

## Article

# Venezuelan Evangelical Digital Diaspora, Pandemics, and the Connective Power of Contemporary Worship Music

Fernando Adolfo Mora <sup>1,\*</sup>  and Enrique García Martínez <sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup> Bioengineering and Applied Biophysics Group, Simón Bolívar University, Caracas 89000, Venezuela<sup>2</sup> Entrecristianos, 28051 Madrid, Spain; ejgarciam@gmail.com

\* Correspondence: famorac@gmail.com

**Abstract:** During 2020–2021, the COVID-19 pandemics exacerbated the use of digital communication tools for the general population as well as for migrant and diasporic communities. Due to social distancing requirements, church activities had to be suspended or restricted, therefore, local congregations and denominations had to incorporate social media as part of their regular worship channels in an unprecedented way. At the same time, these new spaces opened an opportunity for diasporas to reconnect with their churches back home, and to participate in digital worship projects. In this paper, we study the case of the digital worship collective *Adorando en Casa* (AeC), which was started at the onset of the pandemics, producing several crowdsourced original musical compositions, uploaded in popular social media sites, and distributed via messaging apps. We focus on the reasons for participation of Venezuelan musicians and singers from different regions in the country, and from the large diaspora of Venezuelan Evangelicals. Additionally, we analyze the characteristics, structure, and theology of some of the songs recorded, to show how the concept of a digital diasporic spiritual consciousness is powerfully expressed through worship music.

**Keywords:** pandemics; contemporary worship; digital worship; COVID-19; coronamusic; digital diasporas; migration



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## 1. The Rise of Digital Religion during the Pandemics

Since early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has created all kinds of crises in contemporary society. Its effects on individuals, families, groups, organizations, and nations are yet to be known and understood. As Deborah Lupton and Karen Willis put it, “the COVID crisis is a complex and ever-thickening entanglement of people with other living things, place, space, objects, time, discourse and culture” (Lupton and Willis 2021). It has trespassed its physical health dimensions, as a viral disease that produces an inflammatory response that affects different body systems, with life-threatening cardio-respiratory complications, to become a relational disease that has disrupted all spheres of society. Christianity worldwide was thoroughly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. All over the world, churches were asked to put regular services on hold. Unexpectedly, the digitalization of rituals, Bible studies, discipleship groups, church services, counselling, as well as the transmission of religious knowledge and information, and the like, went from being just an idea of some religious entrepreneurs, to becoming an urgent need. Due to the lack of experience, many churches started to replicate with great difficulty in the digital space what was commonly done face–face. Basically, we were witnessing the accelerated rebooting of offline activities to a whole different space with a set of powerful media affordances designed for patterns of interaction, information flow, knowledge dissemination, and wisdom elicitation, that were completely novel and, in some cases, somewhat incompatible, with a face–face Christian culture.

Previous researchers had envisioned a progressive incorporation of digital technologies in religious practices, adopting the term *digital religion* to describe the intersection

between religious traditions and the evolving and ubiquitous digital technologies (Campbell and Evolvi 2020). Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic represented an abrupt change to the practice of religion all over the world. The different ways that churches and Christians in general responded to these challenges implied the introduction of new tools, new practices, the adaptation of existing platforms, and a greater dependency on digital media, and information and telecommunication technology in their everyday lives during the lockdowns. Without intending it, Christianity arrived at a point where digital religion practices became essential to any believer, in different church traditions, and all over the world. It was possible to consider in a tangible, and somewhat massive way, how social networks, telecommunication technology, data management, new media, and the like, were being incorporated by believers “into their everyday life and into their patterns of worship and religiosity” (Campbell and Evolvi 2020). It was not simply a matter of what new platform, software, or gadget could be used, but how its use was shaped by the spirituality and theological views of the potential users. Thus, this real-life situation forced researchers to pay close attention to “existential, ethical, and political aspects of digital religion, as well as issues of gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality.” (p. 7). In a way, the practice of religion during the pandemic became an immense laboratory where many different initiatives were started, some successful and lasting, others less effective, and many others with purposes that were charged with conspirative theories and political messages.

Some years before the pandemic, Helland stated that digital religion goes beyond the packaging of liturgies into new digital media; instead, it involves a careful conceptualization of the “societal and cultural components we associate with religion with the elements we associate with a digital society” (Helland 2016). Taking this into account, there are some aspects that conditioned the reengineering of church services in digital spaces during the COVID-19 crisis, such as the individualism and commodification introduced by the widespread use of the Internet; the accessibility to huge amounts of content and knowledge that produces a weakening of religious authority; the networked nature of digital media which leads to the flattening of religious structures, their decentralization, and deterritorialization; and also the immediacy and ubiquity of networks and social media that induce changes in the temporal logic of users, and modify the levels of commitment to communities. To classify the attempts to create digital spaces during the pandemic, the framework proposed by Piotr Siuda, that combines two contrasting axes, *information vs. participation*, and *innovation vs. tradition*, is useful (Siuda 2021). According to that, the first axis informs about the level of participation and creativity of the implementations, which implies also a more varied and intense use of digital technologies. The second axis informs about how churches or organizations deploy their existing power dynamics, if the level of information is controlled, and if the communication protocol follows rigid patterns or is more spontaneous. Siuda (2021) also proposes several questions which serve to map any digital religion initiative within the proposed two-axes framework, that can be used to investigate our case study, such as: which digital tools are used? What kind of spiritual activities are facilitated? How about the characteristics of the religious experiences in the digital space? Additionally, how these digital religion practices are incorporated within the existing church structures or if they occur as independent initiatives?

