or listen to the AfroPop.com [interview with Jean Kidula](#), a Kenyan ethnomusicologist and musician, on the rise of the Kenyan gospel music industry. She ends by contrasting gospel music in Kenya and the United States. Kidula says that in American gospel lyrics, the “Christian message tends to be separated from other social messages.” The lyrics talk about God and love the way other songs talk about friendship or romance.

In Kenyan gospel lyrics, Kidula sees a much closer relationship to daily life, “between theology and society....how you relate to the supernatural....how to live, what to eat, what to do when you are in trouble....”

Consider the songs used most often in your congregation’s worship. How closely do the song topics or lyrics relate to your daily life?

Turn to the Word of God

Begin by asking people to go to different parts of the room depending on whether they are most likely to trust information they received from “someone who knows someone”...someone they know...broadcast news...online..in print. Have people “vote with their feet” again, according to whether or not they can recite the Christmas story as given in Luke 2:1-20.

Share these resources:

- [Brief audio clip](#) about literate people who value oral more than print traditions
- Read this excerpt from a free [storying manual](#) on the rise and fall of the early church in North Africa (p. 8, from “In his book, *This Holy Seed*” to “respond to and reproduce”).
- Brief statements: Ethnomusicologist Paul Neeley wrote, “Hear this challenge: To the literate I have become the Word on paper, to the nonliterate I have become the Word in song.” The Apostle John wrote, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Jesus once wrote with his finger in the sand, but we don’t know which words. Christ often quoted the prophets and psalms but didn’t write a book or leave any written record.

How do you define the term the Word of God? Is it the Word of God if you don’t receive and pass it on as printed words on pages? In what ways do you experience the Word of God in worship? How does this experience transfer to your daily life, both as an individual and a community member?

Start a book club

Good books to start discussing are:

- [All the World Is Singing: Glorifying God through the Music of the Nations](#) by Frank Fortunato with Paul Neeley and Carol Brinneman
- [Christian Worship Worldwide](#) edited by Charles E. Farhadian
- [Culture Making: Reclaiming Our Creative Calling](#) by Andy Crouch
- [Is It Insensitive to Share Your Faith? Hard Questions about Christian Mission in a Plural World](#) by James R. Krabill
- [Music in the Life of the African Church](#) by Roberta R. King, Jean Ngoya Kidula, James R. Krabill, and Thomas A. Oduro
- [One Bread, One Body: Exploring Cultural Diversity in Worship](#) by C. Michael Hawn

Enjoy intriguing interviews and lectures after the fact

Get in on what others have already heard at a Calvin Symposium on Worship:

- Listen to [interviews with international guests](#)
- Hear experts give [global perspectives on worship](#)—Roberta King, Jorge Lockward, Setri Nyomi, Angela Tam, Emily Brink
- Read interviews with [four enliveners of cross cultural song](#)—Alison Adam, C. Michael Hawn, Swee-Hong Lim, and Helen Phelan

Or listen together to [ethnodoxology presentations](#) given by Frank Fortunato and Bill and Robin Harris at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

Learn More

Listen to brief audio interview excerpts from an interview with Robin Harris and Frank Fortunato on November 20, 2008:

- [Ethnomusicology, ethnodoxology,](#) and unreached people groups, 2:57
- Literate people who [value oral more than print](#) traditions, 1:25
- Non-print ways the [gospel has spread in Sudan and Turkey](#), 4:11
- [Mission ships](#) that spread the gospel through mini arts festivals, 4:30

Robin Harris is a missionary whose passion for ethnomusicology and networking resulted in founding [International Council of Ethnodoxologists](#) (ICE). She is the ICE coordinator. Robin and her husband, [Bill Harris](#), now work for [Operation Mobilization-USA](#) in the [Heart Sounds International](#) division. Bill and Robin Harris write several [blogs](#).

Frank Fortunato is ICE vice president and co-authored [All the World Is Singing: Glorifying God through the Music of the Nations](#). He worked for 15 years on [Operation Mobilization \(OM\) mission ships](#) and is now [Heart Sounds International](#) coordinator.

[Paul Neeley](#), ICE president, is a member of [Artists in Christian Testimony](#), does ethnomusicology consulting with multiple missions, and teaches at various schools. He edits the journal [EthnoDoxology](#).

[Join International Council of Ethnodoxologists](#) (ICE) to get full access to online networking and global worship resources and to receive a discounted subscription to EthnoDoxology. [Sign up](#) for ICE's free monthly ezine, distributed through Google Groups.

Ethnodoxologists note similarities between church planting in non-literate cultures and among post moderns. Both cultures put a high value on story, orality, and community. Intrigued? Check out the [orality links](#) in this issue of [Momentum](#), an online missions magazine.

Read [Christian Worship Worldwide](#) edited by Charles E. Farhadian. Find your online door into ethnodoxology, perhaps through a blog on [missional worship and arts in Japan](#) (anime, manga, and taiko drums), [Ethnic Harvest](#), [World Christian Gathering of Indigenous People](#), or [global worship resources](#) (scroll down).

Browse related stories on [creating a culturally sensitive church building](#), [drama in worship](#), [Reformed churches worldwide](#), and [worship aesthetics](#).

Start a Discussion

Appropriate worship in diverse cultures:

- How would you explain the terms *sacred* and *secular* to someone new to your church? In your cultural group or congregation, where and how does the event of worship connect (or feel disconnected) from daily life? Try explaining the second question in the context of your answers to the first question.
- What part does Scripture memorization play in your church? If a lot, how much of that memorization is biblical narrative? Explain your answer.
- Regarding sharing faith and making disciples, what are the pros and cons of depending on external

resources (print, online, audio, video, etc.) instead of “what’s between your ears”? How do these choices shape your congregation’s worship and demographic makeup?

- What musical or theological training is necessary for someone to write an appropriate song for Christian worship? What cultural values shape your answer?

Share Your Wisdom

What is the best way you’ve found to talk about appropriate use of the arts in worship?

- If you conducted a congregation-wide conversation about worship in your culture or subculture, which methods did you use? Which main metaphor for worship did you settle on and why?
- The [bonus story](#) gives options to help your group take a first step into ethnodoxology. Which idea worked best in your church? What did you learn and how did you follow up on that insight?

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