

About That Word “Church”:
A Musing about Word Substitution in *Love is the Spirit of this Church*

Elizabeth Alexander, composer and lyricist
March 21, 2018

Every year I receive several requests from musicians asking if they might alter the lyrics of my songs in some way. Without exception, all of these requests are thoughtful and thought-provoking, motivated by large and important questions. Because I am hopelessly addicted to large and important questions, I find myself responding to all of them.

Today I received an interesting query regarding *Love is the Spirit of this Church*. The song itself is a mongrel, a choral arrangement of a 19th-century hymn tune by Elisha A. Hoffman, with 20th-century lyrics by Tony Larsen, and 21st-century revised and additional lyrics written by me.

That query and conversation led me to an interesting place, which I share with you now:

—

Hi Elizabeth,

I loved your arrangement of “Love is the Spirit of this Church” and introduced it to my choir on Monday. Rehearsal became a discussion around singing “this church,” as some people feel that our congregation is not a church, and are thus uncomfortable singing that lyric. What is your stance on changing the word to “place” or “house”? Please let me know what you think.

Conscientious Choir Director

—

Hi Conscientious Choir Director, and thank you for such a thoughtful question.

Your singers make a good point. These days, many people refer to their houses of worship as assemblies or congregations or meeting houses. Why not simply sing “place” or “house”? There’s nothing magic about the word “church.”

Or is there? Is “church” a word with a spiritually rich etymology? I looked it up, of course. The word “church” comes from the Greek word for “lord,” and is a shortening of the phrase “house of the Lord.” Although there’s a lusciously poetic sound to that phrase, the word “Lord” is tricky for many people, including me. Unlike words for God which suggest love, intimacy and acceptance – Yahweh, Spirit, Creator, Redeemer, Holy One, Father/Mother, Still Small Voice – the word “Lord” expresses a power dynamic, the same one that existed between lords and serfs. (Wince.) Clearly, a knowledge of the etymology of “church” isn’t going to help the word sit better with

people who have qualms about it.

However – and I don't think this is a small however – one of the things that is lost by changing the word “church” is that it severs the connection with James Vila Blake, the Unitarian minister who in 1894 penned the covenant which inspired Tony Larsen's lyric:

“Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law.
This is our great covenant:
To dwell together in peace,
To seek the truth in love,
And to help one another.”

These words are, if not revolutionary, at least a bit anti-establishment. Blake declares that his religion is not about *creeds* and *laws*, but instead about *love* and *service*. This is a powerful vision for any religious community. Variations on Blake's covenant would go on to become the congregational covenants of many Unitarian churches in the United States.

So yes, something may be gained by ditching “church,” but something else is lost. (Holy Babies and Bathwater, Batman!)

In case you haven't figured it out by now, I'm a reluctant lyric-changer myself. That doesn't mean I haven't edited or altered poems and lyrics; I have! But not lightly. As much as possible, I want to engage deeply with the historical and cultural context of the actual words of the writer. In the process, I've discovered that sometimes the words I wish to get rid of at first blush end up being the most meaningful. I believe that living with words that make us uncomfortable gets us out of our comfort zone, forcing us to see the world through the eyes of others, both past and present.

Like I said, this is not an ironclad rule for me, but whenever possible I try to make this principle my default. In fact, I will go to great lengths to find a way to contextualize, comment on, or expand on problematic lyrics rather than sanitizing them.

Yikes, that last sentence sounds so academic and theoretical! What might these approaches actually look like in practice?

CONTEXTUALIZE: This is the most straightforward approach, and it will work with any piece of music. Quite simply, if a choir were to perform *Love is the Spirit of this Church* after James Vila Blake's covenant were first introduced and read aloud, it would be most appropriate to sing Blake's word “church.”

COMMENT: If a choir were to sing the “Old-Time Gospel Version” of *Love is the Spirit of This Church* at an interfaith or secular gathering, the spoken *ad lib* sections could be used to address the issue head on. The speaker might say: “That's right, it's love! And what if the place we're

talking about is a synagogue or mosque, or meeting house or shelter, or school or workplace or family or support group? Well, then make that place about love! Make it *all* about love! Embody the spirit of love everywhere you go!”

EXPAND: You might call this method the “Gilbert and Sullivan,” since it was inspired by performers who slip clever modern references into Sullivan’s more comic lyrics. After singing the first half of *Love is the Spirit of This Church* as written, allow some of your own elaborations to creep into the subsequent choruses, ever widening the circle of love. (Hint: You get extra credit if your original lyric scans.)

So instead of:

“For it’s love, yes it’s love,
For it’s love that’s the spirit of this church.
Not the walls or steeple but a gathered people
Is what makes up the spirit of this church.”

Try this:

“For it’s love, yes it’s love,
It’s the spirit of synagogue and shrine.
Whether mosque or temple, the commandment’s simple:
Love will make any common place divine!”

This last approach is the most radical. It certainly won’t work with every piece of music. And many composers and lyricists balk at any suggestion that elaborations be made to their songs, so please don’t tell them I told you it was okay! But in the case of *Love is the Spirit of This Church* – especially the “Old-Time Gospel Version” – creativity and bold improvisation are already built into the ethos of the song, so you can make the song your own without banishing Blake – not to mention having to sing the word “house” on the last note of dozens of phrases. (Eeoww, it makes my mouth hurt just to think about it.)

In the end, it’s your performance, and how you respond to words that don’t resonate with your performers or audience is not a trivial question. So I applaud you for not mouthing lyrics mindlessly, and I also applaud you for not altering lyrics willy-nilly. Whatever words you decide to sing – and ultimately it is your choice – your commitment to making this decision with integrity is what makes love the spirit of your choir.

Be well, and sing on!

Elizabeth