

CCLI TOP 100 + BEYOND:  
A TOOLBOX  
FOR WORSHIP  
LEADERS



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The United Methodist Church

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This resource is made possible by your generous support of  
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# INTRODUCTION

DR. DIANA SANCHEZ-BUSHONG, DIRECTOR OF MUSIC MINISTRIES, DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES  
REV. DR. NELSON COWAN, PROJECT MANAGER, CCLI TOP 100 + BEYOND PROJECT

**M**any negotiations take place when selecting a song for the worship service. The theology of the song lyrics matter. Whether people sing “I and me” or “us and we” matters. The language choices for God and humanity matter. The “fit” of the song within the scope and theme of the current sermon or worship series matters. The skill level of musicians and vocalists matters. The technology the church employs—or does not—matters. How we contextualize and arrange the song for the congregation matters. Finding a balance between introducing new songs, reinforcing core songs through repetition, and honoring the “old favorites”—yes, even in contemporary worship—matters. Choosing songs that balance the wishes and desires of the pastor(s), of the worship team, of the congregation, and—most important, choosing songs that glorify our Triune God—matters!

Our CCLI Top 100 + Beyond Vetting team is made up of pastors, church musicians, and academics who have been in your shoes. So, let us start with a fundamental truth: making song selections for a worship service will **never** please everyone in your church and/or your larger network. However, this does not mean that you should not put in the effort to carefully and thoughtfully curate your congregation’s song selections. In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, he advises the people to sing not only with their spirit, but also with understanding (1

Corinthians 14:15). In other words, both the head and the heart are important considerations in song selections. John and Charles Wesley emphasized this fusion of head and heart, as hymns were intended to communicate the core tenets of our faith.

As United Methodist church musicians, pastors, and leaders, how do we proclaim our Wesleyan theological heritage in our worship services while also honoring the biblical command to sing a “new song” to the Lord? How can we be both thoughtful and contemporary (literally, *con* – “with” and *tempus* – “time” ; *contemporary* – “with the times”) in selecting songs for our worship settings? How can we appreciate the popularity of the latest worship songs, while also evaluating them critically in light of our shared doctrinal commitments? How can we sing songs from other cultures, other styles, other genres, and represent them in authentic ways?

Featuring the insights of various vetting team members, this teaching document will offer some observations, recommendations, and best practices to add to your worship planning toolbox. Rather than one narrative document, we are spotlighting the insights of various team members through short and digestible teachings. We pray that this document will edify your ministry. We thank you for your dedication to enriching the worship life of our beloved church.

# HISTORY OF THE PROJECT

DR. DIANA SANCHEZ-BUSHONG

The original project, founded in 2015, was called the “CCLI Top 100 Vetting Project.” It was the synthesis of several events and developments current at the time, including a new hymnal revision project, a worship gathering called “Fusion” that focused on modern worship music, and the Open Source Liturgy Project (a United Methodist venue for developing new liturgical texts with cultural and linguistic diversity). Central to all those projects was a vetting process with a team of practitioners developing and implementing guidelines that were distinctly United Methodist in theology and practice. The CCLI Top 100 project has been a widely used resource and source of discussion in our denomination.

Since that original project, Discipleship Ministries

has continued to widen its resourcing beyond the majority culture (predominantly English-speaking Anglo-American churches) to uplift culturally diverse congregations as a primary audience. To that end, the CCLI Top 100 + Beyond Project was born. The purpose of this project was to vet the CCLI Top 100 songs since 2017, as well as to source and vet modern songs that may make up a large part of the repertoire of culturally diverse congregations. The vetting team recommended songs for the entire team to consider. Some of these songs were original pieces from team members, songs from the black gospel tradition, and songs from the Latinx and African traditions. Furthermore, songs sourced for this project aimed to speak of justice-oriented concerns in a way that aligns with a Wesleyan theology of grace.

