

## Article

# Liturgies of Livability or Liturgical Violence: What Kind of Space Is Christian Congregational Song Creating for LGBTQIA2S+ and Nonbinary People?

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**Abstract:** The liturgy is one of the most important places in which people are formed theologically through components such as prayers, music, visual art, and preaching. Yet, depending on the theology that is expressed, the liturgy can be a place that heals or harms. Because LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people are often excluded and made invisible in Christian worship, this article focuses on the importance of Christian congregational song and how—drawing from Nathan Myrick’s work—it can be ethical for LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people when it contributes to their flourishing. First is an articulation of a theology of “both/neither” which (1) acknowledges that LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people exist, (2) is based on a sexually polymorphic reading of Genesis 1:27 and asserts that LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people are made in God’s image, and (3) celebrates difference, diversity, and multiplicity. Next is a discussion of how enacting a theology of “both/neither” in the liturgy creates liturgies of livability for LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people, whereas when it is not, it inflicts liturgical violence. This article concludes by exploring examples from Christian congregational song that support liturgies of livability through their expression of a theology of “both/neither.”

**Keywords:** liturgy; worship; theology; congregational song; hymns; LGBTQIA2S+; nonbinary; queer; sexual dimorphism; sexual polymorphism



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## 1. Introduction

Dom Lambert Beauduin points to the formative nature of the liturgy when he describes it as the “theology of the people” (Beauduin 1926, p. 88). Worship is indeed one of the most significant places in which people are formed theologically, through such components as prayers, music, visual art, and preaching. Yet, because of this very significance, worship has the power to form or malform, heal or harm, depending on the theology that is being expressed through these components. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, two-spirit (LGBTQIA2S+), and nonbinary people have been and continue to be oppressed and marginalized, both in society and in religious communities. They are often excluded and made invisible in worship services that do not name or acknowledge them. Worse, they are told they are not welcome because they are inhuman, sinful, and not loved by God, sentiments that are expressed not only in churches but also in societies that reinforce binary and cisheteronormative understandings of sex, gender, and sexual orientation.

As Siobhan Garrigan illustrates, Christian worship—and specifically Christian congregational song<sup>1</sup>—has often been an unwelcoming space for LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people:

As you sing with the faithful in all times and all places, how often have you sang in terms that were not based on heterosexist binaries—father and mother, male and fe-male? Are you invited to sing as “sopranos and altos/tenors and basses”

or just as “women/men,” regardless of the voice God gave you? How is sexual diversity talked about and otherwise imaged in your worship? How do you recognize the one in every 2000 babies born with “indeterminate” sex organs? How many prayers begin only, “Brothers and Sisters?” (Garrigan 2009, p. 215)

Garrigan’s description leads to the question: what oppressive, hegemonic, binary, and cisheteronormative notions of God and humans are entrenched in Christian congregational song? “Unethical” congregational song reinforces these oppressive, hegemonic, binary, and cisheteronormative notions of God and humans, which does not lead to the flourishing of LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people. Conversely, “ethical” congregational song does contribute to the flourishing of LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people by using inclusive language for humans and expansive language for God. Here, I draw on Nathan Myrick’s framework of ethics in congregational song, such as when he defines congregational music as ethical when it “enables human flourishing for each individual in the community” (Myrick 2021, p. 91). Additionally, argues Myrick, “musical care calls for a response to the declared needs and desires of the oppressed and victims of unjust action” (Myrick 2021, p. 92). This response includes “declaring identity and humanity” and “opposing injustice—that is, realities that prohibit flourishing” (Myrick 2021, p. 92).

The unfortunate reality is that for LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people, most congregational music is not ethical because it is steeped in binary and cisheteronormative language for God and humans that excludes them. These songs do not enable the flourishing of LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people, nor do they speak to the injustice and oppression they face on a daily basis. Moreover, congregational song does not acknowledge the humanity or identity of LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people when it is grounded in theologies that do not see them as beloved and made in God’s image.

This article extends work I have done with respect to the inclusion of intersex people in worship and congregational song in *Religion and Intersex: Perspectives from Science, Law, Culture, and Theology* (Budwey 2023b) by examining how congregational song can be made ethical for LGBTQIA2S+ as well as nonbinary people, leading to their flourishing by being deliberately made inclusive, particularly in congregational song texts. This work of inclusion contributes to the flourishing not only of LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people but also for all churches and allies, because whether they realize it or not, there are LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people in all congregations and Christians are called to respond to God’s commandment to love and welcome *all*. First, I will articulate what I call a theology of “both/neither” in order to give a theological foundation for this work. Next, I will discuss how this theology, when enacted in worship, creates liturgies of livability for LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people. In contrast, when a theology of “both/neither” is missing in worship, it inflicts liturgical violence on them. Finally, I will survey examples of Christian congregational song that support liturgies of livability through their expression of a theology of “both/neither,” and therefore promote the full humanity and flourishing of LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people. This survey offers options for worship leaders looking for new songs that can be included in worship as well as examples for congregational song writers who want to contribute to the imperative work of creating liturgies of livability.

