



By **JAMES R. KRABILL**

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Arts and mission have not always been the best of friends. Many young people today and virtually all secular academics are quick to claim that Christian mission has too often dismissed, demeaned, or even destroyed local arts expressions around the world in an effort to impose the West's imperial project of "The 3 Cs"—Commerce, Christianity, and Civilization. This is a harsh assessment, requiring a more nuanced analysis. Some Gospel communicators have, in fact, given their entire lives to preserving indigenous languages through literacy work and Bible translation. Others have conducted music workshops or developed arts programs to encourage believers in producing new artistic creations deeply rooted in and inspired by locally embraced arts genres and aesthetic values.

But in too many instances, Western artistic expressions have been elevated and promoted over local ones. Commonly employed terms for arts of European origin, such as "fine arts" or "high culture" imply that some arts are better than others, superior in aesthetic content, quality, and performance, and perhaps even closer to God's plan and desire for humanity. In many parts of the world, Western arts expressions have long played the privileged, authoritative role of defining, shaping, and judging local arts, labeled condescendingly as "folk arts" and thus as inferior, incompetent, and a grade below the Euroarts standard of excellence.

A growing number of Majority World pastors and church leaders are aware of this challenging situation and wish to change the current trajectory of things by

rediscovering and embracing local artistic expressions in the daily life, worship patterns, and mission activities of the church. At the close of a 2006 music composition workshop in the Democratic Republic of Congo, workshop participants issued a “Declaration” in which they stated:

We have noticed with regret the remarkable absence of traditional music in our churches. This was caused by the arrival of the first missionaries, traditional music has been erased, leaving in its place modern music, which has given youth the feeling of being despised, wronged. Yet God wants to be praised with various musical instruments, Western as well as African (Psalm 150:3–4).

By the end of this workshop, we have been able to discover that we have incredible, multiple musical riches in our different African languages. Let us recognize that a song inspired and composed in one’s mother tongue touches the heart and can change the life of a person, console him, make him joyful and lead him to accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

May this workshop, the first of its kind, not be the last. We desire that the God who is the Master of time and circumstances open other opportunities so that this good initiative may contribute to the proclamation of the Good News and Salvation by songs in our heart languages, for our Lord is enthroned upon praises and adoration (see Revelation 7:9–10).¹

Inspired by a similar vision, a group of Christian artists, coming from the disciplines of anthropology, missiology, visual arts, ethnomusicology, and worship studies, gathered in 2003 for the first Global Consultation on Music and Missions (GCoMM). Many participants at the consultation had experienced a lack of full support and enthusiasm for their arts-focused ministries from their own mission

organizations and churches. They came hoping to find a kindred spirit with people passionate about the vital role the arts could play in Christian ministry and the rapid growth of faith communities around the world.

Emerging from that gathering, marked by invigorating camaraderie and fresh hope, a new network was born—the International Council of Ethnodoxologists (ICE), more recently renamed the Global Ethnodoxology Network (GEN). Combining two Greek roots, *ethnos* (peoples) and *doxos* (praise or worship), the ethnodoxology movement has focused from the outset on working toward a future in which communities of Jesus followers in every culture might engage with God and the world through their own artistic expressions. Not limited to any one art, GEN embraces the vast array of artistic expression and encourages local creativity through the arts in the church’s life, worship, and witness to others. In the words of Brian Schrag, an early GEN founder and supporter, ethnodoxology encompasses “all the arts, from all the world, for all of God’s purposes.”²

For the past two decades, GEN has worked to support and equip ethnodoxologists in local contexts and ministries around the world. Three primary activities characterize GEN’s principal contribution to the arts and mission world—networking, training, and resourcing. *Networking* has been key to GEN’s identity from the beginning through its free email newsletter (every four to six weeks at worldofworship.org/newsletter) and its members-only web-based email forum where several hundred associates interact regularly on wide-ranging arts-related topics and enjoy access to a Virtual Library of resources. To participate at this level of GEN engagement, one can sign up to be a one-year, five-year, or lifetime member (worldofworship.org/signup), with an option of sponsored membership for international scholars and practitioners from under-resourced countries. In addition to these virtual connections, “GEN and Friends” share networking meals and enjoy arts tracks at various global conferences, such as the Calvin Worship Symposium, the Global Consultation

¹ From a forthcoming article by Muriel Swijghuisen Reigersberg and Brian Schrag: “Ethnodoxology,” in *The Oxford Handbook on Music and Christian Theology*, edited by Steve Guthrie and Bennett Zon (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

² From Schrag’s preface to *Creating Local Arts Together: A Manual to Help Communities Reach Their Kingdom Goals* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013), xv.

on Arts and Music in Mission (GCAMM), the Evangelical Missiological Society (EMS), and the American Society of Missiology (ASM).

The *training* aspect of the network has seen the development of two popular training courses—*Introduction to Ethnodoxology* and *Arts for a Better Future (ABF)*—both of which have been embraced and adopted by mission, arts, and educational organizations worldwide. The one-week ABF course has enjoyed particular growth with over 1,100 participants to date from more than 60 countries on five continents. Two-fifths of these participants have been from churches and ministries in the Global South, including Africa, Asia, the Pacific Islands, Latin America, and the Caribbean. To facilitate the growing number of training initiatives occurring in other-than-English languages, GEN has taught and developed course materials—in partnership with William Carey Publishing (WCP)—in French, Indonesian, Portuguese, Spanish, Chinese, and Korean, with Russian and Mongolian currently in process.

Resourcing is the third GEN area of activity. In addition to the course materials described above, the network has produced two larger volumes, likewise published by WCP—*Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook* and *Creating Local Arts Together: A Manual to Help Communities Reach Their Kingdom Goals*. The 580-page *Handbook*—featuring over one hundred authors from twenty countries—provides biblical and theological foundations for the ethnodoxology movement and offers global case studies, practical tools, and online materials with media clips, relevant books, journals, and other resources for arts and mission practitioners. In 2013, GEN developed a journal, *Ethnodoxology: Global Forum for Arts and Christian Faith* (artsandchristianfaith.org). This open-access, peer-reviewed journal features academic articles, working papers, and book reviews of interest to the network.

The GEN network is a dynamic movement and continues to learn with and from its many relationships around the world. The content of the current *Mission Frontiers* magazine is one such example. It celebrates the 20th anniversary of GEN and the ethnodoxology

movement and features GEN’s “Seven Core Values for Arts and Mission” that have emerged after two decades of experience. The seven values presented in this issue—Christian Worship, Potent Arts, Historical Awareness, Human Agency, Locally-Grounded Methods, Academic Rigor, and Confident Hope—are accompanied by stories through the voices of ethnodoxology instructors and practitioners around the world. It is our conviction that the synergistic relationship between arts and mission has never been more relevant or more important.

As you read and reflect on the following pages, it is important to remember that the Incarnation is the ultimate example of the Gospel’s ability to be articulated, received, appropriated, and reproduced into an infinite number of cultural contexts. Benjamin M. Stewart writes:

The incarnation of Christ includes Christ’s honoring of local cultural patterns including dress, language, cuisine, time-keeping, gesture, and relationship with local ecology. [...] The Church as The Body of Christ rightly honors each local culture in which it is incarnated by similarly assuming the givenness of local patterns, grounded in the scriptural memory that, in Christ, God comes to the world ‘deep in the flesh’ of local culture.³



May the following stories inspire you to keep that scriptural memory alive! 📖📖

³ Stewart, Benjamin M. 2014 “What, Then, Do Theologians Mean When They Say Culture?” In *Worship and Culture: Foreign Country or Homeland*, Gláucia Vasconcelos Wilkey, ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 46.