

Conference on Contemporary Praise & Worship:

Interdisciplinarity, Industrialization, and Imagination



July 28–29, 2026 | Belmont University | Nashville, Tennessee



**BELMONT
UNIVERSITY**

WLR
WORSHIPLEADERRESEARCH.COM



CREATIVE ARTS COLLECTIVE
FOR CHRISTIAN LIFE & FAITH



CALVIN INSTITUTE OF
CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

Conference Logistics

The conference will run from approximately 1:30pm July 28 through the evening on July 29. We recommend you book two nights, arriving the morning of the 28th and leaving on the 30th.

Location: Belmont University, 1501 Wedgewood Ave, Nashville, TN 37212, Janet Ayers Academic Center

Parking: Free parking is available in the Janet Ayers Academic Center garage (below ground)

Hotels: There are MANY hotels in Nashville, here are a few particularly close to campus. There are no group rates available for the conference. (Listed in order of proximity)

- The Moxy Hotel
 - Price: ~\$125 avg/night
 - Location: 1911 Belcourt Avenue, Nashville, Tennessee 37212 USA (approximately 0.5 miles from campus)
 - Reservations: <https://www.marriott.com/en-us/hotels/bnaov-moxy-nashville-vanderbilt-area/overview/>
- Scarritt-Bennett Center
 - Price: starting at \$109 plus fees [multiple accommodation types including shared bathroom].
 - Location: 1027 18th Ave S, Nashville TN (approximately 1 mile from campus)
 - Reservations: <https://scarrittbennett.org/lodging/>; call 615.340.7469 to speak with a Guest Services staff member for reservations.
- Hampton Inn Nashville/Vanderbilt
 - Price: ~\$200 avg/night
 - Location: 1919 West End Avenue, Nashville, Tennessee, 37203, USA
 - Reservations: [Hampton Inn Nashville/Vanderbilt](#)

Campus Map



NUMERICAL LISTING

- Fidelity Hall
- Freeman Hall
- Belmont Mansion
- Rogers Center
- Inman Center (P)
- McWhorter Hall (P)
- The Lawn
- Ayers Academic Center (P)
- Thomas F. Frist, Jr. College of Medicine (P)
- The UPS Store at Belmont
- Little Bruins Preschool
- Belmont Ministry Center
- Hewlett Hall
- Thrallkill Garage (P)
- Russell Hall
- Thrallkill Hall
- Hillside
- Benz Hall
- Dickens Hall (P)
- Horrell Hall (P)
- Guitar House, 1508 Compton
- Enactus, 1512 Compton
- Crockett Center for Athletic Excellence
- Facilities Management Services
- Belmont Commons
- South Garage/Tennis Facility (P)
- Dynamo Room
- Department of Sport Science
- McAfee Concert Hall
- Belmont Heights
- Trout/Black Box Theater Complex
- The Fisher Center for the Performing Arts
- Curb Event Center
- Curb Garage (P)
- Beaman Student Life Center
- Bell Tower
- West Amphitheatre
- Galhart Student Center
- O'More College Annex
- Leu Center for the Visual Arts
- Hitch Building
- Massey Performing Arts Center
- Bunch Library
- Gallery of Iconic Guitars (GIG)
- Leu Art Gallery
- Hart Studio Museum
- Wilson Music Building
- Heron Hall
- Patton Hall
- Pembroke Hall
- Potter Hall
- Hall House
- Potter Hall
- Fouth Alumni House
- Baskin Center (P)
- Massey Center
- Admissions - Welcome Center
- The BruinsShop
- Johnson Center (P)
- Harrington Place Dining (dining)
- Maddox Hall
- Kennedy Hall
- Wright Hall
- Wright Hall

