Journal of Contemporary Ministry

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About this Journal

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 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

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

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

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

advocate, we will see from them a renewed, creative commitment to expressing their culture, values, and distinctivenesses 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

October 2021

Keynote Address

Journal of Contemporary Ministry

Keynote Address

Sounds of Revival: An Unapologetic Apology for Megachurch Worship Practices

Clayton Coombs

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Abstract

The phenomenon of the megachurch is inextricably linked to its worship practices, and revival is the lens through which both the nature of our Churches and the songs that we sing must be interpreted. This article takes as its starting point the analysis of Contemporary worship in Lim and Ruth's *Loving on Jesus* (2017). Written from the perspective of a Pentecostal theologian and long-time megachurch member, it presents a positive view of contemporary, and specifically megachurch worship. The article draws on both historical and contemporary sources to present the view that megachurch worship is not merely a passing fad or a phenomenon to be analysed. It is rather an experience to be embraced, and one which offers genuine encounters with God. This experience is not only biblically defensible. It is historically orthodox in its aims and emphases, and consistent with a context of revival.

Introduction

The so-called "worship wars" have long since been fought and won and it seems contemporary worship is here to stay. But this series of papers is not just about the styles and methods of contemporary worship. It is also about megachurches, the vehicles which often define these styles and champion these methods, and develop the pioneer organisations that others follow. For that reason, my purpose in this paper is not merely to describe what does happen in megachurch worship, but to explain why it should and must keep happening. In this respect I differ from a recent and incredibly helpful analysis by Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Loving on Jesus* (Ruth &

Lim, 2017), which has helped frame my own thoughts and with which I will dialogue. In what follows, I aim to provide not a history then, but an apology (in the classical sense) for megachurch worship, or, an exegesis of revival. And to be clear, my contention is that that is exactly what is going on. The phenomenon of the megachurch is inextricably linked to its worship practices, and revival is the lens through which both the nature of our Churches and the songs that we sing must be interpreted. Put simply, I contend that revivals, large churches, and new songs go hand in hand. Moreover, I aim to show that they always have done. And for this reason, what is happening in the churches is not something novel, at least in the theological sense. It is deeply rooted in Scripture, it is soundly orthodox theologically, and it is continuous with what has happened in revivals past, dating back to the very birth of the Church. I write as a Pentecostal scholar, and a long-time member of one of Australia's largest churches, Planetshakers.

In their history of contemporary worship Lim and Ruth (2017), set out nine essential characteristics of what they call "contemporary worship." While I realise that their study includes churches whose worship may be described as "contemporary" but that are not megachurches, there is sufficient overlap with the context they are examining to use their definition as a basis for discussion of megachurch worship. The nine characteristics are in four general groupings (Lim and Ruth, 2017, p. 2) as listed:

- Fundamental Presumptions
    - Using Contemporary, nonarchaic English
    - A dedication to relevance regarding contemporary concerns and issues in the lives of worshippers
    - A commitment to adapt worship to match contemporary people, sometimes to the level of strategic targeting
- Musical
    - Using musical styles from current types of popular music
    - Extended times of uninterrupted congregational singing
    - A centrality of the musicians in the liturgical space and in the leadership of the service
- Behavioural
    - Greater levels of physical expressiveness
    - A predilection for informality
- Key Dependency

- A reliance on electronic technology

My hope is that my thoughts on this will be a resource for those wishing to support and champion the amazing work that megachurches do and their worship practices. But more than that, my hope is that I will be able to provoke or encourage further research in these critical areas. So, with that in mind I present an unapologetic apology for megachurch worship practices.

Before I continue, it is also important to note that hymns have always been important in the life of the church. Most of them — at least the ones that have stood the test of time (here I think of hymns like "How Great Thou Art," "Be Thou My Vision," "Holy Holy Holy," "A Mighty Fortress is our God," etc.) — have a primarily catechetical function and are thus necessarily laden with important theological terms and concepts. And yet in exhorting the Ephesian believers to "speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (Eph 5:19), Paul reminds us that this catechetical function is only one among several distinct purposes of church music, which also include, at the very least, the exuberant declaration of God's mighty acts, the celebration of God's goodness, and the facilitation of personal encounter with God by the Holy Spirit.[1] These additional functions have come to be designated in recent times by the collective term “praise and worship.” Thus, Lim and Ruth demonstrate the evolution of these terms, charting their theology and usage, which according to them has largely been driven by Pentecostal Churches and adopted by others (S. H. Lim & Ruth, 2017, p. 14).

One of the things that I believe Lim and Ruth have gotten profoundly right in their observations about contemporary worship is their discussion of the sacramental quality of worship. Of course, the terminology they use would be entirely foreign to most megachurch attendees, especially to Pentecostals who comprise the vast majority of this group. Their insistence on the terms *sacramentalism* and *liturgy* in a work on contemporary worship — apparently an implicit critique of Pentecostalism’s iconoclasm in the first instance and oral culture in the second — is puzzling to say the

[1] To be clear, I do not contend that Paul necessarily intends to designate three *genres* of music in use in the Church, though such a conclusion would not be unwarranted, but rather that his apparent need to use three different words to define the scope of Church music in the first century is parallel to a similarly diverse scope of church music in our own day. New Testament commentators often use the term ‘hymn’ when designating passages such as Philippians 2:6-11; e.g. (Gordley, 2018). If this usage is correct, such ‘hymns’ are certainly theologically rich and catechetical in nature. It should perhaps be noted that the earliest post New Testament hymn, the *Phos Hilaron* written in the 4th century or perhaps even slightly before, can hardly be said to be ‘theologically rich’ by comparison however. (For some analysis of this see Alexandru, 2020).

least. Furthermore, though their appeal to the liturgical terms *anamnesis* and *epiclesis* may communicate with precision to scholars in the field, one cannot help but wonder if they would be better served by adopting the more familiar terms associated with the phenomenon they are attempting to analyse, namely *praise* and *worship*. But these more traditional classical terms serve to make a very important point, for sacramental theology at its core is the belief that the Church, in its worship, can truly encounter God. That is, that via the sacraments—certain actions or rituals performed that admittedly have certain elements of tradition, but ultimately find their genesis in Scripture—Christians can experience the "real presence" of Christ. In that sense, Pentecostals and Charismatics could certainly be said to have a sacramental understanding of worship (whether or not they use that word), for surely the premise of megachurch worship is to truly encounter God's presence. But the point is that this expectation of encounter, however it is described and whether (or not) it is actually experienced, is not novel. It is not a recent innovation. It is consistent with the expectation that the Church has always had in its worship, however expressed.

Lim and Ruth's analysis suggests that Pentecostals have perhaps not gone far enough in developing a theology of God's presence, and specifically God's manifest presence, that special moving of the Holy Spirit that most of us know from experience yet struggle to articulate in a way that is defensible outside of our movement. They point to just a handful of texts that are commonly used to establish the expectation of God's presence in congregational worship. If they are right, and my own experience suggests that they are, then it is incumbent on us, mainly Pentecostal and Charismatic megachurch people, to do the work biblically and theologically to better explain the phenomenology of God's Presence. And I would commend this as a fruitful direction for further research. But make no mistake, the encounters that are experienced in "contemporary worship" are *real*. That is not to say that these cannot be simulated or exaggerated or outright faked. Lim and Ruth acknowledge that some churches

"...adopted contemporary worship for tactical reasons. Whereas the Pentecostal approach had been to adopt the new music as a way of encountering God, these congregations tended to implement contemporary worship as a strategic way of attracting new people." (S. H. Lim & Ruth, 2017, p. 131)

And it goes without saying that it is possible at times to misinterpret merely emotional experiences as being "God encounters." But what seems undeniable, even in the face

of the most cynical criticism of megachurch worship, is that people can and do really encounter God in these contexts. Testimonies—anecdotal evidence to be sure, but testimonies too numerous to ignore—describe real encounters with God's Spirit that have resulted in deep inner healing, instantaneous transformation, miraculous physical healing, refreshing, encouragement, expanded vision, the release of spiritual gifts, and that most important miracle of all, salvation. In short, the encounters that are experienced in the context of megachurch worship are consistent with a context of revival.

It should be obvious by now that, while I am a worship enthusiast, I am not a worship expert. My expertise lies in the area of theology and history. And while the Pentecostal movement of the last hundred or so years is an area of passion area for me because I am part of it, I am far more comfortable in ancient than in recent history. That would certainly be a limiting factor if what we were discussing were indeed a recent phenomenon, but we have already established that the expectation of encounter in worship is not an innovation. What then of the evolution (or perhaps revolution) within the nature of that worship—the songs—that Lim and Ruth document? If their analysis is anything to go by, most seem to have accepted the narrative that this revolution is indeed a recent innovation. But I want to challenge that narrative in two key areas because I believe that the Church is doing now what it has always done, or at least what it has done at its best, that is during previous periods of revival.

The first notion that I want to challenge is that the reason for the undeniable, and at times almost explosive, growth of churches in recent decades is because finally we got our methods right. That is, churches grow big because *we* make them big. Here, Lim and Ruth tend to support this narrative rather than challenging it. To simplify their argument, Churches until about the 1960s sang hymns with archaic language, and then the Church went through some kind of revolution where language was modernised, and many traditional trappings were shed with relevance becoming paramount. Note here that one of Lim and Ruth's nine characteristics of contemporary worship is "a commitment to adapt worship to contemporary people, sometimes to the level of strategic targeting" (S. H. Lim & Ruth, 2017, pp. 2, 4). While it is considerably more charitable, I note that this understanding of the recent evolution of "contemporary worship" does share similarities with the typical accusations levelled against megachurches and their leaders by self-appointed church watch dogs and hostile media (for example, see Parsons, 2017).

I first encountered this narrative not long after I had begun attending a Megachurch in Melbourne in the mid-nineties. I was watching Australia's television program "A Current Affair" over dinner with my parents, who were still disappointed in my ecclesial decision making and felt that they had raised me to be the sort of person that ought to know better. So, you can imagine what an entertaining dinner conversation ensued when a much younger Brian Houston appeared on our screens complete with Hawaiian shirt, trademark winning smile, and larger than life voice. (Hillsong) Pastor Brian has become a lot more street wise in his dealings with the media since, and at his expense so have the rest of us.

But it is an all-too-familiar script. We have all heard variations of the themes discussed that night. Churches that get big, do so because they compromise the message of the gospel — they don't preach enough repentance, or they don't preach about sin etc; they get big because they have a singular charismatic leader; often the founder who holds way too much power and/or has way too much money. Here, the arguments continue as many and various — surely if we throw enough mud, some of it will stick right? Churches get big because they focus not on biblical truth but on entertainment —music, lights, etc. Music entertainment is a clever marketing strategy because after all that is all these big churches are — big businesses. Churches get big because they preach prosperity and faith healing *et cetera*.

In return, I want to suggest something a little subversive; a little revolutionary. Megachurches are good. They are good for people; they are good for other churches, and they are good for the world. But more than that, people don't make megachurches, God does. We are not that clever. It is fine to analyse a church from the outside, as indeed Lim and Ruth do with the growth of Willow Creek church and the movement of imitators that it spawned (S. H. Lim & Ruth, 2017, pp. 14, 15). But if you asked my pastor, the pastor of Planetshakers Church, about how the Church started or why it grew as much or as rapidly as it did,[2] you would not hear anything about "strategic targeting." What you would hear about is prayer and the Holy Spirit and being obedient to a word from God. What you would hear is the story of *revival*. And here is my point. Churches may remain big for a time through methods and systems. But churches do not typically grow big without a genuine move of God.

[2] According to the *Brill Encyclopedia of Pentecostal and Charismatic movements*, Planetshakers has been the fastest growing Church in Australia's history (S. Lim & Coombs, 2021).

My main argument is that big churches are evidence of big moves of God; of revival. Big churches make a big impact for God. Big churches are champions of big thinking. They grow big people who do big things. And for sure, they typically have big name leaders with big targets on their backs so when those leaders make even little mistakes those mistakes have big consequences. But both the magnitude and the extent of the disappointment (and even outrage) that is justifiably felt when big leaders fall is testament to the enormous influence that these churches exert within global Christendom, an influence that extends far beyond their official membership. And that should come as no surprise. God has always used larger churches, usually those in significant cities, to influence the direction of the global Church. We think in the early years of the Churches of Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Caesarea, Rome, and later Constantinople. In the early days of the Protestant Reformation, we might think of the influence of the Church of Geneva or the Church of Oxford. What is significant about these places is that they were all at some time or other, what our megachurches of today are: revival centres.

In earlier times, just as in our own day, big churches were used by God in big ways. They fed the poor, they sent missionaries, they established movements, they often significantly shaped the cities that were in[3] and importantly, for our purposes here, they influenced how other churches worship.

And that brings me to the second area I want to challenge in the narrative: the transition away from old songs — the hymns with archaic language — to new songs. I'll start with this observation. People don't actually write old songs. We only sing old songs when new ones haven't been written for a while. In Planetshakers, the Church I am part of, new songs are being written and released on a monthly (and even at times on a weekly) basis. Just this week I was leading our chapel service in Planetshakers College, and I requested a particular song of one of our worship leaders. I didn't realise, but the song had been written in 2015. Our young worship leader was incredulous. "It's...five years old! That's like 20 years in Planetshakers!" The implication was clear. Why sing a song from five years ago when you could sing one from this month??

The truth is that there are so many *new songs* being sung in churches in this season that we seem to have forgotten it was only a generation ago when we had to sing

[3] One thinks of the influence that Ambrose exercised over the city of Milan, or John Chrysostom in Constantinople, or indeed Calvin in Geneva.

Amazing Grace every second week because it seemed like the last time a truly great song had been written (Newton, 1779). But that is because what the Church is now experiencing worldwide—and not all parts of the Church, I grant, but make no mistake it IS being experienced in all parts of the world—is revival. This is a revival of the type that we have not seen since that associated with the Methodist movement in the mid to late 1700s. And it is of course no coincidence that “Amazing Grace,” perhaps one of the greatest worship songs of all time and certainly still the most well-known, was written in this period.[4]

The point is this: songs are always new and fresh; even “contemporary” when they are written and first sung. And this is the case with all the old hymns. The archaic language that they are written in is testament to their enduring quality; many of these older songs are remnants of revivals past. And I mean revivals plural. It is not just the Wesleyan revival that left its mark on the church’s worship. But let’s briefly look at the Wesleyan revival. This example will bear out what I have been suggesting to this point. In addition to large crowds and an experience of the presence of God, many conversions and accounts of supernatural manifestations, also nearly 7000 songs were authored during the period of this revival by Charles Wesley alone, not to mention the other lesser known songwriters of this period. That is a rate of between four and five new songs per week maintained consistently over a thirty-year period! In addition to that, new and innovative methods of church growth were introduced, hence the name of the denomination that grew out of that revival—the Methodists. Methodism represented not a novel theology, but indeed, new methods. In other words, a translation exercise that updated the look and feel of the church for a new era. It sounds a lot like "contemporary worship."

But what of other revivals? The Protestant Reformation influenced large numbers of people in that many found faith in Christ in and through this movement, particularly in the early stages of it. The word of God was received with joy by large crowds, and new churches were established. What do we also find? This period of revival was one in which many new songs were authored, at least one of which (“A Mighty Fortress is our God”) was sung in the Church I grew up in. Perhaps most significantly was the

[4] John Newton was not actually a Methodist, though he was certainly a contemporary of John Wesley and no doubt affected by the same revival. The song Amazing Grace was written during a period of prolific hymn writing and growth in his own Church at Olney. For more information see (“Amazing Grace! (How Sweet the Sound),” n.d.)

monumental translation exercise which was commenced, and is still underway, which started with the first vernacular translation of the Bible from the original languages since Jerome’s translation into Latin in the fifth century. Again, new methods, large crowds, mass conversion, new songs, and the updating of language.

Speaking of Jerome’s translation of the Vulgate in the fifth century, it should come as no surprise that its publication similarly coincided with a period of revival among Latin speaking Churches. One of these that we know about occurred through the ministry of Augustine. In the City of God Book 22 chapter 8, Augustine (of Hippo, 2009, pp. 739–749) recounts a series of supernatural miracles of which he himself was personally aware. These miracles he reported (too numerous to recount here) included instantaneous physical healing and the supernatural provision of finance; in fact, the same sorts of miracles that are reported in many megachurches today. The last of these accounts contains the healing of a brother and sister from a disorder that caused persistent uncontrollable shaking. Augustine describes a large crowd and the “sounds of wonder” as a deafening spontaneous praise erupted in response to the miracles (Augustine of Hippo, 2009, p. 749).

Space does not permit further discussion about the many other revivals throughout history, but what I am seeking to establish is that these three things have always gone together: revival, church growth, and new expressions of worship. You cannot separate the three. Revival led to a release of worship. Worship has carried revival. Revival has birthed the megachurch. The megachurch is the vessel for revival.

And so, my conclusion to this point. Neither marketing nor mere sociology is the correct lens through which to view contemporary and megachurch worship. Revival is the correct lens through which to view it. I plead the following: Megachurches and their worship are not a theologically emaciated, hyper-emotional expression presenting a dumbed down version of the gospel. They are not the result of clever marketing strategies (are we really that clever?). These churches are not novel, they are soundly orthodox. Megachurches represent revivals; and their worship invites us to an experience of encounter with God. And while mimicking their methods may produce a measure of ‘success’ for a time, true success is to be found by seeking and obeying God. Lim and Ruth’s work provides a cursory attempt at understanding the biblical theology that undergirds the contemporary Praise and Worship revolution, but without any real insight.

Crucially, these authors have picked up the use of the tabernacle of David typology in Pentecostal literature (though this seems interchangeable for them with the tabernacle of Moses or the Temple of Solomon), but they seem to have largely missed the point of it. They do recognise why it is that of these three, the tabernacle of David is the preferred biblical typology for entering God's presence. But they seem to think that it is because of "the perceived lack of animal sacrifice in David's tabernacle" (Lim & Ruth, 2017, p. 127). This is perhaps a helpful insight, but far from the main point. Actually, the tabernacle typology has been used to expound megachurch or revival worship because the Ark in the Old Testament not only represents, but somehow mysteriously carries, God's Presence. The worship teaching around David's tabernacle arose for two key reasons. First, unlike the Tabernacle of Moses which preceded it, and the Temple of Solomon that succeeded it, the Tabernacle of David represents a brief prophetic window where there was no veil of separation between the Ark of the Covenant and God's people when they drew near to worship. Those who developed this typology, and Melbourne megachurch pastor Kevin Conner (1989) is foremost among them (although not the first to introduce the idea), have observed that it was during this period that Israel learned to praise. Similarly, it was during this period that musicians and singers were rostered on literally around the clock to worship God before the Ark, i.e., in God's presence. During this period many of the Psalms were authored, which is significant.

The second reason why the Tabernacle of David typology is preferred is there is evidence during this time of what we might call 'revival'. In addition to the large crowds, constant musical worship and new songs being authored, there is also the story of Obed-Edom the Gittite. This man became one of the singers, and this marks the inclusion of a Gentile family into the covenant promises of Israel. In other words, the Tabernacle of David prefigured not merely a worship experience, but the New Covenant itself, where the veil would be torn and the sacrifice would be made once for all. It evoked a time when the Presence of God would become available to all as the Holy Spirit was poured out, and the Good News would be preached. It is this good news that the promises that had once belonged only to Israel were now available to the Gentiles; i.e., to the nations.

And that is why it is the promise about the restoration of David's tabernacle that the apostle James reads at the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. This marked a time of revival. This was a time of reinterpretation and the translation of God's message into

the languages of the nations, which occurred first supernaturally on the Day of Pentecost. At the inauguration of the global church, the disciples spoke without having learned the languages of all present, and those who gathered heard them giving glory to God each in their own tongue. This was a time of supernatural manifestation, mass conversions, an experience of the tangible presence of God. Additionally, this was a time when, according to the book of Acts (2:47) the Church was “praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people” and the Lord was adding to their number daily those who were being saved. It was at *this* time, a time of revival, that James reminded the Church that God would restore in these the last days the Tabernacle of David not merely so that we could have big churches or feel-good songs, but *so that* all the nations would be able to come into God’s promises and worship him with us.

In conclusion, we cannot and must not cheapen what God is doing through megachurches throughout the world in this generation by merely analysing it. As I have said, megachurch worship invites us: to an *encounter* to be experienced and shared; it offers us a *revival* to be embraced and shepherded; and it is rooted in a *theology* to be received and defended.

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"Reimagined, not Redundant": Hillsong Church Online & Worship Practices

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Abstract

This article examines the worship practices of Hillsong Church Online in relation to the church's historically kinaesthetic expression of worship and Daniel E. Albrecht's ritual framework for Pentecostal ritual in *Rites in the Spirit.* This analysis will focus upon Albrecht's distinction between the "celebrative" and "contemplative" modes of worship and praise and use this to highlight the important differences between these traditional microrites within a typical Pentecostal or Charismatic worship service. The emerging digital microrites examined are being developed and introduced by the Hillsong Church Online community and its leadership. Incorporating insights from key recent works within Digital Religion studies, the paper concludes by reflecting on how digitally embodied microrites are now being further reimagined for the future church.

Introduction

While online worship, and indeed Online Churches, began to emerge long before 2020, the global pandemic saw a dramatic and rapid increase in the number of religious communities seeking to establish themselves in the digital space. The landscape of Online Church expanded overnight. Nevertheless, many congregations participated in this expansion reluctantly and considered online services supplementary and a temporary alternative until their physical church services could resume. However, Hillsong's Global Senior Pastor, Brian Houston, has repeatedly affirmed that Online Church services will continue in some capacity once Hillsong Church can resume its physical services. As a result, scholars interested in the Hillsong Movement and those within the church community itself now have an excellent opportunity to explore what a digital expression of Hillsong Church might look like. This paper focusses particularly on the worship practices of Hillsong Church Online because they are situated within Hillsong Church's own traditionally kinaesthetic/embodied worship practices and seeks to engage and interpret these practices from the perspective of Daniel E. Albrecht's ritual framework (1999). This article aims to demonstrate that although Pentecostal ritual requires reimagining in the digital space, it has not become redundant.

Online Church Studies and Digital Methodology

My study here of Hillsong Church Online (henceforth HCO) adopts an ethnographic approach with an emphasis on my participant observation within the HCO community as well as interviews with key stakeholders of the HCO team.[5] Interviewees were chosen on the basis of their roles with the HCO department through purposive sampling. Leaders consented to participate in this research with the knowledge that interview material or organisational titles might potentially compromise confidentiality but that their anonymity would be assured wherever possible without significant impact to the data.

As this methodology was instrumental to my dissertation on digital presence at HCO, many of the examples within this article have come from my own observations as both a congregant and team leader within HCO services. I have volunteered since 2019 as a "platform oversight" – a role that requires the rostering of volunteers to moderate live

[5] This methodology has been excerpted from my own research project and MTh Dissertation; Young (2021), Thanks for Watching Joining: Religious Creatives and a Digital Theology of Presence at Hillsong Church Online.

stream chats and additional communication with the Pastoral Care team regarding chat member safety. While I have also participated at various times simply as a congregant and worshipper on HCO – both using the chat functionality in the online experience and not using it – the core focus of this paper will be to reflect upon my experiences as a participant-observer in the role of a chat moderator within the HCO team. While it might be argued that such a level of participation might influence the evaluative element of my research, it has certainly also increased my access to data – access that provided an emic view of the HCO culture which allows for more accurate and ‘thicker’ description (Varis, 2015, p. 62).[6] There is also some debate whether people posting in chat rooms are posting “public” information (Sugiura et al., 2017, pp. 193–194). However a live stream, which is made available on YouTube, Facebook and its own open access platform, is quite a public forum by both physical and digital standards (Talip et al., 2016, pp. 92–93).

Digital Ethnography assists the study of Online Church communities because it appreciates the integration of online and offline spaces. While ethnography traditionally expects the researchers to be in the same physical space as the participants, the digital world allows the researcher to be in one location, the HCO content creators in another, and the participants entirely elsewhere (Walker, 2010, pp. 25–26, 30). As in, HCO may exist virtually through a website, but it is not isolated from the physical sites from which community members join for Sunday service.[7]

Digital Ethnographers (including, for example, Sarah Pink and Christine Hine) have developed a variety of methodologies for the effective critical study of online cultures, presented in edited collections such as *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice,* as well as Hine’s *Embedded, Embodied and Everyday.*

Pink, for example, considers the shift in ethnographic practices where they become digitally mediated and offers five principles for digital ethnography – we should, she suggests, celebrate its multiplicity, non-digital-centric-ness, openness, reflexivity, and unorthodoxy (Pink et al., 2015, pp. 3, 8–14). These principles reflect both the transience of digital platforms and also their integration into everyday life and encourage researchers to consider the practice of Digital Ethnography as an invitation

[6] Typically, one of digital ethnography’s challenges is the ability to ‘lurk’ behind a screen. While ‘lurking’ allows the researcher to observe the digital culture without risk of the community members modifying their behaviour for an outsider, this position is largely considered deceptive and unethical.
[7] This is emphasized by Global Senior Pastor Bobbie Houston’s expression of “*One House, Many Rooms” being reframed as “One House, Many Living Rooms.”*

into new ways of knowing and alternative data collecting processes (Pink et al., 2015, pp. 8–14). In particular, Pink highlights the definitive need for reflexivity during data collection (Pink et al., 2015, p. 12). Such reflexivity is also characteristic of the Pentecostal worshipper currently adapting to the practice of online worship and ritual – which does not come without its tensions.

