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Editorial

Special Issue: Worship and the Megachurch

Hello again to all readers of the *Journal of Contemporary Ministry*. In this issue we are doing something different: a special themed issue on “Worship and the Megachurch.” As the guest editorial explains, this emerged from a special conference in 2020 and when I was approached about a special issue, I was happy to oblige.

This theme very much fits with our vision of encouraging discussion about issues related to contemporary ministry, in this case issues that have generated a fair bit of “heat” and perhaps not enough “light.” Both the place of mega churches and the emerging forms of contemporary worship associated with Pentecostal mega churches in particular have been controversial. So I am sure we all have things to learn and arguments to embrace or contest as we read this issue.

So I welcome our three guest editors who have shepherded the main articles in this issue through the usual peer-review process and produced an issue that will be relevant and stimulating, I’m sure. They are **Andrew Davies** of the University of Birmingham (UK), **U-Wen Low**, until recently of Alphacrucis College Melbourne campus, and **Tanya Riches** of Hillsong College and University of Birmingham. They will now introduce the contributors to this special issue.

Hopefully there will be more special themed issues of the journal in the future as well as some multi-themed issues. It’s up to you to send me the articles!

Before I conclude, I want to mention the passing of **Emeritus Professor Gary Bouma** who has served on the editorial board of this journal from the start. Professor Bouma was an Anglican priest and a leading sociologist in religion. For many years he worked for Monash University in that field and mentored many people through doctoral work and post-doctoral research. He wrote over 30 books on religion in Australia and on the skills of empirical research. He also co-authored several with emerging scholars in the field. The Australian government recognized his efforts in 2013 by appointing him Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for services to sociology, interreligious relations and the Anglican Church of Australia. I met Gary when he served as chair of the academic board of Harvest Bible College. I found him to be a great friend of

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Pentecostalism (though not himself Pentecostal) and a great supporter of research of all kinds. His advice as we started the *Journal of Contemporary Ministry* was invaluable. He will be greatly missed by all who knew him.

God bless you all

Jon Newton

Guest Editorial

Worship and the Megachurch

In October 2020, as convenors we were delighted to host our first 'Worship and the Megachurch' conference with the Edward Cadbury Centre for the Public Understanding of Religion at the University of Birmingham. The original plan was to hold it in Melbourne, but as readers are perhaps aware, the global pandemic took our year in unexpected and challenging directions. National, let alone international, travel became impossible, and all the world went online.

However, for larger churches, this pivot often brought as many opportunities as it did challenges. Many of these congregations were already experimenting with digital platforms before the international government lockdowns. Therefore, 'megachurch hopping' became popular in the first few months of global lockdown, where it was not uncommon for worshippers to follow the sun round the planet, starting with morning worship in Oceania and ending it some 20 hours later in California, dropping in on a couple of Asian and European congregational services *en route*.

As academia too caught its breath and began to seize its own new opportunities, researchers often learned the new skills of digital communication and presenting online and wholeheartedly embraced the opportunity for collaboration across continents. Our event, therefore, was originally envisaged fundamentally as an Australia/UK dialogue, but gained a global audience and an international perspective, which contributed immensely to its success. As participants from all over the world brought their insights to the digital table, this greatly enriched the discussion.

The conference committee believed these breakthrough insights were worth sharing with a broader audience. We are honoured, then, to now present some of the key insights from that digital conference to you now in this special volume of the Journal of Contemporary Ministry. For this context, we have intentionally selected the more practically focused papers; as in, those which speak directly to church praxis and culture (with some of the more theoretical papers to appear in a subsequent collection elsewhere). Therefore, this collection represents the activities within the conference. A series of invited plenary speakers explored the core themes of the conference out of their own professional and individual contexts. Within this volume, we present the personal reflections of **Clayton Coombs**, president of Pentecostal and Charismatic Bible Colleges (PCBC) and a scholar

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on the Empower 21 Spirit Empowered Movement Academic Forum advising the Global Spirit Empowered movement on theological issues. His plenary offered a distinctive apologetic for the worship culture of the Australian megachurch Planetshakers as well as a passionate defence of this tradition and some of the harsher critique that megachurch spirituality is often subjected to.