ALPHABETICAL LISTING

- Admissions - Welcome Center
- Ayers Academic Center (P)
- Baskin Center (P)
- Beaman Student Life Center
- Bear House
- Bell Tower
- Belmont Commons
- Belmont Heights
- Belmont Mansion
- Belmont Ministry Center
- Benz Hall
- The BruinsShop
- Bunch Library
- Crockett Center for Athletic Excellence
- Curb Event Center
- Curb Garage (P)
- Dickens Hall (P)
- Dynamo Room
- Enactus, 1512 Compton
- Facilities Management Services
- Fidelity Hall
- The Fisher Center for the Performing Arts
- Fouth Alumni House
- Freeman Hall
- Galhart Student Center
- Gallery of Iconic Guitars (GIG)
- Guitar House, 1508 Compton
- Hall House
- Harrington Place Dining (dining)
- Hart Studio Museum
- Heron Hall
- Hewlett Hall
- Hillside
- Hitch Building
- Horrell Hall (P)
- Inman Center (P)
- Johnson Center (P)
- Kennedy Hall
- The Lawn
- Leu Art Gallery
- Leu Center for the Visual Arts
- Little Bruins Preschool
- Maddox Hall
- Massey Center
- Massey Performing Arts Center
- McAfee Concert Hall
- McWhorter Hall (P)
- O'More College Annex
- Patton Hall
- Pembroke Hall
- Potter Hall
- Rogers Center
- Russell Hall
- South Garage/Tennis Facility (P)
- Sport Science, Department of
- Thomas F. Frist, Jr. College of Medicine (P)
- Thrallkill Garage (P)
- Trout/Black Box Theater Complex
- The UPS Store at Belmont
- Maddox Hall
- Wilson Music Building
- Wiseman Hall
- Wright Hall

(P) Parking Garages

Campus Security 615.460.6617
University Operator 615.460.6000



*Johnson Garage: Visitor Parking on levels P1 & P2 on Jack C. Massey side
For a comprehensive, searchable campus map that includes all dining, retail and University department locations, please visit map.belmont.edu.

Logistics

The conference will take place in the Ayers Academic Center (8). Free parking is available in a below ground lot.

Conference Overview

Tuesday, July 28

- 1:30–2:30 pm | Registration and Refreshments
- 2:30–2:45 | Welcome
- 2:45–3:45 | Industry Reps Roundtable and Q&A
- 3:45–4:00 | Break
- 4:00–5:30 | Concurrent Paper Session 1
- 5:30–6:45 | Dinner (catered, on campus)
- 7:00–8:30 | Keynote: Kelsey Kramer McGinnis

Wednesday, July 29

- 8:30–9:00 am | Coffee and Pastries
- 9:00–10:30 | Concurrent Paper Session 2
- 10:30–10:45 | Break
- 10:45–12:15 pm | Keynote: Melanie Ross
- 12:15–1:30 | Lunch
- 1:30–2:30 | Concurrent Paper Session 3
- 2:30–2:45 | Coffee Break
- 2:45–4:15 | Concurrent Paper Session 4
- 4:15–4:30 | Break
- 4:30–5:30 | Collaboration Session
- 5:30–8:30 | Bussing and Dinner at the Museum of Christian and Gospel Music

Tuesday, July 28 Schedule*

1:30–2:30 pm | Registration and Refreshments

2:30–2:45 | Welcome

2:45–3:45 | Industry Reps Roundtable and Q&A

3:45–4:00 | Break

4:00–5:30 | Concurrent Paper Session 1

Breakout A: Complicating Common Frameworks

"Seeking Ethical Worship: Common Hymnal and Alternative Worship Music Models" by Peter Miles

"Complicating Confluence in the History of Contemporary Praise & Worship: A Case Study from the International House of Prayer in Kansas City" by Jonathan Ottaway

"From Sacrament to Musicking: Contemporary Praise and Worship as Aesthetic Mediation of Presence" by Emily Snider Andrews

Breakout B: Lessons from Close Listening

"Synth Pad as Interface in CWM" by Abigail Byrd Glidewell

"Gungor's Vocal Distortion: Pushing the Limits of CWM's Cover Culture" by Dylan Crosson

"Grouping, Meter, and Meaning in His Mercy Is More: The Hymns of Matt Boswell and Matt Papa" by Samantha M. Inman

5:30–6:45 | Dinner (catered, on campus)

7:00–8:30 | Keynote: Kelsey Kramer McGinnis

"Collaborating on the First Draft of Worship Music History: Why Journalists Need Scholars and Scholars Need Journalists"