Hine's understanding of the digital world as it has been weaved into day-to-day living has been of considerable assistance to this study. She affirms that contemporary digital ethnography must consider the online and offline worlds? without disconnecting the two (Hine, 2015, p. 14). While some studies may presume online platforms to be escapist in nature, there is often no clean break between the offline and the online world of the individual interacting through the screen; at the very moment they are digitally engaged, the individual is also physically engaged in their surrounding environment (Hine, 2015, pp. 32–53). In the context of researching HCO, this has required the consideration of more than the open tabs of a live chat - but also the offline expressions that accompany a worshipper's online service experience.

'When Worlds Collide': The Online/Offline Integration of HCO

The integration of online and offline worlds allows HCO members to join services from various points around the globe. Quite a few of the attendees of Hillsong's Australian livestream services join in from North and South America, Africa, Asia, Europe, as well as wider Oceania. This is regardless of whether the service is streamed at a time suitable for their respective time zones. Therefore, many international attendees join in the middle of their night. While some attendees join HCO from their home or local cafe, others participate while in transit from one fixed point to another. People have commented on the service livestream chat that they are watching from the train or listening to the service in the traffic on their daily commute. I have also joined a service myself while in the air flying across Canada from Vancouver to Toronto. This multiplicity of offline environments would never have been a consideration in traditional Pentecostal worship practices. However, they must now be taken into consideration when establishing the limitations of digital embodiment and the reimagining of worship practices online.

In current Digital Religion studies, it has been noted that learning, employment and religion sectors are all migrating to online "third spaces" (social spaces separate from

work/home concerns) and during the pandemic, at a higher rate (Campbell & Evolvi, 2020, p. 3; Oldenburg, 1989). As a result, *social presence theory* researchers began to examine how individuals can feel closer to people who are geographically farther away than those with whom they experience face-to-face interaction (Lowenthal, 2010, pp. 129–136; Wilson et al., 2008, pp. 979–1002). Stuart Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi use the language of “third space” to suggest that the “meaning-making” of conceptual projects like a website are just as constructible as meaning-making within physical spaces such as cafes, bookstores, bars, or churches (Hoover, 2015, p. 8). They refer to the "as-if-ness" of digital third spaces, which always require some level of decision-making with the individual or community practising online religion to act *as if* they are participating within a tangible sacred space (Hoover, 2015, pp. 13–16).

While Tim Hutchings does not utilize the terminology of “third space” in Creating Church Online, his research on the development of five "self-defined" online churches offers some significant insights into religious "third space" contexts (Hutchings, 2017, p. 12). Considering Hutchings’s research while conducting my own participation in these live streams meant that I needed to conceptualise my existence as a researcher in a "third space." Therefore, I sought to document my own experiences of the moment while engaging with other congregants through a digital medium that interweaves with their ‘third space’ experiences.

Religious Responses to a Global Crisis

In response to Covid-19, many religious communities have had to establish themselves online, and over the last 18 months, this has prompted reflections on the challenges and opportunities in doing so. In *Religion in Quarantine: The Future of Religion in a Post-Pandemic World,* Heidi Campbell offers a series of reflective essays from scholars and practitioners with personal experience in digital religion. This collection focus on discussing how physical religious communities reacted and innovated in response to the social distancing restrictions of the pandemic, as well as asking where this innovation has provoked challenges (H. Campbell, 2020, pp. 1–2). One contributor, Daniel R. Bare, speculates that: “those who are not so strident to embrace Christian corporeality in doctrine, will emerge from quarantine prepared to adopt online worship as the practical outreach methodology of the future.” (Bare, 2020, p. 38). While indicative of common attitudes toward digital worship, Bare’s assertion displays only a limited acknowledgement of the online integration into every

day life and the potential for digital worship realities that exist primarily in digital third spaces but still cultivate a corporeal experience for online congregants.

A comparative study of the responses to the pandemic by Asian and European church leaders conducted by Alexander Chow and Jonas Kurlberg highlights various expressed concerns from ministers that a church “digitally simulated” online risks damaging the Christian theology of embodiment and incarnation (Chow & Kurlberg, 2020, p. 2-3). Chow and Kurlberg note that the speeds at which church leaders were forced to move online meant that any theological and liturgical reflection on this transition very often came after the initial crisis responses (2020, p. 7). Yet, as Heidi Campbell and Sophia Osteen note, while moments of crisis enable religious communities to respond pragmatically and practically, they also open up a space for reimagining beliefs in practices and re-evaluating which practices lie at the heart of religious identity and community (Osteen & Campbell, 2020, p. 58). While Hillsong Church’s digital expression did not begin as a response to Covid-19, a similar reflection and reimagining has been undertaken by Hillsong Church through the development of HCO in the light of Australia’s social distancing restrictions.

Media as a Tool of Engagement (But Not Embodiment)

Though Hillsong’s official “Online Campus” was launched only in February 2019, the church had been represented online long before this, not least through over ten years of digitally streamed content on YouTube. The Digital Department of Hillsong Church could see potential in this content all along for the creation of Christian community, more than simple Christian witness.[8] However, Hillsong Church leadership continued to emphasise the church’s physical gatherings until the pivot to online due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Nevertheless, the media in all its many forms has consistently shown itself to be an integral tool for evangelism. The internet was seen by many as an extension of what was already made available through television and radio (Austin, 2017, p. 23). In fact, through Hillsong Church’s involvement with transnational media, like the *Christian Broadcasting Network*, Hillsong’s brand began to spread beyond its initial locality (Hutchinson, 2017, p. 48). What began as Hills Christian Life Centre in a localized Sydney suburban congregation has transformed over the past 30 years into a global

[8] Hillsong Church joined YouTube on April 30, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/user/hillsongchurchsydney

phenomenon with many physical campuses around the globe connected to the Sydney hub (Hutchinson, 2017, pp. 47–48, 55). In 2018, two-thirds of the weekend attendance of Hillsong Church was in congregations outside of Australia (the Church has at time of writing 123 campuses and locations in total around the globe) (Alcorn & Houston, 2018). The global presence of the church has permitted Hillsong to continue growing outwards rather than face what Mark Hutchinson has called "the 'cold death' of self-enclosure" while also avoiding the "'hot death' of majority culture" (Hutchinson, 2017, p. 55). Today, this global presence continues to be assisted and extended by Hillsong Church’s digital footprint. As a result, worship leaders and service MCs must now be conscious they are addressing a global audience. Nevertheless, the attitude toward digital media observed in these HCO services reflects contentment with broadcast media as a tool for evangelism, but not as a tool for bi-directional connection.

Hillsong Online Campus: A Pathway to Physical Church

Hillsong’s Online Campus is the dynamic out of which the digital *community* of the church has formed. In February 2019, Hillsong Church launched its Online Campus on the Facebook and YouTube platforms. From its launch up until the 2019 Annual Report, Online Campus grew to reach a total of 99 countries – many of which do not presently have a physical Hillsong site (Hillsong Church Australia, 2019, p. 76). Hillsong Online Campus was established "to make room for those who consider themselves a part of the Hillsong family but cannot attend a physical campus." (Hillsong Church Australia, 2019, p. 76) This would ensure that physical services were still regarded as the fundamental form of gathering for a Sunday service, and ward off any potential complacency or disengagement that could germinate in a church community that could “tune in” for Church from the comforts of their bedroom. Pastor Brian Houston was adamant that the latter group would not be the intended community of Online Campus - instead, the Online Campus was for anyone who could not ‘get to church’ due to physical or health restrictions.[9] Therefore, the volunteers and staff were encouraged to assist the online congregants in their walk with God - with the ultimate goal being that a member would eventually have their physical or health restrictions relieved so that they might join a physical Hillsong Church campus (Hillsong Church Australia, 2019, p. 76). While this may have been the mentality prior to March 2020,

[9] This meant that Hillsong’s *Church of the Air* – a previous project developed to offer livestreams of church for the population of outback Australia – would eventually come under Online Campus.

the adverse circumstances of Covid-19 required Hillsong Church to move its entire community online.

HCO: A Call to Reimagining Worship Practice

As reflected in Campbell's *Religion in Quarantine*, faith communities around the globe have wrestled throughout the pandemic with the break from their physical worship practices. Covid-19 has challenged event-based religious practices to become creative in their execution in an effort to not only abide by government laws but also to exhibit love for one's neighbour. In response to the initial lockdown protocols set out by the Australian government in March of 2020, Hillsong Church's Digital Department worked closely with a number of other staff members and their teams to present a digital platform for all Hillsong Church Services. While this may have appeared to happen overnight, the Digital Department of Hillsong Church had been preparing for a Hillsong Church livestreamed service to be available for some time:

> "We had one guy working on it for a few months in the background, just because he felt God put [it in] his heart, then Covid hits, and we had it overnight, literally within a week, that was done." (Paul, personal communication, October 23, 2020)

The Online Campus staff and volunteers have continued to serve as part of the HCO team. This has also included service teams for YouTube and Facebook live streams of the services made available on HCO. While this has been the pragmatic response of one megachurch to a set of unprecedented circumstances, it has presented a tension as compared with traditional Pentecostal worship practices of Hillsong Church as well as opening potential for reimagining how these worship practices might present themselves afresh in digital expression. I experienced this "reimagining" firsthand as a member of HCO and a live stream chat host volunteer moderator.

Where the Spirit Moves, So Do Pentecostals

Hesitance amongst pastors over the acceptance of livestream services as the "new normal" of worship practice for the foreseeable future is accentuated by the stigma attached to building faith communities online (Hutchings, 2017, p. 12/270). Tim Hutchings notes that the definition of *church* varies according to theological tradition; for some, the church gathers *wherever* Christians meet in the name of Christ; for

others, there must also be the performance of particular rituals – potentially *properly authorised* by religious leaders (Hutchinson, 2017, pp. 12-13/270). Particular to Pentecostal theology, it is important to acknowledge, is the *iconic* role of the human body within Pentecostal worship (Albrecht, 1999, p. 147). Noting that Pentecostalism is traditionally kinaesthetic in expression, Daniel E. Albrecht's *Rites in the Spirit* offers a framework for interpreting the liturgy of a Pentecostal service. The microrites of a Pentecostal worship service, as defined by Albrecht, present some interesting similarities and differences to the digital microrites which are being reimagined by the HCO community and its leadership. This will be examined following a review of the contextual factors that are unique to the megachurch Hillsong.

Hillsong Church's iconic liturgy developed in context of a "freedom of expression," which was developed in relation to the trans-Tasman charismatic renewal flowing between New Zealand and Australia in the 1970s (Austin, 2017, p. 22). This renewalist movement began to influence the then Assemblies of God of Australia (AGA) towards a tolerance of radical displays of joy found in the free worship and dancing of some of its congregations (Austin, 2017, p. 23). This *tolerance* was not gained without struggle and confrontation, however, as evident from the story D. A. Austin tells of the experience of preacher David (Paul) Yonggi Cho at the 1977 AGA Commonwealth conference in Melbourne, where: "although reportedly surprised at the dancing during worship, [Cho] did not condemn it ... Indeed, Cho threatened to leave when attempts were made to suppress this public display of joy." (Austin, 2017, p. 23) These public displays reveal a key characteristic of traditional Pentecostal logic: when it comes to ritual, "God is expected to move, *but so are God's worshippers.*" (Albrecht, 1999, p. 148)

Although Hillsong was founded in 1982 and has arguably moved away from many Pentecostal influences towards wider evangelicalism, due to these contextual factors it is still appropriate to evaluate the megachurch's liturgy via the lens of Albrecht, who emphasises in *Rites in the Spirit,* that while the bodies and gestural actions of Pentecostals have not been explicitly labelled as holy icons, they undoubtedly function in this way liturgically (Albrecht, 1999, p. 148). How these traditionally physical worship practices can be digitally expressed needs to be further examined alongside Albrecht's framework for Pentecostal rites and ritual.

Seeking to provide a comprehensive Pentecostal liturgical framework, Albrecht considers the “ordo” (or order of service) of a sample of three Pentecostal communities he studied in “Sea City,” California in the 90s (Albrecht, 1999, p. 24). Although Pentecostal liturgy is not commonly spoken about in Sunday service (and neither is high church terminology used, e.g. *rites* and *ritual*). Albrecht found use in these terms when considering the practices and experiences that composed the spiritual lives of congregants in his study. Albrecht separates the service into a number of foundational rites, including worship and praise, the pastoral message, and altar call and response (Albrecht, 1999, pp. 153–154). My interest here is primarily in Albrecht’s framework as it pertains to the rites. Still, it is important too to further examine his quest to identify the smaller "microrites" (particularly of the worship and praise time) while also highlighting the affective "modes of sensibility" that animate the liturgy as a whole.

Albrecht identifies microrites as the practices and gestures which work as building blocks to construct the shape of the foundational rites - such as worship and praise. (Albrecht, 1999, p. 176). Microrites provide the basic blueprint for Pentecostal praxis as they arrange the whole of the liturgy (Albrecht, 1999, p. 176). How these microrites are rearranged to form the blueprint of digital Pentecostal ritual can appear abstract partly due to its unfamiliarity and partly again due to a *perceived* detachment from the physical. Yet the transition to HCO has necessitated the reestablishment and the freedom to reimagine these microrites in the digital space. This reimagination by both the leadership and the congregation of Hillsong Church during their participation in HCO will be discussed below.

How these microrites form is significantly impacted by the “modes of ritual sensibility” to which they are oriented (Albrecht, 1999, p. 199). According to Albrecht, ritual sensibilities are responsible for more than the ritual’s technical success; they play a structural role, helping to bring them to life (Albrecht, 1999, pp. 177–178). These modes of ritual sensibility shape the worshipper’s experience of a rite - including the rite of worship and praise (Albrecht, 1999, p. 179). For example, the two modes which are inherent to the worship and praise rite are the “celebrative*” mode* and the ”*contemplative” mode* (Albrecht, 1999, p. 184). As these modes define a typical physical or *offline* service, they must be reimagined to imbue the online service with comparable significance. Albrecht’s ritual framework is indispensable for considering how the modes continue to orient and animate the digital expressions of these

microrites within worship and praise. I will now discuss how the *celebrative mode* has been adapted to an online setting, as well as the challenges that have come with this reconceptualization.

The Celebrative Mode of Ritual Sensibility

The "celebrative mode of worship and praise" seems a fitting starting point for analysis; as Albrecht outlines, this is where most Pentecostal worship sets begin. The tone of this ritual sensibility is playful and fun (Albrecht, 1999, p. 181). This mode grants the worshippers permission to detach themselves from the requirements of everyday life which will remain outside the designated time and space during the Sunday ritual - the hope being that these responsibilities will be resumed with fresh perspective post-ritual (Albrecht, 1999, p. 181). Within the celebrative mode, Pentecostal worshippers are encouraged by one another and their worship leaders to be not only expressive but also innovative in their worship – to “sing unto the Lord a new song.” (Albrecht, 1999, p. 181-89) often in physical services at Hillsong, this takes the form of dance moves or the congregation’s playful additional vocalisations to the lyrics. Albrecht likens this mode to a musician’s improvisation on the melody of a song (Albrecht, 1999, p. 181-89). Taking liberties to deepen Albrecht’s metaphor, it should be noted that the masters of musical improvisation are those who know the original score inside and out. Their ability to call and respond to other musicians in the band is more than a copy of the riff played by their counterparts; it is a conversation. Likewise, in acting improv groups, the rule of improv is "Yes, *and …*" There is an acceptance that the actions of others will have an effect on one’s own movements and an invitation to participate afresh as one sees fit.

In the celebrative mode, Pentecostal movements and gestures are improvised; like children at the playground, there is no specific result desired beyond the creation and expression of joy (Albrecht, 1999, p. 181). However improvisational, these movements are still executed with a certain level of control displayed by the worshipper, which avoids the mode becoming chaotic and thus dysfunctional (Albrecht, 1999, p. 181-89). Being naturally improvisational and playful in their worship style, it is quite possible Pentecostal worshipers may be the perfect candidates to innovate microrites for the digital space.

The following are typical examples from Sunday services on HCO taken from participant observation. Once the service commences, Online church members often showcase this celebrative mode through their use of the live chat. There are generally several posts of confetti or dancing emojis. What may be considered *spam* by moderators at other points of the service is permissible *during this mode* as a playful response to the joy outpouring from the hearts of worshippers typically used to raising their hands in the air and jumping up and down in the mosh pit side of the stage. *The live chats are now the mosh pit – sans the inevitable elbow to the face.* Therefore, chat members improvise off of one another's responses – copying and pasting emojis and scriptures that relate to the present moment. There is no intended outcome from these actions; they are a digital replication of a physical activity, allowing congregants to immerse themselves fully in the digital service by participation rather than being distracted by other tasks such as household chores or their commute.[10] Importantly, the celebrative mode can take place digitally beyond the chat spaces as well. For example, there are those who note that they continue to sing aloud and dance live in their living rooms – embracing the online/offline integration of the service into their everyday life. Worship leaders, as well as chat moderators, encourage congregants to engage through singing and dancing if their spaces allow, showing an understanding of the importance of this expression as a microrite, and part of the celebrative mode. Together the congregation sings a new song – by responding online by quoting and commenting on lyrics from the songs being sung by the worship band. These budding or emerging digital microrites harmonize with more traditional Pentecostal microrites as they align with the playfulness of the mode.

The Contemplative Mode of Ritual Sensibility

The other mode to be discussed in reference to the praise and worship rite is the contemplative mode. Having passed through the high energy of the opening praise song in the Sunday setlist, the contemplative mode often announces itself with a drop of energy levels and the introduction of musical keypads (Albrecht, 1999, p. 183). This ritual mode can appear somber and passive in comparison to the celebrative mode, but this passivity occurs as an expression of surrender rather than resignation.

[10] There is no doubt God can still meet community members in their everyday tasks as they tune in and out to the Sunday service. While Online Church is often presumed to supply more distractions to the message, there are often as many distractions available during a physical service where one is surrounded by hundreds of other individuals.

Albrecht does not define contemplation in a literal sense but rather uses the term in light of its association with deep receptivity and openness to God (Albrecht, 1999, p. 183 ff. 14). Contemplative sensibility is often dominant during the worship rite - although it does also appear throughout the service in moments of prayer during the altar call and response at the end of a Sunday service - and is often most noticeable during the chorus of the second song (Albrecht, 1999, p. 184). Unlike the playfulness and improvisation that usually accompanies the celebrative mode, there is an anticipation and an active stillness that accompanies the congregation attentiveness to the presence of God (Albrecht, 1999, p. 184). Whereas in the celebrative mode, the worshiper has some control over their free play, the celebrative mode asks the worshipper to relinquish all control in the form of surrender (Albrecht, 1999, p. 184). The worshipers ready themselves in anticipation for what they cannot control - for who they cannot control - seeking the action and presence of God in their lives (Albrecht, 1999, p. 184). Like the energy that accumulates in the air before a lightning strike, there is an expectation of lightning striking, but there is no control over just where that might occur.

Within HCO services, this ‘lightning strike’ is not restricted by a physical location or time zone. During this mode, HCO chats change focus from playfulness to piety. Comments focus now on expressing adoration and affirming the lyrics of the worship song. There is an increase in cry-face and raised hand emojis, as well as the bubbling up of hearts and prayer hands from the corner of the Hillsong Church Online chat box inspired by Instagram Live – an application developed to increase the community’s sense of participation in the service. Prayers are typed out, asking God to do what only He can and accepting that He is the one in control while the congregation actively waits on divine intervention. However, alternatively, some participants choose not to type in this moment. As recollected by one interviewee, their experiences of supernatural encounter during the live stream has been largely due to a sense of *arrestment* in the presence of what they referred to as the "raw beauty" of the moment which allowed them to "switch off autopilot" and "really engage in God’s presence being already there … I was taking notice." (Graham, personal communication, September 11, 2020) Another interviewee remembered an instance where they felt God’s nearness, surrendering to the moment as mediated through the live stream:

It wasn't this "deep thing" it was just a need to focus. So, I put my phone down, closed my eyes, and I just started praying, started focusing, started reflecting, and it had been so long since I'd done that. Full transparency, I started to cry for a moment. It just felt like this ease. Like I was back. I remember praying "Oh God, You're right here with me! You're very close." So, worship is happening online, and all these other things, and I'm just [crying]. And I remember asking after, "why was that so emotional for me?" It was just such a connection with God. And my friend looked at me and said, "it's just been a while since you've been to the well." (Leo, personal communication, September 4th, 2020)

In response to this surrender, community members oftentimes reply in the chat that they are experiencing an encounter with God during these moments of service in ways that they never expected when they first linked into the service. An openness to these new (and evolving) microrites presents an avenue for expressing their encounter with God within the digital corporeal reality.

"To the Fullest of our Limitations": A Redefinition of Embodiment

Teresa Berger's @ *Worship* may offer some help here by constructing a framework for participation in virtual worship practices. Berger affirms that some online practices can instigate a multi-sensory experience that affects the body as much as, if not more than, traditionally offline practices (Berger, 2018, p. 46/163). Berger affirms that effective practices are those which allow human participation – whether online through clicks, or offline through rosary beads, each practice is just as *real* as the other, even though it is executed differently (Berger, 2018, p. 46/163). Acknowledging these differences in expression, Berger asserts that "There is no abstract, universal account of active participation, only concrete, particular, embodied active participants." (Berger, 2018, p. 46/163) To elaborate, she gives some examples:

An elderly man with senile dementia who follows a televised Mass in his care facility will participate in worship differently from the granddaughter who sits with him. An unborn child in her mother's womb attending Stations of the Cross in a brick-and-mortar church is present differently from an adult in the same church who happens to be blind…[or the] young man recently paralysed who cannot physically make his way

to his parish church any longer yet finds comfort in being present via Skype on an iPad that is taking his place in the pew… (Berger, 2018, p. 46/163)

Berger then proceeds to ask:

"is one participation ‘fuller’ than the others? Or are they all ‘full’ - including the digitally mediated presence of the paralysed young man - to the extent that individual human embodiments allow?" (Berger, 2018, p. 46/163)

Here, Berger suggests a sort of gradient of embodiment. While such a pattern does not negate the iconic kinaesthetic nature of Pentecostal worship, it does *challenge* the Pentecostal digital worshiper to worship in the ‘fullness’ of their own embodiment limitations.

Many in attendance of HCO services find themselves in similar situations to those mentioned by Teresa Berger. While some are limited solely by social distancing restrictions, many who would have been without community prior to the pandemic have now been invited to participate in worship in ways never made available to them before. The digital environment heightens the accessibility of the existing programs – for example, Hillsong’s language translations team provides access to a much wider audience than previously possible – and now includes Auslan translations of morning and evening Sunday services. Therefore, these congregants can take part in the digital liturgy alongside other members of Hillsong who may have experienced (or perceived) embodiment in more tactile ways than are currently available. However, the present limitations around physical gatherings present Hillsong’s global congregation with an opportunity to embrace the level of *fullness* offered by the digital expression, therefore erasing certain inequalities. Unfortunately, the obstructions to community and equality experienced prior to the pivot to online are unlikely to be resolved when physical services resume, and many of these individuals will likely continue joining online services rather than return to physical gatherings.

Conclusion

There will, of course, be some who object that the actions of Hillsong Church Online worshippers are a caricature of what worship practices *ought* to be. At this point, we must face the fact that religious communities will continue to negotiate the tensions in accepting these digital expressions of worship practices for years to come. At Hillsong, the lockdown restrictions have often been expressed as a “loss” to the community as

a whole. The reimagining of these practices is essential not only in response to the current pandemic but also for the ongoing inclusion of congregants who have been inhibited by past parameters of worship. This includes those who are incarcerated, disabled, and elderly. As the Pentecostal church reimagines their characteristically playful worship for the online media age and embraces digitally mediated worship as a viable pathway to spiritual encounter with the One they cannot control who reveals Himself in whatever way He chooses – be that brick-and-mortar or pixels and clicks – a whole new practice is opened up, even perhaps "unprecedented" in possibility.

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Mediating through Translations from Hillsong Megachurch to the Hills Chinese Community

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Abstract

Hillsong Music is a popular brand of Contemporary Christian Worship music, whose musical sound influences countless denominations in multiple countries. The global distribution of the songs has expanded into 17 different languages, which includes Mandarin translations by the Hillsong 华语 team. Before discussing the external distribution of these translated songs, this article explores the unique community of Chinese diaspora congregation members attending “Hills Chinese,” a Mandarin and Cantonese run service within megachurch Hillsong Church's Sydney campus. This is where most of the translations team are located and serve weekly. Within my ethnographic research, I propose that the congregational musicking engaged by the congregation’s leaders and the Hillsong 华语 team mediates between their ecclesial identity of being a Hillsong service and their cultural identity as the Chinese community in Sydney. The music localisation (or contextualisation) process applied by this group to Hillsong worship songs is reviewed with wider implications for this music producing megachurch. This article argues that the focus or attention of publishing houses should be on the recipients of translated songs; thus, in the case of translations, shifting focus to the non-western voices within this predominantly English-speaking megachurch.

