Singing justice? Congregational song and social justice in contemporary British Methodism

The Fifteenth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies

Martin V. Clarke, The Open University, UK

In the section of its website devoted to answering the question "What is distinctive about Methodism?" the Methodist Church of Great Britain lists "Born in song" and "Living a holy life" among the answers. In its description of the former, it notes that "Singing is still an important means of learning about, sharing and celebrating our faith."[1] The latter, meanwhile, includes this statement: "Holiness is not just about personal spirituality and prayer. It will also be expressed through a commitment to social justice and to enabling other people to become followers of Jesus."[2]

This paper examines how Methodism's stated commitment to social justice and its deeply embedded traditions of congregational song intersect, using British Methodism's current authorised hymnal, *Singing the Faith* (2011), as a case study. Drawing on data from a long-term survey of the hymnal's use, it explores reasons why several modern hymns addressing social justice are among the most widely sung items in the hymnal, while other selections in the "Justice and Peace" section are seldom sung. It argues that both textual and musical characteristics need to be considered. This paper explores critical questions about the suitability of such repertoire in helping congregations to recognise their own complicity in historic, systemic, and cultural injustices, in enabling them to learn from those marginalised by such injustices, and to offer themselves humbly to the work of justice.

Social justice and congregational song both have deep roots in Methodism. Singing was central to the evangelical and devotional activity of the movement in its earliest days, as hymns fulfilled key doxological and pedagogical functions. Although not labelled as such, social justice manifested itself through ministrations to prisoners, concern for the welfare and education of those in workhouses, and opposition to slavery. Lusty singing and a commitment to social justice have become central pillars of Methodism's self-identity and it is thus unsurprising that the two have become connected, especially in recent authorised hymnals. As Anthony Reddie has observed, however, Methodism's

[1] "Born in song," The Methodist Church, https://www.methodist.org.uk/about/what-is-distinctive-about-methodism/born-in-song/.
[2] "Living a holy life," The Methodist Church, https://www.methodist.org.uk/about/what-is-distinctive-about-methodism/living-a-holy-life/.

willingness to proclaim its heritage of social justice engagement and advocacy has not made it immune from injustice and inequality in its own organisation and activity. Reddie argues that "And yet the uniqueness of the social and theological vision created by John Wesley and his many successors has to be balanced with an all-enveloping world of Whiteness in which White exceptionalism and White normality is taken for granted."[3] He goes on to assert that a "theology of good intentions" has limited Methodism's ability to engage with and reform its own structures and processes to be more inclusive, more representative, and more just. Commending James Perkinson's book *White Theology*, Reddie makes explicit reference to congregational song: "[it] is one of the few texts written by a White theologian that has accepted that Whiteness is a problematic that cannot be imagined away by a few well-crafted prayers and a hearty rendition of 'Kum-bah-yah'."[4]

While Reddie's reference to "Kum-ba-yah" may seem a somewhat throwaway remark, it reflects a serious issue about the relationship of Methodist belief and praxis, which this paper aims to interrogate with reference to a selection of hymns from *Singing the Faith* that foreground social justice themes. In particular, it explores the extent to which such hymns might, perhaps inadvertently, reflect the theology of good intentions that Reddie identifies as a barrier to furthering the cause of social justice despite its well-meaning basis. While, in keeping with most thematic and theological hymnological studies, it pays close attention to the lyrics, it argues too that the musical substance of these hymns is significant in the ways in which they communicate meaning. That melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic characteristics shape the way in which singers understand and interpret texts may seem obvious but is often overlooked in the analysis of hymns. The relationship between singing and justice may seem strong and straightforward considering both the prevalence of hymns addressing the theme and their apparent popularity. Their linking is, however, not unproblematic, as Reddie hints. As Joshua Kalin Busman argues, the act of singing can often and easily become the dominant focus for worshippers over and above the semantic content of the lyrics:

> when religious music plays a role in shaping religious belief, it is not primarily through its ability to preserve theological texts but rather through its ability to convey theology through sound. That is, even when music conveys or contains textual elements, it is not reducible to

[3] Anthony Reddie, "Whiteness, Patronage and Bourgeois Respectability in the Methodist Church: The Fernley-Hartley Lecture, 2021," *Holiness* 7, no.2 (2021): https://doi.org/10.2478/holiness-2021-0010.
[4] Reddie, "Whiteness, Patronage and Bourgeois Respectability."