Tuesday, July 28

Wednesday, July 29 Schedule*

8:30–9:00 am | Coffee and Pastries

9:00–10:30 | Concurrent Paper Session 2

Breakout A: Case Studies in CPWM

"Praise, Protest, and the Presence of God: South African Pentecostal Worship and Friends First as an Archetype of Liturgical Resistance" by Travis Gandy

"Bring the Choir Back: The Reappearance of the Black Gospel Choir in Popular Media" by Sylvia D. Jones

"BRockin' for Jesus: Transnationality, Cosmopolitanism, and Counterculturality in Brazilian Christian Rock" by Marcell Silva Steuernagel and Fernando Berwig

Breakout B: Commodity and Nostalgia in CPWM

"'An Oldie But a Goodie': Throwbacks, the Church, and the Industry" by Shannan Baker

"The Riches of Worship, or How Everything Became Commodity and Commodity Became Everything" by Joshua Kalin Busman

"Do It Again: Tracing Nostalgia in Recent Contemporary Praise and Worship Music" by Hilary Ritchie

Wednesday, July 29

10:30–10:45 | Break

10:45–12:15 pm | Keynote: Melanie Ross

"Everything New Is Old Again: Worship Music, Commerce, and the Church in Historical Perspective"

12:15–1:30 | Lunch

1:30–2:30 | Concurrent Paper Session 3

Breakout A: Communal Negotiations of Evolving Practices

"Advice for 'Will/ow': Insights from the Young People and Christian Worship Study" by Nelson Cowan

"Hands Raised and Voices Lifted: Embodied Participation in Contemporary Praise and Worship" by Seonghyun Park

Breakout B: Contemporary Worship and

"From 'Soulmusic' to 'Sournotes': Evangelical Cultural Negotiation Through the Musical Discourse of Christianity Today" by Bruce Benedict

"Christian Camp Rock: Forming Servants, not Rockstars" by Ellie Grace Lashier

2:30–2:45 | Coffee Break

2:45–4:15 | Concurrent Paper Session 4

Breakout A: Evaluative Frameworks for Worship Music

"Dialectic Dynamics: How Worship Musicians Traverse the Dialectic of the Contemplative and the Charismatic in Gospel and Contemporary Worship" by Jayden Anderson

"Beyond Theme Tags: A Speech Act Taxonomy for Congregational Song" by Lawrence Chen

"Sing, Sing, Sing: Examining the Psalms and Contemporary Worship Music's Lyrical Usage of the Word 'Sing'" by John P. Chilcote

Breakout B: Contemporary Worship and Placemaking

"'Listening' Modernity: Timbre, Musicolonality, and Contemporary Praise and Worship Music" by Fernando Berwig

"Welcome Home to Nowhere: Non-Place Worship, the Interchangeable Room, and the Portable Liturgies of Contemporary Worship" by Brad Campbell

"Global Songs, Local Spaces: Contemporary Worship Songs as Tools for Placemaking" by David (Caleb) Castro

4:15–4:30 | Break

4:30–5:30 | Collaboration Session

5:30–8:30 | Bussing and Dinner at the Museum of Christian and Gospel Music

Keynote Speakers

Kelsey Kramer McGinnis

Christianity Today, Lecturer at Grand View University



Collaborating on the First Draft of Worship Music History: Why Journalists Need Scholars and Scholars Need Journalists

Most reporters are familiar with the cliché, “journalism is the first draft of history.” When it’s done well, journalism provides a clear, fact-based record of events as close to when they happened as possible. But journalists need scholars. This is true in every reporting beat—including worship practices and music.

Without the slow, interpretative, archival work of worship scholars, reporting on worship practices can so easily become public relations, armchair theology, or storytelling with missing context. Journalists need scholars, and not just as potential sources to call for a quote.

Scholars also need journalists and the institutions that help verify facts and uphold editorial ethics and standards. Journalists can get artists, leaders, and executives on record. When we do our jobs, we can provide the details that become the foundation for deeper analysis.

The pace of change in the contemporary worship music industry is fast and getting faster. We need each other if we are going to document its history with accuracy and depth.”