## 2. Moving toward a Theology of “Both/Neither”

Creating and sustaining liturgies of livability begins with engaging with scripture and theology, since the story of the creation of humans is often at the center of debates around sex, gender, and sexual orientation. Moving away from a sexually dimorphic reading of Genesis 1:27 and toward a sexually polymorphic understanding of humanity embraces *all* human beings along the spectrum of sex/gender as created in God’s image, rather than excluding those who do not fit into rigid binary categories. Sexual dimorphism is a paradigm where “people are seen to be naturally (in a normative sense) unequivocally and exclusively male or unequivocally and exclusively female” (Jung 2006, p. 293). This paradigm is considered by many Christians to be “‘natural’ and ‘God-given’” due to a sexually dimorphic interpretation of Genesis 1:27, which implies that “to be a human being made in the image

of God means to be created ‘clearly female’ or ‘clearly male’” (Budwey 2023b, p. 129). This sexually dimorphic understanding of Genesis 1:27 was the foundation for intersex activist Sally Gross being told “she ‘does not satisfy the biblical criterion of humanity’ because as an intersex person who is not ‘determinately male or determinately female,’ she does not ‘satisfy the divine criterion for humanness’” (Budwey 2023b, p. 133, quoting Gross 1999, pp. 70, 70n7). Furthermore, because of this sexually dimorphic reading of Genesis 1:27 that “God created all human beings determinately male or determinately female with nothing in between,” Gross was told “that ‘like dogs, cats and tins of tuna, [she is] not the kind of thing which could have been baptized validly’” (Budwey 2023b, p. 133, quoting Gross 1999, pp. 70, 70n7). Those who uphold the paradigm of sexual dimorphism violently exclude and dehumanize anyone who does not fit into this socially constructed binary, to the point of calling them unbaptizable and not made in God’s image.

Corresponding to the sexually dimorphic belief that all humans are either “clearly female” or “clearly male,” the cisheteronormative expectation is that all humans will be cisgender (i.e., those assigned female at birth will identify as women and those assigned male at birth will identify as men) and heterosexual (i.e., all women will only be sexually attracted to men and all men will only be sexually attracted to women).<sup>2</sup> These longstanding dominant binary and “either/or” beliefs about sex, gender, and sexual orientation erase an entire swath of people, including intersex, nonbinary, transgender, queer, two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and asexual people, which is why the idea of sexual polymorphism is foundational for dismantling frames that enable liturgical violence.

A sexually polymorphic understanding of Genesis 1:27 views *all* human beings as created along a continuum of sex/gender, thereby including those who identify as a woman or man, both woman and man, and neither woman nor man, while also allowing people to identify as they choose and be sexually attracted to whomever they choose. Justin Sabia-Tanis supports this reading of Genesis 1:27 by explaining that the story of creation in Genesis is one of poles and all that lies between, as opposed to strict binaries. Just as God created night and day and everything in between, including dawn and dusk, God also created humans male and female, including all those “people occupying many places between the poles of female and male” (Sabia-Tanis 2018, pp. 57–58).

In this article, I argue for a movement away from the binary of “either/or” to the more inclusive notion of “both/neither.”<sup>3</sup> A theology of “both/neither” (1) acknowledges that LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people exist, (2) is based on a sexually polymorphic reading of Genesis 1:27 and asserts that LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people are made in God’s image, and (3) “celebrates difference, the truth and reality of the diversity of God’s creation, and the multiplicity of human embodiment” (Budwey 2023b, p. 150). This theology is necessary in order to fully embrace people of all sexes, genders, and sexual orientations, particularly in cultures and religions that enforce rigid binaries and exclude those who do not “fit” into what is considered to be “normative.” For example, LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people are literally in a state of emergency in the United States as there is an attempt to erase them out of existence through the introduction of over 500 bills in the first few months of 2023, fomenting “an unprecedented climate of fear, hostility, and discrimination” through such tactics as banning books and classes that speak about them as well as making it illegal for transgender and nonbinary people to receive gender-affirming care (HRC Staff 2023).<sup>4</sup>

This erasure—steeped in sexual dimorphism—is carried into and mutually supported by liturgies that do not acknowledge the existence of LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people by not naming them and through the exclusive use of binary language for God and humans. As Patricia Beattie Jung points out, “people can only really understand who they are in light of who God is” (Jung 2006, p. 302). If the prayers, songs, preaching, and visual art in worship only use language and images of God that are feminine or masculine, then the corresponding assumption is that all humans—who are made in God’s image—are also only either feminine or masculine, thereby excluding all people outside of the sex/gender binary. Sarah Johnson and Adam Tice, editors of the 2020 hymnal *Voices Together* (Kauffman 2020),

underscore the importance of using inclusive language (language for/about humans) and expansive language (language for/about God)<sup>5</sup> in worship:

The words we use in worship shape how we understand God, one another, and the world around us. The metaphors we use affect how we encounter God in worship. They also form our worldviews in ways that may be beyond our conscious awareness, affecting how we relate to other people by defining what we see as normal, acceptable, or good in ourselves, others, and the world. Therefore, the words we use in worship also shape our actions and how we live into God's just and peaceful new creation. (Johnson and Tice 2022, p. 20)

The use of inclusive and expansive language in congregational song is ethical because it promotes the full humanity and flourishing of LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people by recognizing that all people are made in God's image and are a reflection of the multiplicity and diversity of creation, including human embodiment.

