

Special Issue Reprint

Multilingualism in Religious Musical Practice

Edited by
Jeremy Perigo and John MacInnis

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Basel • Beijing • Wuhan • Barcelona • Belgrade • Novi Sad • Cluj • Manchester

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About the Editors

Jeremy Perigo

Jeremy Perigo is a Professor of Theology & Worship Arts at Dordt University and has also served as a visiting lecturer and research supervisor at Regent University, Northern Seminary, the University of Aberdeen, and the London School of Theology. Over the past two decades, he has taught and trained in worship at seminaries, Bible schools, and mission bases worldwide. He earned a Doctor of Worship Studies from the Institute for Worship Studies, with a focus on contextualizing Christian worship in Middle Eastern settings. Perigo's research explores the intersection of worship, theology, and culture. He hosts *Worship/Theology*, a podcast that bridges faith and practice. His work has appeared in peer-reviewed journals such as *Studia Liturgica* and *Evangelical Quarterly*, and has been cited in *Christianity Today*, *Relevant Magazine*, and *The Church Times* (Anglican). An accomplished saxophonist and active worship leader, he seamlessly combines artistry and scholarship.

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Editorial

Bearing Witness from Pentecost to the Eschaton: Introduction to “Multilingualism in Religious Musical Practice”

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Through the Holy Spirit’s orchestration at Pentecost, the Church’s first public voice was multilingual praise. As the Spirit-filled disciples descended from the Upper Room into the streets of Jerusalem, they praised God in a multitude of languages from around the world (Acts 2:4–11). The work of the Spirit was linguistically manifested in these Galilean disciples, enabling them to “declare the mighty deeds of God” in languages and dialects of those gathered “from every nation under heaven” (v. 5).¹ Shocked and surprised by this cacophony of voices, many asked, “And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born?” (v. 8). Biblical scholar F. F. Bruce characterizes this event as “nothing less than the reversal of the curse of Babel,” (Bruce 1988, p. 59) yet instead of this multilingual community being reunited by one distinct language, their multilingual and multicultural particulates were preserved. Ecclesiologically, unity is not found in one language, but in one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, and one Baptism.² Theologian Amos Yong defines this ecclesiology emerging from Acts as “unity in diversity,” (Yong 2005, pp. 137–45, 172–73). highlighting, “The many find their wholeness in the one, and the one’s effectiveness and beauty are to be found in the diversities of its members, including the sons and daughters, men and women, young and old (Acts 2:17–28) from around the world” (Yong 2005, pp. 173–74).

Over the past two thousand years, Christian movements have, in part, followed pathways of missionization and migration, in which churches and their worship adapted linguistically. Often, the liturgical languages of local Christian communities were influenced by political, ecclesiastical, cultural, and economic powers; yet missions historian Andrew Walls characterizes historic cultural shifts under his “indigenizing principle,” which he describes as an “unvarying feature in Christian history” where Christians “desire to ‘indigenize,’ to live as a Christian and yet as a member of one’s own society” (Walls 1996, p. 7). Broadly, Christianity’s openness to adopting, adapting, contextualizing, and localizing has fueled a diversity of cultural forms and expressions of faith that include a multitude of languages. In particular, missiologist Lamin Sanneh sees the Christian adoption of local indigenous forms for God as an intentional approach in linguistic translation that “opened the way for indigenous innovation and motivation in the religious life” (Sanneh 2003, p. 10). In his view, “Translatability is the source of the success of Christianity across cultures. The religion is the willing adoption of any culture that would receive it, equally at home in all languages and cultures, and among all races and conditions of people.”³ Though intentional, unintentional, and at times nefarious forces have shaped Christians’ postures toward culture and language, Walls and Sanneh observe a degree of continuity in Christianity’s adaptability and openness toward translations and indigenization. These linguistic dynamics are salient in Christian worship, notably in congregational singing.

Though fueled by the work of the Spirit at Pentecost, multilingual worship requires resilience and intentional liturgical decisions of local congregations. Choosing to participate

in singing in a new language without fully understanding its syntax and semantics can require a hospitable posture toward corporate worship that welcomes those with different linguistic needs, desires, and expectations. A similar posture of humility may be needed for first-language speakers, as participants from other linguistic groups who attempt to sing in a new or unfamiliar language may be prone to phonetic and phonological errors and to accent variation. A key aim of language translation is to establish dialogue and connection between distinct linguistic groups, which can be anchored in Christian hospitality and enable human flourishing. Yet beyond the horizontal dialogue between Christian worshippers from different cultural backgrounds, Christian worship is a vertical dialogue between God and worshippers. Within a dialogical view of worship, God speaks and reveals, and the people of God respond. Multilingualism in religious musical practices points to a belief in a God who self-reveals in a plurality of languages and who receives praise in all languages.

In contradiction to this view, ecclesiastical powers have often been closely tied to nationalist movements, whereby specific political agendas elevate certain languages and cultural expressions in worship while marginalizing others.⁴ These assimilationist approaches to worship can be observed in contemporary evangelical church-planting literature. Missiologist Donald McGavran's homogeneous-unit principle of Church Growth undergirds much church planting among evangelical Christians globally. McGavran writes, "(People) like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers."⁵ Unintentionally, when applied to corporate worship, this homogeneous-unit principle promotes accessible mono-cultural equivalents and worship practices within ethnically similar groups. Against these hierarchical cultural orders, Sandra Van Opstal, theologian of multicultural worship, describes worship as "an inclusive and diverse table that embodies reconciliation and points to the future celebration of God's people from every tribe, tongue, people, and language." (Van Opstal 2016, p. 16). In her view of worship, there is an invitation to recognize that within the practice of multicultural and multilingual worship, local churches enact an anticipatory liturgical response. These communities bear witness to the future coming of Christ, enthroned and surrounded by multicultural worshippers singing praise in a multitude of languages (Rev 7:9–12). As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr prophetically critiqued, "We must face the sad fact that at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning when we stand to sing 'In Christ there is no East or West,' we stand in the most segregated hour of America" (King 1968). Attempting to reverse these divisive liturgical inclinations, which, for evangelicals, are buttressed by McGavran's homogeneous unit principle, churches can engage in the work of reconciliation through local liturgies. Congregations enacting multilingual worship resonate with the unity of the Spirit at Pentecost and manifest a foretaste of the multilingual choir at the eschaton.

In a previous Special Issue, my co-editor, John MacInnis, along with several contributors, explored the dynamics of language translation and localization in religious music.⁶ Throughout the process, we continued to notice multilingualism as a significant socio-liturgical dynamic in many Christian communities. Alongside a growth in theologically oriented books on leading multicultural churches, numerous studies of Christian communities in places such as the global metropolis of London, the cosmopolitan city of Edinburgh, and the strategically located migratory hub of Athens exhibit multilingualism and multiculturalism.⁷ However, the challenges and possibilities of multilingualism are not particular to mega churches or cosmopolitan cities. The multilingual praise of Pentecost reverberates in churches across the globe, particularly in those that demonstrate Sanneh and Wall's principles of translatability and indigenization. This congregational engagement with multilingualism in Christian worship music represents a deliberate ethical decision of hospitality that bears witness from Pentecost to the Eschaton.

In rural Northwest Iowa, where MacInnis and I both live, several churches exhibit approaches to multilingualism in corporate worship. In Sioux Center, María Magdalena Reformed Church focuses on “making a multi-generational, multi-ethnic, bilingual worship service.” Their Sunday worship always features songs, prayers, and sermons in English and Spanish. With international students and faculty in attendance from neighboring universities, expressions of worship are also often vocalized in Korean, Kiswahili, Ukrainian, and Bajan Creole, among other languages. About a mile down the road, Christ Community Church self-defines as “One Church. Two Languages. Multiple Cultures.”⁸ This church offers two weekly linguistically diverse services, one in Spanish and one in English. Though worship is conducted in a particular language, they see themselves as one church led by a shared, multicultural staff. Another ten miles down the road in Orange City, the American Reformed Church was founded over a hundred years earlier than these two churches by Dutch Reformed immigrants, who desired to offer “English-language worship.”⁹ This novel approach contrasted with other Reformed churches in the area, which continued to worship in Dutch for decades.¹⁰ Though these communities are not specifically featured in this study, their unique models of ministry and diverse engagement with multilingualism undergird this project for us as editors. Even in rural communities, the engagement with multilingualism in Christian worship is diverse and complex. Multilingualism in Christian worship is layered and influenced by countless factors, including culture, missional postures, ecclesiastical powers, liturgical expectations, personal and corporate stories of migration, and worship preferences.

This Special Issue explores the dynamics of multilingualism in Christian worship, a phenomenon with a historic and global reach, with particular connections to missionization and migration. Within such a complex and expansive phenomenon, the contributors focused on multilingualism in religious music, drawing from theological ethicist and ethnomusicologist Nathan Myrick’s concept of “musical caring”, in which congregational music demonstrates care ethics “when it enables human flourishing”, “provides space for people to voice their needs. . .honestly”, and “preserves people in and restores people to just relationships with each other” (Myrick 2021). In summation, this Special Issue explores the motivations for and approaches to multilingualism in sung congregational worship.

This project has been blessed by the many established and emerging scholars from a diversity of academic disciplines and Christian traditions. Their combined multi-voiced localities and scholarship give a taste reminiscent of the sounds of Pentecost and a foretaste of the future multilingual worship seen in John’s vision of the throne of God.

In “I Thought It Was Beautiful; I Just Wish I Could Understand It”: The Awkward Dance Of Multilingual Worship,” Marcell Silva Steuernagel, in addition to exploring strategies for leading multilingual worship emerging from liturgical data from the United Methodist Course of Study School at Perkins School of Theology, offers a vital overview of the growing body of scholarship at the intersection of multilingualism and Christian worship.

Kathryn Minyoung Cooke, in “The Music of the Silent Exodus: Nunchi Bwa-ing and Christian Musicking in a Second-Generation Asian American Church,” argues that at Glory Church, a second-generation Asian American church and multilingual setting, Asian American identity is not perceived sonically but rather through collective experience and physical performance.

In “Understanding ‘Love’ in the English Lyrics of the Original Songs by the Multilingual New Creation Church Singapore,” H. Leng Toh and Daniel Thornton study New Creation Church Singapore, a multilingual congregation in which members speak numerous languages, such as Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil, at home. Yet the church’s original congregational music is in English. Analyzing this unique context, these two scholars collab-

orate to discern the differences in the use of “love” in the lyrical theologies of contemporary Christian songs in Australian English and Singaporean English.

In “Cultural Expression and Liturgical Theology in the Worship Songs Sung by British-Born Chinese,” James Yat-Man Tang and I analyze the musical repertoire of Birmingham Chinese Evangelical Church, revealing that although English songs from the West dominate the worship services, through a British-born Chinese reading, several lyrical themes notably resonate with aspects of Chinese culture.

Adán Alejandro Fernández, in “The Precedent for Vernacular and Multilingual Liturgies in the Catholic Church in Latin America”, examines the emergence of folk music in Nicaraguan Masses that, despite some ecclesiastical disapproval, continued to enrich devotional practice and theological discourse.

Drawing together biblical studies, poetics, and language analysis, Jordan Covarelli explores the Benedictus (Song of Zechariah) as a potential case of multicultural worship in his article, “Multicultural Worship in the Song of Zechariah and Contemporary Christian Worship.”

In “Multilingual Complexities in the Origins and Development of the Harrist Movement and Its Worship Patterns in Ivory Coast,” James R. Krabill constructs a historical narrative of the ministry of William Wade Harris, revealing a case of linguistic complexity fueled by Harris’ encouragement of converts to compose hymns in their own local languages.

Adekunle Oyeniyi’s article, “Multilingual Singing in Nigeria: Examining Roles, Meaning, and Function in Wazobia Gospel Music” analyzes Wazobia gospel music as a multilingual musical practice through which layered identities are negotiated within Nigerian Christian contexts.

Alberto Annarilli examines the impact of migrations from South America and Africa to Italy on Protestant hymnals of Baptist, Methodist, and Waldensian churches in “Multilingualism and Interculture in the Repertoire Proposed in Hymnals from 2000 to Today: A Study on Italian Protestant Churches.” He examines these denominational models of migrant churches and analyzes the process of editing and translating hymns.

Gathering these scholars and helping see their work published has been an absolute joy and honor. Many of these articles and relational connections originated at academic conferences such as the Christian Congregational Music Conference and the Society for Christian Scholarship in Music annual meetings, for which we are grateful. Finally, the team of editors and staff at *Religions* deserves special thanks for their expertise and support during the creation of this project. We hope that this Special Issue will be a helpful resource for scholars and practitioners, expanding awareness and understanding of how multilingual worship music continues to reverberate in communities around the world and bears witness to the unity of the Spirit.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*, © 1995, by The Lockman Foundation.

² See Ephesians 4:4–6. In my view, the larger context of Act 2 also reveals these unifying factors.

³ (Sanneh 1990, p. 51). In particular, Sanneh saw the role of missionary as key in translation. He stated, “The translation role of missionaries cast them as unwitting allies of mother-tongue speakers and as reluctant opponents of colonial domination.” (Sanneh 2009, pp. 94–95).

⁴ Winner traces the impact of “sin” on Christian worship practices, highlighting how Eucharistic, baptism, and prayer have been used to divide in damaging ways. See Winner (2018). Marti critiques much of the essentializing practices that depict multiracial worship music as “stereotyped” and “idealized,” and discourages “attempting to create categories from a handful of different races/ethnicities”, stating that, instead, one should pay “attention to interactional and organizational dynamics.” (Marti 2012, pp. 41, 50).

- 5 (McGavran 1970, p. 198). To increase the number of unchurched, evangelical mega church pastor Rick Warren proposes a type of liturgical pragmatism focused on attractive forms of worship that resonate with a particular type of person, which he calls Saddleback Sam. Addressing the issue, he states, “Create a service that is intentionally designed for your members to bring their friends to. And make the service so attractive, appealing, and relevant to the unchurched that your members are eager to share it with the lost people they care about.” This culturally oriented liturgical pragmatism prioritizes accessibility of a particular form of culture and a particular group of people, resulting in cultural divisions and cultural hegemony expressed in worship. (Warren 1995, p. 253).
- 6 See https://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special_issues/Language_Practice (accessed on 17 December 2025).
- 7 For recent ecclesiological texts, see Gray (2021); Anderson and Cabellon (2010); and Rah (2010). For studies focused on the dynamics of Global Christians in particular contexts, see Goodhew and Cooper (2019); Chow et al. (2024); Carlson (2021).
- 8 Maria Magdalena RCA, *About Us*, Maria Magdalena RCA, <https://mariamagdalenarca.org/about/> (accessed on 17 December 2025); Beacon, *A Multicultural Church in Sioux County*, Northwestern College, <https://beacon.nwciowa.edu/a-multicultural-church-in-sioux-county/> (accessed on 17 December 2025); Christ Community Evangelical Free Church, *Home*, <https://www.christcevfrees.org/> (accessed on 17 December 2025).
- 9 American Reformed Church of Orange City, “About,” <https://www.americanchurchoc.com/about> (accessed 17 December 2025).
- 10 For more on the linguistic shifts of Dutch Reformed congregations, see (Vos 2022, chap. 2).

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Article

“I Thought It Was Beautiful; I Just Wish I Could Understand It”: The Awkward Dance of Multilingual Worship

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Abstract: This article explores strategies for planning and leading multilingual worship. It offers an overview of translation and multilingualism for readers unfamiliar with the growing body of scholarship in these fields and connects them to the role of translation and multilingualism in Christian worship, leveraging decolonial perspectives to critique its history. This article draws from a data set of approximately 40 liturgies designed for the Course of Study School of the United Methodist Church at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University. It uses selections from these liturgies to demonstrate how issues of translation and multilingualism might be dealt with in worship planning and leadership. Finally, the article points to possibilities for further exploration at the intersection between Christian worship and multilingualism.

Keywords: Christian worship; decoloniality and Christianity; liturgy; multilingualism; translation

1. Introduction

Every year, Perkins School of Theology offers courses for licensed local pastors in the United Methodist Church (UMC) who do not have a seminary degree through a program called Course of Study School (COSS). At Perkins, COSS cohort has historically included native English and Spanish speakers, many of whom speak both languages and a few who do not. These intensive weeks of summer study, offered for many years on the campus of Southern Methodist University, include daily chapel services for students, which I have designed and led since 2019.¹

A few years ago, an English-speaking participant approached me with questions about the bilingual liturgy we had just concluded. They wanted to know more about the process of crafting multilingual liturgies, and I shared some of the principles that guided our planning of these services. As our conversation progressed, it became clear to me that this person was bothered by some aspect of the service. They asked: “I really do enjoy the hospitality of bilingual worship, but I was wondering why certain parts of the service switched to Spanish without any warning or translation”. Finally, the source of their discomfort came out: “I thought it was beautiful; I just wish I could understand it. I wish everything was translated, so we could understand what was going on the entire time”.

Who was this “we” the person was referring to? At that moment, my experience as a foreigner and non-native English speaker living in the United States shoved the “pastoral me” from the driver’s seat and I quipped: “Well, that’s how many of us feel every day”. While merely anecdotal, this occurrence illustrates some of the linguistic tensions inherent to the history and practice of Christian worship. My conversation with that worshiper reflected tensions around language and participation in worship. My response, perhaps laced with more sarcasm than it should have been, was meant to remind this native English speaker that, for those of us living in a second language (so to speak), the feeling of disorientation around language is a daily companion. A better response to that person, perhaps, would have emphasized that Christian hospitality in worship might call for a healthy dose of the liturgical awkwardness that arises from feeling “out of the loop” during a service that flows between languages.

Crafting and leading multilingual worship is not a simple undertaking.² The process is riddled with decisions about which languages to include; when to switch between them; where to source congregational music, readings, prayers, and scripture translations; considerations of liturgical flow; and nowadays, issues of copyright and streaming licenses across geographical and legal boundaries.³ This article engages with current literature in translation and multilingualism studies, seeking to provide insights from these disciplines for those planning multilingual worship. It also examines a particular attempt at crafting and leading multilingual worship: the chapel services for COSS. Between 2019 and 2023, I have planned and led approximately 40 multilingual worship services at COSS. In this article, I draw upon this collection of liturgies as a primary data source that dialogues with bibliographies from various fields, including church music studies, worship and liturgy studies, translation studies and multilingualism studies, to examine several aspects of multilingualism in religious musical practice.⁴ In the context of the particular linguistic challenges of COSS at Perkins, which is located in Dallas, Texas—an important intersection between Black, Latine and White experiences in the South of the United States—I hope to contribute to scholarly conversations about motivations and approaches to multilingualism in congregational worship.

2. Translation and Multilinguality

This article provides an entry point for those not familiar with the growing corpus of language, translation, and multilingual scholarship that can inform conversations about language in Christian worship. While I adopt a broad understanding of terms like “translation” and “content”, hoping to emphasize possibilities for engagement, I acknowledge that any and all of these concepts can be problematized and/or nuanced in various ways. I refrain from doing so because, in practice, congregations who engage with multilingualism in their worship planning are probably not dealing with conceptual nuances of theory but with the concrete difficulties of language barriers, truncated translations, and other fraught aspects of the awkward dance of multilingual liturgy.⁵ Therefore, I offer Giuseppe Palumbo’s broad definition of translation as “a text in one language that represents or stands for a text in another language; the term translation also refers to the act of producing such a text” (Palumbo 2009, p. 122). In the spirit of liturgical hospitality that fuels many such attempts at multicultural and multilingual worship, I append to Palumbo’s definition Gilmei Fleck’s idea that the exercise of translation allows different cultures and agents to establish dialogues, as well as to connect different spaces and times; what he calls a movement toward the creation of meaning across boundaries of incomprehensibility (Fleck 2023, p. 248).⁶

The term “multilingualism” has also been variously defined. Kohl and Ouyang define multilingualism in contrast to “monolingualism,” as a descriptor of “speech communities that use more than one language” (Kohl et al. 2020, p. 4). John Edwards argues that multilingualism exists as a double valency, both as a “simple description of global linguistic diversity” and as “a representation of the individual and group abilities that have developed because of that diversity” (Edwards 2012, p. 25). While many scholars distinguish between bilingualism and multilingualism, I align here with Aronin and Singleton, who employ multilingualism “in such a way that [it includes] the concepts of bilingualism and bilingual within their respective ambits” (2012, p. 7).⁷ Thus, I consider the liturgies used in COSS services multilingual even when they are only engaging with two languages, at least in part because this use conforms to Kohl and Ouyang’s idea of a speech community that uses more than one language. Further, my engagement with multilingualism also leverages the spirit of the “multilingual turn” that “challenges the hegemony of monolingualism as the norm” (Ainsworth et al. 2023, p. xvi). Aneta Pavlenko argues that the multilingual turn is nothing but a recognition that our world is “more multilingual than ever before” (Pavlenko 2023, p. 4). Others support this claim, arguing against the artificial “one-to-one match between a country and a language”, whereas in fact “all national states are multilingual” (Maiden et al. 2020, p. 70).

Moreover, there is widespread recognition that translation and multilingual studies are by nature interdisciplinary endeavors. Translation studies “addresses a wide range of questions” (Bermann and Porter 2014, p. 6) and is “interdisciplinary from start to finish (Yazici 2009, p. 8). In fact, argue Wakabayashi and Kothari, translation “should be problematized in inverted commas to suggest the scope of activities and concepts” associated with it in different languages, “as well as the dangers of extrapolating from English practices and conceptualizations” (Wakabayashi and Kothari 2009, p. 7). If such is the case, recognizing the multidisciplinary of translation and multilingual studies includes recognizing the cruciality and agency of practices and conceptualizations from outside the English-language center of intellectual gravity, as we shall see.

To add another layer of complexity to the issue, the translation of liturgical texts and congregational music is fraught with particular complexities. Lucile Desblache offers a typology of the translation of song words, including transcription, intralingual, and interlingual translation (Desblache 2018, pp. 312–14). She also suggests the term “transcreation” to depict other-language versions of songs, where “new words, which are intended to fit an old tune, convey a fresh semantic and poetic message, which may or may not be in line with the original text” (Desblache 2019, p. 248). For her, the translation of music “involves the transfer or mediation of some elements of a musical text to enhance its meaning for its intended audience” (Desblache 2018, p. 298). I take her reference to “some elements” as an acknowledgment that it is not possible to translate all aspects of music between languages and the cultures linked to them; in fact, this would not be the ultimate objective of music translation, because “there is an element of desired untranslatability in the translation of musical texts, governed by the necessity to allow space for the expression of emotions, of dissent or resistance” (Desblache 2018, p. 304). Thus, dealing with music translation means embracing what Desblache calls “partial untranslatability” (Desblache 2018, p. 308).

That untranslatability can reside in and between any of the component elements of a song, religious or otherwise. Speaking specifically of religious hymns, Dinda Gorrée says that “new interpretation and translation is a common presence in psalmody and hymnology”, and these transformations can happen “in the music, in the text, or in both music and text” (Gorrée 2005, p. 27).⁸ Throughout the history of Christianity, argues Gorrée, “both music and text are constantly rearranged and retranslated” in order to help them fit the expectations of participants and/or ideological proclivities of institutions, in a constant process whereby congregational songs are “upheaved, refixed, translated and retranslated” (Gorrée 2005, p. 33).

The dynamics of upheaval that Gorrée mentions reflect the extent to which the history of Christianity is a history of cultural shock and negotiation. From liturgical languages used across geographic boundaries to more blatant instances of colonial oppression that include language erasure or tight control, beneath the surface Christian worship has been a battleground from the linguistic perspective, even as religious institutions presented as consolidated organizations. Within that history, liturgists and other church leaders have experimented with multiple approaches to the leveraging and control of the language of and in worship. The enforcement of language and the enforcement of liturgy frequently come hand in hand. The Roman Catholic Church, for instance, insisted on the preservation of Latin as the approved liturgical language for use across its sphere of influence for centuries. For Desblache, even as the church “imposed Latin as the sole language for sung liturgy and religious music pieces from the ninth century throughout Europe, it encouraged the standardization of musical forms as [a way] of spreading its power and ideologies” (Desblache 2019, p. 204).

In fact, for Tom Hare, “a history of the translation of the Bible is in many a history of the Bible itself” (Hare 2014, p. 534). He argues that Christianity has relied upon translation, most notably Jerome’s Vulgate, and that the Bible continues to be the most widely translated book today (Hare 2014, p. 533). There are other examples, such as the Buddhist Sutras, the Hindu Vedas, the Quran and the Hadith. In each of these cases, translation has been treated differently; in some cases, no translation is allowed, while in others—and such is the case

with the King James version of the Bible, for instance—a translation has “achieved iconic status” (Edwards 2012, p. 58). A similar connection can be drawn between the Russian Orthodox Church and Church Slavonic.⁹

Victor Westhelle lays bare this history when he connects the history of Latin American colonialism to the “missionary efforts of mainline churches in reproducing in the mission field their own church doctrine, liturgy, and rituals underwritten by centuries of European, and later North-American, piety and religious fervor” (Westhelle 2010, p. 61). From the perspective of the liturgies of Western Christianity, these aspects of power and their colonial expressions, whether missionary or economic, have resulted in a configuration whereby English has been considered the *lingua franca* of many traditions, especially in the Northern hemisphere.

During the modern missionary movement, while some attention was paid to the translation of hymns, this attention rarely contemplated multilingual dynamics during worship itself. The work of Joan Larie Sutton (1930–2016) exemplifies the mindset of most mission boards in the North in relation to the translation of congregational music. Sutton worked in Brazil for many years as a missionary through the International Mission Board, and translated a significant number of hymns to Portuguese, as well as liturgical works such as Handel’s *Messiah* and Brahms’s *Requiem*. Sutton’s work was crucial to the spread of Protestant hymnody in Brazil. While she in fact encouraged her seminary students to compose worship songs in Portuguese, much of her own work revolved around translation (Mulholland et al. 2001, pp. 35–36).¹⁰

While the work of Sutton and others before and after her was certainly important in hymn translation, it is also true that throughout much of the world touched by the combination of colonial economic and political interests, and by the spread of Christianity through the modern missionary movements that rode on the coattails of those colonial routes, English was implicitly or explicitly considered the *lingua franca* of Christian worship in the Protestant world, much like Latin in the Roman Catholic world.

It is worth noting that the expression *lingua franca*, or “language of the Franks”, originally referred to “the mixture that Arabs (and others)” in the Eastern Mediterranean “heard the ‘Franks’ of different mother tongues using among themselves” during the Crusades. This *lingua franca* developed, into the 19th century, “to include instances where a single language provided the necessary bridging” (Edwards 2012, p. 48). While Edwards does acknowledge the need for *linguas francas* as a means of “cross-group communication”, he also mentions (in the same paragraph) the “linguistically ‘murderous’ potential of the English language” (Edwards 2012, p. 25). In other words, the need for translation and multilinguality is always imbricated with questions of power, an issue that seemed to be a blind spot in early scholarly examinations of translation. Doorslaer and Flynn describe how even late 20th century approaches to translation demonstrated “a lack of concern” for questions of power and identity (van Doorslaer and Flynn 2013, p. 3). The situation has since begun to change, and Fleck highlights how previous notions about the “invisibility” of the translator have been debunked (Fleck 2023, p. 259).

In all of these cases, languages and translations “may exert considerable influence on the identity of the user” (Aronin and Singleton 2012, p. 72). In fact, for Fleck, the colonization of minds, identities, and imaginations through the use of translation in the colonial projects could be considered more lasting and profound than its geographical ramifications (Fleck 2023, p. 251). In other words, translation has served as a vehicle to convey a religious message but has also helped shape theology, populate the religious imagination, and form liturgical language whenever and wherever religion has crossed language boundaries.

Therefore, it is crucial that current examinations of translation and multilinguality account for the positionality of the translator as well as for broader issues of power and the performance of ritual. The positionality of the translator is what Waisman calls the “specific site” of the translator, which includes “the entire cultural sociohistorical context in which translators perform their task” (Waisman 2004, pp. 11–12). Consequently, argues Waisman,

any translation is dated because it reflects a “specific point in time” (Waisman 2004, p. 202). Second, within the context of a broader discussion of translation and coloniality, one must consider the force of religious and liturgical texts and actions in actual performance. For Cláudio Carvalhaes, liturgical rituals not only organize religious life but also “interpret the life of the individual and the group in the world and consequently interpret the world itself” (Carvalhaes 2015, p. 3).¹¹ In this sense, the history of Christian liturgy is as much a history of religious power as it is a history of piety, because “whoever holds religious power defines, allows, authorizes and demands the proper practices/behaviors of the faith” (Carvalhaes 2015, p. 4).

The second half of the 20th century witnessed a burgeoning interest in the expression of diversity through and in Christian liturgy. The Second Vatican Council opened up linguistic possibilities that had been unavailable until that moment in the Catholic world. In addition, the establishment of the World Council of Churches created a lattice upon which church bodies could connect and interface, making room not only for comparative studies of liturgy and the language contained in it but also for questions about the role of language in praying, reading, chanting, and singing across linguistic boundaries.

Further work by the World Council of Churches, along with connected initiatives such as the *Global Praise* publication series by GBGMusik in partnership with the General Board of Global Ministries of the UMC (Kimbrough and Young 1996, 2000, 2004), demonstrated the burgeoning market for worship resources in languages other than English in North America. In recent decades, many North American denominations have provided resources for multilingual worship. An important first step across the mainline church world has been to offer worship resources in languages other than English. The strategy of the United Methodist Church (UMC) provides one example among many. After the publication of the *United Methodist Hymnal* in 1989 (United Methodist Church 1989), the UMC approved the publication of a second official Spanish hymnal, *Mil Voces Para Celebrar* (MVPC), in 1996 (Martinez 1996). Another official hymnal followed in 2001 (United Methodist Church 2001), this time a bilingual English–Korean publication titled *Come, Let Us Worship*. Other denominations followed similar strategies.¹²

While such publications have addressed the need for worship resources in other languages, they have not focused specifically on multilingual worship (save for a few exceptions, such as *Come, Let Us Worship*, which does provide at least a few resources clearly intended for bilingual worship in English and Korean). More recent publications, such as *Santo, Santo, Santo/Holy Holy Holy*, published by GIA in 2019 (Calvin Institute of Christian Worship 2019), reflect updated standards in relation to the treatment of language in congregational singing specifically. The editors of this hymnal paid careful attention to the original language of each song, its translation, and the order and layout of the languages in each piece, with the goal of inviting congregations to “embrace ways of singing that strengthen empathy, mutuality, and hospitality within the body of Christ” (Calvin Institute of Christian Worship 2019, p. 6).

Overall, scholars have noticed an increase in scholarship and resources addressing multilingual worship. This increase reflects a deeper paradigm shift at the other side of translational power dynamics: that of liberation. Carvalhaes has identified the growing influence of liturgists from the Global South who contribute new ways of speaking about liturgy and worship, “radically changing a field that relied on European/US thinking” (Carvalhaes 2015, p. 7). From this perspective, translation can go both ways; while it has historically enabled colonial oversight, it can also be used to dismantle such structures. As Bermann and Porter describe, translation can facilitate imperialistic aspirations but also resistance to them (Bermann and Porter 2014, p. 9). Desblache provides the example of Martin Luther, who “transgressed the Catholic Church’s moral order and did so with the help of translation” by composing music, borrowing melodies, and adapting texts from non-liturgical sources (Desblache 2019, pp. 205–6). Thus, music translation, just like the translation of other texts, can protect the dominant discourse but can also serve as “a liberating instrument for the voices of peripheries” (Desblache 2018, p. 300).

It is in that spirit of liberation that my considerations about the translation of liturgical texts and congregational song lyrics are offered here. As mentioned before, in order to craft liturgies that are more than a mere spread of statistically equivalent liturgical components in more than one language, worship planners must work with multiple sources at a time and negotiate questions of sense, balance, simultaneity, sequentiality, and transitions between different languages. Even in cases where a selection of congregational songs does include multiple languages, questions remain about scriptural passages, prayers, other readings, the language of the sermon, and other aspects of the worship experience.

The bibliography I have engaged with here provides insights into the questions of translation, multilinguality, and coloniality that worship designers must engage with in their planning process. It provides a framework of sorts, providing some conceptual clarity and terminology for conversation, both scholarly and practical. With this literature in tow, we now shift from the abstract to the concrete. The COSS translations we will engage with here represent one effort in space and time to deal with such questions and complexities. With these challenges in mind, I offer here a set of possibilities for dealing with language and translation in worship planning that range on a spectrum between sequentiality and simultaneity. Throughout, I focus on multilingualism as the through-line, or central organizing principle, of liturgical planning in more than one language.

3. Patterns and Possibilities for Multilingual Worship at COSS

Perkins' COSS program is sponsored by the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the United Methodist Church (Course of Study School n.d.). Conducted in partnership with several theological schools, including Perkins, this five-year curriculum is required of all clergy not enrolled in a seminary degree program. According to Methodist historian Ted Campbell, for many years it was the main avenue of theological education for Methodist clergy (Campbell 2024).^{13,14} Before the COVID-19 pandemic, students travelled to the Perkins campus in Dallas, TX, for in-person classes and study. Between morning and afternoon sessions, students would gather for worship in Perkins Chapel. Since 2019, I have been planning and leading most of these services.

While there certainly is scholarly interest in issues of worship in relation to language, culture, and ethnoraciality (Dougherty and Huyser 2008; McCarron 2014; Ramos et al. 2020), COSS services present a unique opportunity for continued development. Multilingual or even bilingual services are frequently exceptions to the norm in the United States of America. At COSS, on the other hand, all services are at least bilingual, and sometimes involve more languages. Moreover, because I work with COSS faculty, staff and students toward several consecutive services, there is ample opportunity for formal feedback and informal interactions (including the level of participant engagement from day to day) that impact how these services are planned and led. Over the years, I have received feedback from readers, church musicians, theology professors, pastors, and lay leaders in Spanish and in English about what they thought worked well in these services and what, well... did not work at all. Therefore, over my five years of involvement with COSS, the services I planned and led in that context not only represent my own ideas and strategies for multilingual worship but also reflect the feedback of others involved in the worship life of COSS. This feedback, along with our trial-and-error lessons from planning and leading each year's sessions, have transformed how I approach design and execution for the next year's services and coalesced into the principles I will outline in this article.

I offer these considerations about multilingual worship on a spectrum. On one pole of the spectrum stand sequential possibilities: instances in which languages are negotiated sequentially during worship. The other pole of the spectrum is occupied by the simultaneous use of more than one language at a time in worship. Between those two, possibilities exist for weaving language together in many ways. I begin here with the sequential possibilities, and then move on to the ones that involve simultaneity.

I begin with the time-honored "word-for-word" arrangement that one may encounter, for instance, in sermon translation. The order of these language alternations, whether

following a prepared script or translated on the spot, follow a similar pattern: content is delivered in one language, followed by a rendition in another. In COSS liturgies, I tend to avoid this pattern, although it does surface in a few instances.¹⁵ An example is the greeting from the Feast of Beginnings, the first COSS service of every summer:

This is a day of new beginnings! ¡Nuevos comienzos trae este día!
 New friends, new classes, new challenges await us.
 Nuevos amigos, nuevas clases, nuevos retos nos esperan.
¡Nuevos comienzos trae este día! This is a day of new beginnings!
 Dios está con nosotros; damos un paso confiando en Dios.
God is with us; we step out in faith.
 This is a day of new beginnings! ¡Nuevos comienzos trae este día!
 Glory be to God on high! ¡Gloria a Dios en las alturas!^{16,17}

As in most cases in which this arrangement is applied, the content is conveyed in both languages in alternation. Nevertheless, the predictability of the translation pattern is broken halfway, between the second and third lines, with the preservation of Spanish. The use of the responsorial format, and the fact that both congregation and leaders are required to speak both languages, helps convey a horizontality in the reading. In other words, one language is not necessarily subservient to the other.

Using the antiphonal format for sequential translation in liturgy offers other possibilities. One strategy that has been particularly well-received in COSS services is to use responsorial language-shifting to highlight the multilingual nature of the liturgy, thereby dismantling an implicit expectation of sequential, word-for-word translation: that any content will be systematically delivered in all languages. But while the implicit understanding of word-for-word sequential translation is that it can, somehow, convey the same content in all the languages involved, both translation studies and multilingual studies have demonstrated that such a promise is impossible to fulfill, as I state earlier in this article. One way to highlight the impossibility of word-for-word translation in the antiphonal format is to set it up as a conversation between languages instead of an attempt to translate content. One example employed in several COSS liturgies uses a prayer from the *Book of Common Prayer* (The Episcopal Church 2007, p. 57), altered to reflect both English and Spanish:

O heavenly God, in whom we live and move and have our being:
Te suplicamos humildemente que nos guíes y gobiernes con tu Santo Espíritu,
para que en todos los afanes y quehaceres de nuestra vida no te olvidemos,
sino que recordemos que siempre caminamos en tu presencia;
 por Jesucristo nuestro Señor. **Amén.**¹⁸

The rhythm of the language shifting is slightly different in this second prayer than in the previous example. In performance, this type of configuration offers an opportunity for the multilingual aspect of the liturgy to be highlighted. By providing the congregation with a more extended clause in Spanish, it emphasizes the multilingual dynamic as an added layer that contributes to the texture of the service. Another example of the same technique illustrates a slightly different rhythm of translation but operates according to the same basic principle. The following is a dismissal prayer used in COSS liturgies:

Santo Dios, envíanos el Espíritu del Cristo resucitado.
So that we may see with our eyes, hear with our ears, and love with our lives.
Enséñanos a orar hasta que Cristo venga otra vez. En su nombre lo pedimos.
 Hasta entonces la jornada continúa. Until then, we walk, we pitch our tent, we walk again.
 And may God guide us on our way. Y que Dios dirija nuestro caminar.
Amén.¹⁹

In this instance, content is distributed in English and Spanish for both leader and congregation, but cross-references are built into both languages. “Until then, we walk”, for instance, is complemented by “que Dios dirija nuestro caminar” in the following line. As a

whole, the parts of the petition reinforce and enrich each other, even as they afford a notion of what is being asked for in both languages.

It is also possible to couple this multilingual responsorial format with a refrain, especially in contexts where language shifting is an unfamiliar practice to the congregation, or in which most participants are not at least partially bilingual or multilingual. The following congregational response, from the *Book of Alternative Services of the Anglican Church of Canada* (Anglican Church of Canada 1985, pp. 118–19), was modified to provide the congregation with a Spanish-language litany in response to the intercessory prayers:

Keep us, O Lord, as the apple of your eye.

Guárdanos bajo la sombra de tus alas.

For the peace of the whole world, we pray to you, Lord.

Dios, ten piedad.

For those who are weary, sleepless, and depressed, we pray to you, Lord,

Dios, ten piedad.

For those who are hungry, sick, and frightened, we pray to you, Lord.

Dios, ten piedad.

For rest and refreshment, we pray to you, Lord.

Dios, ten piedad.

Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping, that awake we may watch with Christ, and asleep we may rest in peace.

Amen.²⁰

In this prayer, participants who struggle with the opening phrase in Spanish have several opportunities to rehearse the Spanish response each time and become more comfortable with it between leader petitions, which in turn offers them a chance to take a mental breath and prepare for the next repetition.

Another possibility that highlights language shifts in congregational singing leverages sequential shifts between verse and chorus or refrain, or by singing different hymn stanzas in different languages. This strategy is particularly helpful in bilingual contexts, such as multigenerational Latine churches in the United States, where first- and second-generation immigrants may be more familiar with the Spanish version of a song, while younger participants (who may or may not be exposed to Spanish at home and have adopted English as their native language) relate more readily to the English lyrics. By alternating between languages, multiple immigrant experiences are contemplated and participants are invited to connect through singing. I have used this strategy for contemporary worship songs on some occasions, but it has worked particularly well with established hymns that are known across geographical and language boundaries precisely due to the colonial enforcements that have upheld them outside of their Euro–North American birthplace. In these cases, singing in both languages appears to create space for cross-language relationship building, therefore providing a hymn with the potential to shift from an alienating sign of colonization to a hospitable opportunity for multilingual engagement: an example of how translation—even translation meant to enforce a particular theological perspective in another language—might be turned upon its head, subverting the power configurations of the colonialist history of much worship repertoire.

These types of responsorial formats, or alternation between song sections, have one thing in common: they presume structural space between language shifts. In other words, participants can expect a language shift at specific inflection points in the structure of the reading or song: a change between verse and stanza, a verse of poetry, or another sectional subdivision. But what happens when these shifts are played with, compressed, made mid-sentence or mid-melodic line? This question opens a second sequential opportunity for multilingual engagement: weaving languages together not only between choruses and refrains but at any point within a reading, prayer, or song section.

When sequential language shifts are thus compressed together or set at unequal and/or unpredictable points in the liturgical element, they become a kind of multilingual “weaving together” that produces an altogether different result. An example from COSS arises from a mashup between versions of a prayer of confession and proclamation of grace sourced from the *United Methodist Hymnal* and from *Mil Voces Para Celebrar*, the English- and Spanish-language UMC hymnals:

Merciful God, we confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart y con frecuencia no hemos sido una iglesia fiel. No hemos cumplido con tu voluntad, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love, no hemos amado a nuestro prójimo y no hemos escuchado la voz del necesitado. Forgive us, we pray. Free us for joyful obedience, mediante Jesucristo nuestro Señor. Amen.

Escuchen las buenas nuevas: “Dios muestra su amor para con nosotros, en que siendo aun pecadores, Cristo murió por nosotros” ¡En el nombre de Jesucristo ustedes son perdonados! Hear the good news: Christ died for us while we were yet sinners; that proves God’s love toward us.

¡En el nombre de Jesucristo eres perdonado(a)! In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!²¹

Theoretically, this technique is straightforward: to simply weave together English and Spanish portions of a liturgical component, be it a congregational song, a reading, or a portion of scripture. In practice, participants are required to redouble their attention to their reading in preparation for the language shifts. Because of that renewed attention, this weaving technique provides a new texture, a new flavor, even to well-known liturgical texts. This flavor arises precisely from the fact that language shifts are not smooth or imperceptible; they call attention to themselves because of the shift itself and because content “tastes” different in different languages. To recite “No hemos cumplido tu voluntad, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love, no hemos amado a nuestro prójimo y no hemos escuchado a la voz del necesitado” is different from engaging with the same words in only one language. The recitation “tastes” different on the tongue.

The same technique can be employed in musical compositions as well as readings and prayers. I composed a piece for COSS services that offers a modified version of the priestly blessing from Numbers 6: 23–27 in English and Spanish, shifting between languages with each clause (Figure 1):

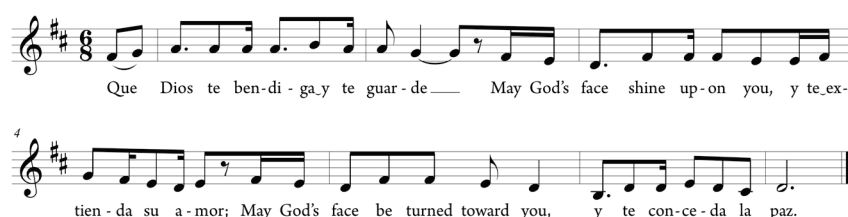


Figure 1. Score of “Bendición/Blessing” by Silva Steuernagel (2020a).

As with alternating verses in hymns or sections of congregational songs, this composition illustrates the compression of idioms into a new, interwoven artefact that leverages the shift between languages to draw in both English and Spanish speakers. Granted, the learning curve for songs like this is steeper than if they were monolingual, but that is precisely the highlight: multilingualism as a characteristic, not as a flaw or hurdle to be erased. Since 2020, when this song was composed, participants have learned to enjoy its unique flavor as a summary of COSS worship experience.

So far, we have moved from amply spaced, word-for-word sequential translation modes into various patterns that highlight the richness of language in multilingual worship in different ways. The notion of compression moved us away from the sequential pole of the multilingual spectrum, ever closer to the second large cluster of possibilities on that spectrum: that of simultaneity.

The boundary between compressed language shifts and the actual overlapping of languages in liturgy is a fuzzy one, made even fuzzier due to the dithering and participatory discrepancies that characterize corporate worship broadly speaking. Elsewhere, I have used Thomas Turino's repurposing of Charles Keil's notion of participatory discrepancies to describe the unique texture of congregational singing, characterized as it is by "simultaneous variables in singing and other forms of participation" (Silva Steuernagel 2021, p. 92). In multilingual congregational singing or recitation, these discrepancies, which I describe as "a sonic marker, a textural sign of participation" (Silva Steuernagel 2021, p. 93), are amplified by the overlapping of two or more languages spoken simultaneously. Once again, the mark of engagement in multilingual worship is not uniformity but diversity.

As I mentioned earlier in this article, worship at COSS has followed a directive on the multiplicity of language that resists colonial aspirations of linguistic control and oversight, not only in relation to music but other parts of liturgy as well. This pedagogy seeks to reinterpret misguided paradigms of corporate Christian worship. The portraits of adoration in the book of Revelation provide an appropriate example. In the seventh chapter of Revelation, John describes "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" who cried out in a loud voice (Revelation 7: 9b–10a, New Revised Standard Version). The colonial proclivity for oversight and control requires that in this scene, every person in the multitude—especially the majority whose native language falls outside the normative linguistic boundaries of empire—cry out together in one tongue, one language. In the case of Western Christianity, this normativity has tended toward the English language (and preferably in Western hymnic form, singing in four-part harmony, and accompanied by a pipe organ).²² In this skewed interpretation, all have been absorbed into the culture of the empire. Language variety has disappeared, and multilingual worship is erased in a process not unlike the consolidation of the various liturgies of medieval Europe into the unified matrix of the Holy Roman Empire under Charlemagne.²³

The language reality of COSS requires that its worship life reflect a different paradigm, which recognizes that the sound of the worshipers in Revelation is not the sound of consolidated empire. Instead, it is the sound of many languages and accents, the sound of variation, that characterizes the collective cry of God's people. According to this directive, the doxological impetus behind the acclamation of the gathered people in Revelation is a phonetic and linguistic tapestry that highlights, celebrates, and mirrors God's multi-faceted creation through the texture of multilingual worship. In that sense, COSS worship has worked to create room for multilingual recitation, prayer, and singing.

This posture requires pushing past even the scripted weaving together of languages reflected in "Bendición/Blessing" and toward an invitation for participants to speak and sing in the language they are comfortable with, without feeling that they are deviating from a linguistic norm. While it remains true that even word-for-word sequential translations generate rich theological resonances that are distinct from monolingual worship, planning for simultaneous languages creates linguistic hospitality and nurtures a liturgical environment that celebrates a unique multilingual tapestry: a sonic trademark of the awkward dance of multilingual worship.

This posture requires specific preparation: sourcing materials in all languages to be included; translating and adapting wherever necessary; engraving scores or providing hymnals that include originals and translations; and providing instructions, written or verbal, that help usher participants into liturgical performance. These instructions may be invitations for people to step out of their comfort zone and experience a language they are not comfortable with; or they may invite participants to worship in their preferred language without having to worry that their participation will be negatively received by others. In both cases, the result is a texture of linguistic simultaneities.

Furthermore, leaders must model multilingual aspirations during the service and potentially rehearse multilingual speaking and singing in order to provide an example for participants to follow. At COSS, we regularly invite participants to sing in two or more languages at the same time. We have used, for instance, "Te invitamos, oh Cristo/Come,

Be Among Us, O Jesus” (Anonymous 2019)—an anonymous Latin American composition rendered in English by Greg Scheer—on multiple occasions. Our experience at COSS is that initially, participants tend to self-organize, collectively gravitating to English or Spanish according to the loudest voice in the room.²⁴ But over the years, they have come to relish the multilingual texture generated by overlapping two or more languages: a multilingual paradigm shift.

In some cases, we have experimented with bilingual textures, such as English and Spanish, and with trilingual textures. At COSS, this has meant including, for instance, songs with Portuguese as another Latin American language. One example is “En tu misericordia danos paz/Em tua misericordia dá-nos paz/Lord, in Your Mercy Give Us Peace”, a song composed by Argentineans Gerardo Oberman and Horacio Vivares (Oberman and Vivares 2019) and translated into Portuguese by Simei Monteiro and into English by Kathryn Ray.²⁵ Another is “Pelas dores deste mundo/Imploramos tu Piedad/For the Troubles” (Gaede Neto 2019). Originally written in Portuguese, it features Spanish and English versions by Simei Monteiro, Jorge Lockward and Juan Gattinoni. This practice could certainly be extrapolated to include as many languages as are appropriate to the worshiping congregation. The more languages are overlapped, the more complex the resulting multilingual tapestry. In all cases, this invitation moves the gathered congregation away from aspirations of homogeneity and into worship spaces that highlight and celebrate the multilingual nature of Christian worship.

4. Multilingual Flow: Considerations and Conclusions

A key question that surfaces from the examination of these liturgies is: what have we learned about worship design, leadership, and congregational participation in relation to multilingual engagement? In the context of this special edition of *Religions*, I offer three considerations on planning and leading these services that may shed light upon “the motivations for and approaches to multilingualism” in worship (Perigo and MacInnis 2024).

