

THE CHRISTIAN ASSEMBLY

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Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	IX
PREFACE	XIII
ONE: CONCEPTUAL ESSAYS.....	15
PRELUDE: PURPOSES & DIRECTIONS	17
Worship ... and Other Components	19
One Another in the Assembly.....	22
Simple, Organic.....	30
TERMS	31
The Place We Gather	31
“Praise” and “Worship”	32
Concatenation: “Worship Service”	34
Other Terms.....	37
INTERLUDE NO. 1: A BAD SUNDAY	38
PEOPLE: LEADING OTHERS.....	40
Perspectives in Romans 14	40
Distractions	41
Choosing Public Leaders (No Gifts, Please?)	42
The Sabbath—Not a Christian Doctrine.....	43
Sabbaticals for Leaders	44
Shepherds as Public Leaders	45
Servant Leaders	46
Ding-ding	46
Meaning: In Beholders’ Eyes.....	47
Brass Tacks: Logistics and Peripherals.....	48
What Impacts the Assembly Experience?	48
Change	48
Going Through the Motions: Preparing.....	54
Connecting With All.....	55
Style vs. Content.....	56
Selection of Material for Worship.....	58
On the “Church Year” and Easter.....	59
Flow: Here’s One Way To Do It.....	61
Slavery to PowerPoint (and Other Masters).....	63
Silence: Letting It Sink In	64

Specifics and Pet Peeves	65
Computerization, Printed Programs, and Spontaneity	67
INTERLUDE NO. 2: GREAT EXPECTATIONS?	71
TWO: MUSIC PRINCIPLES & TRENDS	73
PURPOSEFUL SINGING	74
Why Do We Sing (Like That)?.....	74
Those Who Don't Sing.....	76
Darryl Tippens on Singing.....	77
Wesley's Directions.....	79
Intentional, Not Merely Utilitarian.....	80
Categories and Content.....	80
On New Songs.....	81
Questionable Wordings.....	83
The 70s, 80s, and 90s.....	86
Surveying Content in Hymnals and Contemporary Sources.....	87
PRACTICALITIES IN MUSICAL LEADERSHIP.....	93
Harmony and "Dumbing Down" Musically.....	93
The Eyes as Communicators.....	94
Hand and Arm Gestures.....	95
Common Rhythmic, Melodic, and Harmonic Mistakes	98
Pitch Matters.....	100
Half-steps: It Really Does Matter	100
Pitching Children's Songs	103
Teaching a New Song.....	105
INTERLUDE NO. 3: ANOTHER BAD SUNDAY.....	110
Rhythm and Tempo.....	111
Rhythm & the Agitated Style: Arrhythmia.....	111
(Non-)Comatose Music.....	113
Tempus Non Fugit.....	115
Tempo, Key, and Style Variation	117
NOTATION: PROVIDE FOR THE LITERATE	119
TOPICAL CONTENT: AN AREA FOR GROWTH	121
Categories, Pairings, Oldies, and More	123
Song Pairings	125
The Beatles, Oldies, and Hymnody.....	129
Observations, Reflections & Dreams.....	131

CONTEMPORARY CONCERNS	134
Contemporary Worship Music in A Cappella Churches.....	134
Notation’s Even More Important Now	134
Notation Service-providers.....	137
A Copyright Primer.....	139
Syncopated and Delayed Rhythms	141
Songs with Slow Harmonic Rhythm.....	145
Songs with Exceptionally Long Notes	147
But We Don’t Have a Bass Guitar!.....	148
Repeating the Last Chorus, and the Last Half Again.....	149
Special Songs	151
Praise Teams	152
These Incisive Challenges Really Shouldn’t Be Ignored.....	155
Tessitura.....	160
PowerPoint Particulars	162
Relevance and Participation.....	165
Dear Dad: An Offbeat Birthday Affirmation (1/1/12).....	167
Words—Old and Not-as-Old	169