### 3. Liturgies of Livability and Liturgical Violence

The liturgical application of a theology of "both/neither" leads to the question: are worship services creating liturgies of livability by including and encouraging the participation of LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people, or are they inflicting liturgical violence by excluding and discouraging the participation of LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people? I offer the experience of one of my interview partners from *Religion and Intersex* who is intersex and no longer identifies as a man or a woman to show the real-life consequences of exclusion: "I'm seen as a woman, I think so, but now people who don't know me will think I'm a man and I don't care about that too much but when I hear texts 'brothers and sisters' and 'men and women' I'm sitting in the church and I think OK, you don't want me here? And I go then" (Budwey 2023b, pp. 176–77). Additionally, a friend whose child identifies as nonbinary told me when they sing a song in worship that says, "sons and daughters," it is incredibly painful for them as it excludes their child. These are examples of liturgical violence.

I have previously defined liturgical violence<sup>6</sup> as occurring when liturgies are not based in a theology of "both/neither," making intersex people feel invisible and excluded as they are not encouraged to participate in worship because they are not recognized and named or, even worse, they are told they are sinful, inhuman, and not made in God's image. Just as I have argued in previous work for the deep need for liturgies of livability<sup>7</sup> for intersex people that are based in a theology of "both/neither," make them feel included, and teach that they are made in God's image, here I expand and deepen my previous arguments on liturgical violence by making the case that liturgies of livability are possible and necessary. I argue that congregations, church leaders, lay people, and congregational song writers should create liturgies that promote the flourishing of LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people, helping to create contexts and communities that sustain livable lives.

Liturgical violence happens in three ways. First, it occurs when prayers, songs, preaching, and visual art do not recognize that LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people exist, hindering their flourishing by not allowing them to "reach their full potential by feeling fully human and fully accepted for who they are" (Budwey 2023b, p. 196), regardless of their sex, gender, and sexual orientation. Second, liturgical violence does not recognize that LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people are made in God's image. Based on a sexually dimorphic reading of Genesis 1:27, it is steeped exclusively in binary (feminine and masculine), cisheteronormative language for humans (e.g., "women and men" or "brothers and sisters") and for God (e.g., Father or Mother). Regarding language for God, "by not using expansive language and multiple images of God, the message is sent that those who are outside of the sex/gender binary are not created in God's image" (Budwey 2023b, p. 197). Third, "it does not celebrate difference, diversity, and multiplicity"; instead, "it works on maintaining the status quo by supporting socially constructed perceptions of what is considered 'normal' and 'natural'" in terms of sex, gender, and sexual orientation

(Budwey 2023b, p. 197). Liturgical violence creates experiences like those of my interview partner described above, where they are given the message that they are not welcome in church communities and their liturgical practices.

Liturgies of livability, on the other hand, enact a theology of “both/neither,” as they first recognize that LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people exist, enhancing their flourishing and allowing them to “reach their full potential by feeling fully human and fully accepted for who they are,” regardless of their sex, gender, and sexual orientation (Budwey 2023b, p. 198). This enacting of a theology of “both/neither” means explicitly including LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people in prayers, songs, preaching, and visual art. Second, liturgies of livability recognize that LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people are made in God’s image. Drawing on a sexually polymorphic reading of Genesis 1:27, it uses inclusive language for humans, recognizing that people exist along a spectrum. Correspondingly, liturgies of livability also use expansive language and multiple images and metaphors for God that are both binary (feminine and masculine) and nonbinary (nongendered). The goal is not to completely eradicate binary language, but rather to employ Sallie McFague’s argument for the use of numerous images of God with the understanding that “many metaphors and models are necessary, that a piling up of images is essential, both to avoid idolatry and to attempt to express the richness and variety of the divine-human relationship” (McFague 1982, p. 20). By using McFague’s “piling up of images” strategy, “the multiplicity of images and metaphors reflects the multiplicity of human embodiment” (Budwey 2023b, p. 199). Third, liturgies of livability “celebrate the difference, diversity, and multiplicity” by calling into question “what is deemed ‘normative’ or ‘natural’” regarding sex, gender, and sexual orientation (Budwey 2023b, p. 199).

#### 4. Christian Congregational Song and Liturgies of Livability

Composing and singing Christian congregational songs that enact liturgies of livability is crucial for the flourishing of LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people. To do this, songs must affirm the existence of LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people by explicitly naming them because “all worshipping communities deserve to name themselves and have their names be honored” (Task Force on Liturgical & Prayer Book Revision 2022, p. 23).