Introduction

Sydney-based megachurch Hillsong Church was started by Brian and Bobbie Houston (Riches & Wagner, 2012). Amidst the growth, a little-known Chinese community was formed and runs as the sole non-English speaking worship service at the main

campus. Today, "Hills Chinese” represents two (Cantonese and Mandarin) worship services hosted on the Sydney Hills site. The translated materials (including songs) are distributed internally within Hills Chinese but are also distributed externally to the broader transnational Mandarin-speaking audience in other churches through Hillsong’s global distribution channels. This practice is indicative of Hillsong’s “one house many rooms” ecclesial model, as demonstrated in Tom Wagner’s (2014) study on the same sonic experience and brand across Hillsong’s global campuses. While literature and media has focused much on the popular Hillsong church and music brand (e.g. Evans, 2015), little attention has been paid to these non-English translations or congregational flows within the literature. Hillsong 华语 *Huayu*, the translation team for Mandarin, has not appeared in studies about Hillsong Church or megachurches in general, until this paper.[11]

This article presents the account of the Hillsong 华语 *Huayu*’s translation work in Hillsong’s large congregation space, and how this has contributed to the building of the Hillsong Chinese community. Hills Chinese community is arguably linked with Hillsong through congregational musicking (Small, 2011) in the church’s two language services. This article reviews the megachurch worship practices of Hillsong from the perspective of the Chinese community leaders, asking how a translated song is used in navigating their cultural identities and experiences within Hillsong Church. Music contextualisation, as Swee Hong Lim (2017) suggests, becomes indicative of the Chinese community’s ability to adapt the Hillsong sound (Riches, 2010; Wagner, 2014), by using Chinese expressions and idioms within their translation process. This article proposes that the focus or attention of the Hillsong publishing house (as well as others who produce translated songs), should be on the recipients of translated songs, and thus should shift to the non-western voices in this predominantly Western megachurch.

[11] Throughout the article, I will be using Simplified Chinese, indicative of Hillsong 华语‘s focus on the Mainland Chinese market, and the use of Pinyin, which is the phonetics to pronounce the Chinese characters. Pinyin will be used throughout the paper for educative purposes. Note that *Huayu* represents the shared language across Chinese heritage people *Huaren* 华人 across the globe.

Literature and Context

Hillsong Music Australia and Music Distribution

Hillsong Music, an iconic brand of Contemporary Christian worship music produced by Hillsong Church, is now studied globally: both as a marketing brand and a congregation, but also now a global movement (Evans, 2006; Riches, 2010; Wagner, 2014). The production of the songs involves various translators across these global campuses, who provide this “resource” for language needs within Australian services and also Hillsong’s various other global congregations (Riches, 2020).[12] Tim Whincop, head of Hillsong Music Australia (HMA), suggests they seek "influence over sales." Distributing music and resource allows churches to do ”music differently" (Edwards, 2020). This is indicative of Hillsong’s contribution to “contemporary worship”, motivated towards seeker-friendly sounds (use of current and innovative sounds such as Hillsong United), appealing to youth ministry (currently Hillsong Yong and Free), and the “contemporary person” in western culture (Lim & Ruth, 2017).

Regarding Hillsong Music's global multilingual distribution, Whincop suggests in his interview:

> A lot of remote places around the world were singing our songs in English when they don't even speak English ... Hillsong now releases translated sound recordings of its songs in 17 different languages, including Spanish, Portuguese, Korean, Arabic, Italian, German, and Swedish. (Edwards, 2020)

The solution to the apparent inaccessibility becomes the drive for Hillsong (and other English worship song distributors) to translate into local languages.

The overall intention is to maintain the original English lyrics' integrity while aiming for the best quality translation. Hillsong 华语 *Huayu* operates from their context within the Hills Chinese community and also utilise their connections to transnational Mandarin-speaking communities (Yin, 2007).[13]

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[12]Hillsong’s leadership prefer the term “resource” to indicate the non-market significance these songs and albums hold.
[13]The transnational community refers to the diaspora’s connections (the 1st and 1.5 generation) to their home country, i.e., the team members within Hillsong who have family members back in Mainland China and still travels frequently. See Yin, 2007.

Use of Translated Worship Music and Practices in Chinese congregations

In discussion of translated worship songs within Chinese communities in general, there needs to be recognition of the history of translated congregational music already within the Chinese church's tradition. It is difficult to separate out the Western influences embedded within Church music traditions in China, though the church in China was established before the "western" missionaries entered (Wong, 2006; Yong, 2008).[14] Translated hymns accompanied the protestant missionary movements entering China during the 1800s, outlined in Fang Lan Hsieh's (2009) account of Chinese Christian Hymnody. Her work documents the historical process of translations, as well as how hymn translators wrestle with the dimensions of 文理 *wenli* (the poetic nature of Chinese) and 白话 *baihua* (the colloquial nature of the language) (Charter & DeBernardi, 1998; Hsieh, 2009). These are parameters that the Mandarin translators still face today.

English songs translated into Mandarin are still used transnationally (within China and the diasporic communities across the globe), continuing the use of "western" songs within the broader repertoire in Chinese church worship. Even Mandarin songwriters, such as the American-based group 赞美之泉 *Zanmeizhichuan* (Streams of Praise) arguably still write and produce songs inspired by western conventions and melodies in order to resource Chinese churches transnationally (Wong, 2006).[15] Another popular Taiwan-based band 约书亚乐团 *Yueshuya'yuetuan* (or Joshua Band in English) continues to translate popular contemporary worship songs, which includes Hillsong worship songs.

Swee Hong Lim, a postcolonial liturgist, suggests that music contextualisation is indicative of musicking worship practice within the Chinese church (Lim, 2017). Worship music in Chinese churches, as proposed by Lim, happens in three song-phases: (i) *adopted* songs as imported resources of Western music that help a faith community (Lim, 2017, p. 5); (ii) *adapted* songs that embrace local expressions in a Western frame (Lim, 2017, p. 6); and (iii) *actualised* songs that draw inspiration from local culture away from Western conventions (Lim, 2017, p. 6). Chinese diaspora groups including Joshua Band and Streams of Praise mentioned above are considered 'adapted' in Lim's typology due to their use of western hymns and conventions.

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[14] There is a wide variety of work that recognise the existence of Christianity before "Western" missionaries entered, but this paper will highlight two authors I already draw upon.

[15] A comprehensive account was provided by Connie Oi-Yan Wong in her dissertation.

‘Actualised’ songs include the works from 吕小敏 Lu Xiaomin, a reportedly illiterate peasant women who has authored 1000 plus "indigenous" Canaan hymns 迦南诗选 *jianan’shixuan* (Sun, 2012). The question is where the current practices of Hillsong Church and members of Hills Chinese fit in this model.

Ethnomusicology, Christian congregational Music and Localisation

Alongside Lim’s typology, in this paper I draw upon Congregational Christian Music studies (CCM) (Ingalls et. al., 2016; Porter, 2014). CCM facilitates an interdisciplinary study of congregational musicking that provides space for cultural approaches to music (as stated, via ethnomusicology) but also the integration of theological insight.[16] CCM studies occur across genres: from hymnals to contemporary worship song (Ingalls et al., 2016, p. 2). As described by Ingalls, Landau and Wagner, CCM studies allows the "interplay of the musical creator's intentions, performance contexts" in "music styles" and "meanings of song texts" (Ingalls et al., 2016, p. 4), and in this case the interplay of performance and theology (or the performance of theology).

When discussing the translation practices of the Hillsong Chinese community, I draw further on CCM’s approach to music localisation. The concept of music localisation presented by Ingalls, Reigersberg and Sherinian's volume encourages a review of Christian congregational musicking noting its cultural settings. Studies of music localisation within CCM studies tend to focus on musicking "shared across spatial and cultural divides; some linked to past practice, some innovative – and make them locally meaningful and useful in the construction of Christian beliefs, theology, practice or identity" (Ingalls et. al., 2018, p. 15). It is important to note that for many, Christian music translation is a colonial West-to-East enterprise. I have explored the nuances around this in my forthcoming publication for Australasian Pentecostal Studies (Chan, 2021). However, here I seek to position the work of the Hillsong 华语 Huayu as localised Christian music-making displaying "practices that do not fit neatly within the model of either indigenisation or its converse, assimilation" (Ingalls et al., 2018, p. 12). Examination of music localisation allows the focus to be primarily not on the distributor or distribution process but on the local community and the musicking

[16] Ethnomusicologist Mark Porter suggests Ethnomusicology is a means to be able to study congregational music within the lens of its culture, i.e., Contemporary “western” Christian congregational music within Western Art Music. See Porter 2014

process. This is crucial as it is the community within Hills Chinese (both leaders and using feedback from attendees) who eventually choose and decide the usefulness of the practice, or in this case, the translated song, within their group.

Theology behind Translations and Worship Practices

Missiologist Lamin Sanneh (2009) suggests that the translation of the Christian message is both missiological and theological. He proposes that Christianity is a *translated religion,* using the historical expansion of Christianity through vernacular translation eventually adopting the culture (such as the early church's use of Hellenistic Greek). The theological understanding of other cultures as a destination of God's salvation and kindness is vital, focusing on those who receive or hear the message (Sanneh, 2009, p. 32).

Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong provides basis for applying Sanneh's translatability to ethnomusicology and musicking. Yong suggests the continual interface of gospel and culture from its beginnings, sees the growth of Christianity move beyond its western-centric focus (Sanneh, 2007; Yong, 2014).[17] Translations, are still an interaction of the Christian message and culture (vernacular language). Yong in his work with ethnomusicologists in *Spirit of Praise* (2015) suggests that *musicking* in Pentecostal contexts is indicative of oral tradition. Music within congregations is used to theologise on the ground level . Other elements of worship that Pentecostal churches focus on is embodied experience within their worship service (Miller & Yamamori, 2007), alongside the importance of space, leadership, and congregational elements (Albrecht, 1999). This paper recognises that the translators (within their Pentecostal context) view the songs as experience and translation beyond simply linguistics. Rather there is a mediation of the other elements of space, leadership, and message that is packaged with the song.

Research Methodology and Design

My research primarily draws on ethnomusicology, using examples of “fieldwork at home” amongst Chinese music, with studies such as Stock and Chiener's work in Taiwan with 南管 *Nanguan* musics, studying musical practice as an insider to the

[17] Engaging with Sanneh's translatability allows Yong to discuss a focus on a possible Asian American focus on evangelistic theology.

environment and culture (Barz & Cooley, 2008; Stock & Chiener, 2008).[18] This method allows me to use my practice fieldwork as, first, a practitioner within the Hills Chinese community (where I have been a worship pastor and volunteer within the team for 8.5 years). Second, I am a 1.5 generation Chinese-Canadian (immigrated to Canada and familiar with both the Canadian culture and my Hong Kong background) fluent in English, Cantonese and conversational Mandarin (Kim et al., 2003; Yong, 2014).[19] For this task, the discipline of Ethnomusicology provides the possibility for exploring the performance of music but also its examination as a cultural artefact (as in reviewing performance within its lingual, social, and cultural context) (Nettl, 2015). This field itself has changed from studying cultural music at a distance (from a western perspective) to allow for researchers' ability to study cultural musicking via participation within various social dimensions, with ethnography's focus on local narratives and perspectives (Nettl, 2015, p. 10). This is here applied (not least to myself as one of the translators who partakes in congregational musicking) to allow me to observe the team's reflexivity as translators negotiate their migrant realities, cultural backgrounds, and megachurch context.

Ethnographic methods use fieldwork (participant-observation and interviews) involving the researcher within CCM studies to observe "on the ground" from the congregational level the musical practices within the church. I conducted my ethnographic research over a period of one year during my MTh as a participant within the Hills Chinese music and translation team, with a view to finding the use of translated Mandarin worship songs and how they are localised by the users (here the leaders and the worship team members). This larger study focused not only on the translation process but also on the reception of the songs within three Sydney-based Chinese congregations (Chan, 2021).[20] As this study focuses upon one site (a Pentecostal megachurch), the ethnographic data will be discussed in relation to theological concepts drawn from missiology and Pentecostal theology to analyse? the ecclesial aspects of the songs (Fiddes, 2012; Haight & Nieman, 2009).

[18] Though the context may be different, I would argue that fieldwork at home still applies in an Australian Chinese diasporic setting.

[19] I was born in Hong Kong and immigrated to Canada when I was young. However, I am 1.5 generation as my community growing up was 1st generation Chinese immigrants. I am still in touch with the Chinese culture from the Hong Kong perspective, and now in Sydney I am married to a 1st generation immigrant from Mainland China. However, my language ability allows me to understand songtext, but with research limitations, I am limited to English academic sources. For more on 1.5 generation see Kim et al, and also Yong's theological text on Asian American evangelical theology.

[20] Author's forthcoming article focuses on the wider scope of three Sydney based congregation's use of the translated songs.

Participants who were interviewed as represented in this article were selected leaders of the Hills Chinese Community (two services that run from the Hillsong main campus site in Sydney), as well as the translations manager of Hillsong Music, and various members of Hillsong 华语 *Huayu* team (also volunteers within Hills Chinese). The following outlines the cultural context of each participant:

Figure 1: Participant Demographic and Context

Name[21]	Region of Origin	Description of role and cultural context
Huang	Mainland China (also currently located)	Involved in both translation and production of translated Mandarin songs
Chen	Mainland China	Translator; involved in Hills Chinese service as a congregation leader
Tan	Malaysia	Translator and congregation leader; involved in the Hillsong Chinese ministry since the early 1990s, originally from City Christian Life Centre, and involved with the Chatswood service
Xu	Mainland China	Translator since 2010, and involved in the Chatswood now Northshore service, works with the Hills Chinese team
Tsai	Taiwan	Translator since 2019 Hills Chinese service worship team member
Jun	South Korea	Korean translator since 2011; employed by HMA as the Translations Manager since 2016.
Service Pastor 1	Hong Kong	Service pastor of Hillsong Hills Chinese and part of the Eldership of Hillsong Church
Service Pastor 2	Hong Kong	Service pastor of Hillsong Hills Chinese
Yuen	Mainland China	Worship leader in Hills Chinese for over 30 years

[21] Pseudonyms have been used for anonymity for the participants. These names identify with the person’s heritage, with phonetics that are closely identified with the heritage of interviewee: Malaysia, Taiwan, South Korea and Mainland China. For this paper, there is no need to particularly assign a Chinese character to their name, so the Pinyin will be used with no characters (an English transliteration is used).

Ying	Taiwan	Involved with Hillsong church and also attended the Hills Chinese service.
Lo	Taiwan	Involved with Hillsong church and also attended the Hills Chinese service.

A further necessary delimitation: while this paper discusses practices of translation within congregational musicking, I do not focus on the linguistic aspects of the song translation process, but instead the song as a product of the process in context of ecclesial musicking. I also acknowledge various complexities when discussing Chinese diaspora or migrant groups which may not be examined in full here. For example, Ben Dumbauld's (2012) ethnomusicological research within a Chinese American Church highlights that worship practices can differ within one church due to a combination of generational and cultural differences. However, this paper will not focus on the generational aspect. Hills Chinese represents first and 1.5 generation Chinese communities in a specific context within an English-speaking megachurch in Hillsong. Within this community the Mandarin language needs were the same across generations.

Ethnography and Findings

Jun as the Translations Manager of Hillsong Music

My ethnography starts with Jun as the leader and facilitator of translations within Hillsong, a member that works internally within the operations of HMA's distribution to 17 different languages. Most significantly, Jun works to create a space for the different language groups, including Hillsong 华语 *Huayu* (personal communication, January 25, 2019). Jun's work sets the framework from which translators operate, as she oversees the different language translation teams for HMA. It is also significant that she represents a non-Western voice within the church and oversees the various opportunities for translation work, but especially for Asian language translations, as a Korean translator herself. Her insights as a Korean first-generation immigrant in Australia, as well as a translator and church member, contribute to her understanding of the translation process and product. Jun's work to expand the translation work to Asian languages has only been recent (compared to the previous focus on Spanish and

other European languages), though translation into Mandarin occurred since the outset of the Chinese service at Hillsong.

To Jun and many of the translations team, the songs produced by Hillsong church are products of the heart of its culture. That is, these songs are seen as God-given or "anointed".[22] Given the spiritual weight the team place upon the songs, Jun suggests:

> By introducing what is being given to our church, even though it was primarily in English, my passion is to carry that heart and spirit into our language. (Jun, personal communication, January 25, 2019)

As leader of the translations team, Jun assumes the responsibility for ensuring official translations carry the same "heart and spirit" as interpreted by the church while still carrying the message forward in other languages. However, here Jun recognises various limitations to the translation process in operating from an English repertoire. While there is an array of "resources" that Hillsong produces, Jun suggests that not all songs should be used in its language services or translated for other churches:

> We consider whether it is singable in the congregation/church setting; not all the songs are fit to sing in church services. Just like we don't sing all the Hillsong United songs or all the Young and Free songs in our [Hillsong] congregations, there are certain songs that are more fit [for] worship services, and there are some songs that have same impact when you listen to it. (Jun, personal communication, January 25, 2019)

This comment reflects upon the variety of music produced by the bands of Hillsong and notes that certain melodies and arrangements within songs are used differently across these various musical groups of Hillsong.[23] Similarly, not all songs are considered suitable for multilingual congregational use across all languages. For example, Jun notes the positive impact of one of Hillsong's 2018 songs, "Who You Say I Am" (Hillsong Worship, 2018), as a strong example:

[22] Inferring a Pentecostal understanding of a Spirit-empowered nature of worship.
[23] These three different musical groups within Hillsong represent three different sounds, where Hillsong Worship caters to a more “congregational” sound for churches, Hillsong United a more creative and innovative sound, and Hillsong Young and Free, which is catered to the current youth’s taste (the youth demographic is unspecified, but likely more American and Australian preferences).

> We hear testimonies about how, especially the younger generation, they are restored from depression, restored, a strength from the translated line itself about us being a child of God… our identity comes from Christ. From one of the testimonies I heard, when our Chinese translations is sung in China, there are a lot of young people impacted. (Jun, personal communication, January 25, 2019)

名份祢已赐给我 *mingfen'niyicigeiwo,* meaning "You have given me identity", provides a powerful declaration in Chinese, and is more direct than the English lyrics "I Am Who You Say I Am", a phrase seldom heard within the Chinese context. However, she admits that more continual connections and feedback from the Chinese churches and communities are welcome.

The Hills Chinese space

Translated Mandarin songs are essential to the Hills Chinese service to maintain the "one house many rooms" model within the service. To provide a similar or the sonic sound (Wagner, 2014), it requires careful translation of songs into Chinese to facilitate similar congregational musicking within Hills Chinese as in the rest of the church. Following translation, the Hills Chinese leaders contextualise music within each space (teaching, connect groups, celebrations) to assist the community. The space is a Hillsong space (English-speaking predominantly), but the leaders would also emphasise that they are distinctly Chinese as well.

The Hills Chinese pastors are from Hong Kong, which allows them cultural familiarity with the Chinese diaspora community they serve from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Malaysia and other Cantonese and Mandarin-speaking backgrounds. The pastors are aware of the needs of the Chinese-speaking diaspora community, creating space for them to grow spirituality:

> Language-wise, culture-wise, and in a Chinese community in an English Church, we [create] a community model that people can feel connected, feel encouraged to use their gifts. The Chinese community can be there for anyone wanting to be connected to a smaller congregation, that can use their language to express their spirituality and grow. (Hills Chinese Pastors, personal communication, January 19, 2020)

Tan, a fellow lay pastor who has worked with the Lees in the early years, recalls his experience with serving the Chinese community to Hillsong:

> Without providing a Mandarin-speaking service, or Cantonese, they [the Chinese community] wouldn't have a chance of experiencing serving God or sharing their testimony. Without the translations or opportunity for them to go up [on the platform] and share something, sharing communion or sharing a giving message or testimony they would have missed out a lot. (Tan, personal communication, February 2, 2019)

Without language access, the attendees from the Chinese community lack the usual participation Hillsong attendees have in the English service (often referred by the congregants as the main service) via ecclesial practices such as serving, testimony, communion, and understanding the teaching.

Ultimately, the pastors created a worship space within Hillsong that is distinctly Chinese, in which language plays a significant part. The service strategically moved (from a bilingual Mandarin-English service) to a monolingual (Mandarin) service in 2017, and eventually leading to the second Cantonese service in 2021.

Their emphasis on language creates a space for the Chinese community while connecting with the larger church in the megachurch model. They explain that:

> [the Chinese community] would have the same experience as a westerner, in our next-door Convention Centre, experience the worship. The Chinese people have the same experience. Bring it to a level of experience of what the Australian congregation is experiencing. The lyrics, the music, the anointing. (Hills Chinese Pastors, personal communication, January 19, 2020)

At Hillsong, singing common songs contributes toward maintaining the same experience in each room and carrying that same "anointing" of worship across the many rooms (Evans, 2006, pp. 100–101).[24] Here the translated worship song acts as a mediator of the presence of God, but also in situating Hills Chinese as a "room within the house" of Hillsong. However, this simultaneously provides a space to

[24] The anointing of the music is understood by the pastor, to be the Holy Spirit coming to power amongst the congregation (as identified by Evans in his discussion of "the Hillsong Anointing.")

accommodate the congregants' cultural identity. For instance, from my observations as a practitioner, the Hills Chinese weekly sermons and preaching are often catered to draw upon cultural values and metaphors, with setlists of translated songs chosen to "resonate" with the congregation. The pastors continue to learn what values and topics the congregants want from their church, its team and other community members. For example, this community together observes Chinese holiday celebrations such as Lunar New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival through specialised performances of songs as well as evangelistic messages, and community events catering to these events and their cultural themes. To the pastors, Hills Chinese is a space of intercultural exchange with the English-speaking culture found within Hillsong. In this way, the pastors created an intentional space for the Chinese community to the Hillsong ecclesial practices outworked in the Chinese language.

Understanding the context of the song

As outlined in the previous section Chinese pastors and leaders were pivotal in starting this ministry and space for this cultural community, and the translators who work on the song and message within the worship service work towards this aim but also ensure that the ecclesial heart of the songs is understood through this cultural lens. Therefore, the following section will detail the importance of the song translators in creating the synergies with megachurch culture. With the strong emphasis on worship songs and the ecclesial unity within Hillsong, largely it falls to the work of translators to correctly translate existing songs that can contextualise well for Mandarin speakers. Both localisation and adaptation is considered essential within the Hills Chinese space.

Song translators within the church understand the role songs play within its vision and teaching but also in voicing the needs of the congregation. Here Chen, member of Hillsong 华语 *Huayu*, suggests:

> "A song written by anyone [in the church], reflects the vision of the church, [but also] their personal revelation, and it reflects what they think can help the congregation or whoever is singing it."
> (Chen, personal communication, April 22, 2019)

As a guideline, the translation must reflect both the songwriter and the church. This reflexivity of the songwriter and church intention

cannot be lost in translation when moving into a new recipient language. Chen continues:

> "We are not meant to recreate something completely new, but rather carrying that same vision, same understanding and even revelation a lot of time and be faithfully reflecting that in our translation." (Chen, personal communication, April 22, 2019)

To maintain an understanding of the original intent and vision, Chen emphasises to the team that they must experience the song as used in the congregation first (meaning to partake in congregational musicking before attempting to lead it via translation). Therefore, the team members of Hillsong 华语 *Huayu* mostly experience the songs first within the English church services participating along with the congregation. This is true for all except the external members who act as cultural informants providing feedback from the Chinese mainland. Xu, for instance, who has been a Hillsong congregation member since 2008, responds:

> "I think it helps to understand the culture of the church and how the church and how the composers in this church would usually express their thoughts and lyrics."[25] (Xu, personal communication, January 31, 2020)

Similarly, Tsai, a newer member of the team, is an international student attending Hills Chinese, who also shared his experience of being a part of the wider Hillsong environment. He compares this with his insight as a recent outsider:

> Being here in Hillsong, it allows me to understand more in translations. There is more access to this information. If today, I was in another church, then I do not have this environment. The access to this information is not there. This comparison may be less. (Tsai, personal communication, January 22, 2020)

Here Tsai emphasises the process of musicking together that forms the Hillsong 华语 Huayu process. Engaging the song's original context and experiencing its reception within the congregation and by the Hillsong leadership is important. Thus, while the song can move freely, the theological message, according to the translators, should

[25] Culture is not mentioned as the sense of nationality or ethnicity, but rather discussing the organisational and leadership culture of Hillsong Church.

not be detached from its original meaning or the subsequent meanings derived from the ecclesial setting.