My first consideration is that thematic cohesiveness is crucial to the effectiveness of these services. Concerns over multilingualism create their own center of gravity and can deeply alter the design and leadership of worship. While it may be possible to theologically justify engagement with worship for the sake of multilingualism alone, the pastoral goals of communal worship life at COSS include other aspects beyond language. Thankfully, our experience is that worship can certainly be experimental and a rehearsal of many things, and having a sturdy thematic through-line that participants can connect with adds both purpose and direction to the experience.²⁶

Every year, in preparation for COSS, the program leadership discusses an overarching theme for all the services within that cycle. In 2019, services during the first week focused on questions of belonging and marginalization in relation to God’s kingdom. Throughout that week, each service focused on marginalized archetypes of biblical society—the orphan, the widow, the stranger—and arrived at a broad understanding of the people of God. In 2020, COSS leadership decided to focus on consolation and reassurance as central liturgical themes amid the raging COVID-19 pandemic. The resulting theme was “Liturgies of Peace and Strength for a Time of Crisis”. Throughout the two weeks of worship, services gravitated around themes such as “God’s Grace in an Unforgiving World”, “Hope for the Hopeless”, and other similar engagements with God’s presence during a time of heightened anxiety and loss. Consequently, in 2021, under the title “Liturgies of Hope for a New Today”, COSS liturgies invited participants to contemplate God’s renewal in a world attempting to discern what life might look like after the peak of the pandemic. These liturgies began with lament for those lost to COVID-19 and coaxed worshipers into memories of Jesus’s touch, God’s voice, and the Spirit’s whisper. Much as multilingual engagement adds nuances to well-known congregational songs and biblical passages, in each of these cases, the multilingual nature of the worship services added new dimensions to the themes and benefited from the clear thematic structure of these governing narratives.

Within these larger thematic arches and in each liturgy, a second consideration refers to flow. Clergy, liturgists and worship leaders frequently speak of the awkward pauses that characterize gaps between liturgical moments, failed and badly rehearsed transitions between songs, and other infelicities of flow during worship. Scholars of music (Turino 2008, pp. 30–31) and music cognition (Margulis 2013, p. 25) have adopted Mikhail Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow, a state in which one is completely immersed in something (Csikszentmihalyi 2014, p. 230). My own ethnographic work in Christian worship has shown how participants fall into and out of flow during the course of a liturgy, hovering "at the fringes, negotiating their participation as the ritual activity unfolds" (Silva Steuernagel 2021, p. 91). In the context of multilingual worship, given the added cognitive load of switching between languages and the self-consciousness that comes along with an invitation to worship in a language that is not one's own, flow becomes even more important.

If the threat of "falling out of flow" already looms large over liturgy broadly speaking, worshipping in more than one language generates further rough edges, new snags, for participants' attention to hook onto and away from immersion in the experience. The temptation for languages and shifts between them to be construed as "distractions" is significant. In order to reduce anxieties around this issue, it is crucial for liturgical leaders to rehearse transitions and coach all who are participating in the liturgy about what will take place. How are participants being instructed to participate? Have leaders rehearsed their own transitions to model the engagement that worshipers are being invited to emulate? Nevertheless, I argue that the goal of preparation is not to erase language shifts or simultaneities because they might offer the potential for distraction; instead, the goal is to rehearse with a mind to embody the multilingual nature of the experience. In summary, all that can be done to preserve flow should be considered with extra care in order to counter-balance the fragility of multilingual worship, in which negotiations of language occupy so much of participants' bandwidth as they attempt to engage with unfamiliar sounds in their mouths and hard-to-read words on the page.

In certain cases, preserving flow might mean building in teaching moments during the liturgy, or time for rehearsal before the service. When leading COSS liturgies, I frequently factor in time to teach a new chorus in all included languages before inviting participants to sing along, and I program enough repetitions to allow them time to familiarize themselves with it. Having said that, to the greatest extent possible, I strive to not present myself as an expert in any and all languages that may be involved in the service. Instead, I try to rely on native speakers of any languages included to provide authoritative models that can honor participants' attempts to speak or sing in a new language. Of course, in contexts like COSS, in which many participants are already at least partially bilingual, negotiating language shifts becomes easier. Similarly, congregations who have had time to rehearse language shifts (either in the context of worship or elsewhere) will move beyond self-conscious liturgical awkwardness to a more confident engagement with these spoken and sung repertoires. In Texas, it is common for multilingual speakers to shift between and mix languages throughout the day. Having rehearsed the practice in their daily lives, they are less ruffled by these dynamics in worship.

A final comment about flow refers to what I dub the "direction of language" in multilingual worship. It is particularly important that worship designers and liturgists account not only for language distribution—how much of each language is being contemplated in the liturgy—but also for order. If, for instance, every element of the liturgy appears in English before any other language, it quickly becomes apparent to the congregation what the normative, "native liturgical language" of the experience is expected to be. I am not suggesting here that a quantitative balance between languages needs to be preserved at all times; in fact, in certain situations, repeating one element may be as effective as introducing many new ones. Consider the example of "Dios, ten Piedad" given earlier in this article, which uses repetition as rehearsal with the intention of helping non-native Spanish speakers become comfortable with one clause. In our experience, each repetition of

the litany in Spanish accrues further gravitas in response to the English-language petitions. This directionality of language constitutes an important aspect of multilingual flow, and attention to this aspect will facilitate participation, especially because “non-Western ideas and practices should not and do not require validation by the West” (Wakabayashi and Kothari 2009, p. 6). Attention to flow can help prevent any implied suggestion that English is the “actual” language of Christian worship, while any translation of that English is simply a conveyance of the *sacra lingua franca* in another. Such is not the case.

Overall, multilingual worship provides an opportunity for participants to step into the language-scapes of others and create environments in which the awkward liturgical dance of negotiating unfamiliar languages unites worshipers instead of driving them apart through implied or explicit enforced normativities. The multilingual nature of these spaces generates further topics for researchers interested in such matters. Questions around digital mediation and multilingualism quickly surfaced for COSS in 2020 with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and have not receded. Instead, digital mediation has become an increasingly crucial consideration in multilingual worship, including the role of artificial intelligence in facilitating multilingual participation with resources such as automatic captioning and others.

Another important dimension of multilingual worship, connected as it is to questions of mediation and virtuality, refers to the translation of worship songs marketed across the globe by transnational worship agents like Hillsong, Bethel, and Elevation Worship, to name but a few. How have perceptions of translation changed as worshipers have gained increased access not only to a song’s translation in their native language but also to songs’ original English versions as well? What does normativity mean in these configurations from the perspective of language, and how do worshipers negotiate such configurations in the construction of their own piety and religious identity?

Amid questions like these, scholarly investigations of multilingual phenomena in Christianity are essential to increase comprehension of how Christian worship continues to unfold into current realities of an interconnected world. Perhaps one way to further such investigations is to embrace what Kohl and Ouyang have dubbed “creative multilingualism”. They propose the term as a provocation “to think of language not as typically homogeneous, monolithic and unified, but as intrinsically diverse-languages” (Kohl et al. 2020, p. 6). Theirs is an invitation to move from thinking about languages as ossified artefacts to thinking about language with a fluid organicity that reflects the myriad ways that people negotiate sense and community in human experience. For Kohl, creative multilingualism reflects that reality because it makes explicit “the creative processes that are at work in our use of languages, in the many ways in which languages connect, meld and bring forth new varieties, and in the living interaction between languages” (Kohl 2020, p. 223).

I would suggest that worship planning is also a process whereby new liturgical fusions and flavors are created as people interact with each other and the world around them. COSS liturgies are certainly a result of the process of exploring the awkward interstices between languages and expectations about what Christian worship should or should not sound like. While this article focuses on one particular set of multilingual liturgies in a particular context, I offer these considerations in the hope that they will help scholars and practitioners shed further light on the varied expressions of Christian worship that unfold in and between different languages.

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Notes

¹ While COSS has recently moved fully online, it still includes daily chapel services.

² Throughout this article, I employ “worship” and “liturgy” somewhat interchangeably, although I do tend to favor “worship” when speaking of the experience as a whole, and “liturgy” when referring to discrete portions of the worship order or its unfolding in time.

COSS liturgies draw from a wide variety of sources, with due permissions and attributions indicated throughout and covered by Perkins' copyright licenses and use permissions of various kinds. In this article, I attribute authorship and copyright of prayers, readings and songs under the same expectations of fair use that govern other literature engaged with in the context of research and academic writing.

I must note that my involvement with COSS predates my engagement with much of the literature presented in this article. In this sense, the article does not seek to demonstrate how the literature may have shaped worship planning. Instead, I seem to examine COSS liturgical experience through the lens of the literature, thereby providing a systematized framework for others attempting to develop similar projects.

Other stakeholders of multilingual worship development in North America take a similar approach. As an example, see (Huyser-Honig 2011).

Unless otherwise noted, all translations from non-English language sources are my own.

Aronin and Singleton provide a helpful overview of the history and wide-varying definitions of multilingualism (Aronin and Singleton 2012, pp. 1–9). Overall, in this article, I distinguish “multilingualism” and “multilinguality”. I take “multilinguality” to refer to the quality of multilingual worship in which more than one language is being used. “Multilingualism” is distinguished from “multilinguality” by referring to an intention to practice, plan for, or study the multilinguality of such experiences.

Other scholars primarily focus on the text as the locus of song translation (Hui-tung 2018, p. 351).

For information about the history of Church Slavonic, its religious uses and its revival in post-Soviet Russia, see Bennett (2011).

Very little is available in English about Sutton's life and legacy. Most biographical information is in Portuguese (Mulholland et al. 2001). Sutton's papers are available as part of Baylor University's Brazilian Baptist Music Missions Collection: <https://digitalcollections-baylor.quartextcollections.com/arts-collections/joan-sutton-brazilian-baptist-music-missions-collection> (accessed on 15 January 2024). (Joan Sutton Brazilian Baptist Music Missions Collection n.d.).

For a discussion of the distinction between “religious text” and “sacred/holy text”, see Hassen and Șerban (2018, p. 327). Here, I use “religious”, “sacred” and “liturgical” texts in a broad way, including the language of prayers, readings from translated Scripture, and lyrics of congregational songs.

Such as Concordia Publishing House's *Cantad al Señor!* (Hintze and Puig 1991).

E-mail communication with the author, 23 February 2024. Campbell is the Albert C. Outler Professor of Wesley Studies and Church History at Perkins, and an authority on the history of North American Methodism. For more information about the history of Methodist theological education, see (McCulloh 1980).

For a history of Perkins School of Theology, see Allen (2011).

Preaching is an exception. I encourage COSS preachers to engage creatively with language. While some do flow between English and Spanish seamlessly, others stick to alternated expositions in two languages.

This invocation, used at the opening of the Feast of Beginnings, was written by COSS liturgy team before my time. It first appeared in the 2007 worship guide, and is used here by the permission of Dr. Roberto Escamilla, who served as the Worship Coordinator for COSS that year.

Throughout this article, where bold is used in the context of liturgical readings and responses, it serves as a cue for the congregation to join.

Wednesday, 20 July 2022.

Monday, 8 July 2019.

Tuesday, 27 June 2023.

From the Communion liturgy, *UMH*, (1989, 12)/*MVPC* (1996, 10).

For more on decolonizing Western notions of congregational singing, see (Silva Steuernagel 2020b).

For a detailed account of the history leading up to the ecclesiastical and liturgical reforms enacted under Frankish rule, see Herrin (2021). Although her book is not focused on liturgical history, it provides a well-researched account of the events and shifting politics connected to the development of the Roman rite and its enforcement over and against other rites practiced throughout the Christian West, or what she describes as “liturgical uniformity within the Frankish territories” (Herrin 2021, p. 432).

Wednesday, 30 June 2021.

Tuesday, 29 June 2021

“Repetition opens up the possibility of looking at the performance of church music as a rehearsal of piety that occurs in revolving micro- and macro-cycles: the weekly liturgy and the church calendar” (Silva Steuernagel 2021, p. 187).

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Article

The Music of the Silent Exodus: Nunchi Bwa-ing and Christian Musicking in a Second-Generation Asian American Church

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Abstract: In 1996, Helen Lee dubbed the departure of second-generation Asian Americans from the non-English-speaking immigrant churches that they were raised in as the “silent exodus”. This nationwide phenomenon was taking place largely because first-generation churches failed to provide the second generation with culturally relevant care that would enrich their ethnic, national, and spiritual identities. Glory, the church of focus in this study, was founded by and is home to many silent exiles. In hopes of being an enriching church for second-generation Asian Americans, pastoral staff and leaders have created spaces within Glory for racial identity and faith to be in conversation with one another. However, in regard to the music of the church, they were stumped on what could be done to make it uniquely and proudly Asian American. This conundrum inspired a key question in this study: What is distinct about the way that Asian Americans worship God through music? This study argues that the worship music at Glory Church is distinctly Asian American not by what is sonically perceived, but rather by what is physically performed and collectively experienced. The Korean-English, or Konglish, term *nunchi bwa-ing* (눈치 봐-ing) is utilized as a keyword to describes Christian musicking in a multilingual setting and foregrounds the Korean/Asian American worshipping body. This study concludes by looking forward and arguing that Asian Americans ought to amplify their worship music to the larger Contemporary Worship Music scene as it has the potential to be a powerful site of intergenerational healing.

Keywords: Asian American music; multilingualism; second-generation Korean American; Christian worship; Korean American church; Contemporary Worship Music; Asian American; embodiment; emotion

1. The Steven Yeun/Ali Wong Dichotomy

The dark comedy-drama BEEF created by Lee Sung Jin was one of Netflix’s most popular shows in the spring of 2023. In addition to the acclaim that the series received, BEEF went viral for one particular scene in the third episode “I Am Inhabited by a Cry” S. J. Lee (2023) which featured Steven Yeun’s character Danny having an emotional breakdown as he stood in a Korean American church congregation singing worship music. Yeun grew up attending a Korean American church and, although his experiences were not identical to those depicted in BEEF, being in a church setting singing with other Korean Americans helped him feel an intimate and personal connection with the emotional breakdown that his character underwent. Independent from the series, BEEF’s church scene went viral because the accuracy of the scene, from the instrumentation and style of the music to the emotional intensity felt by everyone in the room, resonating deeply with people who grew up attending Korean or Asian American churches. Through its pinpoint accuracy, the scene became a catalyst for conversations concerning the cultural impact of the Asian American church in the lives of those who grew up in that religious environment.

While this scene carried an emotional weight for Yeun and other Asian Americans who grew up attending church, Yeun’s co-star Ali Wong told him that she thought this scene was hilarious and found it even funnier that Yeun could not understand what was

so funny about it. What had been nostalgic and intimate recreations of Korean American church life for Yeun were caricatures that demonstrated how bizarre emotional expression is in worship settings for Wong. As much as many Asian Americans have experiences with and deep ties to the church and Christianity, just as many have never set foot in a Christian church and are thus unfamiliar with what goes on practically in a church service, let alone the role of worship music in those services.

When I began my research on worship music at Glory,¹ a church located in the heart of Manhattan, New York that is home to a predominantly young adult Asian American congregation, BEEF had not been released yet. After BEEF and the church scene rose in popularity, the series became an effective means to discuss a key question in this project: What is distinct about the way that Asian Americans worship God? When I interviewed Glory's founding pastor Rev. Dr. Choi, he brought up BEEF and drew a Steven Yeun/Ali Wong dichotomy as an illustration of Glory's Sunday service attendees:

So now the question is, how do you reach out to a deconstructed Korean American Christian and at the same time, the Ali Wongs? One person's deeply moved and gripped by the music once again, the other person thinks this is a joke and hilarious. And that's sort of the tension that I find myself in because, as I mentioned before, my heart is for the Ali Wongs. Our heart is obviously for the Steven Yeuns that are de-churched, grew up in the Korean church left for five years, and are coming back or something like that. But it's also for the Ali Wongs. So how do we make it so that our church doesn't look funny or ridiculous? Intellectually credible, but at the same time, how do we emotionally also move like the Steven Yeuns?

Choi's goal to reach out and appeal to the Steven Yeuns and Ali Wongs does not come from a desire to merely stay relevant or be popular, but from Glory's mission statement: "inspiring thinkers to believe & inspiring believers to think".² The mission statement itself is not a uniquely Asian American one, but the predominantly Asian American demographic of the church since its founding in 2015 has challenged pastoral staff and volunteer leaders of the church to consider how to get Asian American non-Christian thinkers to believe and how to get Asian American Christian believers to think critically about their faith. Given Glory's ethnic composition and mission statement, pastoral staff and leaders have curated various aspects of the church to be distinctly Asian American to provide spaces within Glory for issues concerning race and Christianity to be in conversation with one another. Some of these initiatives have included organizing a church-wide retreat in September 2019 focused on race and faith, hosting a panel geared towards empowering Asian American women in light of the Atlanta spa shooting on 16 March 2021, and partnering with the Coalition of Asian American Pacific Islander Churches (CAAPIC).

However, when it comes to curating the music of Glory to be distinctly Asian American, my interlocutors among the pastoral staff and volunteer leaders admitted that, despite their theorizing and efforts, they were stumped on what could be done. According to my interlocutors, the music team (referred to as the praise team) leaders and pastoral staff reached two main conclusions after many conversations. The first was an acknowledgement that many of Glory's weekly service practices, from the music to the sermons, came from pervasively white schools of thought and that they needed wisdom in discerning what exists in Glory's Sunday service as a relic of white hegemony versus an expression of Christian faith.³ The second conclusion was that any quick solution to add Asian sonic elements to the music such as to "kpop-ify" the service, add East Asian instruments, or sing in different languages, felt disingenuous to the identity of Glory.

The responses from my interlocutors made me wonder whether, despite the fact that Glory's praise team plays Contemporary Worship Music (CWM) songs written by mostly if not entirely by white artists, there was something beyond the sound of the music that made it distinctly Asian American. I drew inspiration from Wong (2004) who approached the ethnographies in her book *Speak it Louder* by analyzing the processes behind how Asian Americans make music rather than categorizing and specifying a comprehensive definition

of Asian American music. Within the emerging field of Christian Congregational Music, I looked to scholars who have written on body ethics and Christian musicking such as Steuernagel (2021) and Im (2021) by considering how worship music is practiced at Glory through the worshiping body as cultural expression. From my observations both on and off the church stage as praise team musician and regular congregant as well as through conversations with my interlocutors, I argue that the worship music at Glory Church is distinctly Asian American not by what is sonically perceived, but rather by what is culturally curated, physically performed, and collectively experienced. In this study, I use the Korean-English (colloquially known as Konglish) term *nunchi bwa-ing* (눈치 봐-ing) as a keyword to describe a uniquely Korean/Asian American act of Christian musicking. Given my argument that ethnic distinction in musical worship can have cultural potency through means other than sound, I conclude this paper by looking forward and arguing that Asian Americans can and ought to amplify their worship music by physically and emotionally engaging their culturally distinct worshiping bodies as it has the potential to be a powerful site of intergenerational healing.

2. Keywords and Positionality

Before I share the findings of my research, I wish to clarify my intention behind certain keywords and fields in this study. I refer to Glory as a second-generation Asian American church; however, the church itself is not formally labeled in that way, nor do all the attendees self-identify as second-generation Asian Americans. I choose to use this term to define Glory in order to acknowledge its historical positionality as well as the current composition of the church's population. Glory was founded by a group of 1.5/second-generation Korean Americans who were raised in a first-generation immigrant church, the story of which I will share in greater detail alongside the broader history of the Korean American church. Although the majority of Glory's Asian American population is Korean and the church's foundation is rooted in the story of the Korean American church, I refer to Glory as an Asian American church rather than Korean American in order to be inclusive towards the non-Korean Asian Americans who attend Glory. The pan-Asian nature of Glory's congregation is in itself an indication of its second-generation identity. Jeung (2005) argues in his book *Faithful Generations* that the tendency for Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and other Asian Americans to cross panethnic lines in the development of second-generation Asian American churches is evidence that racial dynamics play a crucial role in their lives as Americans. The panethnic unity in second-generation Asian American churches is built upon similar stories of oppression as a collective racial minority group as well as a communal belonging bound by similar networks and lifestyles. Therefore, referring to Glory as an Asian American church establishes it as a space of panethnic mingling where Asian Americans whose ancestors may have come from warring countries are able to attend church alongside each other.

The term second-generation Asian American, although meant to be used as a term of inclusivity and historical accuracy, still does not embody each person who attends Glory Church. Glory's current population consists of not only second-generation Asian Americans, but also Asians who come from different countries such as Canada, Singapore, Korea, Taiwan, and China. There are also non-Asian congregants, two of whom are white men on pastoral staff at the church. My interlocutors included members of Glory who came from each of these groups: Korean Americans, non-Korean Asian Americans, and White Americans. Given Glory's lack of self-identification as an Asian American church on both an institutional and congregational level despite the church's majority pan-Asian demographic, I asked each of my interlocutors the following question: Is Glory an Asian American church, and how is it/is it not? Each of my interlocutors needed to consider the question for a few moments before giving their own explanation about how the answer is not merely yes or no, but how the history, demographic, practices, teachings, and culture of the church complicate their response. As much as my interlocutors may be hesitant in labeling Glory as a second-generation Asian American church because of the confusion

that they feel in the intermingling of spiritual and racial identity, I believe that referring to Glory as such encompasses the very tensions that they face individually while navigating through their identity as a church collective.

As a second-generation Korean American, I felt a sense of belonging when I began attending Glory Church in late 2017. A few months later I joined the praise team as a multi-instrumentalist able to fill in a number of roles that the team needed such as performing on the cajon,⁴ bass guitar, acoustic guitar, and singing. My experience on all these instruments was thanks to my own history learning the ropes on praise teams in Korean American church and youth ministry contexts. Given that I had experienced and practiced worship music in almost exclusively Korean American contexts, I only became aware of how deeply Korean American culture, particularly through multilingual practices such as Konglish, pervaded in Glory's praise team spaces when I began my research in 2022. One of my early observations, taken on a Sunday morning in November in which I was on cajon and the praise team and I were on standby waiting for service to begin, was pivotal in realizing how Konglish provides a framework to describe the worship music at Glory. I reflected the following in my field notes:

Only a few people arrive early to service, two of which are a middle-aged (50s/60s) white couple who decide to sit in the third row in direct view of the praise team. There is now this sudden tension given how much this couple stands out in the room of mostly Asian Americans in their 20s–40s. This tension is quietly addressed in two ways. First, one of the church staff welcomes the couple personally, sits near them, and continues to make small talk with them. She wants to make them feel comfortable and they seem very touched by the gesture. Second, one of the praise team members asks under her breath, "What's this *baegin* (백인) couple doing here?" *Baegin* means white person in Korean and has a neutral connotation based on context. Here, the negative connotation is clear. No one on the team responds to her question, but her comment speaks volumes about belonging at Glory. Using the word *baegin* rather than "white" separates Koreans from non-Koreans. Everyone on today's team happens to be Korean, but there are many people in Glory's congregation who are not Korean.

Although Glory's Sunday service is held entirely in English, the conversations that take place among the congregants are multilingual in nature, creating a congregational environment that is deeply ethnically coded. Konglish is one of the most dominant languages spoken at Glory Church: as congregants speak to each other in English, they often find that there is an easier and more natural way to explain something using a Korean word. The use of Konglish is so prominent at Glory that there are often instances where non-Korean Asian congregants need to interrupt a Korean or Korean American to remind them that they are not Korean and could not understand the Konglish they just used. Some non-Korean congregants have encountered Konglish so often that they learn the meaning of certain Konglish terms and can understand the implication of the word, or even further, utilize it themselves.

As to the praise team member's use of Konglish, there are multiple ways to perceive her comment: as much as her use of Konglish could be interpreted as cultural exclusion, her actions could also be seen as a culturally sensitive means of dealing with the tension in the room. By using the word *baegin*, she hoped to specifically address the Korean praise team members and mitigate the confusion that she believed we also felt. Ideally, her use of Konglish would also be sensitive towards the white couple who was potentially in earshot of her statement. If they do not understand what she is saying, they will have no way of being discomforted by her question. However, there is no way of knowing for sure whether this white couple could understand her question or not. If the couple actually spoke perfect Korean or even just gathered context clues from the praise member's remark in order to understand her, her question would increase the tension in the room rather than reduce it.

In contrast, by quietly dissipating the tension in the room when the middle-aged white couple walked in, it is more appropriate to analyze the actions of the church staff person

who personally approached, welcomed, and started a conversation with them. This church staff person is also Korean American and her main responsibility is to direct the logistics of Glory's church services. Within the first minute of the couple walking into service and sitting down, the church staff person felt the same tension as the praise team member yet dealt with it in a way that included the couple rather than excluded them. As much as the couple stood out, the reality of Glory's congregation is that there are other middle-aged white members who call Glory their home, so it would not have been unheard of for this couple to feel comfortable at Glory. By personally welcoming the couple and engaging them in small talk, the church staff person made the couple feel at home which contributed to dispelling the tension in the room.

The church staff's observations, thoughts, and decisions can be consolidated into one action: she was exercising *nunchi* (눈치). Robertson (2019) defines *nunchi* as an amalgamation of intuition, perception, action, and social strategic maneuvering as well as "an expert, automatic skill in perceiving and deftly reacting to dynamic social and group situations, especially in ways that adroitly track (either intentional or unintentional) indirect communication" (Robertson 2019, p. 7). The misuse of *nunchi*, whether by under- or overutilizing it, is an example of cultural intimacy which Herzfeld defines as "aspects of an officially shared identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality" (Herzfeld 1997, p. 7). As Korean Americans, we were all aware of the praise team member's attempt at exercising *nunchi*, yet her misuse of it brought about an embarrassment and discomfort throughout the team. In terms of her misuse, the praise team member demonstrated an absence of *nunchi* by directly addressing the source of tension rather than maneuvering around it in a perceptive fashion. While there is a slight nuance of *nunchi* in her choice to use the word *baegin* rather than *white*, the discomfort caused by the question is apparent in the fact that no one on the team responded to her question despite all of us having understood it. Her question embarrassed the team because, by vocalizing her question in Konglish, she externalized our thoughts and exacerbated the very tension that she had hoped to absolve: our insider-ness versus the couple's outsider-ness.

Nunchi is a prevalent value in Korean American culture and the term has been adapted to fit into English sentences which has resulted in Konglish words such as *nunchi bwa-ing*. Adding the word *bwa* (봐) to *nunchi* turns the expression into an action that translates to "to look with *nunchi*". The present progressive -ing at the end turns the Korean term into an English verb, recontextualizing *nunchi* into Korean American culture. In stride with Fellezs (2019) in his book *Listen But Don't Ask Question* and how he uses *olelo Hawai'i* (Hawaiian language) keywords as a decolonizing exercise that centers and therefore mobilizes Native Hawaiian values, I use the Konglish term *nunchi bwa-ing* as a keyword to legitimize and empower Korean Americans and the way they communicate with each other in multilingual settings such as Glory Church. The utilization of Konglish words by Asian Americans⁵ is an example of "ethnic invention" in which ethnic groups from immigrant backgrounds construct their own identity which strengthens the group itself thereby transforming and redefining what it means to be American (Conzen et al. 1992, pp. 4–5). Even when *nunchi bwa-ing* involves no language at all, the action itself is a byproduct that can only emerge from a multilingual community. When *nunchi* is properly exercised, it allows rituals to become spaces in which all participants can express, as Robertson puts it, "morally appropriate emotions" in "morally appropriate ways" (Robertson 2019, p. 26). In the case of musical worship at Glory as one of these said rituals, properly *nunchi bwa-ing* provides all participants, both Steven Yeuns and Ali Wongs, a morally appropriate space to worship God.

3. History of the Korean American Christian Church and Glory

During the Korean Civil War in the 1950s, American troops and missionaries came to aid South Korea which provided the conditions of possibility for a firm establishment of Christianity, particularly Protestantism. While Japanese and Chinese immigrants typically

came to the United States as single men in the early twentieth century, Koreans were able to immigrate as family units due to their affiliation with the Christian church and ministries (Hearn 2016; Yoon 2005). American missionaries and businesses assisted with their moves by combining vocation with religion. For example, many early Korean immigrants worked on plantations that were near a church that held worship services in Korean and also hosted English classes. Mark Chung Hearn writes that the Early Korean Church in America was “a site of solidarity and strength” (Hearn 2016, p. 67). When the Immigration Act of 1965 was passed which welcomed an influx of Asians of varying religious backgrounds to the United States, the Korean church was already established as an institution within Korean American society. There were therefore many Korean immigrant families who attended church for community rather than for religious beliefs because it was a safe haven where Korean culture and practices were preserved which Sang Hyun Lee, quoted by Helen Lee in 1996, refers to as “an inversion of status, a turning upside down of the way they are viewed in the society outside”.

However, as much as these churches were safe havens for Korean American adults, the same could not be said of the children who were also attending the church. 1.5/Second-generation Korean American children⁶ were not only being raised in the Korean church, but also in American schools and social settings which inculcated American ideologies and pressured them to learn English in order to properly assimilate. The Korean-speaking adults became aware of the discontent coming from the younger English-speaking congregants of the church and provided them with temporary solutions. Shin and Silzer (2016) refer to the most common temporary solution in their book *Tapestry of Grace* as the Room-for-Let.⁷ The Room-for-Let is a small part of the immigrant church that is designated for English-speaking members, very often in the form of a youth or college group. Simply stated, it is a room or set of rooms within the immigrant church where first-generation Korean Americans let worship be held in English.

Within the Rooms-for-Let were Korean Americans holding services entirely in English which included the music that they sang as a congregation. Rather than singing from the Korean hymnbooks that the older generation used each week, the youth took inspiration from popular Contemporary Worship Music (CWM) groups and artists such as Hillsong Worship, Vineyard Worship, Chris Tomlin, and Shane and Shane for their worship music repertoire. The fact that acoustic guitar was the most common instrument a lead singer would use in CWM settings was conducive to the bare-bones structure of the Rooms-for-Let. Korean-style congregational worship, namely emotionally intense prayers that are shouted and cried out in congregational settings called *tongsongkido* (통성 기도)⁸ still pervaded throughout the congregational musicking in the Rooms-for-Let, resulting in a new style of practicing CWM in a culturally distinct, second-generation Korean American matter.

As much as a unique second-generation Korean American way of worship was created in Rooms-for-Let, the Room-for-Let model was ultimately unsustainable because its only purpose was to keep the young congregants in the same church as their families. Shin and Silzer described the Room-for-Let model as a good immediate solution at best. Once these young English-speaking Korean Americans became adults, they would not be able to find appropriate resources for them within their Korean American church and would most likely look to another community to accommodate their needs. As this exact scenario unfolded for the first time in the 1990s, journalist H. Lee (1996) dubbed it the “silent exodus”—the departure of second-generation Korean Americans from the Korean-speaking churches that they grew up in because of the church’s failure to attend to their needs.

The second-generation Asian American exiles followed different paths such as moving to a non-immigrant church, taking a break from church, or leaving the faith entirely. Regardless of their destinations, many of the silent exiles harbored hurt, bitterness, and jadedness towards their previous church experiences (Hearn 2016; Kim 2010; H. Lee 1996; Shin and Silzer 2016; Yoon 2005). Kim retells the story of a second-generation Korean American named Samuel who began to see the church as “an increasingly uncomfortable and oppressive place” as he was “trying desperately to disassociate from his Korean identity so that

he could ‘fit in’ with his mainstream white American friends” (Kim 2010, p. 1). Because of the “overly hierarchical and dictatorial” leadership paradigm that Samuel experienced at his church, he felt that he was unable to express his discontent which resulted in resentment and residual pain as he searched for a new church community (ibid.). Samuel, like many second-generation Asian American Christians, felt silenced and marginalized, which motivated his exile.

Glory’s founding pastor Choi, who left his Korean immigrant church when he began college in 1997, pointed to a passionate movement within the silent exodus: “I would say, Asian Americans, as a whole in my generation, it was special. Everyone was going to missions, everyone was going to seminary. Everyone was becoming youth pastors, college pastors... that was almost the norm so much so that people almost felt pressured to”. Shin and Silzer provide nine church models⁹ that second-generation Asian American churches followed as a result of the silent exodus, two of which summarize Glory’s history: the Church Plant and the Independent Church. The Church Plant often starts from scratch with a particular vision and mission to reach a specific group of people. In the case of Glory, Choi and four other founding members who were also Korean American began the church in 2014 with a vision to reach the Ali Wongs - skeptics of the Christian faith who did not grow up in the church. In terms of the music during the early days of Glory, Choi recalls the following:

Our second service, because it was mostly skeptics, no one was singing. It was the least passionate church that I had ever been to... but I loved the fact that no one was raising their hands. I loved the fact that no one was singing and that no one was familiar with that stuff.

The Room-for-Let second-generation Korean American style of worship did not translate into the second-generation Asian American church that Pastor Choi had created. In fact, the majority of Glory’s initial attendees were totally unfamiliar with what to do or how to behave during congregational singing, so they chose not to participate at all. However, the skeptics’ lack of participation brought joy to Pastor Choi because he interpreted it as an indication that Glory Church was attracting the right type of people according to its mission. As of 2023, Pastor Choi continues to make it his goal to create space for non-believing skeptics at Glory, intentionally preaching to the congregation “as if they don’t know anything”. Being a safe church for non-believing thinkers to contemplate the Christian faith remains a primary goal for Choi and Glory Church.

Although Glory was created with Ali Wongs in mind, its culture and teachings also attracted Steven Yeuns—second-generation Asian American exiles who had grown up in the immigrant church and were searching for spiritual communities and resources that would bolster their faith and identity. One of my interlocutors theorized that silent exiles gravitated to Glory because “they [saw] the stories and messages that [were] coming from an Asian American pastor and [thought], ‘he’s saying that and I know why, I feel why, I understand why’”. Within a few years, Glory’s numbers quickly rose from around twenty attendees to over six hundred. Glory’s growth cemented itself as an Independent Church which is distinguished from a Church Plant by its “size and fiscal strength” and “ownership of property” (Shin and Silzer 2016, p. 21). After using rented spaces from 2015 to 2022, the staff at Glory signed a 10-year lease in midtown Manhattan and moved into the space in January 2023. Glory’s new worship space sits three hundred fifty people with a small stage where the praise team plays¹⁰ and the pastor preaches. As Glory draws close to its tenth anniversary, Pastor Choi asserts that his vision for the church will stay consistent: “We still want to be a church for the lost people”.

4. Liturgy and Musical Worship at Glory Church

Glory’s musical worship is best understood within the totality of its weekly Sunday service. The order of the service, known as the liturgy, contains elements of verbal and nonverbal directions that prescribe an appropriate posture of worship/being for each portion of the service. Musical worship in the form of congregational singing led by a

praise band of volunteer members of the church consists of about a quarter of Glory's Sunday service. The band varies in its members on a weekly basis but will most often include a praise team leader who leads by singing and sometimes also playing acoustic guitar, one or two additional vocalists, a keyboardist, a bass guitarist, a cajon player, and a varying ensemble that might include a violinist, an electric guitarist, or both. As of 2023, Glory holds two services every Sunday at 10:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. and the service programs, including musical set and team, are identical to each other.¹¹

Music is interwoven throughout Glory's liturgy as a means of both introducing the nonmusical elements of service that follow it as well as digesting what has preceded it. The instructions and directions given by the worship leader, pastor, and praise team leader predetermine and reinforce the type of posture that is deemed appropriate in order to maintain the ability for Glory's Sunday service ritual space to be one where, ideally, all people who attend can worship comfortably. The production and maintenance of ritual norms in Glory's Sunday services is saturated with *nunchi bwa-ing*. In the following section which delves into an example of musical *nunchi bwa-ing* at Glory, I focus on how the congregation *nunchi bwa-s* each other to standardize a physical posture of musical worship.

5. Nunchi Bwa-Ing at Glory

While *nunchi bwa-ing* plays an important role in maintaining the propriety of Glory's weekly ritual of Sunday service, *nunchi bwa-ing* needs to be done with discretion in musical worship. One of my interlocutors warns: "If you're always *nunchi bwa-ing*, you're always too afraid of offending your brother or sister—which I think is a dominant Asian American value, not being offensive". Robertson (2019) describes the overuse of *nunchi* as sycophantic and overly strategic, and I expand on this idea and interpret the overuse of *nunchi* in church music settings as compromising the quality of worship for those who desire to encounter God through music.

Given that *nunchi bwa-ing* translates to looking with *nunchi*, I went into Sunday service on a February morning and took on the role as ethnomusicologist prepared to look with *nunchi*, particularly curious about the bodily postures of the congregants as musical worship took place. I made myself comfortable in the fourth row although I usually enjoy being in the first row as it gives me more room to raise my hands during musical worship. By being in the fourth row, I knew that I would get a more realistic idea of what the typical Glory congregant would experience at Sunday service. As the service started and the music began to play, I glanced around the room at other peoples' postures and quickly came to the realization that I must not be the only ethnomusicologist in the room; in fact, there were observant ethnomusicologists all around me! Given my personal worship style, I usually am not attentive to how the people around me are worshipping; however, upon putting my ethnomusicologist hat on, I noticed that everyone was looking at each other. I even made eye contact with congregants which was quickly and awkwardly broken off by the other person. It occurred to me that all of these people were *nunchi bwa-ing*, glancing around as they gauged and deduced the ideal and most appropriate posture for Glory's musical worship. While a few people had their hands raised which has become a customary physical posture in Contemporary Worship settings (Lim and Ruth 2017), most people had concluded through their *nunchi bwa-ing* that a more appropriate posture for Glory's service was to have their arms lowered and, if they were to physically express any emotion, it should be limited to singing and relatively undramatic facial expressions. Many congregants, especially those who were newer to Glory or to any church setting in general, were *nunchi bwa-ing* each other so that the ritual appropriateness of Glory's Sunday service would be maintained; however, this decided-upon posture left me feeling unable to express my worship to God, and I wondered whether anyone else felt similarly. My experience with what I had interpreted as overutilization of *nunchi bwa-ing* at this particular Glory service led me to consider what unspoken negotiations were occurring in Glory's worship space that would result in such a reserved physical posture.

One of the most recent foci in the field of Congregational Music Studies has been placing congregational Christian music within the framework of ethics. In the fifth edited volume from the Congregational Music Studies Series titled *Ethics and Christian Musicking*, Myrick and Porter (2021) compile studies that highlight the ethical negotiations of identity, performance, and experience involved in curating musical worship for modern-day congregations around the world. The first section of the book, “The body and beyond”, is of particular relevance to nunchi bwa-ing at Glory Church as Steuernagel (2021) retells the histories of congregational music, religion, and the body, as well as their fraught relationships with one another. Steuernagel argues that musical sound deeply engages the worshipping body and that Western Christian, more specifically White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP), musicking body ethics have permeated congregational Christian music practices which places constraints on worshippers who wish to express their praise to God in more emotionally expressive ways. Im (2021) applies Steuernagel’s arguments in her case study of Black gospel music performed by the Heritage Mass Chorus in South Korea. Given Korea’s history of American missionization and Japanese colonization in the mid-twentieth century which resulted in modern day South Korea and its predominant Protestant religious atmosphere, singing Black gospel music provided the musicians of the Heritage Mass Chorus a space of catharsis and remembrance of their traumatic history in light of the Christian faith that they had embraced through it. Musically and physically speaking, the African American gospel tradition was a tool of reconceptualizing musical worship for the Heritage Mass Chorus by encouraging the use of chest voice and kinetic gestures such as kneeling, raising of hands, and clapping which was in direct contrast to the traditional Korean Protestant posture of worship and exaltation of a clean and pure voice (Im 2021, pp. 59–60). These simple changes in embodied musical worship expanded the range of Christian expressive possibilities for the members and leaders of the chorus.

I insert my study within the ongoing conversation of bodily ethics and Christian musicking, and particularly in the studies of Steuernagel and Im, by suggesting that the utilization of nunchi bwa-ing is an ethical negotiation that Asian American worshippers manage each week as they step into Glory’s Sunday service. Each congregant’s chosen posture of worship based on their nunchi bwa-ing is a physical manifestation of internal ethical negotiations of racial and national identity, religious performance, and congregational experience. The non-expressive physical worship stance that results from nunchi bwa-ing, while being comfortable for some congregants, compromises and constricts the worship experience for second-generation Asian American Christians who grew up in musical worship environments where physical and emotional expression were more encouraged and practiced.¹² Should nunchi bwa-ing be exercised as a means of creating a ritual space where Asian American congregants can experience a breadth of emotions in ways that are culturally and morally appropriate, Glory’s musical worship could potentially become a critical site of emotional expression and healing for its participants.

Christian musicking as practiced in the West¹³ has attempted to “erase the worshipping body” (Steuernagel 2021, p. 21). In studying congregational Christian music such as hymns, there has been a consistent overemphasis on analyzing the lyrics rather than the bodies who sing the lyrics. Additionally, the pursuit of piety was often equated to bodily self-control, or as Steuernagel puts it, “stillness over ecstasy” (Steuernagel 2021, p. 26). The worshipping body is a physical manifestation of internal ethical negotiations which wrestle with the norms set by Western Christian musicking traditions in which “Western Christianity’s ethics straightjackets the body, which serves as the outward indicator of inward, spiritual realities. One might enjoy the music, but should not wear that enjoyment on the body” (Steuernagel 2021, p. 27). As the pastors and praise team leaders of Glory contemplate what aspects of their Sunday service are remnants of white hegemony versus expressions of Christian faith, they must also consider the worshipping body. In fact, they must not only consider the worshipping body, but consider the Asian American worshipping body. What aspects of stillness over ecstasy have seeped into the Asian American worshipping bodies at Glory, and how has that practice been exacerbated by the overutilization of

nunchi bwa-ing? The second-generation Asian American worshiping body is faced with a conundrum of having to suppress its inward ethnic identity and ways of expression for the sake of religious piety as constructed by Western Christianity. This conundrum creates challenges for Glory Church as they seek to self-determine how they will make music in their services given the worshiping bodies that are present at their church.

The second-generation Asian American worshiping bodies of Glory Church can be understood by considering the histories of Korean and Korean American worshiping bodies. In Steuernagel's chapter on bodily ethics, he references Nicholas Harkness's portrait of a Korean Christian singing a hymn in a theater in which she has "clasped her hands together, closed her eyes, and bowed her head in prayer" (Harkness 2014, p. 2). Steuernagel describes this posture as an example of the worshiping body under the influence of Western Christianity that pervades beyond North America and Europe. In the pursuit of physical piety in both musical tone and posture, Harkness's portrait of the Korean Christian is a "portrait of submission, an aspiration of immobility" (Steuernagel 2021, p. 31). Given the fact that American missionaries "installed a transpacific epistemic system in which Christians would continually conflate Euro-American cultural production with holiness", Korean Christians have come to associate Euro-classical vocal timbre and immobile musical posture with spiritual purity (Im 2021, p. 55). According to Im, the false association that Korean Christians have made between religious piety and the purity of vocal timbre and stoic posture has compromised the Korean worshiper's ability to process historical trauma in musical worship settings. She refers to the Western-influenced worshiping body in Korean Protestant musical worship settings as a posture that "exacerbates historical amnesia", erasing the national trauma that South Korea experienced as a Japanese colony as well as the U.S. American military presence throughout the Cold War period, which has resulted in its current postcolonial identity.

In stride with Im and her reflections on the timbre and body posture of Korean Protestant Christians, I suggest that the worshiping bodies at Glory strive for a similar pure sound and that its predominant worship posture resembles Steuernagel's conception of immobility. One of my interlocutors who is one of the praise team leaders commented on the style of music played at Glory Church which resonates with Im and Steuernagel's descriptions of straightjacketed Korean Protestant worship music: "The way we play... we value being really put together and clean and to a T versus more of a free style. That comes with the culture". He also commented on preferring certain types of voice styles to be lead singers on the team as one of the "very, very underlying things" that influence Glory's worship musical style:

There are very, very underlying things, like the kind of singers that we consider to be good or that we like on the stage. The kinds of voices that we prefer are affected by the kind of music we listen to. As for Asian Americans, if you're really into kpop, you'll be into this kind of voice. It affects the team and its preferences.

The type of voice that my interlocutor is referring to when he mentions kpop is not so much mainstream kpop, but more of Korean singer-songwriter and acoustic pop¹⁴ where singers' vocal timbres are recognized by their smooth, bright, and clean tones which are also characteristic of the timbres of Glory's praise team vocalists. Based on my conversations with vocalists on Glory's praise team, none of them claim to consciously manipulate the timbre of their voices while singing worship music, but recognize that their singing styles come from their musical backgrounds. One of the praise team leaders attempted to describe the musical backgrounds of a few vocalists on the team which ranged from "classically trained" to "acapella" to "kpop, ballad, and NRB".¹⁵ These musical backgrounds embodied by the Asian American praise team members who vocalize them influence the praise team makeup and musical aesthetic of Glory Church. Upon other conversations with interlocutors and congregants, I often hear them describe Glory's worship music as clean, simple, and to the point. These descriptors are indicative of the fact that Glory's music, despite being performed thousands of miles away from Korea, resembles Korean Protestant worship musicking because of the second-generation Asian American worshiping bodies

who participate in it have been acculturated into a specific normative understanding of what it means to worship “correctly”.

Due to the intergenerational pain that took place during the silent exodus in the 1990s, second-generation Asian American Christians have experienced a type of historical trauma of their own which, I argue, is being erased by allowing the mainstream WASP worshiping body to be the dominant posture of the congregants of Glory Church. Second-generation Asian American Christians grew up in their immigrant churches which became a “stressful bicultural context of balancing the oft-conflicting Asian parental and American cultural influences” (H. Lee 1996) which was a petri dish for internalized racism to germinate within the minds of silent exiles (Hearn 2016). This internalized racism has restricted second-generation Asian American Christians from seeing their worship to God as something unique and valuable, keeping them in a self-induced oppression in which White Anglo-Saxon Protestantism is the ideal paradigm of holiness and spiritual legitimacy. Similar to the Korean Protestants in Im’s study, the second-generation Asian American Christians of Glory Church are experiencing their own historical amnesia which produces an attitude toward musical worship that aspires to immobility rather than a means of opening up a religious space of emotional expression and healing.

In his book *The Wounded Heart of God*, Park (1993) incorporates the Korean concept of *han* (한), a term for pain that encapsulates the suffering, trauma, bitterness, and guilt associated with being oppressed that Koreans and diasporic Koreans are intimately familiar with and feel united by, to Christian theology as a de-Westernized method of approaching sin and repentance. By reframing sin and repentance through the lens of *han*, Park urges that reconciliation must not only be between the sinner and God, but also needs to act upon the victims who have been sinned against. Second-generation Asian American Christians have been victims to a number of wounding events in their lives, and the historical trauma that their parents and grandparents experienced continues to live in subconscious memory. Second-generation Korean American Christians, for instance, carry not only the *han* of the silent exodus which was an amalgamation of feeling like a foreigner both in and outside of the Korean immigrant church, but they also carry the *han* of American and Japanese colonization that modernized South Korea but also motivated their parents to leave their homes and move to a foreign country in order to provide better lives for their families. Reconciliation from historical trauma must be a communal process that brings restoration to the silent exodus or, as Park writes, “Salvation is a relational event. It is a process of healing and freedom which transpires between sinners and their victims, and sinners and God” (Park 1993, p. 103).

6. There Is a Need for Healing

In April 2023, a guest pastor came to speak at Glory Church and showed a video from an NBC News (2016) series called *The Bridge* to demonstrate what it meant to seek God’s face. The video, titled “Face to Face”, featured young Asian American adults with their parents and each pair was instructed to look at each other without talking for four minutes. Each child/parent pair ended up crying because, in the four minutes where all they could do was gaze into the other person’s face, both of them realized how much they loved each other and how often they avoided expressing that. Many of the parents commented through tears how, when they looked at their child’s face, they became emotional because all they could see was the history of when their child was born to that present moment. Children, also through tears, talked about getting emotional at the thought of all the sacrifices that their parent made in order to give them the life that they currently have. The video clearly struck a chord with the congregation because, by the end of it, Glory’s service space was filled with congregants sniffing with tears in their eyes. As the sermon wrapped up and the service continued in its typical liturgy of offering, closing song, and benediction, the sound of sniffles continued to reverberate throughout the space. Perhaps the sniffles were not actually reverberating, but I could not help but hear them so loudly and profoundly because this was the first time I saw and heard the people of Glory cry as a congregational body.

It was not a coincidence that what made the people of Glory cry was a video about the reconciliation of Asian American parents and their children. The tears and sniffles left a strong conviction in my heart after service: there is a need for healing.

Emotional expression in worship music through tears, raised arms, and more movement in the worshiping body can understandably come off as strange to someone who has never experienced that type of musical worship setting, let alone any type of musical worship setting or church service. Especially when a large part of Glory's mission statement is to appeal to non-believing thinkers, or Ali Wongs, who have never set foot in a church before and tend to carry a suspicion towards the Christian church and its affiliated institutions, it makes sense that certain musical choices of the church work towards not making its congregants uncomfortable or distracted during musical worship. However, when catering to church attendees who are not familiar with bodily expression in musical worship becomes an aspiration of immobility that is exacerbated by the overutilization of nunchi bwa-ing, second-generation Asian American Christians and their worshiping bodies become deprived of the opportunity to experience emotional healing through musical worship. If the leaders and pastoral staff of Glory church wish to critically consider what exists in their liturgy as remnants of Western/white hegemony, they must consider the worshiping bodies that participate in their services and the healing that they need.