This is followed by four articles. Two of these presentations were written by emerging scholars and engage with Hillsong Church. **Sarah Young** is an undergraduate lecturer at Hillsong College, Sydney, whose ethnographic M.Th. Dissertation entitled, “Thanks for ~~Watching~~ Joining: Religious Digital Creatives and a Theology of Presence at Hillsong Church Online” (June 2021) explores the digital aspects of contemporary religious practices or “digital church experience.” Her article here addresses the Sydney megachurch’s transition to online worship, highlighting the practical and systemic changes this required from online pastoral as well as technical teams. **Kenelm Ka Lun Chan** is currently the program director of VET and Diploma of Business at Alphacrucis College (AC) in Sydney, Australia, and also works as a sessional tutor for the ministry and theology department. Hong Kong-born Kenelm has been involved in worship and music ministry for over 20 years, first in a local Chinese church in Vancouver and now leading the music team at a Chinese congregation of the Hillsong megachurch in Sydney. His paper highlights another cultural challenge, and describes the contextualisation of Hillsong worship into the church’s Chinese-speaking congregations.

Two further papers turn our attention to worship songwriting; **Anneli Loepp Thiessen** is a PhD student at the University of Ottawa, where her research focuses on women’s roles and experiences within the contemporary worship music industry. She is an experienced music teacher, church musician, congregational music songwriter, and pianist. Anneli examines the astonishing underrepresentation of women songwriters as single authors over thirty years of CCLI ‘Top 25 Songs’ lists. Finally, **Shannan Baker**, a third-year Ph.D. candidate in Church Music at Baylor University whose research primarily focusses on contemporary worship music and theology, examines the biblical roots of the fire and water imagery that pervades so many of Bethel Music’s songs.

These papers together offer a fascinating snapshot of the state of play in megachurch worship in 2021 and the quest of these internationally prominent megachurch worship collectives to remain diverse and culturally relevant in their representation as well as

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engaging, interactive and solidly scriptural in their communication. **Loepp Thiessen** and **Young** in their different ways highlight the challenges of inclusion and creative engagement with technology that the churches will need to navigate going forward; **Chan** and **Baker** thoughtfully evaluate the processes of megachurch worship contextualisation, considering both the effectiveness and appropriateness as well as the opportunities this offers. The perspectives offered across the board in the conference were both affirming of insiders' faith but also constructively critical, reflecting the voices of friends who cherish what is, but seek to call out even higher and greater things from the communities they speak to.

In addition, we also include several reviews of books that, although they may not address the theme of megachurches in any direct way, we felt would and should be of interest to readers of this special edition of the Journal. **Rosie Shorter** reviews Tim Hein's *Understanding Sexual Abuse: A guide for ministry leaders and survivors*. This topic has been a significant one for the church globally but is also highly recommended for megachurch pastors. From the context of Hillsong, **Tracy Barrell** reviews *The Routledge Handbook of Pentecostal Theology* which comprehensively covers the field, providing a particularly significant resource. **Ceon Dindial** reviews John Swinton's *Finding Jesus in the Storm: The Spiritual Lives of Christians with Mental Health Challenges* which is anticipated to be of assistance for all pastors in the post-COVID context, but from which megachurches may have resources to put to bear towards this topic. **Greta Wells** reviews Adam D. Tietje's *Toward a Pastoral Theology of Holy Saturday: Providing Spiritual Care for War Wounded Souls* suitable for chaplains and pastoral care workers. Finally, **Ben Jacuk** reviews Steve Taylor's new volume *Fresh Expressions: Innovation and the Mission of God* from the perspective of a Native American author engaging with the revitalisation of the church.

The events of 2020-21 (and continuing global volatility) arguably mean that the contribution of megachurches has never been more significant than it is today. These churches have proved that they are capable of responding to the shifts in Christian demographics and implementing the technological advancement that post-pandemic worship life may require. However, at the same time, there are also significant challenges presenting to these larger Christian communities within a pandemic; they are also deeply inculturated in megachurch life. As these various movements respond to the ongoing and lasting impact of the pandemic, perhaps, as these papers

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advocate, we will see from them a renewed, creative commitment to expressing their culture, values, and distinctiveness through a beautiful diversity of voices, languages, and expressions of praise, orchestrating a rejuvenation of the 'omniphony' that was, of course, exemplified and embodied by the Day of Pentecost itself and has carried the global church forward since through its transformational engagement with a thousand regional cultures, ritual preferences and musical choices. Perhaps the 2020s can once again be the season of 'one body, many tunes.'

Andrew Davies, University of Birmingham

U-Wen Low, Alphacrucis College

Tanya Riches, Hillsong College/University of Birmingham

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