THREE: GENERAL TOPICS, PRAYER, COMMUNION, & THE SPOKEN WORD.....173

Didactic Worship Leading.....	175
The “Call To Worship”	175
When “We” Welcome “Them”	177
Greeting Others: The Right to Choose	180
Comments and Levity	180
Prayer.....	182
Ponderings on Prayer as Worship.....	182
Prayer vs. Announcements, and Vice Versa	183
Public Prayersphere	184
Once More, With Feeling.....	186
Distant Relationships.....	187
Do We Really “Need Prayer”?.....	187
Habits.....	189
Closing Prayers and Readings	190
Expression & Emotion.....	191
The Lord’s Supper.....	192
Weekly (Weakly?)	192
Far from the Intent.....	193
The Lord’s Supper: Central?.....	194

Practical Ways to Emphasize the Supper.....	196
(Mis)conceptions	198
Communion Meditation: King Jesus.....	202
The Offering Collection	203
On Being Inhospitable.....	203
Tithing by Choice (and Clicks)	207
1Cor 16:1-4: Translation and Commentary.....	209
The Use of Scripture in the Assembly	211
Versions	212
About the KJV.....	213
Practice and Preparation.....	214
Shorter, Please.....	216
Children and Other Inexperienced Oral Readers.....	217
Preachers and Preaching: “Zooming Out”	217
Preacher-centrism.....	218
The “Invitation”: Christ Receiveth Sinful Men.....	220
Miscellaneous Topics.....	222
Sunday Nights and Wednesday Nights	222
Gospel Meetings and Revivals	224
Bilingual Assemblies	225
Clapping.....	227
Announcements	228
Microphones: Use Them.....	228
Attendance Cards.....	229
Sound Systems: Technical Stuff	230
Overtime: Get Over It.....	231

POSTLUDE	233
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SUPPLEMENTS.....235

52 Angles on Communion (Brian Casey)	236
House Churches and the Lord’s Supper (John McRay)	239
On Children and the Worship Assembly (Bettye Casey).....	246
How Song Leaders Can Pick Good Hymns (Matthew Bassford)	248
Song Leading Experiences (Brian Casey).....	251
Searcy.....	251
Beaumont and St. Elmo.....	255
Cedars.....	255
Camp Manatawny SH2 Hymn Sings.....	257
Lights.....	258
Worship, Service, & the Christian Assembly (C.L. Ganus, III).....	260

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My wife, Karly Casey, has been more patient than I can sometimes admit. I am not that easy to live with. She realizes my need for thought and my need to talk and write about Kingdom things. She maintains an inviting, interested posture when I am in an energetic mode. She listens to me read things aloud, she gives feedback, and she has moved me on many occasions by her own sensitivity to the things of the Lord.

The legacy of my maternal grandfather, Andy T. Ritchie, Jr., lives on—especially now in the lives of those he taught and led most. I cannot say that he *directly* influenced me much in terms of the Christian assembly, yet it deserves acknowledgment that he influenced many others with whom I have been closely associated, and I do have a few personal memories myself. My dad was directly impacted by a greater number of experiences under Granddaddy Ritchie's leadership and sought in many ways to reflect his father-in-law's values. In turn, Dad's emphases in church leadership influenced me for good and have played a large role in establishing the good parts of who I am "in church" today.

It is noteworthy to me that I can think of no preacher (in my congregations) who influenced me notably in terms of the assembly as a whole. In fact, I have irritated more than one preacher along the way because of some contra-normal views, but the men have all been pretty patient with me, regardless. The fact that I *feel* a lack of influence may be shallow and even inaccurate, but it is also a function of the common patterns and structures

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Certain counter-influences have been formative, as well, but I’ll not list names in this category. For instance, if you have ever perpetrated some of the poor leadership practices described in this book, or if you are tied to a “high church” denomination, or if you’ve been one of those who thinks worship is a concoction that has no place in the Christian gathering, well, you’re actually in the company of some very good folks, and I might well count you a friend, and I love you, but you haven’t led the Christian Assembly in the way it should go!

For proofreading and brotherly comments on the first edition of some of this material, I thank Chuck Smith, a dear, lifelong friend. He also eagerly accepted the opportunity to read the new manuscript as it was nearing completion. My parents and wife have read and responded to portions. Bill McGee, another longtime friend whose heart I trust, has read the entire, penultimate version, just before final additions, and offered eminently valu-

able feedback. In no case should any of these caring, serving people be blamed for any of my later errors, my opinions, or my at-times-overwrought statements. I don't intend to be shy, so I have stated some things with force and others with attitude. I alone am to blame if those factors detract from the message.