While there are only a few texts from the history of queer congregational song that have used the words “gay” and “lesbian” (Budwey 2023a), there are texts in *Songs for the Holy Other: Hymns Affirming the LGBTQIA2S+ Community* that use the term “queer,” for example Adam Tice’s 2015 text “Quirky, queer, and wonderful” set to Sally Ann Morris’ 2018 tune THE Q TUNE (The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada 2019, pp. 53–55). This 2019 collection, which is free to download, recognizes the need to “make queer hymns—hymns by, for, or about the LGBTQIA2S+ community—accessible to a wider range of congregations” by compiling them in one place (The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada 2019, p. 2).<sup>8</sup> Some songs also name the oppression and injustice that LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people have faced, such as Slat’s 2019 text “We are the hidden,” set to Megan Coiley’s 2019 tune HIDDEN (The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada 2019, pp. 85–86). This song powerfully conveys the experience of LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people being erased as they are struck from scripture and ignored in song (stanza two), feeling “we don’t exist” (stanza three) as my interview partner experienced through the use of binary language.

We are the hidden; we are unknown.  
We knocked on your door ‘till our knuckles shed blood.  
We are unnoticed; we are unseen.  
We’re too inconvenient to ever let in.

We are the silenced; we are dismissed.  
You strike us from scripture, ignore us in song.  
We are forgotten; we are erased.

For threatening your comfort by claiming our voice.

We are invalid; we don't exist.

Excluded, cast out from the family of God.

We are rejected; we are despised.

But we are still longing to be one in Christ.

We are the future; we are the now.

The stones that sing out when the people are mute.

We have been broken, yet we still live

And work for the Kingdom where all will be loved.

"We Are the Hidden." Words: Slats Toole © 2019. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

An example of how LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people have been erased from scripture is the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26–40. While the term "eunuch" held a variety of meanings in the ancient Near East, it can be interpreted to refer to someone who today has variations of sex characteristics (Budwey 2023b, p. 136). In other words, the Ethiopian eunuch could have been an intersex person. While some songs speak to the importance of this biblical passage as one which teaches the inclusion of someone who was previously excluded, they are usually written from the perspective of Philip.<sup>9</sup> Dan Damon's 2023 text "A eunuch, trusted by my queen," however, is written from the perspective of the Ethiopian eunuch (Damon 2023, #1),<sup>10</sup> and by explicitly naming the person in the passage as a eunuch, it contributes to the creation of liturgies of livability rather than enacting liturgical violence. Set to the driving Irish melody STAR OF THE COUNTY DOWN, Damon powerfully brings to life the painful experiences of this person who was prohibited from worship simply for who they are (stanza one), expressing their anger, hurt, and sadness due to the exclusion and injustice they faced (stanzas two and three). This text makes visible the existence of a biblical character that not only could have been intersex but is also someone that all LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary can relate to in their quest for inclusion and recognition as humans who are loved by God (stanza four).

A eunuch, trusted by my queen, I travel far to pray.

I seek the temple of my God, but walls turn me away.

A eunuch may not go inside this place of prayer and praise,  
but as I am and where I am, my heart's cry I must raise.

Excluded by the human law—unjust, unfair, and wrong—

I lift my prayer, I worship God, I raise an angry song.

What hurt is done to me by this? What hurt is done to you?

You do not even know my name, yet dare call me taboo!

I head for home with heavy heart. I wipe my weeping eyes  
to study what the prophet wrote and then, to my surprise  
a passing stranger calls to me. I beckon him to come.

I help him up, he helps me see that I have found my home.

I am a person. I am here—part of the human race.

The God of love has come for me, yes, love has made a place.

The river sings along our way, and to the shore we run.

Together we rush boldly in beneath the smiling sun.

“A Eunuch, Trusted by My Queen.” Words: Daniel Charles Damon © 2022 Hope Publishing Company, [www.hopepublishing.com](http://www.hopepublishing.com). All rights reserved. Used by permission.

The second way that Christian congregational song can enact liturgies of livability is by affirming that LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people are made in God’s image, based on a sexually polymorphic interpretation of Genesis 1:27. As one of my interview partners said, God created humans male *to* female rather than male *and* female (Budwey 2023b, pp. 134–35). David Bjorlin’s 2020 text “Praise to the God of the in-between space” (Bjorlin 2020) highlights this sexually polymorphic understanding of all of creation—including humanity—as a spectrum. Set to Sally Ann Morris’ 2020 tune VERSUS, Bjorlin speaks to how creation defies binaries (stanza one) in places such as the wetlands (stanza two), blurring land and sea, and in times such as twilight (stanza three), blurring day and night. He points to the LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary community in stanza four, praising those who break “certainties of either/or” by embodying the “both/neither” spectrum of sexual polymorphism.

Praise to the God of the in-between space,  
teaching us all of your limitless grace,  
and for creation that helps us to grow  
past all the binary bound’ries we know.

