

# CCLI 2015-2017 Top 100 Songs Vetted for United Methodist Congregations

## CCLI Top 100 Vetting Team

Taylor Burton-Edwards, Kim Chapman, Nelson Cowan, Keum Hwang, Jackson Henry,  
Laura Jaquith Bartlett, Lim Swee Hong, Robert McMichael, Janice McNair, and Lester Ruth

One of the most significant indicators of the use of newer music in Christian congregations in The United States is the CCLI Top 100 list. CCLI is the nation's leading provider of licensing services for churches that reproduce songs in print or on screen for congregational singing.

As a list, the CCLI Top 100 only indicates what copyrighted songs congregations subscribing to the CCLI license are using the most. The list provides no information about the quality of the songs, either theologically, musically, or in terms of their use of language for humanity and God.

The majority of the contemporary/modern worship corpus reflected in the CCLI Top 100 list is generated by artists whose theological traditions are not generally Wesleyan-Arminian. Most could be described as charismatic, Pentecostal, Calvinist, or neo-Calvinist. These traditions have not fully shared and sometimes have taken positions opposite to our core commitments as United Methodists. These commitments include:

- ◆ an understanding of salvation in which ongoing sanctification and making use of the means of grace are seen as crucial
- ◆ a practice of corporate worship and discipleship in which sacraments are central
- ◆ an attentiveness to doctrinal and biblical accuracy in lyrical form
- ◆ the importance of *congregational* singing, and
- ◆ the use of language for God that is expansive, inclusive, non-patriarchal and that consistently respects persons of all cultures, ethnicities, and physical and mental abilities.

We have sought to be generous in vetting this collection of songs to affirm those we believe we **can** sing as United Methodists and that can be good for us to sing. We have used criteria of adherence to Wesleyan theology, appropriate use of language for God and humanity, and singability.

Here we present two lists of songs, all of which we commend for United Methodist congregations to consider for use in worship. The **Green List** includes those that generally scored 3.5 or higher on a five point scale across our criteria and that we have agreed present few if any obstacles, other than key register in some cases, for our congregations to sing with confidence. The **Yellow List** includes songs that have one or more significant issues we believe may require some conversation between musicians and pastors about whether or how to include them in worship, but are generally sound. The italicized items at the bottom of this list may require additional attention, either because they include language that could be understood as racist, or overuse exclusively male images of God, or could be interpreted as theologically problematic. We still commend them, but we especially encourage further conversation to occur around how these might be performed. Songs that appear in the 2015-2017 CCLI Top 100 but not on either of these lists we have chosen not to commend. All of our scoring and comments on all recommended songs over the past three years will be published on the Discipleship Ministries CCLI Top 100 website (<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/ccli-top-100>).

The corpus of hymns and worship songs keeps expanding. We hope our work to generate these lists and the fuller detail that will appear on our website will be a useful toolset that helps you, our pastors, musicians and worship planners and leaders, discover and evaluate and help your congregations sing old and new songs that are both true to our United Methodist commitments and most appropriate for your particular contexts.

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### Songs new to the Top 100 in 2017 are in bold:

#### **Green List (No or Minor Reservations)**

10,000 Reasons  
Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)  
Because He Lives  
Before the Throne of God Above  
Better Is One Day  
Blessed Be Your Name  
Christ Is Risen  
Cornerstone  
Everlasting God  
**Give Thanks**  
Glory to God Forever  
Great Is Thy Faithfulness  
Here I Am to Worship  
How Great Thou Art  
**I Love You, Lord**  
**Jesus**  
Jesus Loves Me  
Jesus Messiah  
**Jesus, We Love You**  
Lord, I Lift Your Name on High  
Never Once  
**O Come to the Altar**  
Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)  
One Thing Remains (Your Love Never Fails)  
**O Praise the Name (Anástasis)**  
Open the Eyes of My Heart  
Our God Saves  
Relentless  
Set a Fire  
Shout to the Lord  
The Wonderful Cross  
This I Believe  
Today Is the Day  
We Believe  
**What a Beautiful Name**  
You Are Good (Houghton)  
You Are My All in All  
You Are My King (Amazing Love)  
You Never Let Go  
Your Grace Is Enough

