

## The Lawndale Choir: Singing Mennonite from the City

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*Abstract:* This article examines the Lawndale Choir in light of U.S.-Mennonite denominational politics surrounding race during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The choir formed around 1970 at Lawndale Mennonite Church, a congregation that began in 1934 as a mission for ethnic Mexicans in Chicago. In the context of heightened denominational tensions surrounding the church's relationship to its minority members, and in contrast to the newly released *Mennonite Hymnal* (1969), the choir's performances made urban, Latina/o Mennonite musical identities audible to the broader church. Yet they also invited their audiences into a unity that transcended traditional boundaries of ethnic, racial, and religious identity. Drawing heavily on the popular music of the day, the choir's performances implicitly critiqued formulations of Mennonite identity that looked for legitimacy in European historical roots and that presupposed a border between Mennonite religious practice and the secular world.

In 1969, at a denomination-wide Mennonite Church conference in Turner, Oregon, Mary Oyer, a well-known Mennonite musician and choir director, led Mennonites on a hymn-sing tour of the newly published *Mennonite Hymnal*. Oyer had been the executive secretary of the Hymnal Committee that produced the songbook, a committee that included representatives from both the General Conference Mennonite Church and (Old) Mennonite Church. For the first time, these two groups had collaborated to create a shared hymnal. Just before the hymnal's completion, a committee member, Ellrose Zook, wrote to Mary Oyer, expressing his conviction that the hymnal was "more Mennonite than any other hymnal so far published." As the representative from the hymnal's publisher, Zook thought the book captured a particularly Mennonite ethos so well that it would not likely find a market beyond Mennonite denominations. "The idea that we are trying to reach some of the markets that [gospel hymn publishers] Hope and Rodeheaver Hall-Mack are reaching with their book does not quite reflect the true intent of the book," he added.<sup>1</sup> One can understand why Zook may have sensed something

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distinctly Mennonite in the hymnal. At a time when perceived Mennonite acculturation into U.S. society was producing anxiety about the nature of Mennonite identity, the joint Hymnal Committee spent years in their efforts to combine the two Mennonite denominations' singing traditions and to highlight their shared musical roots.<sup>2</sup>

Yet at the same moment that white Mennonites were connecting to a sense of heritage through *The Mennonite Hymnal*, elsewhere at the assembly, John Powell, a black Mennonite pastor, demanded that Mennonites respond to a document called the "Black Manifesto." During the 1960s Powell had been involved in the Civil Rights Movement and in labor organizing in Detroit. The "Black Manifesto," drafted earlier that year at the National Black Economic Development Conference in Detroit, demanded \$500 million from white Christian churches and synagogues in reparation for their role in the exploitation of black Americans.<sup>3</sup> Inspired by the document, Powell called on the Mennonite Church to "confess in word and action to the sins committed against black people" and asked for \$500,000 in reparations from white Mennonite churches to support projects led by a Minority Ministries Council of black and Latino Mennonites.<sup>4</sup> Powell accompanied his demands with a critique that Anabaptist-European Mennonite identity had been institutionalized in the form of racialized power structures within the denomination. His intervention in Turner sparked conversation and controversy in the following years.<sup>5</sup>

Historians Tobin Miller Shearer and Felipe Hinojosa have recently shed light on how, in the twentieth century, "the intersections of evangelicalism and race, not peace and nonresistance, have been at the center of evolving

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1. Ellrose Zook to Mary Oyer (Feb. 3, 1967), Box 16, Folder 2. Mennonite Church, Music and Worship Committee Records, 1909-1992. I-3-1. Mennonite Church USA Archives—Elkhart, Ind. [hereafter cited as MCUSA Archives].

2. *The Mennonite Hymnal* committee and ideologies of Mennonite identity are addressed in more depth in "Music and the Mennonite Ethnic Imagination" (PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 2018), 27-73.

3. James Forman, "The Black Manifesto," *The Review of Black Political Economy* 1 (March 1970), 36-44.

4. "Urban Racial Concerns," 1969. Box 1, Folder 1. Mennonite Board of Missions Minority Ministries Council Records, 1969-1997. IV-21.—MCUSA Archives. See the account of Powell's intervention at the 1969 Mennonite General Conference in Tobin Miller Shearer, "A Demanding Conversation," in *Faith and Race in American Political Life*, ed. Robin Dale Jacobson and Nancy D. Wadsworth (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 213-215.

5. On the "Manifesto Movement" in the Mennonite Church, see Tobin Miller Shearer, *Daily Demonstrators: The Civil Rights Movement in Mennonite Homes and Sanctuaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 190-220.

notions of Mennonite theology and identity.”<sup>6</sup> Music also played a significant role in shaping Mennonites’ perceptions of their identity and history, and their place in American social and political life during the twentieth century. As Benjamin Goossen has noted, a discourse describing Mennonites as a distinct ethnic group was emerging among white North American and European Mennonites after World War II.<sup>7</sup> At the same moment, members of the Mennonite Music Committee began to talk about congregational hymn-singing—especially when performed unaccompanied and in four-part harmony—as a cultural expression that connected singers to an “authentically Mennonite” past, an idea they institutionalized in the 1969 *Mennonite Hymnal*.<sup>8</sup>

The Lawndale Choir, a group associated with the former Mennonite Mexican Mission in the Lawndale neighborhood of Chicago, operated at the margins of that musically constructed identity. Beginning in the 1970s, Mennonite institutional conferences featured performing groups like the Lawndale Choir to highlight the growing diversity of the Mennonite Church beyond the white-Germanic mainstream. The music at the Mennonite Board of Missions 1971 conference (“Mission ‘71”), for example, featured the Lawndale Choir alongside Burnside Mennonite Church’s black gospel choir, and a choir from Betania Mennonite School in Puerto Rico.<sup>9</sup> In the contexts of the ongoing fight for black and brown civil rights in the United States and the ethnoracial politics within the Mennonite Church, the music of the Lawndale Choir made urban, Latina/o Mennonite musical identities audible to the broader church. Yet

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6. Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 12. See, e.g., Shearer’s *Daily Demonstrators*.

7. Benjamin W. Goossen, “From Aryanism to Anabaptism: Nazi Race Science in the Language of Mennonite Ethnicity,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 90 (April 2016), 135-163.

8. A sense of shared Mennonite musical heritage was apparent within the hymnal committee in three primary ways: their interest in the hymns of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist hymnal known as the *Ausbund*; a desire for “reconnecting” Mennonites to a Germanic chorale-singing tradition; and interest in highlighting the nineteenth-century shape-note singing-school tradition represented by Mennonite songbook publisher Joseph Funk. Mary Oyer emphasized these connections in her introduction to *The Mennonite Hymnal* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1969) (unpaginated),

[This hymnal] draws on various cultural backgrounds of Mennonites. Their most distinctive book, the *Ausbund* of 1564, which is still in use, is represented by brief portions of three texts joined with tunes that the sixteenth-century Anabaptists might have known. Mennonites who have remained close to their German background still sing Lutheran chorales; chorale texts and tunes are well represented. Those who spoke English in the early nineteenth century absorbed the American tradition of Watts’ texts—along with authors such as Wesley and Newton—and replaced their German past with American tunes and folk hymns from the singing school tradition. These strands—German and American—join in this book to enrich the resources of each.

