

GUIDE TO Contemporary Worship Music IN VOICES TOGETHER

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Voices Together includes hundreds of expressions of music and worship, gathered from around the world over thousands of years. **Contemporary worship music (CWM)**¹ is among these expressions. This guide introduces the CWM in *Voices Together* to both those who are very familiar with this expression of worship and those for whom it is new.

What is CWM?

It is more helpful to think of CWM in terms of a family resemblance among songs instead of a narrowly defined genre. There are certain traits these songs tend to share that are related to musical style but also to context of origin and intended use in worship. *Voices Together* is less concerned with defining CWM and more focused on representing the diversity within this expression of worship.

CWM has its origins in the mid-twentieth century, with even earlier roots, and has developed significantly over the past sixty years.² Its textual content is diverse, spanning acts of worship and seasons of the Christian year, and drawing on a range of Scripture and other sources in the Christian tradition.

There are various ways CWM may be led in worship, ranging from a single guitar or piano to a small ensemble or full band. The music often includes repeated verses and choruses and is best learned aurally without relying on notated music. This provides the opportunity for musicians to be improvisatory and spontaneous when desired, or rehearsed and predictable.

CWM and Mennonite worship

CWM is widely used in worship within and beyond Mennonite congregations. The top results outside *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, *Sing the Journey*, and *Sing the Story* on the heart song survey conducted at the outset of the process of creating *Voices Together* were CWM songs: “In Christ Alone” (#332), “10,000 Reasons / Bless the Lord” (#111), and “Build Your Kingdom Here” (#393). Nationwide assemblies have featured CWM for decades. CWM, among other musical expressions, is prominent in Mennonite congregations that worship in languages other than English, especially Spanish, and in African American worship. Anabaptist songwriters are writing music for worship that is part of this musical family. CWM is a central and meaningful aspect of worship in many Mennonite communities.



- 1 Contemporary worship music (CWM) is used here as a technical term to describe a specific expression of musical worship. There are many other types of music that are used in worship and that are contemporary in terms of being recent.
- 2 Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Praise and Worship* (Abingdon Press, 2017).

CWM in *Voices Together*

CWM is widely sung across Christian traditions and around the world. The use of much CWM is reported through Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI). CCLI tracks which songs are sung most often by reporting congregations. Songs that have appeared among the top one hundred songs in the United States since 1988 are listed below in the left column. Additional songs in *Voices Together* that share a resemblance with these songs are listed in the right column.

| CCLI Top 100 in <i>Voices Together</i> | Other CWM in <i>Voices Together</i> |
|---|--|
| Your Love Is Amazing #96 Your Grace Is Enough #167 My Lighthouse #597 Blessed Be Your Name #637 Lord, I Lift Your Name on High (Tu nombre levantaré) #365 Open the Eyes of My Heart (Ouvre les yeux / Abre mis ojos) #401 Build Your Kingdom #393 | You Are Good #33 I Will Follow #775 True Evangelical Faith* #439 Tú eres todopoderoso (Because You're Holy) #89 Waterfall* #763 Sword into a Plowshare* #798 Christ Is Risen #349 Segala puji syukur (All Our Praise) #82 Holy Lord #314 |
| Come, Now Is the Time to Worship #29 Build My Life #92 Shout to the Lord (Cante al Señor) #125 How Great Is Our God (Cuán grande es Dios) #116 10,000 Reasons / Bless the Lord #111 God of Justice #772 God of Wonders #178 Here I Am to Worship (Ich will dich anbeten) #227 In Christ Alone #332 You Are Exalted #86 | All the Room Was Hushed and Still #493 Mountain of God* #11 Kyrie eleison #147 Be a Sower* #789 How Long, O Lord* #691 Gravity of Love #494 Here by the Water* #629 Together* #389 We Are One in the Spirit #387 Fill Us with Your Feast #309 |
| Oceans (Océanos) #456 This Is the Air I Breathe (Eres mi respirar) #139 Lord, I Need You #155 No Longer Slaves to Fear #195 There's Nothing Worth More (Nada vale más) #369 Revelation Song (Digno y santo) #415 | Remembrance #479 All Who Are Thirsty #49 Tú estás aquí (My God Is Here) #67 Flow to You #132 Mercy, Mercy, Lord #169 Restless #741 Christ, Be All around Me #848 Beautiful Things #551 When I Can't Find My Way* #591 Lord, You've Searched Me* #609 Noel #256 Your Grace Finds Me #521 |



| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Seek Ye First #417</p> | <p>Trinity Song #60 Seeds* #777 The Lord Your God Is with You* #173 Here's My Life, I Lay It Down #561 Christ Has No Body Here but Ours #568 Thy Word Is a Lamp #398 Love the Lord Your God #288</p> |
| <p>The Wonderful Cross #324 / When I Survey the Wondrous Cross (La cruz excelsa al contemplar) #323 O Lord My God / How Great Thou Art #436 Amazing Grace! #163</p> | <p>Praise God (Doxology) #71 + Alleluia* #72 Come, Thou Fount #563 / Summoned by the God Who Made Us #1 All Creatures, Worship God Most High #81 Be Thou My Vision #549 The Love of God #162 My Hope Is Built #621</p> |