As we will see in the following sections, our case study is not just an implementation done by some tech savvy Christian entrepreneurs, but by a group of believers that, as Sheldon and Campbell (2021) state, “have rejected the dualism of technology as distinct from the spiritual” realm, understanding their use of technology as a vehicle for God’s manifestation, in a world troubled by COVID-19 and other difficult situations such as political persecution and migration. For this reason, we find that the framework proposed by Heidi Campbell (Campbell 2005) is useful to analyze the ways that the users in our case study view their approach to digital tools, and how they describe God’s presence or work in their technology mediated implementations. In this framework, any religious digital space can be seen from four different perspectives: (1) As a *spiritual network*, where people connect in virtual spaces and find meaningful spiritual experiences together; (2) As

a *sacramental space* where God can visit and communicate with the believers, which implies that certain forms of spiritual experiences can be facilitated digitally, and where a sense of holiness can be found; (3) *As a tool* for evangelism, when it is used for missional purposes, or, as a vehicle for the dissemination of religious ideas, when it serves to communicate certain theologies or practices among different religious communities; and, (4) *As a place* where the practice of religion involve the use of technologies for the daily practice of faith, and for the digital interconnection with other believers through virtual communities of faith. In the final section of this paper, we will revisit this framework in the context of our case study.

## 2. COVID-19 Pandemics and Digital Worship

Although streaming church services was not new, it was reserved to certain churches such as those employing a multisite model, where both online and offline audiences participated in the same church service (Campbell and De Lashmutt 2014). However, the COVID-19 pandemic forced almost all local churches, regardless of their size, to find solutions to allow their members to continue worshipping together and connecting as a fellowship, despite the severe lockdowns that were imposed in many regions in the world.

One quick fix to the problem of church attendance during lockdowns was to launch Zoom-based services. The Zoom user base had been growing for several years among educational institutions, because, in some ways, its design mimics a traditional classroom. During the pandemic, church online meetings using Zoom became very popular because the power dynamics of classical attractional churches change very little. In the case of Pentecostal/Charismatic congregations, which rely so much on contemporary worship music expressions, where voices and bodies play a major part of the liturgic experience, a Zoom meeting may seem awkward and incomplete. Worship music has gained a central role as part of the liturgy that was developed after the Jesus Movement in the 1960s and 1970s, due to the use of rock/pop contemporary music styles, dance, congregational participation in spontaneous singing, prophecy, or prayer, which, for the most part, had acquired a performative concert like characteristic. In Pentecostal/Charismatic (P/C) contemporary worship models, sacramentality plays a fundamental role in their theology (Lim and Ruth 2017). Based on Old Testament passages about the enactment of David's Tabernacle (Pérez 2021), a new liturgy emerged, based on the expectation that, if it was well planned and executed, God would be present during the praises of the gathered people. This type of worship experience currently dominates most of the liturgical models employed in Latin America, in what has been termed as the *Pentecostalization* of the Evangelical church in the region (Gladwin 2015).

In contemporary P/C worship, there is a "desire to *encounter the divine* through music, and a sense that, when God is present, He is present in active power" (Lim and Ruth 2017, pp. 130–31). In the sacramental theology of P/C contemporary praise and worship, "the worshiper is lifted up into heaven, into God's presence, into the throne room in which God resides" (Snider Andrews 2019). Intimacy with God is achieved through music that expresses love to God, such that the believer can experience God's presence as real and overwhelming. It seems, at first, that social media and digital worship spaces are incompatible with these experiences of the presence of God. At first glance, the technological affordances available in the existing social media applications are very limited to allow for remote worship in such a way that, praise and worship flow can be facilitated in a seamless way, and to allow the collective display of the type of emotional expressions that a worship service entails (Addo 2021).

Since the beginning of the pandemic music listening, music crafting, and singing seemed like a natural way to withstand the lockdowns. Some authors have started to look at the variety of "practices of listening to, playing, dancing to, composing, rehearsing, improvising, discussing, exploring, and innovating musical products" (Hansen et al. 2021), under the newly coined term of *coronamusic* to designate musical expressions originated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since a typology of coronamusic has not been proposed

yet, it might be possible to call the *musicking* (Small 1999), that is, all the sonic and social relationships that are part of worship music making, listening, participating, interacting, experiencing, dancing, video making, that happened during the pandemic, *coronaworship*.