# SUPPLEMENT, SUPPLEMENT, SUPPLEMENT

➤ REV. DR. NELSON COWAN ◀

One thing that you will see throughout our approved song list is the recommendation to supplement, supplement, supplement. In general, when we encounter a song that may be lacking in one area or more—be it theology, language, or something else—we recommend a principle of addition, not subtraction. For example, many of the songs in the CCLI Top 100 + Beyond list do not feature rich and expansive naming practices for God. Specifically, many songwriters under this contemporary worship umbrella exclusively use masculine pronouns in referring to the first person of the Trinity. While this is not a problem, we understand that scripture attests to broader metaphors and naming practices for God. Therefore, we recommend supplementing these songs with alternative elements in your worship service that speak more expansively of God.



These supplemental elements may be other contemporary worship songs, hymns, prayers, scripture readings, drama, dance, visual art, or teaching and preaching. Be intentional with how and where you place your songs in the order of worship and which elements you juxtapose with one another. For example, your congregation may love to sing the short-form song “Another World” by Kerri Meyer which speaks about the possibility of another world that is “on its way.” However, the song lyrics do not have any kind of God-language or explicitly Christian overtones. To supplement this song, you might precede the singing with scripture readings where Jesus teaches us about the inbreaking reign of God. You might transition musically into songs such as “Marching to Zion” (United Methodist Hymnal, 733) or “The Kingdom is Yours” (*Common Hymnal*). Or, you might sing “Another World” as a musical response in a litany you compose. This principle of supplementation encourages pastors, musicians, and worship planners to be intentional and creative in their worship planning, using contemporary worship songs as tools in a much larger and more expansive toolbox.





# SOURCING SONGS FOR WORSHIP

➤ DR. DIANA SANCHEZ-BUSHONG ◀

As worship leaders and planners, we strive to choose elements for our worship experiences that are relevant, contextual, and grounded in Wesleyan theology. However, in this age where myriad resources are readily accessible, it is apparent that popularity often supersedes some of the basic tenets of United Methodist stances on justice, care of the environment and all creation, human worthiness, and service to our neighbors regardless of color or creed ([Click here to read our Social Principles](#)). By choosing modern worship songs and resources solely based on popularity, we can easily inherit a narrow understanding of God and an even narrower understanding of humanity's cooperative role *with* God. Unfortunately, many of these texts and lyrics are devoid of rich imagery and naming practices for God.

Sourcing material for worship requires a more in-depth reading of texts and tunes. It means searching out how best to use songs that are popular and inviting, but it also means being intentional about pairing them with other songs that have more theological profundity. What we pick for people to sing is important because we are literally putting those words in the mouths of our congregations and asking them to believe what they sing. As you view the list of songs we have here for you, we ask you to consider how you can work them into your worship services so that they not only enhance the theme and scripture for that day, but also how you can surround them with complementary elements that build on the meaning and relevance of the song.



## MAKING YOUR SONG CHOICES CONTEXTUAL

➤ TROI ARAGON-BUCHANAN ◀

**M**usic is intrinsically tied to the environment in which it is created. Orchestras perform in concert halls because the halls provide a natural reverberation. Jazz is performed in small clubs because the audience is close enough to the players to hear them articulate delicately. In the same way, it is important that the styling of the music we play in our churches be tailored to our context.

An essential aspect of picking and arranging music is taking a song in its original format and translating it to fit naturally in our congregation's worship culture. A song that is lyrically rich and full of gospel truth can easily fall flat if it is not presented in a styling appropriate to the context. Something as simple as a song being in a key that is too difficult for your congregation to sing can completely change how that song is received and engaged with by your church. For example, "This Is Living" by Hillsong Young & Free feels natural in its native context because Hillsong worships in an auditorium that seats 3,500 and the Hillsong band can run up to twenty people deep. The same song (if played in the same style) would probably not feel natural in a United Methodist church that has one hundred in worship on any given Sunday, with a band of three or four people.