> those elements, and thus any analysis of religious or liturgical music must account for theology that is being constructed at a sonic, nonverbal level.[5]

Reddie's specific reference to "Kum ba yah" is interesting in this regard. Thought to be of Gullah origin and commonly described as an African American spiritual, it gained considerable popularity in the second half of the twentieth century, partly owing to recordings by Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, and others. In Britain, it appeared in a range of denominational and interdenominational hymnals and became a staple of primary school assemblies, presumably due to its simple melody and repetitive lyrics. J.R. Watson suggests that "it began to be seen as a shorthand for a superficial cheerfulness," which rather underscores Reddie's observation that singing it does not indicate a deep commitment to social justice.[6] While its lyrical and musical qualities serve as distinguishing markers compared to the dominant forms of congregational song in British Methodism, Watson's observation seems to confirm that it likely serves merely as an expression of good intentions in the context described or imagined by Reddie.

Hymns, music, theology, and justice

In *Let Justice Sing: Hymnody and Justice*, Paul Westermeyer poses several searching questions about whether hymnody can or should be concerned with justice:

> Does justice sing? Given the complications and ambiguities of understanding and doing justice, how can we sing about it at all? Can we sing about it in some authentic way? Is singing about it either pompous and inauthentic self-flagellation when we are or think we are unjust, or is it a self-congratulatory activity by which we who sing think we are just and on God's side? Do we avoid the actual doing of justice by substituting a false type of worship for it? Can one avoid the dilemma?[7]

He goes on to reflect on Amos 5: 21-24, suggesting that it is not so much the medium of song that is objectionable, but the ways in which it can be distorted within worship to neglect justice: "If in fact poetry is the very medium of the prophetic rebuke, then justice can sing and be sung."[8] Westermeyer also draws attention to ways in which justice is omitted from the church's song,

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[5] Joshua Kalin Busman, "Worshipping 'With Everything': musical analysis and congregational worship," in *Studying Congregational Music: Key Issues, Methods, and Theoretical Perspectives*, edited by Andrew Mall, Jeffers Engelhardt, and Monique M. Ingalls (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 26.
[6] JRW, "Kum ba yah, my Lord," in *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*, http://www.hymnology.co.uk/k/kum-ba-yah,-my-lord.
[7] Paul Westermeyer, *Let Justice Sing: Hymnody and Justice* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998, 22.
[8] Westermeyer, *Let Justice Sing*, 23.

whether by the excision of stanzas or when it allows the separation of ethical behaviour from engagement with systemic injustice.

In their introduction to *Music, Theology, and Justice* (2017), editors Michael O'Connor, Hyun-Ah Kim, and Christina Labriola identify three approaches to considering the relationships of their three titular themes: "the virtues of musicking itself, the transferability of musical virtues to other spheres of life, and the content and context of musicking."[9] Significant here is their focus on musical practice and experience. They highlight how ethics and justice demand consideration in collaborative musical activities, such as those commonly found in churches: "When done well, relationships are strengthened and deepened, which, theologically speaking, is an experience of grace in the body."[10] Citing one of the most powerful musical calls for justice, they argue "The powerful harmony of voices and instruments not only conveys the proposition that 'we shall overcome', but also embodies a vision of community, participation, and belonging."[11] Strikingly, they organise their volume according to three archetypes for music in relation to justice: that it can be prophetic, pastoral, and priestly.