Music video streaming has been positively associated with the severity of COVID-19 lockdown policies, and with the increased time spent at home (Sim et al. 2020). Youtube can be both, a source of emotion and a meeting point for certain communities (Rosenbusch et al. 2019). In the case of worship music, the richness of the images, the abundance of emotional display, the feeling of the music, are all factors that could produce an authentic online worship experience. Compared to worship leaders in church settings, worship music videos creators on Youtube are subject to a large range of responses from channel subscribers and casual visitors. Authenticity in the worship performance is perceived by followers from the actual way the video is produced, which is typically more grass-root, semi-professional, quite different than highly produced, well written scripts, professionally acted, video clips. In other words, “authenticity [is] established in . . . a dialogic relationship” between creators and viewers as part of the conventions of the social media platform in use (Cunningham and Craig 2017). Under these premises, it is possible to assume that *Worship Music Video* (WMV) streaming exploded during the COVID-19 crisis. Prior to the pandemic, Monique Ingalls had studied different kinds of Youtube worship music videos, focusing her study on user-generated WMVs combining “song lyrics, scriptural texts, and images to commercial recordings of worship songs”, which, according to her, is the most popular way of accessing worship music on the web (Ingalls 2016).

Although WMV’s help to fill the gap left by the impossibility of face-face gatherings, the element of mutual listening, collaborative musicking, and congregational singing is difficult to emulate just by watching Youtube videos. The need to join others to produce a musical creative synergy does not seem to be new in public health crises. According to Chiu, music fulfils the dual role of mood regulation, meditation, emotional healing, and of fostering social cohesion, bonding, connection, and solidarity, in times of isolation (Chiu 2020). For Christians during the lockdowns this meant finding ways to care for each other, to provide for their spiritual and material needs, and to intercede in prayer for the healing of their neighbors, cities, nations, or the world at large. Chiu also relates balcony singing, flash mobs, online musical ensembles, playlist creation, and many other initiatives that were spontaneously put together during the lockdowns around the world, with the singing and music making in other pandemics, such as the Milan plague in 1576. At that time, the singing and recitation of litanies were taken home by order of the city bishop. The singing of praises to God, along with the intercession for those suffering from the plague, continued non-stop, day and night, creating an overwhelming soundscape, which for those in the city reminded of “the roar of rushing waters” in the book of Revelations.

The performative aspect of worship music and the expectation of God’s visitation during the stages of call, praise, intimacy, and thanksgiving, which are part of the contemporary P/C music during the liturgical experience, have been very difficult to reproduce in online musicking during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is due, in part, to the technological limitations that networks and software have for joint music making in real time, and to achieve the presence and togetherness that are essential in the worship experience (Onderdijk et al. 2021). With the idea that sound can facilitate the divine encounter, despite the limitations, some events were promoted to do spontaneous improvisations of music over Zoom (Roberts 2021).

Alternative asynchronous ways for cooperative remote musicking were also explored, such as crowdsourcing individual parts that were edited later to produce WMVs published on social media platforms. One well-known example of online coronaworship musicking during COVID-19 lockdowns was the singing of the benediction in Numbers 6:24–26 based on the musical arrangements of Kari Jobe, Cody Carnes, and members from *Elevation Worship* in Charlotte (North Caroline). A crowdsourced version with the contribution of 30 churches was produced under the initiative of a Pittsburgh church, followed by a *UK Blessing* version with 65 churches participating. After that, more than 100 versions

from different regions of the world<sup>1</sup>, and a global choir live performance coordinated by Elevation Church in May 2020, followed (Fowler 2020). A similar project was the *Irish Blessing*, dedicating the 1000-year-old Irish hymn, *Be Thou my Vision*, to their local health facilities, overburdened with the rapid spread of the SARS-COV-2 virus. The WMV was edited from 500 online submissions, representing over 300 churches in the final crowdsourced video version (McGarry 2020). The resulting WMVs in YouTube of many of these different blessings became viral and, in a way, marked a trend in what coronaworship musicking would look like during the long lockdowns in 2020 and 2021.

Another resource that exploded during the COVID-19 pandemic was the use of WhatsApp religious groups. A 2019 report of 11 emergent economies (PRC 2019) showed that, on average, over 65% of Latin Americans were regular users of WhatsApp, with some countries with more than 72% of penetration (Meher 2022). WhatsApp uses only the cell phone number as identity; thus, the whole contact list automatically becomes a social network. One of the reasons for the fast growth of WhatsApp has to do with the *scalability* of its group feature, because each user can create a group and invite any contact that is in the smartphone, and those invited can repeat the process, thus producing a multiplicative effect. Additionally, there is the possibility of infinite content sharing, defined as *replicability*, some sort of chain effect, where messages are forwarded from user to user, or from group to group, sometimes received by one user repeated times, regardless of its origin or veracity (Pang and Woo 2020).

### 3. Faith on the Move: Venezuelan Evangelical Digital Diasporas and Worship Music

Venezuelan diaspora has been relentless since the year 2012. Starting in 2015 (Chaves-Gonzalez and Echeverria-Estrada 2020), several waves of Venezuelan migrants have been described in the literature, with a fast and steady growth since 2017. In September of 2021, the United Nations accounted more than 5.7 million Venezuelans that have moved out of the country due to the difficult living conditions, 80% of them were in other Latin American and Caribbean countries (R4V: Plataforma Regional de Coordinación Interagencial 2021). This number of migrants represents around 20% of the country's population according to its most recent national census (Instituto Nacional de Estadística de Venezuela 2011).