Praise for the wetlands where habitats thrive  
keeping a network of species alive,  
and in complexity bringing to birth  
life from the cauldron of ocean and earth.

Praise for the twilight where day and night blend,  
never defining beginning or end,  
and on the threshold of darkness and light  
claiming the shadows between black and white.

Praise for the people who witness to more,  
more than the certainties of either/or,  
living as signs of a wild mystery:  
God in one nature, and God One in Three.

“Praise to the God of the In-between Space.” Words: David Bjorlin © 2020 GIA Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

While there are some examples in congregational song that were written with the goal of being inclusive, because they are based in binary, sexually dimorphic language and theologies, they may now be experienced as exclusive, illustrating how evolving understandings of sex, gender, and sexual orientation affect language. One example is Sister Delores Dufner’s 1991 text “Summoned by the God who made us (Sing a new church),” set to the nineteenth-century tune NETTLETON. In stanza two, the original text on the left (Dobbs-Mickus 2011, #727) says, “Male and female in God’s image, / Male and female, God’s delight,” a sexually dimorphic interpretation of Genesis 1:27. Although this text is inclusive of women who still face oppression and injustice as they continue to fight to be recognized as being made in God’s image, the binary language excludes those who are not female or male, including intersex people. The editors of *Voices Together*, the 2020 hymnal of the Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA, asked Dufner if she might consider changing the text to avoid binary language. In the revised version on the right (Kauffman 2020, #1), Dufner says, “ev’ry person in God’s image / ev’ry person,

God's delight," a small but incredibly powerful change that offers a sexually polymorphic reading of Genesis 1:27, including *all* humans.

**Original**

Radiant risen from the water,  
robed in holiness and light,  
Male and female in God's image,  
Male and female, God's delight:

*Refrain*

Let us bring the gifts that differ  
And, in splendid, varied ways,  
Sing a new Church into being,  
One in faith and love and praise.

**Revised**

Radiant risen from the water,  
robed in holiness and light,  
ev'ry person in God's image,  
ev'ry person, God's delight.

*Refrain*

Let us bring the gifts that differ  
and, in splendid, varied ways,  
sing a new church into being,  
one in faith and love and praise.

"Summoned by the God Who Made Us." Words: Delores Dufner, OSB © 1991, The Sisters of St. Benedict. Published by OCP. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

The revision of Shirley Erena Murray's 1998 text, "For everyone born" points to the evolving nature of language and a greater awareness of the spectrum of sexes, genders, and sexual orientations that moves beyond the binary of "either/or." It also highlights the tension between the desire for language that includes all people and language that specifically names some people, particularly those who have been made invisible and have a history of not being named in worship. Cameron Partridge points out the dangers of binary language, particularly in congregational song, explaining that "while this language was intended to be inclusive, its impact in this regard is felt very much otherwise" (Partridge 2020, p. 172). This was the case with Murray's text; while her intention was to be inclusive by naming "all people at the great feast," the binary language of "woman and man" and "gay and straight" excludes entire groups of people, such as nonbinary and bisexual people (Damon and Johnson 2023, pp. 32–33).

Since Murray died in 2020, Dan Damon and Carl P. Daw, Jr. worked to revise the text using nonbinary language. Murray's original text is on the left (Murray 1998),<sup>11</sup> and the revised text is on the right (Damon 2023, #16),<sup>12</sup> changing "woman and man" to "all who share life" and "gay and straight" to "all who have breath."

**Original**

For woman and man, a place at the table,  
revising the roles, deciding the share,  
with wisdom and grace, dividing the power,  
for woman and man, a system that's fair,  
and God will delight when we are creators  
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:  
yes, God will delight when we are creators  
of justice, justice and joy!

For gay and for straight, a place at the table,  
a covenant shared, a welcoming space,  
a rainbow of race and gender and color,  
for gay and for straight, the chalice of grace,  
and God will delight when we are creators  
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:  
yes, God will delight when we are creators  
of justice, justice and joy!

**Revised**

For all who share life, a place at the table,  
revising the roles, deciding the share,  
with wisdom and grace, dividing the power,  
for all who share life, a system's that's fair,  
and God will delight when we are creators  
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:  
yes, God will delight when we are creators  
of justice, justice and joy!

For all who have breath, a place at the table,  
a covenant shared, a welcoming space,  
a rainbow of race and gender and color,  
for all who have breath, the chalice of grace,  
and God will delight when we are creators  
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:  
yes, God will delight when we are creators  
of justice, justice and joy!

"For Everyone Born." Words: Shirley Erena Murray; rev. Daniel Charles Damon and Carl P. Daw, Jr. © 1998 Hope Publishing Company, [www.hopepublishing.com](http://www.hopepublishing.com). All rights reserved. Used by permission.