*Indicates Anabaptist contributors

CWM in languages other than English in *Voices Together*

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| <p>Spanish</p> | <p>Open the Eyes of My Heart (Ouvre les yeux / Abre mis ojos) #401 We Are One in the Spirit #387 Lord, I Lift Your Name on High (Tu nombre levantaré) #365 Oceans (Océanos) #456 How Great Is Our God (Cuán grande es Dios) #116 Tú eres todopoderoso (Because You're Holy) #89 Tú estás aquí (My God Is Here) #67 This Is the Air I Breathe (Eres mi respirar) #139 There's Nothing Worth More (Nada vale más) #369 Shout to the Lord (Cante al Señor) #125 Revelation Song (Digno y santo) #415 Praise God (Doxology) #71 + Alleluia* #72</p> |
| <p>French</p> | <p>Open the Eyes of My Heart (Ouvre les yeux / Abre mis ojos) #401 We Are One in the Spirit #387 Praise God (Doxology) #71 + Alleluia* #72</p> |
| <p>German</p> | <p>We Are One in the Spirit #387 Here I Am to Worship (Ich will dich anbeten) #227 Praise God (Doxology) #71 + Alleluia* #72</p> |
| <p>Indonesian</p> | <p>Segala puji syukur (All Our Praise) #82</p> |

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Learning and teaching CWM

FIVE TIPS FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING CWM

1. Listen . . . on repeat! CWM is best learned by listening. Whether you find a good recording on YouTube or Spotify, in the *Voices Together* recordings, or by listening to a friend share the song with you live, by listening to a CWM song you will become comfortable with the syncopations and road map of the song. Similarly, playing CWM songs before, during, or after worship is one good way to familiarize people with new songs. Remember that you won't sing the song exactly as you hear it in the recordings, but listening is still helpful during the learning process.
2. Take it one step at a time. Invite worshipers to prayerfully listen to most of a new song, inviting them to join in on the chorus or bridge. If this process is repeated for a few weeks, people can be invited to join in on a new section each time.
3. Allow yourself to make “mistakes.” Unlike traditional hymnody, CWM does not have a clear script with contractual notes and lyrics. This idiom lends itself to improvised harmonies, periods of silence, spontaneously repeating sections over an instrumental, and singing a different rhythm from those around you. Release yourself from the expectation that you are to sing it one certain way, and allow yourself the freedom to experiment.
4. Learn in community. Because most CWM songs are intended to be led by an ensemble, you may find it most enjoyable to learn the songs with others. Consider learning some CWM songs with other musicians from your community. CWM is also often accessible across languages and to children and youth—invite everyone into the learning process.
5. Explore the breadth of CWM. Discover songs that connect with a diversity of Scripture readings, the seasons and days of the Christian year, the big moments in our lives, and important practices like communion and footwashing. Although it is sometimes called “praise and worship music,” CWM encompasses all acts of worship and aspects of the Christian story.

PLAYLIST

This [YouTube playlist](#) includes recordings of many of the Contemporary Worship songs in *Voices Together*. Listening to the songs allows for easier aural learning. We encourage you to think of these recordings as starting places rather than final goals, it is likely that the instrumentation and sound will be different for your community.



Related essays in the accompaniment edition and worship leader edition

WORSHIP LEADER EDITION

CWM is an expression of worship as much as a form of music. Although it is most at home in the context of contemporary worship, it can be integrated with diverse worship structures. Spend time exploring the essays in the worship leader edition that address how to incorporate CWM into worship.

- 5 – Thinking Through Flow
- 73 – Leading Different Types of Music in Worship
- 85 – Learning New Songs
- 88 – Planning Contemporary Worship
- 335 – Leading Prayer Extemporaneously

ACCOMPANIMENT EDITION

Spend some time exploring the piano accompaniments, percussion suggestions, and other music resources in the accompaniment edition. The piano accompaniments are intended for use with or without other musicians. If other musicians are involved, adjusting, simplifying, or augmenting the accompaniment is encouraged to provide different melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic elements. You do not need to emulate what you hear in professional recordings. Find an accompaniment, tempo, and road map that works with your community.