Since its founding in 2015, Glory has become a church for the Steven Yeuns and Ali Wongs of Asian America to find culturally relevant resources, communities, and spaces that enrich their faith and identity. Nunchi bwa-ing is present at Glory Church as a tool of ethical negotiation in which congregants observe each other in order to determine the most appropriate physical posture of worship. The attitude induced by nunchi bwa-ing provides a uniquely Asian American way of worship that speaks to both the cultural specificity of the majority of Glory's congregants but also to the ways in which it articulates a distinctly Korean attitude toward social gatherings and, in particular, congregational worship. As my example of the church leader approaching the middle-aged white attendees indicates, nunchi bwa-ing allows for sensitivity in serving the Ali Wongs of Glory's congregation, who may not be familiar with an Asian American worship service. But nunchi bwa-ing may also be used to assuage the trauma experienced by the Steven Yeuns of the congregation by granting them the space to express themselves more ardently than adhering to WASP norms of musical worship. The people of Glory Church and the songs they sing are giving the silent exodus a voice that has the potential to heal current and future generations of the Asian American church.

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Notes

- ¹ By the request of the director of the church, I use pseudonyms for the church and my interlocutors in order to preserve their anonymity.
- ² Excerpted from the church's website. The mission statement is also printed on two banner stands on the left and right of the church stage and are displayed each week. Because of the constant presence of these banners, most church congregants are aware of the church's mission statement. It is also worth noting that many people are attracted to Glory Church because of its mission statement.

- ³ The scope of this paper will solely focus on the musical practices of Glory Church. For sources that elaborate on the broader negotiations within a second-generation Asian American church between Asian and white Christian practices, see Sharon Kim, *A Faith Of Our Own: Second-Generation Spirituality in Korean American Churches*.
- ⁴ Cajon has been the percussion instrument of choice at Glory Church ever since the praise team began incorporating more instruments into their ensemble aside from an acoustic guitar and vocalist. Cajon is generally a popular instrument in minimal and acoustic CWM settings.
- ⁵ Given the pan-Asian intermingling that happens in second-generation Asian American Christian settings, non-Korean Asian Americans have picked up on certain frequently used Konglish terminology and use them regularly, although not as often as Korean Americans.
- ⁶ 1.5-generation means that the immigrant moved as a child and their move was more likely the choice of a parent or some other authority figure. The grouping together of 1.5- and second-generation Korean Americans in this sentence also goes to show how blurred these lines of migration are. I will continue to only use second-generation in this paper as a collective term for 1.5- and second-generation Asian Americans. It is worth noting that, for the sake of providing the necessary background history of Glory Church, I created two distinct groups of Korean-speaking first-generation immigrants and English-speaking second-generation immigrants. The reality of the history is that stories of immigration are always diverse in nature and there are many exceptions and blurring of lines to the narrative that I present in this study. For example, many first-generation Korean Americans can speak English but prefer to speak Korean, and the same goes for second-generation Korean Americans being able to speak Korean but preferring English. There are also young adult 1.5-generation Korean Americans who prefer to speak Korean, as well as older first-generation Korean Americans who are more comfortable communicating in English.
- ⁷ Shin and Silzer make it clear that the Room-for-Let model was drawn from Dr. Hoover Wong's book *Community: Coming Together or Coming Apart* which was self-published in 1999. In Wong's version the Room-for-Let was referred to as the Room-to-Let.
- ⁸ For more information on this type of prayer, see Yoon and his studies on *tongsongkido* (통성 기도) in "Christian identity, ethnic identity: Music making and prayer practices among 1.5- and second-generation Korean-American Christians".
- ⁹ The nine models from *Tapestry of Grace* are: Room-for-Let, Duplex, Triplex, Townhouse, Hotel, Church Plant, Independent Church, Satellite, and 2-in-1.
- ¹⁰ Praise team players on a stage facing the congregation is typical of contemporary Christian church spaces. For more information on space and contemporary worship, see Lim and Ruth Lovin' on Jesus (Lim and Ruth 2017).
- ¹¹ The two services are identical with the exception of a separate children's service being available during the 10:30am service for parents to drop off their children at. The children's service includes a Sunday school where they are taught stories from the Bible.
- ¹² In addition to the Room-for-Let musical culture that I describe in Section 2, second-generation Asian American youth ministries not affiliated with churches known as "para-church" ministries host musical worship events where emotional outpour and activities such as *tongsongkido* are encouraged and practiced. Some congregants of Glory Church, including myself, have been involved and even continue to be involved in these para-church events. Given the scope of this paper, I choose not to bring up para-church musical worship events despite their immense influence on second-generation Asian American Christians.
- ¹³ Steuernagel, upon writing that, "One might enjoy music, but should not wear that enjoyment on the body" notes in his paper that there are, of course, significant exceptions to this statement in Christian musicking as practiced in the West such as Pentecostal and charismatic expressions of Christian faith. He refers to these practices as, "exceptions that confirm the norm" Steuernagel (2021).
- ¹⁴ An example of a female kpop artist whose voice matches this aesthetic would be IU (아이유), especially in songs such as "eight" (2020) or "Ending Scene" (2017). A suitable example for a male artist would be Sam Kim (샘김), especially in songs such as "Love Me Like That" (2021) or "Sunny Days, Summer Nights" (2018).
- ¹⁵ NRB is a Konglish acronym that stands for *noraebang* (노래방), the Korean word for karaoke.

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Article

Understanding “Love” in the English Lyrics of the Original Songs by the Multilingual New Creation Church Singapore

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Abstract: This article explores the way in which love is understood and expressed through the original English lyrics of songs by New Creation Church Singapore (NCC) in comparison to the original songs from Hillsong Church Australia (Hillsong) through the period of 2014–2020. While NCC has a multilingual congregation, reflective of the larger Singaporean society, it composes and releases original contemporary congregational songs (CCS) with English lyrics. English is the primary language in Singapore; however, it is shaped by the languages spoken in homes (e.g., Mandarin, Malay, Tamil). Combined with the theological emphases of NCC, its CCS provide a unique lens into English as a common language of worship. This article demonstrates that while the use of English lyrics is a unifying force for multilingual congregational worship, it is also not benign, but actively shaping Christian confession and associated theology and being shaped by wider multilingual contexts.

Keywords: theology; love; contemporary congregational songs; lyrics; Singapore

1. Introduction

The theme of love has universal prominence within the lyrics of contemporary congregational songs (Thornton 2021, p. 154). While most articles in this special edition will likely focus on multilingual worship, we wanted to consider a slightly different perspective, that of multilingual worshipers and multilingual contemporary congregational song writers even when an ostensibly common language (English) is used for gathered musical worship. As such, this article undertakes a comparative analysis of the lyrical expressions of love in the original contemporary congregation songs (CCS) of two megachurches, one with a multilingual congregation in the multilingual context of Singapore, the other in the predominantly monolingual (English-speaking) culture of Australia.

The data consist of CCS produced by New Creation Church Singapore (NCC) and Hillsong Church Australia (Hillsong) during the period from 2014 to 2020. This analytical exploration hypothesises that although both NCC’s and Hillsong’s lyrical compositions are written in English, their expressions of divine love and divine–human love are nuanced. This divergence emerges as a consequence of both lingual and cultural differences and theological distinctions embedded in these megachurches. As such, this study endeavours to shed light on the multifaceted interplay between language, culture, and theology through a comparison of these producers’ CCS.

English, the shared language chosen for CCS by both NCC and Hillsong, serves as a unifying force during congregational worship, enabling worshipers from diverse linguistic backgrounds to engage in collective devotion. However, the utilisation of English in worship is not innocuous. Because NCC’s and Hillsong’s lyrical contents are moulded by their respective cultural and theological milieus, their songs contribute reciprocally to the shaping of beliefs and confessions within their respective congregations and beyond. “Love” may appear with the same spelling and syntax in the original song lyrics of these two churches, but as we will demonstrate, they are not identical.

Singapore, as a heterogeneous nation with a rich cultural and ethnic diversity, employs the English language as its principal mode of communication within crucial spheres of society, including the educational and economic domains. Within the context of NCC, the coexistence of English and Chinese in different church services reflects the divergent linguistic backgrounds of its congregants. Singapore's bilingual education system ensures that a substantial portion of the population is educated bilingually, with proficiency in both English and a mother tongue language, which includes Mandarin among the Chinese-speaking population (Chew 2017). While NCC caters to this linguistic diversity by offering services in both English and Chinese, the significant representation of English-speaking congregants within the church community underscores the strong influence of English in shared communication.

New Creation Church began in a Singapore flat in 1983 with twenty-five members (Chong 2015). Over four decades, it has grown into an independent megachurch, currently gathering more than 33,000 congregants, according to its website.¹ Central to its identity is a vibrant Pentecostal ethos led by its renowned senior pastor, Joseph Prince, since 1997. Prince's teaching on the 'gospel of grace' has propelled NCC to become one of Singapore's largest independent churches. It has also attracted considerable critique. Chong (2015), who studies the Singapore megachurch phenomenon, suggests that their rapid growth stems from their adeptness at embracing contemporary culture. He highlights societal and economic factors, noting their "appeal to upwardly mobile" individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds, effectively attracting emergent middle-class Singaporeans. Similarly, Goh argues that Prince's message is that "prosperity is not just a sign of God's grace, but is grace itself" (Goh 2018, p. 187). He goes on to argue that the church's five core values situate the church in a "client-centric mold", or in other words, are firmly aimed at satiating a popular culture and mass consumption market (Goh 2018, p. 193). Such an approach has direct implications for the original songs NCC produces and employs in congregational worship.

In a survey conducted by Chong and Hui, exploring the receptiveness of non-Christian Singaporeans to the topic of 'God's love', they found unanimously positive responses based on four different Christian groups (Chong and Hui 2013). Living in a multi-cultural society with government advocacy for religious harmony, Singaporeans are apparently receptive to the 'message of God's love'. Thus, songs expressing God's love for humanity, which are under examination in this paper, should not only be seen as relevant texts for worship, but also as evangelistic tools for the broader community.

The worship team of NCC, known as New Creation Worship (NCW), embraces English as the primary language for its CCS. This choice allows them to reach a wider audience and effectively convey their gospel messages through a common language. However, NCC's English lyrics are not entirely divorced from the linguistic backdrop of the songwriters, as they bear the influence of other languages (mother tongues) spoken in their households, such as Mandarin for the Chinese, and other vernacular languages according to ethnicity. As such, understanding the use of the English term "love", in NCC's original CCS, benefits from multilingual contextualization. Hillsong's songwriters, on the other hand, are primarily native English speakers and writers.

As mentioned earlier, language is not the only factor influencing the songwriters' lyrical creations. The songwriters' theological understanding and orientation also contribute to the way they write about Christian concepts such as love. For example, although NCC shares the core theological tenets of Christianity with Hillsong, it places a strong emphasis on divine love and grace, and the unmerited favour of God for the believers' spiritual transformation. This perspective of love is consistently interwoven into NCC's CCS lyrics. As we will demonstrate, love, as conveyed in NCC's lyrics, tends to revolve around the interpersonal relationship with the divine, accentuating God's transformative capacity in the realm of the believers' daily lives. Only in one instance does the use of "love" allude to the believers' love for God in NCC's CCS.

Hillsong, an internationally renowned entity in the realm of worship music, boasts a substantial repertoire of original songs that resonate with Christian audiences worldwide. Similar to NCC, Hillsong's CCS also feature the theme of love (Thornton 2021, p. 154). However, Hillsong's approach to love transcends the individual and extends to encompass a broader collective of not only the body of believers but also creation itself. As the analysis will bear out, God's love exemplified by Christ's redemptive sacrifice on the cross serves as a unifying force for the church, culminating in the collective act of worship.

In summary, the original lyrics of NCC and Hillsong reflect the distinctive cultural-lingual and theological foundations of each entity, influencing their portrayals of love. As English serves as a common language of worship, it unites worshipers from diverse linguistic backgrounds, fostering a sense of inclusivity and collective devotion. Nevertheless, language is not a neutral medium; rather, it actively shapes and is impacted by the broader contexts in which it operates. In certain contexts, English may be a constant reminder of historical colonialism, with all that it entails for individuals or communities. At the same time, for songwriters at NCC, the choice of writing English lyrics is an act of empowerment, uniting congregants with common language for the purpose of worshiping God, and potentially impacting other churches globally who also worship in English.

2. Literature

Contemporary congregational songs, whether by intention or not, are theological constructions, despite some scholars remaining unconvinced (Ruth 2021, p. 11). They reflect a writer's understanding of God, themselves, the church, the nature of worship, and other phenomena. Furthermore, writers "put words in the mouths of Christians who sing their songs" (Thornton 2021, p. 147). As such, the theology expressed through their lyrics has an impact on those that sing them and listen to them repeatedly. Despite the fact that "hundreds of millions of Christians sing CCS" (Thornton 2021, p. 2), studies examining the sung theology of the contemporary church are still lacking. The following section selectively traces the scholarship that informs the present study.

Examining the contemporary English CCS writing in North America, Ruth notes that there has been a shift towards a conversational style in the lyrics. This transformation involves the integration of "lexical and grammatical features associated with conversation, such as first-person pronouns and contractions" (Ruth 2015). This style identified as a "drift or colloquialisation of written English" brings the written language closer to a spoken form (Ruth 2015). How this conversational shift in CCS writing impacts theological transmission is incorporated into the analysis below. However, it is worth noting here that this deliberate effort by songwriters to create a sense of intimacy and relatability with their lyrics potentially enhances both the songs' accessibility and emotional impact on worshiping congregants. The embedded theology is then not objective or formal but personal and applied.

Studies of Hillsong's music by both Evans (2015, p. 183) and Cowan (2017, p. 93) suggest the presence of a generalised theology in their songs to cater for the global Christian market. However, this does not mean that a discernible theological orientation is absent. Riches' analysis of Hillsong's repertoire from the period 1996 to 2007 provides a comprehensive analysis of the theme of love (Riches 2010). The first aspect identified is "the immutable characteristic of God as Spirit", which Riches relates to the unchanging nature of God's love for humanity. This facet of love highlights God's central role in empowering believers. The second aspect Riches identifies is "love as human emotion", articulating this as a powerful and emotive experience within the human heart. The third aspect is a "response to the cross", which delves into how love is portrayed in relation to Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection. The fourth and final aspect focuses on "the believer's love for God" (Riches 2010). Riches' findings are informative to this study, although they are from a previous era of CCS production by Hillsong. The comparative element of this study brings Riches' work into dialogue with more recent releases from Hillsong and the theological similarities and differences between NCC and Hillsong.

3. Methods and Questions

The methodological design for this study employs both quantitative and qualitative elements. The quantitative approach involves a systematic count of the term “love” in the corpora of both megachurches. These numbers reflect the prominence of the theme within their songs, both individually and as a corpus. They also provide a clear comparison of the degree to which this theme is present in the respective producer’s songs. However, the quantitative analysis alone is insufficient to illuminate the theological nuances of the lyrical content. Therefore, a complementary qualitative analysis is also undertaken. It includes an exploration of employed metaphors and the use of direct or paraphrased scriptures. It includes a division of the overall theme into directional elements of the term:

- Divine love: songs emphasising the nature and unchanging characteristics of God’s love.
- Divine–human love: songs depicting God’s love for humanity, particularly in relation to Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, and sometimes implicating the reciprocal love between the believer and God.
- Human love: songs portraying love as a personal emotional experience within the human heart, and, in the context of worship, as a response to divine love.

Finally, the qualitative analysis explores the grammatical structures surrounding the term. For example, love is expressed as both a noun and a verb. Divine love, as a noun, is further classified by its accompanying adjectives, either descriptive (e.g., love unstoppable) or comparative (e.g., your love is better). Divine–human love is also explored in terms of its participial adjectives, and how love is presented and reciprocated—whether as a transformative force, empowering love, a symbol of grace and forgiveness, or a motivator for spiritual growth. Such analysis provides insight into the theological perspectives associated with the expression of love, as well as the way in which the English language is approached by writers in their respective settings.

The data collection process involved the selection of twenty-five songs from each of NCC’s and Hillsong’s corpora between 2014 and 2020. The compilation of their lyrics was obtained from official websites and through listening to the songs on Spotify to identify any discrepancies between published and performed lyrics. NCC’s corpus was taken from its three albums produced during that period. As an established global Christian music producer, Hillsong has released many more songs/albums than NCC. Therefore, Hillsong’s selection was drawn from Christian Copyright Licensing International’s “Top 2000 Australia Bi-yearly Payouts” report. The selection criteria involved identifying the twenty-five songs produced by Hillsong that were popularly utilised/reported between 2014 and 2020. The list of NCC’s corpus with its composers appears in Appendix A, and Hillsong’s corpus in Appendix B.

4. Findings

How do the original written song lyrics by New Creation Church Singapore (NCC) and Hillsong Church Australia (Hillsong) in the period of 2014–2020 differ in their expressions of love? Tables 1 and 2 provide a summary of the song titles with their respective lyrical expressions of love, the song location, and the frequency of the term. Twenty-one out of NCC’s twenty-five CCS (84%) contain the theme of love with a total of 122 instances. In comparison, 19 out of Hillsong’s 25 CCS (76%) contained the theme, with a more modest 76 instances in total. The term “love” is evidently more prominent within NCC’s lyrics than Hillsong’s.

The following discussion of the analysis is divided into subsections based on the term’s grammatical structure (verb and noun). The noun form of “love” also subdivides into the two adjectival categories outlined earlier.

Table 1. New Creation Church’s Expressions of Love.

NCC Song Titles	Location	Love Expression	Instances
1. Grace Revolution	Verse 1	Love unstoppable	1
	Chorus	Hearts arise to the name of love	4
	Chorus	Your love is a grace revolution	4
2. Hearts On Fire	Chorus	Your love’s changing my heart	4
3. Anthem Of Grace	Verse 1	In Your love there is no fear	1
4. Sweeter Than Wine	Verse 1	By Your unending love	1
	Chorus	Your love is better than life	4
	Chorus	Your love is all I need	4
5. Refuge	Verse 1	In the presence of Your love	1
	Verse 2	For Your faithful love endures	1
6. Forgiven Much	Chorus	By Your unending love	5
	Chorus	For Your love will never fail	5
	Verse 3	Dearly loved	1
7. Restore	Verse 1	Your love has won my salvation	1
	Verse 2	Embraced in love by the Father	1
8. Finished	Verse 1	Your love for me will never fade	1
	Verse 1	Relentless love pursued my soul	1
9. I Surrender	Verse 1	You love me as I am	1
	Chorus	To a love so strong	2
	Chorus	To the greatness of Your love	2
10. I Will Follow After You	Verse 2	I will love You all my life	2
	Verse 4	And I will love You	1
	Verse 4	For You love me all my life	1
11. Sons & Daughters	Verse 2	Your weight of love	2
	Chorus	Stand in the light of Your love	3
12. Love Burns Bright	Chorus	Love burns bright	18
	Verse 1	Your love the only light	3
13. Wonderful (Grace Made Real)	Verse 1	Whisper love that words can’t fathom	1
	Chorus	O how wonderful Your love for me	5
14. Shadow Of Grace	Verse 1	Eyes brimmed with love	1
15. All Of You	Verse 1	Stand upon Your love unshakeable	3
16. For You So Loved Me	Verse 1	For You so loved me/For You so loved	2
	Verse 2	For You so loved me/For You so loved	2
	Chorus	How Your love has seized my heart	6
	Chorus	Oh, Your love will not depart	6
	Verse 3	For You so loved me/For You so loved	2
	Bridge	Trusting in Your love	2
	Verse 4	For You so loved me/For You so loved	2
17 Letting Go	Verse 1	Perfect love has won my heart	1
	Verse 2	Resting in Your love	2
18. Give Me This Mountain	Verse 1	Your love is calling me onwards	1
19. As He Is, So Are We	Verse 1	His love has rescued me	1
20. Supply	Verse 2	I will drink of Your love	1
21. Your Lavish Love	Chorus 1	I am caught in Your lavish love	3
	Chorus 2	I’m immersed in torrential love	2
	Bridge	Love died for me	4
			Total 122

Table 2. Hillsong Church’s Expressions of Love.

Hillsong Song Titles	Location	Love Expression	Instances
1. Broken Vessels	Chorus	Oh I can see the love in Your eyes	5
2. No Other Name	Verse 2	As boundless as His love	1
3. This Is Living	Verse 2	Forever young in Your love	1
	Verse 3	In Your love I’m complete	1
	Chorus	It’s Your perfect love that sees me soar	2
4. In God We Trust	Bridge	Forever strong in Your love	2
5. What A Beautiful Name	Verse 2	My sin was great Your love was greater	1
6. I Will Boast In Christ	Verse 1	Love will never lose its power	1
7. Love So Great	Verse 1	Your love so great	1
	Chorus	Your love is like the wildest ocean	7
8. Look To The Son	Chorus	See the image of love	4
	Pre-Chorus	Love reaching out for us	4
	Verse 2	There’s no fear in love	1
9. Crowns	Chorus	Than just to know His love	4
10. Behold	Verse 1	What compares to His great love	1
	Verse 2	The righteous died for love	1
	Chorus	How great Your love is	10
11. Who You Say I Am	Verse 1	Oh His love for me	2
12. God So Loved	Chorus	For God so loved the world	4
	Verse 1	For His love has salvaged me	1
	Verse 1	For His love has set me free	1
13. So Will I	Chorus	Designed in a work of art called love	1
	Chorus	If You gave Your life to love them	1
14. You Are My Life	Pre-Chorus	In Your love You are life	2
	Post-Chorus	’Cause Your love is all I want now	2
	Bridge	For all the world to find Your love	1
15. Good Grace	Chorus	God is madly in love with you	2
16. The Passion	Verse 1	Of the measure of His love	1
	Bridge	To honour this love	3
17. Touch Of Heaven	Chorus	All I want is to live within Your love	4
	Verse 2	In Your love and affection	1
18. King Of Kings	Verse 4	For the love of Jesus Christ	1
19. Awake My Soul	Verse 1	There is a sound I love to hear	2
			Total 76

4.1. Verb Form

Four songs in NCC’s corpus express love in the verb form:

- “Forgiven Much” emphasises “Dearly loved” as the acknowledgment of God’s love as a sacrificial offering on behalf of the human agent.
- “I Surrender”, in the verse, contains the simple but perennial divine truth, “You love me”.
- “I Will Follow After You” consists of three phrases: “I will love You”, “And I will love You”, and “For You love me all my life”, with two references to human love and an additional reference to the reciprocal nature of divine–human love. This is a fairly clear personal rendering of 1 John 4:19.
- “For You So Loved Me” uses the title phrase “For You so loved me” to reference John 3:16.

Hillsong’s three songs with the verb form of love are

- “God So Loved”, which uses “For God so loved the world”, divine love reflective again of John 3:16;

- “So Will I”, which contains “If You gave Your life to love them”, points to the sacrificial love of Jesus for human beings;
- “Awake My Soul”, which uses “There is a sound I love to hear” referring to human love which longs for a tangible encounter of God’s presence.

4.2. Noun Form

Most CCS use the noun “love” with possessive adjectives, such as “Your love” or “His love”, and are typically references to divine love. NCC’s CCS convey divine love using the second-person pronoun, “Your love”, a total of 71 times, and only one instance of a third-person pronoun, “His love”. However, Hillsong uses significantly fewer second-person pronouns, “Your love” (36 instances), and more instances (11) of the third-person pronoun, “His love”. Put another way, NCC has sixteen songs with “Your love” and only one song with “His love”. In comparison, Hillsong uses “Your love” in ten songs and “His love” in five songs. Here are just a few examples of possessive adjectives in both corpora:

- NCC’s “Hearts On Fire” conveys divine love as “Your love’s changing my world”, and “Anthem Of Grace” uses “In Your love there is no fear”, a clear reference to 1 Jn 4:18. To convey the sufficiency of divine love, NCC’s “Sweeter Than Wine” states, “Your love is all I need”.
- Hillsong uses “In Your love I’m complete” (in “This Is Living”) and “Cause Your love is all I want” (in “You Are My Life”) to focus on the sufficiency of divine love.

In previous research, the songs employing the second- and third-person pronouns were overwhelmingly “directed to Jesus” and not other members of the Godhead (Thornton 2021, p. 209). The findings of this analysis largely align with previous research, although Hillsong’s “Behold” is an interesting case, as it emphasises all three persons of the Godhead with possessive adjectives.

NCC’s and Hillsong’s corpora also contain numerous love lyrics in common noun form. Some examples include

- “Your weight of love” in “Sons And Daughters” (NCC);
- “Hearts arise to the name of love” in “Grace Revolution (NCC);
- “I can see the love in Your eyes” in “Broken Vessels” (Hillsong);
- “Love will never lose its power” in “I Will Boast In Christ” (Hillsong).

Some examples of poetic expressions of divine love in NCC’s CCS include

- “Whisper love that words can’t fathom” in “Wonderful” (NCC). The use of “whisper” and “words can’t fathom” creates a sense of mystery and evokes a visceral picture;
- “Eyes brimmed with love” in “Shadow Of Grace”;
- “Stand upon Your love unshakeable” in “All Of You”;
- Personifications of love in “For You So Loved Me”, including “How Your love has seized my heart” and “How Your love will not depart”.

Such poetic techniques invite worshipers to explore and contemplate the theological concept of love through symbolism and emotional resonance.

Hillsong’s examples of poetic expressions of love include

- “Forever young in Your love” in “This Is Living”;
- “Forever strong in Your love” in “In God We Trust”;
- “All I want is to live within Your love” in “Touch Of Heaven”;
- Adjacent contrasting language in the phrase “The righteous died for love” in the second verse of “Behold”;
- “designed in a work of art called love” in “So Will I”. This particular CCS is full of poetical lyric constructions.

4.3. Divine Love Adjectives

Both NCC and Hillsong employ descriptive adjectives. Here is a sample of divine love descriptive adjectives in both corpora:

- NCC's "Grace Revolution" describes divine love as "Love unstoppable" contrasting with Hillsong's more poetic rendering of the phrase, "Your love is like the wildest ocean" in the chorus of "Love So Great".
- The greatness of divine love is quite commonly expressed. NCC uses the phrase, "To the greatness of Your love" within the chorus of "I Surrender", while Hillsong uses, "Your love so great" in the verse of "Love So Great". Additionally, the phrases "His great love" and "How great Your love" are found in the verse and chorus of Hillsong's "Behold".
- This "Perfect love has won my heart" is found in NCC's "Letting Go" and the phrase can also be found in Hillsong's "This Is Living"—"Your perfect love". The contrast here, though not explicit in the lyrics, is with the imperfect love of humanity.
- The strength of God's love can be found in both corpora. NCC articulates "To a love so strong" in the song "I Surrender". Hillsong's "Forever strong in Your love", on the other hand, focuses on the human recipient of divine love in the song "In God We Trust".
- NCC's songs "Sweeter Than Wine" and "Forgiven Much" employ the phrase "Your unending love", while Hillsong's "No Other Name" uses the expression "boundless as His love". Both churches convey God's immeasurable love using such descriptive adjectives.
- God's "faithful love" in NCC's "Refuge", and "lavish love" and "torrential love" in "Your Lavish Love" also fit the qualitative category of descriptions for his love.

Comparative adjectives are less common, although employed more frequently by Hillsong than NCC. Some examples include

- Hillsong's "What A Beautiful Name", contrasting the enormity of sin with divine love by stating, "My sin was great, Your love was greater". Similarly, NCC employs comparative adjectives, proclaiming God's love as "better than life" and "sweeter than wine", emphasising its surpassing nature over life and earthly pleasures.
- Hillsong's "Behold" uses the phrase "What compares to his great love". While not a comparative adjective per se, the phrase essentially states, "Nothing compares to God's love, because it's greater/better than any other love".

4.4. Divine-Human Love Adjectives

Certain CCS lyrics incorporate participial adjectives reminding us that God's love is not an abstract concept, but an applied divine characteristic to humanity that invites or invokes a response.

- NCC has three songs that reference divine-human love and human participation in divine transformation. "Hearts On Fire" consists of two phrases, "hearts arise to the name of love" and "Your love's changing my heart". "For You So Loved Me" utilises the phrase, "trusting in Your love", and "Letting Go" uses "Resting in Your love".
- Hillsong's "Touch Of Heaven" utilises "Your love is calling me upward", which is not a common phrase, but a familiar sentiment for Christians, and probably a reference to Philippians 3:14. "This Is Living Now" contains "In Your love I'm complete" and focuses on the divine-human relationship that denotes the dependency of the human agent on divine love.

Divine love and divine-human love are the overwhelming categories of love expressed in the lyrics of CCS from both NCC and Hillsong. The only exceptions are NCC's "I Will Follow After You" and Hillsong's "Awake My Soul". That more expressions of human love are not present in the lyrics suggests that writers are conscious of the purpose and focus of worship: that it is predominantly for the One worshipped and not for the worshipper. In Hillsong's case, it may be that songs without human love lyrics are more palatable to churches at large and hence they appeared in the CCLI reports upon which their corpus was selected.

5. Conclusions

The term “love” is the most frequent keyword found in both NCC’s and Hillsong’s corpora. Their CCS use possessive adjectives (“Your” and “His”) to convey divine love for humanity. They also convey divine love using descriptive and comparative adjectives to feature the qualities or characteristics of love. When expressing divine–human love, participial adjectives are added to invite and implicate human participation in God’s transformation process. The usage of the second-person (Your) and third-person pronouns (His) is observed in both corpora, although Hillsong uses “His love” more (11 instances) compared to NCC (1 instance).

There is a difference in the poetic style of NCC’s and Hillsong’s CCS. NCC employs more adjectives than Hillsong (122 instances versus 76 instances). While there are some common adjectives describing the magnitude of God’s love such as “perfect”, “great”, and “strong”, NCC employs additional descriptive language such as “relentless”, “lavish”, and “torrential” for expressing divine love. Hillsong’s CCS, on the other hand, tend to use less flowery English. The reason could be, as Cowan argued, that Hillsong is more focused on its “complexly layered, sonically rich instrumentation” while maintaining a “simplistic” lyrical text (Cowan 2017, p. 97). Both Evans (2015, p. 183) and Cowan (2017, p. 78) observe that Hillsong has a “generalist” approach to theology in their lyrics, as also supported by this research. However, is there also something within the Asian culture of Singapore that leans more towards the embellishment of adjectives within lyrics?

Another observation by Cowan is that Hillsong’s “love” expression usage occurred in almost every song examined from 2007 to 2015 (Cowan 2017, p. 91). However, that is not reflected in Hillsong’s corpus during the study period of 2014–2020. Nevertheless, there is still a significant number of NCC’s 21 songs and Hillsong’s 19 songs out of each twenty-five-song corpus that place a strong emphasis on love.

Though the salvific language of Christ’s love through his atoning death is found in numerous songs in both NCC’s and Hillsong’s corpora, they portray divine love differently. NCC’s “Anthem Of Grace” and “Forgiven Much” show a greater emphasis on God’s grace and mercy, and the believer’s transformation found in Christ’s sacrifice; whereas Hillsong’s “Calvary”, “O Praise His Name”, and “I Will Boast In Christ” put a greater emphasis on Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection, without necessarily directly linking those to the present life of the believer.

Cultural, theological, and lingual nuances can be observed in the original lyrics of worship songs from NCC and Hillsong. NCC’s love seems to have a greater emphasis on divine love, using possessive adjectives such as “Your love” to convey a believer’s personal and intimate relationship with God. While Singaporean culture is more communal than (Caucasian) Australian culture, there is a cultural emphasis on individual agency, and in this case on an individual’s direct and intimate connection with the divine. If Australian culture is arguably more individualistic, Hillsong’s songs use references to divine love to invoke more of a sense of community and shared faith. It is an interesting finding from this limited study that a more communal culture should seek to express a more individual faith, and a more individualistic culture should seek to express a more communal faith.

The choice of possessive adjectives also indicates a difference in the theological perspective between the two producers. NCC’s overwhelming use of “Your love” suggests a strong belief in a relationship with God that is personal and direct. Hillsong’s usage, however, reflects more of a balance between a personal connection with God and the acknowledgement of God’s transcendence.

The poetic expressions of divine love in the songs also reflect cultural differences. NCC’s love is more mystical, emotional, and intimate, employing phrases such as “Whisper love that words can’t fathom”, “Eyes brimmed with love”, and “Your weight of love”. Hillsong’s poetic expressions are just as emotive, but often less personal and more overarching, such as “forever young in Your love, and “designed in a work of art called love”.

Cultural, theological, and linguistic differences between the Singaporean and Australian megachurches evidently affect how they understand and articulate love in the

context of their original contemporary congregational songs. However, it should be reiterated that this study did not include all of Hillsong’s CCS output in the given period. It is possible that Hillsong songs, less popular with Christendom at large and therefore less reported to CCLI, contain more emotive and personal language relating to divine and human love. The parameters of this paper did not allow for an analysis of all Hillsong CCS from 2014 to 2020, although this would be a valuable and complementary scholarly endeavour. Additionally, there is no way to know if these songs were equally employed in worship setlists of these respective churches’ services. It may be that certain songs with particular ways of framing divine or human love resonate with the respective congregations much more than others. If so, then the presence of love lyrics may need to be further nuanced to reflect congregants’ resonance with those songs and, thus, their understanding of love.

Hypothetically, native English speakers might be more adept at using colloquial expressions, wordplay, and creative metaphors to convey their messages effectively. However, that conclusion is not evident from this research. Colloquialisms may be more evident in Hillsong’s corpus, but poetic mastery seems to be more evident in the lyrics of NCC.

In conclusion, we have argued that there is a discernible difference between Australian-English “love” and Singaporean-English “love” in CCS lyrics. In regards to “musical caring” through multilingual worship, several questions remain (Myrick 2021). Is “musical caring” something reflected in the nuanced English expressions of love for the respective congregations in Singapore and Australia? Does English as a common language for worship hamper or enhance a multilingual congregation’s worship experience? What impact does it have on the particular congregation of New Creation Church? More study is needed but, considering the size and influence of New Creation Church Singapore, their original English-lyric worship songs will continue to be written, released, and employed for congregational worship. Scholarly examination, as we have undertaken here, sheds light on the use of English language lyrics in multilingual worship contexts and on multilingual contemporary congregational songwriters.

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Appendix A

Table A1. New Creation Church Corpus.

Number	Anthem of Grace Album (2015)	Composers
1	Grace Revolution	Brendon Seeto, KC Gan
2	Hearts On Fire	Sean Goh
3	Anthem of Grace	Brendon Seeto, KC Gan
4	Sweeter than Wine	Elaine Fung, Sean Goh
5	Refuge	Karen Lim
6	Forgiven Much	Karen Lim

Table A1. *Cont.*

Number	<i>Anthem of Grace Album (2015)</i>	Composers
7	Restore	Brendon Seeto, KC Gan
8	Finished	Josiah Lim, Karen Lim
9	I Surrender	Karen Lim
10	I Will Follow After You	Benjamin Lim, KC Gan
Number	<i>Encounter Album (2017)</i>	Composers
11	Sons & Daughters	Jen Tan, Joseph Yong, KC Gan Daniel Chong, Edwin Wong, Eli Ordonez, Joseph Yong, Melissa Tal Jasuratna, Nicholas Zach Jasuratna
12	Love Burns Bright	Jen Tan, KC Gan
13	Wonderful (Grace Made Real)	Jen Tan, Jilian Har, KC Gan
14	Shadow Of Grace	Elijah Leong, Jen Tan, KC Gan,
15	All Of You	Melissa Tal Jasuratna, Nicholas Zach Jasuratna
16	For You So Loved Me	Caleb Lim, Karen Lim
17	Sky	Edwin Wong, Eli Ordonez, Joseph Yong
18	Letting Go	Jen Tan, Karen Lim, KC Gan
Number	<i>As He Is So Are We Album (2020)</i>	Composers
19	Give Me This Mountain	Elaine Fung, Eli Ordonez, KC Gan
20	As He Is, So Are We	Jen Tan, Karen Lim, KC Gan
21	Supply	Joseph Yong, Karen Lim
22	Your Lavish Love	Karen Lim
23	YHWH	Elaine Fung, Evangeline Ang, KC Gan, Silas Hwang
24	Trust In the Lord	Elaine Fung, Evangeline Ang, KC Gan, Silas Hwang
25	For My Good	Josiah Lim, Karen Lim, Sean Goh

Appendix B

Table A2. Hillsong Church Corpus.

Number	<i>No Other Name Album (2014)</i>	Composers
1	This I Believe	Matthew Crocker, Ben Fielding
2	Broken Vessels	Joel Houston, Jonas Myrin
3	No Other Name	Joel Houston, Jonas Myrin
4	This Is Living	Joel Davies, Aodhan King
5	Calvary	Reuben Morgan
Number	<i>Open Heaven/River Wild Album (2015)</i>	Composers
6	O Praise The Name (Anastasis)	Ben Hasting, Dean Ussher, Marty Sampson
7	In God We Trust	Ben Fielding, Reuben Morgan, Eric Liljero
Number	<i>Let There Be Light Album (2016)</i>	Composers
8	What A Beautiful Name	Ben Fielding, Brooke Ligertwood
9	I Will Boast In Christ	Scott Ligertwood, Reuben Morgan

Table A2. Cont.

Number	No Other Name Album (2014)	Composers
10	Love So Great	Reuben Morgan, Jamie Snell, Joshua Grimmatt
11	Look To The Son	Matthew Crocker, Joel Houston, Scott Ligertwood, Reuben Morgan, Marty Sampson
12	Crowns	Scott Groom, Ben Hastings, Michael Fatkin
13	Behold	Joel Houston
Number	There Is More Album (2017)	Composers
14	Who You Say I Am	Joel Houston
15	New Wine	Brooke Ligertwood
16	God So Loved	Matt Crocker, Marty Sampson
17	So Will I	Joel Houston, Ben Hastings, Michael Fatkin
18	You Are My Life	Michael Guy Chislett, Scott Ligertwood, Aodhan King, Ben Tan
19	Good Grace	Joel Houston
20	The Passion	Scott Ligertwood, Brooke Ligertwood, Chris Davenport
21	Touch Of Heaven	Aodan King, Michael Fatkin, Hannah Hobbs
Number	People Album 2018	Composers
22	Another In The Fire	Christ Devonport, Joel Houston
Number	Awake Album 2019	Composers
23	King Of Kings	Jason Ingram, Brooke Ligertwood, Scott Ligertwood
24	Awake My Soul	Brooke Ligertwood
25	See The Light	Ben Fielding, Reuben Morgan

Notes

¹ <https://www.newcreation.org.sg/about-us> (accessed on 6 May 2024).

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Article

Cultural Expression and Liturgical Theology in the Worship Songs Sung by British-Born Chinese

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Abstract: Multilingual and multicultural worship can take on many models and expressions. Initially, Chinese immigration to the UK in the 1950s and 1960s led to an increased population of churches. Many Chinese church services were conducted in Cantonese, catering to the needs of first-generation immigrants, mainly from Hong Kong. Yet, the children of these older generations grew up with a bicultural hybridized identity expressed first in small English-speaking youth groups that led to English-speaking worship services within Chinese churches. Contributing to the field of worship studies through music repertoire studies over four weeks in June and July 2017 at Birmingham Chinese Evangelical Church, we raised the following questions: (1) what do the chosen worship songs represent with regards to the liturgical theology and cultural expressions of this community and (2) how is self-perception and perception of the divine expressed in the lyrical themes of these songs? Our study revealed that singing English songs from the West dominated the corporate liturgical identity of these services. Yet, through a British-born Chinese evangelical cultural reading, some lyrical themes were particularly resonant within Chinese culture, such as honor, shame, reverence, and bowing.

Keywords: British-born Chinese; liturgical theology; multilingualism; liturgical identity; ethnodoxology; contemporary Christian worship music; Asian worship music; worship studies

1. Introduction

There have been rapid changes in religion among the Chinese, with a fast increase of Christians in both China and the Chinese diaspora across the world, and there is need for additional research and understanding into the culture that is coming to Christ at a rate never experienced before (See Yang and Tamney 2006, p. 128). The Chinese culture is a distinct culture steeped in tradition and contains many unique expressions, and how this identity interacts with the Christian faith is something that requires further research. In order to elucidate the liturgical theology of believers of a certain ethnicity, it is important to understand how religious practices interact with their ethnic culture; as Chong states, this can be “in one of two ways: either as identical to or precedent to ethnic identity, or as ancillary to ethnic identity” (See K. H. Chong 1998, p. 264). Through an initial exploratory study of worship music repertoire, this paper seeks to identify the liturgical theology and cultural expressions of British-born Chinese (BBCs) who attended monolingual English-speaking worship services within a multilingual, Evangelical Chinese church in Birmingham, UK.¹

The liturgical identity of this community could quickly be labeled “Western” based on the language used (English), location of the church (Birmingham), and the Western origins of the worship songs sung (UK, USA, and Australia). Contributing to the fields of cultural studies and worship studies, we explore numerous theological themes in the song repertoires that resonate with cultural identities on several levels.² Though research around BBCs and their Evangelical worship practices is scant, this initial exploratory study

examines the selections of worship songs chosen for worship over four weeks between 18 June until 9 July 2017 at Birmingham Chinese Evangelical Church (BCEC), a prominent church in the UK. Drawing from approaches around the study of the theological content of congregational song repertoires within specific communities, we seek to analyze the songs sung as liturgical texts through a BBC cultural reading.³ Contributing to this special volume's study of multilingualism, this paper provides a unique case of a monolingual worship service within a multilingual church with multilingual families, broadening awareness of the cultural and linguistic complexities of worship song and matters of agency in communities with hybrid cultural identities and dual belonging.

This study first explores the cultural backgrounds of BBC evangelical Christians, including the challenges they faced as immigrants and how these experiences have influenced their cultural identity. Following this, we briefly look into the history of BCEC and the journey it has taken regarding musical worship. An analysis of the song choices of BCEC over a four-week period provides us with a small sample of data that allows us to investigate themes and tendencies that are linked to the cultural identities and liturgical theology of being a BBC within a particular ecclesial context. Our thematic lyrical analysis of this musical repertoire is carried out under the framework of two key questions. Firstly, how do these BBCs perceive themselves? Secondly, how do these BBCs perceive God? In our view, these songs provide a unique corporate expression and dual liturgical identity for BBCs at BCEC, expressed in monolingual contemporary worship songs from the West alongside expression of other cultural identities through the specific theological themes of the songs.

2. Backgrounds of British-Born Chinese Evangelical Christians

Most BBC families can trace their history in the UK back to the 1950's and 1960's, when major immigration took place.⁴ Initially, many Chinese migrants took up manual occupations such as cleaning and catering, and these occupational choices would not change until more recent times, where the children of those migrants would start taking on white-collar and middle-class jobs (Lau-Clayton 2014, p. 17). Lau-Clayton emphasizes that the BBCs who grow up in the families of the first-generation Chinese in the UK face many challenges of cultural identity as they seek assimilation into the society they were born into, and it is this bicultural and often bilingual identity that then influences the way they approach the Church and their liturgical identity. For example, research into BBC culture shows that these cultural tensions cause hindrances to intimacy levels between parents and their children (Lau-Clayton 2014, p. 129). This tension is likely to be caused by the challenges the children face in having to adjust and alternate between the culture at home and the Western culture they are called to function in. This identity crisis can lead these children to reconfigure their own cultural identity, thereby forming a cultural amalgamation or a hybrid culture, or even a third culture (Lau-Clayton 2014, p. 20). In Chinese culture, the priority is to be well fed and have housing and financial stability before anything else can be considered (Settles 2012, p. 24). This would then explain the cultural peculiarities that the BBCs possess, as they live balancing between Chinese cultural priorities and the desires and priorities of Western culture, which may often conflict. As they carry "the baggage of Chinese and Western values and beliefs all mixed up into one concoction", it leads to many having feelings of anxiety and insecurity (Ling 1999, p. 80).

First-generation Chinese parents endured many challenges themselves as they went through the immigrant experience, causing them to put extra effort into raising their children to do well in school and society in the hope they would avoid the discrimination and downward mobility they experienced themselves (ChenFeng 2014, p. 7). The suffering they went through may explain why Chinese parents have been found to be less emotionally, physically, and verbally expressive with their children, as they prioritize providing for and preparing their children for society (Lau-Clayton 2014, p. 128). Acculturation stress is a major factor contributing to depression among Chinese immigrants, and the stress experienced by the first-generation Chinese has been argued to have influenced their approach to

parenting and how they interact with their children (Leung et al. 2012, p. 62). Chinese parents and their children have different expectations concerning communication, as parents expect children to listen to them obediently without question, leaving children frustrated and feeling that obedience is demanded as communication channels are closed (ChenFeng 2014, p. 7). Furthermore, due to traditional Chinese views of familial hierarchy, it is hard for the children to be confident enough to address these concerns (ChenFeng 2014, p. 23).

Despite the efforts of the BBCs and Asian immigrants in the USA in seeking total assimilation to Western cultures, Settles points out that they may feel that they fall short as there is always still a sense of foreignness they cannot escape, due to their physical features (Settles 2012, p. 22). Therefore, many settle for a selective assimilation approach, as this allows them to preserve certain aspects of Chinese culture. Yang notices this in the Asian–American church, as this approach is extremely evident in the ethnic churches they attend, where their churches serve “as a social mechanism that immigrants use to fend off unwelcome aspects of American customs and values while selectively preserving Chinese norms and values” (Yang 1999, p. 99). Hall also recognized that many young Chinese do not relate entirely to non-Chinese due to differences in their upbringing, because being Chinese is still important to them, even if they may seem very American on the surface (Hall 2006, p. 67). The status of being a bicultural minority causes the BBCs and Asian–Americans to live in uncertainty and tension. Yee describes the dilemma: “On the one hand, people who choose to identify themselves as belonging to a minority group (whether racial or otherwise) do not want to be simply assimilated, to be treated as ‘honorary white’. On the other hand, they do want to fit in, to not be treated as ‘forever foreigner’” (Yee 2009). So, whilst the Chinese overseas may be perceived to be drawn to Christianity because of the perceived benefits of association with Westerners, they still desire their own cultural identity. Cultural lines are not fixed, but rather, they are dynamic. At the intersection of worship music and culture, Marcel Stuernagel uses “messiness” to “recognize the fluidity of the cultural flows that result from play in the context of church music” (Stuernagel 2021, p. 155). As we analyze “messy” issues in liturgical identity in a multilingual BBC congregation, we attend to the “hybridity and fluidity of identities of these congregants” (Yoon 2005, p. 219). As Yoon states, identity is a “complex navigation” between stable and hybrid, often forming new identities in the process (Yoon 2005, p. 269). In fact, even those living within the same community and sharing the same ethnicity may still undergo a process of adaptation and evolution as they interact with different cultural characteristics. Xian discusses the distinct characteristics that exist in churches in Hong Kong even between mainland Chinese, Hong Kongers, and also foreigners, where understanding and acceptance of another’s culture is essential in building a “mosaic type of community” that all cultures can reside in together (Xian 2014, p. 101).

When it comes to Chinese culture and Christianity, numerous factors relate to compatibility. Chinese values and traditions are heavily influenced by the teachings of Confucius, where conservative social values and filial piety play significant roles in value systems in the community. In support, Knapp observes that Confucian teaching on hierarchy “has shaped nearly every aspect of Chinese social life: attitudes toward authority, patterns of residence, conceptions of self, marriage practices, gender preferences, emotional life, religious worship and social relations” (Knapp 2005, p. 3). Tseng stresses that these cultural influences are evident in the Chinese church, as there is emphasis placed on group, duty, hierarchy, deference, restraint, and achievement (Tseng 2002, p. 258). For example, ChenFeng highlights that the biblical teachings of honoring one’s parents (Exodus 20; Ephesians 6) directly coincide with the Chinese cultural values of filial piety and hierarchy within the family (ChenFeng 2014, p. 21).⁵ The “comfortable fit” between Confucianism and Christianity has allowed for many Chinese to feel at ease within the church, as it matches up quite well with the values they have grown up with, and the integration is largely seamless with only a few modifications required (Hall 2006, p. 140). For example, Hakka Christians (an ethnic–linguistic Chinese group), were observed by Nicole Constable in Hong Kong, where she witnessed them modifying Confucian rules and transforming

worship of ancestors into expressions of respect that did not conflict with their Christian beliefs. As she explains, “Hakka Christians still maintain genealogy, manners, and moral unrighteousness as key issues in their claim to Chinese identity”. In her view, “Hakka identity persists in Shun Him Tong because of, not in spite, of Christianity” (Constable 1989, p. 232). Here, we see Christianity preserving aspects of culture, rather than critiquing or transforming it.