Because all humans are made in God's image, it is also vital to have congregational song that uses multiple images of God, reflecting the diversity of humanity. While most texts refer to God using masculine language, there are some that use feminine or nongendered language. Thomas Troeger's 1987 text "Source and Sovereign, Rock and Cloud" (Troeger 1987) is an example of a text that uses expansive language for God as well as McFague's strategy of "piling up of images." In this one text, "Troeger uses forty names and metaphors for the three persons of the Trinity, all of which are nongendered" (Budwey 2023b, p. 185). Carl P. Daw, Jr.'s 1989 text "God the Spirit, guide and guardian" (Daw 1989) also exclusively uses nongendered language to describe the Trinity. Set to the nineteenth-century tune WEBB, Laurence Bernier's 1974 text "When Israel camped in Sinai (Our God is like an eagle)" (Bernier 1974) echoes my theology of "both/neither" by addressing God as mother (stanza two), father (stanza three), and "both and neither," therefore allowing all humans "[t]he freedom just to be" (stanza four).

When Israel camped in Sinai, then Moses heard from God:  
 "This message tell my people, and give them this, my word:  
 From Egypt I was with you, and carried on my wing,  
 The whole of your great nation from slavery I did bring.

Just like a mother eagle, who helps her young to fly,  
 I am a mother to you, your needs will I supply;  
 And you are as my children, the ones who hear my voice,  
 I am a mother to you, the people of my choice."

If God is like an eagle who helps her young to fly,  
 And God is also Father, what then of you and I?  
 We have no fear of labels, we have no fear of roles—  
 If God's own being blends them, we seek the selfsame goals.

Our God is not a woman, our God is not a man;  
 Our God is both and neither, our God is I Who Am.  
 From all the roles that bind us our God has set us free.  
 What freedom does God give us? The freedom just to be.

"When Israel Camped in Sinai." Words: Laurence G. Bernier © 1974 UFMCC. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Too often LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people are told they are not made in God's image, they are sinful, and even that they are inhuman, such as the experience of Sally Gross, as described above, when she was told she was not a human and therefore could not be baptized validly. The following three texts by Damon both explicitly name intersex and transgender people—asserting the existence of those who are often unnamed and invisible in worship—and speak to their being made in God's image. In "O God, you share your beauty" (Damon 2023, #44), Damon points to a sexually polymorphic interpretation of the creation story in Genesis, describing how God created "the earth, the heavens / and all that lies between" (stanza one), naming intersex people as formed and made in God's image (stanza two).<sup>13</sup> Damon discusses this text, set to his beautiful 2022 tune SHARED BEAUTY, saying,

In my writing I try to give voice to those whose voice has been denied or rejected. In 1986 at the Franciscan School of Theology in Berkeley, California I took some Bible courses from Michael Guinan, OFM. He spoke for three days about Genesis 1, teaching that the rhetorical device "the heavens and the earth" implies that

God also made everything in between. He said, “This is as true now as it was the first time it was spoken.” As we learn to see the whole spectrum, we begin to celebrate the variety of creation in new ways. I believe the scripture teaches that God made male and female and all that lies between. (Damon 2023, p. 104)

O God, you share your beauty,  
 you make all people one,  
 unique and growing daily  
 beneath your moon and sun.  
 So, not the same, yet lovely,  
 we sing what we have seen:  
 you make the earth, the heavens,  
 and all that lies between.

You show your truth and beauty  
 in intersex as well—  
 a private kind of beauty  
 that lovers seldom tell.  
 And in your inmost being  
 you formed each one of us,  
 you make us in your image,  
 you raise us from the dust.

“O God, You Share Your Beauty.” Words: Daniel Charles Damon © 2022 Hope Publishing Company, [www.hopepublishing.com](http://www.hopepublishing.com). All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Motivated by a 2022 presentation I gave on “Decolonizing Binary Language: Incorporating Intersex People in Congregational Song” (Budwey 2022) and conversations with Marissa Adams, an intersex woman, educator, and advocate, Damon wrote both “O God, you share your beauty” and “Intersex people” (Damon 2023, #31, pp. 102–3; see also Damon and Johnson 2023, pp. 31–32). I believe these are the first published hymns that use the word “intersex” (Damon 2023, foreword). Set to the Gaelic melody BUNESSAN, the first stanza of “Intersex people” also proclaims that they are indeed “formed in God’s image” and reflections of “God’s face.”<sup>14</sup>

Intersex people,  
 formed in God’s image,  
 fashioned with wisdom,  
 power and grace:  
 part of the singing,  
 part of the dancing,  
 part of one story  
 showing God’s face.