Local context

Westermeyer's critique of two common positions that might be tacitly assumed by Christians reflects aspects of his context and that of his book within white North American mainline Protestantism at the end of the twentieth century. While this is evidently different from British Methodism in the twenty-first century, there are sufficient parallels and similarities to make his questions pertinent. The hymnal usage data drawn on below is based on a single church situated in Durham city centre in the North-East of England; throughout the period covered by the data, the church was known as Elvet Methodist Church, but it is now part of Durham City Methodists.[12] The congregation is very predominantly white, aged 60+, and includes many members working in or retired from graduate professions, notably including academia. While its situation within a small city that is home to a prestigious university is significant in understanding particular aspects of the make-up of the congregation, Reddie's critique of British Methodism's hierarchical perpetuation of whiteness suggests that it reflects elements of the denomination that have long held dominant positions.

[9] Michael O'Connor, Hyun-Ah Kim, and Christina Labriola, "Introduction," in *Music, Theology, and Justice*, ed. Michael O'Connor, Hyun-Ah Kim, and Christina Labriola (Lanham, ML: Lexington Books, 2017), xi.
[10] O'Connor, Kim, and Labriola, "Introduction," xi.
[11] O'Connor, Kim, and Labriola, "Introduction," xii.
[12] "History," Durham City Methodists, accessed June 13, 2024, https://durhamcitymethodists.org/history.

In terms of singing justice, it is important to acknowledge these factors. They affect both what is contained within British Methodism's authorised hymnal and how that book is used in local contexts. The majority of members of Elvet Methodist Church/Durham City Methodists enjoy, with inevitably differing degrees of awareness, many forms of privilege on global, national, and local levels, including in terms of ethnicity, health, economics, education, and class. While there is sustained evidence of congregational alertness to and engagement in issues of social justice, inequality is tacitly understood as something that affects other people negatively, and therefore social justice is something that needs to be pursued and administered for the benefit of others. The church is a foodbank collection and distribution point, has been a host venue for the Durham Winter Night Shelter, and, for many years, ran a series of annual projects raising funds for charitable causes in the region and abroad. Charity and social justice are thus inextricably linked in thought and action.

The emphasis on practice articulated by O'Connor, Kim, and Labriola draws attention to the musical characteristics of hymns and their performance in the context of public worship. Throughout the period covered by the data outlined below, music at Elvet Methodist Church was led by volunteer musicians, including two professional-standard organists and a small choir.[13] Pipe organ and piano were the main musical instruments used in worship to accompany congregational singing. In keeping with customary practice in British Methodism, the selection of congregational songs was the responsibility of the named person (most usually an ordained minister or lay local preacher) appointed to lead each individual act of worship.

What was sung?

Records of the hymns sung from 2012 to 2019 provide detailed insights into the use of *Singing the Faith* at Elvet Methodist Church. At a high level, the data seems to confirm that this is a congregation with preference for hymns that might broadly be labelled as traditional. While only 42.7% of the hymns in *Singing the Faith* were also found in its rather more stylistically conservative predecessor, *Hymns & Psalms* (1983), the proportion of such hymns sung each year at Elvet Methodist Church never fell below 60% throughout this period. Of the hymns not found in *Hymns & Psalms*, that is, those newly authorised in British Methodism, 188 were not sung at all during this period, while 203 were sung on no more than five occasions. A small number of hymns accounted for large proportions of the selections sung during the period. The 25 most frequently sung hymns, representing just 3.2% of the hymnal, accounted for approximately 20% of the selections across

[13] I am one of these two organists. I continue to provide music for services at the church on a regular basis.

these seven years. The most frequently used 100 hymns, 12.7% of the hymnal, accounted for almost 50% of the selections.

Despite the overall bias towards hymns that had also been included in *Hymns & Psalms*, the five hymns most frequently selected across this period were all newly included in *Singing the Faith*, as detailed in Table 1.

Rank	First line	Selections
1	Longing for light, we wait in darkness/Christ, be our light (Bernadette Farrell, © 1993)[14]	46
2	Let us build a house where love can dwell/All are welcome (Marty Haugen, © 1994)[15]	43
3	Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided (Timothy Dudley-Smith, © 1967)[16]	35
4	Beauty for brokenness, hope for despair (Graham Kendrick, © 1993)[17]	33
5	Will you come and follow me if I but call your name? (John Bell and Graham Maule, © 1987)[18]	32

Table 1: Five most frequently sung hymns from *Singing the Faith* at Elvet Methodist Church, Durham, UK, 2012-19.

