

Priest, Kersten Bayt. (1998). Disharmony in the 11:00 a.m. worship hour: A case study of an abandoned interethnic church merger. Master of Arts Thesis, University of South Carolina, Department of Anthropology.

This thesis is the story of an attempted church merger between a congregation of Afro-American Independent Baptist tradition and one with an evangelical Southern Baptist tradition (referred to in the thesis as the Independent Church and the Southern Church, respectively). The pastors of these two churches proposed this merger in the context of heated public concern in South Carolina about church burnings and racially motivated hate crimes. In the public as well as the Christian arena there were strides being made toward reconciliation – the Southern Baptist Convention had recently apologized for its historic racism. The pastors of these two churches were convinced that ‘desegregating the 11 o’clock Sunday morning hour’ would be an important step in demonstrating that unity can be achieved.

The two churches had many things in common; similar theology, comparable middle class socio-economic levels, congenial pastors with professional training from the same institution, families in the same suburban school district, and both were meeting in transitional spaces (a school auditorium and a recreational facility). They believed that with all this in common that it should be possible to overcome ethnic boundaries. Thus the merger was initiated with a sense of commonality and positive anticipation.

What unfolded gave insight into the powerful influence of differing *schemas* of worship that were deeply rooted in cultural traditions and tied to ethnic identity. These schemas were reflected in the powerful *positive associations* that each church connected with various aspects of their *own* worship style and *negative associations* that they held with the other church’s schema.

Below is a brief summary of some of the differing values (and related associations) of the two churches. It illustrates their fundamental differences in worship schemas:

Independent Church

What is “good music”?

- Focus on repetition for “spiritual” impact
- Syncopated rhythm with higher volume
- Embellished melodic line
- Testimonies & expressive singing demonstrate “genuineness” - prerequisite to *ministry*, thus:
 - elaborated hand gestures by music leader
 - elaborated facial expressions
 - clapping and “stepping” together
- Value informal/improvisational musical talent

Southern Church

What is “good music”?

- o Focus on words for “spiritual” impact
- o Standard rhythm with lower volume
- o Smooth melodic line
- o Subdued, reverential style demonstrates “worshipfulness”, thus:
 - limited gestures
 - minimal facial expression
 - stand straight and still
- o Value formal/notational music training

What is “good worship?”

- Escalation of expression in service up to the sermon
- Expressive music (as defined above)
- Emotionally uplifting
- Communal & interactive participation
- Demonstrates genuine concern and care for others; worship *is* ministry.
- ‘Front space’ shared by many participants of both sexes.
- Taught example of David dancing before the Lord – 2 Sam 6:14 (expressive, uplifting)

What is “good worship?”

- o Decreases in expression; last song before sermon may be sung *a capella*
- o Distrust of ‘over-emotionalism’
- o Emotionally subdued
- o Individual, subdued response to God
- o Prepares the individual to *go forth* and minister.
- o ‘Front space’ limited to 2 pastors and music minister (all male).
- o Taught on example of Isaiah 6 (solitary experience, humbling, awesome)

Clearly, these two churches were operating from highly disparate *schemas* regarding music and worship in the church. The *associations* that each church had with the varying schemas caused them to judge the other form of worship as inappropriate. The Southern Church’s associations led them to the opinion that an expressive style was ‘over-emotional’ and too much like a ‘performance’. The Independent Church’s associations led them to believe that the music of the Southern Church was stiff, “uptight”, possibly not genuine, and inadequate for ministry to people.

The last issue in the list above shows the ubiquitous tendency to use Scripture in a manner that confirms our own worship schemas. When the pastors taught on the topic of Biblical worship, the Independent Church pastor chose the passage where David danced before the Lord to affirm the value of expressive, uplifting, communal, joyful worship. The Southern Church worship leader chose the example of Isaiah alone before the Lord in the temple, affirming the value of a solitary experience of worship in the presence of an awesome God; emotionally humbling and resulting in hushed reverence.

It is important to point out that the schema and values of the Southern Church dominated at virtually every point of decision-making during the duration of the merger. The choice of music leader was an especially pivotal issue, because it strongly affected the music that was chosen and the style in which it was sung. Why the Southern Church’s music minister was chosen to fill that role *alone*, rather than in coordination with the established worship leader of the Independent Church is enigmatic. One may speculate that he already held that paid position in the Southern Church, or because he was male, but this decision was clearly consistent with the pattern set in all other areas of decision-making; the Independent Church’s values were subjugated rather than validated. This is a key issue in multi-ethnic congregations. We need to take seriously the principles of Philippians 2:3-4 and look out not only for our own interests, but for the interests of others.

Because of the domination of the Southern style during the trial merger, it was the Independent Church members that felt the brunt of disapproval and devaluation of their ethnic style. When the time came to vote whether or not to approve the merger, the Southern Church approved it with one abstention, but the Independent Church ended up with a split vote which killed the merger and ended in the disbanding of the Independent Church itself four months later.

Priest’s conclusion is a significant one for those (like myself) who serve in situations where multiple ethnic groups are represented. She writes, “In worship settings which purport to be setting an example of intercultural/interethnic unity, it would seem that equal value/time must be extended to more than one form of aesthetic spiritual expressivity.”

The disciplines of anthropology and ethnomusicology are closely related and the wise student of ethnomusicology will make use of this. If you've never considered the value of examining anthropological works to enhance your work in ethnomusicology, here's proof that anthropologists have a lot of insight to offer! This study, accessible through interlibrary loan, was especially interesting to me because I serve in the Republic of Sakha in Russia, where most churches have dual ethnic composition (Russian and Sakha) and where there has been a history of inter-ethnic tensions.

This monograph heightened my awareness of the tendency for one ethnic schema to unintentionally dominate another, and broadened my perspective of how I can more fully understand and support various ethnic schemas in the worship context. I would love to see this work published for the consumption of ethnomusicologists. I certainly recommend it for those working in multi-ethnic situations.