“Intersex People.” Words: Daniel Charles Damon © 2022 Hope Publishing Company, [www.hopepublishing.com](http://www.hopepublishing.com). All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Damon came to Nashville in November 2022 to premiere these two hymns at a service marking Intersex Solidarity Day. I asked him if he might also consider writing a hymn that uses the word “transgender.” After being inspired by President Joe Biden’s proclamation on International Transgender Day of Visibility in March 2023, Damon wrote “We celebrate

today with joy" (Damon 2023, #54, p. 106). Set to the Scottish melody YE BANKS AND BRAES, the first stanza asserts that transgender people are "made and known and loved by God," while also speaking to the "scorn and strife" that they face on a daily basis, especially in the United States during the current onslaught of transphobic rhetoric and countless bills that ban gender-affirming care.<sup>15</sup>

We celebrate today with joy  
transgender people everywhere  
who, made and known and loved by God,  
enrich the lovely world we share.  
We celebrate the courage shown  
as daily, braving scorn and strife,  
transgender people find new ways  
to claim part in our common life.

"We Celebrate Today with Joy." Words: Daniel Charles Damon © 2023 Hope Publishing Company, [www.hopepublishing.com](http://www.hopepublishing.com). All rights reserved. Used by permission.

The third and final way that Christian congregational song can enact liturgies of livability is by celebrating difference, diversity, and multiplicity. While there are an increasing number of examples from congregational song that call for inclusion and the celebration of diversity, there are only a few that speak to this explicitly in reference to LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people; two are found in *Songs for the Holy Other*. The first is Mary Louise Bringle's 2005 text "Sing a new world into being," set to NETTLETON as well as Brian Hehn's 2020 tune (*The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada 2019*, pp. 67–70). Stanza one points to LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people who have been excluded in worship because of who they are and who they love. Bringle articulates the dream of "a church where all who worship / find their lives and loves belong." In stanza two, she specifically celebrates "rainbow gifts and colors" found in the diversity of "gender, class, and race."<sup>16</sup>

Sing a new world into being.  
Sound a bold and hopeful theme.  
Find a tune for silent yearnings.  
Lend your voice and dare to dream:  
    dream a church where all who worship  
    find their lives and love belong.  
Sing a new world into being.  
Sing as Christ inspires your song!

Sing a new world into being  
where each gender, class, and race  
brings its rainbow gifts and colors  
to God's limitless embrace;  
    where the lines that once divided  
    form instead the ties that bind.  
Sing a new world into being:  
risk transforming heart and mind!

"Sing a New World into Being." Words: Mary Louise Bringle © 2006 GIA Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Another selection from *Songs for the Holy Other* that uses rainbow imagery to celebrate diversity is Carl P. Daw, Jr.'s 2016 text "All the colors of the rainbow" ([The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada 2019](#), p. 9). Set to the twentieth-century tune ABBOT'S LEIGH, stanza one also describes the beauty of the rainbow and the diversity of the church in "race and class and gender [.]". Daw, Jr. writes that in addition to being a symbol of God's covenant (Genesis 9: 13–16), the rainbow "is also intended to suggest the rainbow flags associated both with the LGBTQ+ movement and with peace movements" (Daw 2016, p. 53). After pointing to the need for all members of the church (1 Corinthians 12:14–28) in stanza two and the call for peace in many languages in stanza three (not printed here), stanza four refers to Genesis 1:26–27 and "[t]he fundamental understanding that every human being bears the image of God" (Daw 2016, p. 53). This text is a powerful charge to celebrate difference, diversity, and multiplicity, while also acknowledging that God's image is found "in each human heart and face [.]"

All the colors of the rainbow  
live unseen in daily light,  
but their splendors find expression  
when released to human sight;  
so the church reveals most beauty  
where diversity is real:  
breadth of race and class and gender,  
room for doubt, and space to heal.  
.....  
.....  
Teach us, God, our need of others;  
through them help us fully live.  
Wean us from our selfish habits;  
let us listen, learn, forgive.  
May we see your longed-for image  
in each human heart and face,  
and behold how those around us  
can be channels of your grace.

"All the Colors of the Rainbow." Words: Carl P. Daw, Jr. © 2016 Hope Publishing Company, [www.hopepublishing.com](http://www.hopepublishing.com). All rights reserved. Used by permission.

This section has given multiple examples of the power of congregational song to enact liturgies of livability for LGBTIQIA2S+ and nonbinary people by explicitly naming them, affirming that they are made in God's image, and celebrating difference, diversity, and multiplicity. It has also shown that there continues to be a need for even more songs written by and for LGBTIQIA2S+ and nonbinary people that contribute to liturgies of livability. These songs can be integrated into worship in conjunction with preaching and visual art during services when passages such as Gen. 1:27 and Acts 8 are read as well as on occasions that celebrate and name LGBTIQIA2S+ and nonbinary people such as Intersex Awareness Day (26 October), Pride, and Transgender Day of Visibility (31 March). It is also important to always be examining liturgical language and integrate these songs throughout the entire liturgical year so that all liturgies become liturgies of livability, rather than only having one token service of inclusion.