#### **Yellow List (Some Reservations)**

Alive  
At Your Name  
Because He Lives, Amen  
Breathe  
Broken Vessels/Amazing Grace  
Come As You Are  
Desert Song  
**Even So, Come**  
Forever  
Forever (We Sing Hallelujah)  
God of Wonders  
**Here As in Heaven**  
Hosanna  
Hosanna (Praise Is Rising)  
How Great Is Our God  
I Give You My Heart  
Indescribable  
I Will Rise  
**Joy to the World (Unspeakable Joy)**  
Lord, I Need You  
Man of Sorrows  
Mighty to Save  
**Resurrecting**  
Stronger  
Unstoppable God  
We Fall Down  
You Are Good (Riddle)  
**Your Love Awakens Me**  
Your Name  
*At the Cross (Love Ran Red)*  
*Build Your Kingdom Here*  
*Good, Good Father*  
*How Deep the Father's Love for Us*  
*Love Came Down*  
*Revelation Song*  
*This Is Amazing Grace*  
*Victory in Jesus*  
*Your Love Never Fails*

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### Comments on Cautions for Yellow List

**Alive**— Theology and Accompaniment: Inconsistent “you” references. Unclear lyrics seeming to be more driven by rhythm and tune than theology. Probably requires a full, skilled band to perform well.

**At Your Name**—Language: Using the name Yahweh for God is historically and inter-religiously problematic. The historic name for God (YHWH in Hebrew) is never pronounced. What makes this more problematic is this song only praises the power of YHWH, while the most common phrase used in association with the divine name in the Old Testament is “full of compassion, abounding in steadfast love.”

**Because He Lives, Amen (Maher/Tomlin)**—Theology and Language: There is no biblical account of Jesus rolling away the stone. The poetics of this song are weak. Phrases seem thrown together incoherently.

**Breathe**— Language: Unclear who “You” is. “I’m desperate for you” may be understood as an indication of a poor relationship, and more indicative of sexual than spiritual intimacy.

**Broken Vessels/Amazing Grace (Hillsong)**—Theology, Language, and Singability: While the song is addressed ostensibly to Jesus (“laying yourself down” in the chorus), it is the Holy Spirit who works to cleanse us and make us more fully bearers of the image of Christ, which appears to be the hope expressed in verse 2, but about Jesus. “I can see the love in your eyes, laying yourself down” can read as erotic poetry rather than address to Christ. The frequent melismas in the chorus make it challenging for congregations to sing.

**Come As You Are (Crowder/Maher)**—Theology and Singability: It is unclear to whom this song is addressed. The only antecedent for “fall in *his* arms” (bridge) is “Heaven” in verse 1. The chorus also has very long sustains on high notes. These would work fine with very large congregation or skilled solo singing and band accompaniment, but not so well for small or midsize congregations or simpler, acoustic accompaniment. Consider transposing it down to B-flat or A.

**Desert Song**—Language: Generally Wesleyan in thought with a Pentecostal twist. Objections may be raised in some contexts to use of battle/conqueror language.

**Even So Come**—Language: Even though bride/bridegroom language is scriptural, there are possible cultural implications with the choice of words in the song, particularly brides “waiting” on bridegrooms. This image creates an unintended power dynamic in which brides are passive. However, the possibility does exist for the image to be redeemed when combined with the direct use of these scriptural images and further interpretation in worship or study. In communities where lines of gender and marriage are being expanded, further considerations may be necessary for use.

**Forever**—Singability and Language: Verse low and complex, chorus high, limits congregational participation. Many “his” references to God.

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**Forever We Sing Hallelujah**—Singability and Theology: The vocal range of this song may be too large for most congregations. The verses are pitched fairly low and the chorus remains very high for extended periods of time. Verse 2 could be read to underwrite salvation without sanctification.

**God of Wonders**—Language: In later verses (not included in Worship & Song), 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun references are exclusively masculine. Easy to address by not including or singing these verses, but enough of an issue in the full score from Song Select to raise a caution.

**Here As in Heaven**—Confusion/collapse in the language of the bridge, in which the words of the Lord's Prayer, "Your kingdom come, your will be done here as in heaven," is directed toward the Spirit of God, instead of the Lord God/YHWH/Father (first person of the Trinity). We applaud the incorporation of the text from the Lord's Prayer, but the divine address is simply inaccurate.

**Hosanna**—Language: Concerns raised about "King of Glory" language in the way it is used—not as in the Psalms, but as a replacement for "Son of Man" in Daniel/Revelation/synoptics. This kind of usage sounds biblical, but isn't. Several suggested the Hosanna section could be extracted and used as a Sanctus for communion if the arrangement were acoustic and toned down enough. The song as a whole, as typically performed, may overwhelm the celebration of the sacrament.