See also, McCabe Juhnke, “Music and the Mennonite Ethnic Imagination,” 27-73.

9. “Mission 71: God’s Now Community,” *Gospel Herald*, Aug. 24, 1971.

choir members also invited their audiences into a unity that transcended traditional boundaries of ethnic, racial, and religious identity. Drawing heavily on the popular music of the 1960s and early 1970s, the Lawndale Choir's music implicitly critiqued formulations of Mennonite identity that looked for legitimacy in European historical roots and that presupposed a border between Mennonite religious practice and the secular world.

### CITY MISSIONS AND THE WHITE MENNONITE ETHNORACIAL IMAGINATION

Mennonites in North America trace their historical origins to a movement of Anabaptist radicals in sixteenth-century European cities who were viewed as heretics by Catholics and Protestants alike. Most Anabaptists were quickly driven out of urban centers, finding refuge in rural enclaves in Europe. When Mennonites began to settle in North America beginning in the seventeenth century, they used their freedom and access to "empty" American space to reestablish the kinds of rural sectarian communities they had maintained in Europe.<sup>10</sup> Within these communities, Mennonites generally preferred to maintain a religious nonconformity to the ways of the world. Still, although Mennonites resisted the dominant patterns of life in the United States, they did not all systematically reject modern U.S. cultural and religious perspectives. By the end of the nineteenth century, Mennonites had warmed to the missionary movement in the United States and established missions not only in foreign countries but also in urban centers and Native American reservations in the United States.<sup>11</sup>

The first Mennonite city mission was the Mennonite Home Mission, established in 1893 in Chicago. But life in this modern urban metropolis often seemed at odds with traditional conceptions of Mennonite life.<sup>12</sup> Mennonites tended to view the separation of rural life as going hand-in-hand with Mennonite nonconformity, imagining their rural communities as morally insulated spaces outside of the U.S. social order. They viewed

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10. Of course this "empty" space was actually space forcibly "emptied" of Native Americans. On Mennonites and historical erasure of Native American people, see John Sharp, "Mennonites and Native Americans: A Reconciliation?," *Mennonite Life* 61, no. 2 (2006), <https://ml.bethelks.edu/issue/vol-61-no-2/article/mennonites-and-native-americans-a-reconciliation/>.

11. See Theron F. Schlabach, *Gospel versus Gospel: Mission and the Mennonite Church, 1863-1944* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1980) 26-42.

12. On the history of the Home Mission, see Philipp Gollner, "Good White Christians: How Religion Created Race and Ethnic Privilege for Immigrants in America" (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2016), 177-232. See also his article, "How Mennonites Became White: Religious Activism, Cultural Power, and the City," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 90 (April 2016), 165-193.

U.S. cities—and the secular values that seemed to emanate from them—with skepticism.<sup>13</sup>

These perspectives not only resonated with Mennonites' value of religious nonconformity; they also aligned with dominant ideas about urbanization in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. Within the influential Chicago School of Sociology during the 1930s, for example, rural contexts were thought to preserve the personal, face-to-face aspects of community that would dissolve in inherently fragmented urban contexts.<sup>14</sup> Influenced by this thinking, Mennonite leaders like Guy F. Hershberger and J. Winfield Fretz worried that urbanization was threatening essential aspects of Mennonite community, and they began to warn against Mennonite urbanization during the late 1930s and early 1940s.<sup>15</sup> Fretz was particularly concerned about Mennonites in Chicago. He had studied for his Ph.D. in sociology at the University of Chicago. Influenced by the Chicago School, Fretz was skeptical that Mennonites' distinctive nonconformist and separatist religious values could be maintained in the city. In his thesis on Chicago's Mennonite missions he commented in 1940 that there was "so little that is characteristically Mennonite about them."<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere that same year he concluded that "[t]he urban soil is not the kind of soil in which the Mennonite Church can grow. It is literally true that the city soil is too hard, stony and shallow for Mennonite ideals to take root. The corrupting influences of the city have choked out much of the seed there sown."<sup>17</sup>

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13. In 1940, for example, Guy F. Hershberger asserted that "the rural environment, it seems, is much better fitted for the preservation of the Mennonite way of life than is the city environment," in "Maintaining the Mennonite Rural Community," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 14 (Oct. 1940), 195-213. This sentiment was also not new among Mennonites. In their 1905 *Mennonite Church History*, Jonas Hartzler and Daniel Kauffman noted that some Mennonites opposed the Chicago Home Mission because "they did not believe the simplicity of the gospel could be maintained in the city." — *Mennonite Church History* (Scottsdale, Pa: Mennonite Book and Tract Society, 1905), 348.

14. On the Chicago School of sociology, see Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London: Routledge, 1985), 22-38.

15. See, e.g., Hershberger's 1940 article, "Maintaining the Mennonite Rural Community," and J. Winfield Fretz, "Mennonites and Their Economic Problems," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 14 (Oct. 1940), 201. For a summary of the Mennonite community movement, see Perry Bush, *Two Kingdoms, Two Loyalties: Mennonite Pacifism in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 130-136.

16. Fretz as quoted in Paul Toews, "J. Winfield Fretz and the Early History of Mennonite Sociology," *Mennonite Life* 54, no. 2 (1999), 19.

17. J. Winfield Fretz, "Mennonites and Their Economic Problems," 201. Fretz was not alone in his thinking. In an introductory article to a 1953 issue of *Mennonite Life* devoted to Chicago's missions, Andrew Shelly described Chicago as a "city of contrasts": It had the "greatest rail center in the world" and was a "Mecca for most religious beliefs," yet the city had also bred "intemperate drinking and crime," and its hurried residents often found themselves "in a vicious circle of thrills." — Shelly, "This Is Chicago," *Mennonite Life* 8, no. 2 (1953), 52-54.

Fretz helped convene a “Conference on Mennonite Cultural Problems” that met irregularly between 1942 and 1967, part of a larger Mennonite community movement that aimed to address concerns about Mennonite secularization and urbanization during the middle of the century.<sup>18</sup>

Where Fretz’s sociological perspectives on the city were indebted to the Chicago School, his moral orientation to urban space aligned with longstanding popular perspectives in the United States. Since the nineteenth century, according to Robert Orsi, a historian of religion, “the city was cast as the necessary mirror of American civilization, and fundamental categories of American reality—whiteness, heterosexuality, domestic virtue, feminine purity, middle-class respectability—were constituted in opposition to what was said to exist in cities.”<sup>19</sup> The city was thus “rendered as the site of moral depravity, lascivious allure, and the terrain of necessary Christian intervention.”<sup>20</sup> Seeing it as their responsibility to rescue the city from its moral failings, progressive-era Christians—including some Mennonites—began to organize urban mission projects like Chicago’s Mennonite Home Mission. By 1953, Chicago was home to over a dozen Mennonite missions and churches, and, as Philipp Gollner has argued, it was through this urban religious activism that Mennonites began to see themselves as white Protestants within the U.S. ethnoracial hierarchy.<sup>21</sup>

Mennonite missionaries were not the only newcomers to Chicago during the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, Chicago’s ethnic landscape shifted dramatically in this period. During World War I, labor shortages spurred the Great Migration of African-Americans who left the South to find new opportunities in Northern cities. At the same time, a significant number of Mexican migrants also moved to Chicago to find work. Many of these new Mexican residents settled in the neighborhood near the Home Mission.<sup>22</sup> It was not until the Great Depression, however, that Mennonite Home Mission workers met many of their Spanish-speaking neighbors while distributing food and clothing in their

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18. See Bush, *Two Kingdoms*, 133-136.