## 5. Conclusions

LGBTIQIA2S+ and nonbinary people experience violence, injustice, and oppression on a daily basis, simply because of their sex, gender, and sexual orientation. This experience

unfortunately includes enduring religious trauma and moral injury in faith communities (Jones et al. 2022). The liturgy, however, should not be a space where LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people have liturgical violence inflicted on them. Rather, it should be a space where Christians respond to God's imperative to love and welcome *all*, where everyone truly has—in the words of Murray—"a place at the table." The goal must be what Roberto Che Espinoza describes as "trauma-informed, harm reduction liturgies" that create "conditions of livability" (Budwey 2023b, p. 198, quoting Henderson-Espinoza 2019).<sup>17</sup>

By enacting a theology of "both/neither," liturgies of livability promote the full humanity and flourishing of LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people by naming their existence, affirming them as made in God's image, and celebrating difference, diversity, and multiplicity. This article has shown the ability of Christian congregational song to be ethical as it embodies these qualities, creating a worship space that heals rather than harms as it contributes to the full humanity and flourishing of LGBTQIA2S+ and nonbinary people. May congregational song continue to participate in Bringle's call to "Sing a new world into being," a world that Damon beautifully depicts in stanza two of "We celebrate today with joy" (Damon 2023, #54):

We pray that all will learn to love  
the differences our bodies know.  
We pray for courage, grace, and strength  
to be ourselves, to reach and grow.  
We work to heal the hate and hurt  
that spring from ignorance and fear.  
We cry to God, the source of love,  
who made us all and calls us here.

"We Celebrate Today with Joy." Words: Daniel Charles Damon © 2023 Hope Publishing Company, [www.hopepublishing.com](http://www.hopepublishing.com). All rights reserved. Used by permission.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This article uses the term "congregational song" to include all types of music that congregations sing in worship, recognizing that the term "hymn" is a specific type of congregational song.
- <sup>2</sup> Judith Butler refers to these corresponding expectations of sex, gender, and sexual orientation as the "heterosexual matrix" (Butler [1990] 2006, p. 208n6).
- <sup>3</sup> The language of 'both/neither' draws from Leah DeVun's discussion of how medieval alchemists used Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and its description of a "biform body" (male and female) that was "both and neither" (DeVun 2021, p. 175).

- 4 It is important to note that many of these laws that deny gender-affirming care to consenting transgender and nonbinary youth also legalize medical interventions performed on infants and children with intersex variations who are too young to give their consent (Human Rights Watch 2022). All people deserve the right to bodily autonomy.
- 5 This understanding of inclusive and expansive language draws from The Episcopal Church’s Task Force on Liturgical & Prayer Book Revision (Task Force on Liturgical & Prayer Book Revision 2022, pp. 21–24).
- 6 I first heard this term from Paul Vasile who had heard it used by Jorge Lockward. Lockward used the term in a different way, referring to when sudden changes are made in worship (Budwey 2023b, p. 207n57).
- 7 I first heard this term from Dr. Roberto Che Espinoza (Budwey 2023b, p. 198).
- 8 The collection has been downloaded over 6300 times (Stephen Blondo, email message to the author, 15 March 2023). The table of contents shows which authors and composers self-identify as members of the LGBTQIA2S+ community (The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada 2019, p. 3). I was a member of the working group that compiled this collection.
- 9 See for example David Bjorlin’s 2018 text “I met a stranger on the road” (The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada 2019, p. 36).
- 10 The text with music may also be found at [https://www.hopepublishing.com/find-hymns-hw/hw9159\\_01.aspx](https://www.hopepublishing.com/find-hymns-hw/hw9159_01.aspx) (accessed on 17 September 2023).
- 11 In the original version, the stanza “For woman and man” was stanza two and “For gay and straight” was listed as optional. In the alternate version, these are stanzas two and four. Murray’s text has been set to multiple tunes, including Damon’s 2022 tune SPRINGVALE (Damon 2023, #16). For more on the process of revising the text, see (Damon and Johnson 2023, pp. 32–33).
- 12 The revised text set to Damon’s tune may be found at [https://www.hopepublishing.com/find-hymns-hw/hw9159\\_16.aspx](https://www.hopepublishing.com/find-hymns-hw/hw9159_16.aspx) (accessed on 17 September 2023).
- 13 The text has four stanzas, with the first two stanzas printed here. The entire text and tune may be found at [https://www.hopepublishing.com/find-hymns-hw/hw9159\\_44.aspx](https://www.hopepublishing.com/find-hymns-hw/hw9159_44.aspx) (accessed on 17 September 2023).
- 14 The text has three stanzas, with the first printed here. The entire text and tune may be found at [https://www.hopepublishing.com/find-hymns-hw/hw9159\\_31.aspx](https://www.hopepublishing.com/find-hymns-hw/hw9159_31.aspx) (accessed on 17 September 2023).
- 15 The text has three stanzas, with the first printed here. The entire text and tune may be found at [https://www.hopepublishing.com/find-hymns-hw/hw9159\\_54.aspx](https://www.hopepublishing.com/find-hymns-hw/hw9159_54.aspx) (accessed on 17 September 2023).
- 16 The text has four stanzas, with the first two printed here.
- 17 Espinoza’s work appears under his old name in *Religion and Intersex* as that was his name at the time of the publication of the book.

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