- 6 – Leading Songs with a Band
- 29 – Learning New songs
- 37 – Leading Different Types of Music in Worship
- 187 – Improvisation and Chord Symbols



Frequently asked questions

WHO IS SINGING CWM?

Around the world, many Christians, including many Mennonites, are singing CWM! Within the U.S. and Canada, there are hundreds of congregations from rural to urban communities and across the theological spectrum singing CWM as part of their worshiping practices, within and beyond Mennonite congregations, in many different languages. In fact, singing popular or contemporary music has had different forms within congregational life much earlier than CWM.

WHY ARE YOU NOT CONCERNED WITH DEFINING EXACTLY WHAT CWM IS?

Music that has been written in the last several decades is often cross-genre and fuses several musical idioms. It is not as clear-cut, especially with the contemporary hymnody movement including more instruments, diverse harmonies, and road maps that might look more like CWM. Furthermore, continuing to divide songs between two groups when the music is much more nuanced only perpetuates an unnecessary conflict.

DO YOU NEED A “BAND” TO LEAD CWM?

No, there is no singular way to lead CWM. Different songs work better than others with guitar or piano, for example, and some feel empty without some sort of percussion. But by and large, if you try a song with the people you have, you will know if it works for you. Again, do not try to emulate the sound of a YouTube or other recording. Find your own group’s groove, using the accompaniment edition as a starting place.

DO I NEED A SOLOIST, OR IS CWM CONGREGATIONAL?

While you may often hear recordings that use soloists, the CWM songs in *Voices Together* do not require a soloist. When learning a piece, it is helpful to have a leader with a strong voice helping to lead the congregation. Remember, CWM is often best learned aurally, so singing through a verse and refrain once by a leader can help the congregation learn a song faster.

HOW DOES REPETITION WORK IN CWM?

In some songs, a refrain or bridge may use a repeated phrase of text and music. Just as with contemplative prayers from Taizé, short songs from the Iona Community, refrains from gospel songs, and repetitive hymn melodies, CWM uses repetition to internalize and contemplate on certain aspects of the song. Consider how time and repetition can bring new awareness, and try to provide variety in other ways (such as getting louder or quieter through the repetitions, or varying which instruments play). Note that many CWM songs are only repetitive if you repeat them. It is also acceptable to sing through the verses and refrains only once, and some songs, such as “In Christ Alone,” simply have verses that are sung through like a traditional hymn.



HOW DO I TALK ABOUT THIS WITH THOSE WHO ARE UNSURE IN MY CONGREGATION?

Engage in dialogue by starting with questions. What are they passionate about? What are they afraid of? Get to the root of their concerns. Find songs that show that CWM actually defies their stereotypes. Encourage them to see music and worship beyond their own preferences to accept the passions heart songs of others. Recognize the diversity of our communities, the expansiveness of God, and the rich ways we are able to learn from all kinds of music as we learn to “sing a new song to the LORD.”

Facts about CWM in *Voices Together*

- “Build My Life” (#92) peaked at number 1 on the Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) Top 100 List in December 2019 as we were finalizing the contents of *Voices Together*. This song was a late addition and reflects widely sung recent material.
- “You Are Exalted” (#86) was originally written as “He Is Exalted” in 1985. Permission was granted to update the text to a gender-neutral second person, “You Are Exalted,” which is how it appears in *Voices Together*.
- The hymnal committee prioritized including CWM by women in *Voices Together* since women’s voices are not well represented in this genre, as is also the case with other types of congregational song. *Voices Together* includes CWM writers such as Audrey Assad (#741), Twila Paris (#86), Karen Lafferty (#417), Leslie Jordan (#848), Lynn DeShazo (#132, #169), and Jessica Hedrick Miller (#591).
- Many CWM songs are based on early Christian, medieval, and Reformation era sources. Examples include “Christ Has No Body Here but Ours” (#568), “Christ, Be All around Me” (#848), “Christ Is Risen” (#349), “Restless” (#741), and “True Evangelical Faith” (#439).
- CWM is written in many languages. English CWM songs are also widely translated. See the list in this resource for CWM that appears in *Voices Together* in languages in addition to English.
- The earliest CWM song in *Voices Together* is “Seek Ye First” (#417), which was written in 1972. The most recent CWM song is the “Alleluia” (#72) refrain for “Praise God (Doxology)” (#71), the former of which was written for *Voices Together* in 2019.



VOICES
Together