A Publisher's Perspective

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The focus of this session is on music in the African American Christian church. My small part in this presentation is that of a church music publisher who has made a significant commitment to serving the African American church. And though I am wearing my publisher's hat, when addressing church musicians I always like to make it known that on this past July first I retired from a career of forty-seven years as a parish musician: first, because it's in my blood—so to speak—and secondly, because I have always felt that my parish work informed what I do as a church music publisher. So...a few words from the publisher's perspective.

We need only to read the letters to the editor in the American Guild of Organists' magazine to know that it is often said that a lot of what is wrong with church music is the fault of music publishers. "If they wouldn't flood the church with music of poor quality, the church would be left only with what is worthy." If it were only that simple.

We live in a market driven society. In other words, what people want, people get. Those who are able to supply consumer wants generally manage to stay in business. Also, to say that poor church music is the fault of music publishers seems to absolve the church itself from any responsibility for what it chooses to sing.

If there were no market for lite beer, no one would manufacture it. Because there is a huge market, every major brewery has a lite version of its brand. Today there is plenty of what some would like to call lite church music, and any publisher that is going to survive must feed that market to some extent. Yet I hope to be judged as a publisher, not on what we do just to stay alive in our industry, but on the other uses to which we put that positive cash flow.

One example dates back nearly twenty years. My firm, GIA, learned that the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus was exploring the possibility of developing a hymnal for African American Catholics—a hymnal that would be faithful to both Roman Catholic and African American traditions. Since this had never been done before, the idea quickly sparked interest at GIA. We have always been attracted to the exploration of new, uncharted territories. A need obviously existed, and we were philosophically aligned with the concept. We approached the NBCCC, made a proposal, and as a result — after several years of compilation and editorial work— became the publisher of the first ever hymnal of its type, Lead Me, Guide Me.

Jumping ahead five years, in 1992 GIA was approached by an ad hoc group of African American Protestants (clergy and musicians) who were members of mainstream denominations currently in the process of developing new denominational hymnbooks. While these African American congregations—which represented only about ten percent of their respective denominations— nonetheless supported the denominational hymnbook efforts, they were fully conscious of the fact that the New Century Hymnal of the United Church of Christ, and the Chalice Hymnal of the Disciples of Christ, would fall short of meeting the needs of African American congregations.

Having become aware of Lead Me, Guide Me, this ad hoc group approached GIA and inquired whether or not we would consider publishing a not-so-Catholic version of that hymnal, with perhaps an appended supplement.
[Contrary to popular belief, GIA is not denominationally affiliated. We publish a great deal of material for the Roman Catholic liturgy, but we remain an independent, privately owned and controlled, commercial enterprise.]

GIA immediately understood the concerns of this group of pastors and musicians; we readily saw yet another need to be met (new territory to explore), and made a proposal of our own. Rather than a revised edition of Lead Me, Guide Me, we suggested that an entirely new hymnal be created from the ground up. Eight years later—a rather lengthy gestation period—and with a substantial financial investment, the African American Heritage Hymnal was born. All indications to date are that it has been well worth the wait and the risk. Both from the ecclesiastical and the ethnomusicological perspective the African American Heritage Hymnal seems to have successfully paved much new territory.

At GIA we believe that a hymnal serves only one part of the parish music-making activity. The repertoire it provides for community song needs to be supplemented by appropriate repertoire for the choir. As the logical next step in GIA’s involvement in serving the African American community, we made a substantial commitment to a new series of choral music known as the African American Church Music Series. We quickly realized that, aside from one or another series featuring a single composer or arranger, no major church music publisher had a broad-based commitment to publishing for the African American church. Music publishing in the African American church community is largely a cottage industry, or vanity press, if you prefer. Most composers of any worth ”own” their own publishing company. Equipped with a music software program, with printing by Kinko’s or a photocopy machine, they are off to various conferences with a briefcase full of scores that they sell as single copies through individual contact with colleagues. The problem with this sort of publishing is the almost total lack of marketing and distribution—and ultimately, measurable income.

For lack of a significant market in that area perhaps no major publishing house has committed itself to serving the African American church. Purchasing quantities of octavos is a foreign experience for many an African American church choir owing to the strong tradition of learning by rote and singing from memory. The quasi-improvisatory accompaniment style that uses the printed page—if at all—for a mere outline, further reduces the focus on printed music. Of course, one by-product of this practice is the limitation placed on musical complexity—although this is somewhat contradicted by the reality that today many African American composers are writing and arranging music of significant complexity. If AACMS is to succeed, this hurdle will have to be overcome. Fortunately, part of the slack is being taken up by a rather high interest in this series developing among non-African American choirs.

In the first two years of the AACMS, nearly sixty titles, from the creative output of approximately thirty African American composers and arrangers, have been contracted, with about thirty titles and a CD recording already in print, and the others in the works. Some of the composers are names synonymous with Black choral music in America; other, lesser known but equally gifted, writers have already been introduced through the series, and as the word continues to spread, manuscript submissions for the AACMS are arriving with a steady flow.

Another aspect of the GIA involvement in publishing for the African American church is in the area of book publishing. At least a half-dozen titles on African American worship and music have been published (or in one case distributed) by GIA.
To conclude this tale about GIA's involvement in this one area of the church, we end up by coming full circle. On this coming Dec. 11, in Chicago, we are hosting the inaugural meeting for the revision of *Lead Me, Guide Me*, a revision that will give more extensive coverage to psalmody and ritual music. Even more interesting, in a sort of leap frog exercise *Lead Me, Guide Me*, which served as a springboard for the *African American Heritage Hymnal*, will now in its second incarnation incorporate the hymnological scholarship developed by the edition it inspired. In addition to all other aspects of this story, this gives a new and little recognized dimension to ecumenical exchange and influence.

**RECOMMENDED READING**


He is a past president of the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada, musician for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and served on the National Association of Pastoral Musicians Council. That association named him Pastoral Musician of the Year for 2000.