19. Robert A. Orsi, “Introduction: Crossing the City Line,” in *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 5.

20. *Ibid.*, 6.

21. Philipp Gollner, “How Mennonites Became White,” 174-177. On Mennonite missions in Chicago in 1953, see Shelly, “This Is Chicago.”

22. Erik Gellman, “Pilsen,” in *The Electronic Encyclopedia of Chicago*, 2005, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/2477.html>. See also Gabriela F. Arredondo, *Mexican Chicago: Race, Identity, and Nation, 1916-39* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 39-58.

neighborhood.<sup>23</sup> As Mexican residents in Chicago began attending the Mission, racist reactions from white Mennonites and other newly evangelized whites at the Mission led church workers to establish a separate “Mexican Mission” in 1934.<sup>24</sup>

“White” and “Mexican” were not the only perceived ethnoracial categories at the Home Mission, however. One missionary wrote in the *Gospel Herald* in 1935:

It might be of some interest to the friends of the Mission for me to name the various nationalities in the membership here: Bohemian, German, Scotch-Irish, Mexican, Scotch-English, Slavish, Norwegian, Bohemian-Jewish, Scotch, Swedish, Bohemian-Indian, French-German, German-Irish, Bohemian-Irish, Spanish, and I must not forget that quite a number of us are just plain Pennsylvania Dutch.<sup>25</sup>

Though it comes as an off-hand comment, the idea that there were some at the Mission—evidently the missionaries themselves—who were “just plain Pennsylvania Dutch” reveals an important ethnoracial distinction in the minds of Mennonite missionaries at the Home Mission. Being Pennsylvania Dutch in this context was an unmarked category—one was “just” Pennsylvania Dutch. The other categories of identity at the mission, then, were categories of difference. Still, it is notable that only the Mexican Mission was conceived of as a project distinct from the rest of the work of the Home Mission. Indeed, it is evident that “Mexican” is not simply a distinction of language, as “Spanish” Europeans represented yet another ethnic category in the mission worker’s description. At the Home Mission, European ethnic groups seemed to belong together in a way that did not extend to “Mexicans.”

Establishing a separate “Mexican Mission” paralleled the ongoing negotiation of racial categories in the United States at the time. In these negotiations, it was not always clear that Mexican migrants would not be subsumed under the category of whiteness. As Matthew Frye Jacobson

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23. Church history in Box 1, Folder 8, Lawndale Mennonite Church (Chicago, Ill.) Records, 1945-1983, III-13-001, MCUSA Archives.

24. As Felipe Hinojosa notes, white congregants began a petition to stop the Home Mission from working with Mexicans. The workers agreed that the Home Mission should seek separate accommodations for the Mexican members, and the Illinois Mennonite Conference leader F. D. King opined that he was “never was strong for mixing Mexicans into our church building with our whites.”—Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites*, 20.

25. “From Our Mission Stations,” *Gospel Herald*, May 2, 1935. According to C. Henry Smith, Pennsylvania Dutch Mennonites migrated from Pennsylvania to Midwestern states like Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa. It is possible that “Pennsylvania Dutch” in the mission report refers specifically to this large sub-group of Mennonites. Nevertheless it also functions as an index of white-Germanic Mennonite normativity. On Pennsylvania Mennonites, see C. Henry Smith, “Pennsylvania (USA).”—[http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Pennsylvania\\_\(USA\)&oldid=143693](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Pennsylvania_(USA)&oldid=143693).

has highlighted, whiteness was an evolving category during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He argues that beginning in the 1920s, there was a consolidation of many European “races” into one white “Caucasian” racial category.<sup>26</sup> As Gabriella Arredondo argues, “becoming white” still seemed like a distinct possibility for Mexican migrants in early-twentieth-century Chicago. With growing migration from Mexico after World War I, however, “Mexican” became a salient category of identity in Chicago that had taken on pejorative associations.<sup>27</sup> In the context of xenophobic backlash against Mexican immigration during the first decades of the twentieth century, Clare Sheridan observed that Mexicans’ “ethnic characteristics became reified and naturalized as immutable racial ones,” foreclosing the possibility that Mexicans would “become white.”<sup>28</sup>

In the context of the city, the Mennonite mission workers viewed the ethnoracial landscape of Chicago through the lens of whiteness. Though the urban “Bohemians” or “Slavs” perhaps did not ethnically belong in the Mennonite Church, Mennonites began to understand them as part of an American white pan-ethnicity.<sup>29</sup> Thus the myriad European ethnicities represented at the Home Mission seemed to belong in Chicago, perhaps even in a way that “ethnic Mennonites” did not. Mexicans, by contrast, were increasingly racialized, barred from American belonging.

Mennonite missionaries working among Mexicans also participated in this conceptual othering, often describing Mexicans as “foreigners within our borders,” “strangers within our gates,” or “Samaritans in Judea.”<sup>30</sup> Though many Mexicans found a religious home at the Mission, a sense of being “other” was a salient part of their experience. Historian Felipe Hinojosa has described how, when Mexicans began attending services at the Home Mission, some white attendees refused to worship alongside them, and white Mennonite leaders at the mission discouraged “mixed” marriages between white Mennonites and Mexicans.<sup>31</sup> For her part, Esther

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26. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 9.

27. Gabriela F. Arredondo, *Mexican Chicago: Race, Identity, and Nation, 1916-39* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 79.

28. Clare Sheridan, “‘Another White Race’: Mexican Americans and the Paradox of Whiteness in Jury Selection,” *Law and History Review* 21, no. 1 (2003), 124-125. See also, Mark Overmyer-Velázquez, “Good Neighbors and White Mexicans: Constructing Race and Nation on the Mexico-U.S. Border,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 33, no. 1 (2013), 14-15.

29. See Gollner, who notes, for example, that after 1924, the Home Mission’s “Fresh Air” program would allow rural Mennonite families the opportunity to select either a “white” or “Mexican” child to host.—Gollner, “Good White Christians,” 219. See also Gollner, “How Mennonites Became White,” 183-185.

30. See also Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites*, 19.

31. *Ibid.*, 18-24.