**Hosanna (Praise Is Rising)**—Theology and Language: It is unclear to whom the song is addressed until the end of the chorus. The line "have your way among us" could in some settings be misconstrued in a sexual sense inappropriate for corporate worship.

**How Great Is Our God**—Theology and Language: While, unlike many modern worship songs, this one is explicitly Trinitarian, it only celebrates God's power and never mentions God's love, which is at the center in Wesleyan theology. The reference to "darkness" in verse one, as opposed to light, could be understood to be racist. All pronouns for God are masculine.

**I Give You My Heart**—Theology: Some may find this song focuses too much on human activity and human initiative in salvation. It's a bit unclear who "you" is in the song, and so this could be read as a collapse of the Son and the Spirit. Could be useful as a song of commitment or a prayer song.

**Indescribable**—Theology: One word is theologically problematic—"unchangeable." While God's *faithfulness* is *unchanging*, and Hebrews 13:8 affirms "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever", the Bible overall does not portray God as *unchangeable*.

**I Will Rise**—Theology: Concerns raised about first verse, that the assurance that "I will rise" seems to be understood as based on the "peace I've come to know," with no mention of sanctification, and an unclear connection to discipleship.

**Joy to the World (Unspeakable Joy)**—Even though this incorporates a well-known and appreciated hymn, the chorus shifts the focus from the world to the individual, which is not the point of the hymn (Joy to the *world*). In addition, there is concern among vetting team members about the continued practice of adding choruses to existing hymns and, thus, creating copyrighted works from public domain hymns. The vetting team will continue to wrestle with the ethics of this practice.

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**Lord I Need You—Singability:** This is a strong song textually, but the musical setting presents problems for congregational singing. Octave leaps are almost never a good idea for generating power in a song as they tend to cut out half of the singers (male or female). The range of the song, with the octave leaps, is too wide to transpose down and still keep the whole song singable by all. We suggest singing the chorus without the octave leap, perhaps having a female voice double it as written while a lower lead voice stays in the same octave as what came before.

**Man of Sorrows—Theology:** Bridge seems to emphasize justification as the endpoint of salvation. In our theology, sin still has a strong hold on us that it takes sanctifying grace to continue to unloose. Consider performing without the bridge or making bridge instrumental to eliminate this problem.

**Mighty to Save—Theology and Language:** The phrase “Jesus conquered the grave” is not biblical. It leaves out the work of the Father to raise him. The New Testament refers to Jesus as King rarely, but this song does so with great frequency. This is another song that sounds biblical in its use of language, but is not.

**Resurrecting--**The reworking of "The head that once was crowned with thorns" by Thomas Kelly in 1820—uncredited, by the way, which is its own problem—radically alters Kelly's original point about shame. Shame in the original is NOT overcome by Jesus on the cross. Instead, we BEAR his shame as we bear his name. Kelly's original text was far more in line with New Testament accounts of the connection between the cross and shame. Shame is not something to be avoided or escaped, but something to expect to happen to us because we follow Jesus.

**Stronger—Theology:** The frequent repetition of “sin is broken” *could* be taken as a repudiation of our need for sanctification and growth in holiness.

**Unstoppable God—Theology:** We commend this song for strong creation imagery, which is somewhat unusual in modern worship music. The combined imagery of creation and deliverance from sin in the verses make this a candidate for use at services of baptism and confirmation or reaffirmation. At the same time, the lyrics identify only Jesus as “Unstoppable God,” while many of the lyrics used point to actions normally attributed to the work of the First or Third persons of the Trinity, almost making them superfluous.

**We Fall Down—Theology, Language and Music:** Trinitarian collapse: The term Holy is ascribed to “the One who sits upon the throne” (the Father) in Revelation, or the “Lord God” in the Old Testament and not to Jesus (Lamb). Yet this song says “we fall down... at the feet of Jesus.” Again the language sounds biblical but isn’t. Musically, there is an apparent misfit between the text (“we fall down”) and the tune (a rising motif).

**You Are Good (Riddle)—Theology:** May be seen as too individualistic. If you delete “to me” in the *performance* of the song (you may not legally change printed/projected lyrics without permission of the copyright holders) the song works well as a generic hymn of praise. Riddle himself deletes “to me” in his more recent performances of this song.