The selections for these five hymns account for approximately 5% of the total selections across the seven-year period. Given that throughout this time, the church usually had two services per Sunday at which it was usual for five hymns to be sung, on average, one of these five hymns could be expected to appear every other week. Significant for the purposes of this paper, all five of these hymns address issues of social justice. For two of the five, "Longing for light" and "Beauty for brokenness," this is underscored by the placement within the "Justice and Peace" section of the hymnal; "Let us build a house" features within the "Mission and Evangelism" section and "Will you come and follow me?" in the "Calling and Commissioning" section, both of which have obvious outward-facing emphases, while "Lord, for the years" is found within the section titled "Our Journey with God."

[14] "Christ, be our light," YouTube, accessed June 14, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oH0FMhH7DrU.
[15] "All are welcome," YouTube, accessed June 14, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GlnVLP0qFEo.
[16] "Lord of the years," YouTube, accessed June 14, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xHFtq9J4U8U.
[17] "God of the poor/Beauty for brokenness," YouTube, accessed June 14, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MO1G-o7Yj-c.
[18] "Will you come and follow me," YouTube, accessed June 14, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1EOmW1_gJwY.

Singing justice: five case studies

The following section examines the words and music of these five hymns in turn.

Longing for light

Contained within the "Justice and Peace" section of *Singing the Faith*, "Longing for light" takes social justice as its central theme. Its opening stanza employs traditional language of light and darkness, asking God to make the singers his light in the world. The first couplets of the second, third and fourth stanzas name specific instances of injustice: lack of peace, despair, hunger, thirst, homelessness, and lack of warmth. The second couplets of each of these stanzas enable the singers to voice their commitment, asking God to make them his voice, his bread, and his building, offering hope, sustenance, and shelter. The final stanza emphasises the varied gifts that the congregation has to offer. The refrain "Christ, be our light!" serves as a strong and repeated reminder that the commitments offered by the congregation can only truly be achieved if they are done through, with, and for Christ. Farrell's lyrics operate on different levels, inviting deep reflection on the themes raised by the hymn. The repeated use of "Longing" twice in each of the first four stanzas demands acknowledgment of the depth and breadth of injustice experienced by those whose lives are affected by the situations named. This is not a hymn that proffers shallow quick fixes. The commitments it asks the congregation to make are imbued with deep Christian resonance: the second stanza emphasises the scriptural imperative for seeking justice, "Your word along has power to save us" while the third stanza invokes sacramental language: "Make us your bread, broken for others." The harsh worldly realities of injustice and the spiritual realities of the Christian faith revealed in word and sacrament and inextricably interwoven here.

Musically, Farrell's own setting of the words amplifies the themes and challenges of the lyrics. The stanzas begin in a minor key, with the melody of the opening couplet set in a low vocal register. The second couplet rises to a slightly higher register and prepares for a harmonic shift to the relative major at the opening of the refrain. The return to the minor key for each of the five stanzas helps to avoid an over-confident mood. Bernadette Farrell (b. 1957) is a Roman Catholic hymn writer, composer and social justice advocate and champion; her work with Citizens UK and successful campaign to improve conditions at the UK's main immigration reception centre indicate that words, music, and action are thoroughly integrated in her understanding of social justice.[19]

[19] "Longing for light, we wait in darkness (StF 706)," The Methodist Church: Resource Hub, accessed June 14, 2024, https://www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/resources/hymns/longing-for-light-we-wait-in-darkness-stf-706/.