Given their social uncertainty and struggles with identity, it is no surprise that the Chinese church acts as a home away from home for first-generation Chinese and their families. The church for them is seen as “center for culture and language transmission and preservation” (Kyaw-Tun 2015, p. 16). Kyaw-Tun goes on to add that they find comfort in meeting people with a common identity background and even physical appearance (Kyaw-Tun 2015, p. 167). Those who attend the Chinese church benefit from the cultural similarities, especially in the way they express themselves, and immigrant converts often rely on the preachers in the Chinese church for many things, from explaining Christian beliefs to practical worldly advice and wisdom. The church community and leaders are often expected to provide wisdom, to comfort and ease anxieties and assure their identity in the overseas society.⁶ According to Cao, the pastor is often viewed as the “father of the younger generation and the son of the older people” (Cao 2005, p. 191). This dynamic leads Chinese evangelical churches to be run much like a family, with a hierarchical system that expects the younger generation to honor and obey their elders. As Toyama-Szeto notes, the Chinese culture is a dyadic culture, where the perceptions and expectations of others determine one’s identity, which is in contrast to Western culture, which promotes individualism (Toyama-Szeto and Gee 2006, p. 57). The way the Chinese evangelicals function as a community influences the way they approach theology, thus making their church community a significant factor in their liturgical theology. As their honor–shame culture generally emphasizes group solidarity and respecting elders, there is pressure for the BBCs to conform and fit in with the church culture they grow up in and to abide by the traditions handed down by their elders, who are often their parents and their parents’ peers. Outside of the worship service, it is clear that community and tradition are held in high regard (both being pillars of Chinese culture), as churches are often places where people eat and experience fellowship together. After all, as Cao notes, religion “can mean a great deal to uprooted people”, (Cao 2005, p. 183) and, as Chong notes, church members are motivated by “their sense of marginalisation from the larger society” (K. H. Chong 1998, p. 282).

Allowing cultural values to influence the functioning of the church community also affects the way the BBCs approach worship music and the lyrics that accompany it. Settles describes her observations of a Chinese immigrant church, stating that “although people love music and the arts, it is usually on the low priority when it comes to allocating budget for equipment or programs. Evangelical Chinese Christians tend to focus on the applications of practical everyday living from the Bible rather than engaging in theology through workshops or classes” (Settles 2012, p. 24).

Exploring how these cultural values impact the way an evangelical BBC church approaches worship may provide insight as to why the Chinese church is still seeing a silent exodus of church-raised young people who find their immigrant churches, as described by Kyaw-Tun, as “irrelevant, culturally stifling, and ill-equipped to develop them spiritually or life in the multicultural society they inhabit” (Kyaw-Tun 2015, p. 12). One of the reasons may be that the Chinese culture has been found to be inward-looking, most probably due to the first-generation Chinese being so focused on survival during immigration. A divide between first- and second-generation immigrants may exist, where the first generation is characterized by urgency and grit, while the second generation can be more open and comfortable. Subsequently, that has translated into how they perceive the local church should function. As Tseng observes, the “immigrant Chinese evangelicals are so proudly independent, most of their second-generation youth grew up with very little contact with Christians who are not Chinese” (Tseng 2002, p. 255). Growing up in their churches, the BBCs are, at times, deprived of significant exposure to the Church as a global

community, and they grow up linking church with their parents and their parents' friends. Combining that with the cultural conflicts and communication problems they experience, many do not feel comfortable in their Chinese churches anymore, and once they become adults and are finally exposed to different expressions of Christianity and church, they choose to leave, even if they do not fully fit in anywhere else (Yee 2009). Kibria argues that the bicultural identity held by groups such as the BBC and Asian Americans is "itself an identity of assimilation, both reflecting and facilitating integration into the dominant culture and society" (Kibria 2003, p. 198). Despite the challenges and tensions that come with holding a bicultural identity, there are also opportunities for creating a third culture that can provide a unique perspective from which they can incorporate diverse cultural expressions of Christianity into forming their own hybrid liturgical identity and spirituality within Asian diaspora communities (Kim 2006, p. 225). In particular, worship music can provide a unique space for the interaction of ideas, values, beliefs, community, and objects that are combined into culturally meaningful sounds and lyrics that reflect the historical and social contexts of songwriters and the groups of people that choose them for their own worship services. Singing Western English songs within a Chinese immigrant church allows the maintaining of familial structure and Chinese cultural values while expressing liturgical hybridity with the surrounding majority culture.

3. Global Contemporary Worship and BBC Liturgical Identity

The Church is not insulated from its culture, and the surrounding culture influences liturgical worship that can only function when it assimilates to the various components of the culture. Thormodson notes: "Humanly speaking, an effective liturgy contains powerful cultural symbolism and language that is able to communicate the Gospel without detailed explanation" (Thormodson 2010, p. 1). He goes on to add that worship has a cross-cultural dynamic, where liturgies are enriched through the sharing of ideas between cultures (Thormodson 2010, p. 5). In agreement, Yee suggests that all worship involves the cultures of those gathered to worship, and God-pleasing offerings of worship are created when those cultures are embraced and utilized (Yee 2009). The Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture states the ideal that worship "transcends and indeed is beyond all cultures". Furthermore, the "sharing of hymns and art and other elements of worship across cultural barriers helps enrich the whole church and strengthen the sense of the communion of the Church" (Nairobi Statement on Worship and Culture 1996). While humanity consists of a beautiful range of diversity in cultures, technology, globalization, and the exposure they bring also affect the worship that is conducted in these different cultures. According to both Beyer and Stringer, this new way of connecting cultures only came about in the later part of the twentieth century, and has caused people, cultures, and discourses to meet and interact with each other continuously (Beyer 1994, p. 7; Stringer 2005, p. 209). The product of this interaction is a burgeoning "global culture", as described by Beyer (1994, p. 7). The contemporary worship movement based in the West has capitalized on these trends, exporting Pentecostalism and Charismatic theological beliefs and worship practices of churches, such as Hillsong Church in Australia and Bethel Church in the USA. As we will see, their songs are often adopted and adapted by Asian-Americans and the BBC churches. It is the mission of these churches for their music to be used globally. Bethel Music, based out of Bethel Church in Redding, seeks "to carry the culture of Heaven to the nations through worship and to see the global expansion of God's kingdom through His manifest presence" (Bethel Music 2017). The music ministries of these churches have swept across the globe and their worship models have been adopted by churches worldwide, regardless of denomination and, at times, even local cultures. In particular, Wong observed a rising prominence of "megachurches" across the globe, noting the reforms that the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements fostered in local church patterns and practices (Wong 2006, pp. 88–89). A potential danger here is that global culture can be quickly imported to a degree where local cultural expressions around the globe begin to lose their own identity or even consider another form of cultural expression more holy and superior (i.e., "the culture

of Heaven”), choosing to adopt trends from communities with very different experiences and cultural backgrounds and peculiarities. In adopting the songs that come from other cultures, there is a high risk of losing the genuine authenticity and vulnerability that comes with singing songs from the heart of your own local culture and community.

One of the challenges associated with such access is that an increasing number of churches sing songs written by a relatively small group of songwriters and worship leaders.⁷ Though these songs may bring fresh momentum to new ways of worship that contain personal expressions of praise, confessions, brokenness, and forgiveness in Christ, they may not necessarily speak specifically into or reflect the theological beliefs or cultural identities of local churches. The risk here is that songs become more ambiguous and irrelevant to the groups that try to sing them, losing the effectiveness and the spirit in which the song was originally written. Busman stresses that many churchgoers are now expecting the same “curated experience” that the megachurches and conferences offer, often resulting in disappointment and frustration when their expectations are not met (Busman 2015, p. 69). Once believers have become used to listening to the high-quality music performances that they listen to and see being recorded from big conference gatherings across the world, they become disillusioned because their own small church congregations are incapable of replicating the same mood for worship. Simultaneously, Busman adds that there are also those who have benefited from worship recordings that have helped smaller and newer congregations, who may lack resources and musicians, in defining their own identity (Busman 2015, p. 69). As contemporary worship music becomes more global and the sacredness and authenticity of songs become harder to distinguish from popular songs, it is the responsibility of individual cultures and congregations to selectively choose, adopt, and adapt songs that sometimes originate from the other side of the world, finding strategies to make these songs relevant for their own contexts.

Chinese churches in the West, especially English-speaking congregations, have not been exempt from these global influences. As Yee observes, there is no Asian–American Christian music, just as there are “no particularly Asian-American ways of gathering, forms of prayer, styles of preaching, customs for the Lord’s Table, or central themes in spirituality and discipleship” (Yee 2009).⁸ He goes on to add that worship in the Asian–American setting is simply a slight variation of majority-white culture, theology, and worship, and raises the concern that Asian–Americans have not taken steps in cultivating ways of worship that acknowledge their own cultures and embrace their whole selves. Similarly, Settles suggests that the Chinese in the USA need help in understanding their unique identity and to be made aware of the possibilities for expressing it through songs (Settles 2012, p. 7). After all, music does not simply emerge from communal experience but creates an experience that brings people together in the first place, and as Ingalls points out, “musical style does not only reflect the preferences of the existing congregation, but increasingly it affects the very constitution of that congregation as evangelical churchgoers base their choice of a church home on varying theological, aesthetic, and practical criteria” (Ingalls 2008, p. 342). A cultural bifurcation between Asian and American or British and Chinese liturgical forms is at best naïve, as entire communities gather to express a multiplicity of diverse cultural identities, seeking to incorporate many aspects of their liturgical identity. In his research on spiritual formation and worship song in China, Lim Swee Hong discerns an “interdependent relationship” between musicking and community. He states, “In this relationship, the community relies on musicking for its construction, while the relevance of musicking is authenticated by the community’s continued use” (Lim 2017). Additionally, Sweehong defines phases of contextualized congregational worship as “adopted”, “adapted”, and “actualized”, revealing the agency and activities of local churches in drawing songs from a Western context and actualizing their own hymnody (Lim 2017). This entire process places an enormous demand on local churches as they work to discerningly contextualize the overwhelming reach of the global worship brands exporting the “culture of Heaven”.

The dynamics between music and diasporas has come to be of increasing interest to researchers in recent times. As research into ethnomusicology has developed, the relationship between music and identity has become a major theme that has highlighted the fact that “diasporas depend on expressive cultural practices for their very existence” (Turino 2008, p. 107) and that music is an essential contributor in constructing a distinctive diasporic identity. Music is a central component in people finding their own identities (Slobin 1994, p. 243) and plays an important role in expressing ethnic and religious identities amongst ethnic minorities such as the BBCs (E. K. C. Chong 2011, p. 11). Maynard-Reid also reminds us that cultural “worship patterns” are “not monolithic”, because each culture includes its own diverse spectrum due to the fluid and dynamic nature of culture itself (Maynard-Reid 2000, p. 17). Thus, a worship style that may work for one BBC church may not necessarily be the preference of another. Additionally, a church such as BCEC may offer multiple services in multiple languages and music styles to serve and express the identities of various members of their BBC community.

The sheer amount of time and effort devoted to music in BBC churches shows that it is an important part of the contemporary music culture in these Chinese communities. Chong argues that for most Christians, it is the hymns sung in childhood, and not the Bible, that express their beliefs the most, and the theological vocabulary that those hymns provide act as a foundation for future experience to supplement (E. K. C. Chong 2011, p. 42). The solution to the worship and cultural challenges discussed above is not quite as simple as creating a new stylistic strand of worship that belongs to the Chinese in the West or creating a new multilingual worship service within a Chinese church in the UK. Instead, each congregation should seek to discern how its unique cultural expression can be drawn together to express liturgical identity. The challenge is to consider the unique cross-cultural experiences of the BBCs, including the trials and challenges, and allowing the Word and Spirit of God to speak into those cultural contexts to provide similarly unique worship experiences. Interestingly, it is the weakening of language barriers due to globalization and transnational migration that has allowed groups such as the Chinese diaspora to adopt so many songs from the majority-white culture. As they sing in English, they proceed to emphasize their own culture through the language of another aspect of their culture, which is the focus of our analysis of the worship repertoire of the English-speaking service of Birmingham Chinese Evangelical Church (BCEC).

3.1. *Birmingham Chinese Evangelical Church*

The BCEC is a church based in Birmingham, UK and consists of three congregations that cater for the three main spoken languages in the church: English, Mandarin, and Cantonese. There is also a satellite congregation in Telford that conducts services in Mandarin. The congregation that was the subject of this repertoire study was the English congregation, which in 2017 consisted of 140–160 regular attendees. In June and July of 2017, we collected data on the songs sung in corporate worship by this congregation, for theological analysis of a monolingual worship service within a larger multilingual church. This community seeks to accommodate the bicultural expressions and identities of the BBCs whilst still welcoming people of many diverse backgrounds and cultures. In 2017, the demographic of the church was distributed between children, teenagers, students, young adults, families, and those over 45 years of age; it could be described as a relatively young church as only approximately 10–15% of the congregation were over 45. Like Asian immigrant churches in America, some of the members of the English congregation were children of the immigrant members who attended the Cantonese or Mandarin services in either Birmingham or other Chinese churches in the UK (Yang 1998, p. 57). Reflective of the Chinese settlers in the U.K as a whole, the congregants in BCEC spoke some form of Chinese as their mother tongue, such as Cantonese, Hakka, or Mandarin, or Vietnamese (Lau-Clayton 2014, p. 17), and most grew up with relatively greater affluence than earlier generations of Chinese (Tseng 2002, p. 255) due to most of them being well-educated, having professional jobs, and living in middle-class suburbs (Yang 1998, p. 243). All these

traits are characteristic of many BBC and Asian–American churches in the UK and USA, respectively. The goal of BCEC is to not only be aware of the cultural peculiarities that their congregants possess, but also seek to accommodate and embrace all the believers that come through their doors. Our study particularly focused on the liturgical identity of the English-speaking service as bicultural worship through monolingual singing drawing from Western contemporary worship songs yet with some lyrical themes particularly resonant within Chinese culture.

BCEC was founded as Birmingham Chinese Christian Fellowship (BCCF) in 1964 by Reverend Frank Cheung, meeting in the basement of a Chinese takeaway. The fellowship was established as BCEC in 1992. For the first thirty-three years, the congregation met and conducted services in Cantonese, and in 1997, they held their first separate Mandarin and Cantonese services. Two years later, in 1999, the English house ministry started and was established as a service three years later in 2001. In the last twenty years of existence, the English service has blossomed and outgrown the other two services, and now provides training for leaders for both the other services and other Chinese churches around the country. As the church has grown, the style of worship that can be seen on a Sunday morning and in cell groups has also grown in different ways.

Throughout the early years, BCEC had similar struggles to many Chinese churches; given the small numbers in the church, resources and personnel were lacking. Through the first ten years of the English service, the pastor Reverend Bert Han would often lead worship and then preach himself. Many of the first-generation Chinese at the church did not have the luxury of learning musical instruments growing up, so the church struggled for musicians. As the church gradually grew, the recruitment for worship team members was still challenging and the main requirement was not necessarily musicianship skills, but a willing heart and personal character, factors resonant with many Chinese immigrant churches.⁹ Along with many other small churches, it was difficult to even find members who were able to harmonize, showing the lack of resources that were available for worship. These factors led to musical worship being a simple, straightforward affair with song choices often dictated by their level of difficulty and accessibility to both the musicians and the congregation.

Another challenge that was beginning to evolve was the different musical and theological ideals that were beginning to emerge and conflict with each other. As Kim-Cragg noticed in the Korean American church, groups were not only linguistically but also theologically different, and younger generations were attracted to contemporary English Christian liberal theology and contemporary worship music, finding their beliefs and preferences conflicting with the adults who were primarily drawn to more conservative Christian perspectives and the traditional hymns that seemed to match them (Kim-Cragg 2012, p. 121). These same challenges continue to exist in BCEC as well as other Chinese churches across the UK, further highlighting the differences between the BBCs and their more traditional Chinese predecessors. In the unique case of BCEC, the leaders in charge were more open to change and interested in creating a church model that would not be too different to the seeker-sensitive models popularized by megachurches around the world, where churches prioritized making church accessible and comfortable for both believers and non-believers.¹⁰ As the worship leaders and pastors of BCEC continued to grow in their own personal faith journeys, as well as seeing the church multiply, they were given the freedom to express, allowing BBC individuals to achieve what Kim defines as a “creative synthesis of exclusion and belonging” within the confines of their spiritual community (Kim-Cragg 2012, p. 237). As with those in America, most Chinese churches in the country had been conservative in theology and nearly half were nondenominational evangelical (Yang 1998, p. 240), but BCEC in recent years has begun finding its own identity and therefore its own confidence in stepping out to explore other expressions of spirituality. While many of the cultural identities mentioned above still exist within the church, the church’s growth has also brought in a second and third generation of Chinese who are beginning to exhibit traits noticed by researchers that are different from previous generations.

For example, Lau-Clayton noticed in her investigations that contemporary BBC parents were now becoming more “direct and emotionally expressive with their own children. Parents demonstrated their open display of love and affection through hugging and kissing, as well as praising children more generally” (Lau-Clayton 2014, p. 131). This influx of “next-generation” parents of BBCs are more culturally fluid than in the past and may be one of the reasons why the worship services at BCEC have begun to evolve and become more expressive in recent years.

3.2. Theological Themes and Cultural Identities within Worship Songs in the English-Speaking Service at BCEC

While musical worship is not the only expression of a believer’s faith, as noted above, the repertoire of a congregation can provide us with a picture of a community’s theology and cultural identity. Through the analysis of the song choices over a timespan of four weeks (consecutive Sundays, starting 18 June 2017), we were able to gain a glimpse into how the liturgical identity of the BBCs influenced their approach to worship at BCEC.

A typical Sunday service at the BCEC consists of a welcome greeting and announcements by the “emcee” (often conducted by one of the pastors), followed by two worship songs, a sermon, and three response songs. At the end of the last response song, the preacher returns to offer a final prayer and benediction. In the four Sundays that were used as a study, the services followed this same pattern, resulting in five songs each week that contributed to an overall list of twenty songs that formed our case study. It should also be noted that in this four-week period, the worship leader was different at every Sunday service; all four were BBC males in their 20s.¹¹ Appendix A presents the four worship set lists that were used for the study, with information regarding songwriters also included.

Of the worship songs sung during this period, all came from the UK, USA, or Australia, and all of them were written and/or had been performed by internationally renowned Christian artists and churches. Seven of the songs emerged from Hillsong Church in Sydney, Australia (“At the Cross”, “Christ is Enough”, “Cornerstone”, “From the Inside Out”, “Hosanna”, “Man of Sorrows”, “This is Our God”), while four of the songs were written by worship leader Chris Tomlin and one by Charlie Hall, who were both part of the Passion movement in the U.S. (“Enough”, “Give Us Clean Hands”, “God and God Alone”, “Our God”, “Whom Shall I Fear”). Four songs were written by popular UK-based contemporary Christian artists Tim Hughes (“Here I Am to Worship”) and Matt Redman (“10,000 Reasons”, “I Will Offer Up My Life”, “You Never Let Go”), who have been involved in UK worship and the youth movements Worship Central and Soul Survivor. The remaining three songs were from the following American artists: Jonathan and Melissa Helser (“No Longer Slaves”), who have links to Bethel Music and Bethel Church in Redding, California; Aaron Keyes (“Dwell”), a worship leader with 10,000 Fathers & Mothers based in Colorado, Spiring, CO; and All Sons & Daughters (“All the Poor and Powerless”), also popularized by The Digital Age, a band from Texas that consisted of former members of the David Crowder Band, also linked to Passion. Though “Before the Throne of God Above” was originally written by Charitie Lees Smith, it has been popularized by Phil Wickham, Shane and Shane, and Sovereign Grace Music, all based in the USA (Bancroft and Cook 2009).

Initially, there appears to be no direct link between any of these songs and BBCs or Asian-Americans, which supports Yee’s lament that there is no such thing as Asian-American or BBC music, and rather, the worship conducted in English-speaking Chinese churches is strongly connected with and similar to white contemporary worship culture (Yee 2009). All the churches and songwriters whose songs were used here are of white descent; these artists presumably came from very different cultures to the BBCs and presumably do not share the same cultural identities and experiences. As discussed above, the struggle with identity that most BBCs go through has resulted in them not necessarily being able to embrace either of the cultures they find themselves stuck between, therefore resulting in their choosing to adopt and assimilate into the white-led contemporary worship

culture made popular by megachurches such as Hillsong and Bethel. This process has been made possible by technology and the exposure and access it grants to people in search of new worship music to use in their own churches. While these megachurches have benefitted from the developments in digital technology over the past few decades, Bowler and Reagan also note their “entrepreneurial spirit to act as able partners with the expanding worship industry in production, marketing, distribution and tracking of new worship music” (Bowler and Reagan 2014, p. 188). The expansion of the worship industry has provided small local communities such as the BBCs with access to a broad range of worship music that is adopted and adapted into local corporate worship services. Yet, the question is, how is the English-speaking service at BCEC able to relate to the songs written by people of such different backgrounds and cultural context? While an initial answer is that the lyrics of these popular worship songs generally address the core doctrines of faith shared across cultures, thereby allowing them to be easily adopted cross-culturally, further analysis does allow us to gain a better understanding of why the BBCs chose these songs and attended a service which exclusively sang these songs. After all, even predominantly white contemporary Christian music still consists of a large range of styles and genres, and through analysis of the lyrical theology of these songs, we can gain insights into how the BBCs perceive themselves and God.

3.3. *Self-Perception in Congregational Songs of BCEC English-Speaking Service*

Drawing from the above discussion on cultural identity, scholars have highlighted a tendency of BBCs to be more conservative in nature when interacting within their community. This conservative nature is not limited to social interaction, but also relates to spiritual interaction with God. Evangelical Chinese Christians generally identify with more conservative theology, and their cultural context discourages them from disclosing personal emotions and experiences while simultaneously valuing self-control and indirect communication. Cao notes that it is this Chinese “way of life” that “tends to underplay all matters of the heart” and prevents many younger-generation Chinese from sharing personal emotions with their parents, let alone in public settings (Cao 2005, pp. 194–95). This conservatism seems in direct contrast with Western cultural values present within the modern contemporary worship sung at BCEC, which promotes self-expression, individualism, and embodied celebratory dancing and clapping. How are these diverse cultural expressions evident in their repertoire? While the worship leaders at BCEC select songs exclusively from contemporary worship music from the West, they also seem to avoid the more up-tempo songs that those same churches also produce. Within the set list, there are no songs that lend themselves to dancing or upbeat celebration; furthermore, there are not even any lyrics that encourage the lifting of hands or any bodily expression other than bowing down. Worshippers at BCEC utilize Western songs but adopt specific songs that encourage reverence over emotive celebratory songs.

In the case of BCEC, the worship leaders are aware that their role requires them to firstly select and lead songs that are both accessible and relatable to the cultural identities of the BBCs, but then strive to lead them to a place of worship that is free from the inhibitions and misconceptions their cultural backgrounds have instilled. One of those inhibitions that is commonly experienced in Chinese churches is the concept of shame. Honor–shame cultures are often linked to world-majority cultures and particularly cultures of the Middle East and East Asia where particular sociocultural values and practices center on avoiding public and personal shame and honoring their communities above personal guilt or individual success, which are emphasized more in Western contexts.¹² With regards to soteriology, Western contexts emphasize Christ’s work bringing freedom and cleansing from individual sins, while honor–shame cultures highlight Christ’s salvation as covering shame and restoring from communal disgrace. Within Chinese cultures, as Settle emphasizes, the fear of public perception and the need to “save face” contributes to the honor–shame culture, preventing individuals from being able to freely and joyfully operate in the realm of grace, as it is of great importance to them to save face and not shame

the family with their sins and problems (Settles 2012, p. 23) Furthermore, the Chinese culture is rich with traditions and rituals that are supposed to help protect people from shame. The song “Give Us Clean Hands” (Week 1) is a popular song at BCEC, as the lyrics are in reference to Psalm 24 and relates to this honor–shame culture, honoring God and asking Him to cleanse and purify the worshippers’ hands and hearts. The lyrics to the verse address Chinese cultural norms of honoring ancestors and gods through bowing and bending:

We bow our hearts, we bend our knees,
Oh, Spirit come make us humble.
We turn our eyes, from evil things,
Oh Lord, we cast down our idols.¹³

Additionally, worship leaders seemed to address the honor–shame culture that gave cause for rituals followed by many BBCs growing up, as they chose songs that focused on emphasizing the grace of God. An example of this is “From the Inside Out” (Week 2), where the lyrics at the beginning of the song highlight the mercy and grace of God despite the many failures of humans, giving assurance and hope to the worshippers that they are not exempt from God’s forgiveness:

A thousand times I’ve failed, still your mercy remains.
And should I stumble again, I’m caught in your grace.¹⁴

The messages conveyed by those lyrics, in general, are atypical of Chinese culture (See Wu 2013), with shame and failures being things that are often hidden from the sight of others, and the fear of failure governing the way they live. The same message is also portrayed in another song, “At the Cross” (Week 4), where the words once again highlight the fact that God’s love remains for us despite Him already searching and knowing our hearts and failures:

Oh Lord, you’ve searched me, You know my way.
Even when I fail you, I know you love me.¹⁵

Another reoccurring theme around self-perception is the reassurance in identity. Though BBCs may face social uncertainty, they find identity as God’s children. While Yee calls into question the lack of worship songs that speak to the social uncertainty and marginalization suffered by the Chinese in the West (Yee 2009), it is also evident that in BCEC, this issue is addressed through song choices such as “No Longer Slaves” (Week 1), where the repetitive chorus references the Scriptures from Galatians 4:6 and Romans 8:14–15, reminding the congregation of their identity as children of God despite their social status wherever they live:

I’m no longer a slave to fear, I am a child of God.¹⁶

The addressing of fear also appears in “Whom Shall I Fear” (Week 4), where congregants declare the assurance they have in God, reminding them that there is no need to fear the “darkness” or the “enemy” because no opposition can stand against God. The lyrics in the bridge speak strongly to this theme of banishing the fear within their hearts:

And nothing formed against me shall stand,
You hold the whole world in your hands.
I’m holding onto your promises,
You are faithful, you are faithful.¹⁷

This theme was also found within the same set list (Week 4), as the song “Dwell” echoed a very similar message. The words in the bridge again provide the congregants with a space to repeatedly declare the power of God against the forces of darkness that they fear, using Scripture from Isaiah 54:17:

No weapon formed against me will prosper,
No weapon formed against me will prosper,

No weapon formed against me will prosper,
Says the Lord.¹⁸

The lyrics of the chorus remind worshippers of the safety they find in God, and that there is no need to fear when they trust in the Lord, even in the face of the “enemy” (Verse 1, Line 2), the “terror” (Verse 1, Line 3), the “darkness” (Verse 2, Line 2), and “evil” (Verse 2, Line 3).

In the same set list, the worship leader chose to conclude the service with another song addressing fear in “You Never Let Go”. The theme running through the song again echoes the songs sung earlier in the set (“Whom Shall I Fear”, “Dwell”), and overcoming fear is once again the main focus:

And I will fear no evil, for my God is with me.
And if my God is with me,
Whom then shall I fear?
Whom then shall I fear?¹⁹

The worship leader from Week 1 also chose a song with a similar message to conclude the service, with the song “Our God” leading the worshippers in declaring the Scripture from Romans 8:31. Once again, there seems to be a focus on letting go of the fears they have as they hold close to God’s faithfulness and strength:

And if our God is for us,
then who could ever stop us.
And if our God is with us,
then what could stand against.²⁰

The selection of songs focusing on the theme of overcoming fear is significant, showing corporate worship as a space to publicly name and negotiate areas of fear and shame.

Within this honor–shame culture, a lack of self-esteem can emerge. As ChenFeng notes, the negative impacts of facing intergenerational and intercultural conflict while growing up mean that Chinese immigrants can tend to have lower self-esteem than their Western counterparts (ChenFeng 2014, p. 26). Entering into worship in BCEC is often humble and reflective in nature, as opposed to the triumphant and vibrant introductions into worship that are commonly found in more Western megachurches. For example, “All the Poor and Powerless” was used as the first song in Week 1, with a distinct sense of humility and a hint of shame as the song calls congregants to worship:

(Verse 1)
All the poor and powerless, and all the lost and lonely.
All the thieves will come confess and know that you are holy.
(Verse 2)
All the hearts who are content, and all who feel unworthy.
All who hurt with nothing left, will know that you are holy.²¹

In summary, the adapted and adopted Western songs utilized by BCEC reflect many of the conservative values and expressions that are prevailing within their Chinese culture. Although their song choices are taken from different cultural contexts, the lyrics of the songs link to fear, shame, honor, and bowing resonate with and stretch beyond Chinese cultural norms, giving expression to a unique liturgical identity for BBCs. The agency of BCEC is observed as they sing the songs of the dominant worship culture, while selectively maintaining some of their own cultural distinctives. The song lyrics may not specifically mention “shame”, as they originated outside honor–shame cultures, yet the appropriation and assimilation of these dominant worship songs are selectively oriented towards images of shame, even if the word “shame” goes unsung.

3.4. Perception of God in Congregational Songs of the BCEC English-Speaking Service

Through continued repertoire analysis, we now explore how BCEC perceive God. Tseng notes that Chinese evangelicals in the USA adhere “closely to the theological and cultural assumptions of mainstream evangelicalism” (Tseng 2002, p. 253). In his analysis of the lyrical theology in the most sung worship songs in the USA from 1989–2004, Lester Ruth found many worship songs referred to God generically, while Jesus Christ was named much more than the Father or the Holy Spirit when a divine person was named explicitly. He attributed this fact to the Incarnation possibly giving Jesus Christ the advantage as he can be visualized more easily than the other two (Ruth 2015, p. 71), and highlighted the critical importance of worship songs recognizing the Godhead Persons and the roles each play in salvation (Ruth 2015, p. 69). Out of the twenty songs utilized at BCEC, only four explicitly addressed or referred to Jesus, while there were an additional three that implicitly referred to him through lyrical content and description. This factor may indicate that worshippers at BCEC are not as attracted to the visual imagery of Jesus and salvation as much as white evangelical communities, due to their overriding inclination perceiving God as the Father that demands honor, reverence, and fear. It must also be noted that not one song referred to the Holy Spirit as the divine Person, supporting the notion that the BBCs are comparatively more conservative in their approach to theology and worship, distinguishing themselves from the beliefs of the Charismatic churches who write many of the songs that are sung. Here is where we see potential agency, as they intentionally choose not to sing certain songs from these churches that relate to an emotive experience with the Spirit. The lyrical theology of the songs sung present access to God with more distance, humility, and reverence as opposed to the closeness, intimacy, anthropomorphic encounter, and individual confidence referenced in other popular worship songs by these non-Chinese songwriters.²²

Reverence and humility in approaching God through a strong sense of honor was observed. For example, the action of bowing is the only action that is referred to in the twenty songs, such as in “Here I Am To Worship” (Week 3):

Here I am to worship, here I am to bow down,
Here I am to say that you’re my God.²³

Another song that continues the action of bowing or kneeling is “This is Our God” (Week 2):

I will fall at your feet,
I will fall at your feet,
and I will worship you here.²⁴

The previously mentioned songs “At the Cross” (Week 4) and “Give Us Clean Hands” (Week 1) both contain the action word ‘bow’ as well. Furthermore, there is an overriding sense of humility and reverence in other songs too, such as “I Will Offer Up My Life” (Week 2):

In surrender I must give my every part,
Lord, receive the sacrifice of a broken heart.²⁵

Lau-Clayton highlights that one of the main characteristics of Chinese culture when expressing love is in serving others; therefore, service to God is one of the main ways in which they express their love and worship (Lau-Clayton 2014, p. 17). Thus, this song resonates with cultural expressions and theological beliefs, as the chorus provides an opportunity for the congregation to offer themselves back to God in service and sacrifice. The first lines of the chorus are representative of this:

Jesus, what can I give, what can I bring?
To so faithful a friend, to so loving a King?²⁶

Strong evidence of the importance of knowing God through Scripture is observed in these worship songs. With many contemporary worship songs being criticized for lacking

content in regards to the Gospel, it can be said that the songs selected by the leaders at BCEC are scripturally grounded.²⁷ Songs such as “Give Us Clean Hands” (Psalm 24), “No Longer Slaves” (Romans 8:14–15), “Our God” (Romans 8:31), “100,000 Reasons” (Psalm 103), “Man of Sorrows” (Isaiah 53), “Dwell” (Isaiah 54:17, Psalm 91), “You Never Let Go” (Psalm 23), “I Will Offer Up My Life” (John 4:24, Philippians 2:8), and “Cornerstone” (Psalm 118:21–23, Matthew 21:41–43) are direct references or paraphrases of Scripture, whilst other songs in the repertoire contain many doctrinal truths and core concepts of biblical faith. The objective in choosing these songs is clear; the worship leaders select songs that portray important theological truths and reminders that God is known first and foremost through his Word. The experiential language of many popular songs is limited within this BCEC repertoire. Instead, the song choice indicates a high regard for Scripture as the primary source of authority and theological knowledge. In summary, the adapted and adopted Western songs utilized by BCEC reveal a God who can be known through Scripture. This God is worthy of worship through humility, reverence, and the offering of one’s entire life in service.

4. Conclusions

Multilingual and multicultural worship can take on many models and expressions. For the BBCs that attend BCEC, singing English songs from the West has dominated their corporate liturgical identity. Initially, Chinese immigration to the UK in the 1950s and 1960s led to an increased population of churches. Many of the Chinese church services would be conducted in Cantonese, catering for the needs of first-generation immigrants mainly from Hong Kong. Yet, the children of these older generations grew up with a bicultural hybridized identity expressed first in small English-speaking youth groups that led to English-speaking worship services within Chinese churches. Though limited research on these communities exists, our initial exploratory study of the worship music repertoire of English-speaking services at BCEC over a four-week period revealed the following. First, there was no specific BBC worship music employed at BCEC. With the population of BBC Christians being small, combined with their struggles in establishing their own identity in faith and in their musical preferences, their worship songs were all taken from prominent contemporary worship churches and bands led by white Americans, Australians, and British. A BBC evangelical Christian reading of these songs revealed that they were adopted to resonate with cultural norms such as honor, shame, reverence, and bowing. Secondly, though these songs originated from more charismatic Western churches, the song lyrics downplayed anthropomorphic encounters and lacked more expressive actions such as dancing, jumping, and lifting of hands. Instead, the songs emphasized knowing God through singing Scripture. Third, the English-speaking service within a larger Chinese church seems to provide a liturgical home for these BBCs to sustain cultural values, express hybrid worship identities, and maintain familial structures.

Our hope is that this study will encourage additional research on the worship activities of BBCs, which could include ethnographic research with BCEC worship leaders and congregants for a fuller reading of the liturgical and cultural meanings drawn from these worship songs. Drawing on a larger sample size that revealed the repertoire of BCEC for an entire year would increase certainty in our findings and provide additional insights into the relationships between BBCs and contemporary worship music. Additional repertoire studies to compare the worship songs sung at all the various services at BCEC or in a larger sample of BBC churches could provide a wider view of the liturgical identity of this entire multi-lingual Chinese evangelical community. Though we have argued that the adopted and adapted songs from the UK, USA, and Australia carry meaning and identity within this congregation, we also look forward to future artistic worship expressions from BCEC and BBC Christians as they continue to discern how best to express their unique cultural identities in their worship of God.

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Appendix A. Set Lists from BCEC English-Speaking Service from 18 June until 9 July 2017

Sunday Service	Set List
Week 1	All the Poor and Powerless by All Sons & Daughters Give Us Clean Hands by Chris Tomlin <i>Sermon</i> Hosanna by Brooke Fraser No Longer Slaves by Jonathan and Melissa Helser Our God by Chris Tomlin
Week 2	10,000 Reasons by Matt Redman and Jonas Myrin From the Inside Out by Joel Houston <i>Sermon</i> I Will Offer Up My Life by Matt Redman Man of Sorrows by Brooke Ligertwood and Matt Crocker This is Our God by Reuben Morgan
Week 3	Here I Am to Worship by Tim Hughes Before the Throne of God Above Originally by Charitie Lees Bancroft <i>Sermon</i> Enough by Chris Tomlin Christ is Enough by Jonas Myrin and Reuben Morgan God and God Alone by Chris Tomlin
Week 4	Cornerstone by Edward Mote, Eric Liljero, Jonas Myrin and Reuben Morgan Whom Shall I Fear by Chris Tomlin <i>Sermon</i> Dwell by Aaron Keyes At the Cross by Darlene Zschech and Reuben Morgan You Never Let Go by Matt Redman

Notes

- ¹ Terms such as *liturgy* and *liturgical theology*, though traditionally tied to discussions around sacramentality and liturgical ordo, are intentionally utilized within the current scholarship focused on the unique contributions of global evangelicals to liturgical theology and liturgical identity. See (Ross 2014; Ellis 2004; Cherry 2010).
- ² Though we will engage with a variety of sources, particular methodological emphasis will be placed on the growing field of ethnodoxology, exploring how Christians in specific cultures engage with God and the world through artistic expression. With regards to culture, priority will be given to Asian voices studying immigrant Evangelical churches in the U.S.A., U.K., and Canada. For more on the growing field of ethnodoxology, see Krabil (2013).
- ³ Countless repertoire studies exist within worship studies and hymnography. See Clarke (2017); Sizer (1978); Blumhofer (2023). A number of these studies analyze particular theological themes within popular worship songs, such as confession, sacramental theology, Trinitarian language, the Sabbath, or confession. See also Koenig (2008); Ruth (2007); Perigo (2024); McKinley (2024). These studies of contemporary worship song repertoires have been expanded to incorporate cultural studies within several communities outside of the West to examine cultural resonances and the unique liturgical identities of local communities who localize contemporary worship music. See, for example, studies on the use of contemporary worship songs and Protestant hymns in Brazil, Silva Steuernagel (2021) and Monteiro (2022).
- ⁴ As there is a lack of research on BBC Christians, the literature on American-Born Chinese, or Asian-Americans as they are commonly referred to, will benefit our study as they share some similarities in immigration history and experience as well as cultural identity with those of BBCs.
- ⁵ This value may be in tension within these communities, as Jesus' teaching highlights that the call to discipleship may include the "hating" of one's father and mother (Luke 14:26). Additionally, the New Testament, especially Galatians, expands the household boundaries to include others that are not included in normative cultural standards.
- ⁶ For further discussion on the characteristics of Asian immigrant churches see Alumkal (2003).
- ⁷ See, for example, WLR Team (2023).
- ⁸ Contrastingly, Gloria Fanchiang traces a history of Asian-American worship music from the 1970s to the present to encourage Asian Americans to utilize the contextual songs being written and for these churches to write their own worship songs. See Fanchiang (n.d.). Though these artists and songs exist, BCEC's English service chooses not to utilize them.
- ⁹ This characteristic seems to resonate with Chong's analysis of Cantonese Christian worship music among Hong Kong immigrants in Toronto. See E. K. C. Chong (2011, p. 20).
- ¹⁰ Similarities here seem to exist between BBCs and second-generation Korean Americans. See Kim (2006, p. 227).
- ¹¹ Worship leaders were not informed beforehand regarding the nature of this study, to prevent any potential influence on their song choices by the study.
- ¹² For additional discussion on ministry and missions in honor-shame cultures, see Georges and Baker (2016).
- ¹³ Charlie Hall, "Give Us Clean Hands", 2 May 2015, YouTube video, 4:03, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXltkMg5MUE> (accessed on 21 August 2024).
- ¹⁴ Hillsong Worship, "From the Inside Out—Hillsong Worship", 3 August 2017, YouTube video, 5:37, <https://youtu.be/i-9mUDbGsEk?si=vTn41kfradn2rl22> (accessed on 21 August 2024).
- ¹⁵ Hillsong Worship, "At the Cross—Hillsong Worship", 3 August 2017, YouTube video, 7:21, https://youtu.be/xspg7SNxTWA?si=SRUPcMs_gMBI9i3A (accessed on 24 June 2024).
- ¹⁶ Bethel Music, "No Longer Slaves (Official Lyric Video)—Jonathan David and Melissa Helse | We Will Not be Shaken, 26 January 2015, YouTube video, 6:09, <https://youtu.be/f8TkUMJtK5k?si=HYwCljddoK3yCVrK> (accessed on 24 June 2024).
- ¹⁷ christomlinmusic, "Christ Tomlin—Whom Shall I Fear [God of Angel Armies] (Lyric Video)", 29 October 2012, 4:28, YouTube video, 4:28, https://youtu.be/qOkImV2cJDg?si=KbsTepou_5PwP5AR (accessed on 24 June 2024).
- ¹⁸ Aaron Keyes, "Dwell (by Aaron Keyes, In the Living Room), 30 October 2012, YouTube video, 9:13, <https://youtu.be/ufA4JDYupZA?si=PVdjfoJQIvwiwHur> (accessed on 24 June 2024).
- ¹⁹ Matt Redman, "You Never Let Go", 28 August 2015, YouTube video, 4:47, <https://youtu.be/wtD9HSxaMKU?si=NnxhwQMsOuF59jN3> (accessed on 24 June 2024).
- ²⁰ christomlinmusic, "Chris Tomlin—Our God (Live)", 29 October 2013, YouTube video, 5:27, <https://youtu.be/NJpt1hSYf2o?si=qXyP9BiVebwKxIrc> (accessed on 24 June 2024).
- ²¹ AllSonsDaughtersVEVO, "All Sons & Daughters—All the Poor and Powerless", 3 July 2015, YouTube video, 6:16, YouTube video, 6:16, <https://youtu.be/ieOL4X3nk2c?si=6wtC6zb-Yjj3c4qt> (accessed on 24 June 2024).
- ²² For further discussion, see Lau-Clayton (2014, p. 164); Hall (2006, p. 141); and Hardy and Yarnell (2015, p. 114). The lack of intimacy and experience may be leading to a "silent exodus" and dissatisfaction among younger members of the church. See Lee (1996).
- ²³ Tim Hughes—Topic, "Here I Am to Worship [Live], 1 March 2018, YouTube video, 6:49, https://youtu.be/z4A5tIA6_Tg?si=2HeXScmCGnu1RX4W (accessed on 24 June 2024).

- 24 Hillsong Worship, “This is Our God—Hillsong Worship”, 3 August 2017, YouTube video, 6:19, <https://youtu.be/fS-RLamCOt0?si=FMCXtt7A6eKnpexu> (accessed on 24 June 2024).
- 25 Amorphofalis, “Matt Redman—I Will Off Up My Life”, 19 April 2009, YouTube video, 5:07, <https://youtu.be/RWXWHdgapjI?si=kTpdqc5Xn04wZVix> (accessed on 24 June 2024).
- 26 See Note 25 above.
- 27 For example, see Dawn (1995).

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Article

The Precedent for Vernacular and Multilingual Liturgies in the Catholic Church in Latin America

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Abstract: This paper examines the emergence of vernacular liturgies in Latin America, particularly through the incorporation of folk music in Nicaraguan Masses following the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II). In response to the Romanization of the Catholic liturgy in the nineteenth century, folk songs in local languages became a form of theological and cultural resistance, offering an alternative to the Latin-dominated liturgical tradition. Despite Vatican disapproval of certain Mass settings due to their non-traditional texts, these vernacular liturgies transcended their missionary origins, enriching both devotional practice and theological discourse. The study explores key Vatican II documents on liturgical participation, examines the role of liberation theology in framing vernacular and multilingual Masses as tools for social and religious transformation, as well as historical precedent as a lens for understanding the progression of change in the setting of the Mass, particularly in Latin America. Using the *Misa Campesina*, by Carlos Mejía Godoy, as a case study, the paper demonstrates how Nicaraguan folk Masses embody the intersections of ecclesial reform, cultural identity, and social justice within the broader context of Latin American liturgical innovation.

Keywords: Second Vatican Council; Vatican II; Nicaraguan masses; multilingualism; Latin American liturgical theology; Roman Catholic liturgy; liberation theology; Sacroanctum Concilium

1. Introduction

In Latin America, vernacular liturgies began incorporating diverse musical styles, particularly in folk Masses in Nicaragua. In the years following Vatican II, folk songs associated with vernacular languages emerged as a counter to the Romanization of the Catholic liturgy that had taken place in the nineteenth century. Although many Mass settings created in Latin America during this period were deemed inappropriate by the Vatican because of their texts, the resulting liturgies transcended their initial missionary purpose by offering a deeper theological and cultural framework. This paper contributes to the field of liturgical studies by examining the missionary and devotional nature of vernacular liturgy in the Catholic Church through a theological and historical lens. It will explore instances of vernacular liturgy and their context, key documents from the Second Vatican Council regarding the importance of participation in the liturgy, and liberation theology as a lens for interpreting the multilingualism and vernacular Mass settings in Latin America. The paper will also demonstrate how specific vernacular and multilingual Masses in Nicaragua represent the intersections and culmination of these themes, particularly in the *Misa Campesina* by Carlos Mejía Godoy.

2. Theological Considerations

Culture is often seen as essential to expressing the Christian faith. The Church is said to “incarnate” itself through culture, preserving theological truths while allowing for diverse forms of expression. The very Incarnation of Christ as an Aramaic-speaking Jewish man speaks to the intentionality of his inception in the ancient world. The premise of Catholic theology is that God came to humankind to be with them in a particular time, teach them using their language and customs, and love them immeasurably only to succumb to mortality and be fully realized as God in his resurrection. Scripture points to this clearly in John 1:14, 1 Timothy 2:5, Colossians 2:9, Philippians 2:7, Hebrews 4:15, and Galatians 4:4.

At the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, it was declared that Jesus Christ has two natures—one human and one divine—united in a single person, a concept known as the hypostatic union. This means Jesus is fully God and fully man, with both natures remaining distinct yet perfectly united. Anselm of Canterbury, a Benedictine philosopher and theologian, later emphasized the distinction between the divine (invisible) and human (visible) aspects of Christ, as follows:

Therefore the God-man, whom we require to be of a nature both human and Divine, cannot be produced by a change from one into the other, nor by an imperfect commingling of both in a third; since these things cannot be, or, if they could be, would avail nothing to our purpose. Moreover, if these two complete natures are said to be joined somehow, in such a way that one may be Divine while the other is human, and yet that which is God not be the same with that which is man, it is impossible for both to do the work necessary to be accomplished. For God will not do it, because he has no debt to pay; and man will not do it, because he cannot. Therefore, in order that the God-man may perform this, it is necessary that the same being should perfect God and perfect man, in order to make this atonement. For he cannot and ought not to do it, unless he be very God and very man. Since, then, it is necessary that the God-man preserve the completeness of each nature, it is no less necessary that these two natures be united entire in one person, just as a body and a reasonable soul exist together in every human being; for otherwise it is impossible that the same being should be very God and very man.

(Anselm of Canterbury 1926, p. 59)

The hypostatic union, the doctrine that Jesus is fully God and fully man, is a model for the Christological–Ecclesiological relationship, the invisible and visible relationship between Christ and the church. Therefore, as the church teaches its followers to be priests, the “People of God” (a phrase popularized by the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen gentium* to encompass both the clergy and laity) becomes sacramental to God’s existence. Humans cannot exist outside their lens of culture, and Jesus, being fully human, brings with him the culture of a Jewish man. Culture is the hallmark of being human. For this study, I will be using Kathryn Tanner’s following description of “culture”: “Human beings, because they lack biologically based blueprints for behavior, are formless and aimless, hardly human at all, without culture” (Tanner 1997, p. 26). Turner describes culture as essential to be human and, furthermore, relational. She writes, “The struggle over culture, whether and to whatever extent it produces true commonality of beliefs and sentiments, presumes culture as common stakes: all parties at least agree on the importance of the cultural items that they struggle to define and connect up with one another” (ibid, p. 57). Cultural items include music-making, vernacular, art, dance, etc., and the suppression of culture is, therefore, a suppression of humanity.

This does not mean, however, that humans are, by virtue of being human, sacramental in precisely the same way as Jesus. The Incarnation of Christ was a historical and non-repeatable event according to Christian tradition. However, as Anscar Chupungco has considered, “the incarnation is an historical event, but its mystery lives on whenever the Church assumes the social and cultural conditions of the people among whom she dwells. Adaptation is thus not an option, but a theological imperative arising from incarnational exigency” (Chupungco 2006, p. 59). The Church must, therefore, grow from within communities and culture and cannot possibly grow apart from them. *Ad gentes*, one of the documents promulgated at the Second Vatican Council, reads, “the Christian life will be adapted to the mentality and character of each culture, and local traditions together with the special qualities of each national family, illumined by the light of the gospel, will be taken up into a Catholic unity” (Second Vatican Council 1996b).

Ad Gentes, as a foundational document of Vatican II on the mission of the Church, offers a repudiation of the colonial history associated with the Catholic Church by emphasizing the respect for and incorporation of local customs and cultures rather than asserting dominance over them. The document frames the inculturation of missionary activity—that is, the proclamation of the Gospel to non-believers—within the context of the Trinitarian missions of the Son and the Spirit, both of whom are sent forth by the Father (Hahnenberg 2007, p. 135). Moreover, the inculturation of the liturgy is explicitly included within the Church’s missionary efforts in the initial sections of *Ad Gentes*, as follows: “The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father”.¹ Whereas pre-Vatican II missionary activity was predominantly focused on the preaching of the Gospel, the opening paragraphs of *Ad Gentes* present a broader vision of the Church’s mission and how it is to be accomplished, particularly in response to the growing secularization of Western Europe (Hahnenberg 2007, p. 134).