For permission to include their worthwhile material in the Supplements section of this book I thank Dr. Clifton L. Ganus, III, Bettye Casey, Dr. John McRay and Leaven/Pepperdine University, and Matthew Bassford. The simple fact that another author's material is include in the Supplements section does not imply that he or she agrees with everything in this book.

Standing in view of . . .

- ◆ my nature that cannot be satisfied with the status quo
- ◆ innumerable instances in which people have had to show patience with my overwroughtness about the assembly
- ◆ those individuals' contributions to my thinking and practice
- ◆ rich times shared during the years in gatherings of believers

. . . I am distinctly grateful.

Brian Casey
Searcy, Arkansas
June 2016

<https://ChristianAssemblyAndWorshipBlog.wordpress.com>
<http://tinyurl.com/org-simple>

Preface

It has been called many things

The assembly of the saints

The gathering of Christians

Devotionals

Worship

The church service

Goin' to meetin' (a phrase from yesteryear)

Church

Regardless of the label, the significance of the Christian assembly is unquestioned by most believers. Or is it?

Have we reached a time when we are so tired of hearing Hebrews 10:25-26 (quoted in order to inflict guilt on those who had skipped, or who were thinking about skipping . . . a kind of enforced attendance) that we rebel—in practice, if not in our hearts? Do we find ourselves just *attending* without purpose, submitting to the *activity* without deeply experiencing much of what God intends?

Even those of us who habitually attend may find ourselves minimizing the importance of the assembly; this phenomenon is related, I think, to good habits with bad *reasons* and/or bad *execution*. In other words, we would not find ourselves having to advertise the assembly to the fringe element if the activities had been carried out with more depth, intentionality, and, well . . . *quality*. Not only would *we* continue to be there when Christians are gathered, but the contagion of our feelings about the assembly's value would affect all those around us. More people would be present, and everyone would be engaged. In my wildest dreams, there would *be* no fringe element.

About small groups: It bears mention that my heart and thoughts have increasingly gravitated toward the small group *as* the church assembly. In other words, a “life group” or “cell group” or “small group” may be merely tacked onto the regular church program, or it may be considered integral (as in an increasing number of churches), or it may be considered to *be* the primary church group. Count me in the last group. I believe in the small group assembly to this extent: I pour more of myself into it than into any

other type of church meeting in which I am involved. I do wish to uphold, and help to improve, group gatherings of all sizes. This book only barely touches on the small group gathering in some respects, but additional writings on topics related to the organic church and small groups may be found at <http://tinyurl.com/org-simple>. A narrower selection from within that category is my personal “mini-odyssey” with Bible study groups and small groups through the years: <https://blcasey.wordpress.com/2015/10/>.

In the pages that follow, I affirm the importance of the Christian assembly through observations, comments, opinions, reflections, and suggestions. These thoughts and words spring largely from my own experiences in relatively large assemblies in dozens of churches whose signs read *Church of Christ*, but I have also participated with other Restoration and non-affiliated churches and have had various types and levels of experience with other traditions, as well, through association brought about by employment and musical endeavors. Although I write primarily from the perspective of the primitivist, restoration-oriented tradition, the broader evangelical legacy of recent decades is both in the background and the foreground. A good proportion of the section on music deals with a *cappella* churches that may use hymnals and/or hymn-style music along with contemporary songs. I have dealt in some detail with a number of contemporary music concerns.¹

Those from various, perhaps mostly “low church” traditions will be able to gain most from reading. Since the first edition of this material, written in 2005-2007, I have added and revised based on continued experience, thought, and study; one revision was produced in 2010-12, and the present work has involved thoroughgoing revision and addition.

May God be honored.

¹ The Music Principles & Trends section of this book is available separately.

Notation: Provide for the Literate

According to documentation on the website of Lincoln Christian College & Seminary, Alexander Campbell didn't like printed music.