Furthermore, some words and concepts can only be understood by those who are also congregants; that is, there are symbols and metaphors laden with meaning only within the Hillsong setting. For example, Tan explains how the message of the song may be "preached from the pulpit" before a songwriter pens it into music. He provided a specific example with the word "seasons," that he understood the congregation to be holding a particularly laden theological message regarding timing or a period of waiting that is allowed by God:

> In Chinese translations, “seasons” is understandable, but you tend to use it as a period of time, rather than the word. So, we need to make a choice to say either seasons or a period of time.
>
> [But here] the word seasons is going to appear more and more in our preaching, in the way we are stating [it], in the way we are singing our songs … Seasons [has] become an acceptable term in Christian circles now. (Tan, personal communication, February 2, 2019)

Tan's example here also illustrates how the translation process determines which aspects of the original context are kept. Chen describes another example *So Will I,* which in her view epitomises the "freshness" that is unique to the Hillsong songwriters within lyrics and melodies:

> This song was a huge surprise for me. We managed to translate it. I didn't think it was going to be so singable. I didn't think people will actually use it in their worship. Because it was so wordy in a way, and the translations was very poetic. However, the feedback I got so far people loved it. Because of that beauty and "freshness", it carries in its lyrics, in its melody as well. (Chen, personal communication, April 22, 2019)

The “freshness” that Chen describes is a unique or poetic way of language that is not usually found in CCM, at least in the view of the translators, and especially in the Chinese language. These metaphors and images of the environment had not been used often within the Christian context or applied to Christian spiritualities; therefore,

the translators found there were no traditions or language to draw upon, at least within the Chinese Church. The translation of the song "So Will I" 我也会 *woyehui* provides an example of these metaphors used (Hillsong UNITED, 2017):

All nature and science	自然与科学 zi ran yu ke xue
Follow the sound of Your voice	都来跟随祢的声音 dou lai gen sui ni de sheng yin

The lines above speak of the authority of God over nature and science, a line not often found even in English lyrics (perhaps due to the theological implications), let alone in Chinese hymnody. The theological meaning and understanding of the context here fed into the translators' choice, and because of the "freshness" of the discussion of nature and science for instance, the translators ensured the level of unique wording is kept even in the Chinese expression (through 自然与科学 *ziran'yu'kexue*).

Translators' role to mediate

Within the Hills Chinese community, the pastors and, most importantly, the translators aim to mediate the original song within context to their recipients in a way appropriate to the culture. The recipients in this case include both the Hills Chinese community and the transnational Mandarin community to whom the translations are distributed. Many of the team and leaders used the term "sharing" for this process of making translations available. They understood the song as an Australian ecclesial and theological product that they translate back into Chinese culture, thereby contributing to the song, as described by Xu:

> You come across a good song that resonates with you that you think it's good, that you think it's going to help more people resonate with the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit … it's a tool for other people to get closer to God. You don't have to use this tool, but if you think this tool is good, you would want to share it. (Xu, personal communication, January 31, 2020)

However, in their translation process, what matters most to the Hillsong 华语 is their focus on the recipient or the contextualisation process.

While the Hillsong 华语 *Huayu* team is comprised of those attending the megachurch, there are also team members who act as cultural consultants outside of the congregational setting to ensure relevance to the transnational community. This ensures the wider Chinese church communities have a say in this process. For example, Huang, a translator who works with Hillsong 华语 *Huayu* overseas, describes translation from the recipient's perspective:

> With Worship Leaders and people in China, when it comes back to translation, a lot of those resources they are looking for are in English … when people's hearts get moved by those lyrics, they want to sing it in their own languages … it's that freshness, the message that's being said, in those songs is something they haven't gotten too much of before. (Huang, personal communication, November 17, 2018)

The recurring notions of "freshness" here indicates that recipients in China want something contemporary that they do not have already in Chinese. Tsai continues this notion in his thoughts, drawing from his previous insight as an outsider:

> I think it opens our eyes because each of our cultures only has a limited worldview. We don't have as large of a view as we have imagined. So other than our language and culture, it's important to understand other views, other cultures in worship. (Tsai, personal communication, January 22, 2020)

Tsai sees a difference between the worship expressions in English versus Mandarin; an effectively translated song successfully bridges the two cultures and can therefore be framed as a cultural exchange from his perspective as a Mandarin speaker.

Whether from a personal conviction or the desire for cultural exchange, language differences often become a challenge to address. Here there were varied responses across the translators:

> In English there are many words…usually express[ed] using difference phrases, different ways. You don't just use one word, to describe the differences. Especially when there are a lot of words that describe feeling in the lyrics. Then it will be difficult. There are differences in the language. Where in Chinese, you don't describe

> your feeling in certain ways. (Xu, personal communication, February 2, 2019)
>
> I [use] the indicator as what Mandarin songs are already out there, and how they do it, and refer to that. If we are producing something, lyric-wise, close enough to those, I know it's going to work. (Chen, personal communication, April 22, 2019)

The issues raised here by the translators pertain to the words available in the Chinese language to express what was originally written in English, that is, the expectation to translate directly or phrase-by-phrase. However, Chen focuses her team on Chinese cultural conventions through her application of the *XinDaYa* Chinese criteria of translations applied from her training in Mainland China:

> 信 *Xin* is faithfulness – to see whether you are faithful to the original text.
>
> 达 *Da* means accuracy – whether you accurately reflect the meaning or the meaning behind it.
>
> 雅 *Ya* means elegancy, which is the ... higher-level goal to reach. It reflects whether or not we can keep the rhyme, whether we can polish the sing-ability. (Chen, personal communication, April 22, 2019)[26]

In this model, 信 *Xin* and 达 *Da* attend to the original Hillsong song-lyric as text. At the same time, 雅 *Ya* requires a higher level of poetry and elegance achieved with a clear understanding of Chinese cultural tastes. This convention allows for evaluation of translated songs into the culture, and ultimately the focus is upon the recipient Chinese language (Gu, 2010; Hermans, 2003).

When the song is translated well, the congregation can engage. Yuen, a worship leader in Hills Chinese since the 90s, notes the power of effective translations from the feedback received:

[26] My language ability as the researcher unfortunately has limited access to text on *XinDaYa*, and such only has access to the sources that are available in English text regarding translation studies. I recognize there are a significant number of texts, but this paper focuses on the ethnographic data that shows Chen's use of the concept. Gu's and Hermans's texts were among a few that I could access which helps explain the philosophy behind *XinDaYa* as a model and concept.

> Now we have moved to all Mandarin, I find it's easier to really 感动 *gandong*.[27] The quality of the Chinese becomes closer, accurately representing the song. Secondly, words can reach listeners. There are two areas: Accuracy and 感动 *gandong*. (Yuen, personal communication, January 17, 2020)

The improved contextualisation within this Mandarin-focused strategy affects the congregation, and Yuen has received feedback that it creates a deepened response in worship. The term 感动 *gandong* here means to illicit a deep response. An example of this is found in the song 破碎器皿 "Broken Vessels" (Hillsong Worship, 2014), one which Yuen often chooses within leading worship:

Empty-handed	But not forsaken
一无所有	祢却不离弃

一无所有 *yiwusuoyou* is an idiom meaning "there is nothing to my name", followed by 祢却不离弃 *niquebu'liqi,* "You (God) have not left me".[28] Paired together these concepts reflect Chinese poetry as well as the theological notion that, "with nothing to our name, God is still with us". Changing the two idioms from the English "empty-handed" to the Chinese "nothing to my name" is the attention to accuracy Yuen appreciates. Of course, the choice of wording for this translation is determined by the process: the use of idioms and cultural conventions to portray a level of poetic-ness to best fit Chinese cultural poetic expectations and sensibilities.[29]

The use of the Translated Song and Purpose

While the Hills Chinese community navigates their space within the Australian megachurch context, they also consider the larger global church and wider Chinese community they can "influence". The translators in Hillsong 华语 *Huayu* were aware of the social contexts to which they provided translated songs and continued to wrestle with both the Australian ecclesial setting and the Chinese cultural needs. Chen suggests 崇洋媚外 *chongyangmeiwai* as a compelling reason why these Hillsong translations are so popular and links this to the yearning and openness for songs that

[27] Where the people are touched and moved in their heart.

[28] It would be good to note that in Chinese (according to the translator's response), it is stronger to name God rather than to leave it ambiguous as "but not forsaken", which in English does not explain the subject being God

[29] The author also acknowledges that translations is contested within song translations. While there could be other preferences in the translation's accuracy, this specified translation in Broken Vessels was the meaning that works for the participant and the community interviewed and observed.

are initially in English. 崇洋媚外 *chongyangmeiwai* is a phenomenon where people (in the younger generation) are infatuated with the foreign. Understanding Chinese culture means recognition of these trends, according to Chen. Tsai responds when asked on the usefulness of the song to the context in which he translates:

> "Would anyone *want to sing it*? If I like a song, I would want to translate it into Chinese. I would be 感动 *gandong* [moved], but I wonder if anyone would sing it because I know the original context." (Tsai, personal communication, January 22, 2020)

On an individual level, Tsai's response notes that he is emotionally moved (感动 *gandong*) by the music. However, he wonders if all Hillsong songs are suitable for the Chinese culture, something that the team will not know until they have tried to translate them.

However, I would highlight in this article the continual effort of the translations team to ensure that their efforts extend beyond simple mechanical translation. The translated song ultimately is intended to build the community attending Hills Chinese. The song is contextualised to this context and eventually, it is assumed, the congregation will write songs in Mandarin on their own (Lim's third song phase of actualisation). Chen, with her framework of translations and despite recognising 崇洋媚外 *chongyangmeiwai*, responds:

> Translations were *never meant to be the end*, meant to be a channel, meant to be something in between … that creativity being inspired, being stirred up in them, for them to have a platform … A lot of it I see translations as a practice, as a warmup, before they do their own thing. (Chen, personal communication, April 22, 2019)

In other words, in her view, the translated songs should inspire creative songwriting in the Chinese language, in line with Lim's discussion to bring musicking towards actualising songs. Returning here to Chen's notion of "freshness", she believes this attribute also should inspire new ideas. Perhaps the same notion of "influence" mentioned in the earlier mentioned interview of Tim Whincop, the influence of Hillsong here really is that "music is done differently", but in this sense, a possibility of a new local sound could arise after the translated resources have been heard.

Further Discussion

This article's purpose was to account specifically how the Chinese community navigated the necessary reflexivity of existing as a cultural community within the megachurch Hillsong Church through their musicking practices as observed within the process of song translation. The translators mediate between Hillsong's songs catered to an English speaking community and adapt the song (Lim, 2017) towards the use within the Chinese congregation through careful selection of Chinese expressions. The eventual goal of the translators is to see the worship songs become actualised expressions, which come directly from the Chinese congregations.

Musicking happens first as translators participate in the congregational "performance" of the larger English services of the church. I proposed that a second layer of musicking happens as the song translators select songs to be translated into Mandarin and propose ways of negotiating the varied meanings, as they feedback with the other leaders and congregation as well as members such as Yuen. The implications of the translated song here go beyond the congregation's mere ability to sing together but the translators described a tension between the song as brought by the individual, as well as the wider ecclesial identity (both megachurch Hillsong and as appropriated by Hills Chinese). They described this as sharing the same Hillsong "experience." Translation was used as a vehicle to enhance participation in the megachurch but also to reinforce their cultural identity as a Chinese diaspora community living within Sydney. The interviews noted two aspects as important to this process, an accuracy/alignment to Chinese literature in translation and agreement between Chinese/English worship expressions that enhances the experience of worship. Ultimately, translations, as suggested by Sanneh, served to bring the interface of the church message and practice, and the recipient culture. What makes the difference is how much care is given to the recipient (Sanneh, 2009).

Returning to the literature, Amos Yong, a Pentecostal theologian, suggests that especially in the Pentecostal congregation, musicking can allow for *theologising* through cultural themes, and worship practices can show unity and diversity of cultural identities (Riches, 2015; Yong, 2015). This process of adaptation to actualisation suggested by Lim makes the difference between simply adapting what is western and foreign with Chinese cultural conventions, to what is written as fully indigenously Chinese (Lim, 2017). Here the practice of the translators shows a

transnational connectedness to Chinese communities within, but also outside of, Sydney, and even to groups within Mainland China. The translators show evident effort to maintain integrity towards the Chinese culture, within the process of translating Christian megachurch songs. In interviewing the translators, two key questions emerged: a functional question, “is a song translatable”, and a more important philosophical one, “*should* a song be translated?”. Musicking with the song becomes the negotiation of all these functions. The translation of songs, musicking, and the outworking on the localisation process here in this space is indicative of the formation of the Hills Chinese identity to be in unity with Hillsong while remaining diverse.

Do megachurches such as Hillsong aid or hinder this process of building the Chinese Christian community? First, it is essential to note that the church's evangelistic and missional nature exhibited in Hills Chinese is made possible because autonomy is given to the relevant leaders who choose to serve their community. The Hills Chinese pastors drew upon the megachurch Hillsong’s buildings, people, message, and worship songs provided to create a belonging (ecclesial identity) for the diaspora Chinese community. Within this space, the leaders work with the translations team to build and honour their heritage (cultural identity). While Wagner, for instance, suggests that the church is united through a "single globalized sonic experience" (Riches & Wagner, 2012; Wagner, 2014, 2017), I believe here the potential of the localised space at Hills Chinese becomes important.[30] Here it can be different, yet still Hillsong. The act of translation becomes essential for the community’s aims. This musicking is not simply "transporting" the same structures but acknowledging that the Hills Chinese space allows for a new localised product that draws together both the ecclesial and cultural. This has important ramifications for both ecclesiology as well as missiology.

However, it is important to note that the megachurch structure within Hillsong can, of course, also hinder the actualisation and localisation process for the community's musicking if not made aware of the larger forces. To start with, the "global" Christian music market still prioritises English as an originating language. 崇洋媚外 *chongyangwaimei* within China, as Chen describes, captures what is potentially a western hegemony: that the Chinese churches, at least the younger generation, want the western songs. Wagner's ethnographic work from the London campus explored the Hillsong Sound, observing the single sonic experience, or the same aural branding,

[30] The discussion of the market brand and sound of Hillsong has been discussed extensively through Riches’ and Wagner’s work, as a non-exhaustive example.

replicated throughout the church campuses (Wagner, 2014; Riches, 2010). When global music markets and evangelistic motives combine, this becomes counteractive to the localisation process given the western-centric dominance favouring the English-speaking practices (the Hillsong setup of music). With 崇洋媚外 *chongyangwaimei*, and the favourable “contemporary sound” that appeals to the youth in China, would there be demand for an actualised song?

In his discussion on Pentecostal and postcolonial missiology, Amos Yong warns against the "zealous" language of Pentecostal global evangelism, suggesting highlighting the grassroots movement within the "locality of the convert" (Yong, 2017). While I do not presume to have a solution, this shows how highlighting the locality and contextualisation work of the translations team and the Chinese community leaders become vital. The mediation or reflexivity of the translator becomes more essential to countering the homogeneity in worship practices.

Such connections have already been currently established not only in the Hills Chinese community but also transnationally. Further feedback and research from Chinese congregations on the use of the translated song are still needed, both in academia and also in practice. But with a local service within Hillsong that is already working towards actualisation (as proposed by Lim to be musicking directly from the indigenous culture rather than borrowed conventions), the hope is that greater localisation or contextualisation will occur in future endeavours (Lim, 2017). At the very least, the diasporic community within Hills Chinese Is situated within the adapted song process in their translations.

To conclude, the Hills Chinese community is unique within the Hillsong Church organisation. However, the Hills Chinese service and the translations team's influence spread transnationally, working with outside members. The account of Hills Chinese within Hillsong may have implications on how this can be modelled within other megachurches. This especially has implications on their cultural practice spaces and to the broader discussion of other Chinese congregations towards the usefulness of the translated song to their construct of ecclesial and cultural identity.

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Peer Reviewed Articles

“Boy’s Club”: A Gender-Based Analysis of the CCLI Top 25 lists from 1988-2018

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the problem of gender representation in contemporary worship music industry. An in-depth, data-driven study of the Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) top 25 lists since 1988 shows that women are vastly underrepresented, while collaborations between men dominate the charts. As the industry has developed, women have struggled to hold not only the #1 spot, but any spot on the top 25 list. Contemporary worship music has evolved significantly over the past 30 years, and yet 1994 was the last time a woman held the #1 position on the charts. Even though they have written powerful, accessible music, music by women is often unreachable due to industry standards and methods of exposure. Scholars have studied the history (Ruth & Lim 2017, 2021), theology (Thornton 2021; Cowan 2019), and practices of contemporary worship music (Nekola 2013; Ingalls 2018), but a thorough examination of the gender of the songwriters over the past decades has not been completed. Using data analysis and discussion on industry processes, this paper offers key insights into how women have contended with the evolving industry.

Keywords: Contemporary worship music, women in music, Evangelical women, worship, industry

Introduction

It was an early morning in 1978 when Laurie Klein sat alone in her mobile home, strumming her guitar with a bible beside her. During a difficult time of her life, Klein found encouragement during her morning devotionals. This particular morning, she felt deprived of anything in her to sing and prayed for Jesus to provide a song if she was to sing. The words tumbled out of her mouth: “I love you Lord, and I lift my voice,

to worship You." She scribbled down the lyrics in case she might want to sing them again (Myrick, 2019). After she sang the song for her husband, he suggested that she share it with a local pastor. Since then, according to Klein, the song has "quietly made its way around the world" (Boley, 2001, p. 94).

The telling of this song story can be seen as a part of the data presented in this paper; in fact, this chorus became one of the most sung Christian songs in the world. In April 1994 Klein's song "I Love You Lord" ranked #1 on Christian Copyright Licensing International's (CCLI) Top 25 list USA, a chart that largely represents the songs that White American Evangelical churches are singing the most.[31] Here, it is important to note that the CCLI charts in Christian music represent the weekly songlists of many congregations who report to this national body, which administers the copyright licensing.[32] Therefore a CCLI #1 position indicates a widespread participation by Christians singing this song, but can also be viewed as recognition of a song's popularity. In the Christian music world, this is the equivalent honour of a #1 ranking on a Billboard Top 100 chart. Although many songwriters, like Laurie Klein, have reached the famed #1 position on the CCLI Top 25, these songwriters generally have not been women: April 1994 was the last time a solo woman held the #1 spot.[33]

This raises various questions: why aren't there more female songwriters represented on these charts? When did the exclusion for women songwriters begin? Why has it not been addressed? Who does this industry chart really represent? How have the various changes in the industry in the last decades impacted the participation of women songwriters? The question of whether women are underrepresented in the CCLI charts (and if so, why) is complex, but will be explored within this paper.

Instead of being penned during early morning devotionals, many popular songs today are written in intentional collaborations as part of a highly competitive industry. As the contemporary worship music industry has developed, it has become increasingly commercialized with men subsequently coming to dominate the Top 25 list. Women have not only struggled to hold the #1 spot, but *any* spot on the Top 25 list.

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[31] In general, CCLI does not cover gospel music, and most of the artists they feature are White. This leads to a list that is most used by White congregations, and therefore only represents a portion of contemporary worship. For more on this, see: Bjorlin, D. (n.d.), Consumerism and Congregational Song, *Centered in Song (blog)*, Center for Congregational Song, https://congregationalsong.org/tag/david-bjorlin/.

[32] CCLI publishes different lists depending on the country. Throughout this article, the US charts are examined.

[33] In December, 2017, Brooke Ligertwood shared the #1 position with Ben Fielding for cowriting "What a Beautiful Name."

Therefore, the CCLI data represents the industrial complex of contemporary music, but also its system of developing songs for the global church's participation. The thesis of this article is that the decline in ranking songs by women songwriters began at the turn of the century, when the contemporary worship music industry became commercialized in such a way that it excluded women from participating. Thus, the industry has become dominated by collaborations among men, with little recognized input from women.

Background to Contemporary Worship Music Songwriting

The culture around songwriting has developed radically since the seeds of contemporary worship movement first emerged around the 1960s. Following the sound and tone of the era's pop music emerged music from The Jesus People movement. These songs were characterized by the hippie, grassroots atmosphere of the time and followed the musical example of artists like Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger (Lim & Ruth, 2017, p. 60). Responding to the demand for the Christian music, in the 1970s contemporary worship music was commercialized by groups such as Maranatha! Music (Perez, 2021, p. 180). A large repertoire of contemporary music became available, and worship "sets" of back-to-back songs became a staple in Christian worship services. Leaders planned services that led the worshipper through a variety of affects towards an intimate encounter with God (Lim & Ruth, 2017, p. 61). Throughout these developments, women like Karen Lafferty and Amy Grant contributed songs to an ever-growing canon of repertoire. As this worship movement began to industralise and transform, it grew in popularity and accessibility. This emerging industry identified, recorded, produced, and marketed artists who created music for churches. By the 1990s, contemporary church music was globally acknowledged as a worship movement, with significant influence from African American contemporary gospel music groups (Lim & Ruth, 2017, p. 67) as well as ones from England and Australia (Ruth, 2017, p. 3). At the time, many churches were engaged in "the worship wars," clashing over divided preferences for traditional music (as characterized by organs and choirs) and contemporary music (led by praise teams with drum kits). By 1999, Michael Hamilton had published an article declaring contemporary worship music the winner of the worship wars (Hamilton, 1999).

Over the past 20 years, ensembles from megachurches such as Hillsong and Bethel have come to define the industry. These churches develop countless musicians and

artists in their kids and youth ministries, and increasingly retain the power of production and distribution. Writing music for their own services and performance contexts, they are able to select and promote songs that already “work” as measured by their congregations. Through tours and conferences, they have brought contemporary worship music to thousands of churches around the world, where it has now become a dominant musical language. With the rise of social media and online streaming platforms, these churches built their brands, staying connected with communities who eagerly anticipate new music (Thornton, 2020, p. 49). Parallel to secular pop stars, many worship songwriters also achieved celebrity status, filling stadiums during elaborate tours and selling millions of albums every year. These key figures have defined contemporary worship music and are instrumental in its development beyond a grassroots movement to a successful music industry.

This essay provides a closer look at who these worship songwriters are, through an in-depth analysis of the CCLI Top 25 lists between 1988 and 2018. Specifically, this project examines how women have been represented on the CCLI Top 25 lists, and what factors contribute to their experience and representation. It draws on Jada Watson’s methodology for data-driven research of gender representation on popularity charts, using her coding system and analytical method to track gender related trends over time (Watson, 2019, p. 539). Ultimately, this essay aims to expose how the changes within the contemporary worship songwriting industry, including the surging importance of the megachurch, have led to an increasingly homogenous group of songwriters, and limited the capacity for songwriter women to thrive.

Literature Review

Despite the movement existing since the 1960s, scholars did not start researching contemporary worship music until the mid 2000s (Ingalls, 2018, p.10). Researchers from various disciplines have outlined its theology (Lim & Ruth, 2017; Cowan, 2019; Longhurst, 2015, pp. 158-172) and practice (Ingalls, 2018; Evans, 2006; Busman, 2015). A significant body of research has also developed around the commercialization of the industry, including the way that it has developed as a recording industry (Nekola, 2009; Mall, 2012; Thornton, 2015), its global impact through touring and media (Wagner, 2014, pp. 59-73; Evans, 2015, pp. 179-196; Ingalls, 2016, pp. 293-308), and its reliance on media and technology for success (Nekola, 2013, pp. 117-136; Nekola, 2015, pp. 1-21; Thornton & Evans, 2015, pp. 141-160). This research

makes it evident that the industry operates in the same way as much of popular music: through widespread marketing, and the commercialization of artists and groups.

The CCLI Top 25 list, on which this research is based, has received attention in several academic publications. For example, *The Message in the Music* (2007) featured essays that analyzed the 77 songs that had appeared on the CCLI Top 25 lists. Margaret Brady's historical-critical analysis of the song musical styles is featured in this collection, which highlights how contemporary worship music responds to trends in popular music (Woods & Walrath, 2007). Another analysis of the changes in contemporary worship music can be found in Matthew R. Sigler's 2013 article that examines the CCLI Top 25 list (Sigler, 2013, p. 445), tracking recent changes in charting songs. Outside of academic contexts, the United Methodist church has assembled a team to analyze the theology of the CCLI Top 100 songs. In putting together this project, the United Methodist church acknowledged the immense impact of this list on congregational singing.[34]

Daniel Thornton's book titled *Meaning-Making in the Contemporary Congregational Song Genre* (2021) is the first volume to devote significant time to the experiences and output of CCLI songwriters. In this work, Thornton (2021, p. 42) highlights the deficit of female songwriters, noting the discrepancy between the high number of women church attendees and the low number of women songwriters. Given that literature on the experience of songwriters within the industry that fosters them is only a recent development, issues related to representation of women within this male-dominated field is not widely available. There is some research on the experiences of women in contexts where contemporary worship music is present, such as Tanya Riches' chapter "The Sisterhood: Hillsong in a Feminine Key," which articulates the ways Hillsong (as one of the main music producers) supports and promotes the work of women in all spheres of life and work, contrary to public perception. Explaining how Hillsong supports women in its various communities, Riches notes that women have made substantial contributions as preachers (Riches, 2017, pp. 85-105). Similarly, Kate Bowler's book, *Preachers Wife: The Precarious Power of Evangelical Woman Celebrities,* examines how conservative evangelical women are often limited in their influence by virtue of not being able to preach in many contexts, but describes how

[34] The team, which was active from 2015–2017, included: Taylor Burton-Edwards, Kim Chapman, Nelson Cowan, Keum Hwang, Jackson Henry, Laura Jaquith Bartlett, Swee-Hong Lim, Robert McMichael, Janice McNair, and Lester Ruth.

they have managed to gain incredible social and theological influence regardless. In particular, she outlines how major Christian woman musician celebrities such as Amy Grant and Rebecca St. James influenced significant social movements and Christian culture, using their status and music to impact audiences (Bowler, 2019, p. 140).