Beauty for brokenness

Also within the "Justice and Peace" section of the hymnal, Graham Kendrick's "Beauty for brokenness" covers a very broad range of issues relating to justice: food, shelter, medicine, employment, land, rights, peace, sanctuary, freedom, and the environment. The hymn is conceived as a prayer for God to provide for those in all kinds of need and to restore the earth. The refrain, which occurs after the second, fourth, and fifth stanzas, turns attention to the singers, who pray that God will grant compassion, "melt our cold hearts" and increase our love. The first and last stanzas are explicitly evangelistic, with prayers for the increase of God's kingdom (stanza 1) and that "the nations" will come to know and worship God and "seek your salvation" (stanza 5). The lyrics are rather diffuse in their coverage of social, economic, political, and environmental injustices; the third and fourth stanzas in particular have are somewhat list-like in petitioning God to address many different issues. The refrain clearly distances the singers from those they sing about in the stanzas; those summarised as "the poor" and "the weak" are clearly understood as others for whom we who sing must weep ("let tears fall like rain") and to whom we must offer compassion, warmth, and love.

Kendrick sets the whole song in a major key, employing a fairly low vocal register at the beginning of the stanza, which gradually rises, creating a sense of optimism, towards the refrain. The refrain itself is largely set in a higher register and employs more emphatic melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic gestures, expressing a degree of confidence somewhat at odds with the lyrical request to be granted greater compassion for and love towards those in need. The harmony, rhythm, and melody combine notably at "God of the poor" and "melt our cold hearts" to create a strong sense of momentum towards resolution, which is further emphasised at the conclusion of the refrain, where a two-bar dominant pedal, a common harmonic device to build anticipation of the final resolution, instils confidence that "our love" will, or maybe already has, been changed "from a spark to a flame."

Let us build a house

Marty Haugen's hymn has an obvious appeal for Methodists given the alignment of its refrain, "All are welcome in this place," with Wesleyan Arminianism, and especially Charles Wesley's repeated use of "all" in hymns such as "Father, whose everlasting love." The linking of "all" and "welcome" is especially resonant for churches aspiring to be both evangelistic and inclusive; the strapline on the British Methodist Church's website captures these two goals and deliberately places them alongside justice: "We are called to be a growing, inclusive, evangelistic and justice-seeking Church."[20]

The word "justice" appears in the third stanza of the hymn, which is focused on the church as a place of sacramental worship, "where peace and justice meet." Justice becomes a more apparent theme

[20] "The Methodist Church," The Methodist Church, accessed June 17, 2024, https://www.methodist.org.uk/.

in the subsequent stanzas; the fourth emphasises the inclusion of "the outcast and the stranger," while the fifth longs for a church "where all are named," acknowledging that this will necessarily make it a place of both sorrow and joy. The focus on justice here is essentially internal to the church, perhaps explaining the placing of the hymn under the heading "Mission and Evangelism." Its principal concern is that the church is a place in which everyone is welcome and affirmed, and which expresses the inclusive breadth of God's grace. The use of "Let us build…" at the opening of each stanza implicitly indicates that such a church remains aspirational, suggesting, though not openly confessing, that the church locally and institutionally has not been and is not always a place where all are made welcome, heard, valued, and assured of God's grace.

The hymn encourages those who sing it to take on such a commitment in their local context. The use of "house" rather than "church" directs the singer towards consideration of the physical reality of their local church rather than the church as an institutional or denominational structure. It is thus clear that the "us" is personal. Although each stanza moves from "Let us build…" to emphasising that the house must be a place in which God's presence and grace are present and made known, their construction is such that the physical, emotional, and intellectual labour required to realise these goals are presented as solely human activities. The hymn asks nothing of God. This is a startling omission given the breadth and depth of activity to which the hymn summons its singers: it calls for building, hoping, dreaming, feasting, healing, strengthening, serving, teaching, loving, treasuring, and claiming to be the work of the church.

This lack of any explicit petition to God to assist, guide or sanctify human efforts at these holy aims combines with the textual and musical character of the refrain to give this hymn a confirmatory character. There is an incongruity between the "Let" of each stanza, implying an ongoing task, and the "are" of the refrain, which seemingly claims that the aim of welcoming all has been achieved. Haugen's musical setting is purposeful in character; its robust rhythms and harmonies combine with a memorable melody to create a sense of momentum towards the refrain, where the repetitions of "All are welcome" are set to a rising melodic sequence. The music does not draw out the text's implicit indication that the inclusive, affirmative church it seeks is not yet a reality; rather its confidence and propulsion mask the apparent textual disjunction between stanzas and refrain by adding considerable weight to the message of the latter.