It is noteworthy that during his lifetime, Campbell refused to allow musical notation to appear in his hymnbook, notation not appearing in it until the 1871 edition. He was a man of strongly-held opinions about church music. He felt that notation appearing on the same page with lyrics would detract from worship.

Even today, some feel that displaying musical notation on a screen, perhaps more than using a printed hymnal, is “elitist,” pandering only to the musically knowledgeable.

I disagree. There are still quite a few of us (maybe 50%, although I admit the number is declining) who are aided greatly by musical notation in worship. At least for a few more years—until *a cappella* churches evolve/split again into a) the more instrumentally friendly and b) the less so—give me music notation, or don't ask me to sing or lead.

We must provide for the future. Even when the song is known by the majority of the congregation (remember that the majority is not everyone), why not provide music notation in some format? If for no other reason, do it because children who may be learning to read music can learn parts and thereby preserve the experience of harmony. I think the message is clear in the following anguished thoughts I received via e-mail:

*Last Sunday night _____ (leader) did it again: led probably seven or so songs and offered **no** music access. The really maddening thing about it was that several were in the book! Furthermore, there were numbers up on the pretty PowerPoint word displays that didn't correspond to what was in the book! If that wasn't a triple whammy!*

It's not a generational problem either. While I didn't know some of the songs, some younger worshippers may not have known “Count Your Blessings.”

Anyway, I think it is discriminatory (that would be “anti-unity,” in Biblical terms) to project words only (except on occasion). It is a snub to people who don't know the song and an even greater snub if some of those people can read music. Having both words and music available will never discriminate

against the ones who do not read music; yet **not** having music does cut out the ones who **could** use it (and I strongly believe more people read music, to some degree, than is claimed).

Besides the personal snub I feel, I tend to feel angry that leaders are dealing a slashing blow to the singing as a whole . . . while seeming to be happy with a retrogression in this department.

We are not illiterate! We don't learn other things by having information passed down from the fathers, as in the olden cultures. We read the news, we read about technology, we read inspiration, we read for pleasure ... we are nearly all readers! Why must our worship assemblies assume ignorance on the part of average Joe & Jill? It gives the "leader" an undue hold over us while robbing the whole assembly of greater participation.

This obviously intense message will doubtless leave some mouths agape and turn most people off. The letter certainly speaks clearly, yet I will take up this topic again below, in the "Contemporary Concerns" section. Here, I would simply append to the last sentence. It would be the unusually arrogant leader who would intentionally set out to exert authority, taking "hold over" a congregation, but the lack of such negative intention is precisely why I am writing this paragraph: *we desperately need leaders to be aware of what they're doing when they know the songs **but do not give the congregation the opportunity to read the music** to whatever extent each one can.* A terribly ironic scenario is the result: a leader sets out to lead people who are incapacitated in following his lead! (They cannot follow if they don't know what to sing.)

Some churches might have had a difficult time getting a projection system going and/or do not yet have the funds to purchase *The Paperless Hymnal* or some similar product that allows them to display music on the screen. Home-church groups might not have resources to buy hymnals or song books of any kind. A lyrics-only sheet for each song may be all that is available, for a while. The ethical problem lies primarily with churches that have five staff ministers and technology budgets of thousands per year, yet manifest apathy toward the literate majority.

If you have the resources, please do not make the mistake of neglecting to provide either printed or projection-displayed music. It will make a *huge* difference for the small segment of your church that are musicians, and it will be beneficial, though perhaps unnoticed, for a substantial number of the others.

Contemporary Concerns

Contemporary Worship Music in A Cappella Churches

There are very good reasons for singing contemporary songs, but problems do show up when congregations attempt to sing some of them. Let's face it: it is just plain difficult to use some contemporary music in *a cappella* settings.

Add to this difficulty the apparent shyness of some modern worship leaders about using their hands to help keep the beat and keep the congregation together—I know, it seems old-school to “beat time.” The “rhythm of the saints”⁴⁵ problem is made worse when beats are skipped and no one can predict when the leader is going to sing the next note because he is not rhythmically governed, and there are no visual cues, either. The simple fact is this: visual elements can help a great deal in guiding sonic ones.