In the literature, the term *diaspora* has been employed to describe a large national, cultural, or religious group living in foreign lands (Baumann 2010), dispersed from its homeland due to war, economic, political, ethnic, or religious reasons (Butler 2001). Four basic features characterize a diaspora: (1) The scattering into several destinations, which in the case of Venezuelans, includes almost all Latin American and Caribbean countries, the US, and European nations, with Spain as the main destination; (2) some kind of relationship to homeland has to be present, for example through remittances, or, as we will see below, through different forms of social, cultural, religious and political participation using digital affordances, which can be classified as *social remittances* (Levitt 2007); (3) a consciousness and identity as a group that binds them together and also connects them with the homeland, which is continuously reinforced through messaging groups, associations of migrants, and online activism, or as Vásquez puts it, diasporas: "relate to the homeland through desire, through the unfulfilled longing for a paradise lost and the utopian dreams of a future return to mythic origins" (Vásquez 2008); and also, (4) that the state of dispersion persists long enough such that it cannot be considered only a temporary exile; in this regard, the majority of Venezuelan migrants left the country since 2015, but the conditions for possible return are harder, as political conflict endures.

The religious dimension is another element that binds the diasporic community, and which modulates its relationship with the homeland, and its idealization according to a specific spiritual imagination or worldview. According to a Pew Research Center study, the percentage of *Evangélicos*<sup>2</sup> in Venezuela was growing at about 1% per year, which would lead to more than 20% in 2021 (PRC 2014). Following this pattern, it is safe to say that around 20% of the total Venezuelan diaspora are Evangelicals (García Ayala 2019), without counting those converted in their pilgrimage through countries where

evangelical churches are growing quite fast (Pérez Guadalupe 2020). The unique role that digital religion plays here is that these diasporic communities can connect and relate through networks that span through the different host countries where there are Venezuelan migrants. Not only these networks have different topologies, but digital technologies also allow for the creation of many different networks of networks. However, their power rest in the fact that besides the purely relational aspect, the networks of believers also contain multiple “phenomenological realities consisting of narratives, practices, cognitive maps, and microhistories” (Vásquez 2008). This leads us to consider how evangelical migrants incorporate religious networks in the way they live their religion in the diaspora. Thus, documenting diasporic religious network formation during the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of accessibility, type of actors, religious power of members, ways of exchange and communication, digital media employed, type of content shared, formalization, and other aspects, is an important contribution to the understanding of “how religious networks come to be constituted and rooted in a particular space and time and how different kinds of ties come together to form transnational social fields” (Vásquez 2008).

Venezuelan migration waves have occurred during the proliferation of the use of social media and smartphones. Due to the magnitude of social networking usage, researchers have been able to estimate the number of Venezuelan migrants in South America using Facebook (Santos 2018), or to track the flow and routes of migration using Twitter data (Mazzoli et al. 2020). Venezuelan Evangelicals in foreign lands have become true digital diasporic communities (Ponzanesi 2020), recreating identities, sharing opportunities, spreading culture and ideas, and even influencing churches, organizations, and even governments (Alonso and Oiarzabal 2010). The immediacy, fluidity, and frequency of new telecommunication modes facilitates building up trust, intimacy, virtual presence, and the transmission of emotion, which are fundamental for the creation of meaningful religious spaces, especially in Pentecostal and Charismatic expressions of worship and prayer.

When looking at music making by diasporic communities, it is enlightening to consider what Walter Brueggemann has called the *disciplines of readiness* (Brueggemann 1997). By drawing from the experience of the Babylonian exile in the Old Testament, Brueggemann sees the Jews learning to practice such disciplines through dangerous *memories*, dangerous *criticism*, dangerous *promises*, dangerous *new songs*. These disciplines belong to the realm of the ritual and liturgy of the diasporic worshiping community. One of the most powerful vehicles through which memories, criticism, and promises can travel, and reach other diasporic communities in forced exile, are *dangerous new songs* that speak of their homeland and of the new alternatives that are. Artistic forms such as music, can be valuable ways to communicate the difficulties of migrants and diasporic communities in their pilgrimage, such as discrimination, exclusion, and lack of access to basic rights, the sense of loss of the migrant’s natural world, of their first loves, or the most cherished dreams, can be captured in songs (Paniagua-Arguedas 2017)<sup>3</sup>.

The use of Christian music by diasporic communities has been studied in reference to migrants from African countries, due to the extraordinary growth of their diasporic Pentecostal churches around the world, especially Nigerian congregations in the UK, where music has played a central role in their expansion (Sabar and Kanari 2006). However, very few studies have been done among Latin American Evangelical diasporic communities. Rocha studied the fascination of immigrants from Brazil who were members of Hillsong church in Sidney (Rocha 2017). Adopting Hillsong music as the proper way to worship God, was one way to capture their imaginations, identifying with something powerful, and, at the same time, detaching from the religiosity and legalism of the Pentecostal churches in their homeland. Deborah Berhó observed in Hispanic churches in the state of Oregon that most of the songs used were in Spanish, and they preferred US-Hispanic or Latin American composers in their repertoire (Berhó 2020). Recent research among Peruvian and Bolivian migrants attending a Pentecostal church in Iquique (Chile), observed that, despite the global sound and familiarity of migrants with the repertoire, *nostalgia* was the main feeling evoked by worship music among the diasporic community (Vélez Caro and

Mansilla 2019). However, the pain produced by loneliness, vulnerability, and economic scarcity that migration brings, can be overcome through the rich symbolic imagery and powerful sonic texture that contemporary worship music possess.