Ventura, an early member of the Mexican Mission, remembered, “I had always felt that I was a Mennonite in culture and religion, and at the same time I knew I was different by the way I looked.”<sup>32</sup> At the Mexican Mission, congregants were encouraged to conform to the conservative ways of Mennonite dress, but even in a bonnet and dress, perceptions of racial difference remained.<sup>33</sup>

### FEELING MENNONITE, LOOKING MEXICAN

In the following decades, the Mexican Mission grew into a stable and more autonomous congregation called Lawndale Mennonite Church. By the 1970s, Lawndale offered services in both Spanish and English, and many of the families at Lawndale included “second generation” Mennonites—people for whom the Mennonite congregation at Lawndale was the only church home they had ever known. One such congregant was Dan Ventura. Ventura’s parents were Catholics, but “converted” to the Mennonites in the 1930s, as one of the first Mexican families to join the Mission. By the time Ventura was born in 1946, his family was, in his words, “totally entrenched in the Mennonite church.”<sup>34</sup>

As Ventura describes it, he was “born Mennonite.” Indeed, Ventura explains his formative years by including much of what would have been considered “traditionally Mennonite”: he was born into the Mennonite Church; he went to a Mennonite high school; he sang from a Mennonite hymnal; and, despite living in Chicago, Ventura says he grew up “on the farm.” “There was a program through several churches in Chicago and churches in central Illinois, the Goshen, Indiana area, and Iowa—Kalona, Iowa. Mennonite strongholds. And it was called ‘Fresh Air.’ For us kids, we called it ‘going to the farm.’”<sup>35</sup> Fresh Air programs were common across the United States at the time. As Miller Shearer notes, these programs were based on the idea that the city was a harmful place for children: “[Fresh Air b]oosters repeatedly contrasted urban and rural environs to demonstrate the superiority of the country and its ability to restore children to a state of wholeness, health, and purity.”<sup>36</sup> In the context of the Great Migration and subsequent white flight, these ideas increasingly mapped onto racialized conceptions of urban space after World War II. As Shearer explains, supporters of Fresh Air programs

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32. Quoted in *ibid.*, 21.

33. On the maintenance of “Mennonite” worship styles at the Mexican Mission, see *ibid.*, 18-22.

34. Ventura in conversation with the author, Oct. 19, 2016.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Tobin Miller Shearer, *Two Weeks Every Summer* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2017), 25. See also Gollner, “Good White Christians,” 217-221.

“focused on crafting a narrative about black and brown children restored to full health and well-being through short stays in the country.”<sup>37</sup> While many hosts intended well, Fresh Air programs were also ripe for abuse of racial and gendered power dynamics. The experience of one Mennonite Fresh Air child, Janice Batts, for example, presented a horrifying narrative of sexual abuse during visits to some of the same Midwest Mennonite communities where Ventura spent time.<sup>38</sup>

Ventura, however, speaks in generally positive terms about his experience in the Mennonite Fresh Air program. For Ventura, these experiences validated his Mennonite identity:

[I asked my mother,] “How old was I when I first went to the farm?” And she said, well, you were in the womb. So that’s why I say I was born and raised Mennonite, gone to Mennonite farms in Indiana, Central Illinois, and Iowa. And so when I was out there I was in a Mennonite church on Sundays, Wednesday nights for prayer meeting and singing. And Sunday night sometimes was hymn sing.<sup>39</sup>

After his childhood years spending time in rural “Mennonite strongholds,” Ventura continued along an outwardly traditional Mennonite trajectory when he enrolled at Bethany (Mennonite) High School in Goshen, Indiana. He even worked on a nearby Mennonite farm to earn his keep. Ventura remembers his classmates being surprised that a Mexican from Chicago operated with such comfort in this rural, white Mennonite community. Ventura explains, however, that he had perhaps a more authentically “Mennonite” experience “on the farm” than did some of the children of the white-collar Mennonite professors at Goshen College who also attended his high school.<sup>40</sup>

Ventura’s formative years shaped his ability to act as a Mennonite insider. Still, if there was a strong sense of feeling at home in rural Mennonite spaces, there were also experiences in which racial differences kept him from fully belonging:

On the farm, for example in Kalona, Iowa, I can remember walking into the church. Of course they were Conservative Mennonite, and the men sat on one side of the aisle, and the women sat on the other side. And they were very plain buildings, churches. And everybody was blond. And I would walk in, and everybody would look at me,

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37. *Ibid.*, 7.

38. See Batts’s interview in “The Kindness of Strangers: A Fresh Air child hosted by Mennonites breaks her silence,” published on the *Our Stories Untold* blog, <http://www.ourstoriesuntold.com/kindness-strangers-fresh-air-child-hosted-mennonites-breaks-silence/>.

39. Ventura, in conversation with the author, Oct. 19, 2016.

40. *Ibid.*

because by that time, by Sunday, I had a pretty good tan going, and black hair.<sup>41</sup>

Despite living out the criteria of an authentic, if constructed, Mennonite identity—born into the church, living “on the farm,” singing “Mennonite” songs—Ventura’s brown skin and dark hair rendered him out of place in the context of the Kalona Mennonites’ white, blond-haired congregants. Certainly white Mennonites in Chicago may have experienced alienation from the multi-ethnic urban context, but phenotypic whiteness meant they could align with and benefit from membership in the dominant category of American belonging in the city, namely white Protestantism. Ventura’s body did not afford him the same flexibility; he was readily perceived as an outsider, neither fully “American” in Chicago, nor fully “Mennonite” in Kalona.

### THE LAWNSDALE CHOIR: SINGING BEYOND MENNONITE TRADITION

Ventura’s experience at Lawndale, “on the farm,” and at Bethany High School instilled in him a sense of Mennonite tradition that manifested in part as an affinity for singing. For white Mennonites, unaccompanied congregational hymn singing in four-part harmony had become a means of experiencing a shared European-Anabaptist heritage. Still, valuing congregational hymn singing as a “traditionally Mennonite” practice did not fall along strict ethnoracial lines. A letter from Ishmael Campos printed in Lawndale’s newsletter in 1970 indicates that, at least for some Latina/o church members, “traditional” Mennonite music making was an important part of life at Lawndale.

Some of our hymns have been called too difficult for the congregation to sing, and perhaps this is so. And yet, when a trained group sings these hymns they can be so beautiful and uplifting, as we all realize, I’m sure. Certainly, one of our proudest and worthwhile Mennonite “traditions” has been the excellence of our music and our singing groups. And to the outsider, perhaps the most impressive.<sup>42</sup>

It would not be difficult to imagine that longtime members of the Lawndale congregation, such as Dan Ventura and his family, viewed congregational hymn singing as part of their own sense of religious tradition. As Campos’s letter suggests, singing offered a way of

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41. *Ibid.*

42. “The Vineyard,” March 1970, Lawndale Mennonite Church (Chicago, Ill.) Records, 1945-1983, MCUSA Archives.

differentiating between Mennonite insiders and outsiders for those at Lawndale, even if they did not fit the normative ethnoracial mold.

Though Campos valued “traditional” Mennonite hymn singing, this was far from the only musical style that appealed to members of the congregation. When Dan Ventura returned to Chicago after graduating from Bethany High School, his growing interest in choral singing spurred the formation of a new choir at Lawndale. Known simply as the Lawndale Choir, the group developed an engaged, urban performance aesthetic that relied as much on contemporary popular songs as traditional Mennonite hymns.

The idea for the choir began when Ventura enrolled in classes at City College in Chicago. As Ventura recalls, “There was a semester that I took off from ‘reading, writing, and arithmetic,’ and the way to stay connected to school was to take some music course[s], one of which was singing and voice lessons.” This turn to music while at City College revealed a surprising talent for choral singing that grew out of Ventura’s Mennonite church experiences.