Maybe we shouldn't throw out the baby with the bath water. Yes, there are some unhelpful aspects of how we used to do song leading, but leading rhythmically with the hand may be a method worth saving—especially if it helps keep people together.⁴⁶

Some judgment should be applied when selecting contemporary songs for use in *a cappella* churches. In succeeding musings, I will try to provide examples of modern songs that work, and some that do not work well, in *a cappella* settings—along with explanations.

Notation's Even More Important Now

Above, I introduced this topic in the essay “Notation: Provide for the Literate.” It is even more important to consider the provision of music notation in the context of contemporary music.⁴⁷ While there are many songs (learned in my first two decades) for which I can sing melody, bass, or tenor from memory with more than 95% accuracy, everything has changed with the introduction of a disproportionate number of new songs. Now,

⁴⁵ This phrase is used with a wink at Paul Simon, who recorded an album by the same title.

⁴⁶ Please see above (Practicalities in Musical Leadership | “Hand and Arm Gestures” section).

⁴⁷ This topic was introduced in “Notation: Provide for the Literate” above, prior to “Topical Content.”

while LaHaye and Jenkins have their *Left Behind*,⁴⁸ I have my own “Left Out.” My take on a tiny slice of Christendom Pie paints no armageddish picture (but it does mix metaphors!). Truthfully, it’s rather un-cataclysmic. Some of this may even appear tedious, but please stay with me—especially those readers who don’t consider themselves particularly music-minded.

*At times, I am **left out** of the goings-on in church gatherings because music is not made available when I’m supposed to be singing. I don’t like being left out.*

Displaying music on PowerPoint slides (or in hymnals) acknowledges general congregational literacy and enables the musically literate worshippers to take part fully.

Stated in the Negative: *Not displaying music assumes general illiteracy and **disables** some musically literate worshippers who don’t know the song.*

How is it, exactly, that I am disabled? If I end up guessing whether F goes to G next, or to Eb, I’m wrong half the time. I choose not to be more distracted by intuiting the notes and singing the wrong ones, so I stay passive. Either way, I’m going to be distracted some, and for me, it’s usually better not to try to sing at all when there’s no music notation and I don’t know the song. My soul does better in trying to listen and meditate for a few instants on some concept in a line I hear than in trying—and almost invariably failing—to sing the right notes.

People who think displaying at least the melody line of the music is “elitist” may be 12% right, but is that 12% worth leaving some of us out? I really don’t like being left out. On the other hand, I am finding it necessary to make at least some allowances for trends in the church at large. A participatory congregational dynamic is less important now in many congregations than it was even 10-15 years ago, and I have to wonder whether I’ll be able to sing anything at all in another 10—if churches continue their lazy habits about displaying music.

The bald truth for me is that **I am unable to sing an unfamiliar song in a church gathering unless musical notation is provided.** Please pause to ponder that. Please.

⁴⁸ I have little use for the whole hyped-up LaHaye series because it is, after all, hyped up, and it assumes the “rapture” and other eschatological events that I do not assume.

You may think the songs in your church are “easy,” but they all are built of the same melodic and harmonic materials, so they sound a lot more alike than you may realize. Plus, the number of notes and musical tones I deal with in an average day simply does not allow me to retain the particular, banal melody of your new favorite song, whether a line is repeated 4x or 20x. I’ve tried, thinking, “I’ll bet I look silly, standing here and not singing when she knows I’m a professional musician.” So I listen, and I try to remember “how it goes.” By the 7th or 8th time the same phrase rolls around, I try it, and sure enough, I get something wrong—I end up substituting the melody or rhythm of derivative song #453 instead of #739. (Many of them do sound alike.)

You may think I should just get over myself and sing the song incorrectly, but that is not who I am. Some of it is a matter of **choice**—I choose not to do too many things carelessly and inaccurately—and some of it simply results from the glut of notes and tones in my particular life. Many tunes do become indistinguishable after a while; I am sincere when I say I am **unable** to sing at times.

You may think that I could just worship in my heart, without singing. And you would be correct. I’m trying, but it’s difficult for a musician to avoid music, focusing on only the words, when music is all around him.