In the case of the Venezuelan diasporic communities, migrants who once were pastors, worship leaders, church planters, home group leaders, now work in the host land as Uber drivers, delivering food, doing domestic service, in all kinds of occupations that can provide enough money to pay food and lodging, even as undertakers of COVID-19 fatalities in Lima (Perú) a job that was rejected by locals (Galdos and Somra 2020). The message of hope that the gospel brings is a way of dealing with the hardships of everyday life. One of the coping mechanisms of migrant Evangelical populations, or for those converted while migrating, is to join a church where a solid network of believers can be found. In this situation, music is a very powerful instrument when, as exiles, the diasporic community is trying to reimagine faith and give sense to what is happening to them. Music unites the diasporic community and serves as a vehicle for its identity formation in the host culture. However, this process was completely disrupted for Venezuelan Evangelical migrants during the 2020–2021 COVID-19 pandemic. Regular gatherings in the local churches in the host country had to be suspended, and diasporic communities became virtual and had to rely on new ways to interact and keep united. In the next section, we explore a case study of a digital worship music digital community composed of members from the Venezuelan Evangelical digital diaspora, as well as Christians in the homeland, that was started spontaneously during the COVID-19 pandemic, where both, nostalgia, and hope, for a better situation in Venezuela dominates the poetry, influences the musical style, and dictates the characteristics of the WMVs produced for use by Venezuelan Evangelical churches.

#### 4. Case Study: *Adorando en Casa* as Virtual Communitas

Simons (2009) has defined a case study as “an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in ‘real life’” (p. 21). In this regard, we centered our research interest on *the case* at hand (Starman 2013), as a unique illustrative example of the interaction between different research areas, such as digital religion, religion and migration, digital diasporic communities, and contemporary worship music, within the context of an ongoing complex situation such as the COVID-19 pandemics. The case study is done both retrospectively, by collecting data from different sources, since the beginning of the digital worship community at the onset of the pandemic, and also, through collective reflection of the members of the group as they continue their collaboration through the 4th or 5th wave of the pandemic. We approached this research without proposing any hypothesis, but with the firm idea that we could learn from the case study and identify new areas that require in depth exploration based on the documentation of a real-life experience such as the one we will describe below.

*Adorando en Casa* (AeC) is a collective of worship leaders, musicians, singers, and pastors that was formed at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. To study the development of the group, we have reviewed all their productions that were posted on Youtube, looking at the responses and commentaries to these WMVs. Additionally, we analyzed interviews that were done by Evangelical media, as well as the opinion of pastors and other Christian leaders. As a way to obtain a more objective observation, we also asked a Venezuelan musicologist, worship leader and pastor, Wershin Montiel, who is also part of the diaspora, to listen and comment about the lyrics and musical arrangements of the seven songs, produced by AeC, with more visits in their Youtube channel. We also did participatory observation in the WhatsApp group and Telegram channel of AeC for several months, which allowed us to observe the virtual community and the interactions during the processes of music production, times of prayer, or mutual care.

In order to gather direct observations from those who were part of the network, we conducted a digital focus group with eight members located in Toronto—Canada, San Jose—Costa Rica, Quito—Ecuador, and Merida and Valencia in Venezuela, using a Telegram chat, from 4 October to 24 October 2021. The focus group was carried out with three rounds

of questions. The first one was targeted to get to know more about the participants and the reasons why those living abroad had left Venezuela. The second batch of questions sought to find out why they had decided to join AeC, and the benefits of being part of the network. The third round allowed the participants in the focus group to reflect on the musical genre and the lyrics of the songs produced collectively by AeC, as well as to consider the impact of the music among Evangelicals in Venezuela. All participants in the focus group had a Pentecostal background, although some had moved to Neo-Pentecostal or New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) churches recently. Of those in the diaspora due to the Venezuelan crisis, only one was still in the process of integration into the new culture. All joined AeC, either because of the need to connect their faith during the pandemic, looking for an opportunity to serve God, or because of the need for friendship. Among the participants of the focus group, it was agreed that through AeC they managed to connect with Venezuela. Besides that, the growing sisterhood and brotherhood among the members of AeC, wherever they may be, allowed for more personal mutual edification, prayer in difficult times, or spiritual renewal. In general terms, all the participants in the focus group wanted to continue producing music together, and staying interconnected, after the pandemic ends.