Because I had been singing all my life—and I really couldn’t read music! And I sight read, because that’s how we sang out of the book. You know, out of the hymnal. I attended Bethany High School and we had chapel every day, so we sang songs. . . . And I would be singing Wednesday nights again, and singing with the MYF [Mennonite Youth Fellowship]. Singing on Sundays. So I was used to that.<sup>43</sup>

After a positive experience singing at City College, Ventura invited some of the Mennonites from his church to join the college choir, including Arlen Hershberger.<sup>44</sup> Hershberger, a white Mennonite who grew up in Kalona, Iowa, had recently completed his undergraduate degree in music from the University of Iowa and relocated to Chicago. There he lived in an attic apartment owned by one of Ventura’s older brothers. When the group of Mennonites that Ventura attracted to the choir at City College organized their own choir at the Lawndale church, Hershberger, with his music degree, was well positioned to lead the group.

The success of their first concert inspired the group to consider further performances. As Hershberger recalls: “[At first] we sang some songs at Christmas time, and I remember that being pretty special. They had this idea that they were going to raise some money because they needed a new furnace in their church.” Eventually they came up with the idea to go perform for the “rich Mennonites” in the farming communities downstate.

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43. Ventura in conversation with the author, Oct. 19, 2016.

44. *Ibid.*

“So the idea of singing some songs was initially just ‘well, let’s just go raise some money,’” remembers Hershberger. “So we went downstate and sang, and we were better than we thought we were! . . . We went out and sang, and people *loved* it! And everybody came home, and everybody was all excited.”<sup>45</sup>

When the Lawndale Choir went out to perform in rural Mennonite congregations, raising money for their broken furnace, the music had to appeal both to largely young urban members of the choir but also to rural Mennonite congregants. According to Hershberger:

The popular music of the day was all about “‘c’mon everybody, smile on your brother; love one another,” and since we were the poor folks from the city going downstate to all those rich churches, . . . we sort of made the most of that. And so it really became very much about what you get between sort of mainstream Mennonites and the Spanish Mennonites.<sup>46</sup>

Singing contemporary popular songs with positive messages worked on several practical levels. First, the well-known melodies were much more accessible to choir members who had less formal musical training. Second, the young members of the Lawndale Choir embraced the music with excitement. As choir member Gracie Torres remembers,

It was the music of the times. Of the ‘70s. Songs like “One Tin Soldier” has a message, a Gospel message. . . . There was a message there. I was always gung-ho on Christian music, but when I heard [Hershberger’s] choices, they were so good; they could be so applied.<sup>47</sup>

As Torres emphasizes, the music resonated with her not because it demonstrated a Christian separation from the world. Instead, she was drawn to the message against war and violence in songs like “One Tin Soldier” because it seemed to engage the contemporary world in a meaningful way.

In one way, the choir’s embrace of popular musical styles paralleled a broader opening of Christian church music. Since the Second Vatican Council between 1962 and 1965, the Catholic liturgy had become open to vernacular linguistic and musical expressions. During the 1960s, various congregational songs and settings of the Mass appeared that embraced musical styles from rock to polka with ripple effects across many Christian

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45. Arlen Hershberger in conversation with the author, Dec. 14, 2015.

46. Choir Performance program [1971], in Box 4, Folder 9, Mary Oyer Papers, 1950-2004, IV-04-18-22, MCUSA Archives.

47. Gracie Torres in conversation with the author, May 26, 2017.

denominations.<sup>48</sup> But in their secular contexts, the contemporary popular songs also connected the Lawndale Choir to countercultural sentiments of youth in the United States more broadly. Though earlier in the 1960s the songs of solidarity during the Civil Rights Movement relied heavily on congregational singing styles (e.g., “We Shall Overcome”), the anti-Vietnam War and Black Power movements of the later 1960s and early 1970s increasingly turned to popular musical styles as forms of resistance and protest.<sup>49</sup> Whether in the form of soul-infused ethnoracial solidarity, or what Jerome Rodnitzky characterizes as the “general discontent” and “vague, anti-establishment mood” of folk-rock, popular music became a means of political identification and expression in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>50</sup>

In general, the Lawndale Choir steered clear of identity politics in their early performances, and their songs were at most politically ambiguous in lyrical content. Moreover, though much of the choir’s repertoire consisted of secular songs, members were strategic about the selection and performance of their repertoire to encourage religious readings. For example, in their rendition of Burt Bacharach and Hal David’s “What the World Needs Now is Love,” made famous by Jackie DeShannon in 1965, the Lawndale Choir recast the song for a sacred setting.<sup>51</sup> The song begins with the refrain, sung in DeShannon’s version as a solo over Bacharach’s signature muted brass and strings orchestration: “What the world needs now is love, sweet love. . .” The sacred rereading offered by the Lawndale Choir is apparent in the verse that follows the opening refrain:

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48. Robert Walser, “The Polka Mass: Music of Postmodern Ethnicity,” *American Music* 10, no. 2 (1992), 185. See also Milburn Price, “The Impact of Popular Culture on Congregational Song,” *The Hymn: A Journal of Congregational Song* 44, no. 1 (1993), 15-19.

49. See Barry Shank, *The Political Force of Musical Beauty: Refiguring American Music* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014), 52-71. See also, Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Let the Church Sing ‘Freedom,’” *Black Music Research Journal* 7 (1987), 105-118. Manuel Peña argues that the music of the Chicano movement in the later 1960s and early ’70s often venerated Anglo-Hispanic biculturalism (such as Spanglish). Musically, biculturalism took the form of a hybridization of Mexican *ranchero* and American *jaitón* styles.—Manuel H. Peña, *Música Tejana: The Cultural Economy of Artistic Transformation* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 1999), 62-63. Earlier in the 1960s popular recording artists had been largely unable or unwilling to express their personal politics in their music. Moreover, to do so was considered a liability by the record labels. Increasingly after 1965, however, the politics of Black Pride and Black Power were viewed as market opportunities, and at the same time, activists in the Civil Rights Movement recruited black performers to the cause. See Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations* (London: UCL Press, 1998), 388-416.

50. Jerome L. Rodnitzky, “The Sixties between the Microgrooves: Using Folk and Protest Music to Understand American History, 1963-1973,” *Popular Music and Society* 23, no. 4 (1999), 109.

51. The Lawndale Choir recorded this song on their album *Everything Is Beautiful*, Mission MR LMCC 274, [1972], 33⅓ rpm.

Lord, we don't need another mountain,  
There are mountains and hillsides enough to climb,  
There are oceans and rivers enough to cross,  
Enough to last till the end of time.

The verse opens with the word “Lord.” As DeShannon sings it, however, it remains ambiguous as to whether listeners are to understand the word “Lord” as prayer-like or profane. The Lawndale Choir performed the verse to emphasize a prayer-like reading. As the Lawndale singers transitioned to the verse, their choral singing became a musical background. In the foreground, a voice entered *speaking* the text of the verse, rather than singing. Set as spoken text, the choir’s audience could have heard the verse as equally appropriate for the pulpit as for the radio.