A helpful practice is to take every song you are con-

sidering introducing and strip away all the excess musical elements, performing it as simply as possible: one vocalist and one piano, or one acoustic guitar. Does the song still resonate as it did when it was musically "full"? Pay attention to what essential aspects you feel are missing. You may find that a song does not resonate without multiple vocalists, or an electric guitar, or without a drummer. Once you have identified the core elements of a song, ask yourself if your team can pull off the core elements. You may find that your three-person team can effectively pull off a stripped-back arrangement of a complex song. As a result, this stripped-back arrangement may lead your congregation to connect with the lyrics in a way that they would not have if your small team was attempting to play the original arrangement.

Remember that a song is just lyrics and melody, while everything else is aesthetic and delivery. We should aim to do what we can do well, rather than stretch to do what someone else is doing and perform it poorly. Being faithful with what we have been given stewardship over is all the Lord asks of us, and we believe that Jesus will do the rest. Bringing this mindset into our worship ministries leaves us with so much room for holy creativity as we seek to lead our churches as faithfully as we can.

# DREAMING OF LYRICS BEYOND THE PREVAILING THEOLOGY OF THE CCLI TOP 100

➤ REV. DR. GERALD LIU ◀

One particular theological need “beyond” what the current CCLI Top 100 offers is wider and more nuanced lyrical content regarding who God is for us and who we are in God. We have noticed that a “needy theology” pervades the CCLI Top 100. It resembles adolescent crushes or harlequin fiction more than scriptural faith or the travails, beauty, and truth of the authentic Christian life.

There are exceptions of course, but they are few and far between.

For United Methodists, so much of what we believe about love, time, grace, the incarnation, atonement, sanctification, and more comes from hymnody replete with marvel and wonder at the incomprehensibility of God, and often penned by Wesleyan or Methodist hands:

*'Tis mystery all: th'Immortal dies!  
Who can explore his strange design?  
In vain the firstborn seraph tries  
to sound the depths of love divine.  
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore;  
let angel minds inquire no more.*

SECOND STANZA FROM “AND CAN IT BE THAT I SHOULD GAIN”  
[UNITED METHODIST HYMNAL, 363]

We understand that the music of the CCLI Top 100 is not hymnody. Nostalgia is not what we are dreaming here. We also know that some hymns are made contemporary through new arrangements.

Yet we want to name a frontier and encourage leadership of Christian contemporary music that fearlessly attends to the violent, prejudiced, wild,

complex, and wonderful world that we are called to transform in Christ with the gift of the Holy Spirit and the enduring love of God. We yearn for songwriters and song leaders who search for ways to articulate the justice, peace, power, love, and awe of God, and our responsibility to participate in such divine intervention. United Methodist songwriters: we need you in this genre!

# CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN SONG ADAPTATION

➤ LA'QUENTIN JENKINS ◀

**A**s we realize a more inclusive and unified body of Christ, we must discuss the ways we honor culturally competent practices in our various worship settings, especially when we decide to include music from a culture that is not our own. In today's divisive and racially charged social climate, I imagine many white and non-Black worship leaders/music ministers feel apprehensive about including music in worship from African American gospel artists for fear of appropriation or tokenism.

When a worship leader wishes to adapt/contextualize an arrangement or song from another culture, the worship leader should do so with the desire to understand more deeply the culture in question. We achieve this through reading scholarly works and consulting worship leaders/music ministers from that particular culture. From this we seek to understand more deeply the history of this music and the way that music functions in this aspect. When we fail to do this work, we risk walking the tight rope of appropriation due to uncertainty. Do the work, consult Black voices, and do so in the spirit of unity and inclusivity!