During the focus group, the participants recognized Ronald Sifontes, a professional musical producer from Mérida in the Venezuelan Andes, as the inspirational leader who started the network. Ronald was forced to close his music recording studio when his work contracts went suddenly to zero in March 2020. At the beginning of the pandemic, he was reminded of a prophetic word received in 1993 from the Mexican worship leader Marcos Barrientos, realizing that the COVID-19 crisis was one of those times that the prophecy spoke about, and that it was important to step out. Immediately, he started to draw from his personal network those worshipers, psalmists, pastors, and musicians, from several churches in the country, and from the Venezuelan diaspora, inviting them to unite and do something in the musical arena. Very quickly, those invited brought more people to the network, such that by early April 2020 a growing WhatsApp group had already been started, and the name for the community was coined: *Adorando en Casa* (Worshipping at home, AeC).

Initially, three objectives were proposed for the network in a Youtube video, stating that it was a space for the expression of worship using different musical styles with the participation of Venezuelans from all over the world, and from all denominations; to encourage participation not only through music, but by developing devotionals, scripture reading, and prayer rooms; and, the composition of new worship songs that reflected the times and the difficulties confronted by Venezuelan Christians, emphasizing the use of Venezuelan rhythms and instruments (Sifontes 2020). To demonstrate the concept, the network produced a crowdsourced a version of the well-known Latin American worship song, *Cuán bello es el Señor* (How beautiful the Lord) (AeC 2020c), which was quickly released on 7 April of 2020, scarcely 15 days after lockdowns had started in many countries, including Venezuela. The arrangement of the song was done using *Onda Nueva*, a Venezuelan musical style that fuses Venezuelan *joropo* with jazz and bossanova; sixteen worship leaders, singers, and musicians joined the project.

A multi-track model for the virtual ensemble was used, in which individual members recorded their part and a coordinator assemble the different pieces into a complete recording or video (Daffern et al. 2021). Although conceptually simple, the implementation required several steps to follow that depended on the technology available. Daffern et al. (2021) distinguish the role of the facilitator and of the participant in the recording. In the case of AeC, the facilitator, Ronald Sifontes, had a lot of experience editing audio and video, as well as the musical ability to create the backing tracks for the rest of the participants. Due to the lockdown, the equipment used was minimal, without access to the studio and other sophisticated audio interfaces. Moreover, uploading and downloading audio/video files was done using mobile broadband, which in the city of Merida is rather unstable and with a low throughput<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, the facilitator of AeC had to coordinate with participants their different contributions, organize the received recordings, edit them into

a final product, uploading it to the social media sites, or distributing it via WhatsApp or Telegram. Participating members had to learn the new songs, create a minimal set-up to record their solo track, following the pre-recorded backing track created by the facilitator. The majority of AeC members used their mobile phones as recording device, having to make their recordings when their houses were quiet, many times in closets or bathrooms, or late at night, taking into consideration that everybody was staying home. Due to the peculiarities of life in Venezuela, a country without gasoline, with daily electricity outages, and an obsolete telecommunications infrastructure, worsened by the pandemic, all the musical production work faced big challenges. As members of the network described it:

After videos were published, we asked ourselves, how did we do this? We did it by the grace and mercy of God. Without recording studio, many hours of patient editing with simple software tools, working around electricity cuts that did not have fixed schedules, sometimes working the night shifts until daybreak, using old computers, outdated smartphones, recording in crowded houses because of the lockdowns. (a member of AeC)

The precarious situation faced in Venezuela, exacerbated by the new living restrictions imposed by the lockdowns, created a sense of social instability or disequilibrium, a disruption from normal life, something that could be classified as a *liminal* state. According to Victor Turner, precisely in *liminality*, when things are confused and risks abound, is where a transient society, a *communitas*, emerges spontaneously, to undertake the goal of collective transformation (Turner 1969). Liminal states, such as the one produced by the pandemic, are characterized by their transient nature, humility, unselfishness, simplicity, suffering, spiritual growth, absence of rank and status, solidarity, togetherness, all of which facilitate the emergence of a *communitas*. AeC became a *communitas* formed around worship musicking, that provided a safe space for co-creation, imaginative engagement, redefining personal mission, experimentation, and learning together. Early members of AeC felt that something needed to be done despite the limitations, as one of the would put it: “We know that excellent equipment and instruments are necessary, but if we don’t have them then, are we not going to do what we should?” (VyV 2020).

By reflecting on the encounters of the disciples with Jesus in John 20, a project to crowdsource the composition of original songs was started in the early months of the pandemic. Two original songs, *Tú Vives* (You are alive) (AeC 2020a) and *Sopla tu aliento en mi* (Blow your breath on me) (AeC 2020d), were the network’s products of this challenge. In *Tú Vives*, using a modernized *gaita* rhythm from Zulia (Venezuela) state, a saddened Mary Magdalene returns to the tomb of Jesus. Her pain increases when she sees that the body of Jesus had disappeared. However, Jesus, calling her by name, reveals that he is alive. With a joyful heart she adores him and runs to announce the miracle to the other disciples. The song was intended to minister to the health workers caring for those suffering the complications of the viral infection, who were seeing so much death, but who were also meeting Jesus in many new ways. The song invites them to adore him, and to receive renewed strength to continue with their mission. *Sopla tu aliento en mi* enacts the breathing of Jesus on his disciples, sending them to fulfill the Great Commission (John 20:22–23). The song has an arrangement that mixes Venezuelan Caribbean rhythms of *gaita tamborera* (another musical genre of Zulia state) and *sanguero* (a drum-based rhythm from Aragua state in the central coast). People located in different countries contributed with the lyrics, playing instruments, singing, and in producing the Youtube WMV. One of the singers, a professional musician working for a dance orchestra in Spain, was so struck by the song that he decided to collaborate. Among the contributors to both lyrics and music, were California Vineyard pastors, Daniel and Nicole Hernández, for whom the rhythmic proposal that resulted, invited the incorporation of body movements to give glory to the Lord, in a way that facilitates an encounter with God that is truly Latin American.