Still, the music of the choir remained edgy in the rural Mennonite congregations that hosted their performances. For one, their use of contemporary popular music ran counter to dominant Mennonite preferences in which even the more popular styles of Christian gospel music were suspect.<sup>52</sup> In addition, the Lawndale Choir used a wide range of instrumental accompaniment at a time when instruments were often considered too worldly for use in Mennonite churches. As Dan Ventura recalls, “Back when we introduced instruments to some churches, it just didn’t go over very well. We even had drums. Brass!”<sup>53</sup> This meant that in some instances the choir’s performance was relocated from the church building to a different venue.

Though popular songs made up a large portion of the program, their overall performance was remarkably heterogeneous. A printed program indicates that the choir organized their performances as a religious service, including prayers and meditations (see Table 1). The program began with vocal works by Schubert and Bruckner followed by an introduction and prayer. After the prayer, the choir sang several gospel songs ranging from traditional (“Amazing Grace”) to more recent (“Oh

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52. Chester K. Lehman, then a former dean of Eastern Mennonite College and a future member of the *Mennonite Hymnal* Committee, articulated an example of this aesthetic perspective at a conference on music and worship in 1959. His presentation was entitled “Congregational Singing - Our losses and gains.” In it, he opined that the 1927 *Church Hymnal* had not been “readily accepted by the church” because of “the church’s retrogression in her taste. . . to the popular emotional gospel songs.” These popular gospel songs, according to Lehman, did not meet “the standards of good poetry and good music.” Instead they “in general are very inferior. They wear out.”—Box 6, Folder 2, Music Committee, Walter E. Yoder, I-3-1, MCUSA Archives.

53. Ventura in conversation with the author, Oct. 19, 2016.

Happy Day”). Following the meditation, however, the program featured several secular popular songs.<sup>54</sup>

<b>Table 1, Lawndale Choir Program, ca. 1971</b>	
Box 4, Folder 9, Mary Oyer Papers, 1950-2004, IV-04-18-22, Mennonite Church USA Archives.	
Sanctus	Schubert
Locus Iste	Bruckner
<b>Introduction, Prayer</b>	
O Happy Day	Hawkins
Amazing Grace	Newton
Swing Down Chariot	Traditional, Arr. A[r]len H[ershberger]
Hymn Medley	Arr. A[r]len H[ershberger]
<b>Meditation</b> (spoken)	
Get Together	Powers, Arr. A[r]len H[ershberger]
Everything Is Beautiful	Stevens, Arr. A[r]len H[ershberger]
Put Your Hand in the Hand	MacLellan
Bring Peace O Lord	A[r]len H[ershberger]
<b>Thoughts on Peace</b> (spoken)	
When Peace Like a River	Crosby
What the World Needs Now	Bacharach
In the Ghetto	Davis
Listen Christian	Anonymous
Who Will Answer	Ames

While songs like “What the World Needs Now” and “Get Together” (written by Chet Powers and popularized by The Youngbloods in 1969) kept a positive outlook, the program ended with a 1968 song by Ed Ames titled “Who Will Answer,” leaving the choir’s audience with a poetic litany of concerns from the modern urban world. This was the only song whose lyrics appeared—in full—in the program. Additionally, a brief note above the printed lyrics encouraged the audience to hear the song’s question as directed to them: “This song was written by Shiela Davis, a housewife frustrated by the pressures and questions of contemporary life. Where is our hope? Who will answer? The conclusion is yours.

54. Choir Performance program [1971], in Box 4, Folder 9, Mary Oyer Papers, 1950-2004, IV-04-18-22, MCUSA Archives.



Hallelujah.”<sup>55</sup> With this note, the audience was asked to receive the song as a personal question.

Their performance began with a pointed question, sung in chorus—“Who will answer?”—before the choral texture abruptly changed to quiet sustained *oohs* accompanied by a single electric organ note, creating a kind of gospel chapel texture.<sup>56</sup> A solo voice entered, confidently but subdued, delivering his message on a single pitch with speech-like declamation. Before the third verse, the organ and *ahhs* led a transition to a new key. The third verse proceeded through a gradual crescendo as the tone of the soloist became more urgent and emotional:

On a strange and distant hill  
A young man’s lying very still  
His arms will never hold his child  
Because a bullet running wild  
Has struck him down, and when we cry,  
“Dear God, oh why, oh why?”

Who will answer?

In sum, the song’s verses made oblique references to issues of loveless marriages, drug use, suicide, and war, and the question of the refrain repeatedly called its audience to acknowledge and respond to these challenges: “Who will answer?”

In one way, the performance of this song was an indictment of white Mennonites’ desire for “separation” and the concomitant unwillingness to engage the pressing problems of the time: will Mennonites answer? On another level, the song’s critique of violence resonated positively with Mennonite “peace church” concerns during a period when the United States was engaged in an unpopular war in Vietnam. In any case, the use of secular popular music portrayed an urban ethic of engagement in a hurting world. Moreover, it rejected a clear demarcation between the sacred and the secular, an idea that undergirded Mennonites’ desires to remain separate from society and shaped the ways white Mennonites conceived of their group’s history and traditions.<sup>57</sup> Maintaining a sense of faithful religious separation may have been plausible in rural insular

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55. *Ibid.*

56. The Lawndale Choir recorded this song on their album *Everything is Beautiful*.

57. Tobin Miller Shearer notes a similar dynamic in the life of Vincent Harding, an African-American Civil Rights activist and Mennonite. According to Shearer, Harding resonated with “traditional” Mennonite values, but “called on his cobelievers to transform the principles of nonconformity and nonresistance into active service to the world” during the 1960s. Shearer, “Moving beyond Charisma in Civil Rights Scholarship: Vincent Harding’s Sojourn with the Mennonites, 1958-1966,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 82 (April 2008), 247.

Mennonites communities, but from the perspective of Chicago, that sense of separation was untenable.



Figure 1, Front of Choir Performance program [1971], in Box 4, Folder 9, Mary Oyer Papers, 1950-2004, IV-04-18-22, Mennonite Church USA Archives

For the Lawndale Choir, community did not exist in a contained Mennonite bubble. An introductory note in the choir's printed program proclaimed to their white Mennonite audiences:

We, the members of the Lawndale choir, are the urban community. We are only a small part of the vast conglomeration of races, nationalities, religions, the rich and the poor who make up the city.

Day and night we see around us the evidence of people in need, evidence of fear, hate, and despair.<sup>58</sup>

In Chicago, the members of the Lawndale Choir encountered “the world” not as abstract secular space, but in the form of diverse individuals in need.

For the choir members, Mennonite life was not easily separated from life in the urban community. Still, the choir did not position themselves in direct opposition to a rural, “ethnically Mennonite” perspective. Instead they described their performance as presenting a universal Christian perspective emerging from their heterogeneous urban context. As the program notes expressed it:

We feel that we have a message which cuts across the barriers of color and creed, the old and the young, conservative and liberal, the urban and the rural in response to people whoever they are, wherever they are. Our music, with its various idioms and its variety of expressions, reflects the diversity of the city. . . . We wish to reaffirm with you the great christian [sic] themes of love and brotherhood and their universal relevance.<sup>59</sup>

From the choir’s perspective, urban space was not considered a worldly threat to Christian life as it was for many white Mennonites.<sup>60</sup> Instead the diversity of the city offered the opportunity for a deep Christian unity that transcended worldly social categories in a way that was not possible in homogeneous rural Mennonite communities. The diversity of musical styles reimaged an identity not defined by a shared history and tradition, but one in which ethnic and social differences were secondary to the unity made possible through Christ.