3. Developing Active Participation in the Liturgy

In the fourth century, the Catholic Church adopted Latin, the language of the Roman Empire, as its primary language. As the Roman military expanded its reach across conquered territories, Latin gradually replaced Greek, the original language of the Gospel writings. Over time, Latin became widespread, and the Vulgate, a Latin translation of the Bible by St. Jerome, was established as the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church. Despite the Church’s continued use of Latin, however, its usage declined throughout Western Europe.

Although the Council of Trent reaffirmed Latin as the official language of the liturgy and council in 1545, early signs of a desire for the vernacular in religious practice emerged. Ferdinand I, the successor of Charles V, along with the French representatives at the council, expressed a preference for incorporating more vernacular language into the liturgy.² Specifically, Ferdinand I requested permission to use German psalms and hymns in religious services.

As Latin persisted over the centuries, its usage among the general population steadily declined, effectively turning the Roman Rite into a European export (McGreevy 2023). Parishioners increasingly attended Mass as passive spectators, and few priests were proficient enough to conduct the Latin Rite in a way that was comprehensible to the congregation. As Rita Ferrone observes, “there were no missals for the people to ‘follow along’ with what Father was doing, no translations of the Latin for use in the pew, such as existed in the church of the 1940s and 1950s... Many priests themselves were only minimally skilled in pronouncing the prayers, and would mumble or rush through the liturgical texts without any expectation that the people gathered could make head or tail of what was being said.

In any case, it was not considered necessary or desirable for them to do so. Attending to the words would be a ‘distraction’ from the individual’s prayer” (Ferrone 2007, p. 2).

The concept of “active participation” by the laity in the liturgy began to take root and gain traction during the Liturgical Movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This movement was notably influenced by figures such as Dom Prosper Guéranger of the Benedictine Abbey of Solesmes in France, who played a pioneering role in the liturgical revival. Guéranger sought to celebrate the liturgy according to a purely Roman model, drawing inspiration from the medieval period to address the diverse local liturgies that had developed across France (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2025). Simultaneously, in Germany, a patristic revival at the University of Tübingen further contributed to the academic study and development of liturgical practices (ibid, p. 6).

The liturgical revival was based on a “return to the sources” approach, though the objectives differed significantly across regions. Dom Prosper Guéranger emphasized unity through uniformity, aiming to address the diverse liturgical practices within France. In contrast, the revival in Germany highlighted the concept of the “mystical body of Christ”, which questioned the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church. Keith Pecklers, S. J., observes the following: “For his part, Guéranger lamented the fact that such liturgical diversity deprived the faithful of drinking deeply from the church’s wellspring and thus advocated a liturgical practice at Solesmes which adhered strictly to the Tridentine Roman Rite, basing much of his own research, however, on medieval foundations rather than patristic ones” (Pecklers 2012b, p. 320). It was particularly the patristic sources, which emphasized the Church as the “mystical body of Christ”, that had a lasting impact on the Second Vatican Council.

At the height of the Liturgical Movement, Pope Pius X published his 1903 document, *Tra le Sollecitudini*, which recognized the social dimensions of the liturgy, particularly in relation to participation and cultural representation. In the document, he states the following: “... Our people assemble for the purpose of acquiring the true Christian spirit from its first and indispensable source, namely, active participation in the most sacred mysteries and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church” (Pope Pius and Proprio 1903). While the goal of achieving active participation through the use of local languages, musical styles, and cultural integration had not yet been fully realized, raising awareness about the importance of lay involvement in the liturgy played a crucial role in shaping the evolution of liturgy and music in Latin America following Vatican II. This was particularly significant as the Liturgical Movement began as an educational exploration of the liturgy, which later developed into a broader movement focused on mission and evangelization (Ferrone 2007, p. 6).

Tra le Sollecitudini focused primarily on chant and polyphony. While considerably narrow in its inclusion of different musics compared to *Sacrosanctum Concilium* at the Second Vatican Council, the document is aware of the need for a unifying quality of liturgical music. It reads as follows:

Sacred music should consequently possess, in the highest degree, the qualities proper to the liturgy, and in particular sanctity and goodness of form, which will spontaneously produce the final quality of universality.

It must be holy, and must, therefore, exclude all profanity not only in itself, but in the manner in which it is presented by those who execute it.

It must be true art, for otherwise it will be impossible for it to exercise on the minds of those who listen to it that efficacy which the Church aims at obtaining in admitting into her liturgy the art of musical sounds.

But it must, at the same time, be universal in the sense that while every nation is permitted to admit into its ecclesiastical compositions those special forms which

may be said to constitute its native music, still these forms must be subordinated in such a manner to the general characteristics of sacred music that nobody of any nation may receive an impression other than good on hearing them.³

The document references Roman polyphony and Gregorian chant as key examples that demonstrate his description of the qualities of sacred music. Within the broader history of liturgical music and its practices, this document can be understood as, at least in part, a historical response to the operatic and instrumental Mass settings that were popular in Western Europe at the close of the nineteenth century. This response is evident in section 11, which states the following: “In the hymns of the Church, the traditional form of the hymn is preserved. It is not lawful, therefore, to compose, for instance, a *Tantum ergo* in such a way that the first strophe presents a romanza, a cavatina, an adagio, and the *Genitori* an allegro”.⁴

Chant was seen as a way to mitigate the overexclusion of the congregation by the operatic choirs and instrumental music of the late nineteenth century Western European church. The communion procession, particularly, was an opportunity to make people aware of the corporate act, as Benedictine Patrick Cummins wrote the following:

Thanks to the reform of the communion-procession, which is reviving in many places, we begin to understand again one of the main aspects of the Communion: that it is the consummation of a corporate offering, and that the reception of the Sacrament is itself a corporate action. . . The liturgy uses for this, the communion-procession, no particular method, but the usual musical plan of all processions: an appropriate refrain, alternated with an appropriate psalm. The refrain, called an antiphon, is a text selected for its eucharistic meaning; it is sung again and again, so that its being repeated may help to reveal its spiritual implications.

(Cummins 1943)

The liturgical revival, while aiming to restore active participation through chant, ultimately resulted in a more homogenized, Romanized style of liturgical music. This emphasis on chant, particularly in Latin, still became problematic as the language was incomprehensible to the majority of the Catholic Church, diminishing the potential for congregational engagement. However, at the Second Vatican Council in 1962, the document *Sacrosanctum Concilium* permitted the use of the vernacular in the liturgy and urged the clergy to familiarize themselves with the cultural traditions of the diverse communities they were called to serve. This emphasis on local idioms in the Church’s mission is reflected both in *Ad Gentes* and *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, which share a common focus on cultural integration and liturgical inculturation. In *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC 119), it states the following:

In some places, in mission lands especially, there are people who have their own musical tradition, and this plays an important part in their religious and social life. For this reason their music should be held in due esteem and should be given a suitable role. Not only in forming their religious sense but also in adapting worship to their native genius. . . Therefore, in the musical training of missionaries, special care should be taken to ensure that they will be capable of encouraging the traditional music of those peoples both in the schools and in sacred services, as far as may be practicable.

(Second Vatican Council 1996a)

The permission for the inculturation of the liturgy at Vatican II, in effect, fulfilled the vision of Pope Pius X, who had emphasized participation of the laity. The permission to inculturate the liturgy built on Pius X’s earlier initiatives by incorporating the vernacular

and, eventually, cultural music as essential modes of active participation in the liturgy. By drawing on historical precedents in the liturgical movement and further back, Vatican II sought to renew the Catholic Church, integrating diverse cultural expressions while remaining faithful to its core teachings. This became known as *ressourcement*.

4. Ressourcement

The return to the early sources that had driven liturgical renewal also led to the reforms at the Second Vatican Council in what was known as *ressourcement*. AG and SC, particularly shared a lens for unity in the early church through diversity as Faggioli illuminates the following:

In those same decades in Europe, and especially among the Russian Orthodox theologian *émigrés* in France, *ressourcement* became the basis for the renewal of the Orthodox theology of the diaspora in the twentieth century. It was not an accident that the eucharistic ecclesiology of the post-Vatican II period retrieved many of its insights from Orthodox theology. Also, for Vatican II *ressourcement* was one of the most decisive keywords for twentieth-century theology: it embodied the need for theology to go back to the old sources of the undivided Church and the modern world, and between Christians and all of humankind.

(Faggioli 2012, p. 20)

The vision of the early undivided church, before the Catholic Church split from the Orthodox Church, would then appropriately celebrate diversity and unity within the church today, particularly in the Catholic liturgy. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 37 reads as follows: “Even in the liturgy the Church does not wish to impose a rigid uniformity in matters which do not involve the faith or the good of the whole community. Rather does she respect and foster the qualities and talents of the various races and nations”.⁵ The liturgy, therefore, must be both universally comprehensible through simple and concise language and inculturated by its community to catechize more effectively. Historically, the liturgy has adapted to various languages from Greek to Latin to Slavonic, from Roman Rite to Byzantine Rite, and from early commonly held meal practices to formalized eucharistic rites, so it would be imperative to these points that the liturgy now be understood by the laity. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 10 reads as follows:

Nevertheless the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows. For the aim and object of apostolic works is that all who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of His Church, to take part in the sacrifice, and to eat the Lord’s supper.⁶

According to the passage, the rite of baptism enables and demands that the laity participate in the liturgy, as all activity of the Church flows from and to the liturgy. The invisible and visible, Christological and ecclesiological, come together with the Church as the sacrament, or visible sign of God’s love and presence. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 5 reads as follows: “For it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church”.⁷ The whole Church is the laity, who are living sacraments of God’s presence. The liturgy is viewed as an intersection between humankind and God in the action of Christ at Mass. As a mode of *ressourcement*, Ratzinger references Augustine’s *Tractatus in Ioannem* to describe the event of Christ as follows: the paschal mystery “is not the action of a man, but an action of God. . . It is precisely this ‘work of Jesus’ which is the real content of the Liturgy” (Ratzinger 2003). The past is made present, and the living sacrament of the Church encounters Christ in the real presence of the Eucharist.

The liturgy serves as an encounter between the invisible and the visible, with the inculturated liturgy representing the latter. The concept of “noble simplicity” within the liturgy is intended to ensure clarity and highlight the themes and words of the Mass without obstruction. Participation in the liturgy similarly occurs on the following two levels: internal and external. Internal participation involves understanding and contemplating the words spoken and presented at Mass, while external participation entails engaging with the dialogues, hymns, and movements of the liturgy. However, the external takes on a more communal dimension and awareness, as it also has the capacity to edify or dissolve the personhood and image of God present in one another. External participation is always participating in the mutual sanctification between members of the laity. The liturgy, therefore, is constantly in mission, with each weekly celebration transforming the faithful into Christ through the religious expressions and external participation of the laity rooted in the culture of the local community, something referred to in terms of the “New Evangelization” at Medellín, which is discussed later. The people, as a collective, are no longer only individuals but are united in Christ, not despite their cultural expressions but through them. In this way, they become a sacrament of the Church as a whole.

Pope Pius XII was also particularly influential in the liturgical movement up to Vatican II. Referring to Pius XII, Ferrone writes the following: “While he affirmed the idea of objective reality in worship, he criticized partisans of an ‘objective piety’ who sought to minimize subjective engagement in the liturgical action. He warmly approved of a ‘return to the sources’—the study of liturgical history—even though he condemned antiquarianism” (Ferrone 2007, p. 9). Objective piety often implies that there is a correct and incorrect way to practice piety, leading to a uniform standard for how it should appear. However, reducing piety to a uniform expression overlooks the diverse ways it is expressed across different peoples, cultures, and nations and how they are still united in Christ. The various modes of sanctification exist as external forms of participation among the laity. This is especially relevant to the liturgical movement as piety (internal and external) is also a mode of participation of the laity; it is how the laity responds to the liturgy and participates in it; the early church understood this in its missionary approach to spreading Christianity by inculturating the early liturgy.

The early Church recognized the importance of inculturation in its missionary efforts, adapting the liturgy to local languages and traditions to facilitate the spread of Christianity. More recently, this principle was evident in 1615 when Jesuit missionaries were granted permission to celebrate Mass in Chinese. Similarly, in 1631, full vernacular privileges were extended to Georgian and Armenian missionaries, allowing them to conduct the liturgy in their native languages. Across the Atlantic, Jesuit missionaries in the region of modern-day Montreal received authorization from the Holy See to incorporate the Iroquois language into the liturgy, further demonstrating the Church’s commitment to linguistic and cultural adaptation. This approach continued in the United States, where Bishop John Carroll, at the first Diocesan Synod of Baltimore, in 1791, permitted limited use of English in the liturgy. The Gospel was read in the vernacular on Sundays and feast days, followed by a sermon in English, and vernacular hymns and prayers were encouraged. Expanding upon these efforts, Bishop John England of Charleston edited the first American edition of the Roman Missal in English in 1822, further solidifying the role of the vernacular in worship (Pecklers 2012a, p. 168). These instances illustrate the Catholic Church’s longstanding engagement with vernacular languages as a means of fostering both communal worship and missionary outreach.

By the time of the Second Vatican Council, the missionary spirit of the church was going to act in continuation with what the early church had begun since it was no longer dependent on the disciples journeying around the world to spread the gospel. Hahnenberg

writes the following: “Following Vatican II, the older paradigm of missionary work that saw the European church ‘sending’ and the rest of the world ‘receiving’ gave way to the following new paradigm: a vision of the whole worldwide church sharing together in the one mission of evangelizing the world. While in many ways AG was shaped by the concerns of the first paradigm, it anticipates the second” (Hahnenberg 2007, p. 139). The second paradigm became known as the “New Evangelization”, which was a term first used at the Medellín Council in 1968 and then popularized by Pope John Paul II.

5. The Medellín Council and the New Evangelization

The Council of Medellín, Colombia, met in 1968 to discuss how the Second Vatican Council would implement its changes within the Latin American context. The topics covered included poverty, peace, and justice, with liberation theology underpinning many discussions. When Pope Paul VI came to the conference, his speech seemed to echo past denunciations of liberation theology by condemning the violence that might ensue, implying to many that peace would be achieved by accepting their lot in life without complaint. David Abalos writes the following:

It is clear that they want to forge new relationships with the people; when they speak of poverty, justice, peace, and youth, therefore, they are not asking simply for a redistribution of land or other needed reforms, but for a radical transformation of the whole economic, social and political system. Ignorance and destitution are no longer seen as “natural” conditions of existence, but have become issues to be creatively transformed.

(Abalos 1969)

There was an awareness of one’s situation, similar to the “woke” movements in the United States in recent years, where its citizens engaged in mass protests against injustice, such as wealthy inequality, racism, and sexism. This was known as *conscientización* in Latin America. *Conscientización* is the awareness of one’s condition in life, not as a matter of fate but as one decided upon for the benefit of the dominant class. Maritza Montero writes the following: “It conveys the idea of developing, strengthening, and changing consciousness. It was created in the field of education, specifically of adult education, in the early 1960s, producing at the same time a new conception of consciousness” (Montero 2014). Poverty in Latin America was no longer tolerated as the norm, and education was believed to play a defining role in fighting systemic poverty, not just individually in the course of one’s choices in life but in the realm of economics and social justice.

Paulo Freire (1921–1997) was a Brazilian philosopher–educator whose ideas drove the discussions on liberation and *conscientización*. In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (1968), he writes the following:

Consciously or unconsciously, the act of rebellion by the oppressed (an act which is always, nearly always, as violent as the initial violence of the oppressors) can initiate love. Whereas the violence of the oppressors prevents the oppressed from being fully human, the response of the latter to this violence is grounded in the desire to pursue the right to be human. As the oppressors dehumanize others and violate their rights, they themselves also become dehumanized. As the oppressed, fighting to be human, take away the oppressors’ power to dominate and suppress, they restore to the oppressors the humanity they had lost in the exercise of oppression.

(Freire 2005)

At the Council of Medellín, this idea became manifest from one of Vatican II’s famous contributions to discussions on liberation based on human dignity. One of the documents of Vatican II, *Gaudium et spes*, speaks at length to discuss the importance of the true dignity

afforded to humans due to their being made in the “image of God”. If humans are created by God and all that God created is good (Gen 1:31), then humans are also good. However, this image is distorted by sin and humankind’s inclination towards sin. *Gaudium et spes* 13 reads as follows: “Examining his heart, man finds that he has inclinations toward evil too, and is engulfed by manifold ills which cannot come from his good Creator. Often refusing to acknowledge God as his beginning, man has disrupted also his proper relationship to his own ultimate goal as well as his whole relationship toward himself and others and all created things” (Second Vatican Council 1975).

By disrupting the relationship between oneself and God, one can disfigure or distort the fullness of Christ within oneself and others. *Populorum Progressio* 16 states the following:

Self-development, however, is not left up to man’s option. Just as the whole of creation is ordered toward its Creator, so too the rational creature should of his own accord direct his life to God, the first truth and the highest good. Thus human self-fulfillment may be said to sum up our obligations.

Moreover, this harmonious integration of our human nature, carried through by personal effort and responsible activity, is destined for a higher state of perfection. United with the life-giving Christ, man’s life is newly enhanced; it acquires a transcendent humanism which surpasses its nature and bestows new fullness of life. This is the highest goal of human self-fulfillment.

(Pope Paul 1967)

The “fullness”, in the sense of the word above, of the indigenous people of Latin America was disrupted by colonization. Their history of being exploited and enslaved over centuries of conquest and imperialism had created generations of poverty, trauma, and loss of identity and culture. The Spanish had supplanted their indigenous religious practices and language. Latin America has since gained independence but not without the pains of populist leaders, coups, and rebellions.

The documents at the Medellín Council described temporal actions that were part of the evangelization process. In chapter 7, section 13, it says the following:

Por otra parte, esta evangelización se debe realizar a través del testimonio personal y comunitario que se expresará, de manera especial, en el contexto del mismo compromiso temporal. La evangelización de que venimos hablando debe explicar los valores de justicia y fraternidad, contenidos en las aspiraciones de nuestros pueblos, en una perspectiva escatológica. La evangelización necesita como soporte una Iglesia-signo.⁸

Furthermore, this evangelization must be carried out through personal and communal witness, which will be expressed, in a special way, in the context of this same temporal commitment. The evangelization we have been speaking of must explain the values of justice and fraternity, contained in the aspirations of our peoples, from an eschatological perspective. Evangelization requires a Church as a symbol as its support.⁹

As a continuation of the mission of the early church, the Medellín Council called for the evangelization of the baptized. It was the responsibility of all Christians to evangelize each other in a temporal manner, as follows:

Por el hecho de que sean bautizados los niños pequeños, confiando en la fe de la familia, ya se hace necesaria una “evangelización de los bautizados”, como una etapa en la educación de su fe. Y esta necesidad es más urgente, teniendo en cuenta la desintegración que en muchas zonas ha sufrido la familia, la ignorancia religiosa de los adultos y la escasez de comunidades cristianas de base.

Dicha evangelización de los bautizados tiene un objetivo concreto: llevarlos a un compromiso personal con Cristo y a una entrega consciente en la obediencia de la fe. De ahí la importancia de una revisión de la pastoral de la confirmación, así como de nuevas formas de un catecumenado en la catequesis de adultos, insistiendo en la preparación para los sacramentos. También debemos revisar todo aquello que en nuestra vida o en nuestras instituciones pueda ser obstáculo para la “re-evangelización” de los adultos, purificando así el rostro de la Iglesia ante el mundo.¹⁰

English:

Because young children are baptized, trusting in the faith of the family, an “evangelization of the baptized” is already needed, as a stage in the education of their faith. And this need is more urgent, given the disintegration that family has suffered in many areas, religious ignorance of adults and the scarcity of basic Christian communities.

This evangelization of the baptized has a concrete objective: to lead them to a personal commitment to Christ and to a conscious surrender in the obedience of the faith. Hence the importance of a revision of the pastoral care of confirmation, as well as of new forms of a catechumenate given the adult catechesis, insisting on preparation for the sacraments. We must also review everything that in our lives or in our institutions can be an obstacle to the “revangelization” of adults, thus purifying the face of the Church before the world.¹¹

The New Evangelization represents a continuation of the early church’s mission, emphasizing that the responsibility for evangelization lies with all baptized individuals, including the laity. It marks a return to foundational principles and had a significant impact on liturgical music in South America. The vernacular Masses introduced in Latin America after Vatican II are a natural extension of the effort to reclaim the “fullness” of Christ and the dignity of individuals, reflecting their creation in the image of God. Two such Masses—José Ríos’s *Misa Típica* and Carlos Mejía Godoy’s *Misa Campesina*—encapsulate the essence of Nicaragua through the use of its native language, local music, and cultural history. These Masses represent natural inculturations of the Gospel—through multiple vernacular languages and musics—that are not just inevitable but necessary to reflect their community (Assis 2008).

6. The *Misa Campesina Nicaragüense*

The Episcopal Council of Latin America reinterpreted Vatican II in light of the Latin American experience at the council in Medellín, and among its many results was the Familia de Dios movement in Central America. The council emerged from “grassroots efforts by priests, sisters, and popular communities to collectively enact liberation. Each community established its own socially committed model of church within an experimental parish shaped by inwardly directed pastoral work” (Gordillo 2021). The whole point of the Familia de Dios course was to allow for “individuals to develop critical awareness via their own agency” (ibid). People were among equals in these courses, which a priest sometimes did not lead.

The Familia de Dios course was designed with conversion and renewal at its center. Conversion was brought upon by *cursillo* and conversion through “emotional conversion

experience” and sought to train lay leaders without the aid of priests. The course was brought to Panama in 1963 so that a parish could be founded that followed four principles of parish formation, as follows: work with men first, and then with their wives and other women, have an introductory course called *Familia de Dios* in small neighborhood group discussions which, connecting everyday human experiences to scripture, move toward a basic conversion through weekend retreat (*cursillo*) and form a neighborhood-based church community and expand it through the course and *cursillo* (ibid, p. 64).

Out of this community came the *Misa típica*, written by José “Pepe” Nelson Ríos (1938–2016), a member of the San Miguelito community in Nicaragua. The Mass itself uses several music styles to represent the San Miguelito community, as follows: *tamborito*, *torrente*, *gallino*, *punto*, *cumbia*, *capricho*, and *son de tuna*.

To familiarize the listeners of Panama with his Mass, Ríos uses a pre-existing melody for the Sanctus, subtitled “Melodía clásica panameña”. Among the different types of dances and instruments is also a way of singing called the *saloma*, a “melismatic wail or utterance sung on a vocable” or a “syllable” (ibid, p. 67). It can be heard in the Introduction, Kyrie, and Agnus Dei, and it is a distinct Panamanian practice.

After this Mass was recorded, the artwork was chosen for the front of its jacket. It was a photograph of a mural by Chicago artist Lillian Brulc (1923–2012) called “The New Passover”. On the left side of the image, there is a small gathering of worshipers around a leader to discuss the Word of God. In the midst of them is also a guitar player leading in song. To the right of that, there are several San Blas Indians meeting around a teacher. Above these groups is a highly stylized angel. On the right side, you will see workers building the “foundations of the New Church” elaborated in the construction of a wall meant to keep out figures in clerical garb. Within this group, a *Familia de Dios* leader develops lay leaders. And sharply in the center stands a Panamanian farmer with a bamboo stalk across his shoulders, making a cruciform shape. This is the Christ-Peasant, *el Cristo Campesino*, whose earthly suffering was the church’s focus after Vatican II, especially as a precedent for liberation theologians.

In San Pablo, Nicaragua, the *Misa típica* inspired the creation of the *Misa popular*, composed primarily by Manuelito Dávila in 1968 in San Pablo, Nicaragua. Inspired also by the *Familia de Dios* model from San Miguelito, this parish auditioned the new Mass for approval by church authorities during the Medellín Council in early 1969. The only reservation the authorities had was with its text during the Creed was the following: “... We believe in Jesus Christ, His Son, who ‘was born of our people’, in place of saying that he was born of the Virgin Mary” (ibid, p. 69). Although not official, other critiques of the new Mass include a bishop’s comment of the mass having “pinches guitarras”.¹²

Like the *Misa típica*, the *Misa popular* had a successful run of LP’s so much that in its second round, the artwork for its jacket depicted a socially conscious community. However, in its artwork, the socially conscious became politically conscious and engaged. Artist Leoncio Sáenz (1935–2008) depicts on the jacket the following:

A dystopian crucifixion scene in which a naked, suffering *Cristo Campesino* meets his end on a makeshift cross, while flanked by witnesses. At left, his family looks on with dread as a house burns in the distance. Carrion birds hover above the crucified. At right, a mélange of people completes the macabre spectacle: soldiers point their bayonets at the condemned, a seated military figure wields a bone staff, the Catholic hierarchy avert their gaze, and nondescript men crowd the background. Above them, just below the album title, a stylized depiction of the Palacio de la Curva, home of the director of the Guardia Nacional...

(ibid)

Following the success of the *Misa Popular*, Nicaraguan songwriter Carlos Mejía Godoy (b. 1943) was approached by Father Ernesto Cardenal (1925–2020), a well-known Nicaraguan liberation theologian and outspoken critic of the Somoza regime, to compose a vernacular Mass setting. He received theological guidance from Cardenal, as well as from Ernesto's brother, Fernando Cardenal (Gordillo 2021, p. 76). Godoy had previously collaborated with Father Ernesto, setting his poetry to music. Godoy was already known as a radio personality for his socially committed songs and activism. Godoy prepared the text and composed the music for all parts of the *Misa campesina*, except for the *Canto de meditación*, which was written by composer Pablo Martínez Téllez. The *Canto de meditación* is famous for beginning with an iconic whistling imitation of birds native to Nicaragua. The only other contributor to the LP recording was Capuchin priest Gregory Smutko (1931–2001), who provided the song *Miskito lawana*. Smutko worked with Miskitu indigenous communities on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua (ibid, p. 77).

The text for the *Miskito lawana* reads as follows:

Miskito nani ba won dara walaia
 Swak sakan storka na pain wali banwaia.
 Won aisa purara ai kupia pihni ba
 Miskito nesanka ban yami munisa.
 Won dama Ebrahim pain kasak luki kan
 Ba mita witinra God bui brisata.
 Miskito mani sin pain kasak luki ba
 Won Aisa purara yamni won brisa na.
 Won dama Ebrahim God bui aisata
 Ai Waihla nanira sut pura luaia
 Gad mita yawonra sim baku takam sa
 Won waihla nanira sut pura luisa.
 Won Dama Ebraham God bui aisata
 Ai kyamka nani ba ailal ban takbia
 Gad mita yawonra sim baku takan sa
 Miskito nani ba ailal sin bara sa.

(ibid, p. 77)

English:

Miskitu brothers, we must reflect,
 This is the story of our salvation.
 Let us ponder that our Celestial Father
 Gives the Miskitu people his blessing.
 Our father Abraham had enormous faith,
 Which is why the Lord chose him as a guide.
 We, Miskitu, ought to believe
 In Him who is the pure fountain of Liberation.
 When the Lord spoke to our father Abraham,
 He gave him strength and valor to fight relentlessly.

When the Lord speaks to us, his Word gives us [strength]
 To overcome those who sow terror.
 God said to Abraham: your sons will grow
 And will joyfully populate this beautiful nation.
 The Miskitu brothers will multiply
 To exult, united as one, the glory of the Lord.

(ibid, p. 77)

The placement of this song in the liturgy can be interpreted by what comes before it and what comes after it. The *Santo* is sung before and ends with the following: “Vos sos el Dios parejo, no andas con carambadas, vos sos hombre de ñeques, el mero tayacán. . .”. This translates to “You are the just God, you are not messing around, you are the man of bravery, the only ‘tayacán’”. *Tayacán* is a Nahuatl word that describes a type of leader or teacher of the people. This word allows for the *Santo* to transition to the next musical portion of the liturgy, the *Miskito Lawana*, because the Miskitu people are the original people of Northern Nahuatl-speaking Indigenous people (Miskitu History n.d.). After the *Miskito Lawana* is the communion song, *Vamos a la milpa*. A communion song accompanies the Catholic laity in the procession to receive communion. The last few verses of the communion song, *Vamos a la milpa*, read as follows:

La comunión no es un rito intrascendente y banal.
 Es compromiso y vivencia, toma de conciencia de la cristiandad.
 Es comulgar con la lucha de la colectividad. . .
 Es decir yo soy cristiano y conmigo hermano vos podés cantar
 Es decir yo soy cristiano y conmigo hermano vos podés cantar.

(Godoy and El Taller de Sonido Popular 1979)

English:

Communion is not an insignificant and banal rite.
 It is commitment and experience, awareness of Christianity
 It is to communion with the struggle of the community. . .
 It is saying that I am a Christian and with me, brother or sister, you can sing
 It is saying that I am a Christian and with me, brother or sister, you can sing.¹³

The reception of the Eucharist in Catholicism is a horizontal acknowledgment of the presence of Christ in all peoples. It is a corporate act that St. John Chrysostom describes as “The Body of Christ. And what do they become who partake of it? The Body of Christ: not many bodies, but one body” (ibid). Many bodies become reconciled to one. Including the Miskitu text right before communion strongly suggests that the Miskitu people are to be reconciled with other Christians through communion and as adopted siblings of Christ.

The Miskitu text appears in a Latinized version of the language and is inserted alongside the Spanish vernacular text. The intent of having a vernacular text of a historically oppressed indigenous people in the Catholic liturgy is to dignify the Miskitu people as inheritors of the faith and adopted children of God every bit as authentic as Abraham. The historical precedent of devotional music and its connotation of representing its speakers and a personal relationship with God is present here. However, the impact is further felt with the oppressive Somoza government in Nicaragua when the song takes on a contemporary liberation connotation and immediate connection with the people.

The Guardia Nacional (National Guard) cut short the outdoor premiere of the Mass, and Mejía Godoy was quickly arrested. The Mass text was banned for its explicit appeal to revolutionaries and presentation of Liberation Theology. However, it was popularized because of its commercial recording and because the violence toward a defenseless crowd at the Mass premiere drew further criticism of the Somoza government. Godoy was already secretly a member of the underground Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) (Gordillo 2021, p. 78).

The following two particular movements of the *Misa Campesina* illustrate the localized vernacular of the Mass: the *Señor Ten Piedad* and the *Gloria*. First, the words of the *Señor Ten Piedad* are drastically different from the approved translation of the Kyrie and, without ambiguity, invoke tropes of oppressor and oppressed Liberation theology. The Kyrie reads as follows:

Cristo, Cristo Jesús
 Cristo, Cristo Jesús
 Identifícate con nosotros.
 Señor, Señor mi Dios,
 identifícate con nosotros.
 Cristo, Cristo Jesús solidarízate
 no con la clase opresora que exprime y devora a la comunidad,
 sino con el oprimido con el pueblo mío sediento de paz.

(ibid)

English:

Christ, Christ Jesus
 Christ, Christ Jesus,
 Identify yourself with us,
 Lord, Lord my God,
 Identify yourself with our cause.
 Christ, Christ Jesus, be in solidarity with us,
 Not with the oppressor who steps on and devours the community.
 But with the oppressed, with my people thirsting for peace.

Every movement of the Mass ordinary of the *Misa Campesina* differs from the official translations and uses various localized musical styles. The second movement, for example, is the *Gloria*, which, while vastly differing from the approved translation of the Catholic church, uses a *son de toro* musical style, a type of music called the *chichero*. This type of dance brings to the imagination the mischievous nature of the bull. *Chicheros* generally consist of brass bands used for various kinds of church worship in western Nicaragua but are also popularly associated with *chicha*. This rice-based drink can be alcoholic if fermented, and *Chicheros* are vendors of this drink. The incorporation of *Chicheros* in the liturgy is a stark contrast to the musical decorum of the extraordinary form of the Mass before the Second Vatican Council by incorporating the historically socially lower ranks of society in the Mass. In this way, the Catholic Church becomes a more inclusive institution where the phrase “preferential option for the poor” takes on real-world dimensions, particularly within the Mass liturgy. Class and extant ethnic divisions fade in the street behind the saint carried on a platform when people sing the *son de toros* during saint’s day processions. Interestingly, in 1662, a visitor named Frasso described how the members of Indian *cofradías*

feasted copiously, became inebriated, and played music and danced to “*remorar la memoria de su antigüedad*” on feast days of saints (Scruggs 2005).

Multilingual Mass liturgies serve multiple functions, particularly in linguistically diverse parishes. In California, for example, many parishes conduct liturgies in both English and Spanish to accommodate their multilingual congregations. However, following Vatican II, the incorporation of indigenous languages alongside Spanish—exemplified by the *Misa Campesina*—not only acknowledges but also validates indigenous communities by embedding their historical presence within the liturgy itself.

In this context, the “New Evangelization” is directed toward baptized individuals rather than those unfamiliar with the Gospel. Multilingual liturgies provide a symbolic and practical means for indigenous communities to claim space within the Church’s worship while maintaining continuity with the Latin tradition. In the *Misa Campesina*, for instance, Miskitu is used for the Mass propers, which vary from week to week. Similarly, the *Misa Incaica*, composed by Germán Quiñones, employs Latin and Spanish for the Mass Ordinary—fixed parts of the liturgy—while Quechua is reserved for the propers. Notably, the names of the Ordinary remain in Latin, though their texts are rendered in Spanish, reflecting the integration of indigenous identity with Catholic faith in a way that does not separate the liturgy from the lived experience of the laity.

The propers of the *Misa Incaica* include *Bendicionta Churaykuway* (Canticle to the Virgin), *Munakuyki* (Song to the Blessed Sacrament), *Wawaykita Muñapuay* (Song to the Virgin), *Hamullary* (Communion Hymn), *Kollama Maria* (Song to the Virgin), and *Bendicionta Churaykuway II* (Canticle to the Virgin) (Quiñones et al. 1996). These elements illustrate how multilingual liturgies function as both an expression of cultural identity and a means of fostering deeper engagement with the faith.

In Latin America, there were a number of vernacular mass settings. Some were simply translations of the Latin Mass, while others strayed further from the official translation. Many of these settings were not musically noted and require further study for their vernacular and multilingual language use, particularly of indigenous languages, and cultural music styles (See Table 1).

Table 1. A sample of mass settings from Latin America after Vatican II¹⁴.

Year of Publication	Mass Name	Composer	Nationality
1960s	Misa panamericana [or “Misa de mariachi”]	Jean-Marc Leclerc and Mariachi “Hermanos Macías”	Mexico
1964	Misa criolla	Ariel Ramírez	Argentina
1964	Misa nativa Tupanói [Tupasy?] rory	Mariano Celso Pedrozo	Paraguay
1965	Misa chilena	Raúl de Ramón	Chile
1965	Misa a la chilena	Vicente Bianchi	Chile
1965	Misa incaica en Quechua	Marcelo Grondin and Germán Quiñones	Bolivia
1965	Misa mexicana	Delfino Madrigal Gil	Mexico
1965	La misa en México	Rafael Carrión	Mexico
1965	Misa ranchera	Anselmo Murillo	Mexico

Table 1. Cont.

Year of Publication	Mass Name	Composer	Nationality
1965	Misal campirano	José Arraiza	Mexico
1966	Misa en jazz	Tino Contreras	Mexico
1966	Misa guaraní	Justo Ramón Colmán	Paraguay
1967	Misa típica panameña de San Miguelito	José N. Ríos	Panama
1968	Purahéi Guasú Ñandejárape	Abdón Irala	Paraguay
1968	Misa folclórica paraguaya	Justo Ramón Colmán	Paraguay
1969	Misa criolla [de bodas o peruana]	Jorge Madueño and Chabuca Granda	Peru
1969	Misa nativa paraguaya	José Franco Alderete	Paraguay
1969	Ñe'a tovyavá	Mariano Celso Pedrozo	Paraguay
1969	Misa popular nicaragüense	Manuel Dávila, Ángel Cerpas, Luciano Sequeira, and José de la Jara	Nicaragua
1969–70	Misa folclórica colombiana	Mario Giraldo G. and Rubén Darío Vanegas Montoya	Colombia
1970	Misa por un continente	Francisco Marín Rubén Bareiro	Paraguay
1972	Misa tepozteca	Jean-Marc Leclerc and Gérard Krémer	Mexico
1974	Misa folclórica	Herminio Giménez	Paraguay
1975	Misa folclórica paraguaya	César Medina	Paraguay
1975	Misa guaraní	Miguel Angel Duarte Barrios	Paraguay
1980	Misa popular paraguaya	Miguel Angel Echeverría	Paraguay
1990	Misa folclórica paraguaya	Florentín Giménez	Paraguay
1992	Misa folclórica	José Luis Miranda	Paraguay
1997	Misa Ña ñe 'e guaraní me	Miguel Gómez	Paraguay
2002	Misa guaraní	Casimiro Irala	Paraguay

7. Devotional Music: A Precedent for Sacred-Secular Styles Integration

Vernacular music and liturgy is specific to a region. The vernacular of Nicaraguan liturgies incorporated the styles, musics, and languages of the multiple peoples of Nicaragua.

They were not exclusive to the liturgy however since it was their culture through which they expressed the liturgy after Vatican II.

Before Vatican II, vernacular language served as a mode of both individual and collective devotional music within the Catholic Church. Moreover, the distinction between liturgical and secular music was not always clearly defined, as vernacular and popular styles were often employed in both contexts. As Kendrick notes, “the best-known case is that of Heinrich Schütz’s 1625 *Cantiones sacrae*, which is a book of sacred texts of pseudo-Patristic and Protestant heritage, and is dedicated to an Imperial counselor who had converted from Lutheranism to Catholicism” (Kendrick 2008, p. 325). Although *Cantiones sacrae* was composed in Latin—a language widely used among both Lutheran and Catholic communities in Western Europe at the time—Schütz incorporated the secular madrigal style, particularly as a means of expressing joy, as exemplified in No. 29 of the collection, *Cantate Domino canticum novum*.

Along with the blending of liturgical music and secular music among Protestants and Catholics was the notion of using music for personal devotion. Grazioso Uberti writes about the need for music in Part V of his dialogue *Contrasto musico*, as follows: “resolved the objections to the use of music in personal prayer by pointing to the use of the voice as an external expression and stimulant of internal devotion, and of song as one of the most perfect and regulated forms of vocal communication” and, referencing Boethius, “suggested that *musica instrumentalis* was not only useful in prayer, but served also to raise the soul to God, and to rouse the mind and the heart” (ibid, p. 329).

In late seventeenth-century Italy, vernacular moral cantatas, such as those in Monteverdi’s *Selva morale e spirituale*, began to emerge. In this collection, Monteverdi juxtaposes vernacular madrigals with Latin motets, masses, and psalms, creating a rich interplay between sacred and secular musical traditions. The spiritual themes of the madrigals closely resemble the devotional poetry of the seventeenth century, reinforcing their religious significance. While the precise context of their use remains speculative, these pieces were likely performed both within and beyond the liturgy. A wide range of genres and styles in Western Europe—including the solo motet, chorale, dialogue, villancico, *cantio natalitia*, psalms, and their paraphrases, noëls, madrigals, and *lauda*—contributed to the faith lives of the assembly, enriching both communal worship during Mass and personal devotion outside of it (ibid, p. 337).

The blurring of boundaries between liturgical and personal devotion is also evident in Scripture, particularly in the *Song of Solomon*. This biblical text frequently portrays the love between two spouses as an allegory for the relationship between Christ and the Church, while another interpretation presents Mary as the Bride and God as the Bridegroom, reflecting a form of Marian devotion. In both cases, the *Song of Solomon* serves to prepare the faithful—whether in a liturgical setting or through private devotion—to receive the Eucharist and cultivate a personal relationship with Christ. Music set to texts from the *Song of Solomon* played a dual role as a mediator between God and the Church, as well as between God and Mary. As one scholar notes, “Insofar as such pieces were sung at the Elevation of the Mass, they were also a musical personalization of a ritual moment, meant to prepare the believer for union with Christ in the reception of the Eucharist. On the other hand, the same goal of fusion with the Redeemer was an integral part of individual devotion, and this supported the private performance of such pieces” (ibid, p. 330). Thus, the interplay between sacred music, liturgical practice, and personal devotion reinforced a deeper spiritual connection between the believer and the divine.

The integration of the vernacular brought about the personal devotional practice in Nicaragua as well. Father Ernesto Cardenal wrote a work that blurred the boundaries between devotional/liturgical and sacred/secular in 1964. In his *Salmos*, Cardenal rewrites

specific psalms to be more specific to the socioeconomic realities of Latin America. The psalms used are attentive to the themes of liberation theology. For Psalm 150, he writes the following:

Alabad al Señor en el cosmos, Su santuario de un radio de 100.000 millones de años luz,
Alabadle por las estrellas y los espacios inter-estelares alabadle por las galaxias y los espacios inter-galáxicos alabadle por los átomos y los vacíos inter-atómicos,
Alabadle con el violín y la flauta y con el saxofón,
alabadle con los clarinetes y el corno con cornetas y trombones con piano y pianolas,
alabadle con blues y jazz y con orquestas sinfónicas con los espirituales de los negros y la 5 de Beethoven, con guitarras y marimbas,
alabadle con toca-discos y cintas magnetofónicas.

(Cardenal 1969)

English:

Praise the Lord in the cosmos, His sanctuary of a radius of 100 billion light-years,
Praise Him through the stars and interstellar spaces, praise Him through the galaxies and intergalactic spaces, praise Him through the atoms and interatomic voids,
Praise Him with the violin and flute and saxophone,
praise Him with clarinets and horn, with cornets and trombones, with piano and player pianos,
praise Him with blues and jazz and with symphony orchestras, with Negro spirituals and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, with guitars and marimbas,
praise Him with record players and tape recorders.¹⁵

Cardenal's work represents the culmination of devotional and liturgical syncretism, as well as a profound process of vernacular inculturation. Like Godoy, Cardenal integrates more than just the local language into the liturgy; he fuses it with devotional practices, liturgical expression, vernacular music and poetry, and the principles of liberation theology. In this context, musical genre and style function as a form of vernacular expression essential for the full participation of the laity—inseparable from, rather than external to, their experience of worship.

8. Critical Response to the Use of Vernacular

The use of the vernacular in the 1960s onward does not come without critique and outright opposition. Bishop Peter J. Elliott writes about the problems of “dynamic equivalence”, a principle endorsed by the 1969 instruction of the Consilium for implementing the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, as follows:

The first way of understanding truth in liturgical translation is obvious and has been raked over by various critics ever since the International Commission for English in the Liturgy [ICEL] produced its translations over thirty years ago. This is simply the question of whether *this* vernacular text tells the truth, the question of truthfulness or truthful accuracy in translation. Do these English words convey the Catholic doctrinal meaning that is embodied in the words of the Latin original authorized by the Church?

(Bishop Elliott 2007)

Elliott here argues that vernacular language confuses the meaning found in Latin. This treats the text itself as external to its understanding by the laity. As language changes

from generation to generation, so do its different learning modes. Latin translations have undergone several revisions since the inception of the vulgate by St. Jerome in the 4th century. The *Nova Vulgata*, the authoritative Bible translation, is the most recent translation with different editions. Vernacular translations can be expected to undergo the same rigorous translation process. Instead of decrying vernacular translations, the Catholic Church benefits from them as adaptive texts for particular peoples, written as local interpretations of the initial Latin Vulgate.

Among the various cultures and peoples of the world, there exists a rich tapestry of understandings of theological, scriptural, and liturgical concepts, as seen in the Jesuit missions in China in the seventeenth century when they were determining how ancestral worship might conflict with Catholicism. The Catholic Church monitors the translations for significant deviations (as we encountered with the *Misa Campesina*). Still, even with substantial deviations, liturgical translations regarded as unsuitable for the Roman Rite are essential to the authentic devotional life of the laity outside of the official liturgy and its understanding.

The author goes on, as follows:

Taking the essential Christian word “grace” out of seasonal liturgical prayers is a symptom of the deeper doctrinal malaise underlying the current ICEL texts. As others have noted, this is a kind of Pelagianism. What *we* do is what matters. So *we make the liturgy*; it is no longer primarily a gift to us from God through the Church. By contrast, Pope Benedict XVI, when Cardinal Ratzinger, pointed out that the “liturgy derives its greatness from what it is, not from what we make of it”.

(ibid)

The author perceives the translation process as a type of Pelagianism, or self-earned salvation. It is possible to over-theologize this example since the translation process and inculturation were the same as the process of Latin liturgy. The quote by Cardinal Ratzinger also disregards the laity’s participation as irrelevant in the liturgy in judging its “greatness”, presented as outside the contribution of the laity. We can surmise that he is referring to the liturgy’s text and its function as serving as a place where heaven meets earth in a re-presentation of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. However, if Catholics believe the Eucharist to be the source and summit of the Christian life, as stated in *Lumen Gentium*, its greatness in the liturgy presumes a transformation in the laity that leads from and to the Eucharist.

Another writer argues over the semantics of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, as follows: “Obviously by those who have taken credit for the demise of Latin and so gleefully proclaim the triumph of their own version of the place of the vernacular, which the fathers *permitted* in certain parts of the Mass at the same time that they *ordered* the use of Latin” (Schuler 1981). Schuler here mischaracterizes the use of vernacular from the Christendom perspective as a top-down authoritarian mandate given by a ruler to subordinates at Vatican II. The reality is much more encompassing of the collaborative nature of Vatican II, uniquely understood in how participants spent time together during the council when not in official meetings and discussions. When all sixteen of the documents of Vatican II are considered, not just *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, one does not get the impression that reaching out to non-Christians, separated Christians, cultures around the world, and the Catholic Church’s call to mission is simply an option but an encouragement to adapt to different circumstances. For example, the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) posits the different options for the entrance chant not to simply affirm a hierarchy of musics but to allow the music to adapt to the congregation and situation present.

The use of Latin provides the framework from which to integrate the vernacular. Using the concept of *Ressourcement*, the French theology of the mid-twentieth century prioritized

early sources of the Catholic Church to bring about change through precedent, and the use of Latin as the official church language lends itself to using other languages. Lang writes the following: “It has been argued that the use of Latin did not raise an impenetrable barrier to popular understanding of and participation in the Mass. In the Romance-speaking countries, where the vernacular developed from Latin, there was a basic understanding at least of the meaning conveyed in liturgical texts, and this was so even among the lesser educated, at least if they chose to follow attentively” (Lang 2017, p. 110).

The focus on language is only a part of the picture concerning vernacular language. As many modes of participation exist within any setting, the vernacular becomes wider, encompassing different mediums such as art and architecture and, for our purposes, music. Frank Senn writes the following:

The laity have always found ways to participate in the liturgy, whether it was in their language or not, and they have always derived meaning from the liturgy, whether it was the intended meaning or not. Furthermore, the laity in worship were surrounded by other ‘vernaculars’ than language, not least of which were the church buildings themselves and the liturgical art that decorated them.

(Senn 2006, p. 145)

9. Conclusions

The use of the vernacular in liturgy encompasses a broad spectrum of musical styles, instrumentation, cultural practices, and languages. The shift to the vernacular marks a reversal of the nineteenth-century Romanization of the Mass, restoring linguistic and cultural diversity to Catholic worship. This process of inculturation, particularly evident in multilingual liturgies, such as the *Misa Campesina*, has contributed to the development of a liberationist theology rooted in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Central to this theological framework is the recognition that the freedom offered by Christ extends beyond spiritual salvation to include liberation from poverty and oppression.

Multilingual vernacular liturgies serve as a tangible expression of the “New Evangelization”, emphasizing the active participation of the laity in the liturgy. By incorporating local languages and cultural elements, these liturgies not only affirm the identity of worshipping communities but also reinforce the Church’s commitment to social justice and inclusivity, aligning with the principles established at Vatican II.

Within this framework, poverty and violence are not seen as divinely ordained conditions of a rigid caste system but rather as systemic injustices that disproportionately benefit a privileged few. By integrating the vernacular, the liturgy becomes not only a more profound expression of cultural identity but also a means of articulating the historical struggles of the Nicaraguan people. This vision of liberation does not seek violent retribution but rather the dignification of the oppressed, aligning with the principles set forth at Vatican II and reaffirmed at the Medellín Conference.

The use of vernacular languages and musics in the liturgy embodies this theological vision, allowing the Catholic Church to be fully present within diverse linguistic and cultural contexts while maintaining its universality. As a result, vernacular liturgies offer a rich field for further study, particularly as an intersectional approach within liturgical studies, highlighting the dynamic relationship between faith, culture, and social justice.

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Notes

- ¹ AG, section 2.
- ² Father Uwe Michael Lang, “Trent and its Liturgical Reform: The Council Debates and Decrees”, <https://adoremus.org/2024/12/trent-and-its-liturgical-reform-the-council-debates-and-decrees-part-iii/> (accessed on 1 January 2025).
- ³ *Tra le Sollicitudini*, section 2.
- ⁴ Ibid., section 11.
- ⁵ SC, section 37.
- ⁶ SC, section 10.
- ⁷ SC, section 5.
- ⁸ “Documentos finales de Medellín”, Proyecto Ensayo Hispánico, last modified 2015, <https://www.ensayistas.org/critica/liberacion/medellin/medellin9.htm> (accessed on 2 January 2025).
- ⁹ Translated by the author.
- ¹⁰ “Documentos finales de Medellín”, Proyecto Ensayo Hispánico, last modified 2015, <https://www.ensayistas.org/critica/liberacion/medellin/medellin10.htm> (accessed on 2 January 2025).
- ¹¹ See note 9 above.
- ¹² Translated to “fucking guitars” (Gordillo 2021, p. 70).
- ¹³ My English translation is based on the Spanish text found in Carlos Mejía Godoy and Pablo Martínez Téllez, *Misa campesina nicaragüense*, text of mass (Nicaragua, after 1977).
- ¹⁴ Compiled from (Gordillo 2021, p. 60; Colman 2021, p. 24).
- ¹⁵ See note 9 above.