# SINGING THE GLOBE

⇒ REV. LYDIA MUÑOZ ⇐

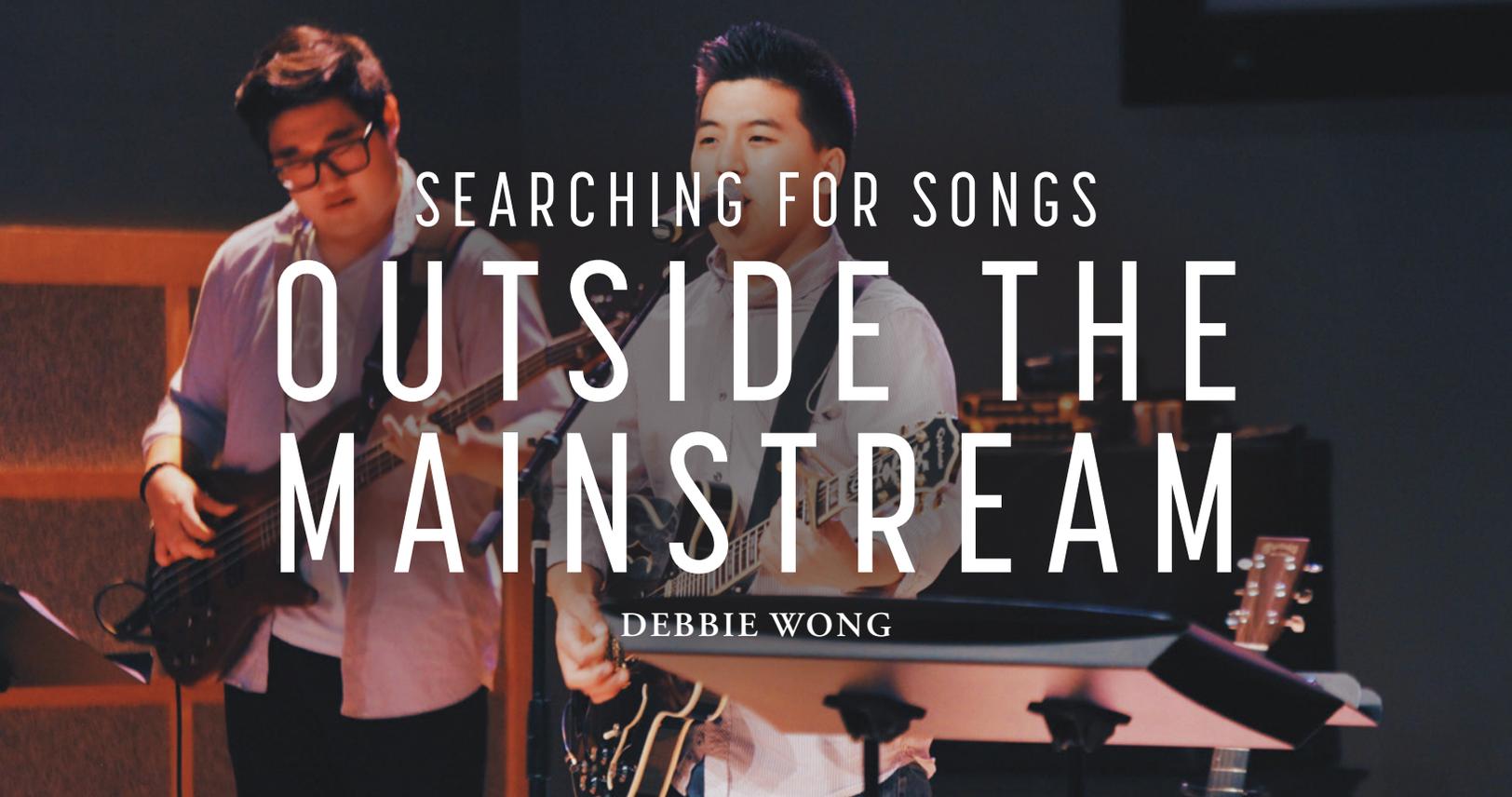
**G**lobal music is an important part of any corporate worship in a congregation. Through global music we put into practice our theological affirmation of the “communion of saints,” which is our understanding of how the invocation of the Holy Spirit connects us with the church universal—every gathered community in the name of Jesus that worships in every place of the world. Global music, when it is incorporated into the life of the congregation, helps congregations worship “incarnationally,” which means we sing in solidarity with our sisters and brothers around the globe. It is important that global music not be used as travel or “cultural tourism.” As the worship leader, pastor, and/or chief liturgist, it is important that you share the background information and history behind the selections as much as possible. This provides the congregation a way to stand in solidarity and be true to the commitment to engage in anti-racism and anticolonialism.