You may think that I’m in a minority, and you’re right. Just be aware that we’re here—me and a few others. Maybe we’re 15%, and maybe we’re 40%, but we have trouble worshipping with the congregation when you don’t provide musical notation so that we can avoid the distraction of being inaccurate with the music. **And, perhaps of more weighty statistical interest: a huge proportion of churchgoers would be helped, to some degree (if not completely enabled), by music notation.** They may not know or admit it all the time, but they are partially musically literate, having been educated in our public schools, and they can sing more heartily if they have notes in front of them than if they have just the words.

You may think that what I’m calling for—**musical notation in church gatherings in literate populations**—is an elitist measure. There seems to be a correlation between this “elitist” criticism (which I steadfastly resist) and the pursuit of “church growth.” When people (preachers and others whose livelihood depends on more people coming through the doors) get

together to try to solve the church world's problems apart from scripture, they can come up with all sorts of questionable ideas, and this is one of them.⁴⁹

You may think that there are larger Kingdom causes to be spending time on, and again, you're right. But this cause deserves some attention, as well—all in good perspective of the assembly's goals.

Church leaders, please consider taking the step of providing the words and the music for your assemblies. It hurts no one, and it helps more of us than you may realize.

Notation Service-providers

Here are a few evaluative details about three organizations that provide similar, overlapping services:

A View of Worship

AVOW expressly caters to “Midsize Church of Christ”—a hypothetical group that has a praise team, rotating musical leadership of widely varied ability, and a leadership that favors blended worship.

Given my very limited knowledge of AVOW materials, I will confine comments to one area in which I believe this organization's materials are lacking: the translation of certain contemporary elements to the *a cappella* medium. Based on dialogue with one of the founders, I believe AVOW is in the habit of *simplifying* contemporary music in order to make the songs seem accessible to more congregations.⁵⁰ The simplification of rhythmic

⁴⁹ I also question the “rule” that says your church won't grow past 75-80% of its seating capacity. Suspiciously, I find this principle shallow and self-serving; it leads to a drive for a newer, bigger building, which in turn makes it look like the preacher is doing great things, or else people wouldn't have flocked to him, leading eventually to the need for a bigger building. While preachers' scorn of musical notation is not self-serving in the same way, it is shallow and amounts to ignorance shown toward the worthy, generally and musically literate people who fill the seats.

⁵⁰ AVOW is aware of multiple larger congregations' expansions of AVOW arrangements into more skillful, characteristic versions. My guess is that the larger congregations doing more with the published AVOW arrangements are the *only* groups that are really approximating the original songs. This supposition is based on a good deal of experience with groups of varying abilities. Even the most skilled, rehearsed *a cappella* singing cannot approach all the aspects of many original contemporary songs. My belief is that, for instance, removing an added 9th from a chord in order to simplify it actually changes the character of the music in that spot. The music there is no longer the same.

patterns is a common type of modification. However, if one simplifies rhythms in order to unify a congregational song, the character of the original music has likely been essentially changed. People who know the original songs can be frustrated when presented with changes, because the sound is different. Further, if a good proportion of the church does know the song, they will end up ignoring the written arrangement, anyway—with the result that no one ends up singing together.

AVOW finds that some congregations “will generally only introduce a new song to the repertoire if it can be taught in one or two repetitions or praise team rehearsals,” and AVOW believes it is serving those churches’ needs. Perhaps so, but those congregations’ repertoires may also be impoverished. (Here I am commenting on the congregations more than on AVOW.) Some difficult songs are worth taking time to learn and may be just as beneficial as certain simple songs (whether found in hymnals, heard in informal settings, or arranged from contemporary sources). I find that there are

- ◆ some contemporary songs that most congregations can sing
- ◆ others that need praise teams to shore them up (and then, of course, the congregations aren’t doing much of the singing, anyway)
- ◆ yet others that shouldn’t be attempted with a *cappella* congregations at all (end of story)

For more information on which types of songs work best or don’t work, see below. If your church is ravenous for new songs arranged simply, you might want to try AVOW, and you may find an arrangement of your favorite radio song relatively quickly this way. (Or you could hire me to produce your church’s custom arrangements!)