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Article

Multicultural Worship in the Song of Zechariah and Contemporary Christian Worship

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Abstract: This article explores the ethics of “speaking” the artistic languages or idioms of diverse cultures in the earliest Christian communities. This article presents a key New Testament text, the Song of Zechariah (the *Benedictus* in Luke 1:68–79), as a poetic text meant for communal performance and examines that cultural phenomenon through the lens of “musical caring” to examine the meaning such a poetic phenomenon has for modern Christian life and worship. First, I will briefly summarize the evidence for the Song of Zechariah as a lyrical poem containing the artistic “multilingualism” of both Hebrew and Greek poetic idioms. Then, I will assess such an artistic communal expression in its first-century context with Myrick’s concept of musical caring, broadened to allow for uncertainty of the Song of Zechariah’s first-century performance methods. Finally, I will consider the twenty-first-century implications or lessons from such care and inclusivity in the first century.

Keywords: multicultural worship; early Christian worship; contemporary Christian worship; biblical studies; biblical psalms; Greek poetry (classical); ethics of style; diversity and inclusion

1. Introduction

While earning my PhD, every time I drove to campus, I passed through a heavily Latino community. A fixture of this area was a mall with a movie theater that had a billboard which read “*El Cine en tu Idioma*” (the cinema in your language.) As a modest student of the Spanish language, I knew *idioma* meant language. However, as a musician and artist, I know the word *idioma* to mean a style or mode of expression in an artform (e.g., certain melodies are more idiomatic for violins than they are for flutes or the human voice). The correlation of the two terms shows the way one often speaks of a musical language and even different musical languages between cultures. Consider the Mendelssohn quote that “music is more definite than words”.¹ And yet, a musical idiom—much like a spoken language—can only be interpreted in the way the performer/composer intended if the audience understands the same idiom. I give this example not as a conflation of two terms that look the same but to highlight the overlap of meanings between a musical or artistic idiom and our linguistic concept of language or *idioma*.

This article explores the ethics of “speaking” the artistic languages or idioms of diverse cultures in the earliest Christian communities. This article presents a key New Testament text, the Song of Zechariah (often called by its Latin name the *Benedictus*, Luke 1:68–79), as a poetic text meant for communal performance and examines that cultural phenomenon through the lens of “musical caring” as expressed in works such as Nathan Myrick’s *Music for Others*² to examine the meaning such a poetic phenomenon has for modern Christian life and worship. First, I will briefly summarize the evidence for the Song of Zechariah as a lyrical poem containing the artistic “multilingualism” of both Hebrew and Greek poetic idioms. Then, I will assess such an artistic communal expression in its first-century context with Myrick’s concept of musical caring, broadened to allow for uncertainty of the Song of Zechariah’s first-century performance methods. Finally, I will consider the twenty-first-century implications or lessons from such care and inclusivity in the first century.

2. The Multiple Idioms in the Song of Zechariah

The Song of Zechariah—along with all the Lukan canticles—arises from a rich song-writing and hymn-singing intertestamental period.³ While many have debated whether various ancient hymnic texts would have been sung or read aloud or read quietly, recent research suggests that public singing was far more common in the Roman era than it is today. Éléonore Salm surveyed how various orators wrote about the delivery of other orators (Salm 2015). She found that many of the foremost orators complained of a chronic practice of many orators, finding every opportunity to elevate their speeches to song. This phenomenon, unparalleled in modern Western times, arises from the “melody of language” inherent in the Latin and Greek tongues. Therefore, scholars that have adopted a hermeneutic of suspicion when assessing whether hymn-like texts were actually sung do so by projecting asynchronous modern presuppositions onto ancient contexts.⁴ The answer of whether a hymnic text would likely have been sung ought to receive a default answer of more-than-likely unless clear evidence indicates otherwise.

Considering this evidence as well as the psalm-singing nature of Second Temple Judaism and descriptions/depictions of singing in the New Testament church (Col 3:16; Eph 5:19; Matt 26:30; Rev 5:9–10), the Song of Zechariah ought to be examined as a text of song or a psalm. The entire form of the song follows the parallelism of Hebrew psalmody.⁵ Zechariah’s song opens with a line taken directly from the benedictions at the end of the books of the Hebrew Psalter: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel” (Luke 1:68a; Ps 41:13, 72:18, 89:52, 106:48). The seven and a half verses (Luke 1:68b–75) settle into twelve lines divided into four triplets—or four sets of three-line groupings. Each of the three lines in a triplet parallel each other in echoing similar imagery, offering a clarification, or offering a contrasting yet complementary image. For example, Luke 1:68b–69 continues: “For he has visited and redeemed his people/ And has raised up a horn of salvation for us/ In the house of his servant David”. The second line gives another image (a horn of salvation) of *how* God has visited and redeemed his people. The third line clarifies *where* the horn of salvation came from, fulfilling ancient prophecy. After the four triplet sets, verses 76–79 continue with a couplet, another triplet, and then a final four-line sequence of parallel lines. The last four lines have interweaving layers of resonance: “the sunrise will visit us from on high/ To shine on those who in darkness/ And in the shadow of death sit/ The one to guide our feet into the way of peace” (vv. 78b–79). The Song of Zechariah has poetic craftsmanship to rival the Biblical psalter or other intertestamental psalms such as the *Hodayot* or *Psalms of Solomon*.

However, layered within this exquisite psalm lie six lines that also fit into the infamous Greek poetic meter of dactylic hexameter—the meter of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.⁶ In the Greek, verses 72–75 maintain Hebrew parallelism while meeting this Greek meter. Multi-genre artistry fittingly appears in the thematic climax of the song. It declares what the Lord’s saving redemption came to do: “to fulfill mercy promised to our father and/ to remember his holy covenant, the oath/ that he swore to Abraham our father/ To grant us, who from the hand of our enemies have been delivered, to serve him fearlessly in holiness/ And righteousness before him all the days of our life”. This core section declares the covenant faithfulness of God of Israel with the poetry of Greece and Rome.

This multi-genre or multicultural artistry is striking for two reasons: (1) what we call Christianity began as a sect of Judaism and still had a decidedly Jewish self-identity throughout the first century,⁷ and (2) the mixing of Hebrew and Greek poetic elements for communal song is unique in antiquity. The Jesus movement began as a Jewish sect that followed a Jewish messiah. Throughout the first century, this sect grew in number and diversity as it increasingly added Gentiles to its number. However, regardless of the Jewish vs. Gentile composition, even by the end of the first century, Jesus followers apparently were still frequenting synagogues like they were in the New Testament era since the Jewish leader Gamliel II felt the need to expel Christians from synagogues around 100 CE (González and González 2022, pp. 41–43). While the Jesus movement grew in a Hellenized world from a Second Temple Judaism with varying levels of Hellenization, one

aspect of the Jewish world that largely avoided the effects of Hellenization was their poetry. The only other extant example of a Jewish document using Greek poetry is the *Exagoge* by Ezekiel.⁸ The *Exagoge* was a Greek-style play based on the stories of the patriarchs' journey to Egypt and later Exodus. However, it was intended for entertainment purposes rather than communal worship. In fact, it seems to have been rejected by Jewish communities, especially those in Jerusalem, and received only by Gentile audiences.

The Song of Zechariah, unlike the *Exagoge*, was intended for communal worship. As Lukan congregations heard the Gospel of Luke, or one of the "memoirs of the apostles", read aloud as they assembled for worship and edification, they would have heard the Song of Zechariah sung aloud. And in time, as they recognized and learned the song, they may have come to sing it communally. Having established the uniquely multicultural artistic expression in the Lukan Song of Zechariah, I can now turn to what impact this inclusive technique could have had for the diverse communities of Jesus followers as they learned to care for one another.

3. The Ethics of Style

Monique Ingalls's observation about modern corporate worship equally applies to that of the first century: "musical style itself communicates a specific set of ideas and values to enculturated listeners".⁹ The first-century Jesus movement began as a Jewish movement both ethnically and religiously. However, it quickly became a novel thing: ethnic exclusivity faded as religious exclusivity increased. Non-Jews were worshiping the Jewish God and following a Jewish Messiah side-by-side with Jewish believers.

Gentile inclusion in Jewish practices was not new to the Jesus movement, but the level of equality was. Second Temple Judaism allowed Gentiles with varying levels of commitment and conviction to attend synagogue—but not Temple. At risk of oversimplifying things, in scholarship, these Gentile worshipers are often grouped into two categories: *God-fearers* and *Proselytes*. *God-fearers* were Gentiles who attended synagogue while also still offering sacrifices at the shrines of other gods. The God of Israel, YHWH, was just another God in their pantheon. *Proselytes*, however, represented a level of conversion and increased devotion on the part of the Gentiles that involved observance of Torah law, including circumcision for the males.¹⁰ The Jesus movement offered Gentiles full membership without full Torah observance (Acts 15:19–20). The ethics of such an invitation can be explored in this Song of Zechariah embedded in the Gospel of Luke.

Various (ethno)musicologists have drawn inspiration and insight from Charles Taylor's *The Ethics of Authenticity* and *Sources of the Self*.¹¹ Timothy Rommen highlights that Taylor's framework for ethics provides an "an emphasis on the existential aspects of life" as a means for understanding communal ethics and meanings.¹² Taylor emphasizes that an analysis of ethics cannot remain in the abstract but must assess the lived practices of a people group, which he calls a "thick" description of ethics. Ethnographers building off his premise emphasize that the music of a people or region likewise informs and is informed by—shapes and is shaped by—the ethics of the same. While Taylor, Rommen, Myrick, and others establishing this framework apply it to the modern context, it need not stay there. Indeed, Taylor argues for this framework as a corrective to the default social imaginary of the modern West. Therefore, this corrective framework can be worn by modern scholars seeking understanding of past eras. This framework corrects our modern astigmatism.

In music or any artform, "style itself functions as discourse." (Rommen 2007, p. 36) Genre and poetic forms are a language—an idiom—that carries with it an implicit in-grouping. An artistic idiom, like a community, carries within it genetics and a heritage. Like a community, an artistic idiom has encoded within it a means of belonging and understanding. Like a language, an artistic idiom or genre carries within it a requirement for shared meaning-making to interpret and understand one another. To speak a certain language is to welcome the heritage of meaning-making carried within the language and to welcome native speakers to connect their present situation to their heritage inherent in the language. To use an artistic idiom is to welcome the artistic genetics within the

idiom carried within the forms and to welcome native artists and audiences to connect their present situation with the heritage of the artform. When a new artform engages in a new context, it brings with it a fresh perspective and nuance. However, just as some words in a language have different meanings and terms in different regions and settings, various styles and artistic symbols within an artwork or genre may not always retain the same meaning across times, places, and spaces.¹³ As W. David O. Taylor says, any new artform “both opens up and closes down possibilities for the formation” of a community.¹⁴ While Nathan Myrick notes that “communication-cum-community formation is not always a definable ‘good’; sometimes those communities are formed in opposition to other such communities—to destructive effect”, communal identity formation can serve a healthy purpose. While there were elements of Christian self-identification that developed in opposition to Jewish communities—and vice versa—in later centuries,¹⁵ this article focuses on the role music can play in uniting previously incongruous communities. Music’s community formation power may not be “always a definable ‘good’”, but it surely can be. As Simon Frith says, music is “the cultural form best able both to cross borders . . . and to define places”.¹⁶

4. First-Century Church Caring for Others in Corporate Song

Mark Porter claims that, “musical practices within a church community have the potential to be a location of *ethical significance* and that the interaction between the musical lives of diverse and different individuals and the church community of which they are a part is a key site for ethical negotiation”.¹⁷ While this belief is set in the context of 20th- and 21st-century Western churches, the claims remain true across cultures and centuries. While both church fathers and twentieth-century church leaders voiced moral concerns over certain styles of music influencing and inspiring elicit behaviors, discussions of musical styles in worship also call for the ethical considerations of inclusion and identity. Within a diverse community, the hegemony of a particular cultural expression implicitly places the expression’s culture in a place of primary importance. Many times, within a culture or subculture, those in places of power work to preserve their place of privilege. The Jewish exclusion of the *Exagoge* by Ezekiel serves as an example of this in act in the Roman era. By contrast, the Song of Zechariah features an inclusion of Greco-Roman artistry that embodies the Gentile’s full inclusion in the new messianic community.

Curiously, the section of Greek dactylic hexameter does not coincide with the mention of “those that sit in darkness”, which could represent those outside the historical Jewish and Hebrew people and faith (Luke 1:78–79). Instead, as mentioned above, it coincides with the central claims of the song that the God of Israel has been faithful to his covenant with the fathers of the Hebrew faith to rescue them from the hands of their enemies to worship Him in holiness. The song does not give “those that sit in darkness” a moment to have their own cultural artistry heard as they are reminded of their historical identity in some first-century form of tone painting. Instead, the Greek artistic form declares God’s covenant faithfulness to “our father”, modeling the adoption of the Gentiles into the people of God. Likewise, the section of dactylic hexameter ends with lines declaring that they, the people of God, would serve God “in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life” (v. 75). The juxtaposition of the covenant text with the novel poetic style models an ethic of inclusion and comradery across ethnic boundaries.

Additionally, the wedding of Hebrew poetry and covenant language with Greco-Roman meter invites a reimagining of the term “our enemies” (v. 74). The enemies of the Jews were historically the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greek Seleucids, and finally the Romans; however, the presence of Gentile members in the community and the presence of Greco-Roman lyrics or meter in this song creates a juxtaposition between traditional labels and contemporary situations. This juxtaposition invites a redefinition of one’s enemy for both the Lukan communities’ in-group and out-group. The hostility between Jew and Gentile breaks down in the very artform as Hebrew and Greek poetry combine in a celebration of YHWH’s faithful deliverance through the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, their messiah. The Greek or Roman followers of Jesus now heard and perhaps

sang a song in their own genre celebrating YHWH's faithfulness to them. The inclusion of Greek artistry models to the Lukan congregations that serve the Lord in holiness is not simply an adherence to an ethnic heritage but a welcoming of all the good things of present in creation and culture. Holiness has a positive position, rather than only a negative that stands in opposition to all aspects of the other. The call to be set apart (which holiness means) does not mean an ascetic life detached from the life around them. Instead, those that come into the holy service of YHWH bring their whole selves. Within certain limits, cultural practices, including their artistic styles and genres, were allowed to be offered before him all the days of their lives.

Similarly, the adoption of a foreign or even "pagan" artform into a liturgical context provided an opportunity to the early Jesus followers to realize that those different than them were not inherently the enemy. They could live as a community of believers peacefully within a larger culture, engaging with that culture and welcoming aspects of that culture into their communal practices. Other cultural practices of civic and cultic participation—these two were closely intertwined—never found a home in the Jesus movement: animal sacrifice, cult prostitutes, gladiatorial games, polytheism, or ancestor worship.¹⁸ Various aspects of these ran in contrast to instructed behaviors for the followers of Jesus. However, styles of song, at least initially, seem to have been an area of welcome acceptance and inclusivity. Here stands an example of the Pauline concept of "being all things to all people . . . for the sake of the gospel, that I might share with them in its blessings" (1 Cor 9:22–23, ESV) both expanded and constrained. The liturgical experience of a multicultural hymn expands this Pauline adage by inviting every member to practice "being" something that they "might share with them in [the gospel's] blessing". In its historical-cultural context, it also constrains the Pauline passage, demonstrating that Paul and other believers would (or should) not break certain moral principles "that [they] might save some" (v. 22). Hymnic or poetic styles, like dietary habits (Gal 2:11–14; 1 Cor 9:21), were negotiable practices, while the previously mentioned cultic practices of the dominant pagan culture were not acceptable in the name of winning "those outside the law".

5. Contemporary Ramifications

The first-century Roman world was not so dissimilar from the twenty-first-century Western world. Both represent cosmopolitan melting pots of diverse cultures and belief systems. Both include cultures of social stratification enhancing dominant sentiments of belonging and the "other". While the modern construct of the "self" may be different from its ancient counterpart, the issues of communal belonging, religious gatekeeping, and acceptable practices of worship remain constant across the millennia.¹⁹

The wrestling between tradition and fresh creativity seems to reinvent itself with every generation, region, and culture. The Song of Zechariah's inclusion of artistic expressions from new members from "foreign" cultures speaks to contemporary issues of the cultural assimilation of the Christian church. Whether on the mission field or in diverse population centers, people from new cultural backgrounds frequently join a church or are converted by missionaries. The blending of Hebrew and Greek poetic forms or genres speaks an encouraging word to advocates of multicultural worship such as Sandra Maria Van Opstal.²⁰ Christian worship, in both the first and twenty-first centuries, should welcome creative expressions from various cultural heritages. Converts from new cultures should not be asked to adopt the cultural norms of the original or dominant people group. Rather, their participation includes the incorporation of their native artistic idioms. The Song of Zechariah models that not only are the peoples of every tribe and tongue welcome in the house of YHWH, but so are the artistic forms of every tribe and *idioma*.

The Song of Zechariah's layering of both Hebrew and Greek poetry together in the same lines suggests that multicultural worship is not having a worship jukebox that jumps from one genre to the next with each song, creating a musical schizophrenia. Instead, when the styles or genres can be infused with each other, it invites simultaneous joint participation from the diverse cultures represented in the community. The multicultural song uniting

various genres into a single artistic expression embodies the uniting of people from diverse backgrounds into a united people. Pastoral discernment is required to negotiate the real-world application of this. Perhaps Luke had just such a reason for including a song with only a portion in Greek meter.

6. Conclusions

Embedded in the Lukan nativity narrative, the Song of Zechariah combines Hebrew and Greek poetic forms into a song intended for corporate worship and edification. The central stanza of the Song of Zechariah retains its pattern of Hebrew Psalmic parallelism while also settling into a rhythm of Greek dactylic hexameter. This corporate expression of faith provides an insight into the ethics of style within the first-century Jesus movement and offers potential ramifications for contemporary Christian worship practices. Choices of artistic style in corporate worship are not neutral. While different genres are not inherently evil or prone to causing listeners to sin as twentieth-century Christian traditionalists claimed, the exclusion or inclusion of artistic styles and musical genres speaks to the ethics of who does or does not naturally belong in the community of faith. Privileged genres lead to and/or arise from privileged peoples. To honor one genre above another is to honor one people group above another within the “One New Man”. Just as a single language or *idioma* is not premier within the majority of the Christian faith, neither should a single genre or artistic *idiom* receive preferential treatment within the faith.

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Appendix A

For Table A1, the superscript numbers ^{68–79} are the verse numbers of the song in the Gospel of Luke. The italicized section is the central stanza that contains Greek dactylic hexameter. The superscript letters in the cola ^S, ^F, and ^A stand for synonymous, functional, and antithetical parallelism (respectively).

Table A1. The Song of Zechariah as Hebrew poetry (Luke 1:68–79).

Lyric	Cola
⁶⁸ Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel	A
For he has visited and performed redemption on his people	B
⁶⁹ And has raised up a horn of salvation for us	B ^S
In the house of his servant David,	B ^F
⁷⁰ As he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets of old,	C
⁷¹ Salvation from our enemies	C ^F
And from the hand of all those who hate us;	C ^S
⁷² <i>To fulfill mercy promised to our fathers and</i>	D
<i>To remember his holy covenant,</i> ⁷³ <i>the oath</i>	D ^S
<i>That he swore to Abraham our father,</i>	D ^S
⁷⁴ <i>To grant us [],</i> ²¹ <i>who from the hand of our enemies</i>	E
<i>Have been delivered, to serve him [fearlessly]⁷⁵ in holiness,</i>	E ^F
<i>And righteousness before him all the days of our life.</i>	E ^F
⁷⁶ And you now, child, will be called the prophet of the Most	F
For you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,	F ^F

Table A1. Cont.

Lyric	Cola
⁷⁷ The one to give knowledge of salvation to his people, In the forgiveness of their sins,	G G ^{F/S}
⁷⁸ Through the compassionate affections of our God, In which the sunrise will visit us from on high,	G ^F H
⁷⁹ To shine on those who in darkness And in the shadow of death sit, The one to guide our feet into the way of peace.	H ^{A/F} H ^{S/F} H ^{A/F}

Table A2. Scansion of the Song of Zechariah's central section as Greek meter.

I – – I – U U I –: U U I – U U I – – I – – I ποιῆσαι ἔλεος μετὰ τῶν πατέρων ἡμῶν καὶ To fulfill mercy promised to our fathers and I – – I – U U I – – I – U U I – – I – U I μνησθῆναι διαθήκης ἀγίας αὐτοῦ, ὄρκον To remember his holy covenant, the oath I – – I – U – I –: U U I – – I – U U I – – I ὃν ὤμοσεν πρὸς Ἀβραάμ τὸν πατέρα ἡμῶν, That he swore to Abraham our father, I – – I – – I –: U U I – – I – – I – – I τοῦ δοῦναι ἡμῖν ἀφόβως ἐκ χειρὸς ἐχθρῶν To grant us [fearlessness], who from the hand of our enemies I – – I – – I – – I – U² U I – U U I – U I ῥυθθέντας λατρεύειν αὐτῷ ἐν ὁσιότητι Have been delivered, to serve him [fearlessly] in holiness, I – U I – U U I –: U I – U U I – – I – U – I – – I – U – I – – I καὶ δικαιοσύνη ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ πάσαις ταῖς ἡμέραις ἡμῶν. and righteousness before him all the days of our life.
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Notes

- Find this and Mendelssohn's further thoughts in (Mendelssohn 1906).
- For more on Myrick's work, see (Myrick 2021a, 2021b, 2018a, 2018b).
- Consider, for example, Hodayot, the Psalms of Solomon and the Odes of Solomon. For more information, see (Pajunen and Penner 2017; Helyer 2002; Embry et al. 2018).
- For examples, see (Leonhard and Löhr 2014; Leonhard 2014; Brucker 2014, pp. 1–14).
- Space limits an exhaustive analysis. For the full analysis see (Covarelli 2024).
- The scansion is provided in the Appendix A.
- For more on this, see (Boyarin 2006; Eisenbaum 2009; Becker and Reed 2003; Boyarin 2013; Boccaccini et al. 2016; Bird et al. 2023; Fredriksen 2022).
- For examples, see (Jacobson 1982; Kramer 2022).
- Having established the Song of Zechariah as a song, I will treat the surviving poetic elements of the songs as musical elements and refer to them as such (Ingalls 2017).
- For more, see (Oliver 2013; Fredriksen 2003, pp. 41–52).
- For more, see (Taylor 1989, 1992). For perspectives on Taylor, see (Myrick 2021a, chap. 2; Rommen 2007, pp. 33–34, 43–46; Frith 1996, 2008).
- As quoted in (Rommen 2007, p. 33).
- For more on this, see (Best 1993, pp. 39–40; Bohlman 2001; Molino et al. 1990).
- Taylor examines numerous common artforms and how each one opens up and closes down these opportunities. (Taylor 2019, p. 11).
- For more on this, see (Boyarin 2006).
- For more, see (Frith 1996, p. 125).

- 17 Porter (2016, p. 35), emphasis added.
- 18 Ambrose, On the Duties of the Clergy, I.20.85, II.21.109; Arnobius, Against the Heathens, III.37–44, and Books IV, VI, and VII.; Athenagoras, A Plea for the Christians, ch. 13–14; Tertullian, Ad Nationes, I.10; (Kreider 2016, pp. 44–51; Townsley 2011, 2013).
- 19 For seminal research on contemporary worship music in the west (especially America), see (Ruth and Hong 2021); for a constructive theology of modern worship, see (Jordan 2024); for wider perspectives, see (WLR Team 2024; Edwards 2009; Hung 2024).
- 20 Opstal provides a fantastic argument for and proposals for multicultural corporate worship practices in (Van Opstal 2016).
- 21 In the Greek, the word translated “fearlessly” appears after the phrase “to grant us”, because Greek syntax allows modifiers to appear almost anywhere in the sentence. However, the adverb applies to serving God in holiness. Throughout my translations, I have aimed to preserve word order where possible because of the significance for identifying line order, line breaks and chiastic structures; however, here, the syntax of the English language causes the meaning of this word to be very difficult to retain in its original place. Therefore, the empty brackets serve to show the place of the word in the Greek text and the brackets around fearlessly show you where the word fits in the English syntax.

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Article

Multilingual Complexities in the Origins and Development of the Harrist Movement and Its Worship Patterns in Ivory Coast

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Abstract: The Harrist Church in Ivory Coast, West Africa, emerged from the ministry of Liberian William Wadé Harris who baptized between 100,000 and 200,000 people during his eighteen-month evangelistic tour, 1913–1915. This story is full of linguistic complexities and anomalies. Harris himself spoke only English and his own local Liberian Glebo language. He was therefore compelled to work through expatriate English-speaking merchants, knowledgeable of and conversant in local languages, as interpreters and translators in addressing the twelve ethnic groups who heard and accepted his message. Harris encouraged new converts to compose hymns in their own indigenous languages by transforming musical genres embedded in their local musical traditions. Additionally fascinating is that during this early colonial period, the twelve ethnic groups impacted by Harris's ministry lived in almost total isolation from each other and developed their own hymn traditions for thirty-five years (1914–1949), unaware of the existence of churches and worship patterns in neighboring ethnic districts. Only in 1949 did they suddenly become acquainted with the broader, multi-musical, multilingual reality of the Harrist movement. Since then, individual musicians and choirs from local congregations have gradually begun to sing a few of each other's songs, though the challenge of becoming a truly multicultural, multiethnic church remains a work in progress. Documentation of these developments include written colonial and early Protestant and Catholic missionary sources and a large number of eye-witness interviews. Primary research methods employed here come from four intersecting disciplines and theoretical frameworks: orality studies, with particular focus on oral sources in constructing historical narrative; religious phenomenology; mission history; and ethnodoxological research.

Keywords: multilingual; William Wade Harris; Harrist Church; ethnodoxology; orality; missiology; prophet; West Africa; Ivory Coast; African Independent Churches (AICs)

1. Introduction

In the fall of 2010, the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization was held in Cape Town, South Africa. The gathering brought together over 4000 evangelical leaders, thinkers, and practitioners from 198 countries for the purpose of “strengthening the church for world evangelization”.¹ The African context for the assembly prompted organizers to include a remarkable dramatic performance in one of the plenary sessions. The presentation featured four representative figures from Africa's past who had contributed significantly to the growth of the church on the continent: Kwame Bediako (1945–2008), Ghanaian theologian and church historian; Tokunboh Adeyemo (1944–2010), Nigerian scholar and longtime general secretary of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa; Simon Kimbangu (1887–1951), Congolese healer and preacher, imprisoned for thirty years by the Belgians as a security threat and for disturbing the peace; and William Wadé Harris (1860–1929), Liberian prophet-evangelist who, in the view of African church historian, Adrian Hastings, conducted “the most extraordinarily successful one man evangelical crusade that Africa has ever known” (Hastings 1976, p. 10).

With a similar laudatory tone, Nigerian scholar Ogbu Uke Kalu's (1980) edited work on the history of Christianity in West Africa included a chapter by G. O. M. Tasié highlighting

the “significance of native agency” in the mission efforts of the church (Tasie 1980). In it, the author explored early 20th century regional church developments as local men and women of faith took over from Western mission agencies the responsibility of “evangelizing the peoples of their own ethnic groups”. This period of transition, according to Tasie, was first generated by the charismatic personality of William Wadé Harris (Tasie 1980, pp. 296–99). It is Harris’ photo, it should additionally be noted, that was ultimately selected to grace the front cover of Kalu’s aforementioned 1980 edited volume as “the face” of Christianity in West Africa.

The lightning speed and ultimate effectiveness of Harris’ eighteen-month ministry (1913–1915) is one full of linguistic complexities and anomalies. How, speaking only English and his own local Liberian Glebo language, did he manage to travel the West African coastline and forever alter the religious beliefs and practices of diverse populations he encountered along the way? How, in addition, did he launch a creative music explosion among the twelve ethnic groups he met—groups living in relative isolation from each other at the time and speaking languages unknown and largely unintelligible across ethnolinguistic lines?

Exploring these questions is the primary focus of the present three-part study, beginning with an overview of what is known by scholars and eye witnesses of the life and formative influences of the evangelist, followed by an examination of the methods of communication he employed and the music counsel he offered in the course of his ministry, and concluding with a look at the subsequent challenge the Harrist movement has faced in attempting to create a cohesive, national worshipping community while supporting and promoting local indigenous musical expressions as recommended by their spiritual founder William Wadé Harris.

Documentation of these developments include written colonial and early Protestant and Catholic missionary sources and a large number of eye-witness interviews undertaken and published in Bureau (1971), Haliburton (1971), and Krabill (1995). Primary research methods employed here come from four intersecting disciplines and theoretical frameworks: orality studies, with particular focus on oral sources in constructing historical narrative (Ki-Zerbo 1972, pp. 9–37; Krabill 1979, 2014; Vansina 1961; 1980, pp. 166–90; 1985); religious phenomenology (Moreau 2018; Smart 1996; Turner 1979); mission history (Anderson et al. 1994; Shenk 2002; Skreslet 2012, 2023) and ethnodoxological research (Krabill 2013; Schrag 2013).

2. Who Was William Wadé Harris?

Charles Pelham Groves’ monumental study, *The Planting of Christianity in Africa*, identified “three notable missionary figures” in French colonial territories during the First World War: Albert Schweitzer in Gabon’s tropical rain forests, Charles de Foucauld in Algeria’s Sahara region, and William Wadé Harris encountering littoral peoples in West Africa’s Ivory Coast (Groves 1958, vol. 4, 4). The lives and ministries of Schweitzer and Foucauld are well documented, but Harris’ story has had fewer sources to rely on and was consequently for many years far less known.

Most Roman Catholic priests of the period simply wrote Harris off as a Protestant-inspired imposter attempting to undermine their mission efforts. Disdain and suspicion of him were so deep among the clergy that even referencing his name in reports to superiors was routinely avoided. In one remarkable communication by Monsignor Jules Moury, Ivory Coast’s vicar apostolic at the peak of Harris’ ministry in 1914, Moury simply exclaimed:

*Space is lacking here for exposing the external means which Divine Providence has used for the accomplishment of His merciful designs. I must thus limit myself to exposing the effects. These effects—it’s a whole people who, having destroyed its fetishes, invades our churches en masse, requesting Holy Baptism.*²

Among expatriate Methodist mission workers and their African colleagues in neighboring Gold Coast, little was known of Harris, though admiration and approval of him grew as it was learned that he had connections early in life to the Methodist church in his

home country of Liberia. The later arrival a decade after Harris' departure from Ivory Coast of mission personnel from the English Wesleyan Methodist Church and their subsequent claim to be the legitimate heirs to Harris' legacy set them up as the primary researchers and reporters to the outside world of what became known of the evangelist (see de Billy 1931; Platt 1934; Shank 1979).

Other streams of inquiry in the latter decades of the 20th century also threw light on both the content and context of Harris's ministry.³ Historians interviewed hundreds of first-generation eye witnesses to Harris's evangelistic work and labored to reconstruct the unfolding story of his impact on Ivorian coastal societies (Amos-Djoro 1956; Haliburton 1971; Holas 1965; Yando 1970; S. Walker 1983). Anthropologists examined traditional religious cosmologies and placed these alongside the message that Harris articulated and embodied (Augé 1975; Bee 1970; Bureau 1971, 1996; Dozon 1995; Piault 1975).⁴

Initiatives were undertaken to collect and examine the liturgical texts of the Harrist Church—the sermons, confessions of faith, hymns, and prayers—to explore what impressions could be gleaned about Harris from the oral memory of the faith community resulting from his ministry.⁵ Members of the Harrist community itself produced a number of important manuscripts and several published volumes during this period (Ahui 1988; Aké 1980; Kouassi 1985). But it was primarily the seminal research conducted by David A. Shank into the early years and pre-ministry influences of Harris's life in Liberia that has most deepened our understanding of the prophetic thought patterns and practices for which the self-proclaimed “Black Elijah” of West Africa is best known.⁶

3. A Master Communicator Facing Overwhelming Obstacles

Despite the multiple, diverse, and sometimes contradictory narratives regarding Harris's ministry, there is one thing upon which virtually everyone agreed: The 53-year-old Liberian prophet–evangelist created an immediate sensation when he arrived in Ivory Coast in July 1913 from his native Liberia and walked along the coast from village to village, preaching a fiery message and engaging in power encounters with prophecies and miracles. “He appeared to the inhabitants to be a spirit, he was so unlike any humans they knew”, reported Jacques Boga Sako, an eye witness to Harris's ministry. “His white gown and turban, his black sashes, his white beard and flashing eyes, filled all who saw him with awe, and it could be believed that a new god had arrived, more powerful than any preceding ones” (Haliburton 1971, p. 50). Calling local populations to offer up their objects of worship, Harris proceeded to burn the objects—referred to by Harris himself as “fetishes”—and then baptized the villagers who heeded his call. It is estimated that the prophet–evangelist baptized between 100,000 and 200,000 villagers from among twelve different ethnic groups that he encountered during his 18-month ministry from July 1913 to January 1915.

Donald K. Smith, in his book, *Creating Understanding*, has identified twelve “signal systems” through which human communication occurs (Smith 2021, pp. 294–312). These include: *verbal* (speech); *written* (symbols representing speech); *numeric* (numbers and number systems); *pictorial* (two-dimensional representations); *artifactual* (three-dimensional representations and objects, the “things” used in living); *audio* (use of nonverbal sounds, and silence); *kinesic* (body motions, facial expressions, posture); *optical* (light and color); *tactile* (touch, the sense of “feel”); *spatial* (utilization of space); *temporal* (utilization of time); and *olfactory* (taste and smell).

William Wadé Harris made use of virtually every one of these communication modalities in delivering his message. He was not ignorant of the fact that for pre-literate audiences, nonverbal gestures, signs, and symbols were of utmost importance. David Shank devotes two entire chapters to Harris's effective use of “‘spiritual’ phenomena”—prescience, spiritual leading, exorcism, healing, speaking in tongues, signs, miracles (Shank 1994, pp. 174–88), and “symbolic patterns”—clothing, a staff-cross, baptism, fire, the Bible, a sheepskin, and calabash rattles (ibid., pp. 189–223). Historian Sheila S. Walker has even claimed that “it appears that people were impressed less by Harris' words [...] than by the

concrete demonstration of his power, which gave meaning to his message” (S. Walker 1983, p. 116).

This is not entirely true, however. For Harris did make prolific use of verbal communication through hundreds of discourses and sermons to diverse audiences in a wide variety of circumstances. Shank calls these utterances by Harris “the prophetic word”, coming frequently as a *proclaimed message*, and elsewhere in the forms of *blessing* and *cursing*, *prayer* and *song*, and *teaching* (Shank 1994, pp. 224–42).

4. Pre-Prophetic Language Training as a Church Worker and Seafaring Laborer

The William Wadé Harris who crossed the Cavally River from Liberia into Ivory Coast in 1913 was a well-seasoned, fifty-three-year-old man with a curriculum vitae of which relatively few men in his day could ever hope to boast: student, traveler, seaman, mason, husband (25 years), father (six times), grandfather (four), preacher, government-paid interpreter, and employee of a prestigious church-mission society as assistant schoolteacher, catechist lay reader, and boarding school director. These are the diverse elements that contributed to the making of the man-become-prophet (Shank 1994), preparing him for the second chapter of his life so different from the first.

These achievements, impressive as they are, in no way explain, however, why coastal villagers by the thousands were willing to leave the safe confines of their secluded encampments, abandoning fish traps and field work, to walk for days through dense forests and along scorching sandy shorelines to receive whatever blessing this man had in store for them.

The excitement that Harris seems to have generated was related not to a long list of past credentials, but to his own dynamic personality, to his mighty words and many acts of electrifying power. Yet Harris did face a serious problem: How was he to communicate through teaching and preaching with audiences speaking languages he had never before encountered?

At the age of thirteen, Harris was taken a hundred miles west from his home village of Glogbale among the Glebo people in the easternmost region of Liberia to live with his uncle, Rev. John C. Lowrie, a Glebo Methodist preacher–minister and erstwhile teacher. Under his uncle’s tutelage, Harris studied the Bible and learned to read and write in both Glebo and English languages. Many years later, Irish Catholic missionary–priest, Father Harrington, was amazed at Harris’s spoken English, writing, “he spoke in perfect English, a very remarkable acquisition for a [seafaring] Kruman” (Harrington 1917, p. 13). In the Lowrie household and at school, there were morning and evening prayers, grace at meals, weekday school lessons, and on Sunday, the Sunday school, morning and evening worship, and a mid-week prayer meeting (Shank 1994, p. 49).

When his uncle Lowrie was transferred back to his Glebo home region of Cape Palmas, Harris took a year to work as a “kruboy”—a seafaring laborer transporting goods between ships and ports up and down the coast from Liberia to Gabon with stops in Ivory Coast, Gold Coast, Dahomey, Nigeria, Cameroon, and various islands in between (Gunn 2021). Harris made four such trips in that year, expanding his horizons of the broader world and learning some of the key people, trades and languages on the West African coast. In 1880, Harris returned to his home village as William Wadé Harris—a literate, baptized Methodist, sophisticated and “civilized” according to the local standards set by Americo-Liberian settlers, and increasingly aware of national and regional politicoreligious dynamics beyond Liberia.

Though baptized as a Methodist before his seafaring adventures, it was upon his return to his home region that, according to his own testimony, “the Holy Ghost come on me” under the summons of a certain Rev. Thompson and “the very year of my conversion I started preaching” (Shank 1994, pp. 57, 61). For the next thirty years, Harris served local Methodist and Episcopal churches in a variety of ways, as a mission employee, a day-school teacher, a headmaster of the boarding school, and as a liturgical lay reader in

Glebo and English languages following the “Table of Readings” in the *Book of Common Prayer* in both Old and New Testaments (Shank 1994, p. 76).

Because of his remarkable language proficiency, Harris was also recruited as a government interpreter for the national administration in Monrovia on behalf of his own Glebo people, thus thrusting him into the mainstream of Liberian politics at a local level. This role eventually put him at serious odds with the Americo-Liberian government, but served the function nonetheless of preparing him for his work in Ivory Coast where he would need to depend on translators and interpreters for his preaching and teaching ministries there.

5. Making Use of Local Language Resources for Preaching and Teaching in Ivory Coast

Ultimately, Harris’s growing discontent with the Americo-Liberian government in Monrovia landed him in trouble. Relationships between local Glebo and Liberian authorities were deteriorating rapidly and finally came to a crisis in 1907–1908. Harris, caught between his Glebo roots and his “civilized/Christian” training, was torn in both directions. In 1909, he was arrested, imprisoned, then tried and found guilty of treason for having participated in an unsuccessful *coup d’état* designed to overthrow the Liberian authority and replace it with some form of British protectorate. Harris was fined, sentenced, imprisoned, then finally released, only to be placed back in prison until the uprising was over in 1910 and the Glebo people had been crushed with harsh conditions laid upon them. Harris, now a 50-year-old man and experiencing the most discouraging moment of his life, was—according to his own testimony—awakened one night from his prison bed and called by God via the Archangel Gabriel to “exchange his Western-style clothing for a white toga-like robe” and begin preaching “the destruction of fetishes and the reign of Jesus Christ”. Later that year, Harris was seen out on the streets again, this time preaching, “Repent! from all your sins, or . . . [hell] fire!” (Krabill 1995, p. 172; Shank 1994, pp. 105–30; S. Walker 1983, pp. 14–15).

In July 1913, Harris carried his message out of Liberia, across the Cavally River, and into the newly established French colony of Ivory Coast where he would confront a complex maze of linguistic challenges. There were at that time and still are today at least sixty “indigenous” languages spoken in Ivory Coast (Loucou 1984, pp. 180–84),⁷ regrouped in the southern coastal region into two large linguistic families of Kru-related speakers (in the southwest, spilling over into Liberia) and Akan (in the southeast, shared with Akan-speaking groups in Gold Coast, today’s Ghana). The Bandama River, running north to south, divides Ivory Coast down the middle and separates the two regional linguistic family groupings from each other.

As Harris progressed eastward along the coast from Liberia and into Ivory Coast, he encountered Kru populations in villages and port towns such as Tabou, San Pedro, Sassandra, Drewin, Kadropka, Fresco, and the Dida village of Lauzoua, until he reached the Bandama River. Just to be clear, of the twenty-some languages spoken within the larger Kru family, few are fully inter-intelligible, though speakers seem to recognize the existence of certain connections and inter-relationships (Krabill 1995, p. 11; Tonkin 1985, p. 30). This explains why some of the early teaching Harris attempted to carry out in his native Kru-family Glebo language and a few of the Glebo song texts he sang for Kru-speaking Dida-language baptismal candidates were vaguely recognizable, yet far from sufficient for exhorting the growing crowds through teaching and preaching. Once Harris crossed the Bandama River, however, and into the Akan family of languages, his Kru-related Glebo language was of no use to him whatsoever.

So, what was Harris to do? There is no record of Harris understanding or speaking the French language—though at this early phase of France’s linguistic imprint on their new colony, with no organized colonial educational system, no body of instructional literature, or other means for teaching the French language to the local population, an understanding of French would not have resolved his communication challenge. Harris did, of course, speak English and, as it turns out, “pidgin English”—emanating from the long-established British ports and colonies in Nigeria, Gold Coast, Gambia, and Sierra Leone—had for

decades been the common trade language in use all along the West African coast, including in emerging French colonial territories.

Enterprising, semi-skilled, and educated English-speaking merchants—often referred to as “clarks”, i.e., clerks—from British commercial firms and centers circulated up and down the coast, buying and selling products, acquainting themselves with local languages and cultures, occasionally marrying local women, and in some instances, gathering for worship among themselves as West African expatriates (see clerk photos in Krabill 1995, p. 211; Morris 1982). There is evidence of at least one such English-speaking Methodist congregation in Ivory Coast at this time, established not as a mission outpost for reaching the local population, but to accommodate anglophone Protestant merchants from neighboring colonies.

Several of these English-speaking merchants became aware of and excited about Harris’s preaching ministry. Many of them, like A.E.M. Brown and “Papa Penny”, were Methodist Protestants from the Fanti ethnic group in the Gold Coast, or in the cases of J.W. Samuel Reffel and a man named Goodman, both Methodists, from Sierra Leone (Krabill 1995, p. 176; F. D. Walker 1926, opposite page 29; Shank 1994, p. 9). There were a few non-Methodist merchants—a Sierra Leonian Baptist and John Thomas, a Roman Catholic clerk from Bathurst, Gambia—who offered their services to Harris in various aspects of his work. According to Shank, Harris seemed less concerned during this early ministry phase about the confessional affiliation of the clerks, and more focused on “providing care for his followers from the people available, whether Catholic or Protestant” (Shank 1994, p. 9).

Some clerks volunteered to assist Harris in his ministry. Others were specifically recruited, even “ordained”, by Harris (Shank 1994, p. 244) for the work of interpreting, preaching, baptizing, recording the names of the baptized, being dispatched to areas where Harris had not yet gone or could not reach, or even teaching rudimentary confessions of faith or biblical passages like the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Apostles’ Creed. None of these men were church employees or theologically trained clergy. They were businessmen, possessing the unique gift of understanding and speaking both English and one or another of the local Ivorian languages. In at least one instance, a local literate clerk, Jacques Boga Sako, from the Avikam ethnic group centered in and around Grand Lahou, also joined Harris and assisted him in his work (Shank 1994, p. 244).

Harris preached in English and the clerks would interpret. According to eye witness testimony in Haliburton (1971, p. 118), Harris focused on two principal instructions: “God is all-powerful, so you must burn your fetishes” and “Love one another”. In de Billy’s (1931) account of Harris’s preaching, we find a much longer, more elaborated sermon text from the prophet–evangelist’s 1913 baptizing ministry in the coastal village of Kraffy. This text—though admittedly a synthesized, somewhat artificial reconstruction—would suggest that Harris’s preaching may well have contained from the earliest days a message of rather solid substance (for the full sermon, see de Billy 1931, pp. 15–16; Eng. trans. in Shank 1994, pp. 227–28; and Krabill 1995, pp. 179–80).

6. Harris’s Counsel on Music and Its Implication for Language Usage and Development

Once the crowds had heard a powerful sermon and received baptism from Harris, he proceeded to give them practical counsel on how to conduct their new life together. Emile Beugré, from the Dida village of Nzida, recalled these words from the prophet–evangelist:

Upon arrival in Kraffy, Harris told our fathers, “I am going to baptize you, but when you get back to your village, you must burn all of your fetishes. Then, you must choose men of calm spirit to serve as your preachers. Even if they don’t have much knowledge, God will bless them because of me. Build yourselves a house of prayer and if you don’t know what to say to God, pray in my name, telling God that it is Harris who told you to do this, and He will hear your pleas. Do everything just as I say, and if all is not for the better, then I myself will take full responsibility” (Emile Beugré, in Krabill 1995, p. 187).

Other testimonies recount the counsel offered by Harris regarding the music to be sung in the new faith communities. In the Dida village of Lauzoua, he simply commanded

people to start singing. The exchange that ensued in that instance between local leaders and Harris is reported as follows:

Mr. Kouadjo Affo, an important man in Lauzoua, told the Prophet, "We would be glad to do what you ask if we knew the songs of God, but since you have come as God's messenger, it is you who must teach them to us". And so it was that the Prophet told the people of Lauzoua that God has no personal, favorite songs; that He hears all that we say in whatever language; that it is sufficient for us to praise Him in our own language for Him to understand (Krabill 1995, p. 5).

It is important to remind ourselves at this point, that Harris had spent over thirty-five years—nearly all of his pre-prophetic adult life (1873–1910)—attending, worshipping in, and actively serving the “civilized” Methodist and Episcopal churches of eastern Liberia. Throughout those years, he had grown to love the Western musical traditions of the churches he attended. When asked in 1978 whether Harris had any favorite hymns, his grandchildren recalled without hesitation, “Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending”, “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah”, “Jesus, Lover of My Soul”, “How Firm a Foundation”, and “What A Friend We Have in Jesus” (Shank 1994, p. 239). All the more remarkable, then, that Harris should have been willing to set aside his own personal musical tastes in order to encourage the creation of indigenous worship traditions by taking the music and dance forms with which the local people were already acquainted and transforming them for appropriate usage in worship settings.⁸

For the Dida people—one of the first and largest ethnic groups to feel the impact of Harris’s ministry—the pre-Harris musical repertoire was vast, including at least 30–40 distinct classifications of traditional music genres, ranging from love ballads and funeral dirges to songs composed for hunting, rice planting, and rendering homage to wealthy community leaders. Not all musical genres, however, were suitable, according to Harris, for use in praising God. One female musician from Lauzoua stepped forward in Harris’s presence and began singing a *zlanje* tune—a love song with suggestive lyrics aimed at seducing potential partners into sexual activity. “That song does not honor God”, Harris said. “Sing something else”. At that suggestion, another singer came forward proposing a *dogblo* tune—a type of honorific praise song that literally hurls forth or shouts out the name of a nature spirit, a wealthy family head, or clan leader deserving special attention or recognition. “That’s it!” Harris reportedly exclaimed. “That is the music you must work with! Though now you must refrain from using these songs for earthly rulers and lesser spirits and begin transforming the words bit by bit to bring glory to God”.⁹

Harris never explained, so far as we know, what it was that informed his position on this matter. Clearly, something occurred during his 1910 trance-visitation with the Archangel Gabriel that produced in him a shift from Western to more African forms of faith expression. The impracticality and cultural inappropriateness of introducing to large crowds strange-sounding Western melodies and translating rather complicated English-language hymn texts may also have sent the prophet–evangelist searching for other solutions. Such considerations, though, did not seem to discourage him from preaching English-language sermons that needed translating or from teaching certain “imported” liturgical texts such as the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer, seen by Harris as basic, indispensable elements of worship for new converts.

The primary issue at stake for Harris seemed to be not so much the question of Western versus African musical forms, but rather whether or not, in one way or another, God’s message was getting through to the hearers. From this prospective, Harris could on occasion order the Fanti Protestant clerks to teach new converts Western Christian hymns (Haliburton 1971, p. 100), while in other settings, this same concern provided him with a handle for issuing critiques of certain African musical traditions—such as the sexually tainted *zlanje* love songs in Lauzoua—which according to him failed to achieve the desired objectives.

Whatever the reasons behind Harris’s choice to encourage the composition of indigenous worship music in local languages, the effect was a phenomenal burst of creative

musical energy across the twelve ethnic groups that were taught and baptized by the prophet–evangelist. While I lived with my family among Dida Harrists in the 1980s, it was my rare privilege to work with church leaders to collect and transcribe in one village over 500 hymn texts from the oral worship traditions of the church, spanning the 75-year period from 1913 to 1988. Since our departure from Ivory Coast in 1996, hundreds, if not thousands of new compositions have been added to the multiethnic Harrist Church’s repertoire, and these, in several new musical styles that did not yet exist during our years of worshiping with the Harrist community (Krabill 2005, pp. 93–97).