As you incorporate global worship, here are some tips to consider.

**1 DON'T BE AFRAID TO INTRODUCE DIFFERENT LANGUAGES;** just do it in smaller doses. Use a phrase or a word that people can handle with ease. This way, your congregation may not be intimidated to use a different language.

**2 TRY TO USE INDIGENOUS INSTRUMENTS WHEN INTRODUCING GLOBAL MUSIC;** however, that is not always possible. But if you have an opportunity to have your choir or worship team help in the leadership of a particular global piece, it is helpful to have them understand the indigenous instruments that go along with that particular selection (i.e., if it's an African song, consider using recorded music of how the authentic instruments might be used). It helps to be equipped with this knowledge instead of assuming particular sounds or instrumentation based on cultural caricatures. Even if we cannot reproduce the sound exactly, as a group and congregation, we can add authenticity.

**3 USE BACKGROUND INFORMATION TO HELP SET UP THE CONTEXT OF THE SONG.** I recommend including a small paragraph in the bulletin or briefly preface the piece for the congregation so that they understand the setting and cultural context of the global song. Understanding where, why, and who the piece comes from helps people stand in solidarity. Remember that singing global music is another way of praying with the global church.



# SEARCHING FOR SONGS OUTSIDE THE MAINSTREAM

DEBBIE WONG

Updated once every six months, the CCLI Top 100 list is a handy resource for telling us what contemporary worship songs churches across North America are singing. However, this should not be mistaken for a list of songs that *should* be sung since it simply reflects popularity and makes no effort to evaluate the theological soundness or musical integrity of the songs. Furthermore, the list masks the influence of other factors that may contribute to a song's apparent popularity.

First, to be featured on the CCLI Top 100 list, a song must be licensed under CCLI. Since CCLI is the largest licensing company for contemporary Christian songs, it is easy to assume that its catalog accurately reflects the breadth and diversity of contemporary worship songs. In reality, however, many songs are not licensed through CCLI. For example, a lot of contemporary gospel music will never be found on the CCLI Top 100 list despite its widespread usage simply because it is not copyrighted through CCLI.

This points to the second factor of demographics.

The songs in the CCLI Top 100 list by and large reflect the preferences of a certain racial and economic demographic, which makes up one part of the global Christian community. The artists on the list are mostly well-known, white, North American males whose already-large industry influence is simply furthered by their appearance on the Top 100 list. Ignoring these hidden factors can cause us to overlook many other Spirit-inspired songs that can edify the local and global church.

Simply put, biggest (or most popular) is not best, and the Christ of the gospels seems to me to be one who actively searches for “the least of these.” What if we were to imitate Christ in this manner in our selection and consumption of contemporary worship songs? At the very least, it will allow us to experience a broader swath of the treasures gifted to the church through our musicians, even if only Jesus knows their names.

Why not begin by challenging your praise team to learn one new song this year from outside your usual context? You might just find a new favorite song.



# INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE VERSUS COPYRIGHT LAW

➤ REV. JACKSON HENRY ◀

**I**nclusive language is important. The fact that we worship a God who transcends our feeble understanding of the divine, yet came to us in human flesh, inspires a broad use and understanding of language and its power in singing, community, and faith formation. Furthermore, using language that stems from a heavily patriarchal society often is used to the exclusion of many within the global community. Gender, race, perspective (and the list goes on and on)—these are all considerations in encouraging inclusive language. God is more than “he.” Humanity is more than “man.” These examples may seem basic, but they are found in the CCLI Top 100 more than you might realize.