Taylor Publications

I have more limited experience with Taylor Publications, as well, but that experience I do have spans different music styles and several years. I cannot recommend Taylor, based on what I’ve seen. There are better arrangements available elsewhere.

The Paperless Hymnal

Focusing on Church of Christ hymnal repertoire, the extensive Paperless Hymnal library incorporates multiple versions of many songs in order to correlate to a few widely used hymnals. Where multiple hymnals disa-

gree on specific words or notes, the standard is the *Praise for the Lord* book.⁵¹ (This “pro” can also be a “con,” because few leaders actually seem to notice that there are multiple versions, or perhaps they don’t care, and they end up using the wrong one. Variant words and harmonies can be switched, creating momentary confusions.) TPH also includes a relatively small but growing number of contemporary songs; these arrangements, while sometimes simplified, seem to employ better concepts and sources than those produced by either AVOW or Taylor.

TPH regularly (on multiple occasions each year) produces corrected versions of songs, and it is up to someone from each congregation to stay on top of this process, updating the church’s files. I can personally attest to the fact that TPH’s process is refined and thorough. Although I disagree mildly with a few cosmetic/notation choices, they are consistently applied.

Based on aggregate quality and the connection I perceive between stated mission and achievement, it is my pleasure to recommend *The Paperless Hymnal* above other, similar sources of which I’m aware. It is not because TPH focuses on hymnal repertoire that I recommend them; I simply find that they have a more viable *raison d’etre*. In other words, focusing on arranging *contemporary* songs in an *a cappella* milieu is in my opinion destined to be a somewhat problematic venture, so I prefer to advocate a service that helps *a cappella* churches spend more time doing what they can do well.

A Copyright Primer

In this age, copyright and other legal matters are important considerations. The brief observations below should be helpful in clarifying some general principles.

First: copyright is primarily a *concept*, not a document or formal government sanction. In other words, copyright exists, in this country and many others, simply by virtue of the creation of any material considered “intellectual property.” A book is “copyrighted” when it is typed, not only when it is published with a © 2016 notice or when a document is filed with the government.

⁵¹ James Tackett, the Paperless Hymnal editor, with whom I have worked on occasion, is good about making other versions available where appropriate.

Second: churches are bound by copyright (and “performance rights”) laws just as individuals, corporations, and academic institutions are bound by them. It is a mistake to assume, simply because an organization is a non-profit or not-for-profit one, that it is exempt from laws. Churches must abide by copyright laws because the laws are, after all, laws, and because it is the ethical and considerate thing to do in our age.

Third: a CCLI (Christian Copyright Licensing International) license will cover 98% of most congregations’ needs vis-à-vis songs written by the last four (or so) generations of songwriters. The cost of the license is reasonable and is based on the size of the church.

- ◆ Essentially, the CCLI license grants the right to photocopy or project music (or words only) for congregational use.⁵²
- ◆ In addition, musical arrangements may be made where they do not previously exist, under certain guidelines.
- ◆ Permission to reproduce individual songs that happen *not* to be covered by the CCLI license may be obtained by corresponding directly with the respective copyright administrators. This process can be dizzying and time-consuming, but it is only rarely a necessity.

One bit of misinformation that I suspect infects a great many otherwise in-the-know people is the idea that church music *notation* is somehow protected by copyright differently from the way that *lyrics* are protected. That is a false impression. If your church has a standard CCLI license or other permission to use a song, you can legally, ethically print melodies or arrangements and distribute handouts in a church bulletin, project them on screens, or even print them in bound supplements for congregational use. This is quite an important message to disseminate, in order to head off the ignorant actions of some who unintentionally end up eroding congregational singing by asserting that it’s only legal to project or print words!

Fourth: “fair use” and “academic purpose” clauses in copyright law may be applicable.

Standard disclaimers apply: I am not a lawyer, and the above must not be considered legal advice. It could be considered some relatively educated information. A legal expert may be helpful in non-standard situations.

⁵² Check current documentation at <http://us.ccli.com> for details.