Biographical information on leading Christian worship songwriters like Amy Grant and Darlene Zschech is available in volumes such as *Jesus Rocks the World* by Bob Gersztyn (2013). However, questions around the development of songwriters, their history and background, have not received the same attention by scholars. Importantly, there is a clear lack of scholarship on the representation of women in the contemporary worship music industry. This research seeks to begin to fill this gap by providing an overview of how women songwriters have been represented in contemporary worship music, using the CCLI Top 25 as a source for data on popular songwriters.

Industry Contexts: CCLI and Contemporary Worship Music

After having provided an overview of the available scholarly literature, I will next address the industry context that contemporary worship songs are born into by describing the CCLI ranking system. As noted above, contemporary worship music receives active engagement weekly from churches around the world who worship using these songs during congregational gatherings. Singing songs during corporate worship often requires intentional permission seeking for copyright laws not to be broken. Though regulations differ from country to country and the reporting structures are national, the global body that administrates this copyright internationally is CCLI.

The history of this organisation is long and somewhat complex. In 1984, after learning of a $3.1 million lawsuit against the Archdiocese of Chicago, Oregon pastor Howard Rachinski began to apply the concept of “Permission of Use” to churches worshipping with contemporary worship music. This allowed communities to obtain blanket permission for “non-commercial” copying activities, and the concept eventually turned into “StarPraise Ministries.” As churches rapidly signed on, it became clear that a need was being met: communities were eager for a third-party organization to facilitate the copyright process. StarPraise had assumed an important role for Christian music, similar to secular Publishing Rights Organizations such as ASCAP (the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers) and BMI (Broadcast Music, Inc.). In

1988, StarPraise Ministries was incorporated under its current name, Christian Copyright Licensing International. In some ways, CCLI is distinct from secular Publishing Rights Organizations, however, songwriters need to be affiliated with one such organization to receive performance royalties under US copyright laws. Throughout the 1990s, CCLI expanded to cover Canada, parts of the UK, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. In the 2000s, it expanded to resource more European countries, Singapore, Brazil, and Korea. As of 2016, CCLI issued licenses worldwide with more than 250,000 churches using them for copyright permissions ("History," n.d.).

CCLI requires churches to pay a fee for their license based on congregational size, and then to report which songs the congregation is using across a 6-month period. With this information, CCLI pays royalties to copyright holders based on how much their song is being used ("FAQ," n.d.). Starting in 1988, CCLI began publishing a semi-annual report with the top songs that churches are using in their services. This list was first published with the top 25 songs and has since expanded to the top 100 songs. The list of current top songs has become a significant way that worship leaders find new songs for worship services (Bjorlin, n.d.). As the industry has developed, songs that rank on the Top 100 list have, increasingly, come to be produced by a major publisher or otherwise marketed to reach a maximum number of worshippers. This is evidenced by the way that administrators for songs in the 1980s and 1990s were mostly independent, whereas large organizations such as Capitol CMG that are most prominent as administrators today. As Bowler and Reagan note,

> Rather than focusing on local or denominational music, churches could now ask: what songs do people want to sing in church? What worship songs are popular? CCLI created a pulse on the most popular worship songs in the country, raising awareness of the national market for worship music that was emerging. (Bowler & Reagan, 2014, p. 202)

Because the lists are used to build a global worship repertoire, songs that reach the CCLI list are encountered more often, leading to more frequent singing in churches, a higher reporting of use, and subsequently to repeated occurrence on the Top 100. In other words, the cycle is self-reinforcing. Further, songwriters and publishers are more likely to try to recreate the sound and theology of songs on the Top 100 list, to find

similar resonance with listeners, and hope it will achieve similar success on the charts. Because of the wide influence of CCLI, songwriters whose songs are represented there will be sung more, and their careers will advance further than songwriters who do not have similar exposure on the Top 100 list.

Analysis: Gender Representation on the CCLI Top 25 – Materials

This study uses a dataset that contains the Top 25 songs from each CCLI report issued between October 1988 and December 2018, which represents a total of 60 reports and 1525 songs. Because many of these songs reappear between lists, it is important to note that there have been 130 unique songs on the list, repeated over 30 years for a total of 1525 songs (i.e. the list does not include 25 new songs each time it is published). The data for this project was collected based on a spreadsheet of top 25 song titles over time that was developed and maintained by Lester Ruth and Daniel Jesse,[35] which I expanded upon by adding categories for songwriters, collaborations, publishers, and gender. All the biographical information included here (such as gender, group type, etc.) was curated by the author.

As noted, the project is based upon Jada Watson's data analysis methodology (Watson, p. 546), which codes variables to determine gender related trends over a designated period of time. Watson's methodology draws upon the work of Marc Lafrance, Lara Worcester, and Lori Burns, using three gender variables instead of two: male (solo or group), female (solo or group), and male-female (group) (Lafrance et al., 2011, p. 558). The CCLI dataset contains records for each of the 1,525 charting songs and includes the song's title, rank, copyright date, songwriter name(s), songwriter gender, ensemble type (solo, duo, trio, group), publisher, number of male songwriters, number of female songwriters, and total number of songwriters. These pieces of information, captured in a spreadsheet, were then analyzed to reveal trends over the 30-year period studied here. Following the format of similar such quantitative studies, this paper firstly presents the data, followed by a discussion section where the data will be analysed and interpreted. Like the work of LaFrance and Watson, this research has been structured to reveal gender-related trends, in this case found on the CCLI Top 25 lists between 1988 and 2018, but not outside of this period.

[35] While CCLI initially compiled top 25 lists, they now report the top 100. For the purpose of consistency in this research, the top 25 songs from every year have been used.

Gender Representation on the CCLI Top 25 Chart

Table 1 (below) summarizes all the songs on the CCLI Top 25 lists from October 1988 to December 2018, revealing that 74.3% of the songs that have been on the CCLI Top 25 chart since 1988 have been written by men, 17.9% of the songs have been written by male-female collaborations, and only 7.8% of songs have been written exclusively by women. While the third category theoretically includes all female collaborations, there has never been an all-female collaboration on the CCLI Top 25.

Ensemble Type	# of songs	% of songs
Solo men or all male collaborations	1133	74.3
Men-women collaborations	119	17.9
Solo women or all female collaborations	273	7.8

Table 1: Percentage and Number of Songs by Songwriter Type

To understand the overall breakdown of gender representation in the Top 25 over time, the graph in Figure 1 maps the distribution and number of charting songs by male artists, female artists, and male-female collaborations over time. Solo versus collaborative works will be explored later in the article. This line graph shows that at the beginning of the study period, the numbers of songs grouped into men, women, and collaborations were the most gender equal in the entire study period, with the smallest percentage difference between songs written by men and women (only a 10% difference). Throughout the 1990s, the number of male songwriters stayed consistent, while the number of solo female songwriters began to decline on the charts. Although this was just a slight decline (from 30% to 28%), the space they previously occupied was filled by collaboration songs.[36] Beginning in the early 2000s the number of songs by women decreased significantly over the course of 5 years, dropping from 28% in 2000 to 8% in 2005, while the songs by men increased from 68% in 2000 to 88% in 2005. This decline in representation of women on the CCLI chart after 2000 was not unique to contemporary worship music; other studies such as LaFrance's study of Top 40 airplay and Watson's study of Billboard's Hot Country Songs chart reveal a similar decline of female artists in this period (Lafrance et al., 2011, pp.

[36] The number of collaborations throughout the 1990s was inconsistent, often having one collaboration per chart for a percentage of 4%. In 1988 there were 13% collaborations between men and women, but at many other points in the 1990s, there were 0% male-female collaborations.

562-63; Watson, p. 546). By 2010 there were consistently high numbers of songs written by men-only, consistently low numbers of songs written by women-only, and the same low number of male-female collaborations. By the mid-2010s, the number of songs by women decreased further to the period low of 4%, but interestingly, the number of songs by men also decreased. Songs by male-female ensembles filled this gap, increasing to 28% of the charting songs by the end of the period. By the end of the 2010s, the number of male-female collaborations was increasing, and the number of male-only songwriters was declining.

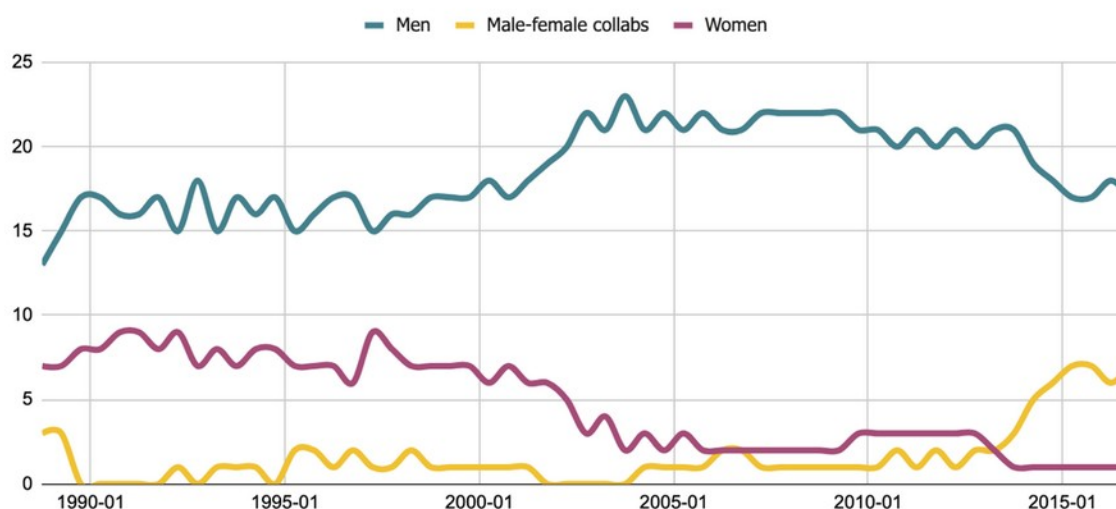

Figure 1: Gender Frequency Distribution of Top 25 (1988–2018)

The number of songs by women decreased gradually over the course of this three-decade period. While the first chart in 1988 featured seven songs authored by women-only, by the final year of this period (2018) just one song by a woman writer remained in the Top 25. The number of songs by men reached an all-time high in 2003 at 92%, but also declined gradually to the end of the period to 72%. Though they still clearly dominate the chart in every year of this study period, the decline in the number of songs by men is likely correlated to the increased number of collaborations between men and women. Overall, the percentage gap of songs between men and women was 46.2% on the first chart recorded in 1988 and more than doubled to 94.4% in 2018. This percentage gap reached a record high in October, 2013 of 95.2%, here indicating the largest discrepancy in representation between men and women. The number of collaborations between men and women has risen significantly since 2013, though not close to the level of songs written exclusively by men, whether solo or collaboratively.

While the rate of women charting on the CCLI Top 25 is significantly declining perhaps even more striking yet is the way that women have been absent from the #1 position. Figure 2 (below) maps the distribution of the #1 song position between 1988 and 2018. Songs tend to reappear on this list, and sometimes may receive the #1 position multiple times.

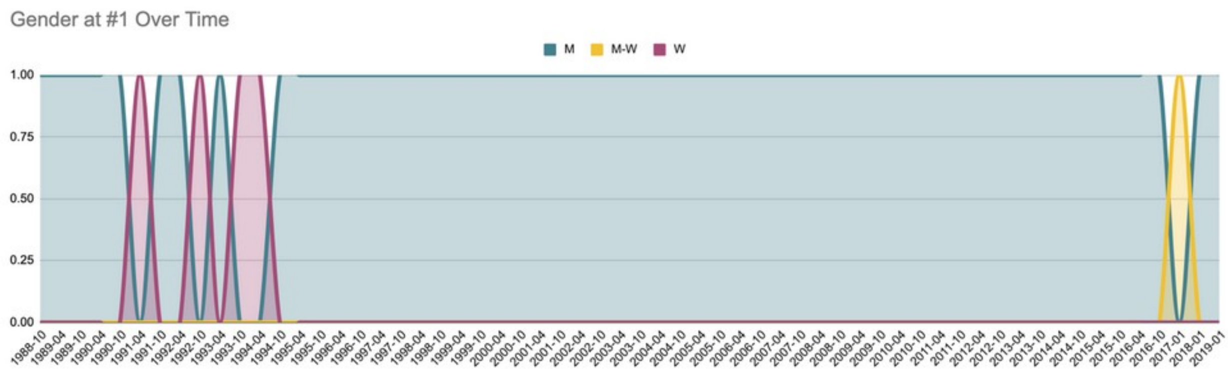

Figure 2: Songwriters by Gender at #1 Over Time

Women songwriters held the #1 spot a total of four times throughout the 1990s. Perhaps more critically, this represents just two different female songwriters who held this position: Leona Von Brethorst with “He Has Made Me Glad” on the October 1993 chart, and Laurie Klein’s “I Love You Lord,” which charted three times between 1991 and 1994. Since 1994, however, the #1 position has been dominated exclusively by men, with only one exception: in 2017, the male-female collaboration of Brooke Ligertwood and Ben Fielding took the #1 position for their song “What a Beautiful Name.” Of the 25 different songwriters whose songs have appeared in the #1 position, only three of them (12%) were women. Five different men (Chris Tomlin, Matt Redman, Jesse Reeves, Ben Fielding, Jonas Myrin) have held the position for more than one song, but no women have held the position for multiple titles. While some women have been represented in collaborations, these writer teams generally do not gain the number 1 position multiple times, and it is therefore still solo males and exclusively male collaborations that hold the majority of the #1 positions.

Collaborations on the CCLI Top 25 Charts

As noted, one of the most striking differences between the CCLI Top 25 charts in 1988 and 2018 relates to the role of songwriter collaborations. This section outlines the

trends regarding this data more fully. Figure 3 (below) tracks the authorship of songs, mapping songs by one songwriter against those written in collaborations.

Figure 3: Group vs. Solo Songwriters From 1988–2018

Figure 3 outlines how songs by solo writers have decreased, and songs written in collaboration have increased. In the late 1980s and 1990s, most songs were written by a solo songwriter, with a small number written by a duo. Until the early 2000s, the number of songs by solo writers was consistently high, with a low number of collaborations. This began to shift in 2003, with a substantial decline in solo writers and significant increase in collaborations over the following 10 years. In 2013, another significant shift in the songwriter credits occurred when a larger number of songs were written in collaborations than by solo songwriters. After 2013, the number of songs written in collaborations continued to increase, with the number of solo writers declining to only one per chart. Between 2013 and 2018, “Revelation Song” by Jennie Lee Riddle was the only song on the Top 25 listing just one songwriter.

The prominence of collaborations on the Top 25 charts requires some consideration, with particular attention to how women were represented in these teams. From 1988 to 1993, when there were collaborations on the chart, women made up 50% of the collaboration. That number reached a record low in 2012 when only 3.1% of writers in collaborations were women. At the end of 2018, this number increased slightly when 9% of writers in collaborations were women. Most of these duos represented in the data from the 1990s were husband/wife teams, such as Wayne and Cathy Perrin. In

contrast, the collaborations on the 2018 Top 25 lists are often between artists from different labels and across continents. While there are still some husband/wife collaborations, many male-female team collaborations now come from outside of familial contexts.

Below, Table 2 summarizes the one male-one female collaborations over this period, revealing eight of the 11 collaborations were between husband/wife teams.

Song Title	Year	Songwriter #1	Songs	Songwriter #2	Songs	Family?
“There’s Something About That Name”	1970	Bill Gaither	2	Gloria Gaither	2	Yes
“Because He Lives”	1971	Bill Gaither	2	Gloria Gaither	2	Yes
“Let There Be Glory and Honour and Praises”	1978	James Greenelsh	1	Elizabeth Greenelsh	1	Yes
“When I Look Into Your Holiness”	1981	Wayne Perrin	1	Cathy Perrin	1	Yes
“Great is the Lord”	1982	Michael W. Smith	2	Deborah Smith	1	Yes
“Blessed Be Your Name”	2002	Matt Redman	7	Beth Redman	1	Yes
“Indescribeable”	2004	Jesse Reeves	6	Laura Story	1	No
“Glory to God Forever”	2009	Steve Fee	1	Vicki Beeching	1	No
“Holy Spirit”	2011	Bryan Torwalt	1	Katie Torwalt	1	Yes
“How He Loves”	2015	John Mark McMillan	2	Sarah McMillan	1	Yes
“What a Beautiful Name”	2016	Ben Fielding	5	Brooke Ligertwood	2	No

Table 2: Husband/Wife Collaborations

In the case of each song writing pair, either each collaborator appears in the Top 25 the same number of times, or the man has appeared more frequently for a higher number of songs.

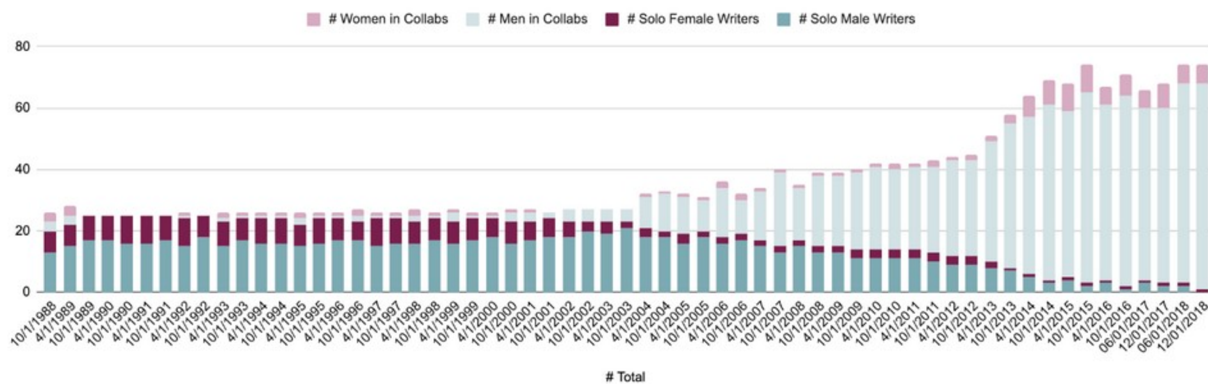

Figure 4: Gender in Collaborations Over Time

Figure 4 outlines the total number of men and women songwriters represented on each chart, presented here to indicate the overall authorship and movement. The numbers are consistent with more male than female songwriters and very few collaborations until 2003. From 2004, a spike in collaborations can be seen, with large numbers of men collaborating but with only a few women involved. After 2004, as mentioned earlier, the number of solo songwriters gradually decreased as the number of collaborations increased. Critically, between 2004 and 2014 there was a high number of individuals in collaborations, but very few were women. The lowest number of women in collaborations was 3.1% in 2012; but gradually increased to 12.3% in 2017, and 8.2% in 2018.

Because of the decrease over time of solo writers on the Top 25 list, women are increasingly only represented in male-female collaborations, and they are less prominent than men in the collaborations formed. Thus it is not uncommon to see one woman's name alongside four or five male names as collaborators on a Top 25 song.[37] It is important to note that since 1988, no all-female collaborations have occurred on the CCLI Top 25; the 7.7% women on the list are exclusively solo women. Further, there have only been two songs that have had more than one woman collaborate on them: "Forever (We Sing Hallelujah)," written in 2013, and "Tremble," written in 2016. Women songwriters have gradually been eliminated from ranking solo song-writing positions, as well as from collaborative song-writing positions.

[37] Some examples include "Lord, I Need You," cowritten by Christy Nockels, Daniel Carson, Jesse Reeves, Kristian Stanfil, and Matt Maher, or "Build My Life" written by Brett Younker, Karl Martin, Matt Redman, Pat Barrett, and Kirby Kaple.

To better understand how the landscape of contemporary worship music has changed over the last 30 years, a comparison of gender representation between 1988 and 2018 is presented below (see Figures 5–8).

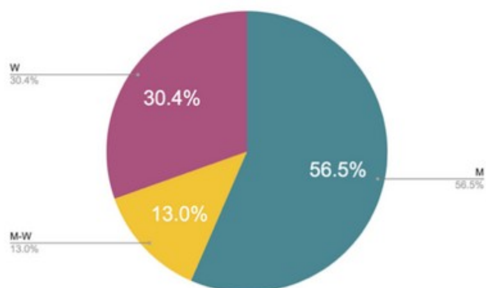

Figure 5: 1988

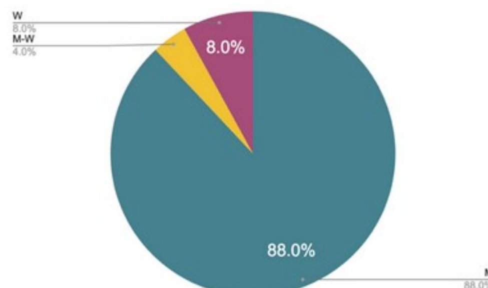

Figure 7: 2008

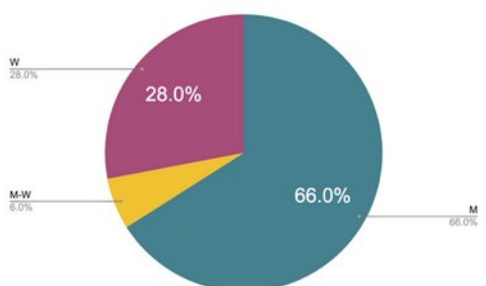

Figure 6: 1998

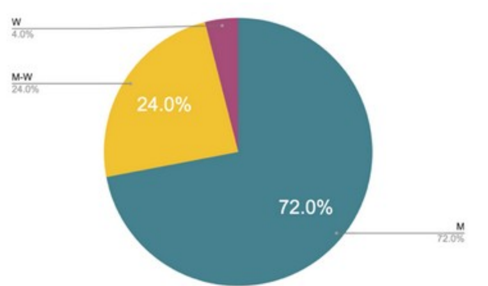

Figure 8: 2018

In 1988, 30% of the songs on the Top 25 list were written by women. Another 13% were written by male-female collaborations, and 56.5% were by men. One decade later in 1998, 28% of the songs were by women, only a small decrease from the previous decade. By this year there was a reduction in collaborations to 8%, with 66% of songs written by men. A significant shift had occurred another decade later by 2008 a, where only 8% of the songs were written by women, with 88% by men. Further, one decade later in 2018, only 4% of the songs were by women. Another 24% were authored by male-female collaborations, and 72% were by men.

In summary, over the period 1988 to 2018, songs by women or with contributions by women dropped by 26%. Because the occurrence of collaborations has changed so significantly since 1988, a closer examination of male/female collaborations reveals that they were 37.5% women, and 62.5% men in 2018, without a single occurrence of a women-only collaboration, but several male-only. This comparison is further evidence that collaborations among men are dominating the charts, with women being represented unequally in male-female songwriting teams.

Discussion: Gender Inequality

The findings of this study indicate that gender inequality is a significant issue in the contemporary worship music industry, as in other genre and chart cultures (Lafrance et al., 2011, p. 558; Watson, p. 546). This problem was prominent in the early years of CCLI and has only grown substantially worse over the course of the three decades that followed. Several key observations from the analysis support this point:

1. The CCLI Top 25 list has changed from being dominated by solo songwriters in 1988, to containing only one solo writer in 2018;
2. The majority of songs on the Top 25 list are collaborations among men;
3. The majority of collaborations between one man and one woman have historically been between family members (such as husband/wife teams);
4. Women collaborations with other women do not appear on the charts, and increasingly women represent less of the solo songwriters;
5. A woman did not hold the #1 position between 1995–2018, except for a male-female collaboration in 2017. In contrast, this period represents 19 men.

This article has demonstrated the problem of the gender inequity in the Christian worship charts; a trend that cannot be attributed to one single cause but is likely the culmination of several larger contributing factors. It is also important to acknowledge that the CCLI charts are not representative of the *entire* global church; denominations also use songbooks and many churches do not participate in the reporting processes. Therefore, particularly in America this organisation represents a subset of the contemporary worship scene; arguably overrepresenting White evangelicalism and its influence on more mainline congregations. Since the CCLI lists represent what White evangelicals sing, one particular disadvantage for Evangelical women is that, in many cases, they must contend with a complementarian theology that seeks to limit their roles outside the home (Barr, 2021, p. 111), as evidenced in the way that Laurie Klein’s husband was the one to encourage her to share “I Love You Lord” more widely. It is possible that men may be used by women in more conservative contexts to ”authorize” the creation and use of songs by the wider church. Communities (as in churches, denominations, labels, distribution houses) which maintained a complementarian theology may struggle to endorse a lifestyle of travelling, touring, and press engagements that placed a woman’s primary affiliation outside the home or in authority over a man. Further, Bowler and Reagan observe the rise of celebrity culture throughout this period, which cemented music as a career and platform for

artists: “Once dominated by faceless and nameless artists, by the turn of the century, the worship music industry had transformed into a celebrity platform.” (Bowler & Reagan, 2014, p. 204) This transformation correlates with the decline of ranking women songwriters, who, like Laurie Klein, found success as nameless grassroots writers but disappeared into the background upon the emergence of celebrity platforms.