7. Multicultural or Ethnocentric? The Harrist Story as Invitation and Warning

We have attempted in this article to highlight some of the multilingual complexities inherent in the life story and ministry of the prophet–evangelist William Wadé Harris, and in the mass movement that emerged from his brief but electrifying preaching, baptizing, and fetish-burning tour through Ivory Coast at the outset of the twentieth century. We began by chronicling Harris’s early years of language formation in English and Glebo, his Liberian mother tongue, and his exposure to other West African cultural and linguistic realities during his year as a seafaring “kruboy” traveling up and down the coastal route from his homeland to Gabon. Then, we explored Harris’s passionate, unbridled commitment to the ministry calling he had received from God via the Archangel Gabriel, which pushed him beyond the confines of his native Liberia and into the complex linguistic maze of Ivory Coast.

During his eighteen-month tour in this newly established French colony, he confronted a seemingly unsurmountable communication challenge by partnering with West African merchant-clerks conversant in both English and several local languages in order to connect with local populations through the clerks’ interpretation and translation services of his preaching and teaching ministries. In a colony where French authorities required all religious services to take place in either Latin or French languages, Harris informed the teeming crowds flocking to him that they could talk to God through songs and prayers in their own indigenous languages and that God would understand (Krabill 1995, p. 5). While politically provocative for French officials, this word of counsel from Harris had the effect on local populations of empowering and energizing them to return to their home villages and create locally produced worship patterns, spontaneously uttered prayers, and countless indigenous musical compositions for immediate use in the newly forming faith communities throughout the southern coastal region of Ivory Coast.

There are very few Christian communities anywhere in the world that have never sung an imported song. The Harrist Church is a remarkable exception to the rule. This has now occurred for over a hundred years because of Harris’s early counsel to the very first believers in 1913 and by virtue of the movement’s ongoing embrace, encouragement, nurture, and guidance of the church’s composers—many of whom are women—in providing the movement’s musical diet for worship, communal rituals, and celebrative holidays and festivals.

There are moments, however, when the Harrists’ insistence on indigenous song composition and usage has proven to be somewhat cumbersome, inconvenient, and potentially even an impediment to the movement’s expansion and growth. With the migration of Ivorian villagers in recent decades from rural to urban areas, it has not always been easy for Harrists from different ethnolinguistic groupings to know how to worship together. French is the only language taught in the public school system in Ivory Coast and is the mode of common parlance among most urbanites in social settings and business encounters. But Harrist songs are not composed in French, only indigenous languages, and so becoming multicultural, multilinguistic worshiping bodies in urban contexts can present a challenge for Harrist churches.

In the 1990s, I attended a Harrist worship service in a village on the outskirts of Ivory Coast’s capital city, Abidjan, where a group of French tourists happened in to the church building and sat down for worship. The younger preacher in the congregation got up to

translate into French the elder preacher's prayers and sermon, but was told that this was not permitted, because "the Prophet Harris had instructed the church to sing and pray in its own language and God would understand". In such instances, we see the gradual transformation of Harris's wise instruction in the form of a recommendation to becoming a commandment—that worship *can* occur in local languages, according to Harris, to a requirement that it *must* take place in such a manner.

During the early colonial period, Ivorians were not encouraged or even permitted in some instances to travel widely across the colony. Dida Harrists in the western sector of the territory knew virtually nothing of Harrist communities existing further east among the Alladian, Adjukru, Ebrie, and other ethnic groupings. Only around 1950—thirty-five years into the movement and long after the passage of Harris in Ivory Coast—did the Dida learn of a man named John "Jonas" Ahui from the Ebrie village of Petit Bassam who in 1928 had visited Harris in Liberia and then returned to Ivory Coast to begin the long process of revitalizing and unifying Harrist communities scattered over many miles along the Ivorian coastline (Shank 1979; Krabill 1995, pp. 55–61; Ahui 1988, pp. 179–239). Since then, and up until the present time, there have been many efforts to work at creating a national church identity across ethnic lines through the establishment of a National Committee in 1960, a Harrist youth organization in 1975, a publication on doctrinal statements and liturgical structures (Aké 1980), a Harrist historical version of the message and impact of the prophet–evangelist (Ahui 1988), and a dossier of legal documents clarifying the status and legitimacy of the current spiritual head and national committee of the Harrist movement (Dogbo 2001).

As for musical developments in the church, recorded cassette tapes of various local ethnic and regional choirs began circulating among the faithful in the 1980s and eventually, in the 1990s, a national choir was formed. The majority—though not all—of the songs sung by the choir, however, were in Ebrie, the language and ethnic identity of the spiritual head, the church's Chef Suprême, from Petit Bassam near Abidjan. One key church leader, Thierry Djolé—a historian, theologian, singer, and composer from the Dida ethnic group—has worked tirelessly over the years to diversify the national choir's repertoire and to provide leadership to ACoFess, the Association de Koya Harriste Festival (the Harrist Choir Festival Association). As a new generation of Harrist musicians begins to play an active role in the church and as the movement puts down deeper roots in Ghana, Benin, France, and elsewhere beyond the Ivory Coast, it will be interesting to watch whether the church will explore creative ways of becoming increasingly multicultural or whether it will rely more heavily on the ethnic-focused origins that inspired the first generation of believers following the counsel of the prophet–evangelist William Wadé Harris who gave birth to the movement over a century ago.

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Notes

- ¹ A full report of the gathering can be found at: <https://www.lausanne.org/gatherings/congress/cape-town-2010-3> (accessed on 18 October 2023), and in the edited volume by Julia M. Cameron (2012).
- ² Archives of the Société des Missions Africaines (Rome), 12/804.07:28:761, 1914. For a more thorough overview of Catholic views on Harris during this period, see Michel Bee (1970).
- ³ The most complete survey of efforts in this regard is David A. Shank (1983).
- ⁴ Concerning pre-Christian language and history, I do not cite here the existing wide range of English-speaking non-Ivorian scholars in the field, because they do not immediately apply, ethnically or historically. Bediako, Pobee, and Oduyoye are, for

example, from the larger Akan family in Ghana. Harris and the Dida people the prophet first encountered and evangelized were from the larger Kru linguistic and ethnic family. Furthermore, the anglophone neighbors on either side of Côte d'Ivoire were colonized largely by Protestant missionaries and have in recent years been studied and analyzed by English-speaking Protestants like the abovementioned scholars. For "pre-Christian language and history" in my study, I have relied primarily on francophone (often Catholic) scholarship, in the works of the academics referenced here. Their studies appear in my bibliography.

- 5 The most in-depth study here (Krabill 1995) focuses on primarily on the Dida people, one of a dozen or so ethnic groups transformed by Harris's ministry in Ivory Coast.
- 6 Shank's three-volume Ph.D. dissertation, *A Prophet of Modern Times: The Thought of William Wadé Harris, West African Precursor of the Reign of Christ* (University of Aberdeen, Scotland, 1980) appeared in an abridged published form in 1994.
- 7 Pierre Alexandre (1972, pp. 89–91) has divided African states into four categories according to the linguistic homogeneity or heterogeneity to be found in each of them: (1) "Linguistically homogeneous states"—eight nations; (2) "Linguistically heterogeneous states, with one or several dominant African languages"—nine nations; (3) "States with moderate linguistic heterogeneity"—five nations; and (4) "States with great linguistic heterogeneity"—eight nations. Ivory Coast is to be found in the latter group, whether or not Ivorian languages actually number exactly sixty, a few more or less.
- 8 I have written about the musical counsel Harris gave to early believers in numerous places, including (Krabill 1990a; 1990b, pp. 56–59; 1995, pp. 5–7, 181–85; 2005, pp. 88–102; 2008, pp. 64–65; and Krabill et al. 2013, pp. 245–48).
- 9 This fascinating exchange took place between Harris and new converts in the village of Lauzoua. It is a composite description based on two interviews, the first conducted by Modeste Lévy Beugré on 30 April 1977, with Gnaba Koadjan (Head Harrist Apostle from Braffédon), and the second, my own interview on 11 December 1982, with Simon Laubouet Oti (Harrist Preacher from Guity). The first of these interviews can be found in its complete, unedited form in Shank (1980, vol. III, Appendix XXV: 923f).

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Article

Multilingual Singing in Nigeria: Examining Roles, Meaning, and Function in Wazobia Gospel Music

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Abstract: This article presents an introductory historical, sociolinguistic, and ethnographic study of “Wazobia gospel music”, a twenty-first-century Nigerian congregational musical genre. The term ‘Wazobia’ signifies a fusion of the three regionally recognized local languages in Nigeria: Wa (Yorùbá), Zo (Hausa), and Bia (Igbo)—words that mean ‘come’ in the respective languages. In the Nigerian context, the Wazobia concept could also symbolize the inclusion of more than one ethnicity or language. By dissecting three multilingual Nigerian congregational songs, I unveil the diverse perceptions of Wazobia gospel music and the associations of the musical genre in line with the influencing agencies, text, and performance practices. Furthermore, I provide a detailed description and analysis of the textual and sonic contents of Wazobia gospel music, emphasizing its roles, meanings, and functions in the Lagos congregations context. I argue that Wazobia gospel music—multilingual singing in Nigerian churches—embodies multilayered roles in negotiating identity and creating hospitality. The complexity of studying congregational singing in cosmopolitan cities (like Lagos, Nigeria) due to multiple ethnolinguistic and musical expressions within local and transnational links is also addressed. To tackle this complexity, this article adopts an interdisciplinary approach, combining historical research, oral history, and hybrid ethnography. This approach ensures a thorough and in-depth understanding of Wazobia gospel music, a topic of significant importance in the study of Nigerian music, linguistics, and cultural studies. By employing frameworks of musical localization and signification, I incorporate the results of my ethnographic studies of three Protestant churches in Lagos, Nigeria, to illustrate Wazobia gospel music’s continued importance. The article conceptualizes multilingual singing and offers fresh perspectives on studying Nigerian Christian congregational music in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Wazobia gospel; multilingual singing; congregational music; Nigeria

1. Introduction

Music is profoundly significant across cultures and societies. It may serve as a unifying language that transcends linguistic barriers, enabling people from diverse backgrounds to connect emotionally and culturally. Music can evoke powerful emotions, convey deep messages, and foster a sense of community and belonging. In various cultures, music plays a crucial role in rituals, celebrations, and daily life, providing a means for expression and communication. In the Nigerian context, just like many other multilingual societies, music is an integral part of cultural heritage, with contemporary genres like Afrobeat, Highlife, *Juju*, and Gospel music reflecting the nation’s rich history and diversity.¹ Nigerian music has gained global recognition, showcasing the country’s artistic talents and contributing to its cultural diplomacy.

As a result of globalization, Nigeria is increasingly important in world music, economics, and religion.² Nigeria is essential to global Christianity because of the large number of Christians within the country and the influence of its diaspora. For example, Evanthia Patsiaoura's work about the Nigerian diaspora in Athens, Greece, underscores how "Nigerian Pentecostals employ music to express, facilitate, and embody faith in the church and everyday life settings" (Patsiaoura 2018, p. 167). Through what Patsiaoura calls "shared musico-spiritual practice" in Athens' locality, she describes what may inform how Nigerian Pentecostal congregations across geographic borders are shaped, experienced, and imagined" (Patsiaoura 2018, p. 177). The diaspora study exemplifies how Christians in Nigeria listen to and worship through gospel music. As African scholar Ezra Chitando points out, "Gospel music represents a valuable entry point into a discussion of contemporary African cultural production" (Chitando 2002, p. 5). Studying Nigerian gospel music may provide an entry to understanding more significant Nigerian cultures. Therefore, scholars must delve into the intricacies of Nigerian gospel music, as this is a key to unlocking the beliefs and practices of this large and influential group of Christians. This article aims to describe multilingual singing in selected Lagos Christian congregational worship and examine its various roles, meanings, and functions in negotiating identities and creating hospitality. In addition, the article seeks to identify how multiethnic churches may reflect on the concept of multilingual singing and its implications on congregational worship.

The article employs historical, sociolinguistic, and ethnographic approaches to examine "Wazobia gospel music", a term the author coined to conceptualize multilingual singing in Lagos, Nigeria. Wazobia gospel music may exemplify a subgenre of Nigerian gospel music in multiethnic and multicultural congregations. Providing an introductory view of Nigerian gospel music is essential before considering the intricacies of Wazobia gospel music.

2. Nigerian Gospel Music: A cursory Background

Like many other evolving concepts, gospel music in Nigeria has received different interrogations and interpretations by musicians, patrons, and scholars, emphasizing various aspects such as its origin, functions, and content. While scholars have argued for or against the fact that Nigerian gospel music started before the 1960s, there is general agreement that some significant developments began during this pivotal decade. Nigerian theologian and sacred musicologist Femi Adedje traces the origin of Nigerian gospel music to the 1960s and argues that this development had its antecedent thirty years earlier (Adedje 2005, p. 146). Various names attached to Nigerian gospel music were *orin igbàgbo* (Christian songs), gospel, indigenous sacred songs, and spiritual songs.³ Definitions of gospel music in Nigeria have emphasized its two-pronged nature as a spiritual and social commodity, exhibited in its use in the church setting and outside the church (Adeola 2021, p. 85). This understanding suggests that gospel music in Nigeria is not restricted to the formal Christian liturgy as a branch of Christian music but is also adaptable to Christian activities outside the strict liturgical settings, such as social functions.

Nigerian gospel music shares some similarities and distinctiveness with African American gospel in its performance practices. One of the foremost researchers in Nigerian gospel music, Matthew Ojo, observes that Nigerian gospel music is similar to African American gospel music in its audience participation, the repetitiveness of its song verses, constant improvisation, and the pattern of its calls and responses, among other features (Ojo 1998, p. 211). However, Nigerian gospel music is distinctive in its use of indigenous drums, such as *sèkèrè*, *dùndún*, and *agogo*, which are often mixed with Western instruments, such as drum sets, keyboards, and synthesizers (Ojo 1998, p. 216). Gospel music is gaining large audiences throughout Nigeria because the musicians try to express their messages

cross-culturally as they engage in cultural and ethnic diversities, making constructing a global identity a viable enterprise (Ojo 1998, p. 230). It is, therefore, pertinent to consider briefly how language diversities may have contributed to music multilingualism in Nigeria.

3. Understanding Ethnolinguistic Composition

In order to understand the dynamics of Nigerian gospel music, it is first important to understand the degree of linguistic complexity in Nigeria. With about 500 native languages, Nigeria is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world (Nwafor 2002, p. 22). The ethnolinguistic diversity in Nigeria was a significant factor that necessitated the adoption of English as the official language of communication.⁴ Residents in cosmopolitan cities also devised new means of communication using the most common vernacular languages and Nigerian Pidgin to carve a unique ethnolinguistic identity. Scholars have discussed the creative appropriation of various Nigerian languages (including Nigerian pidgin) in performing popular and gospel music (Liadi 2012; Adedeji 2010). Nigerian Pidgin⁵ is developing as a major lingua franca in multilingual workplaces, schools, and most cosmopolitan cities. Nigerian Pidgin is intelligible to both uneducated and educated people.

The multilinguistic conditioning in Nigeria is complex. Most Nigerian historians concur that the country has more than 250 ethnic groups (Falola and Heaton 2008; Mwakikagile 2002; Nwafor 2002). The linguistic situation in Nigeria is such that major and minor languages are classified according to their speakers' population and perceived widespread use (Oyetade 1992, p. 33). For example, minority languages, such as Edo, Efik, Fulfulde, Izon, Kanuri, and Tiv, are spoken by smaller ethnolinguistic groups scattered throughout the country. After the initial creation of the twelve states of the Federation, these languages were included in the national news broadcast (Tomori 1985, p. 287). Nigerian linguist Oluwole Oyetade supports the view that the three major languages—Yorùbá, Hausa, and Igbo—are widely spoken outside their states of origin, and “these main languages together with the others in the group are often used officially at the national level for news broadcast on Radio Nigeria” (Oyetade 1992, p. 33). Therefore, the three major languages collectively representing Wazobia—Hausa, Igbo, and Yorùbá could be regarded as languages of wider communication in Nigeria besides English.

In the Nigerian context, the term “Wazobia” represents a confluence of the three regionally recognized local languages: Wa (Yorùbá), Zo (Hausa), and Bia (Igbo)—terms which mean ‘come’ in the three languages. In places or settlements where there are Nigerians, Wazobia could also symbolize the inclusion of more than one ethnicity or language.

The Wazobia idea is ubiquitous beyond the academic space. The media and market space also embody the Wazobia—multilingual concept. Wazobia radio and television, featuring a mixture of native languages and Nigerian Pidgin, provide platforms for mediating indigenous songs and local news across cosmopolitan cities in Nigeria.⁶ The Wazobia concept has transcended Nigeria's borders. For example, Wazobia African markets are available in Houston, Texas, where people can shop for Nigerian groceries and other locally-made products.⁷ Wazobia has become a local and international concept.

This article extends the multilingual, multicultural ideal expressed in the term “Wazobia” beyond the marketplace to the realm of Christian congregational music. To do so, I explore the intersections of multiple languages within Nigerian Christian congregational music, focusing on selected churches in Lagos, a cosmopolitan city in Nigeria. The purpose of the study is to uncover issues this cultural–religious relationship engenders. The practice of Christian congregational music in Lagos embodies the merging of multiethnic groups, cosmopolitanism, and the flow of transnational activities. Within the framework of this study, musical worship in Protestant churches is usually bilingual, multilingual, or multiethnic, structured to reflect diversity and inclusion. As a result, aspects of congre-

gational music (the use of repertoire, such as hymns, choruses, contemporary songs, and indigenous instruments) are often selected to mirror the multiple ethnic or tribal identities of the parishioners. I use the term “Wazobia gospel music” to describe the contemporary multilingual congregational music repertoire often used in the Nigerian context to bridge cultural and linguistic divides.

4. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This article is a product of my dissertation ethnographic study. My primary methodologies included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and congregational surveys. As a native of Nigeria and a student of Yorùbá culture, I engage my background understanding of the culture in reviewing both old and current literature to situate relevant developments of local musical expression. Ethnography is a viable method for describing the observed interface of music and culture (Rice 2014, p. 34). Therefore, I have employed participant/observer ethnographic research methods, incorporating interviews, online surveys, and congregational music from three Protestant churches in Lagos. My motivation for studying the three congregations has developed over the last decade as a “cultural insider” and “culture bearer” of Wazobia gospel music.⁸ My extensive experience in the field, serving on staff at one of the churches since 2015 and attending several services and musical concerts at the other two churches over the last twenty years, provides a solid foundation for this study. The three churches’ geographical location (two on Lagos Island and one on Lagos Mainland) and demographics (including parishioners’ language diversity) are helpful for investigating music and multilingualism. In addition, the three churches have developed a sophisticated digital audiovisual ministry that enabled me to conduct “hybrid ethnography”, integrating in-person observations with a view of online services.⁹ From November 2023 to January 2024, I visited the three churches’ Sunday services, midweek services, and music rehearsals. I conducted semi-structured interviews with five members and worship leaders from each church.¹⁰ After my in-person participant observation in January 2024, I continued to study the three congregations incorporating hybrid ethnography through online and offline platforms (Przybylski 2020, p. 3) until April 2024.

My fieldwork incorporates both ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ perspectives. This approach is rooted in my background as a polyglot who can speak three local languages (Yorùbá, Hausa, and Nigerian Pidgin) and English. I consider myself an insider, which gives me significant access to the history of the growth and development of the Nigerian congregational song repertory. As a practitioner, I have led congregations in singing multilingual songs. The “emic” perspective within my home congregation seemed insufficient for studying the complexity of music and language in Lagos congregational singing. Therefore, I sought to conduct research as an “outsider” among other Lagos-based congregations that are part of different denominations. However, since I am a practicing Christian from Nigeria, speaking multiple local languages, I see myself more or less completely as an insider within Nigerian diverse cultures. The typical critiques of emic perspectives have raised concerns that the researcher is so close to the phenomenon that they lack a critical perspective (Nettl 1992, p. 387). My research has considered both the “emic” and “etic” perspectives. It uses varied academic theories and methods to give a more distanced perspective on studying Wazobia gospel music. Furthermore, the “etic” academic audience of my postgraduate research in the UK and my doctoral work in the United States has helped to refine my perspective.

The article interprets this research in light of two main theories: “signification” and “musical localization”. As an essential aspect of musical understanding, Akin Euba proposes that signification may assist in establishing the identity and meaning of local music (Euba 2001, p. 121). This theory alludes to musical instruments as signifiers that enable

us to recognize musical types, although we can also understand musical types through an assortment of signifiers. According to Euba, texts appear to be a significant signifier in Africa, which explains why texts are used in vocal and instrumental music.

The second framework, “musical localization”, conceptualizes the role of congregational music in local communities. This model discusses how local people make congregational music and what specific identity local music-making reveals about the people, the cultures, or surrounding influences. Musical localization is defined as:

The process by which Christian communities take a variety of musical practices—some considered ‘indigenous’, some ‘foreign’, some shared across spatial or 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. 30)

In this study, musical localization explains how Nigerian gospel music has evolved amidst various influences, such as traditionalism, multiculturalism, and transnationalism. In other words, recently, the performance practice of Wazobia gospel music draws mainly from a fusion of indigenous musical elements, ethnolinguistic diversity, and foreign influences.

Wazobia gospel music study fills a gap in the emerging research of Nigerian contemporary Christian music. Limited academic literature explores studies of Christian congregational music and multilingualism in Nigeria. Many available scholarly investigations focus solely on the social collectivity of music in monolingual contexts and mass-mediated Nigerian gospel music.¹¹ While providing valuable insights into the contexts of Nigerian gospel music, prior studies neglect a careful investigation of the current upsurge of multilingual congregational song repertoires directly linked with the Nigerian evangelical churches and gospel music industry. This study is an attempt to fill this lacuna.

5. Explanation of Field Data and Sources

Since not much study has been conducted on contemporary Nigerian gospel music, particularly from a linguistic perspective, any undertaking in this area appears immensely difficult. The current study gathers empirical data from Protestant churches, mainly Baptists and Pentecostals, to conceptualize the reception of Nigerian contemporary gospel music. In order to galvanize a broader representation, I extended my online survey beyond the three field sites to other Protestant churches in Lagos. Between November 2023 and March 2024, I received 161 responses from fifteen churches.¹² These churches represent congregations in Lagos, where Wazobia gospel music is regularly performed in worship/services and other Christian musical events.

The data reveal the language distribution in Lagos Protestant churches. Participants in the online survey were from different languages and ethnicities. Figure 1 below indicates demographic data by ethnicity. The graph shows that participants from twenty-eight ethnicities participated in the survey, with Yorùbá, Igbo, Ijaw, Urhobo, and Hausa in the top five. The number of participants according to the languages of the top five is Yorùbá (108), Igbo (14), Ijaw (4), Urhobo (4), and Hausa (3). In addition to revealing the diversity of cultures represented in the Christian religious setting, this data reflects the socio-ethnolinguistic and economic makeup of the inhabitants of Lagos. Although Ile-Ife in Osun State, Nigeria, is widely known as the ancestral home of the Yorùbá people, in recent decades, Lagos, located in the southwest, has become the most prominent city of Yorùbá speakers. However, many Igbo and Hausa have historically settled in Lagos on economic grounds (Animashaun 2020, p. 62). My data explain why congregants from some ethnicities make up a higher percentage and suggests why songs from specific languages feature more frequently in congregational singing than others. For example, in the monolingual song

category of all the churches I visited, Yorùbá songs appear more regularly in congregational singing than in other languages. However, Yorùbá songs fuse with songs from different languages in the multilingual category.

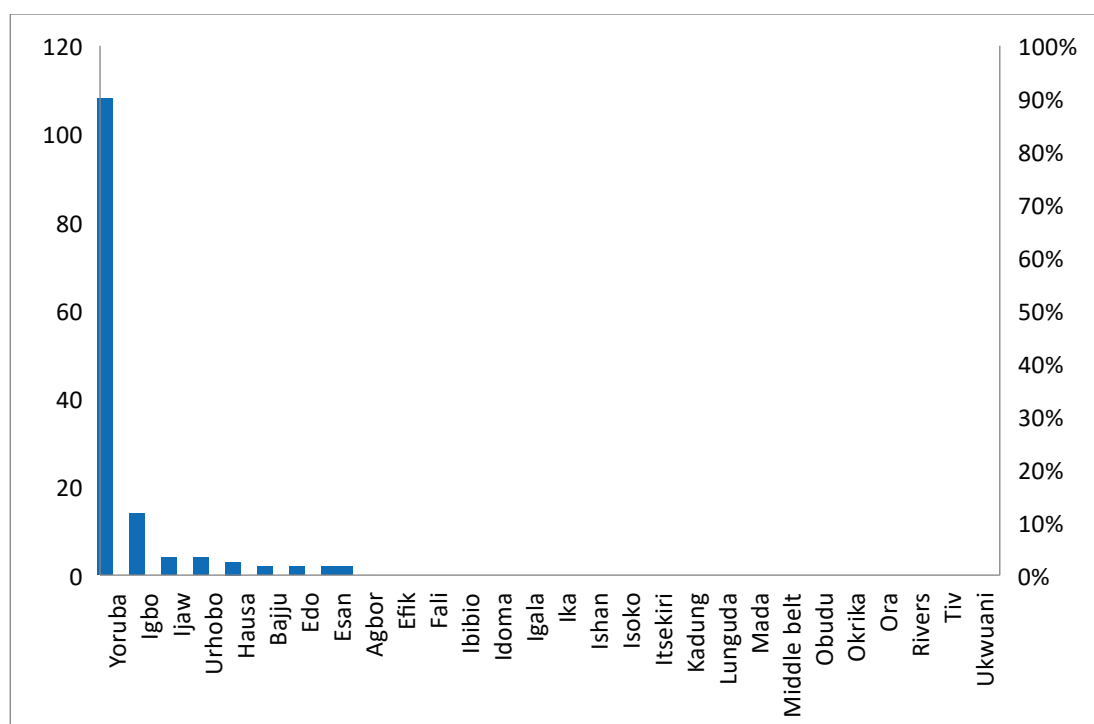


Figure 1. Demographics of worshippers by ethnicity.¹³

The survey data also reveal styles of congregational worship in the churches. In this regard, Nigerians share several Christian worship practices worldwide, past and present. Liturgical theologian Ruth Duck has called attention that “honoring Christians of all nations and cultures means exploring the great variety of ways Christians worship in the world” (Duck 2013, p. 6). This idea points to the uniqueness of how different traditions describe Christian worship. Duck suggests further how to approach congregational worship study.

Another way to understand Christian worship’s diversity is through congregational and ethnographic studies, by spending significant time worshipping with a particular congregation and conversing with the leaders and members. In this way, researchers learn what worship means to the congregation members beyond descriptions in worship books, denominational guidelines, and scholarly reflections. Of course, researchers must focus on careful listening and realize the limits of what they can learn in a relatively brief sojourn with the congregation (Duck 2013, p. 6). Knowing the nuances various congregations use in their worship is necessary for describing their congregational music practices.

Issues related to worship styles have preoccupied discussions of Christianity in various traditions. According to Constance Cherry, “Worship styles will always be a part of the landscape for Christian worship. So, worship architects need to understand the role that style plays, and they need a vocabulary that helps them be conversant about it as they lead”.¹⁴ Cherry identifies and discusses five worship styles within Western Christianity: liturgical, traditional, contemporary, blended, and alternative (ancient-future worship and seeker services), and suggests a “convergence worship” model (Cherry 2021, pp. 254–61). I found Duck’s concept and Cherry’s models helpful in describing Nigerian worship styles.

In addition to observing worship services in the three churches mentioned above, I conversed with church leaders and members through in-person and online mediums. In the online survey, I asked respondents to describe their church’s worship styles. Figure 2

shows the graphical representation of most respondents' terminologies for describing worship styles in their churches.

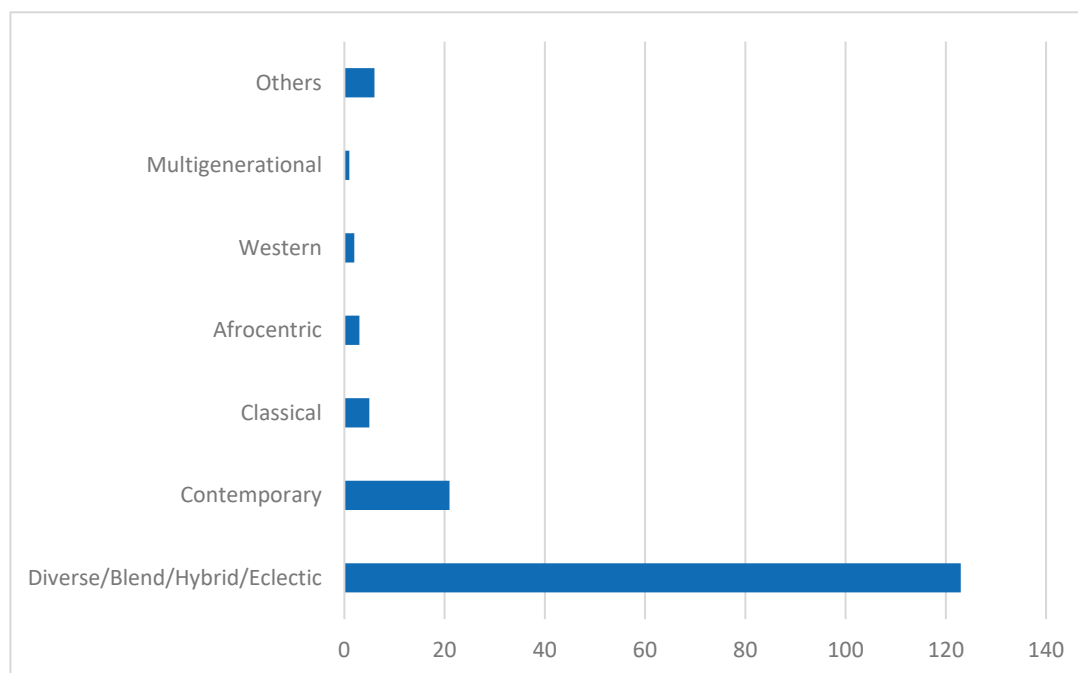


Figure 2. Congregational worship styles.

The above responses indicate ways congregants describe congregational worship in Nigeria. The description of worship styles has implications for what to expect in congregational music. Although music does not equal worship, for worship can exist without music, many worshippers view music and worship as inseparable (Segler and Bradley 2006, p. 110). However, we cannot rule out the functional nature of music in congregation worship. According to Franklin Segler and Randall Bradley, “Music provides an expression for our most exuberant praise and lament for our grief. Music is present within all the functions of the Christian community; it accompanies all the actions of our lives through which God can be present” (Segler and Bradley 2006, p. 110).

My ethnographic study of Lagos churches reveals that congregational music intersects, defines, or reflects local worship styles. In this regard, congregational singing in Nigeria embodies musical localization, incorporating the ‘local’ and ‘foreign’ ways of making music. Local artists navigate political, power, and cultural boundaries while mediating musical practices. While the Western culture—English language, singing hymns, anthems, and instruments—is retained in most churches, multilingual music has remarkably marked the localization of Nigerian church music. Nigerian gospel music continues to evolve in the twenty-first century with the increasing fusion of local and foreign elements, such as the vernaculars, English, and indigenous and Western instruments. This recent practice is exemplified in the Wazobia gospel music. However, before Wazobia gospel music emerged, Nigerian Christian music evolved from a confluence of Western and African music traditions.

6. De-Colonization or Africanization of Church Music?

In order to understand the significance of Wazobia gospel music, it is necessary to take a cursory view of what suggested the Africanization of music within the church.¹⁵ The introduction of church music by missionaries who came to Africa was closely associated with Europe’s colonization and Christianizing project (Ojo 1998; Sadoh 2009). At the advent

of Christianity in Africa in the nineteenth century, converts were prohibited from singing folk songs or playing indigenous musical instruments (Ojo 1998, p. 212). Instead, Western hymns, musical instruments, and European tonality were imposed on Africans (Idamoyibo 2005; Odewole 2018, p. 5). Solemnity in worship in the early mission-oriented churches meant “no dancing, no clapping of hands” (Ademiluka 2023, p. 1). In this regard, the Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, and Baptist Missionaries adopted the European forms of expression in worship. In other words, some leaders of these mission churches initially invalidated the whole corpus of African practices—including drumming and dancing in worship. However, the early twentieth century witnessed the impact of The African Church Movement in Africa, which sought to integrate local cultural expressions into Christian worship. One of the issues that dominated the early history of the African Church Movement was the question of African forms of music and worship (Sanneh 1983). According to missiologist Lamin Sanneh, amongst other controversial elements, this development led to the introduction of drumming in worship and African versions of Western hymns (Sanneh 1983, p. 177). In describing the Africanization of worship in Kenya, Jean Kidula argues that by the 1980s, the manner and content of East African gospel music had succeeded in breaking away from missionaries’ performance and sonic expectations (Kidula 2000, p. 412).

The Africanization of Christian worship became a watershed for the emergence of charismatic churches and the Pentecostals in Africa (Sanneh 1983, p. 180). Africans demanded Christianity, which reflected their own cultural context. This development suggests a form of religious adaptation in Africa, showing how Christian conversion was negotiated. As rightly observed by Zimbabwean scholar Ezra Chitando, “The introduction of vernacular hymns and choruses, indigenous instruments, and oral traditions in church music meant that while Africans converted to Christianity, they were also converting Christianity to African cultural realities. Cultural interaction has never been a one-way affair but has always entailed creating new horizons for encounters” (Chitando 2002, p. 91). This new horizon includes using African languages and idioms in Christian worship. In the mid-twentieth century, several African churches began exploring making singing relatable to local people. In my research, I encountered this growing process of decolonizing African Christian liturgy in the fusion of traditional dance, Western hymn singing, drumming, and singing in contemporary Christian worship. These expressions were incorporated into musical localization and signification concepts, which I discussed earlier. The Wazobia gospel music embodies the continuation of musical localization, signification, and globalization.

7. The Emerging Wazobia Gospel Music

The current wave of intertextuality in local song-texts in Nigeria is unprecedented in its sheer volume, visibility, extent, preponderance, and intricacy.¹⁶ The twenty-first-century reconstruction of Nigerian gospel music to signal localization and also aspire to globalization, involving such activities as using English/Pidgin and vernaculars to relate to wider audiences, has inaugurated a new Nigerian gospel genre—what I am calling Wazobia gospel music. Another prominent concept in the performance practice of the Wazobia gospel is code-switching/code-mixing. Code-switching and code-mixing are sociolinguistic phenomena commonly observed in bilingual and multilingual speech communities. Scholars such as J. K. Chambers (2009), Miriam Meyerhoff (2019), and Banda (2019) have widely discussed the intricacies concerning literary language and conversation. These authors have conceptualized the intersections between communication and multilingualism. In particular, Miriam Meyerhoff’s book *Introducing Sociolinguistics* critically examines attitudes to language by exploring Social Identity Theory (SIT) and

Accommodation Theory (Meyerhoff 2019, p. 78). SIT is “a social psychological theory holding that people identify with multiple identities, some of which are more personal and idiosyncratic and some of which are group identifications” (Meyerhoff 2019, p. 78). SIT is a theory of intergroup relations in which language is one of many potent symbols individuals can use strategically when testing or maintaining group boundaries (Meyerhoff 2019, p. 78). Accommodation Theory has much in common with the tradition of Social Identity Theory. Its principles are intended to characterize speakers’ strategies to establish, contest, or maintain relationships through communication (Meyerhoff 2019, p. 80). SIT and Accommodation Theory explain an aspect of negotiating language boundaries in Wazobia gospel music. However, code-switching/code-mixing appears to be a more noticeable concept in the performance practice of Wazobia gospel music.

Many Nigerian scholars have written extensively on code-switching and code-mixing in Nigerian popular and gospel music; examples include M. O. Ayeomoni (2006), Anas Sa’idu Muhammad (2023), Naomi Chimene-Wali (2019), and Jacob Oluwadoro (2021). Drawing from song lyrics, Naomi Chimene-Wali investigated how the major languages spoken in Rivers State (south-south, Nigeria) are mixed and switched in gospel music. The study reveals that code-mixing and switching signal globalization and localization as gospel singers use English/Pidgin and vernaculars to relate to a broader fan base and connect with their roots (Chimene-Wali 2019, p. 11). In this regard, the gospel artists studied by Chimene-Wali alter/mix codes to create gospel music that most locals and non-native speakers will embrace. Similarly, Oluwadoro opines that gospel artists engage in this concept to gain their acceptance, knowing full well that code-mixing is a common feature among the youth in most cosmopolitan Nigerian cities (Jacob Oluwadoro 2021, p. 31). My research builds on the above studies by incorporating ethnographic studies and current examples of songs from Nigerian gospel artists.

Prominent Nigerian gospel artists who fuse different languages and multicultural elements in their music include Nathaniel Bassey, Mercy Chinwo, Tim Godfrey, and David G. In the following section, I demonstrate three examples of Wazobia gospel music by exemplifying its textual categories through the concepts of code-switching/code-mixing and multilingual medley. I also discuss the distinct sonic nature of Wazobia gospel music by describing its main musical components.

“Chinedum (God Leads Me)” by Mercy Chinwo

The first example of Wazobia expression is a song by Mercy Chinwo, a Nigerian Gospel musician, singer, and songwriter raised in Port Harcourt who mostly ministers in Lagos.¹⁷ The lyrics of the song *Chinedum* combine three languages: Igbo, English, and Nigerian Pidgin. The song begins with a verse in Igbo and then moves into a multilingual chorus. An excerpt of the lyrics from the chorus is as follows:

Chinedum mo (guided by God)

Anywhere you lead me, I will go

Me ago follow you dey go (I will follow you)

Anywhere you lead me, I go, go (anywhere you lead me, I will go)

The song *Chinedum* presents God as the one who leads and guides and whose leadership always brings good results. After repeating the chorus, the artist breaks entirely away from Igbo, the initial code in which the music started, into English and Nigerian Pidgin. The song ends with repeating the Igbo *Chinedum mo* (guided by God).

“No One Like You” by Eben

The second example is by Emmanuel Benjamin, known as Eben.¹⁸ He is a Nigerian gospel singer, vocalist, and songwriter in Lagos. This song features another prominent

Nigerian gospel artist, Nathaniel Bassey. The text of this track in the album combines Nigerian Pidgin, English, Yorùbá, and Igbo. The text begins with the use of a global trope ‘oh’ added to the word ‘man’, such as ‘man oh’¹⁹ and then adds the Igbo *Eze* (a term for King) in the second part:

You’re not a man, *oh*
 You’re not a man, *oh*
 You’re the God who opens doors no man can shut
 You’re not a man, *oh*
 You’re the God of everything no man like you.
 No one like you, Jesus
 No one like you, *Eze*
 No one like you, Father.

The song acknowledges that no one can compare to God, the King, playing with the word *Eze* (in Igbo known as King) and then referencing Jesus, Father, and Master. At the song’s end, the writer introduces additional code-mixing in the line “No One Like You, Atofarati, Awimayehun, Aledewura”. Here, the writer introduces three Yoruba words: Atofarati (dependable), Awimayehun (one whose words never change), and Aladewura (one with the crown of gold).

“My Trust is in You” by David G.

The third example, “My Trust is in You” is a song produced by gospel artist David Gbenga, also known as David G.²⁰ The song text combines five languages: English, Igbo, Yorùbá, Idoma, and Hausa. The song begins with the first verse and chorus in English:

Lion of Judah
 My trust is in you
 Ancient of Days
 My trust is in you

Other verses switch to a combination of English and the vernaculars (Igbo, Yorùbá, Hausa, and Idoma) as follows in the excerpt:

Isi ikendu (Igbo: The streams of life)
 My trust is in you
*Oyigiyigi*²¹ *baba mioo* (Yoruba: Eternal Rock of Creation, my father)
 My trust is in you
Seriki duniya (Hausa: Master of the universe)
 My trust is in you
Obadabada (Idoma: Massive God)
 My trust is in you.

The above song’s lyrics carry a clear and repetitive message, emphasizing the artist’s trust and confidence in God. The song demonstrates names and titles attributed to God in English and the vernacular. Like most Nigerian Wazobia gospel artists, David G. uses code-switching/mixing of local dialects and English texts to construct meanings. In other words, using multiple languages is complementary and reflects the musician’s cultural context.

Another performance practice of Wazobia gospel music involves singing a medley of songs in different languages. Although the multilingual medley arrangement may also incorporate code-switching or code-mixing features, as discussed above, it usually employs

language sequentially. For example, “High Praise 1”, a song released by the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) in 2006, consists of a medley beginning with “Come and See the Lord is Good” and “Thank You So Much, Lord Jesus”, which is repeated in Yorùbá, (*Olúwa mi Mo Dúpe*) and Igbo (*Chineke Nna Imela*), and later switched to Urhobo (*Otega Oghene Tega*). The RCCG medley is representative of the multilingual medley that continues to evolve among gospel music groups and in Nigerian congregations. This singing style uses several repetitions, call and response, lyrical tunes, and highly rhythmic instruments.

The above examples showcase some of the performance practices of Wazobia gospel music. Using English or Pidgin English and vernaculars to relate to wider audiences has become a common feature of Wazobia gospel music. What might this mean for the Wazobia gospel genre?

8. “Bringing Them Home”: Musical Worship, Signification, and Identity

Wazobia gospel music signifies ethnic identity that holds profound meaning for participants. Meaning in music is localized. What appears meaningful in a culture may not resonate with another culture’s values, ethics, quirks, and expectations. What does singing mean in a culture? Is there a relationship between musical style and congregational response? These questions highlight the important role of signification, in other words, understanding music’s significance as a peculiar human experience.²² Timothy Rice’s idea of signification corroborates Akin Euba’s argument that signifiers of ethnic identity in local music have always been one of the most vital features of African traditional culture, and arguably, ethnic diversity has been an enriching rather than constricting factor (Euba 2001, p. 120). By implication, in the African context, music (as sound or text) can communicate or mediate meaning at an individual and community level.²³

That music makes meaning to people when it resonates with their culture is true in both popular music and church music. I found this to be true in my research. When I asked one of my interviewees, a local church musician, why he incorporated songs in native dialects and local instruments, he said, “The intercultural expressions will bring them home”. By this, he means that when people hear sounds from their native culture, they engage more in worship. This meaning-making is reflected in how congregants relate to music and native languages. For example, in the survey I distributed to various Christian worshipers in Lagos, I asked congregants what the most positive aspects of singing in their native dialect were. Some of my respondents answered as follows:

“It is something I can connect with. It’s the language I grew up with . . . Praising God in my mother tongue makes me feel more connected with him”.

“It brings greater meaning and better understanding”.

“It makes worship more meaningful to me”.

“It gives me a sense of identity that Christ is for all races, not just a few sects”.

“It facilitates deep meanings, awesome connection, nostalgia, personalized experiences”.

The primary themes from my survey related to the question above include feeling a deep connection with God, worshipping with understanding, enhancing participatory worship, engaging with worship on a deeper level, and affirming identity.

9. “Reaching Many People”: Musical Worship and Hospitality

A second role of Wazobia gospel music is to create a space for hospitality. The word “hospitality” readily reminds us of guests, visitors, or strangers’ friendly and generous reception and entertainment. Church music scholars and practical theologians have used

the term to demonstrate the practices of welcoming and integrating people into worship. According to Randal Bradley, “Music is a fit receptacle for embodying the hospitality of Christ. When we offer music to someone, we are serving as host; when we receive music, we, as guests, accept it as a gift. Ideally, music functions in the reciprocal gift-giving roles of host and guest and readily serves as welcome to the stranger” (Bradley 2012, p. 168).

The above indicates that music functions as hospitality in two ways—giving and receiving. Bradley reiterates music as an agent for the church’s hospitality by highlighting areas such as music being ‘multilingual’ and ‘inclusive’, among others.²⁴ Music is multilingual when it can speak “multi-musical languages”. This idea suggests music speaking a language of several musical styles that can resonate with worshipers’ experiences (Bradley 2012, p. 172). In the same way, to create avenues of communication, “attempting to speak/sing/perform musical language that is familiar to another also facilitates dialogue” (Bradley 2012, p. 173). In addition, Bradley states that music is hospitable when it promotes inclusiveness and accessibility (Bradley 2012, p. 173). In other words, the church’s music should be functional by attempting to serve everyone in the congregation. I found Bradley’s theory of musical hospitality useful in describing one of the functions of Wazobia gospel music.

Multilingual singing has enabled Nigerian gospel artists to reach many people. During an interview, one of the local artists mentioned that writing songs incorporating many languages has helped him to “reach many people across language and ethnic divides”.²⁵ My interviewee notes that besides receiving inspiration from God, he writes multilingual music as a deliberate attempt to encourage participatory singing. According to him, people often identify with English, but when they hear other local languages alongside, they are encouraged to participate on a deeper level. What my interviewee said above relates to some of my survey responses. When I asked my respondents what the most positive aspects of singing in other people’s dialects are, some said:

“It engenders a sense of unity and belonging in diversities. This action builds fellowship and community in the church”.

“It helps me connect with the diversity of language and also know that a language does not limit God”.

“It brings variety into our worship and allows the minority ethnicities in our congregation to have a sense of belonging”.

“It makes the act of singing in worship more intentional. When I enjoy a song in another language, I must seek its meaning. I tend to be more conscious when singing it and avoid the risk of singing mindlessly”.

“It helps me to learn how other people see/think about God”.

The action above can be described as a convergence, expressing spirituality and hospitality. According to Constance Cherry, being hospitable in worship involves more than being friendly or personable; it requires deliberate attempts to incorporate various participation dynamics (Cherry 2021, p. 300). In Cherry’s argument, hospitality involves designing and leading inclusive worship services—worship designed to invite the ongoing participation of all worshipers and encourage them to offer themselves fully in worship. Cross-cultural musical participation may contribute to our sense of musical hospitality. As Michael Hawn notes:

Using music from other cultures does not necessarily imply combining styles into one “universal” form. On the contrary, it is an acknowledgment of and participation in diverse voices within a liturgical structure. Inevitably, the juxtaposition of styles influences each other. Cross-cultural musical participation implies, however, that we attempt to appreciate

sui generis, the contribution of each perspective to our understanding of God (Hawn 2005, p. 103).

But can we say all worshipers are truly included in musical worship? My fieldwork revealed some levels of exclusion in the practice of Wazobia gospel music.

10. “Disconnect. . . I Don’t Understand the Dialect!”

Thus far in this article, I have demonstrated that Wazobia gospel music embodies identity, enables diversity, and promotes inclusion. As such, it would seem to be a perfect repertoire for congregational singing, for one of its goals is to engage worshipers in meaningful, participatory singing experiences. Within the participatory tradition, “Participatory values are distinctive in that the success of a performance is more importantly judged by the degree and the intensity of participation than by some abstracted assessment of the musical sound quality” (Turino 2008, p. 33). In other words, we may understand participation in congregational singing by the degree to which people feel included in the performance. It appears congregants do not feel included in Wazobia gospel music in the same way.

In analyzing responses to my online survey, I found out that multilingual songs allow for inclusion and participation but can also pose exclusion risks. When I asked my respondents to mention what they think may be a disadvantage of participating in congregational Wazobia gospel music, responses highlighted feelings of “disconnect” and “exclusion”.²⁶

“It can cause exclusion and a lack of a sense of belonging for non-native speakers of the languages sung”.

“There could sometimes be a disconnect in understanding the song’s meaning”.

“When the majority don’t understand the meaning, and it’s not properly introduced, people don’t follow”.

“Some worshippers may be excluded from worship when they do not know the dialect or languages sung”.

“Unless translated into English, not everyone would understand the meaning of the songs”.

The above shows that the degree to which multilingual songs promote inclusion and exclusion in worship varies from one congregation to the other. The questions raised by multilingual singing offer an opportunity to reexamine Nigerian Christian worship practices and what expressions of congregational embodiment they privilege and marginalize. Cross-cultural music, such as Wazobia, is meaningful when understood as a participatory experience that includes rather than excludes.

11. Considerations and Conclusions

The development of Wazobia gospel music marks a new turn in Nigerian gospel music since the mid-twentieth century. However, the Wazobia gospel music genre, due to developments in digital media and the internet, gained renewed momentum in the twenty-first century. Wazobia gospel music utilizes an increasing combination of local and foreign musical cultures, such as using various vernacular combined with English and incorporating indigenous and Western instruments. As I reflect on my interaction with church members, church music practitioners, gospel artists, and scholars, it is necessary to point out that the meaning of Wazobia Gospel music is multifaceted, and its roles and functions differ in different contexts. In cultural music study, music identity is often legitimized by what the society in question has acknowledged and accepted (Kaemmer 1993, pp. 64–65). In other words, music identity is usually situated within specific cultural

interpretations. Based on my research with some Lagos Christian congregations, the interactions between music and language significantly influenced how Wazobia gospel music identities are shaped and constructed. Through its unique use of multiple languages and musical styles, the Wazobia gospel music genre enables its adherents to identify with the music and relate to its relevant cultural messages. The Wazobia gospel genre has played a pivotal role in shaping the complex soundscape of the Nigerian gospel music industry and its intersection with Nigerian congregational singing. The convoluted meanings, functions, and identities of the Wazobia gospel music genre largely reflect the dynamics of Nigeria's social, political, economic, and religious complications. But what does this leave us with congregational singing?

