

# A CASE FOR CONTEXTUALIZED, ARTISTIC COMMUNICATION IN MISSION



## ROBIN HARRIS

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## ETHNO-WHAT?

What did you think when you saw that strange new word—ethnodoxology—on the cover of *Mission Frontiers*? If it is unfamiliar now, it won't be when you're done with this issue. Twenty years ago the term didn't exist, yet now it represents a significant paradigm shift in missions—affirming the engagement of all kinds of culturally appropriate, biblically grounded artistic communication in the mission, worship, and spiritual formation of the church.

Why is ethnodoxology a crucial issue for the *Missio Dei* in this century? Unfortunately, the commonly held misconception that “music is a universal language” has long blinded us to the need for contextualization of artistic forms of communication, including music but also extending to all other art forms. One of the stubborn obstacles to effective mission today is that we are not consistently communicating the gospel in ways that allow it to thrive in local soil. Through foundational articles, stories from the field, and practical how-to advice, this issue demonstrates the remarkable results of applying ethnodoxology principles in cross-cultural ministry.

## ETHNODOXOLOGY FROM MANY PERSPECTIVES

The articles in this issue were written by 15 field-tested authors, all part of the International Council of Ethnodoxologists (ICE), a network founded in 2003 and made up of missions practitioners, professors, students, and organizations. This

issue gives just a small taste (roughly three percent) of the contents of a set of two volumes produced by ICE and published in 2013 by William Carey Library. They are the first such book-length resources on the topic of ethnodoxology.<sup>1</sup>

**Foundational:** The opening article (page 6), an interview I did with ethnomusicologist Brian Schrag,<sup>2</sup> lays the groundwork for the rest of the issue, describing the guiding principles of ethnodoxology and exploring how this culturally sensitive way of engaging the arts differs from traditional approaches. He proposes a case for ethnodoxology, affirming its crucial role in cross-cultural ministry as well as established churches, and outlining a vision for a future in which all Christ followers will express their faith through the unique artistic resources God has given them.

**Biblical:** Ron Man's article (page 9) gives a biblical perspective on why church planters, from frontier mission contexts to the urban centers of North America, can balance the need to be biblically faithful while still being culturally relevant. Using the metaphor of the solid pillars and flexible spans of a bridge, he outlines a biblical framework that leaves room for remarkable freedom in a church's expression of worship.

**Historical:** Cultural boundaries of the 21st century are highly permeable, with art forms constantly interacting and influencing one another. Missiologist James Krabill's article (page 13) provides some historical perspective by exploring these realities and observing what happens when we do not employ ethnodoxology methodologies from the beginning.

**Cultural:** Anne Zaki reflects on the insights provided by the “Nairobi Statement,” unpacking four ways that worship and culture interact. Her article (page 16) reflects on how a worshipping community can maintain respect for its own cultural gifts while still embracing and appreciating what God is doing in other cultures.

**Holistic:** Traumatic situations resulting from war, conflict, disease, famine, domestic violence, and sexual abuse touch millions of people. Biblically based arts and trauma healing strategies provide an opportunity for the Church to point toward the good news of Christ's healing power, forgiveness, reconciliation, and hope. Harriet Hill's article (page 20) demonstrates this holistic approach

and shows how the arts can function as powerful vehicles to help suffering people express pain that cannot be put into mere words, and bring those hurts to the cross of Christ.

**Methodological:** In this concise summary (page 22) of his book, *Creating Local Arts Together*, Brian Schrag outlines key methods for applying the principles of ethnodoxology—a seven step, flexible, research-based process for facilitating local arts in community.<sup>3</sup> Since 2011, courses based on this approach<sup>4</sup> have taught participants to develop a personal plan to encourage kingdom-deepening creativity in communities they know.

**Strategies and Glimpses from the Field:** This section (pages 26-37) contains perspectives from a variety of field practitioners in many regions of the world.

- Todd Saurman proposes “The Worship Wheel” as a useful tool, not only for contextualizing worship experiences at church gatherings, but also for engaging with communities outside the church
- Ian Collinge applies best practices in ethnodoxology to the challenges inherent in short-term missions
- Jacob Joseph explores some considerations for developing indigenized Christian worship in India
- Andrew McFarland briefly describes William Carey’s experience in India with local proverbs and songs
- Tom Ferguson evaluates his experiences with an innovative church planting model, incorporating indigenous forms of Bible-storying and arts
- Jim and Carla Bowman tell of one incident from their story-and

arts-based church planting model which is multiplying churches in over 30 countries


- W. Jay Moon writes of a powerful use of Hausa proverbs in witness
- Mae Alice Reggy recounts how chanting scripture led to a deeper engagement with God’s word among the Wolayta in Ethiopia
- Paul Neeley reminds us that since the Zabur (Psalms) are mentioned in the Qur’an, they can be a “safe” part of the Bible to use in song creation for Islamic contexts
- Finally, this issue closes with a challenge from the Global South. Cameroonian theologian and pastor Roch Ntankeh poses hard questions to fellow Africans and Western missionaries alike, including this one: “Are our Western partners ready to trust us in the decision-making process?”

## FULL CIRCLE

This issue of *Mission Frontiers* holds extraordinary meaning for me. Not only do I love featuring some of my favorite articles from the *Ethnodoxology Handbook and Manual*, but God launched my personal journey into ethnodoxology with the 1996 July-August edition of *MF*. In the late 90s I was beginning a decade of cross-cultural service with my husband and family in Siberia, and that *MF* issue, hand-carried to us on the field, rocked my world. Its seminal articles by pioneers in arts and mission served as a clarion call to service for me and others in this movement. The issue presented a vision for combining worship and local arts in ministry—an idea that changed our lives forever.

So now I’ve come full circle: from wide-eyed reader of the first worship-and-mission issue to a guest editor

with the privilege of demonstrating 18 years of the movement’s growth and development. It is my fond hope that these pages will influence not just artists in mission, but even more importantly, those who guide the future of mission strategy: mission leaders and educators.

And so I welcome you into the world of ethnodoxology. I hope you’ll enjoy your journey through this publication, recognizing that ethnodoxology is for everyone, not just for artists. After all, God gave every community unique gifts of artistic communication to tell the Truth, to bring healing and hope and joy in response to the groanings of creation. Many of these gifts, however, lie dormant, misused, or dying. Whether your role in missions is as a leader, trainer, practitioner, or artistic communicator, you can help people reclaim their arts, enter the Kingdom, and thrive.<sup>5</sup> 

- <sup>1</sup> “The Handbook” - Krabill, James R., gen. ed, with Frank Fortunato, Robin P. Harris, and Brian Schrag, eds. 2013 *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook*. Pasadena: William Carey Library. “The Manual” - Schrag, Brian. *Creating Local Arts Together: A Manual to Help Communities Reach their Kingdom Goals*, James Krabill, gen. ed. (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2013).
- <sup>2</sup> Originally published online: Schrag, Brian with Robin Harris. “Ethnodoxology’s Time is Here: How Engaging Local Artists Can Expand God’s Kingdom.” *Lausanne Global Analysis 3:1* (January 2014), (Accessed July 13, 2014).
- <sup>3</sup> Schrag, Brian. *Creating Local Arts Together: A Manual to Help Communities Reach their Kingdom Goals*, James Krabill, gen. ed. (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2013).
- <sup>4</sup> See <http://www.worldofworship.org/Training/seminars.php> (Accessed July 12, 2014).
- <sup>5</sup> C.f. Brian Schrag’s article, pg. 23 of this issue of *Mission Frontiers*.