Will you come and follow me?

John Bell and Graham Maule's hymn imagines a series of questions posed by Jesus, inspired by his call to the first disciples. Through its first four stanzas, these questions lay bare the demands, risks, uncertainties, and opportunities for agreeing to follow Christ, before the final stanza switches to the

believer's voice, inviting a commitment to be made. The third stanza addresses questions of justice most directly, asking would-be disciples to commit to ministries of healing and liberation. This theme is implicit too in the fourth stanza, where the need to "reshape the world around" is highlighted.

Unlike other hymns that imagine Jesus speaking, such as "I heard the voice of Jesus say" and "I danced in the morning/Lord of the dance," there is no explicit indication here that this is the perspective from which the first four stanzas need to be understood. The persistent questioning, the direct reference to many events recorded in the gospels, and clear echoes of Jesus's preaching nonetheless make this perspective apparent, even if singing questions constructed as "will you" towards ourselves may not seem immediately logical.

The Scottish folk melody KELVINGROVE for which the text was written helps to emphasise the torrent of questions through its highly repetitive rhythms and melodic phrases. Though not a hymn specifically focused on social justice, in keeping with much of Bell and Maule's work, it nonetheless interweaves a commitment to justice within its broader consideration of Christian calling.

Lord, for the years

Though not directly focused on social justice, Timothy Dudley-Smith's widely sung hymn is framed as a petitionary prayer for individual and corporate faith, and for local and global situations. Although Christopher Idle asserts that "The word 'commonwealth' (verse 3) refers to the whole community rather than to a solely British institution," the hymn nonetheless reflects a context of worldly privilege, in which the human spirit is "oppressed by pleasure, wealth and care," and which has seemingly turned away and forgotten Christ's calling. The hymn serves, therefore, as an implicit reminder of the need to stand for justice and to be aware of the situations faced by the whole of God's creation. Such concerns are, however, bound up within the hymn's dominant evangelistic vision, for individuals, communities, nations, and the world to acknowledge Christ as King and to be remade by him. Michael Baughen's strident tune LORD OF THE YEARS clearly responds to this aspect of the text, as its overall melodic progression rising an octave from beginning to end emphasises Dudley-Smith's triumphant vision.

Themes, practices, and issues

Although these five hymns have different emphases, partly indicated by their placing in several different thematic sections of *Singing the Faith*, several commonalities emerge in both textual and musical terms. Justice and evangelism are linked by both Dudley-Smith and Kendrick, as believers pray for justice as a sure sign of God's kingdom. "Longing for light," "Beauty for brokenness," and "Lord, for the years" are all framed as prayers, despite being rather different in character both textually and musically. Like "Will you come and follow me?" they acknowledge that the work of

pursuing social justice is both aligned with God's purposes and relies on God's strength and guidance. "Let us build a house" stands somewhat apart from the others in this regard; while it is clear that it is concerned with the building up of God's kingdom of justice, its emphasis is solely on human endeavour towards this goal.

Each of the texts apart from "Will you come and follow me?" explicitly addresses the need and desire for social justice from the perspective of Christians empowered by their social, cultural, and political situation to seek justice on behalf of others. This is foregrounded in Dudley-Smith's hymn as he draws attention to the distractions of worldly wealth and desire. Both he and Bernadette Farrell connect this perspective with being distanced from Christ: for Dudley-Smith, we are "lost indeed without him," while Farrell reminds us that until Christ's light brings justice, "we wait in darkness." Haugen, while inviting singers to commit to building a house that is just and gracious, does not reflect on the implications of this current falling short of God's perfect justice and grace.