A further change to the experience of women songwriters is due to the increasing success of collaborations. Co-writing offers a potential for a wider audience through the availability of multiple platforms for promotion, and the possibility of foregrounding more widely recognized contributors while backgrounding those with less significant platforms (Thornton, p. 82). While this evidently increases marketability and platforms for songs, this also negatively impacted opportunities for female songwriters. As men find themselves on the Top 25 list repeatedly for different songs, they also continue to collaborate with the same people, and the CCLI Top 25 list risks becoming an echo chamber. The nature of these collaborations arguably formed a barrier that makes it difficult for women to break into the song-writing circles, a dynamic that is in some cases augmented by fear of men and women being alone together, as practiced through the Billy Graham rule. CCLI charting songwriter Krissy Nordhoff identified this dynamic during a phone conversation in 2020: she articulated that her experience collaborating with men has been limited by the expectation that they not be alone together. In some cases, she described entire songwriting processes that occurred over email to avoid in person or one-on-one collaboration (Krissy Nordhoff, personal communication, April 2020). Inevitably, this inconvenience to celebrity songwriter men collaborating with women may lead some men to focus their collaborations with other men. In order to change this imbalance, publishers, songwriters, radio programmers, and worship leaders and communities must commit to the creation of safe and equitable spaces for co-writing. This represents the “supply” portion of the industry; however alternatively to redress this churches can choose to intentionally select and/or promote women songwriters and their worship choruses in their weekly songlist thereby increasing "demand.”

Further Discussion: The Influence of Megachurches

Pertinent to the subject of this special edition, another significant development in the contemporary worship music industry that has impacted women has been the

emergence of worship music from specific congregations, most notably, megachurches. These multi-site communities with thousands of congregants emerged at the end of the 20th century, quickly developing a reputation as leaders in the worship music industry. Music emerging from three megachurches, in particular – Elevation, Hillsong, and Bethel (as well as their affiliated brand Jesus Culture) – have developed to the extent that their songwriters are responsible for a high portion of the songs on the CCLI lists, with 48% of the songs on the CCLI list at the end of 2018 coming from these churches and affiliate group.[38] The women songwriters at these megachurches have defined the community's musical output, to varying degrees. As Tanya Riches notes of women's roles at Hillsong, "It would be difficult to argue that Hillsong's musical repertoire had not been shaped by the participation of women." (2017, p. 100) The megachurch offers an outlet for women's creativity, to such an extent that their musical expertise has defined much of the church's artistic output. While women's participation in megachurch worship is widespread with women filling roles such as worship leaders, singers, and instrumentalists, as the data shows, one role they rarely fill is that of songwriter.

Figure 6 tracks the distribution of songs on the CCLI top 25 lists from songwriters affiliated with the three major megachurches (Elevation, Hillsong, Bethel) and one megachurch affiliated group (Jesus Culture), and those not affiliated. It shows that megachurches rose to prominence on the charts around 2015. The first song from one of these megachurch groups charted in 1997, marking the beginning of an increase in songs from megachurches, with a sharp 60% increase between 2008 and 2018. Songs from megachurches made up nearly half of the charts between 2015 and 2018 with an average of 41% over that period, revealing the growing presence of songwriters from just four groups within the Top 25 most sung worship songs in the final two years of the study period.

[38] Jesus Culture initially emerged as the musical ensemble for Bethel Church, and subsequently grew into a distinct group. It now produces different albums from the Bethel Church ensemble but continues to be closely linked to the Bethel megachurch. As such, it is identified as a separate entity from Bethel but still falls under the megachurch category.

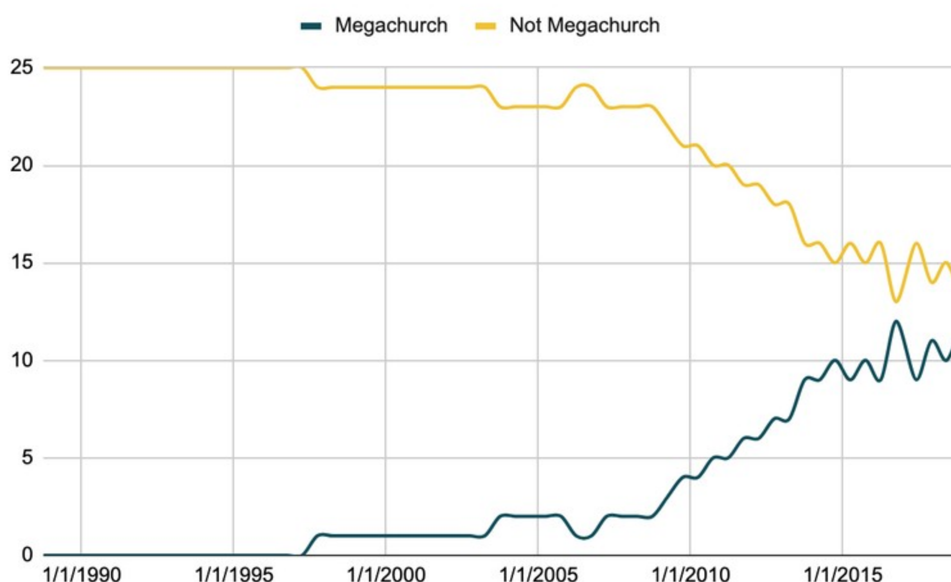

Figure 6: Representation of Songs from Megachurches on the Top 25 from 1988–2018

Representation of Songs from Megachurches on the Top 25 from 1988-2018

In many ways, the popularization of megachurch worship represents a consolidation of the market as has been experienced in other music genres across the Christian worship industry. As evidenced in Figure 6, megachurches have become a significant source of worship music on the CCLI Top 25 lists, but understanding how authorship is distributed amongst the megachurches is also critical for discussion.

Table 2 summarizes the percentage of songs by separating male, female, and male-female collaborations from each of the four prominent megachurch ensembles that appear on the CCLI Top 25 between 2015 and 2018. During this period, 31% of songs were by men from megachurches, 0.0% from solo women or collaborations between women, and 10% came from megachurch collaborations between men and women. Only 4.0% of the songs charting during this period were by female songwriters, with no megachurches contributing songs by solo women or collaborations between women. There were no solo women or female collaborations during this period. Women were thus represented in male-female collaborations, which made up 26.5% of the charts. The largest contributors were solo men or all-male collaborations, who

contributed 69.5% of the songs that charted on the Top 25 between 2015 and 2018. The megachurch ensemble with the largest contribution to the charts over this period was Hillsong, contributing 20.0% of the songs, followed by Bethel with 14.5%, Jesus Culture with 4.0%, and Elevation worship with 2.5%.

This data shows that megachurches are playing a major role in producing CCLI charting worship music, but to varying degrees in their support of women songwriters. While Elevation and Jesus Culture are both prominent ensembles with significant influence, neither of them contributed a significant portion of the songs on their own, as combined, they only contributed 6.5% of the charting songs. However, Bethel and Hillsong combined contribute 34.5% of the overall Top 25 songs during the study period, representing a significant portion of the charting songs. These two churches, then, both influence the Top 25 lists in significant ways through the songs that they contribute. Further, as leading megachurches, they model ways of developing and supporting songwriters and their collaborations.

Given the prominence of these two megachurches on the Top 25 list, their relationship to women songwriters is particularly noteworthy. Neither Bethel or Hillsong have any songs by solo women that ranked on the Top 25 from 2015–2018, nor do they have any songs by female collaborations. Of the 20% of charting songs that Hillsong contributed, only 2% were written in male-female collaborations, with the rest emerging exclusively from men. With 14.5% of charting songs contributed by Bethel, only 4% were written by male-female collaborations, the rest emerged exclusively from men. While many of these churches have strong women who lead across various roles, the data suggests that they are not appearing in songwriting credits. In this instance the songs sung by the community, and therefore its theology, are largely shaped by male voices.

	Male songwriters	Female songwriters	Male-female collabs	Total by affiliation
Elevation	2.5%	0.0%	0.0%	2.5%
Hillsong	18.0%	0.0%	2.0%	20.0%
Bethel	10.5%	0.0%	4.0%	14.5%
Jesus Culture	0.0%	0.0%	4.0%	4.0%
Non-megachurch songwriters	38.5%	4.0%	16.5%	59.0%
Total by gender	**69.5%**	**4.0%**	**26.5%**	

Table 2: Songwriters by Gender from Four Megachurch Ensembles, 2015–2018

Because today's CCLI Top 100 list is made up of songs that are reported to be in use, rather than songs selected by a panel of music experts or theologians, the list is not moderated based on external factors such as gender, race, age, or career status. This leads to a list that reflects how the church participates in worship via songs. Often, only the top songwriters from large churches, labels and publishers are represented on the CCLI Top 100 List. This can be taken to reflect their participation in and influence upon the global church. For women to be represented on the CCLI Top 100 list, the major publishers will need to source and develop more female songwriters, sign and support more women, and promote their music for use in churches. If the largest sources for Christian music are not releasing music by women, it becomes nearly impossible for the music of women to be listened to or sung in worship services.

Conclusion

This study showed how male songwriters have dominated the CCLI Top 25 charts for the last three decades and highlights the changes to the industry in this time. It detailed how women have not been successful in breaking into collaborations. There are a few notable exceptions, however. In December 2020, however, the number one ranking song on the CCLI top 100 told a different story. Nigerian songwriter Sinach's highly popular song "Way Maker" took the #1 position, marking her the first solo

woman to top the charts since Laurie Klein did in 1994. Is it possible that the tide is turning? Could women be more prominently featured on the charts again? Here, Sinach's overwhelming success indicates that there *is* room for songs by women on the charts, but it also raises questions about how women encounter such success. This article identified which labels, publishers, and churches are elevating these women's voices (or, alternatively, failing to elevate them). When "Way Maker" was released in 2016, Sinach was not yet signed to a major North American label and thus was not promoted by one. Perhaps her success indicates that one way to empower women songwriters is to return to the songwriting model of the early days of contemporary worship music. Before the celebritization of worship, the results here show that songs by women appeared to be more easily sourced and more widely sung because of the gift they offered to the church, rather than because of promotion by an industry label, or their touring or publishing contract. With this model, women like Laurie Klein could continue to pen the prophetic anthems for the church, regardless of their audience and platform.

The US CCLI Top 25 list is indicative of the culture of the white Evangelical churches engaging in contemporary worship music. To further change the Top 25 list, and to empower women from within all song writing communities, communities need to prioritize supporting women as collaborators and solo writers. There are several steps already being taken in this direction: *Women Who Worship* is an annual gathering of women songwriters sponsored by Capitol CMG. This retreat was started in 2019 and encourages women to collaborate together and learn from each other ("Capitol CMG," 2019). Groups like *Porters Gate,* signed to Integrity Music through Capitol CMG, have placed a high emphasis on including women and people of colour in their songwriting and performance practice. This group may become a model for other groups that partner with publishers ("The Porter's Gate," 2019). In addition, Brave Worship is a collective started by Krissy Nordhoff, which seeks to empower women songwriters and worship leaders ("About (Brave Worship)," n.d.). Finally, the Faithful Project is an all-women song writing group that released their first album in spring 2021, highlighting the stories of biblical women (Loepp Thiessen, 2021).

When the publishers, megachurches, and labels do not put women at the fore, congregants do not encounter music by women. Churches cannot be blamed for not addressing this inequity when they have not had the opportunity to observe it, and when worship planners have not been exposed to the voices of female songwriters. In

a blog post from August, 2019, Jada Watson observes that “Repetition does not just generate “hits” on the chart, but it develops the sound and culture of musical genre and identity and shapes audience familiarity.” Because this conversation hasn’t started in most Christian circles, churches can’t recognize the unique texts and rich music that is missing when they only program music by men. Without more exposure, leaders are unable to recognize that their culture and identity have been shaped without female voices. The church’s worship would change for the better if the music of women was reclaimed as part of the culture.

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Peer Reviewed Articles

"Seas Of Crimson": A Biblical Analysis of Elemental Imagery in Bethel Music's Lyrics

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Abstract

Bethel Church, a Charismatic Pentecostal megachurch in California, houses one of the world's most influential worship music artists. In January 2021, the church's label, Bethel Music Publishing, accounted for over 20% of the Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) Top 100 list. Because of Bethel's considerable influence, it is important to examine the lyrics of their songs. Contemporary worship songs, especially those emerging from the Charismatic Pentecostal movement, are well-known for including elemental imagery (e.g., fire and water) within their lyrics. This research examines Bethel Music's English lyrics over the past decade for elemental imagery. While there is a potential dichotomy between biblical connections and poetic expression, this research demonstrates how Bethel Music's use of elemental imagery—specifically fire and water—does not fall to one side of the dichotomy but balances these aspects. Instead, it uses biblical concepts, as well as narratives and quotations, to describe the worshippers' life of faith.

Keywords: Bethel Music; Contemporary Worship; Elemental Imagery; Pentecostal; Lyric Analysis

Introduction: Background of Bethel Music

Bethel Church was founded in Redding, California, in 1954. In 1995, Bill Johnson became the lead pastor with a vision of revival, which he acquired while attending the Toronto Blessing in Canada (Shuttleworth, 2015, p. 101-102). Under his leadership, Bethel Church grew into a megachurch with a congregation of over 11,000 persons (Joiner, 2021, p. 16). Since then, Bethel has "planted five Bethel churches in the past

15 years" (Bethel, n.d.) and started its broadcast ministry Bethel.TV. (Bethel.TV, n.d.). Undoubtedly, however, one of the most influential aspects of Bethel Church is its music ministry—Bethel Music.

In recent times, Bethel Church has garnered controversy due to Bill Johnson's theology that emphasizes the Spirit's power and weakens other theological areas such as Christology (Shuttleworth, 2015 p.114) and his emphasis on spiritual practices and manifestations. When Johnson began at Bethel, his new direction for the church caused "almost half of the church's members to leave" (Joiner, 2021, p. 44). However, the church has since recovered from these departures. Arising from his emphasis on revival and spiritual vision, Johnson created the School of Supernatural Ministry, which provides a 3-year training course, which "teaches students how to live a supernatural lifestyle by healing the sick, prophesying, casting out demons and much more" (Joiner, 2021, p. 16). At its launch in 1998, the Bethel School of Supernatural Ministry only taught 37 students; now, it has around 2500 (Joiner, 2021 p.16). While the church and school have grown significantly, the movement's greatest influence globally has undoubtedly been through Bethel Music. Even though other churches' use of these songs for worship has been controversial in some quarters (cf. Tan, 2018), Bethel Music remains one of the most influential voices in contemporary worship music. Since 2010, Bethel created its music label and signed multiple artists that now create the Bethel Artist Collective. Their music label, Bethel Music Publishing, is a notable outlier, because most other worship artists, such as Passion, are signed to record labels, such as sixstepsrecords, that are affiliated with Capitol CMG (Christian Music Group), but Bethel rely on their own label. Bethel's Artist Collective includes sixteen songwriters from around the country (Bethel Music, n.d.) In addition, Bethel Music artists have successfully co-written with other popular worship artists such as Kari Jobe and Ben Fielding. Andrews recognized the prominence of Bethel in her research, citing the CCLI top list from December 2019, which had 16 songwriter credits from Bethel Music and Jesus Culture labels (Andrews, 2019 p. 92-93). In 2020, the number of songs attributed to Bethel Music Publishing and Jesus Culture Publishing in the US list had increased to 22 (CCLI Top 100, 2021). The CCLI Top 100 lists are unique because they reflect churches' use of these songs. Therefore, Bethel Music's current popularity across the global church identifies it as an important corpus of songs to study.

Scholarship in Lyric Analysis

Many scholars have analysed the CCLI top lists. These analyses often use one of two primary lenses, such as trinitarian or eschatological theologies. Lester Ruth's study (2007) analysed the lists to investigate trinitarian theology in popular songs, focussing primarily on mentions of each person of the Godhead and their relations with one another. Similarly, Michael A. Tapper (2017) obtained the top lists from a specific denomination in Canada, which contained many of the same songs as the U.S. lists. His examination drew upon the work of Colin Gunton to offer a trinitarian analysis.

Another theological area that has been analysed is eschatology. For example, Matthew Westerholm's dissertation (2016) focused on the inaugurated eschatological leanings of the collection of the top contemporary worship songs compiled from the CCLI top lists. He focused on the tension within the songs of the "already" in Christ's triumph and the "not yet" of current sufferings.

While many lyric analyses have focused on the CCLI top lists, other scholars focus on songs from one worship artist, such as Hillsong. Tanya Riches (2010) studied the theological evolution of Hillsong's music from 1996 to 2007. Like Ruth and Tapper, she included a section on Trinitarian Perceptions (p. 102). Riches did not provide specific theological categories but addressed the main themes, adding pentecostal categories such as "expected transformation" (p. 112) and their development through each Hillsong phase. Nelson Cowan (2017) continued from where Riches concluded chronologically and analysed Hillsong's lyrics from 2007 to 2015. Cowan specifically focused on the role of these lyrics in Hillsong's liturgical formation. His examination of doctrinal engagement revealed a variety of different theological themes, including the Trinity and eschatology (p.85-90). Mark Evans (2006) also identifies categories for use in theological analysis focused on "song-type" designated by intent. These categories, such as "confessional" and "evangelistic," can be helpful because they reduce biases created by denominations or doctrines (p. 114)

Pertinent to this article, scholars have also studied Bethel Church. Abigail Jayne Joiner (2021) researched Bethel Church ethnographically and provided a geographical picture of the "ordinary life" of Bethel. Her research focused on the affective geographies and embodied experiences of the spirit. Emily Snider Andrews (2019) also studied Bethel Church but through the lens of liturgical theology. While her research did not include an in-depth lyric study, she provided key insights into the role of music

as a sacrament in evangelical worship, especially at Bethel. Theology at Bethel Church was studied by Abigail Shuttleworth (2015), who analysed the teachings of Pastor Bill Johnson. She highlighted specific theological themes, including Christology, eschatology, and soteriology. Another scholar, Tatiana Kalveks (2021), researched Bethel Music specifically for the theological theme of hamartiology and the music's role in lessening the significance of sin. Kalveks' research is rare in analysing the lyrics from the Bethel movement. A final article written by myself and Monique Ingalls (forthcoming) focused on Bethel Music's lyrics specifically juxtaposed to those used at the Toronto Blessing. That study used the method of text data mining to analyse and compare the lyrics of these two worship experiences. The study revealed many commonalities between the two collections of songs including the prominence of element imagery. The songs used in the Toronto Blessing included frequent water references, which is here later examined in Bethel Music's lyrics.

While some of this previous work has focused on theological themes within the lyrics and the church, none have examined lyrics for specific biblical connections or quotations. Therefore, this paper intends to supplement the previous research on Bethel by providing data related to lyric analysis and biblical connections by researching one aspect of Bethel Music's lyrics, elemental imagery, for its biblical connections and quotations.

Elemental Imagery in Song Lyrics

Song lyrics, in essence, are poetry. While a song is a combination of both music and text, the text is the component that has been studied for theological connections. Our human language is not expansive enough or adequate to describe the nature of God (Macky, 1990, p. 58), which is why imagery, including metaphor, can be so effective in spiritual discipleship. The literary techniques of imagery and metaphor are used frequently in the Bible by artists, poets, and prophets in various ways across both Testaments, and often to describe God and the life of faith. Like songwriters today, the psalmists used poetic techniques such as metaphors to describe their personal experiences. The presence of these is evident enough that Psalm scholar William Brown constructed his entire theology of the Psalter around metaphors. He states, "The effective metaphor … stands on a common ground of understanding, and builds on it to elicit new references and associations" (2002, p. 6). Imagery such as the

elements of water or fire often helps connect a song's message with something familiar to the listener.

Classic hymns include lines such as "When peace like a river," "Come thou fount of every blessing," and similarly, contemporary worship songs draw on these images as seen in the lyric, "set a fire down in my soul" (Reagan, 2010). At the outset of the contemporary worship music movement, groups such as Scripture in Song and Maranatha! Singers set scripture to a contemporary melody (for more, see Ingalls et al., 2019). Since then, the Bible has continued to be a primary resource for song lyrics for many artists. Direct quotation of the Bible has been a common practice in songwriting. For example, Chris Tomlin's song, "Our God," paraphrases Romans 8:31, "And if our God is for us then who could ever stop us?" (Tomlin, 2010). While songs may not quote the Bible in its entirety (some do, like Scripture in Song), there is a continuing expectation that contemporary lyrics connect to the Bible for theological strength.

Megachurch songwriters often employ imagery in particularly evocative ways. For example, in 2013, Hillsong United released the song "Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)" (Houston et al., 2012). This song rose in popularity and peaked at number three on the CCLI Top chart in April 2014. "Oceans" also set a record on Billboard's Hot Christian Songs chart, where it remained as number one for fifty-nine non-consecutive weeks (Asker, 2016). This incredibly popular song evokes the biblical story of Peter walking on water (Riches & Wagner, 2017, p. 7). Its vivid representation of water imagery invites the question of where water might appear in other popular worship songs with Pentecostal-Charismatic origins.

Importantly, the question about metaphor has been raised for other North American Pentecostal revival movements. For example, in Main Street Mystics: The Toronto Blessing and Reviving Pentecostalism, Margaret Poloma (2003) identifies the importance of metaphor more generally (rather than specific lyrics) in the music of Pentecostal-Charismatic movements. Specifically, her comments concern the worship at the Toronto Airport Vineyard Church (the site of the "Toronto Blessing"). Importantly, in chapter 2, she directly connects these metaphors to the Bible. In addition, she identifies the prominence of "elemental" references, stating,

> The metaphors selected by P/C Christians to talk about their experience are usually biblical concepts or narrative. Common

> metaphors used when referring to the renewal/revival are based on the basic earth elements that are used repeatedly in scriptures and in accounts of earlier revivals: rivers, rain, wind, and fire. (Poloma, 2003, p. 50)

Adapting Poloma's findings, this study condensed rivers and rain into one basic element, water, and also searched for "fire" references due to connections with the fire that fell at Pentecost.

While there is not enough space to fully trace the connections between the Toronto Blessing and Bethel Church (see: Baker & Ingalls, forthcoming), the Toronto movement gave Bethel's pastor Bill Johnson his vision of revival (Shuttleworth 2015, p.101). Through their Revival Alliance, Bethel Church maintained connections with the Toronto Airport Vineyard Church, now called Catch the Fire (Wilkinson, 2016 p. 33). In an interview, a Bethel artist highlighted the connections between water in the Bible and water in their lyrics. She stated, "There's so much imagery, I think, in scripture of water that I feel like our songs have just kind of gravitated towards that" (E. Rose, personal communication, March 26, 2021). The recognition of this connection by one of Bethel's artists and worship leaders provides further emphasis for water as a prominent image worthy of study.

Contemporary worship songwriters often use creative expressions to describe the life of faith. This paper details how Bethel Music's lyrics, specifically in the imagery and metaphors of water and fire, contain strong connections to the Bible through direct quotation and allusion to biblical concepts and narratives.

Methodology

As stated, this paper will analyse the elemental imagery in Bethel Music's lyrics for biblical connections and quotations. It seeks to answer the question: When elemental imagery is used in Bethel Music's lyrics, is it connected to biblical concepts or narratives, or is it solely a creative poetic expression?

The Bible uses imagery in various places, and Bethel Music draws upon many of these narratives. However, as stated, this research focused on the two most frequent elements in Bethel Music's lyrics—water and fire. Before analysing these references, it is essential to establish a biblical understanding of the two elements via three sources

that provide some biblical background. First, From Literal to Literary: The Essential Reference Book for Biblical Metaphors by James Rowe Adams (2005) was primarily used to provide a biblical understanding of "fire." While this book does have a "water" entry, it solely refers the reader to "Baptism" entry and does not provide additional information about water as a metaphor in the Bible. Second, the Dictionary of Biblical Imagery (Ryken et al., 1998) provides background information about water and fire. Because Adams book does not address water directly, Washing Away Sin: An Analysis of the Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and Its Influence by Lesley R. DiFransico (2016) will supplement the biblical understanding of water as a cleansing agent. The meaning of the imagery will be discussed shortly.

The songs examined are drawn from ten Bethel Live Albums released during 2010-2019.[39] This represents a repertoire of 127 songs; after the removal of eleven spontaneous tracks and two duplicated acoustic tracks, the remaining total is 114.[40] Of these, fifty-two songs (45%) include elemental imagery in the lyrics. Through the process of text data mining, it was determined that the albums contained no trends regarding an increase or decrease in the use of this imagery over time but rather a relative consistency with a few outliers (see Appendix A). As Google hosts a number of open access Bible software platforms, such as BibleHub and Biblegateway with various translations, it was an appropriate search engine to determine whether the lyrics made direct reference to the Bible.[41] If there was evidence of some connection to the Bible either through a quote or reference to a narrative or biblical concept, it was coded as related to the Bible, but if there were no direct or indirect references to scripture or the biblical background, it was treated solely as imagery emerging from personal experience and cultural context.