At some point on the evolution of AeC, the themes for composition shifted to intercessory/prophetic lyrics. Several songs were produced putting emphasis on a vision of the rebuilding of the country. One of them, *Gloria al Todopoderoso* (*Glory to the Almighty*)

(AeC 2021) has a melody that can be classified as an anthem due to its rhythm and style. It is a song that seeks to honor God and expresses gratefulness for the immense riches which he granted to Venezuela. This song has been well received among Venezuelan Christians, especially in diasporic communities. Ronald Sifontes, who wrote and produced the contemporary anthem, says:

For several months I had the phrases *Gloria al Todopoderoso* (glory to the Almighty) and *tierra de gracia y paz*<sup>5</sup> (land of grace and peace), but it was not until September (2020), when I was able to finish composing the song. The song declares gratitude for all the goodness that God has given us, like the beautiful geography and richness of our land, and the beauty of our big-hearted people. The stanzas are a compendium of statements of faith that describe the Venezuela we want to enjoy and see prosper. The music has that traditional air of a hymn, with melodic intervals that evoke hope, joy, strength, and peace. (Entrecristianos 2021)

The entire AeC network, and many more people who were recruited, participated with their voices, giving a choral sound, filled with energy, enthusiasm, and conviction. The song has been featured in many radio stations in state capitals and small towns all over the country, and it is played after the governmentally mandated Venezuelan anthem, *Gloria al bravo pueblo*, at designated times during the day. It has also been featured in recent *Marchas para Jesus* (March for Jesus) in several cities across Venezuela. According to musicologist Wershin Montiel (Montiel 2021), its success is mainly due to its melodic line and harmonic cycle which is simple to “linger” in the mind of the believers, although he finds the arrangement not so attractive to younger generations of believers. Some pastors from different parts of the country refer to a certain “atmosphere of grace” that the song creates, or of “the deep desire to see the nation restored and free from all oppressive yoke” declared by the lyrics, or even consider it as the “new national anthem”. In this regard, a well-known Pentecostal prophet from the Venezuelan Evangelical diaspora, envisions through the song the ideal of a new nation, of a country restored and rebuilt, with the just governance of God over the nation so that the chains of oppression are broken, yokes fall, and truth and light reign:

This anthem was born from the heart of God. It expresses what many of us have believed through prophetic words. God is going to give us a new homeland. The old Venezuela is going to die to give rise to a new Venezuela. This is a proposal for an anthem for a new nation. In this hymn the glory is given to the God of heaven for being the creator and liberator of the new Venezuela. (Jose Hernandez, *Gethsemane Missionary Church, Elkhart-Indiana, IN, USA*)

In a similar fashion, the most popular of the AeC songs in Youtube, *Sana a Venezuela* (*Heal Venezuela*) (AeC 2020b), evokes the text of 2 Chronicles 7:14 and contextualizes its message to the situation of Venezuela with an oppressive regime and in a pandemic situation. The song is reminiscent of African American spirituals and some Psalms crying out to God in the midst of need and oppression. With a more Caribbean ballad rhythm, the center of the message focuses on the importance of turning to God with repentance about the mistakes made by earlier generations of Venezuelans, and to wait for God’s intervention. This is also aligned with the widespread spiritual warfare teaching of *identificational repentance* (Holvast 2009). In this teaching, national collective iniquities give power to the forces of evil to dominate a territory or a nation, causing poverty, sickness, death, disasters, social disarray, which can be transmitted from one generation to the next. By identifying and confessing these collective sins, especially idolatry and immorality, current and future generations can be released of the consequences of the sin of their ancestors and from the demonic strongholds. Taking a more critical stance, Wershin Montiel points out that despite the beauty of the song, it promotes passivity among Christians because it transmits the belief that “only God can” deliver the country from a social disaster where the forces of evil had taken root, without other actions besides prayer and intercession (Montiel 2021).