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**Your Love Awakens Me**—The greatest concern about this song is related to singability issues, particularly vocal range. While the melody is repetitive in places, the range is well over an octave. Adjusting the key lower is difficult in this circumstance because the melody already goes quite low in the original key. Singing down an octave in places might work, but placing it in that low of a range can dampen the overall musical intensity. Congregation members might feel more like observers during this song.

**Your Name**—Theology and Language: The Name we are praising is actually never named until verse 2. This makes the initial intention of the address unclear. The song is also unclear how salvation is in “your Name.”

### **Songs Requiring Additional Caution (Yellow with italics)**

*At the Cross (Love Ran Red)*—Theology and Language: This is a song resonant with Wesleyan overtones about the nature of love and redemption. However, though the intention of “when love ran red and my sin washed white” in the chorus (sung at least six times over the course of the song) may have been a paraphrase of Isaiah 1: 18 (“though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool”), in fact the Hebrew never uses the word “white,” which has strong racial undertones in more recent history. It may be difficult for communities of color to sing these words. Further, the “redness” in Isaiah refers to the people’s sin (scarlet and crimson as blood red, for blood guilt), not to cleansing blood as the theology of this song suggests, and Isaiah connects the cleansing needed by the people not at all to sacrifices (indeed, it rejects sacrifices, and calls the people’s hands full of blood, verses 10-15), but to obedience to the way of God going forward. They are to wash themselves (verse 16), not look to any other agent to wash them.

*Build Your Kingdom Here*—Language: The line “Let the darkness fear” in the chorus could be read as having racist overtones. Could be modified in performance (but not legally in print or on screen without permission from the copyright holders) to something like “Let all evil fear” and the issue would be resolved.

*Good, Good Father*—Language: The music is itself commendable, and widely loved by many. Indeed, this song is #1 on the overall 2016 CCLI list and #1 among United Methodist subscribers to Song Select. The meter support the feeling of affection the between the worshiper and the First Person of the Trinity. It is also unusual, and commendable, among modern worship songs to address any person of the Trinity other than the Second. The imagery of this song, drawing from the words from the voice from heaven about Jesus at his baptism and his transfiguration, supports its particular use at baptism, confirmation, and reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant. Still, the only way the First Person is addressed is Father, and the way the Father is addressed is thoroughly sentimentalized, and so disconnected from biblical usage of the term.

*How Deep the Father’s Love for Us*—Language and Theology: All language for God is masculine, and “bring many sons to glory” (Hebrews 2:10) in verse 1 requires serious attention. Could be altered in performance (but not legally in print or on screen without permission from the copyright holders) to

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something like “bring sinful ones to glory.” Atonement imagery of the Father turning his face away derives from Calvinism not the Bible and may be seen as problematic.

*Love Came Down*-- Theology and Singability: The song generally keeps the Father (God) and Son distinct until the bridge, then seems to collapse all onto Jesus. If bridge is simply deleted the theological problem vanishes and the song has a strong Wesleyan character, focusing as it does on God’s love. The music of the verses is choppy, making it a bit challenging for congregations to sing.

*Revelation Song*— Theology, Language and Singability: Possible Trinitarian collapse. The scriptures ascribe the term “worthy” to the Lamb (Jesus) but ascribe “holy” only to either the Trinity as a whole, to the “One who sits upon the throne” (Father, or Lord God). Since verse 3 is addressed to Jesus, singing the chorus after it seems to heighten the confusion of persons. King of kings language is overused relative to biblical usage. Syncopation and rhythms may be challenging for some congregations to sing.

*This Is Amazing Grace*—Theology and Language: The references to God seem to collapse the Father onto the Son, generating a sort of unitarianism of the Second Person of the Trinity. The whole song, and the bridge in particular, emphasizes “king” language, which is a fairly rare way of referring to Jesus in the New Testament. The Bible never refers to Jesus as “the king of glory.”

*Victory in Jesus*—Theology: The eschatology in this song seems to focus primarily on going “up there” to heaven when we die rather than resurrection and new creation. There is no mention of sanctification. Some may find the language of “cleansing flood” related to “blood” problematic.

*Your Love Never Fails (McClarney)*— Theology: The song never specifies who “You” is. This raises concerns about collapsing the persons of the Trinity. Odd use of biblical language in asserting the unspecified You makes “all things work together for *my* good” in the bridge (reference to Romans 8:28).