The following analysis will demonstrate that while Bethel Music's inclusion of poetic language, through metaphor and imagery, could be understood through cultural or daily experiences, the songwriter's use of elemental imagery—specifically water and fire—in the lyrics connects to biblical concepts, narratives, and quotations.

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[39]. Bethel does have one album in Spanish titled, Bethel Music in Español. This research focused solely on the English albums.
[40]. The spontaneous tracks on the album are recorded spontaneous songs from the live worship events that were used for the recordings. These lyrics are not planned ahead of time nor are they the type of song that another church would attempt to replicate. The Bethel Music website also does not provide lyrics or chords for these songs.
[41]. The quotes in the biblical understanding sections are all from the ESV translation. When songs correlate with a direct quote, the translation will be indicated.

A Biblical Understanding of Water

Like fire, water imagery connects to the Bible through direct quotations and allusions to biblical understanding. The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery explains that water is understood biblically in three main positive ways: “as a cosmic source that only God can control and govern, as a source of life, and as a cleansing agent” (Ryken et al., 1998, p. 929). In the Ancient Near East, the waters and seas were often understood as representing the forces of uncontrollable chaos. The God of Israel was distinctive, not least because of His ability to control the waters (Ryken et al., 1998, p.929). God’s power over the waters is seen in Genesis 7 in the flood narrative and the New Testament through stories of Jesus calming the stormy seas [Mt.8:23-27; Mk.4:35-41; Lk.8:22-25]. In the New Testament, the disciples are amazed and baffled by Jesus’ ability to calm the raging waters. Again, their amazement is because the power over the waters was reserved for God alone in their culture (Ryken et al., 1998, p. 931).

Second, another common Biblical concept is water as a source of life. Water is necessary for the survival of human life. The Gospel of John provides two examples of Jesus connecting living water to eternal life and the Holy Spirit. In John 4:7-15, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that He can give her living water. He states that the one who drinks the water he gives will never thirst again because “The water that [Jesus] will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” [John 4:14b]. This concept of living water leading to eternal life is emphasized by Revelation 22:1, “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb.” Later in John 7, Jesus connects living water with the Holy Spirit stating, “‘Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’’ Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive” [John 7:38-39a] (Ryken et al., 1998, p. 931). Life through water is intimately connected to God.

Third, the most common positive understanding of water is as a cleansing agent. This language is frequently used outside of song lyrics in phrases such as “my sins have been washed away.” Lesley R. DiFransico (2016, p.17) explains how the concept of washing away sin is seen throughout the Bible, noting that the metaphors used for sin tie directly into the metaphors used for the solution: “If sin is understood as a stain, then the solution for sin that will be understood, and possibly enacted, will be washing or wiping” (DiFransico, 2016, p. 17). Water is also used in washing to cleanse oneself

from ritual impurity (DiFransico, 2016, p. 22). In both a metaphorical and literal sense, water can act as a cleansing agent. Specifically, of course, baptism is the sacrament in the Christian faith that “symbolizes cleansing and a passage from death to life.” (Ryken et al., 1998, p.931). The transition from death to life in baptism represents both the harmful and beneficial sides of water— “reversion to watery chaos (a form of dissolution) that precedes the new creation and new life (echoing the imagery of the creation story)” (Ryken et al., 1998, p. 931). The paradox in references to water in both beneficial and harmful ways is paralleled in the lyrics.

Though many of the above water examples are positive, water imagery can also appear negatively. The “water” entry in The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery (Rykan et al. 1998) concludes with references to other words, including “storm.” Here, “storm” is an adverse example, addressed as a paradox; “the storm is a danger and a necessity. It gives life through its water but death through its violence” (Rykan et al., 1998, p. 817). The headings organizing the entry, however, address the danger more than the necessity: Storm as “wind,” “deity,” “God’s attendant,” “God’s agent of judgment,” “God’s enemy,” “evil spirit,” “flood,” “suffering,” and “The Psalm of the Thunderstorm” (Rykan et al., 1998, pp. 817–819). While the metaphor of a storm extends beyond water to wind or air, the storm is included as “water-related.” Similarly, the Bible uses the storm in a metaphorical manner. Isaiah 54:11 describes an afflicted person as “storm-tossed.” Job also uses storm imagery in his closing conversation with God. He states: “You lift me up on the wind; you make me ride on it, and you toss me about in the roar of the storm” [Job 30:22]. Both biblical references demonstrate how the storm denotes suffering. A storm did not physically throw about Job, but his life included immense struggle and suffering. Therefore, a storm is one of Job’s images to describe his suffering to God (and is a primary image for Bethel Music songwriters, as will be seen).

In addition to the biblical understanding of water, Bethel Music’s lyrics often allude to water-related narratives. Some examples of these narratives are found in the New Testament related to Jesus. Jesus walks on water [Mt.14:22-36; Mk.6:45-56; Jhn.6:16-24]. Jesus calms the storm when the disciples are frightened, and this specific narrative appears in all three synoptic Gospels [Mt.8:23-27; Mk.4:35-41; Lk.8:22-25]. These narratives and concepts connect to the water references in Bethel Music’s lyrics.

“Drenched in Love”: Water in Bethel Music’s Lyrics

Water is the most used elemental imagery throughout Bethel Music. References to water (37.55%) are far more frequent than fire (6.3%) in Bethel’s lyrics. One would perhaps expect fire references because of fire’s connection to Pentecost or even the Toronto Blessing church’s new name, Catch the Fire. However, one Bethel artist stated, “water is [perceived as] more inviting," which may be a possible explanation for the water references far outnumbering the fire references. Water appears in a variety of ways throughout Bethel Music’s lyrics. Some examples of different nouns are: “seas,” “ocean,” “river,” “waters,” “waves,” and “fountain.” Water imagery is also found through verbs such as: “flood,” “thirst,” “washed,” and “drench.” Every single album includes water imagery, and it is found in 37.55% of the songs (See Appendix B). The greatest concentration is on the album, You Make Me Brave, which includes water imagery in 77.78% of the songs. Due to the large volume of references, they will be organized in two specific ways: references to God and references to human experience. These references draw on biblical concepts and specific scripture passages, and direct quotations are clearly indicated.

Water imagery is often used in worship songs in the context of God’s love. For example, in the Bethel song “You Make Me Brave,” the lyric used repetitively in the chorus: “As your love in wave after wave crashes over me crashes over me” (Cook, 2013) is clearly a reference to the ocean shore but also likely a reference to the Message translation of Luke 1:50, which states, “His mercy flows in wave after wave on those who are in awe before him.” God’s love is displayed most fully on the cross. Bethel’s lyrics use water imagery to describe God’s actions through the cross. For example, the lyric “You drown our sins in seas of crimson” (Strand et al., 2014) combines two water ideas within eight words—“drown” and “seas.” Though there is no specific Scripture reference for this verse, it draws on the Biblical concept of being washed clean, as mentioned above. It also connects water and blood through the phrase “seas of crimson,” which is a metaphor for the blood of Jesus. The phrase “crimson sea” is used again in a later album in “Drenched in Love” (Bashta et al., 2015). Another example of a metaphor connecting water and the cross is the lyric: “The nails in His hands and thorns on His brow / Rivers of mercy endlessly flowing down” (Johnson et al., 2015). “Rivers of mercy” is a direct quote from the King James Version of Lamentations 3:22 [KJV], which states, “These rivers of mercy run fully and

constantly, but never run dry." This lyric could also be an allusion to the River of Life from Revelation 22 mentioned above. God's act of giving us life is an act of mercy.

Bethel's lyrics often also use water imagery about God's actions. Sometimes this relates to specific biblical events. Most prominently, for example, in the song "No Longer Slaves" (Johnson et al., 2014), the lyrics directly reference Exodus 14, where God splits the sea so the Israelites can get to the other side by walking on dry land. The lyrics put the worshipper in the position of the Israelites with the lyric: "You split the sea so I could walk right through it." The water metaphor continues to parallel "my fears" with the Egyptians who were drowned in the sea through the subsequent line: "You drowned my fears in perfect love." These lyrics are an example of how songwriters use biblical narratives to form elemental imagery.

God's actions also include ones that simultaneously state our condition. For example, when the song uses common washing imagery in phrases such as, "I am washed" (Bashta et al., 2015) or "my every stain is washed away" (Johnson, Riddle, et al., 2012), God is the initiator of the washing. Therefore, these water metaphors are not specifically about human experience but what God has done. In these instances, the lyrics merely state the fact of washing instead of the listener's response to experiencing God's love; the focus is primarily on the "why" and "how" the washing occurs—God's love and Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.

Water metaphors can also be used directly in relation to human experience. Even when discussing human experience with water imagery, the lyrics continue to draw biblical connections. Such imagery can appear as either harmful or beneficial. First, water can be understood positively, as found in the song "In Over My Head (Crash Over Me)" (Johnson & Gentile, 2014). These lyrics use a variety of water-related images related to the concept of being "in [the water] over my head." This can be taken as a direct reference to God leading Ezekiel deeper and deeper into the water flowing from the temple. The Ezekiel 47 passage states explicitly that at one point, the water was "knee-deep." The phrase in this song is, "I'm standing knee deep but I'm out where I've never been." The lyrics present the concept of being submerged (while having connotation to drowning) is usually linked to surrender, which causes the worshipper to rely on God. Typically, the lyrics describe something negative, such as "fears" or "doubts" being drowned by God. In the song "In Over My Head (Crash Over Me)" (Johnson & Gentile, 2014), the lyrics describe the worshipper as drowning in

relation to surrendering to Christ's "love" or "seas of crimson." Drowning metaphorically in love requires a release of control, which in "In Over My Head" is seen as a beautiful thing. When describing the use of water in worship lyrics, one Bethel artist linked it to the concept of being submerged in baptism and how the act of "surrendering to the water in a sense feels kind of symbolic of how we come into the presence of God" (E. Rose, personal communication, March 26, 2021). The lyrics in this song, then, have further connections through the biblical concept of baptism.

However, drowning is also understood in its physical connotation as harmful. While not frequently mentioned in the Bible, this language does appear in the Good News Translation (GNT) of Psalm 38:4 "I am drowning in the flood of my sins." It also appears in Psalm 69:1 [CEV], "Save me, God! I am about to drown." Lyrics referencing drowning from the harmful perspective include, "the wind and waves surround me / And I'm tossed, feel like I'm drowning" (MacKenzie et al., 2013) and "And when I was drowning in my doubt / Your mighty right hand lifted me out" (Cook, 2013 "I Belong"). Though the second reference has a positive outcome, drowning itself is still understood as harmful. Here, the worshiper is drowning in doubt as opposed to the positive drowning in God's love, as mentioned above.

This second reference could also be considered an allusion to the Biblical narrative of Peter walking on water (Matt. 14:28). The complete lyric is: "And when I was drowning in my doubt / Your mighty right hand lifted me out / And now we are walking on the water" (Cook 2013 "I Belong"). When Peter begins to sink, Jesus asks him, "Why did you doubt?" The "I Belong" lyrics refer to this passage, placing the worshipper in Peter's position. The song "Shepherd" also alludes to this narrative stating, "walking on water is just the beginning," implying that God can do even greater things (Cook, 2013). "Waves," like drowning, are utilized both positively and negatively. The negative references include being surrounded or tossed by the waves. The harmful tossing of the waves contrasts with the positive idea presented earlier, with God's love being the waves that crash over the worshipper.

A similar concept to submersion is being "drenched in love." The song, "Drenched in Love" (Bashta et al., 2015), combines original lyrics with the lyrics from the hymn "Nothing But the Blood." Words such as "washed" and "drenched" are used to describe what God has done and the felt result of being free. Many people would

usually view being drenched negatively; however, it becomes desirable when covered with God's love.

Lastly, the word "thirst" is used neutrally, indicating a sense of longing for water. These references often draw upon Psalm 42:1-2, which states, "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." This directly addresses the idea of thirsting for God. A few Bethel lyrics examples include: "I'm thirsty my soul cannot be quenched" (Johnson & Gentile, 2014), "Awaken my soul, come awake / To hunger, to seek, to thirst" (Riddle, 2011), "I will thirst for Him and Him alone" (Gifford and Matthews, 2010), and "We have gathered together with one thirst and hunger" (Riddle, 2010). Such lyrics all connect to the concept of longing for God, as found in Psalm 42.

"Storms of Life": Mixed Water-Related Metaphors

In summary, as mentioned above, while there continues to be a paradox in the approaches to elemental imagery between both positive and negative, it is more common to find water imagery shaped negatively than positively. Some of the negative elemental imagery expands beyond water, specifically in its references to "storms" This section addresses the "mixed" water-related metaphors.

The word "storm" is only ever used in the lyrics negatively, usually to describe the state of chaos in life. The Bible does use storm language about God in an encouraging sense showing God's power and sovereignty (see: Psalm 29:3). However, in Bethel Music's lyrics, the primary biblical allusion is to the harmful concepts related to storms. One of the songs uses the phrase "storms of life" (Johnson et al., 2009) to describe the struggles of life. In each of these songs, though, the word "storm" is not far from an encouraging word acknowledging God's presence with the worshipper during times of turmoil. The following two tables demonstrate how the negative perspective of a storm is placed closely near a positive element that is usually related to God. This encouraging word can come before the storm, as seen in Table 1.1, or the adverse "storm" situation could also be named first, as seen in Table 1.2.

Table 1.1

Positive	Negative
When you laugh /	The storm around me ceases (Cook & Strand, 2014)

a peace	in the storm (Johnson et al., 2013)
the victory is Yours /	You're riding on the storm (Fielding, Johnson, et al., 2017)

Table 1.2

Negative	**Positive**
In the chaos of the storm / I have drifted far, far away	But I call out Your name / Cause You are just a breath, a breath away (MacKenzie et al., 2013)
For every storm,	You're the calm, (Strand et al., 2014)
Though the storm it rages…	I am anchored in You / I can feel You, Jesus all around (MacKenzie et al., 2013)

Storms are used metaphorically, but the Bible also includes stories of Jesus calming the storm. The lyrics, then, draw the listener from Jesus calming the physical storms in the Bible to Jesus calming the metaphoric storms of life. When asked about water imagery in the lyrics, one Bethel artist connected water with "peace." She specifically described the importance of God's peace at Bethel and connected this idea to the narrative of Jesus sleeping in the boat during one of the storm narratives (E. Rose, personal communication, March 26, 2021).

A final water-related metaphor is "pouring." God's love is often described as being "poured out," as seen in three Bethel songs, "For the Cross," "Thank You," and "Son of God." God's love being poured out can be understood in two ways. One is more symbolically connected to liquid with God's love being poured out with the blood of Jesus on the cross (e.g., John 19:34). However, this pouring could also be understood more literally as in communion or the Eucharist, which is often accompanied with the passage in Matthew 26, "for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." In this instance, the liquid used in the sacrament is usually wine or grape juice that is meant to represent the blood of Jesus.

A Biblical Understanding of Fire

Fire appears in the Bible in a variety of contexts. It can be understood functionally through its use for cooking food or as a place where people can commune. However, while fire does physically appear in the text, its symbolic or metaphoric understanding

is more common. Three themes will be explored here: fire as purification, fire as anger, and fire as God's presence.

Fire appears in Old Testament rituals in consuming temple offerings. Some examples of this are 2 Chronicles 7:1, "As soon as Solomon finished his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple." Also, in 1 Kings 18:38, after Elijah had dosed the altar and sacrifice with water: "Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust and licked up the water that was in the trench." Therefore, it also has developed associated meanings, including "God's desire to destroy sin and to purify people" (Ryken, 1998, p. 287).

Fire is also used to describe the transformation of the human condition through purification and testing. Examples of this include Zechariah 13:9, "And I will put this third into the fire, and refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested." In this passage, refining leads to the declaration of God claiming the people as His own and the people in response claiming the Lord as their God. Another example even connects fire with water in Luke 3:16. John the Baptist explains what the Messiah will do when He comes and states: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Baptism is related to water, cleansing, and purification. When fire connects with baptism, it demonstrates that fire will connect to purification (Adams, 2005, p. 111).

Additionally, fire can also speak of anger and retribution – both from God and humans. In Hosea 8:5, anger is used with the fire metaphor of burning: "my anger burns" [ESV, NIV, NASB]. Ryken further states, God's anger "is hot, and he pours it out like fire" (Ryken, 1998, 288). This also relates to punishment; in Genesis 19:24, God rains fire down on the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and throws the devil into "the lake of fire and sulphur" in Revelation 20:10 (Adams, 2005, pp. 109–111). Jesus specifically calls hell the "hell of fire" (Matthew 5:22; 18:9) and the fiery furnace (13:42). Historically preachers have used these connections of fire and hell as an evangelistic tool to convince sinners to respond and accept the gospel. James Rowe Adams states:

Fire as a description of torment in an existence after death may have had a positive effect on some people's conduct, but over the centuries all too few Christians have been frightened sufficiently by the prospect of eternal fire to mold their lives according to the teachings of Jesus. (Adams, 2005, p. 112)

Adams acknowledges that the fire passages in the Bible “may have more power when fire is recognized as a metaphor for an experience of the divine presence.” (Adams, 2005, p. 112). This metaphor has, therefore, had mixed impacts upon Christian discipleship. For this reason, evangelistic references to fire in contemporary worship contexts more often connect to God’s presence more than his wrath.

Not only does fire represent God’s presence in the Old Testament, but it continues to represent God’s presence in the New Testament extending into today through the Holy Spirit, God’s active presence in the world. Though the Holy Spirit is usually not visible like at Pentecost, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is often likened to an internal fire. In Acts 2:3-4, “divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.” Significantly, Adams believes that the biblical “fire” passages “may have more [evangelistic] power when fire is recognized as a metaphor for an experience of the divine presence or for the present-life result of destructive behavior” (Adams, 2005, p. 112). This approach is particularly prominent within Bethel Music’s lyrics because of its relation to the Charismatic Pentecostal movement and its emphasis on God’s presence and the Holy Spirit. Throughout the lyrics surveyed, fire is used in largely comforting terms rather than wrath or anger.

“Burn Like a Fire in Me”: Fire in Bethel Music’s Lyrics

With Bethel’s Pentecostal roots and practices, one might expect fire references to outnumber water references. Fire references are used less frequently than water; however, imagery of fire still appears in all the Bethel albums reviewed except one, You Make Me Brave. In fact, the word “fire” is used nineteen times in fourteen songs. The word “flame” is also used four times. This elemental imagery is significant and biblically rooted.

Fire or flame is typically used in the discussion of God. For example, the imagery is used to address God, “you’re the all-consuming fire” (Aaronson et al., 2010). This lyric directly references Hebrews 12:29, “For our God is a consuming fire.” Another lyrical example, “true love’s fire” (Thompson, 2013), likens God’s love to fire of love as seen in Song of Songs 8:6 “for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord.” Poloma notes that Song of Songs is relatively common for songwriters to use as a biblical connection because it

describes personal intimacy with God. Therefore, while Song of Songs “only infrequently finds its way into a typical Sunday sermon,” various Christians from mystics to Pentecostal-Charismatic songwriters have applied “the love story to the soul and the divine” (Poloma, 2003, p. 52). Bethel’s song lyrics also directly reference biblical narratives. For example, the second verse of the song, “Every Crown” (Davenport et al., 2018), references Exodus 13 with these words: “I have watched how You led through the wild / A cloud by day and fire by night / Guiding me to Your promised land.” In the Exodus story, the pillar of fire represented God’s presence with the people of Israel. At the same time, the person singing is analogized with Israel, and therefore this lyric becomes a present call to feel the presence of God in the “wild.” The Exodus in the wilderness for Israel was a period of testing and waiting. Testing and waiting is something experienced in the life of faith today.

Similarly, Bethel’s lyrics correlate personal testing with the desired outcome of being purified. The correlation is accomplished through alluding to “refiner’s fire” via passages such as Psalm 66:10, “For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried.” Another possible allusion is the direct connection in the Bible between fire and trials as seen in 1 Peter 4:12, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.” When the lyrics include these concepts, the worshipper reflects on when God “led me through the fire” (Fielding et al., 2018) or contemplates the future when he will “walk with me through the fire” (Guglielmucci, 2007). Fire here does not represent God’s presence but rather trials through which a person walks. God is still present, though, as the one leading and walking with the person emphasizing the close relationship between the worshipper and God.

Another phrase that references biblical narratives is when the lyrics ask God to have fire fall. For example, in “There’s No Other Name” (Johnson et al., 2016), the lyrics include: “Your whisper makes Your fire fall down.” This example also relates to the biblical concept of fire representing God’s presence. Fire falling appears in the Old Testament, as noted in the earlier section, when God would send fire to consume an offering. This fire-falling narrative extends from the Old Testament into the New Testament through Pentecost.

The fire of passion for God’s presence is a key theme within the Bethel repertoire, too. Lyrics that ask God to “burn like a fire in me” (Johnson, Riddle, et al., 2012) or “like a

fire in the night…burn within my soul and mind" (Thompson, 2013). This example of fire is related to the connection previously made of fire and the Holy Spirit and, by extension, God's presence. The worshippers ask God to make His presence known and allow them to feel His presence like a fire inside. Such a concept may also refer to Luke 24:32, where the disciples state how their hearts burned within them when Jesus walked with them on the Emmaus Road. This internal fire of passion is the most common theme in the lyrics using fire imagery. These phrases are often appealing to God for some kind of action. The lyrics are not merely referencing fire but asking God to make his presence known inside the worshipper using the image of a fire.

Overall, it is clear that the fire imagery and metaphors in the lyrics are drawn from biblical concepts, narratives, and quotations to express the life of faith instead of merely being a poetic expression. Fire and water imagery are used to describe the struggles of life. Fire imagery, however, mostly focuses on God's presence, while water imagery is primarily used to describe God's love and God's actions related to his love for His people.

Conclusion: Biblical Language in Creative Expression

As seen above, Bethel Music's lyrics clearly integrate the Biblical text within their use of elemental imagery. The above analysis of elemental imagery in the lyrics has shown how Bethel's songwriters draw on and represent biblical narratives, concepts, and quotations to convey their personal experiences. This combination provides a robust biblical vocabulary for worshippers to use in their everyday lives.

Within the repertoire, fire imagery is often used to denote God's presence but also provides language for trials and testing. Similarly, water imagery is used to describe God's actions and love while also providing language to describe the struggles in life. These two elements provide language for both the joyful and painful moments in the Christian's life of faith. These lyrical references can be considered poetic expressions that draw upon our more contemporary understanding of fire and water; however, Bethel Music's lyrics make connections to biblical narratives and concepts, often quoting many passages from scripture.

While this research has focused solely on one aspect of the lyrics, other poetic elements would benefit from further examination. If the songs selected for use in the church provide language for God's people to sing and use in their daily lives, it is

crucial to continue to analyse them. Songs used in the church are poetic expressions for worshipping God, and often these poetic expressions have strong connections to the Bible.