## 5. Discussion

To conclude this paper, we revisit Heidi Campbell's framework introduced before (Campbell 2005), to analyze how AeC members perceive God's work in and through social networks, messaging applications, and the web in general (Sheldon and Campbell 2021). The main points of this framework are developed in relation to AeC as follows:

- (1) *AeC was formed as a spiritual network* that sought to facilitate religious experience among Venezuelan Evangelical diasporic communities spread all over the world. The network was started once the lockdowns were initiated in most countries in the Americas. Over 50% of all AeC members belong to the Venezuelan Evangelical diaspora spread chiefly in South America, with additional members in the USA, Canada, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Spain. Besides, the musical aspect of the network, it serves as connection space where prayer support is provided, devotionals prepared by the members are shared, and religious news are distributed. For example, it was interesting to see how AeC was invited to lead 24/7 warfare worship sessions as part of the national intercessory prayer movement during the week of 24 June of 2021, when several popular animist religious groups had been convened to do a commemorative ritual. AeC members viewed their network's participation as inspired by God.
- (2) *AeC became a sacramental space for worship musicking*. Members of the network believed that God could be found in the possibility of interaction, the gracious listening of each other, the anointing to compose, and in how God touched those that watched their youtube WMV's or listened their recordings in WhatsApp. The pandemic provided an environment for co-writing worship music and lyrics where the usual pressures of offering a congregational worship set every Sunday, or the desire to please the Christian musical industry, were not present or at least were attenuated. As Dave Thornton has said, "creative collaboration is clearly most fertile in open environments of both benevolent honesty and goodwill" (Thornton 2021). AeC became a liminal *communitas* of vulnerable creative people who were not thinking on their own success and benefits, but who felt the need to contribute to the wellbeing of Venezuelan Christians wherever they may be.
- (3) *AeC served to spread ideological and theological principles*, as well as religious practices. The desire of seeing God's intervention in the situation of Venezuela as a broken nation was present in almost all the compositions done by AeC. A *soft dominion theology* (Heuser 2021) is found in some of the songs, which comes from the widespread influence of the New Apostolic Reformation in the churches of the region, to which several of the members of AeC belong to. However, many times the common dichotomy between premillennial or postmillennial thought is present. Some songs describe a future where Venezuela is seen as a healed nation by God, where the kingdom of God can be realized. Others demonstrate a more escapist attitude of waiting passively for the rapture. Only the song *Sopla tu aliento en mi* calls for a more proactive missional impulse. None of the songs make explicit declarations on behalf of the poor, marginalized, or to denounce the injustice of Venezuelan society. The definition of sin and the appeal to purity, as understood by Evangelicals in Latin America, are also present in some of the compositions.
- (4) *AeC successfully demonstrated the use of social media and technology to affirm and strengthen religious identity and community*. By the response of the Venezuelan diaspora to the songs it is possible to see that AeC came at a moment of great need due to the pandemic, but it also demonstrated that Venezuelan Evangelical migrants needed some reference to their faith from the homeland. Many of the members of AeC view this experience as a blessing of God confirmed by prophecy, but also as a miracle, if the extraordinary economic and technical limitations of Venezuelan society are taken into consideration. As a result, those congregated in the AeC network considered themselves as digital missionaries and worshippers for whom the Internet became a vehicle for God's work and mission.

We have attempted in this article to document how the network AeC emerged from the liminal state created by the pandemic, becoming a *communitas* seeking to contribute to churches and believers in a time of national and international struggle, disarray, and pain. The aim was to research AeC as unique case study in order to contribute to the fields of diaspora studies and religion, digital religion, new religious expressions, and lived religion during the pandemic. From this research several directions for more theoretical work can be identified such as the areas of Latin American contemporary worship music, the understanding of the sacramentality of digital worship, and the formation of new religious networks among migrants in Latin America, considering the current waves of Venezuelan, Cubans, Haitians, and Central Americans that traverse the continent in search of a “promise land” where they can flourish and fructify.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Versions from Australia, Burma, Chile, Canada, France, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Lebanon, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mexico, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Romania, Spain, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, Vietnam, Zimbabwe, and an ensemble from Arab-speaking countries in the Middle East, North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt, and South Sudan.
- <sup>2</sup> The designation *evangélicos* in Latin America encompass all Protestant expressions of Christianity. However, according to the cited PRC study, and many others, the majority of *evangélicos* are Pentecostal or Charismatic, although the latter term tends not to be used in order not to confuse with Catholic Charismatic Renewal. In this article, we use Evangelical in the Latin American sense, and, in most cases, we will be referring to Pentecostal Evangelicals.
- <sup>3</sup> The author analyzed 26 songs from different artists and countries, all of them Latin American. The sample included well know artists such as Jorge Drexler, Juanes, Maná, Calle 13, Ricardo Arjona, Molotov, and Daddy Yankee, and different styles such as cumbia, reggaeton, reggae, pop, hip-hop, rap, rock, and trova.
- <sup>4</sup> Anecdotically speaking, to have better coverage for uploading or downloading music and videos, Ronald had to go out of his apartment searching for better signal power. In one of those instances, he got his cell phone stolen by a couple of armed gang members.
- <sup>5</sup> It is important to remember that the first name of Venezuela, when Columbus hit the coast in his third trip to the Indies, was *Tierra de Gracia*. Later on, when the expedition reached Maracaibo Lake and saw the houses on the water, Americo Vesputio, called that Veznezuela which means “little Venice”. That was the name that the Spanish crown ended up giving to the new possession.

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