### MISSION ’71, THE LAWDALE CHOIR, AND MENNONITE RACIAL POLITICS

Through their touring performances in rural Mennonite congregations, the Lawndale Choir quickly gained broad recognition within the church, and in 1971 the choir attracted interest from Mennonite conference planners seeking new ways to represent minority members. In performing for official Mennonite conferences, the choir was cast into the ongoing,

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58. Choir Performance program [1971], in Box 4, Folder 9, Mary Oyer Papers, 1950-2004, IV-04-18-22, MCUSA Archives.

59. Ibid. Final ellipsis is in original.

60. See, e.g., Andrew R. Shelly, “This Is Chicago,” *Mennonite Life* 8, no. 2 (1953), 52-54; and the views of J. Winfield Fretz, treated in Paul Toews, “J. Winfield Fretz and the Early History of Mennonite Sociology,” *Mennonite Life* 54, no. 2 (1999), 17-24.

and often heated, institutional conversation surrounding racial justice that had been sparked by John Powell's "Black Manifesto" intervention at the 1969 assembly in Turner, Oregon.

In Turner, despite instances of racist backlash from some white Mennonites, the Mennonite Church had responded by passing a resolution asking members to give an additional six dollars per member per year to support what came to be known as the "Compassion Fund."<sup>61</sup> A newly-formed Minority Ministries Council led by black and Latino Mennonites controlled the fund and used it for projects they felt would benefit their ethnic constituencies.

Nevertheless, in 1970 ongoing concerns about the church's relationship and responsibilities to minorities spilled over into a conference held by the Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities in Lansdale, Pennsylvania, called "Mission '70."<sup>62</sup> The *Gospel Herald*, the denominational magazine, reported only indirectly on the conflict, which evidently inspired impassioned speeches. Lupe De León, the associate executive secretary of the Minority Ministries Council, for example, called on white Mennonites to "let my people go," expressing his desire for Mexican self-determination in the Mennonite Church.<sup>63</sup> John Drescher, editor of the *Gospel Herald*, also noted the "excellent speeches," but he complained that, though "each speaker rightly bared his soul" about "racism, poverty, and the ghetto," very few of the speeches offered "a plan, a suggestion, a solution to the problems." Without "suggestive solutions," he warned, "we remain a frustrated few which add to the problem by building up hostility, or we are turned into mere activists who become no more than actors."<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, the members of the Missions Board agreed to reexamine the priorities of their domestic mission work in consultation with the Minority Ministries Council and representatives from urban churches over the next year.<sup>65</sup>

The next Mennonite Church mission conference—Mission '71—was to be held in Eureka, Illinois, and the planning committee hoped that the conference could resolve some of the conflict that had characterized the previous years. The task for planning the music for the conference fell to Mary Oyer. During her work on the *Mennonite Hymnal*, Oyer had become interested in non-Western music, and when she became the music planner

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61. One white delegate commented, "If we do what John Powell tells us, they'll have me out of my pulpit and a nigger in there."—Shearer, "A Demanding Conversation," 213.

62. John Powell, e.g., recalled that "tension was paramount" at Mission '70. "Mission '71—Reality or Dream?" *Gospel Herald*, July 20, 1971.

63. Lupe De León, "VS in South Texas," *Gospel Herald*, Nov. 16, 1971.

64. John M. Drescher, "The Spirit of the Lord upon Me," *Gospel Herald*, June 28, 1970.

65. Jim Bishop, "Board Acts on Church Issues," *Gospel Herald*, Aug. 4, 1970.

for Mission '71, she wanted to represent "the widest possible range of music."<sup>66</sup> For Mission '71, her task was twofold: finding performers for the conference and compiling a printed song booklet that would be made available for hymn sings and worship services at the conference. Oyer's notes indicate that she was looking for music in several categories—Spanish, Original, African, Black, Far East, and Folk—designating performative categories based largely on national and racial identities.<sup>67</sup> By this time, the Lawndale Choir had been performing in rural Mennonite communities around the region, and Mission Board member Boyd Nelson was impressed when he heard the Lawndale Choir sing at the Illinois Mennonite Conference. Nelson suggested the group to Delbert Culp, who was in charge of planning for the youth at Mission '71.<sup>68</sup> By the time Mary Oyer took over the planning for music, Arlen Hershberger had written to her requesting that the Lawndale Choir be included on the music program at the conference.<sup>69</sup>

The Lawndale Choir seemed to fit Oyer's "Spanish" category. Still, Hershberger and Oyer had different goals in mind for the choir. As we have seen, the Lawndale choir's performances to this point had aimed to bring awareness of urban concerns to rural Mennonite areas. Hershberger echoed these goals in a letter to Oyer, stating

the [Lawndale] church wished to go into some of the rural Illinois churches in an effort to acquaint them with the work here and to encourage better communication between the rural and urban churches. . . . [W]e lay no claim to greatness but we do represent the urban community and our songs are an honest expression of our concerns.<sup>70</sup>

Oyer, however, also hoped that the members of the Lawndale Choir could authenticate some of the Spanish songs she had been collecting for the conference song booklet. She wrote to Hershberger asking if the choir would look at some of her selections, hoping that the "Latin" members of the choir could tell her "if the songs seemed genuine." "Please be frank about your reactions," she went on to say. "I have a strong feeling that we have imposed Western music on all non-Western cultures for a long time,

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66. "Mission 71 Planning," Box 4, Folder 8, Mary Oyer Papers, 1950-2004, IV-04-18-22, MCUSA Archives.

67. Handwritten note in *ibid.* "Original" referred here to newly composed songs by Mennonites.

68. Culp to J. Weldon Martin (May 10, 1971), Box 4, folder 8, Mary Oyer Papers, 1950-2004, IV-04-18-22, MCUSA Archives.

69. Hershberger to Oyer (May 7, 1971), Box 4, folder 8, Mary Oyer Papers, 1950-2004, IV-04-18-22, MCUSA Archives.

70. *Ibid.*

and that it is time for us to be singing in musical styles of Christians of other cultures.”<sup>71</sup>

Oyer’s recognition of a Western bias in the Mennonite Church demonstrated a remarkable reflexivity for the time; but it is not clear to what extent members of the Lawndale Choir wanted their music to represent an ethnic identity. Their touring program, at least, included no Spanish-language pieces. Nevertheless, part of the choir’s appeal as a performance group for Mission ’71 was the perception of their “Spanish” or Latina/o cultural heritage, allowing the Mennonite Church Missions Board to put diversity on display.