Only Bell and Maule draw attention to the possibility of hostility towards those who seek to follow Christ and build his kingdom: "Will you risk the hostile stare / should your life attract or scare?" In a similar vein, Farrell's recurrent emphasis on longing emphasises that the work of seeking justice is neither easily nor quickly achieved. Her oscillation between relative minor and major keys for the stanzas and refrain of "Longing for light" highlight the impact that music has on the messages of justice contained within these hymns. The frequent turning back to the minor key of longing for and working towards social justice prevents the sure hope in Christ's light from slipping into complacency. In different ways, the musical settings for "Beauty for brokenness," "Lord, for the years," and "Let us build a house" draw attention away from the challenge of justice through their assertive projections of confidence.

Singing justice from an empowered and privileged perspective may well make sense in broad terms for many British Methodists. The present-day British context is one of considerable privilege in global terms, not least in matters of healthcare, education, food security, and political and religious freedom. Using those privileges to further the cause of justice for God's children to whom such privileges is not extended is appropriate for British Methodism at large, and thus a necessary part of its communal song. A range of other considerations are, however, necessary, in order for greater nuance to be brought to this position, and which might, in turn, inform British Methodism's engagement with social justice through its hymnody.

First, the othering of those for whom justice is sought may cause us to overlook several important aspects of this work. What injustices have been and are being experienced by those within or formerly part of British Methodist congregations? Anthony Reddie's insights, cited above, make clear

that there are British Methodists who do not experience racial justice within their own churches. Such experiences are, of course, not confined to churches, as the ongoing repercussions of the Grenfell Tower and Windrush scandals attest, as does data regarding ethnicity and the impact of Covid-19.[21] If the hymns about justice that are most commonly or popularly sung prioritise a privileged, dispensatory attitude towards justice, this runs the risk of working counter to Haugen's vision of a church in which all are welcomed and affirmed.

Such othering and the concomitant valorising of our own efforts also leaves open the possibility that we fail to recognise our own complicity in the creation and perpetuation of social injustices, as well as those closely bound up in British history. Dudley-Smith's "commonwealth" is an especially evocative term in a post-imperial British context; the musical assertiveness of LORD OF THE YEARS does not easily lend itself to critical reflection on what it might mean in a contemporary context to pray "Lord of our land" or "Lord of the world." Similarly, the explicit connection of justice and evangelism in "Beauty for brokenness" risks assuming that power and privilege in relation to the former entitles the same in terms of the latter.

Second, the relationship between singing and justice is different from that between hymns and the other themes and purposes they convey and serve. To take a familiar Wesleyan example, the stanza "O for a thousand tongues to sing / my great Redeemer's praise, / the glories of my God and King, / the triumphs of his grace" is concerned with doxology. The very act of singing those words together in the context of the church's worship achieves the doxological aim that Charles Wesley states. Obvious as it may seem, to sing "peace to the killing fields" or similar does not achieve the justice for which we pray in our songs. More generally, using hymns to give voice to the church's petitionary prayer can be a powerful means of expressing shared commitment, but we must always live with the open question posed by Bell and Maule, "Will you let me answer prayer / in you and you in me?"

How and what we sing are important factors in expressing our commitment to social justice. Broadly speaking, all five examples discussed here represent common musical ground in many British Methodist churches. The historic tradition of metrical hymnody continues, notably in the hymns by Dudley-Smith and Bell and Maule, while the widespread acceptance of songs that represented a new musical idiom in the 1980s and 1990s is seen in "Beauty for brokenness." The musical setting by

[21] Neha Gohil, "Grenfell anniversary: 'I hope people show how they feel … with their votes,'" *Guardian*, June 14, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/jun/14/grenfell-anniversary-i-hope-people-show-how-they-feel-with-their-votes. Amelia Gentelman, "Braverman dropping Windrush measures was unlawful, court told," *Guardian*, April 23, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/apr/23/dropping-windrush-recommendations-was-unlawful-court-told. "Lessons must be learnt from Covid-19's unequal impact on minority groups," UCL News, last modified July 27, 2023, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2023/jul/lessons-must-be-learnt-covid-19s-unequal-impact-minority-groups.