In the spirit of encouraging inclusive language in worship, it might be tempting to simply change the words of a song to be more inclusive. However, it must be acknowledged that words of songs are governed by copyright law. Changing a word in print, which also includes projection, is a violation of copyright law unless permission has been granted by the copyright holder. It is the role of the worship leader and all worship planners to consider needs

for inclusive language and understand how to work within the realm of copyright to know how best to proceed. It is our understanding that within a live context, it is possible to keep a text in its original form in print (including projection) and to encourage singing a different word in its place when it appears. Living into this kind of practice can seem daunting and awkward, but it may be because these kinds of approaches are not widely used. Creating a culture for acceptance and inclusion can be difficult and challenging, but that does not mean we should abandon it for sake of ease.

In all cases of copyright, we also strongly advocate that you become familiar with copyright law and its application in worship contexts. The recommendations of this team should not be considered legal advice. To explore more information about copyright, we encourage you to visit <https://copyright.gov> and enter into dialogue with familiar worship licensing agencies such as CCLI and One-License.net. Also, as most congregations include an online presence, [check out this article from Ask the UMC](#) about copyright issues related to streaming.

# CONSIDERATIONS FOR SAYING “NO” TO A POPULAR WORSHIP SONG

➔ REV. DR. NELSON COWAN ◀

While we uphold the principle of supplementation when a particular song is lacking, there are circumstances when a song should be rejected, even if it is widely popular. As a first step, we invite you to familiarize yourself with some of the guidelines our vetting team used in preparing our list of songs. If the song is neither scripturally sound nor complies with our Wesleyan theological categories, this may be a good reason to reject it for your church. Similarly, if the song uses exclusively masculine language in referring to people, this does not align with our United Methodist language guidelines.

Since many of these decisions to reject songs are made on a case-by-case basis, we wanted to offer you a couple of songs that we chose not to recommend as a part of our team’s vetting process.

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## CASE STUDY 1:

Defender (Rita Springer, Bethel Music)

This CCLI Top 100 song is about God being our defender and protector. Theologically, we had no strong consensus on this song satisfying any of our categories. We took issue with the phrase “all I did was praise/worship/bow down,” as if praise and worship is the only response to salvation through Jesus Christ. As Wesleyan Christians, we understand that salvation is a cooperative process, namely the moment of justifying grace leads us to the life-long process of sanctification. Regarding language in this song, we did not have a problem with any divine address or naming, although this too was vague. However, we found the war language—and in particular, the beheading—to be problematic.

We wanted to like this song because of its beautifully emotional arrangement that would work well as a solo piece in a congregational setting. Yet, ultimately, we chose not to include this in our list because of the theology and language problems.

Do you want to sing about God being our defender and protector? There are better ones to sing. We recommend trying out “Another in the Fire” by Hillsong or “Surrounded” by UPPERROOM, both of which are on our recommended list.

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## CASE STUDY 2:

God of the Moon and Stars (Kees Kraayenoord, Paul Field)

This song was put forward by one of the members of the vetting team for inclusion in our recommended song list. “God of the Moon and Stars” articulates a powerful theology that the God we worship is a God for ALL people. The song then provides an abundance of lists of people who belong to God. For example, “God of the meek and the mild... the reckless and the wild,” and “God of the refugee...the prisoner and the free.” However, the song also includes words such as “God of the...whore,” “pedophile,” and “pimp.” While our vetting team affirms that God is indeed the God of all people, some of these examples—“pedophile,” in particular—will be difficult to sing congregationally. In an effort to “do no harm” to those who have been harmed, we do not recommend this song for corporate worship in churches. Instead, listen to the song for your own devotional purposes, as it does speak to God’s inclusive love for all humanity.