Despite these contrasting understandings about what the Lawndale Choir represented, they did perform at Mission ’71, helping to introduce Spanish songs to the attendees in addition to performing material from their touring program. A headline in the Mennonite Church’s denominational magazine read “Minority Music Planned for Mission 71,” accompanied by an article notifying readers that these “minority” performances would “likely be ‘unfamiliar music’ to the larger Mission 71 audience” (see figure 2).<sup>72</sup> Nonetheless, their performances evidently impressed many at the conference, including Minority Ministries Council Executive Secretary John Powell. As Dan Ventura recalls,

One of the songs we sang when we did the concerts was “Oh Happy Day.” And whenever we sang that was the icing on the cake. . . . I remember [Powell] jumping up on stage when we did “Oh Happy Day.” And that got the crowd going. Everybody singing along, joining in, clapping to the beat, you know those kinds of things. Having a good time.<sup>73</sup>

In the context of much more subdued Mennonite musical traditions, the music of the Lawndale Choir made space for spontaneous bodily expressions of joy for John Powell and others in the audience. Still, Powell himself was left with conflicting feelings after the conference. Following Mission ’71 he wrote in the *Gospel Herald*:

Mission 71! GOD’S NOW COMMUNITY! One could feel the electricity in the air because Mission 71 was electrifying! Unlike Mission 70, where tension was paramount, Mission 71 was exemplary of joy. . . . Yet, there are many questions which have me confused. Was our joy one of reality or was it imagined?<sup>74</sup>

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71. Oyer to Hershberger (May 8, 1971), Box 4, folder 9, Mary Oyer Papers, 1950-2004, IV-04-18-22, MCUSA Archives.

72. “Minority Music Programmed for Mission 71,” *Gospel Herald*, June 22, 1971.

73. Ventura in conversation with the author, Oct. 19, 2016.

74. “Mission 71—Reality or Dream?,” *The Gospel Herald*, July 20, 1971.

## Minority Music Programmed for Mission 71

“Yesu amefufuka, Yesu amefufuka,  
Ametoka kuburini.  
Haya, shangilia, Haya, shangilia,  
Ametoka kaburini.”

(“Our Savior has arisen,  
Our Savior has arisen,  
He has left the grave victorious.  
Therefore let us praise Him,  
Therefore let us praise Him,  
He has left the grave victorious.”)

The Swahili hymn, “Haya, Shangilia,” is one of several African selections to be used at Mission 71. Mary K. Oyer, music professor at Goshen (Ind.) College, is planning to bring together minority forms of music as an integral part of the mass worship sessions to be held July 1-3 at Eureka (Ill.) College, site of the 65th annual meeting of Mennonite Board of Missions, Elkhart, Ind.

Choirs from Mennonite congregations representing minority groups have been invited to sing and interpret the genres of music experienced in their various cultural contexts. In addition to using *The Mennonite Hymnal* for congregational singing, the Mission 71 program booklet will contain approximately 14 songs and hymns in English, Spanish, and Swahili (with English translations).

Choirs and individuals will lead in singing and introducing what will likely be “unfamiliar music” to the larger Mission 71 audience. African music, for instance, depends much on antiphonal singing. Also gospel music as utilized in black congregations must be “experienced live.”

“No song is sung the same way,” said John Powell, who will participate in singing and interpreting American Negro spirituals. Powell is executive secretary of the Minority Ministries Council for the

*Gospel Herald*, June 22, 1971

Figure 2, “Minority Music Programmed for Mission 71,” *Gospel Herald*, June 22, 1971.

Powell remembers that his feelings of excitement were tempered by lingering questions about the ways that the music was received: “Was this acceptance as part of the ministry of minority people, and genuinely accepted, or was it seen as entertainment?”<sup>75</sup> Powell’s ambivalence highlights the possibility that some in the audience—even without rejecting the music—may have heard the music simply as an entertaining sample of “minority” or “Latino” culture, rather than a challenge to normative ideologies of Mennonite community and religious practice.

## CONCLUSION

In recent decades, the Mennonite Church has become more institutionally conscious of its relationship to diverse members of a global Mennonite community, a fact evidenced by the increase in the number of non-Western hymns included in the 1992 Mennonite and Brethren *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. Still, nearly 50 years after John Powell’s “Black

75. John Powell in conversation with the author, May 5, 2017.

Manifesto" intervention, European-Anabaptist ethnic heritage continues to define normative Mennonite belonging for many white U.S. Mennonites.<sup>76</sup> Even looking to the global church has risked reinforcing the idea that racial and ethnic difference is "out there," rather than part of a more local Mennonite collectivity.

Currently Mennonite Church Canada and USA are in the midst of work on a new hymnal, titled *Voices Together*, and slated for a 2020 release. Questions of identity continue to loom over the work. From the outset, the hymnal committee aimed to create a song collection that would "take into account the breadth of the Mennonite Church, and the diverse ways Mennonites sing and worship."<sup>77</sup> The committee's commitment to this work resulted in a grant to visit and experience worship at "musically and racially diverse" Mennonite congregations.<sup>78</sup> It remains to be seen how the new hymnal will shape Mennonites' collective self-understanding, but the experience of the Lawndale Choir poses important questions about the ways institutional music shapes collective identity. If the Mennonite Church aspires to be a more inclusive community through its music, it will require resisting modes of listening and performance that render diverse cultural music as "global" or "ethnic" samples in a normatively white tradition of singing. It will be important for Mennonites to receive diverse musical expressions of Mennonite musicality as an opportunity to rethink how they understand their identity and to do the more challenging—and hopefully more fruitful—work of imagining new ways of being in community.

For the Lawndale Choir, the multicultural politics of ethnic representation was both an opportunity and a limitation. Certainly featuring performances from non-white Mennonites at an institutional conference would have challenged assumptions about the way Mennonites were supposed to look and sound; and the musical selections of the choir made space for new ways of being in community through music. For the Lawndale Choir, representing ethnicity in their contribution to Mission '71 offered them entrance into the discourse of the Mennonite Church at large.

Still, slotted into a performative category defined by ethnicity, the choir had to balance their previous hope of "cut[ing] across the barriers of color

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76. See, e.g., Ben Goossen's reflections on Mennonite genealogy, "Mennonite Genealogy and Racial Privilege," *Anabaptist Historians* (blog), Nov. 3, 2016, <https://anabaptist-historians.org/2016/11/03/mennonite-genealogy-and-racial-privilege/>.

77. "'Project 606': Mennonite Song Collection Project Aims for 2020 Release," *The Mennonite*, Jan. 4, 2016, <https://themennonite.org/daily-news/project-606-mennonite-song-collection-project-aims-for-2020-release/>.

78. "Worship and Song Committee Receives Calvin Grant," *The Mennonite*, May 16, 2017, <https://themennonite.org/daily-news/worship-song-committee-receives-calvin-grant/>.



and creed” with presenting a cultural perspective perceived as unique to their ethnic identity. Presenting the Lawndale Choir as performers of “minority music” minimized opportunities to deeply transform dominant ideas about Mennonite identity. As “minority music” the sounds of the choir were simultaneously incorporated into the church and marked as “other.” This presentation risked obscuring the message that the choir brought from Chicago. Informed by the multi-ethnic reality of the city, the Lawndale Choir members called their audiences to hear beyond categorical formulations of identity, asking their white Mennonite audiences to see themselves not as members of a group set off from the world, but rather as a group called to embrace the challenges of the world.