Haugen and Farrell can be characterised as hybrids of these two traditions. Although they can all be interpreted in many ways musically, none of the five demands extensive musical resources to be realised effectively for congregational singing; a solo keyboard instrument or a small ensemble are more than sufficient. This is musical repertoire that is familiar, approachable, and comfortable in many British Methodist churches. This subtly reinforces the common perspective on social justice found in most of these texts: do they suggest that our position and our responsibilities in terms of social justice are similarly familiar, approachable, and comfortable?

The other selections in the "Justice and Peace" section of *Singing the Faith* offer a potential corrective to the dominance of the thematically and musically familiar approach to singing justice described above. Among the twenty-five hymns in this section are a paraphrase of Psalm 137, the South African song "Freedom is coming," Shirley Erena Murray's stark "God weeps," and Martin Leckebusch's penitential "In an age of twisted values," all of which, among several others, offer different perspectives through their textual themes and musical characters. Murray's "God weeps" names many injustices and portrays them as grievous to God, reminding singers in the final stanza that "and till we understand the Christ, / God waits." These unsettling words are set to the tune EMPATHY by Ian Render, which eschews conventional melodic resolution and employs deliberate harmonic dissonances.[22] "Freedom is coming" employs rhythmic and melodic characteristics that audibly establish its difference from those hymns discussed above.[23] Its lyrical perspective is different: it speaks with hope and certainty, including a second stanza that proclaims, "Justice is coming." The song's origins confirm that these are words of those who have lived experience of many social injustices and long for freedom and for justice for themselves and their communities.

Broadening British Methodism's engagement with songs of social justice is necessary for several reasons. A diet of words written and sung solely from the perspective of our privileged position to seek and dispense justice for and to others risks confirming latent or unacknowledged notions of superiority, and associating this with a spiritual righteousness. Singing words from those who are minoritized within or absent from our communities should be an uncomfortable experience. Drawing on the work of Jon Sobrino SJ, composer and theologian Maeve Louise Heaney VDMF seeks to explore in her own musical work how Sobrino's understanding, which she summarises as arguing

[22] "StF 700 God weeps," YouTube, accessed June 17, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQ3f0NdHbBc.
[23] "Freedom is coming," YouTube, accessed June 17. 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6F1omXtDz0.

that "there is no access to salvation outside the immense reality of the poor," can inform song.[24] She highlights how "the poor teach us to ask the right questions," and help us to understand salvation, redemption and mercy.[25] Music's embodied nature and relational qualities, she argues, can enable us to create and understand new relationships with the world around us. C. Michael Hawn, meanwhile, argues that engaging with the songs of those with whom we aspire to stand in solidarity opens us to new perspectives, asserting that such engagement, at its best,

> goes beyond a superficial, even subliminal, awareness of another culture through popular media or noting, in passing, bilingual hymns in our hymnals. It is an encounter that seeks to open oneself up to another's way of praying – praying in the fullest sense of that word: invocation, praise, adoration, petition, intercession, and blessing. These prayers are mediated through the songs of another culture. Receiving these sung prayers from others' struggles adds an awe-full sense to our encounter with those who send us these gifts.[26]

Engaging with songs such as "God weeps" and "Freedom is coming" may require a degree of humility and vulnerability on the parts of some British Methodist musicians and congregants. Here is music that, perhaps, we cannot approach with the same degree of confidence as those songs discussed above that have proved so popular. If we are able to open ourselves to learn musically, we might also allow ourselves to encounter and be shaped by different perspectives on social justice.

[24] Maeve Louise Heaney VDMF, "Mercy, Music, and the Prophetic Voice of Theology: Jon Sobrino's *Extra Pauperes Nulla Salus*," in *Music, Theology, and Justice*, ed. Michael O'Connor, Hyun-Ah Kim, and Christina Labriola (Lanham, ML: Lexington Books, 2017), 54-55.
[25] Heaney, "Mercy, Music and the Prophetic Voice," 56-57.
[26] C. Michael Hawn, "The Truth Shall Set You Free: Song, Struggle, and Solidarity in South Africa," in *Resonant Witness: Conversations between Music and Theology*, ed. Jeremy S. Begbie, and Steven R. Guthrie (Grand Rapid, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 425-26.