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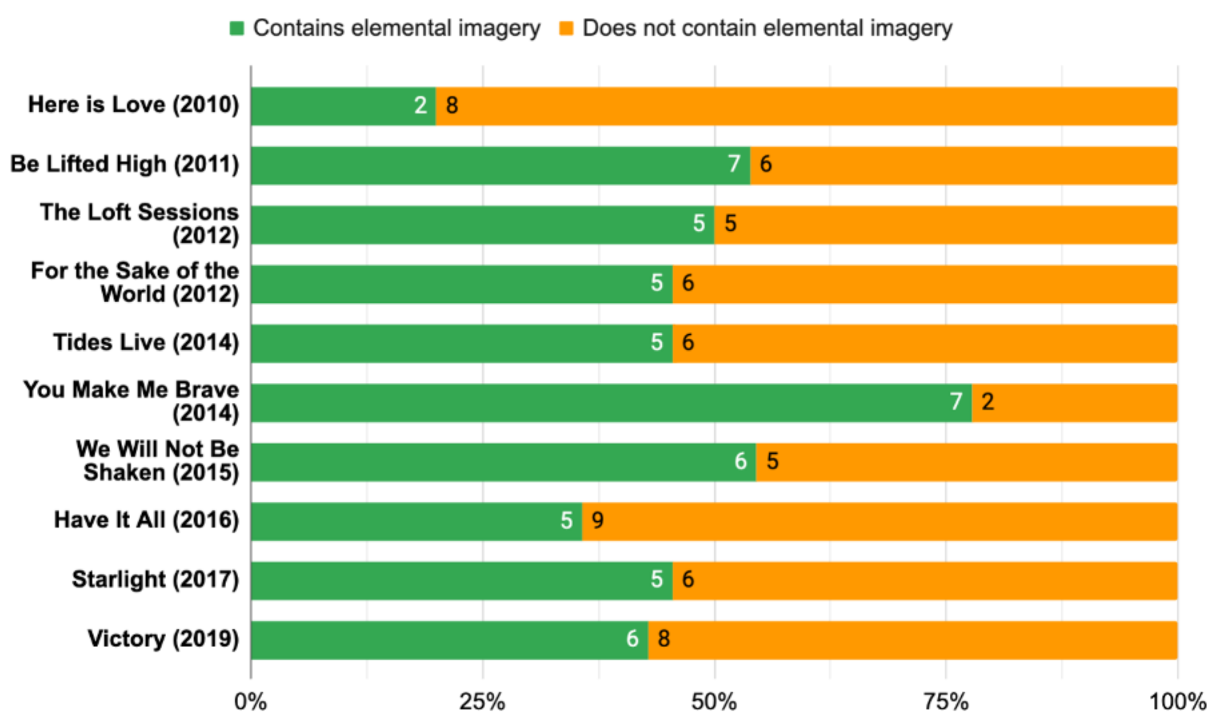
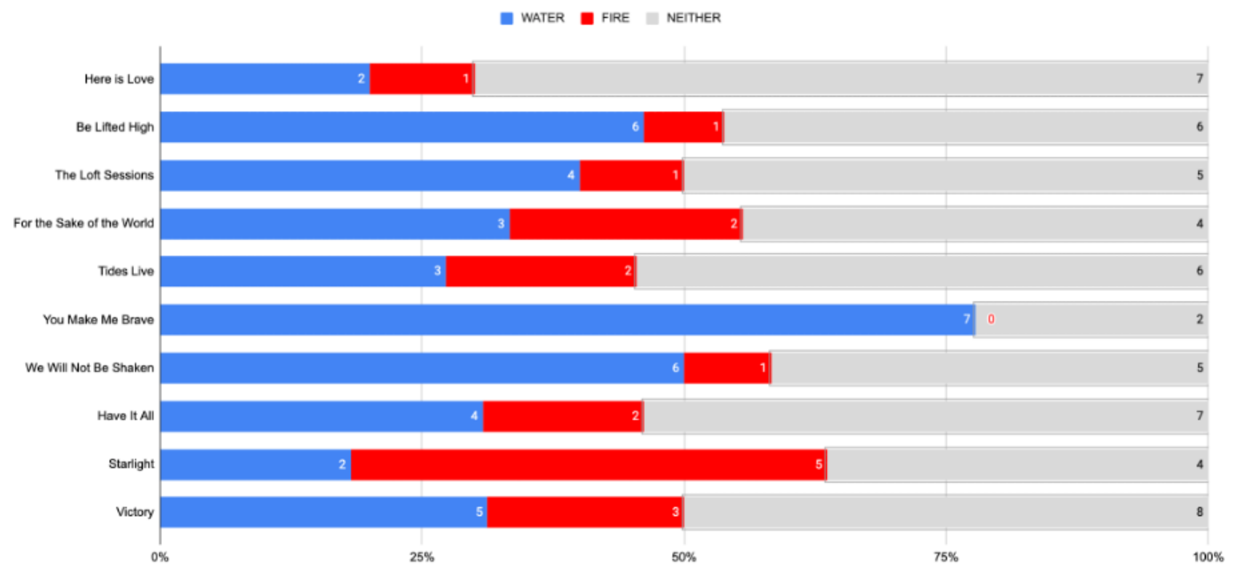
Appendix A



Appendix B



Book Reviews

Tim Hein, *Understanding Sexual Abuse: A guide for ministry leaders and survivors (*Downers Grove, Illinois, Intervarsity Press, 2018), ISBN 978-0-8308-4135-6, 193 pages.

In *Understanding Sexual Abuse*, Tim Hein (2018) provides a sensitive and compelling account of how to be a church community that is safe, welcoming, and healing for survivors of sexual abuse. Hein focuses on the particular dynamics of abuse against children; however, his call for trauma-informed ministry practices is broadly applicable. Written with both survivors and church leaders in mind, Hein draws on various academic and popular sources and his own experiences both as a survivor and working with survivors of child abuse, to provide informed, practical and pastoral advice. Hein's book is written with the assumption that in all church communities there will be some people who are currently in unsafe situations, others who have experienced abuse in the past, and many who carry complex trauma. Throughout, Hein demonstrates that healing is an ongoing process which is both individual and communal. Survivors are encouraged to seek and ask for support (for example, p. 50; p. 160). Church leaders are called on to "ensure that survivors are not journeying alone" (Hein, 2018, p. 167).

Chapters one and two introduce the subject and are perhaps more immediately relevant to those who lead churches and ministries. Chapter one outlines how to begin the work of making the church a safe space through the development of trauma-informed ministries. Chapter two overviews the consequences of repeated stress on the brain and body (pp. 28-30), and then provides a brief historical survey of attitudes and knowledge regarding sexual abuse (pp. 31-48). This chapter also explores key concepts, such as grooming, trauma and dissociation, then details consequences of trauma, for example, anxiety, lower health outcomes, and hypervigilant parenting.

Chapter three focuses on the process of disclosing abuse, both for the survivor and the person hearing their story. For the church-worker, parent, or friend who hears a disclosure of abuse, Hein advises that the key words to keep in mind are: listen, believe and acknowledge (p. 55). He then provides guidance on how best to ask questions when a survivor (either a child or an adult) tells their story. Here, making a disclosure is framed as an act of reclaiming control (pp. 71–72).

In chapters four and five, Hein concentrates on the process of recovery. Importantly, forgiveness is treated as complex, voluntary and ongoing, rather than a quick, immediate, or necessary action. For survivors, Hein refers to the work of Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, *Courage to Heal*, to suggest that "the only essential forgiveness is for yourself" (Hein, 2018, p. 84). While acknowledging this may seem counterintuitive for Christians, Hein suggests that an imperative to forgive (others) can downplay the severity of abuse and can prompt a survivor to blame themselves for ongoing hurt (pp. 92-93). Accordingly, for those in ministry, Hein cautions against "simplistic sermons," noting that "our eagerness to encourage quick forgiveness can actually come from our own desire for the person to just calm down and seem alright" (Hein, 2018, p. 95).

Chapters six and seven challenge church communities and Christian individuals to humbly sit with complexity and "to determine to be personally curious about the hard questions that surround God and suffering" (Hein, 2018, p.117). In chapter seven, Hein makes a creative comparison between the Pixar film *Inside Out* and the book of Psalms to demonstrate the need for, and pathway toward, cultivating and embracing an emotionally diverse and rich faith (p. 133-139). Just as Riley, the child protagonist in *Inside Out* becomes increasingly distressed when she ignores her sadness, trying to cover it with unbridled joy, Hein suggests that if a church culture is unproblematically dominated by cheap joy it is unhelpful for all.

In Chapter eight, appropriately titled 'Choose Life' Hein concludes with a "collection of hints and advice" designed to give survivors "the wind at your back as you walk" (Hein, 2018, p. 160). Throughout, Hein's tone is warm and friendly. Indeed, this book, and especially this chapter, may prove to be a first companion or ongoing guide in the process of recovery.

As I read this book in the shadow of the National Anglican Family Violence Project, a project commissioned by the Anglican Church of Australia which suggested rates of family violence in the Anglican communities were at least the same as, if not higher than, in the broader community, the relevance of Hein's advice for trauma-informed ministry, and the need for this book to be widely read was clear. For those in church ministry, this book would serve either as an insightful introduction or a helpful companion text to anyone seeking to know more about responding well to sexual abuse. For survivors it may give a framework through which to understand their own

experiences, while being a thoughtful and compassionate resource in their recovery toolkit.

Understanding Sexual Abuse is highly accessible and readable. I would have appreciated having the footnotes signalled throughout the text; however, the chapters are well paced, informative and insightful. This book is a necessary resource for all in ministry (whether in a paid or voluntary capacity) as well to all those who collectively make up a faith community. In short, every Christian person would benefit from reading this timely and important book.

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Vondey, W. (Ed), ***The Routledge Handbook of Pentecostal Theology*****, Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2020. ISBN 9781138580893 (hardback) | ISBN 9780429507076 (ebook), 473 pages**

The 2020 *Routledge Handbook of Pentecostal Theology* offers a broad representation of some of the latest research in Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. In his opening preface, editor Wolfgang Vondey acknowledges the continuing tendency for Pentecostal theology to be misunderstood and stereotyped. Thus, the *Routledge Handbook* is intended to go some way towards presenting (and therefore representing) some of the distinct teachings of Pentecostalism, whilst also reappraising them for use in the contemporary context. As such, it is a comprehensive and informative resource for both the mainline traditions as well as for Pentecostals.

Vondey is Professor of Christian Theology and Pentecostal Studies at the University of Birmingham and within this volume has gathered forty-two essays, which are collected into five sections. The authors are a range of pre-eminent Pentecostal scholars and experts in their respective fields. Vondey describes the offering as "a continuing and coherent narrative of the ideas and arguments that shape Pentecostal Theology."

Each chapter presents current reflections on the core convictions and assertions of Pentecostal theology as well as responses to various debates and challenges in the global context. In contributing to the narrative, the authors provide insights from varying disciplinary perspectives (such as liturgical and sociological), critical approaches (post/ decolonial) as well as social locations (South America, Asia, Oceania, Africa, North America, Europe, and the UK), contexts and interests (ecclesial and ecumenical).

Part 1, **"Contextualizing Pentecostal theology"**, serves to orient the reader. The first four essays explore what it is to be a contemporary Pentecostal thinker and practitioner. It questions how a globally diverse Pentecostal theology can, for instance, be 'systematic' or 'spiritual' and whether such definitive categories can exist.

Part 2 on Pentecostal **"Sources"** begins with essays on "Revelation" and ends with "Worship: Embodying the encounter with God" with five theological sources often

acknowledged in the mainstream traditions found between these experiential bookends - Scripture, Reason, Experience, Tradition and Culture.

Part 3 reviewing **"Theological methods"** begins with Jacqui Grey's assertion that reading Scripture with the Spirit in community offers opportunity for Pentecostal theology to mature with a viable and responsible biblical hermeneutic. The following essays then embrace the recent turn in the 21st century towards Pentecostal theological hermeneutics which saw both the introduction of philosophical concepts as well as the stabilizing resource of ecumenical considerations. In this section the "pneumatogical imagination" (the logic of experience) is also explored as well as pneumatologically-driven praxis and a liturgical view of Pentecost, contributed by the editor.

Part 4 on **"Doctrines and practices"** is not the section to which "practitioners" should presume to turn first. Instead, only following the necessary foundational considerations of parts 1-3 is the reader advised to attend to practice in essays that present fresh considerations of internal debates, historical developments, and critical re-constructions of the modern movements' doctrines. These are collected under fourteen topics, including: Trinitarian theology; Oneness theology; Salvation; Sanctification; Spirit baptism; Divine healing; Eschatology; Spiritual Gifts; Spiritual warfare and Missiology.

Part 5 outlines contemporary **"Conversations and challenges"** and anticipates ongoing dialogue and exploration of broader topics such as the Arts and the pursuit of beauty via the outpouring of the Spirit. It also serves to integrate the sometimes marginalized but important issues of gender, race, and other matters of social justice. Here a Theology of Disability and disabled empowerment is explored in light of Pentecostalism's "full gospel" theology and healing practices. Further chapters elevate and respond to other pastoral concerns, issues, perspectives, and disciplines such as: prosperity theology; feminist theology; eco-theology; racial inclusion; economics; philosophy; and religion and science. These are commended as arenas for spirit empowerment, community responsibility, and ministry praxis. In this sense, perhaps especially, there is a perceptible agility and openness to interdisciplinary considerations, global contexts, social concerns and ecumenical considerations.

The authors of the *Routledge Handbook of Pentecostal Theology* demonstrate a willingness to re-examine their tradition, even re-appraising their core methodologies and teachings. In turn, it is expected that these offerings will evidence a developing and evolving contemporary Pentecostalism.

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John Swinton, *Finding Jesus in the Storm: The Spiritual Lives of Christians with Mental Health Challenges* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2020), ISBN: 978-0-8028-7372-9, 224 pages.

John Swinton, Professor in Practical Theology and Pastoral Care and Chair in Divinity and Religious studies at the University of Aberdeen, is considered one of the most prominent voices today in practical theology. His book *Finding Jesus in the Storm* (Swinton, 2020) offers us an insightful gaze into the world of people living with mental health issues. Swinton sets up an attention-grabbing discussion on mental health – perhaps an unexpected topic with this title. His disarming and effective manner creates interest for Christians who may not otherwise enter the world of those who struggle in these particular ways.

Finding Jesus in the Storm takes the reader on an ethnographic journey of exploring the lives of 35 Christians over two years. These Christians have lived with mental health challenges, including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and major depression (p.59). Swinton states that delving into the stories of the lives of these individuals is an attempt "to develop rich, thick and transformative descriptions" of their mental health challenges (p 59). He believes that "thin descriptions" such as statistics on mental health are reductionist and do not contribute to an accurate account of the "contextual, relational, experiential and cultural" aspects of the person living with a mental health challenge (p. 25). He describes his methodology as a "hermeneutical phenomenological conversation" where he employs four horizons that contribute towards a thick and robust description and understanding of the lived experiences of people with mental health challenges (p. 57).

These horizons, as described, are fourfold. First is the application of his own experience over the years in a professional capacity as a psychiatric nurse, pastor, and practical theologian (p. 57). Second, is his exploration of the lives of these Christians living with mental health challenges. This is achieved through "qualitative research interviews—interpretive, phenomenologically oriented conversations intended to initiate an open-ended inquiry into lived experience" (p. 58). Third is an incorporation of the discipline of psychiatry. Swinton explores this discipline to see what it has to offer towards the de-stigmatization of both the psychiatrist and those with mental health challenges (p. 60). The final horizon is a theological orientation that

seeks to reflect on scripture, as well as the Christian tradition and the role of the church to bring further illumination on the subject of mental health (p. 61).

Following Swinton's introduction, the book is divided into five parts. Part I deals with the "art of description," presenting his arguments for a deeper and broader approach to accurately describing the mental health challenges people often face. Part two focuses on "redescribing diagnosis", where he redirects our attention away from simply naming or diagnosing a mental health issue to the emerging lived realities or consequences of such diagnoses. Together, this lays a foundation for parts III, IV and V, which focuses on "redescribing depression." These sections deal specifically with the disorders of depression, schizophrenia, and bipolar but avoid the biologically, linguistically, and spiritually thin descriptions that do not contribute to the individual's overall well-being. In this section Swinton also draws upon our liturgical traditions and seeks to place value on the lament as an approach to reimagining the normative expressions of joy and happiness. Swinton notes, "It is good to be happy. But what is required is a liturgical imagination that seeks to capture the fullness of the emotions that are present within the body of Jesus. Such an imagination recognizes that the liturgical space of worship is formative of the body" (p. 95).

Finally, in his conclusion of the book, Swinton focuses on healing (while helpfully clarifying between curing and healing). In his view, healing should be seen in light of the Hebrew word *shalom*, which is to be in right relationship with God. Therefore, Swinton notes, "to be healthy is to be in right relationship with God regardless of one's physical and psychological state" (p. 206). Furthermore, "Health in this perspective is not a medical or psychological concept but primarily a relational and theological concept. Health is not the absence of anything; it is the presence of God" (p. 210). In redescribing what healing looks like for people with mental health challenges, Swinton posits that "Health is not an ideal, a concept, or a humanly achievable goal. Rather, it is a person" (p. 210).

In summary of the text, within the opening lines of *Finding Jesus in the Storm*, Swinton quotes John 10:10 "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full." Understanding the fullness of this life is central to the purpose of the book. He considers this a profound statement in light of Jesus' life and mission, including the suffering he endured on the cross. He surmises that to partake in the life of Jesus is to live a life which is "both/and." That is, the Christian is to live a life of suffering and pain

but also a life infused with the joy and hope found in the resurrection life. Therefore, people with mental health challenges can take some comfort in knowing that Jesus is truly with them in every storm of life.

As a disability worker, I found the book refreshing as it redresses the lack of lament within many Christian liturgical circles. Recovering this spirituality is critical for people with mental health issues and suggesting that people with mental health challenges become our guide was profoundly moving. Therefore, while the book may have been written with pastors and practitioners in mental health spaces in mind, it may also be recommended to anyone who has a friend, relative or is themselves grappling with mental health challenges. This is a practical outline of how a person can suffer from a mental health challenge and also love Jesus. The strength of this book lies in its testimonies and stories of the persons interviewed. Their stories matter. That Christians listen to understand what their brothers and sisters have been through, we can perhaps get a better grip on the challenges of mental health facing both the world and the church today.

Ceon Dindial
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Adam D. Tietje, *Toward a Pastoral Theology of Holy Saturday: Providing Spiritual Care for War Wounded Souls* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2018), ISBN 978-1-5326-5779-5, eBook, 132 pages.

Rev. Adam D. Tietje is a ThD candidate at Duke University who served as a US Army chaplain for nine years, including a 2010-2011 tour on the cataclysmic frontlines of southern Afghanistan. His book entitled *Towards a Pastoral Theology of Holy Saturday* (2018) is a compelling work that utilises his unique experiences to explore the multi-faceted complexity of post-war trauma and suggest a model of pastoral care for those experiencing deep soul wounds.

Over the course of his five chapters, Tietje covers much ground. In the first chapter, he provides a visceral personal context for this book, outlining in detail his experiences of Afghanistan, including his injuries suffered during this time. Tietje reflects upon the emotional and spiritual damage often experienced by those who have seen active combat, and touches on posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and moral injury before he considers deep spiritual wounds. This leads him to consider the “stuck in the far country” experience of the biblical Prodigal Son, as well as Jesus’ grave experience on Holy Saturday, from which he suggests similarities to the experiences of spiritual dislocation and desolation often experienced by post-combat veterans.

Having laid a contextual foundation of personal experience, Tietje then launches into two chapters that are more technical in nature. Here, he focuses entirely on Holy Saturday, which (as suggested by the book’s title) is the central motif that informs his model of pastoral care. Starting with the three ecumenical creeds of the Western church (the Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed and the Athanasian Creed), he traces a historical understanding of Jesus’ descent into hell, as well as the nature and purpose of his suffering. He continues by noting shifts in understanding through some of the key Reformers before he places Barth’s contributions in conversation with the work of Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. It is here that Tietje argues that the experience of abandonment on the cross extends into Saturday. In love, Christ descends into the deepest experience of death, abandonment, and silence so that those who also fall into similar experiences may, as von Balthasar argues, fall into Him.

Establishing the presence of God even in the darkest grave experience, the third chapter turns to consider the role that spiritual care provides for traumatised veterans, with consideration of previous work in this field. After briefly considering Bonhoeffer and Barth as resources, Tietje draws helpfully from the work of Deborah Hunsinger, who applies Barth's "Chalcedonian pattern" to the disciplines of theology and psychology. In line with this model, he argues that while both fields are inseparable, they each have distinct "natures" and goals, and therefore relate to each other in an asymmetrical manner. This model is then used to incisively analyse Shelly Rambo's previous work on spiritual care and trauma, which Tietje finds incomplete. This insight allows him to posit the unique role that soul care plays for post-trauma veterans, where he engages Hunsinger further to discuss the impact of 'soul wounds' caused by combat. He argues that the overwhelming evil experienced in war, both for survivors and perpetrators, often overshadows the love and presence of God from combat veterans, thereby leading to a Holy Saturday experience.

In the final two chapters, the tone of Tietje's work shifts again in outlining a model of pastoral care for those stuck in the "far country" of trauma, which integrates sobering case studies. Adapting Judith Herman's three non-linear stages of psychotherapeutic recovery, he posits that pastoral carers need to create spaces of sanctuary, lament and confession, and forgiveness and reconciliation. However, a model for pastoral care is not enough. In the final chapter, Tietje makes the compelling point, echoing Henri Nouwen's *The Wounded Healer*, that we are called to enter into the Holy Saturday experience with those we are caring for – and that as broken humans, we are all living in anticipation of the final resurrection. He argues that, in particular, the role of prayer is crucial as part of this process in recognising God alone as the source of salvation. In contrast, humans cannot provide answers in the light of such suffering as seen in war. Instead, the role of the Christian is one of solidarity, presence, and hopeful anticipation.

While this book is best suited to pastoral care workers closely associated with the armed forces, there is much to be gleaned for anyone interested in the spiritual care of trauma survivors. That said, trauma survivors should proceed with caution, as various personal accounts of warfare and the aftermath may trigger distress. For those who are not engaged in the trauma space, there is still much to gain from Tietje's theological exploration of Holy Saturday – though those at a lay level may find this more technical chapter challenging to engage. As a work focused on the military

context, the overall trajectory of peacemaking is abundantly clear. Far from glorifying war, this book is a careful exploration of the common brokenness of humanity and how we can enter the experience of Holy Saturday together, knowing that Christ has already descended into those utter depths.

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Steve Taylor, *Fresh Expressions: Innovation and the Mission of God* (London: SCM Press, 2019), 256 pages.

Within *First Expressions: Innovation and the Mission of God,* Steve Taylor (2019) masterfully develops a clear and contextual understanding of ecclesial innovation through the joint Anglican-Methodist church revitalization effort, “Fresh Expressions,” as well as the grassroots church forerunner congregations, who began these innovative efforts within Great Britain. In doing so, he discusses the tensions found in ecclesial life: the blossoming and (sometimes) death of congregations; managing organizational yet fresh approaches to leadership; attempts to be authentic while remaining ecumenical; and tensions between these “first” and “fresh” expressions of ecclesial innovation as located within a secular age.

Taylor defines these two different forms of innovation: “first expression” which finds its origins as a grassroots movement (bottom-up innovation) and “fresh expression” which is innovation found within an existing organization (top-bottom innovation). This approach gives voice to the margins to focus “on the interplay between faith and culture.” It is by these “expressions” that the institutional/established Church is pushed towards innovation. Innovation can only be sustainable if both “first” and “fresh” expressions are working simultaneously.

His exploration of these “expressions” is via ethnographic data collected over eleven years so to understand the movement of God within these communities (Chapter 1). He begins by introducing “first expressions,” defining it as ecclesial innovation found on the grassroots level. He argues for the use of empirical data and theology working hand in hand to discern the working of God within context through the birthing of the “first expressions” communities, reviewing five different congregations within the UK (Chapter 2). This is followed by Taylor introducing four different understandings of innovation (including “indigenous”) alongside scripture to recognize how such communities are woven in an ecclesial movement of innovation (Chapter 3). Interestingly, Taylor here recognizes that people/cultures change and that “first expressions” not only reveal a God who responds to said change but does so creatively.

After introducing his methodology, Taylor returns to five “first expressions” groups eleven years after their creation (Chapter 4) and examines others that have “tried and

died" (Chapter 5). This is his attempt to recognize what makes a movement sustainable (many times theological insight is incorporated via the collective's descriptive language for God) versus what sometimes contributes to an expression's demise. I appreciated Taylor's willingness to tackle the hard questions which are commonly asked concerning the demise of certain "first expressions" communities. When examined via Taylor's re-aligned understanding of what it means to succeed, this reveals the richness that can come out of these innovative movements within the larger Christian community.

Taylor then examines how "fresh expressions" can emerge through existing organizational structures by letting "first expressions" energize and reform them, which he presents as a "missio-ecclesiology" (Chapter 6). He suggests that true innovation happens within existing organizations if a team of leaders complement each other's strengths, additionally correctly pointing out that two essential elements are commonly missing; optimism and women in positions of leadership (Chapter 7). He goes on to describe the relationship between organizations, noting the essential relationship between the resources of older organizations to fund "fresh expressions" and the innovative vision of "first expressions" communities (Chapter 8) for mission in Britain.

He then argues for a redefinition of the word "authenticity" within the Church as the relationship between faith, culture, and expression within any given context which moves the body of Christ forward (Chapter 9). This contextually-oriented understanding of innovation and authenticity is intended to address how the Church understands its witness in a secular age. Taylor proposes "five features" of witness useful for the post-modern age (Chapter 10). He reveals that a major focus of "first expressions" groups have been relevant to the daily life of the believer (Chapter 11). It is asserted then that innovation practically comes about through structure to turn it into vision. An innovative yet united ecclesiology with the wider church is promoted via a sacramental theology (Chapter 12).

While many points within *First Expressions* are groundbreaking in understanding new workings of the Spirit within the Church, His use of the term "indigenous" to refer to missional methods of innovation, sometimes also referred to as a post-colonial lens to describe ecclesial innovation within Great Britain, is at times tone deaf to the fact that the context he is immersed in has, and continues to be, the birthing place of modern-

day colonial endeavors throughout the world. As an Alaskan Native reader, I feel it would be preferable to leave this term to the many Indigenous communities innovating ecclesial forms in their anti-, de-, and post-colonial contexts. While he does briefly recognize how this church's relationships with these peoples has been problematic, an exploration into the historic and current examples of how Eurocentric forms of "fresh expressions" have caused harm to the globally indigenous communities outside of Great Britain, may have been appropriate.

Nevertheless, *First Expressions* successfully describes newer and contextual expressions of faith in Britain, providing distinct categories along the way without devolving into a "how to book." As a result, we get a rare account of church innovation that thoughtfully helps individuals creatively think and foster creative expressions of worship within their own contexts.

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