Musical worship is beyond just making ethnic or tribal song lists. Certain questions are pertinent to worship leaders and songwriters. What determines the selection of songs from a particular ethnic group in corporate worship? What motivates worship leaders to incorporate multilingual songs? Why do gospel artists write multilingual songs? Is it to reach a broader ministry audience? Is it to galvanize local and international recognition or for market expansion? Worship is first an engagement with God. In congregational worship, our first purpose is not to “get something out of worship” but to extend to God glory and adoration (Malefyt and Vanderwell 2005, p. 135). In other words, pleasing God and not tribe or ethnicity should be the focus in writing or selecting songs for corporate worship. However, congregational worship should be integrated into the whole life of the congregation by being sensitive to the demographics and cultural intelligence of worshipers. Part of this integration in a multilingual setting is for worship leaders to carefully plan God-honoring and edifying musical worship and culturally relevant musical expressions broadly relatable to worshipers.

The study on Wazobia gospel music offers three significant resources to church music scholars and practitioners. First, the study has provided a conceptual framework for describing, interpreting, and understanding the intersection of languages, cultures, and music in Nigerian contemporary congregational singing. Second, the study joins the growing scholarship on decolonization. There have been several recent calls for church music scholarship to be “decolonized”, both in terms of how it is approached (Steuernagel 2020, pp. 24–32) and what voices contribute to it (Ingalls et al. 2024, p. 246). Scholars and practitioners have been working to expand the canon of church music to include songs from around the world and “finding hospitable ways to give these repertoires and practices a seat at the communal table of global church music” (Steuernagel 2020, p. 32). Recent scholarly works provide decolonial resources to challenge and remake Christian musical canons (Ingalls et al. 2024, p. 234; Moshugi 2024, p. 215). My study on Wazobia gospel music combines several interdisciplinary research tools and incorporates conversations with local artists, oral historians, sociolinguists, theologians, church members, and church musicians. This approach represents contemporary reflections and responses within postcolonial discourse. Significantly, it amplifies the voices and practices of Christians and music often absent from church music discussions, fostering a more inclusive dialogue.

Finally, this study provides different tools, methods, and concepts from which anyone thinking about multicultural worship can draw. Scholars in church music studies and related fields can continue to engage meaningfully with this emerging concept regardless of where the communities they study are located. Reflecting on the intersection of gospel music, languages, and cultures in a Nigerian setting contributes to new vistas in congregational music studies.

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Notes

- 1 Nigeria's musical practices are vastly diverse. The genres mentioned above are primarily popularized in South and Southwestern Nigeria and have substantially attracted global attention.
- 2 The claim about Nigeria's potential population growth and its implication for global relevance has been identified. For example, UN statistics show that Nigeria will surpass the USA population by 2050. This data has implications for potential musical development that may arise from the surge in Nigeria's population and the key role this may play in gospel music worldwide. See "World Population Projected to Reach 9.7 Billion by 2050 with Most Growth in Developing Regions, Especially Africa—Says UN", https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/pdf/events/other/10/World_Population_Projections_Press_Release.pdf (accessed on 23 May 2024).
- 3 Adedeji's (2005) provides a comprehensive overview of the evolution of Nigerian gospel music, making it a valuable resource for understanding the historical context of this genre.
- 4 The colonial British government in Nigeria recognized the three major languages, Hausa, Yorùbá, and Igbo, as the primary communication languages after English. Subsequently, the Nigerian constitution recognized these languages as the primary communication languages. See John Chidi Nwafor (2002, p. 24).
- 5 Nigerian Pidgin is English modified by another language or multiple other languages. Pidgin English in West Africa emerged by the early 19th century as a language of trade, a medium of communication between Africans and European traders. It is argued that Nigerian Pidgin English could be considered a language in its own right. See Philip Atsu Afeadie (2015).
- 6 Wazobia, F.M. <https://www.wazobiafm.com/> (accessed on 13 December 2022).
- 7 The Wazobia African Market in Houston also operates a Wazobia kitchen for prepared Nigerian food. Customers can make orders for home deliveries or visit two locations: Westheimer and Beechnut in Houston. See "Wazobia African Market", <https://wazobia.market/> (accessed on 13 December 2022).
- 8 I borrowed this concept from Mellonee Burnim, considering my position as both a scholar of gospel music and a "culture bearer", a member of the culture under investigation. See Burnim (1985).
- 9 The "hybrid field" as a conceptual shift in ethnography became more relevant after the recent COVID-19 pandemic. This disruption has encouraged online presence in most churches in Nigeria and across the globe. In this study, I engaged in an online-mediated platform in addition to the physical fieldwork site. See Przybylski (2020).
- 10 Since some of my conversation partners prefer anonymity, I have generally excluded the names of individuals and their churches from the article.
- 11 Some prominent studies on church music and language in Nigeria have focused on the intersection of media and gospel music, as well as church music and identity. See (Brennan 2018; Brennan and Nyamnjoh 2015; Adedeji 2001).
- 12 After establishing contacts in the three churches, I leveraged my relationships to extend surveys to other churches. I sent links to ministers, worship leaders, music directors, friends, and family connections. The churches represent eight Baptist churches and seven Pentecostal churches.
- 13 Twenty-eight ethnicities/languages participated in this online survey. The leading languages are Yorùbá, Igbo, Ijaw, and Hausa.
- 14 Constance M. Cherry, a prominent figure in the field, provides a comprehensive guide in her book, (Cherry 2021, p. 246).
- 15 This expression is not used the same way by all scholars alongside other terms such as localization, indigenization, inculturation, and contextualization. I employ the Africanization of music as a subset of contextualization, referring to the contextualization of worship, theology, and polity within sub-Saharan Africa's specific cultural and sociopolitical context. See Brown-Whale (1993, p. 5).
- 16 I adopted Joyce Nyairo's description of East African popular music culture. By this expression, Nyairo describes processes of exchange where East African artists derive local styles from examples of American popular music. See Joyce Nyairo (2008, p. 72).
- 17 Mercy Chinwo draws 615 k subscribers on YouTube, 5.1 million followers on Facebook, and 3.3 million followers on Instagram. See "Mercy Chinwo", YouTube Channel, 26 September 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/mercychinwoofficial/> (accessed on 26 September 2023).

- 18 Eben attracts 399.3 k followers on YouTube and 678 k followers on Instagram. See https://www.instagram.com/eben_rocks/?hl=en (accessed on 16 April 2024).
- 19 In Nigeria, vernacular and Pidgin speakers use such words as *oh! ah! yee! and whoa!* to emphasize another word in a statement. The expressions are also employed in singing.
- 20 David G. attracts about 20 k subscribers on YouTube and 55.1 k followers on Instagram. See <https://www.instagram.com/officialdavid.g/?hl=en> (accessed on 17 April 2024). Regarding social media presence, David G does not rank in the league of other artists cited in the article; I included his example to reflect a rare single song incorporating four Nigerian languages: Hausa, Idoma, Yorùbá, and Igbo.
- 21 In African Traditional Religions, *Oyigiyigi* is a word that depicts *Ifa* creation myth, which shows that the universe emerges from the Eternal Rock of Creation called *Oyigiyigi*. See <https://research.auctr.edu/Ifa/Chap7Hermeneutics> (accessed on 7 September 2024).
- 22 The word ‘signification’ in describing musical meaning has multiple meanings, depending on the context in which it is used. Here, I borrow the concept from Timothy Rice, using musical meaning to refer to a broad range of functions and values that concurrently align with the term ‘signification’ and other terms like ‘indication,’ ‘index,’ ‘icon,’ ‘representation,’ and ‘symbol’. See Rice (2017, pp. 89–90).
- 23 This view is corroborated in a study of Macumba-Christianity in Salvador, Brazil, which explores the psychological and spiritual function of movement and dance as mediators of meaning. The Macumba-Christian community engages in movement and dance to connect and make meaning of their ancestral history and identity. The history of Macumba-Christianity is linked with the Yorùbá tribe. The people and their traditions, culture, and spirituality were brought from Portuguese colonies in Africa to Brazil in the 1500s. See DeMarinis (2001, pp. 195–200).
- 24 Other metaphors Bradley uses to describe music hospitality include “music is welcome”, “music is embodied”, “music is intergenerational”, and “music is abundance”. Bradley (2012, pp. 171–76).
- 25 I interviewed Prospera Ochimana on 4 January 2024 (Ochimana 2024). Prospera Ochimana is a Nigerian songwriter, music producer, and worship leader who has won many awards in the Nigerian gospel music industry and the diaspora. Prospera’s use of native Igbo and Igala languages has added flavor to Nigerian congregational singing. “*Ekue*”, “*Dojima Nwojo*”, and “*Chioma*” are a few examples of his songs commonly sung in some Nigerian churches. Prospera shares various perspectives on indigenous contemporary music in Nigeria and his philosophy of music ministry. During the interview, I discovered that Prospera studied linguistics at the undergraduate level. It is interesting to note how his degree in linguistics has enhanced his songwriting and music performance.
- 26 Several of my respondents put “none” in this column. The ten responses highlighted represent how Wazobia gospel music may exclude several worshippers. This has implications for church leaders and music practitioners when planning music for worship services.

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Article

Multilingualism and Interculture in the Repertoire Proposed in Hymnals from 2000 to Today: A Study on Italian Protestant Churches

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Abstract: In the last twenty years the Baptist, Methodist, and Waldensian churches in Italy have experienced an important season of migrations, mainly from South America, South-east Asia, and West Africa. This has led to a problem of sharing and mutual influence on the liturgical and musical levels for Italian churches that they had never experienced before. This article intends to study the editorial proposals of hymnbooks published by the Baptist, Methodist, and Waldensian churches in Italy. How many and which hymnals have been published from an intercultural point of view? Are the proposed repertoires transcultural? How many and which languages have been used in the publications? These three Protestant denominations have used different models for migrant churches. Another important aspect is the translation of the hymns: what language is used, and how certain words, images and theological ideas are made. The article, also using the methods of ethnographic field research, will be enriched by graphs which will show, for each denomination, which hymnographic repertoires were preferred and which vehicular languages were most used (and if this happened).

Keywords: congregational music studies; multilingualism; church music; Italian Protestantism

1. Introduction

The reality of the churches of historic Protestantism in Italy is small from an absolute numerical point of view, but large in terms of historical and social impact for the nation. The Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy, or FCEI, was founded in 1967 and recognizes the Lutherans, Waldensians (reformed), Methodists, Baptists, Salvation Army, and Apostolic Church as belonging to “historical Protestantism”. According to ISTAT and IDOS data from 2023, in Italy there are 58,850,000 residents, of which 5,020,000 are foreigners (i.e., 8.53% are Italian citizens) (IDOS is a center on migration studies in Italy). There are 366,000 Italian citizens who are Protestants, of which only 61,000 belong to the historical denominations; therefore, Protestants in Italy represent 0.68% of Italian citizens, of which only 16.67% are affiliated with historical denominations (Dossier 2023). Therefore, in absolute terms, the Italian citizens who are part of the FCEI churches represent 0.12% of the entire Italian population (data 2023 available on the CESNUR website) (see Tables 1–3).

If foreign citizens resident in Italy are also included in the total, the numbers change quite a bit. In fact, of the just over 5 million foreigners, only 214,000 are Protestants. Most of these, however, are part of evangelical churches; furthermore, due to the phenomenon of so-called “denominational fluidity”, many who were part of a historic church in their country of origin today in Italy participate in the life of churches of a Pentecostal, charismatic, or non-denominational nature. Of these 214,000, approximately 32,000 are part of FCEI churches. Therefore, taking into account the small number examined, it is interesting to note the multifaceted and dynamic presence not only of the religious life of these communities compared to the Catholic majority, but also the numerous social, welfare, and political initiatives of these churches (see Tables 4 and 5). Among these initiatives it is

useful to remember here the activation of the Mediterranean Hope project by the FCEI (a humanitarian monitoring and reception project for migrants, with offices in Lampedusa, Scicli, Rosarno, Lebanon, and Bosnia); the refugees and migrants program for integration processes in collaboration with the Ministry of the Interior of the Italian Republic; the national counter for the laicity of the public school; hospitality by local churches to migrants from various African, Middle-eastern and eastern-European countries; the activation of psychological listening centers and counseling; social activities against gender violence; support centers for employment; and other cultural activities such as libraries, cultural centers, and associations.

Table 1. Population of Italy.

Population	Percentage
Italians	97%
Foreigners	3%

Table 2. Religions in Italy.

Religion	Percentage
Catholics	80%
Minorities	4%
Atheists and agnostics	16%

Table 3. Religious minorities.

Religion	Percentage
Jews	2%
Orthodox	19%
Protestants	16%
Jehovah's Witnesses	18%
Mormons	1%
Muslims	25%
Others	19%

Table 4. Italian Protestants.

Protestant Churches	Percentage
Historical Protestant churches	17%
Other Protestants and evangelicals	83%

Table 5. Foreign Protestants.

Protestant Churches	Percentage
Historical Protestant churches	15%
Other Protestants and evangelicals	85%

This essay aims to study the practices of multilingualism and plurilingualism in Baptist, Methodist, and Waldensian congregations that have decided to undertake journeys of encounter with brothers and sisters who come from other parts of the planet, through publication, translation, and use of various hymns, songs, and hymnbooks.

For ease of study, we borrow some considerations made by the Italian scholars Paolo Naso and Alessia Passarelli, with some of my considerations and modifications based on ethnographic studies in the field (Naso et al. 2014). We divide local churches into five different categories: monocultural churches, welcoming churches, international churches, intercultural churches, and ethnic churches.

The autochthonous monocultural churches are those wholly or largely composed of Italians. Worship, exclusively in Italian with a traditional liturgy, generally does not provide freedom of expression in other languages in songs and prayers. The community, therefore, in its self-awareness, continues to perceive itself as Italian.

Welcoming (or low-integration) churches are those which, despite having welcomed a significant number of migrants, have not felt the need to reorganize their community life. They are churches where worship generally takes place in Italian and with a traditional liturgical approach, in which, however, at least sometimes, some space for expression is provided, such as songs and prayers, in other languages.

International churches are those that are established on a linguistic basis. Typically Anglophone, Francophone, or Spanish-speaking they end up welcoming members from different states. Worship takes place by enhancing and intertwining different theological and spiritual traditions. The vehicular language is also the means through which shared songs and prayers are practiced.

Intercultural churches are those which, having acknowledged the relevance of the migrant component both on a quantitative level and on the relevance of the culture of which it is the bearer, have reorganized community life, the methods of carrying out worship, and the strategies of presence in the territory in which they operate. These churches include Italians and other national groups. The intercultural dimension is determined by the effort to go beyond the dialectic of simple plurality of origin (i.e., multiculturalism) to build new and shared languages that are capable of generating a renewal in terms of identity and forms of organization of congregational life.

Monocultural ethnic churches have certain characteristics: they are composed of members from a single nation or region; for worship and activities they predominantly use the native language or, in some cases, the colonial one (never or almost never Italian); the activities are oriented towards safeguarding the cultural traditions of origin and maintaining them, as well as ecclesiological and theological lines; and they are critical of and reactionary to the lifestyles of the host society and the churches that are part of it, even if they are of the same denomination.

2. The Hymnals of Baptist, Methodist, and Waldensian Churches from 2000 Onwards: Conservative Reactions and Liberal Impulses

2.1. *Innario Cristiano, Claudiana, 2000*

This *Innario Cristiano* is not published by a particular Church; it is the Hymnal of all the Churches of Italy that participated in the National Evangelical Congress, held in Rome in 1920. In highlighting this fact, the importance of which escapes no one, we hope that the singing of the same hymns contributes to an ever-increasing brotherhood of Italian Evangelicals. And may many souls, even outside the sphere of our Churches, find in this Hymnal the expression of their religious feelings and the means of reviving their Christian piety!

(Ernesto Comba et al. 1922)

The preface to the original edition of the Hymnal of the historic Protestant churches in Italy (1922) is useful in understanding what the intent was, one hundred years ago, to create a single hymnbook for the use of the Baptist, Methodist, and Waldensian churches in Italy, in the aftermath of the Risorgimento and at the dawn of the twenty years of fascism. Over the course of these years, the FCEI published two other editions of the Hymnal, one in 1969 and the last in 2000. Given the topic of our essay, we will deal with the latter, also due to the Italian migratory flows that began, in a more structured and massive way, in the 1990s.

The Hymnal contains 354 hymns, almost all of which belong to historical repertoires (Table 6).

Despite youth pushes in the churches, in the historical denominations, there are no musical groups that propose new arrangements and executions of the Protestant repertoire. Another important fact, however, is the absence of superordinate regulations by

churches for musicians, choirs, singers, or leaders; everything is based on the freedom of local congregations.

Table 6. Repertoires present (in absolute numbers and percentages).

Repertoires	Number of Hymns	Percentage
Pre-reformed melodies	17	4.81%
16th century chorales	19	5.37%
Huguenot and Scottish psalms	49	13.85%
Pietist hymns	12	3.39%
European hymns between the 17th and 19th centuries	99	27.97%
Hymns and songs of the Anglo-Saxon Revival and the Franco-Swiss Reveil	103	29.10%
African-American Spiritual	1	0.29%
Hymns of the Italian Risorgimento	8	2.26%
Hymns of the European twentieth century	7	1.98%
Hymns of the Italian twentieth century	23	6.50%
Hymns and songs of the ecumenical movement	8	2.26%
Christian pop songs	0	0%
Folk tunes	5	1.42%
Waldensian hymns	3	0.85%

Another important consideration is that the Italian language does not allow neutral terms or, at least, terms that are inclusive of the male and female genders; this has led in recent years to heated debates in churches on how to use inclusive language (to delve deeper into this theme, we recommend reading the Italian-language research of E. Green and L. Tomassone). In this hymnbook, only one hymn (n. 255) has gender inclusive language (in addition to the baptismal and confirmation hymns).

In addition to these problems, the language used also does not help. In fact, only one hymn is in a non-Italian language, n. 354, i.e., *Le Serment de Sibaud*, which has both the text in Italian and the text in French, as it is an integral part of the Waldensian tradition. The Waldensian Church, and, consequently, the Waldensian people have had French as their vehicular language for centuries. The Waldensian Valleys, north-west of the current Italian Republic, are located on the border with France; furthermore, the Waldensians have always had close ties both with the southern regions of France and with the French-speaking Swiss cantons, in particular with the reformed Geneva. It was only from 1848, the year of recognition of the civil and political rights of the Waldensians by the King of Italy, that the Waldensian Church started to introduce, step-by-step, the use of Italian as the principal language of worship and church life. Nowadays, this hymnal is still the most used in the Methodist and Waldensian churches, which means little involvement for the foreign brothers and sisters who are part of the Italian churches.

2.2. *Cantate al Signore, Claudiana, 2000*

At the same time as the publication of the official hymnbook of the FCEI, an ad hoc commission, Gruppo Musica Evangelica (the Evangelical Music Group), gave rise to an important but unfortunate experiment in collecting songs and hymns for use by churches which looked more closely at the ecumenical movement and the experiences of the World Council of Churches (*Cantate al Signore* 2000).

From the introduction, some salient points of the compositional and propositional ratio of the hymnbook can be deduced: the dignity and duration of the group's work, the highlighting of the intent to add to and not replace the hymn repertoire of the local communities, and the heterogeneous scope of the repertoire proposed (hymns from different regions of the world), which is able to enter into dialogue with new generations. Given the authoritative significance of the *Innario Cristiano* for Italian Protestants on the one hand, and the many proposals for new hymnals on the other—proposals that include Baptist collec-

tions, children’s collections, youth movement music, and books of rediscovered historical repertoire—hymnal commission president Eugenio Rivoir wanted to underline both the seriousness of the commission’s work in terms of the years spent collecting and discussing rediscovered material, and the dignity of their work at meetings, conferences, and national study groups. Another important priority was to reassure those who loved the 2000 edition of the *Innario Cristiano* and worried about the possibility of historical and consolidated repertoire being replaced by new songs and other cultural influences, including those of Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal movements and overseas Baptist movements. In reality, the admirable work undertaken for this hymnbook is evidenced by the international scope that has been given to it, as we find songs from the tradition of the ecumenical movement, hymns from North Europe, and songs from the various states of Latin America, as well as the many proposals from the Eastern churches, the African ones, and also new proposals from Italian composers. Along with the intent to make music from various geographical areas available to the churches, local congregations also had to find a way to enter into dialogue among themselves and with communities and church members who came from other parts of the world. This can be seen from Table 7:

Table 7. Hymns by country of origin.

Countries of Origin	Number of Hymns
Argentina	4
Bolivia	2
Brazil	2
Denmark	1
Ecuador	1
El Salvador	1
France	1
Germany	8
Greece	1
Italy	9
Malawi	1
Nigeria	1
Pakistan	2
Peru	2
Russia	2
South Africa	3
Spain	1
Sweden	4
Switzerland	2
Tanzania	1
Togo	1
Ukraine	2
Uruguay	1
USA	11
Zimbabwe	2
World Council of Churches (WCC)	3
Traditional Hymns (Historical)	7
Jewish melodies	3
Iona Community	4
Taizé Community	7
African-American spiritual	8

In the publication, the musical and rhythmic stylistic features of the proposed songs were respected as much as possible. In this sense, field research would be useful to understand how much the musicians in the churches manage to perform these extra-European repertoires in style.

We observe three major critical issues:

1. The absence of gender-inclusive language. Gender-inclusive language has been considered to be of great importance by the Italian Protestant churches; for many years now, the theological commissions, Synods and Assemblies of the churches have been working on an update of language from an inclusive perspective. For example, official documents are all produced with the use of gender-inclusive language, as are theological treaties and the positions carried out in the ecumenical environment. Music in worship is missing from this discussion, however: in the hymnals, careful use of gender-inclusive language has been absent for many years.
2. The almost total absence of other languages, compared to Italian. In the entire hymnbook we find ninety-two songs with lyrics in Italian, of which two are transliterations from Hebrew and one is a transliteration from the Xhosa language. Six songs instead use a liturgical text, like Gloria, Alleluia, or Kyrie Eleison.
3. The editorial failure of this publication, which was practically not adopted by any local churches, was not only due to traditionalist resistance, but also due to a banal printing error by the publisher: the hymnbook was, in fact, printed with skipped pages, making use of the hymnbook difficult.

2.3. *Let's Sing Together/Cantiamo Insieme*, 2007

The program of the Integration section of the Studies, Dialogue, and Integration Commission (Commissione Studi, Dialogo e Integrazione) was created within the FCEI, called Being Church Together (Essere Chiesa Insieme, ECI), coordinated by Paolo Naso. One of the most important points of discussion and, at times, of friction in the local ECI communities is precisely the music in worship and everything that depends on it: musical instruments, repertoires, languages, and space necessary for movements and dance. One of the most interesting tools is the bilingual hymnal *Let's Sing Together* (Aldridge and Markay 2007), sponsored by the Commission for Multicultural Pastoral Care of the II District of the Waldensian and Methodist Evangelical Churches. In it, there are ninety-three songs from different geographical areas of the world, from different centuries, and different denominational traditions. The importance of this necessary dialogue in international and multiethnic communities is highlighted in the introduction to this hymnal.

The introduction to this volume states its purpose thus:

From the time of the Psalms, singing has been a way to bring together “all the earth”. Many of our congregations are increasingly reflecting the diversity of God’s creation. The idea behind this hymnbook is that when we come together from various backgrounds and cultures to sing our faith, our experience of worship can be even richer. This book is a collection of Christian music from different countries, eras, authors, composers, and experiences of the Christian faith. It is designed as a resource for worship in communities in which Italian and English are the primary languages. At times it will be appropriate for each person to be able to sing in his/her mother language. At other times it may be important to “sing a new song” in a language not our own. (Aldridge and Markay 2007)

The collection consists of ninety hymns and songs and three liturgical texts. The repertoires represented are heterogeneous and inclusive of the different cultures and sensitivities expressed by multicultural and international churches that use English and Italian as vehicular languages (vd. Table 8).

Table 8. Repertoires present (in absolute numbers and percentages).

Repertoires	Number of Hymns	Percentage
Pre-reformed melodies	4	4.45%
16th century chorales	1	1.12%
Huguenot and Scottish psalms	3	3.34%
Pietist hymns	1	1.12%

Table 8. Cont.

Repertoires	Number of Hymns	Percentage
European hymns between the 17th and 19th centuries	13	14.45%
Hymns and songs of the Anglo-Saxon Revival and the Fracon-Swiss Reveil	22	24.45%
African-American Spiritual	6	6.67%
Hymns of the European 20th century	8	8.89%
Hymns and songs of the ecumenical movement	15	16.67%
Christian pop songs	8	8.89%
Songs from African states	7	7.78%
Songs from Latin American states	1	1.12%
Jewish melodies	1	1.12%

The absence of gender-inclusive language is also noticeable in this hymnal.

2.4. *E Tutto il Popolo Dica Amen! Canti e Testi per la Liturgia Comunitaria, Claudiana, 2008/2015*

The collection *And let all the people say: AMEN! Songs and texts for the community liturgy* features another commission, born from a supra-denominational body different from the FCEI, i.e., from the BMV partnership (Baptists, Methodists, and Waldensians, which has existed since 1979), the BMV Commission for Worship and Liturgy. Ermanno Genre (president of the commission), in his introduction to the collection, identifies in the responsories and antiphons some of the oldest models of congregational liturgical practice in the Christian church. Since the first centuries, in fact, congregations have participated in worship precisely at the time of the responsories. In the Protestant world, this practice, although maintained in the Lutheran liturgy, was suppressed by Calvin and increasingly by the Reformed churches, particularly in Italy, where the clash with Catholicism has always been very strong, from the Risorgimento period onwards (Cignoni 2020).

The present volume [...] is situated in this ancient Christian tradition that many churches have maintained over the centuries, and which others have instead abandoned. The liturgical freedom that distinguishes the evangelical churches in Italy will certainly be able to make good use of these proposals. These are [...] texts that are proposed and never imposed. The renewal of liturgy and worship needs convictions, authentic appropriations, not half-hearted attempts or improvised innovations. The responsories and liturgical material presented in these pages intend to give voice to the community that celebrates worship, helping it to feel truly subject to the celebration. The worship is celebrated by the community that gathers [...], there is a need for chorality, polyphony, harmony, and in view of these objectives it is necessary for the gathered community to participate actively. It is therefore not a question of following fashion, in the sense of thinking that every now and then it is good to change, but of ensuring that the worship we celebrate to praise the Lord and to visibly demonstrate our faith and our belonging to the church, in listening of his word and in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, express a true communion. [...] In every generation there is a need for poets, new songs, new music, new liturgical initiatives to express the praise of the Lord today, with ancient and modern words. (Genre [2008] 2015)

The book is divided into different sections: opening, Psalms, praise and thanksgiving, confession of sin, biblical readings, affirmation of faith, Lord's Supper, collection of offerings, intercessory prayers, and blessing.

The "opening" section is made up of ten readings and seven songs, all of which are in Italian. The section dedicated to the "celebration Psalms" is made up of nine readings and nine songs, all of which are also in Italian. The "praise and thanksgiving" section has four readings and four songs. The "confession of sin" section is made up of eight readings and eight songs, one of which is also in English and two of which use liturgical language (Kyrie Eleison). The section dedicated to biblical readings and preparation for the sermon

is made up of a reading and five songs, one of which uses liturgical language (Hallelujah). For the “Confession of faith” or “Affirmation of faith”, we find two readings and two songs in Italian. For the “Lord’s Supper”, we find six readings and liturgical schemes and seven songs in Italian. The “collection of offerings” is proposed with a single song in Italian. For the “intercession”, we find six readings and six songs, all in Italian. For the conclusion of the worship, eight readings and eleven songs are proposed, of which two use liturgical language (Amen and Hallelujah).

The natural observation is that the songs proposed in the book are all, or almost all, from different parts of the world, originally written in a language other than Italian, or composed specifically for ecumenical gatherings (vd. Table 9). This resulted in the exclusion of all non-Italian-speaking church members from these liturgical and worship proposals.

Table 9. Origin (in absolute numbers and percentages).

Places of Origin	Number of Hymns	Percentage
Italy	8	13.56%
North Europe	10	16.95%
East Europe	3	5.09%
North America	6	10.17%
South America	15	25.43%
Africa	6	10.17%
Iona community	7	11.87%
Taizé community	4	6.78%

2.5. *Celebriamo il Risorto, Claudiana, 2015*

The last example we deal with is the hymnbook created within the union of Italian Baptist churches, *Celebriamo il Risorto/Let’s Celebrate the Risen One*. In the introduction we read:

The objectives of this work are: to collect, on the occasion of the celebrations of 150 years of Baptist presence in Italy, the musical material sung in the Baptist churches of UCEBI [that is, the union of the Italian Baptist churches]; indicate proposals for the renewal and expansion of the musical repertoire of the evangelical churches; finally, propose a repertoire that is the result of the sensitivity and different traditions that animate the worship and testimony in churches. (Lella and Spanu 2014)

In fact, the proposed repertoire is varied: from the Anglo-Saxon Awakening to Christian pop, from the songs of the ecumenical movement to the new Italian proposals. The most relevant thing, however, is the inclusion for a selection of hymns of texts in different languages, at least of the languages used in the international Baptist congregations present in Italy. Of the three hundred and forty hymns in the hymnbook, thirty-one songs are printed to include more than one language. The languages are all vehicular languages for local congregations, except, for obvious reasons, the transliterations of Hebrew and Arabic, inserted with the intent of inclusion and interreligious dialogue (the percentages refer only to songs with multi-language text, vd. Table 10).

The hymnbook names the “Nigerian” language; this error should be corrected as the language of the written text is Igbo.

It is also interesting to consider for which hymns and songs the multilingual texts were provided. Twelve are from South America; five from Africa; five from Europe; four are Jewish melodies; three from North America; and one is by an Italian composer. Of these songs, twelve are published in WCC collections, two in Iona community collections, and two in KEK meeting collections.

The problem encountered is that, despite the intent being to include the international communities present among the congregations forming part of the Baptist Union, the absolute percentage of hymns and songs proposed with multilingual texts is very low: out of three hundred and forty-two songs, only thirty-one present these texts in different

languages. If we then analyze the languages offered, for each language the percentages drop considerably. For example, the largest international communities among the Union of Baptist Churches of Italy are the Spanish-speaking ones. Out of thirty-one total songs, there are only twenty-two lyrics in Spanish. This leads to little interaction during services between Spanish-speaking and Italian-speaking church members.

Table 10. Percentage of languages present.

Languages	Percentage
English	34%
Spanish	30%
French	12%
Portuguese	10%
Nigerian	1%
Shona	1%
Xhosa	3%
Zulu	3%
Transliterated Hebrew	5%
Transliterated Arabic	1%

3. The Problem of Translations

The problem of translations of hymns in the churches of historic Protestantism in Italy is a long-standing one. Since the beginning of the evangelization missions on Italian soil by the Methodist and Baptist missions in the nineteenth century, and the dialogue that immediately characterized Italian Protestantism (between Waldensians, Methodists, Baptists, free churches, and Brethren churches), translations of English and American, German and French hymns have been discussed by the churches. While the branch of the Reformed Church in Italy (the Waldensian Church) has always had (at least since the Synod of Chanforan in 1532) a close link with Geneva and with the German reformed churches, the other denominations were either recently founded (such as the Assemblies of the Brethren, founded by Count Piero Guicciardini and Teodorico Pietrocola Rossetti in the Risorgimento period) or foreign missions (there were two Baptist missions, one English and the other American, and two Methodist missions, one Wesleyan from England and one Episcopal from the USA). The Waldensians, who used both French and Italian as their languages of worship, had a vast production of hymnals of psalms and hymns which were closely linked with Genevan publications. The Methodists and Baptists, however, worked hard on translations from English. This meant that commissions for the preparation of hymnbooks had to work hard to provide Italian churches with the vast hymnodic heritage of international Protestantism. Unfortunately, however, it must be noted that the theological and ecclesiological inclinations of the Protestant churches in Italy have influenced the meanings and texts, modifying, replacing, and manipulating the originals. These translations, which continued from the mid-nineteenth century up to the publications of the Italian hymnals of the twentieth century (up to the 2000 edition), today involve clashes and comparisons between communities that come from other parts of the world (mostly Africa, South America, and the Philippines) who use the original texts, and Italian communities who, for more than a century and a half, have used texts that have very different theological inclinations and meanings, (on the same topic, in detail, Annarilli 2024 is recommended). In the following, three examples of hymns from different historical repertoires are proposed.

3.1. *Blessed Assurance*

The famous hymn with lyrics by Francis Jane Crosby and music by Phoebe Palmer Knapp needs no introduction (on the importance and success of the production of Fanny Crosby's lyrics, please refer to the essay by Blumhofer 2006). The original text presents some very clear theological points, which fully reflect not only Methodist doctrine, but

also rhetorical figures typical of awakened texts, for example exhortations to personal conversion, or parenetic phrases for the Christian service; the most used rhetorical figures are synaesthesia (“sweet yoke” or “beloved cross”), synecdoche (“the blood of Christ” to indicate the sacrifice of Christ), and antonomasia (Jesus is the most frequent case: “The Saviour”, “The Redeemer”, “The Lamb”, etc.; but also in other cases as for the Holy Spirit, “the Comforter”, or the Devil, “the Evil”, “the Tempter”, etc.). In Table 11 we provide the original text in the first column (taken from *Songs of Grace and Glory* 1874), the Italian text in the second column (in *Innario Cristiano* 2000, therefore the version still sung in Italy today), and, in the third column, the literal translation into English of the Italian text (the translation is by the author).

Table 11. Blessed Assurance.

Original Lyrics	Italian Translation in <i>Innario Cristiano</i> , 2000	English Translation of Italian Version
1. Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine! Heir of salvation, purchased of God, Born in His Spirit, washed in His blood. <i>This is my story, this is my song, Praising my Saviour all the day long; This is my story, this is my song, Praising my Saviour all the day long.</i> 2. Fulness of mercy, perfect delight, Visions of rapture burst on my sight; Angels descending, bring from above Echoes of pardon, whispers of love. <i>Refrain</i> 3. Perfect submission, all is at rest; I in my Saviour am happy and blest; Watching and waiting, looking above, Filled with His goodness, lost in His love. <i>Refrain</i>	1. Lieta certezza: son di Gesù! Quale dolcezza: ho il ciel quaggiù! Già son rinato, redento son, Son riscattato, ho il suo perdon. <i>È la mia storia; è la mia fe': Tutta la gloria al Cristo mio Re! È la mia storia; è la mia fe': Tutta la gloria al Cristo mio Re!</i> 2. Gesù mi guida, ansie non ho; Il mal mi sfida, pur vincerò! Lo Spirto intanto reca dal ciel L'amore santo del puro Agnel. <i>Refrain</i> 3. Il suo volere osserverò, Del Salvatore l'amor godrò! Sempre guardare a Lui lassù, Nel cor serbare la Sua virtù. <i>Refrain</i>	1. Blessed assurance, I belong to Jesus! What sweetness: I have heaven down here! Already I am reborn, I am redeemed, I am redeemed, I have His forgiveness. <i>This is my story; this is my faith: All Glory to Christ my King! This is my story; this is my faith: All Glory to Christ my King!</i> 2. Jesus guides me, I have no anxieties; Evil challenges me, yet I will win! Meanwhile the Spirit brings from heaven The holy love of the pure Lamb. <i>Refrain</i> 3. I will observe His will, I will enjoy the love of the Savior! Always look to Him above, Keep His virtue in the heart. <i>Refrain</i>

The first strong divergence between the two texts can be observed starting from the first verse: while in the original text the “assurance” is the awareness that Jesus himself is this blessed assurance that saves us, in the Italian text the same “assurance” is reversed, that is, it is the believer who belongs to Jesus, and not the other way around, as the original literary construction suggests. The rhetorical and literary figures of verses 3 and 4 are much less strong and more of a “reformed flavor”: “heir of salvation”, “purchase of God”, “born of His Spirit”, and “washed in His Blood”, become new birth, redemption, and forgiveness. This softening of the text very often clashes with the spirituality of international congregations, which is less timid and lukewarm than that of Italian churches.

In the refrain a fundamental point of conflict emerges: the centrality of music in worship and in Christian life. While in the original text it is proclaimed that “this is my story, this is my song”, in the Italian version the focus is brought back to “faith”. Singing about the importance of the song itself was not thought to be very relevant to the centralities of the fundamental principles of the Reform. This fact is also clear from the situation of church music in Italian congregations: many churches have no musicians and have to sing a cappella on Sunday, or with the aid of a backing track. This neglect is not conceivable for non-Italian church members, who therefore consider Italian churches colder and less participatory in the Gifts of the Holy Spirit. The meaning of the second stanza, while remaining similar, was modified through a different use of the metaphors and images recalled by the text. In the ultra-Catholic Italy of the nineteenth century, in strong and bloody conflict with the Protestants, the translators could not use references to images close

to Catholic tastes; in order to avoid misunderstandings with their own church members, neophytes, and converts from Catholicism, they avoided images such as angels, raptures, excessive verticalization, and mysticism. The only glaring divergence in the third stanza is seen in the last verse: being lost in love was not accepted, because the Italian churches (especially the Waldensian one) have always remained distant from pietist flavors, for example, putting the focus on the sensitive side of the devotional sphere, or the use of emotional metaphors in the texts, or even underlining the private and emotional aspect of being a believer.

3.2. Let Us Break Bread Together

As regards the repertoire of African-American spirituals, the situation becomes quite particular. In the *Innario Cristiano* of 2000, in fact, as written above, of the three hundred and fifty-four hymns, only one comes from the African-American repertoire, that is, only Let Us Break Bread Together. Not only has the repertoire been almost completely excluded from this hymnbook, but the meaning of the only spiritual present has been heavily modified in language, images and theological expressions. As for Blessed Assurance, Table 12 presents the original text, the Italian text, and the translation of the Italian text.

Table 12. Let us break bread together.

Original Lyrics	Italian Translation in <i>Innario Cristiano</i> , 2000	English Translation of Italian Version
1. Let us break bread together on our knees. <i>When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun, O Lord have mercy on me.</i>	1. In preghiera spezziamo il pane insieme. <i>E invocando il Tuo nome volgiamo lo sguardo a te, Signor, pietà di noi.</i>	1. In prayer we break bread together. <i>And invoking your name we turn our gaze to you, O Lord, have mercy on us.</i>
2. Let us drink wine together on our knees. <i>Refrain</i>	2. In preghiera beviamo il vino insieme. <i>Refrain</i>	2. In prayer we drink wine together. <i>Refrain</i>
3. Let us praise God together on our knees. <i>Refrain</i>	3. In preghiera lodiamo Iddio insieme. <i>Refrain</i>	3. In prayer we praise God together. <i>Refrain</i>

As regards this translation, it is clear that the main meaning of the hymn dedicated to the Lord's Supper is respected; however, there are two main points of divergence that we recognize: 1. as regards the three verses, the reference to being in a kneeling position before the Lord; 2. as regards the refrain, the singular subject disappears, to make room for the plural "we". For the first point, the reason for the divergence between the original text and the translated text should be referred to the theological context in which the commission moved when it worked on this hymnal: an environment theologically very close to the European reformed world, mainly to the ideas of Karl Barth, critical of pietism and the peculiarities that derive from it, for example, the excessive underlining of the emotionality of faith and the emphasis on the sensitive side of the single faithful (cfr. Olson and Winn 2015). Reference to the states of prayer, devotion, kneeling, rapture, and adoration is almost completely absent in the hymns and songs proposed. For the second point, however, the motivation is linked to the theological and ecclesiological desire to place the focus on the "we" of the community and never on the "I" of the individual; this too is probably due to the clear desire to stay away from pietist and awakened references. The Waldensian point of view (by far the majority among the Italian Protestant denominations) has, de facto, helped to stem the influences of the Anglo-Saxon awakening, both from the theological point of view and from the musical one. Perhaps the clearest example of this is what the commissions for the editions of the Italian *Innario Cristiano* have put in writing in the minutes of their proceedings (kept in the historic archive of the Waldensian Church in Torre Pellice), as with the following example: "However, the songs were not left aside. On the contrary, a certain number has been added, but choosing them among those who

have some artistic and liturgical dignities. It was therefore inevitable to give up many melodies, or because they are unsuitable for collective singing, or because of poor level.” (Aime et al. 1969). As is easily understandable, this is also a breaking point between native congregations and migrant congregations.

Another interesting thing to point out for this hymn is the history that led to it being included in the hymnal, which also helps us understand why it is the only African-American spiritual present. Over the years, starting from the 1970s, this song has, in fact, been included several times in collections for use by youth groups or churches. The first time it was included in a collection was in 1970 (*Canzoniere 2* 1970), within the *Canzoniere 2*, i.e., the “product of the cadet camp which took place in Agape from 14 to 24 September 1970”. In this translation the text remains much closer to the original; in fact, we read: “on our knees we break bread together, when I fall to my knees, turning my gaze to You, Lord, have mercy on me”. We find it again in a collection produced by the Baptist churches in 1981 and edited by past. Saverio Guarna, with the following words: “We break the bread all together and, falling on our knees, we turn our gaze to you, Lord, have mercy on us”. This second version is in the middle: on the one hand the image of “being on our knees” is maintained, on the other the singular subject is lost in favor of the plural (*Cantiamo Insieme 1* 1981). We find this hymn again in a publication for Sunday Schools made in 1999 (Lorandi and Fuligno 1999). Here the translated text changes again, proposing a literal translation of the original, the same as that of 1970. The theological and political intent of the 2000 *Innario Cristiano* commission as set out above is therefore evident.

3.3. In Christ Alone

The last example that is proposed is of a contemporary song: In Christ Alone, music by Keith Getty and lyrics by Stuart Townend from 2002, Thankyou Music (EMI Christian Music Publishing). For this example, as above, we propose a comparison table for the texts (Table 13).

Table 13. In Christ Alone.

Original Lyrics	Italian Translation in <i>Celebriamo il Risorto</i> , 2014	English Translation of Italian Version
1. In Christ alone my hope is found. He is my light, my strength, my song. This Cornerstone, this solid ground Firm through the fiercest draught and storm. What heights of love! What depths of peace, When fears are stilled, when strivings cease. My Comforter, my all in all, Here in the love of Christ I stand.	1. In Cristo solo è saldo il cuor, forza e luce Egli è per noi; la Roccia solida su cui salva la vita noi abbiām. O immenso amor che calmi il cuor, ogni timor sai dissipar! Conforto vero sei Gesù, qui nel tuo amore salvi siām!	1. In Christ alone the heart is steadfast, strength and light He is for us; the solid Rock on which we save our lives. O immense love that calms the heart, you know how to dispel every fear! True comfort you are Jesus, here in your love save us!
2. In Christ alone, who took on flesh, Fullness of God in helpless Babe. This gift of love and righteousness Scorned by the ones He came to save Till on that cross as Jesus died The wrath of God was satisfied, For ev'ry sin on Him was laid. Here in the death of Christ I live.	Verse absent	Verse absent
3. There in the ground His body lay, Light of the world by darkness slain. Then bursting forth in glorious day, Up from the grave He rose again. And as He stands in victory, Sin's curse has lost its grip on me. For I am His, and He is mine, bought with the precious blood of Christ.	3. Il corpo suo sepolto fu. Luce del mondo dove sei? Ma il terzo di resuscitò: vinse la morte il Salvator! E la condanna ch'era mia Non ha più presa su di me! Io sono suo ed Egli è mio, con il suo sangue mi comprò.	3. His body was buried. Light of the world where are you? But on the third day He was resurrected: the Savior conquered death! And the condemnation that was mine It no longer has a hold on me! I am his and He is mine, with his blood he bought me.
4. No guilt in life, no fear in death: This is the pow'r of Christ in me. From life's first cry to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny. No pow'r of hell, no scheme of man Can ever pluck me from His hand. Till He returns or calls me home, Here in the pow'r of Christ I'll stand.	4. Nessuna colpa né timor, Questa è la sua potenza in me! In lui vivrò e morirò, Egli decide il mio destin. Nessuna forza mai potrà Strapparmi via dalla sua man. Finché verrà e mi chiamerà Qui nel suo nome saldo sto!	4. No guilt or fear, This is the power of him in me! In him I will live and die, He decides my destiny. No force will ever be able to Tear me away from his hand. Until He comes and He calls me Here in his name I stand firm!

The first note to make is that this song was proposed to the Italian churches in Hymnal 2014, i.e., the last hymnbook made by the Baptist churches alone (without the help of

Methodists and Waldensians). We confirm, in fact, that in Italian Methodist and Waldensian churches this repertoire and this song in particular are not sung. Nonetheless, the influence that the Italian Reformed have had on the Baptists is clear: starting from the first two lines of the first verse we notice how some primary elements have been eliminated: the hope that Jesus gives, and the fact that He is “my light, my strength, my song”, not only eliminating these images, but also replacing the singular with the plural. The second verse disappears completely: the most disruptive elements are the references to the incarnation, to the wrath of God, and the vividness of the words used (and therefore of the images proposed). The third verse, however, presents an almost literal translation: the explicit reference to the “blood of Jesus”, very rare in the texts of this hymnal, is interesting. For the last verse, however, we note fidelity to the original, except for the reference to hell, which is actually uncommon in Italian texts (it is very often rendered in other hymns and songs with periphrasis).

4. Conclusions and Perspectives

In this essay I wanted to begin to scratch the surface of the vast hymn production of the Italian Protestant churches from a linguistic perspective, both through the publications of collections and hymnals, and through translation work. Three initial problems are highlighted on which we are committed to continuing study:

- dialogue with migrant and international churches, which have different approaches not only to music in worship in the strict sense, but also from a theological and ecclesiological point of view in general;
- the challenge of language both in terms of gender-inclusive language and of language capable of being put at the service of dialogue between local churches, between denominations, and in the Italian ecumenical movement (still small) in a new perspective of exchange, growth, and empowerment of minorities; and
- finally, I hope that this research I am conducting can be a spur not only to other Italian scholars, but also to the Italian Protestant churches themselves, which are not yet aware of the importance of studies on music in worship and congregational music studies.

The first problem is, therefore, the construction of a dialogue in historical Protestantism in Italy between migrant churches and native churches. Given the work that the FCEI and its Commission for Studies, Dialogue and Integration have been carrying out on an ecclesiological and theological level for more than twenty years, we want to highlight here how much work there is still to be done for music in worship and liturgy. We know well how important these two factors are in the religious life of individuals and of the communities of which they feel a part; the next starting point would therefore be to build this dialogue, so that hymnals and liturgical collections are designed for the purposes of building communities that are Church Together.

The second fundamental point is that of language, with two important considerations. First, many studies conducted on the topic (Naso and Passarelli 2018; Naso et al. 2019) highlight a gender inclusivity problem, with the language used in church (and therefore also in singing) acting as the litmus test of a broader fact which involves the church (in theology, ecclesiology, and liturgy), society (understood both as a community of the individual and as a welcoming society), but also individuals (in the construction of their relationships: within the family, work-related, friendly, and community-based). Second, what language ideal should churches strive for in their congregational singing? The problem of “praying in the mother tongue” (as highlighted in Naso et al. 2014; Ambrosini et al. 2022) is a very problematic and delicate case. On the one hand the use of Italian (as also foreseen by the laws of the Italian Republic) is a necessary factor for the construction of social inclusion, not only of individuals in society, but also of congregations within the local society in which they operate. On the other hand, it is important not to lose the roots of one’s own spirituality, as only in this way can one be an active part in the construction of a truly new integrated and hybrid community (Ambrosini et al. 2018). This problem of language is

also evident not only through the examples of the multilingual hymnals, but also in the translations of the three hymns presented.

The dimension of language, that of theology, and that of dialogue between cultures intersect with the sensitivities of individuals and local congregations, sometimes creating conflicts and sometimes mutual influence between cultures, giving life to that idea of “communion of saints”. Pastor Luca M. Negro expresses an idea that is one of the main points of my research (Annarilli 2023):

I believe that singing in worship responds, in addition to the need for community participation, also to a need which from a theological point of view is to express the communion of saints, which is spoken of in the great “Creeds”, in confession of faith of the Church. The confession of faith speaks of the communion of saints and this means, first of all, a temporal dimension, that is, it means that in the moment of worship we are in communion with believers of all generations. [. . .] The Bible invites us, in various verses of the Psalms, for example, to “sing a new song” for the Lord, not an old song; there is also the old song, but it is important that each generation finds ways to express its faith. And then, this again on the discussion of the communion of saints, also from a geographical point of view. I believe that it is important to understand what Universal Church means, that even the music that is made in the church is universal music. For this reason, if on the one hand it is right for a believer from America to go to a service in an Italian church and hear a hymn that he knows from America, this is fine, but it is also important to let yourself be surprised by the music of all the regions in which Christianity spread. (Negro 2022)

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