Kelsey Kramer McGinnis is a writer, journalist, and musicologist based in central Iowa. She holds a PhD from the University of Iowa. Kelsey is the worship correspondent at *Christianity Today*, where she writes and reports on worship practices and trends, the music industry, and church culture. As a regular contributor to *Christianity Today*’s culture section, Kelsey contributes opinion pieces that comment on Christian media and evangelical culture more broadly. She is also a lecturer at Grand View University in Des Moines, where she teaches music, theology, and humanities courses. She is the co-author of *The Myth of Good Christian Parenting: How False Promises Failed a Generation of Evangelicals* (Brazos press, October 2025). Her second book with Brazos Press (forthcoming, spring 2027) will explore the ways the diet and wellness industry mobilizes the language of faith to reach Christian women.

Melanie Ross

Associate Professor of Liturgical Studies, Yale Divinity School & Yale Institute of Sacred Music



Everything New Is Old Again: Worship Music, Commerce, and the Church in Historical Perspective

Contemporary Praise & Worship is often understood as a recent phenomenon, yet many of its defining questions—commercialization, popular styles, technological mediation, theological formation, ecclesial authority—have a much longer history. This keynote examines the development of the worship music industry from the 1930s through the 1960s, when publishers, broadcasters, recording companies, and church musicians helped create new networks for the production, circulation, and reception of congregational song. By situating contemporary worship within this broader historical context, the presentation highlights enduring tensions

surrounding worship, media, commerce, and ministry, while encouraging greater understanding across scholarly, ecclesial, and industry contexts.

Melanie Ross works at the intersection of ecumenical liturgical theology, North American evangelicalism, and the worship practices of contemporary congregations. Her first book, *Evangelical vs. Liturgical? Defying a Dichotomy* (2014) brings together historical analysis, systematic theology, and congregational fieldwork to argue that the common ground shared by evangelical and liturgical churches is much more important than the differences than divide them. Her second book, *Evangelical Worship: An American Mosaic* (2021) draws on extensive fieldwork in seven congregations to show how evangelical identity is formed through corporate worship practices.

A Henry Luce III Fellow in Theology, Ross has also received research grants from the Louisville Institute and the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship. Ross has written numerous chapters in edited volumes, and her work has been published in journals such as *Worship*, *Studia Liturgica*, and *Pro Ecclesia*, among others. She coedited, with Simon Jones, *The Serious Business of Worship: Essays in Honour of Bryan D. Spinks* (2012) and is coeditor of the *Worship Foundations* series (Baker Academic). Her greatest academic achievements are the successes of her current and former students.

Complicating Common Frameworks

Tuesday, July 28, 4:00–5:30

Seeking Ethical Worship: Common Hymnal and Alternative Worship Music Models

Peter Miles, student at Yale Divinity School

While contemporary worship music (CWM) is a cherished part of lived Christian faith for many, the CWM industry has come under scrutinization due to its culture of stardom, highly produced musical sound, and significant financial revenue that is managed by select organizations (Du Plessis "The Priesthood of Believers," *commonhymnal.com*, Ross *Evangelical Worship: An American Mosaic*, p. 96, Worship Leader Research, "Following the Worship Money"). This paper critically analyzes trends within the CWM industry and explores the organization Common Hymnal as a case study in "alternative" worship music models. Using William Barber and Jonathan Wilson Hartgrove's moral framework model, I critique Common Hymnal's work in three parts: moral analysis, moral articulation, and moral agenda (Barber and Wilson-Hartgrove "Appendix For Organizers" in *The Third Reconstruction*). I make a moral analysis of Common Hymnal's mission, asking: In what ways does Common Hymnal's music support or inhibit the flourishing of communities? Second, I make a moral articulation, addressing the specific ways that Common Hymnal can alter their narrative in order to better create a moral worship music culture. Lastly, I describe a moral agenda based on the work of Common Hymnal and offer suggestions for how the organization can continue to create worship music that is life-giving and drawing people closer to God. This paper ultimately contributes to conversations about the ethics of the CWM industry and discusses new ways of creating worship music that serve the church thoughtfully and faithfully in the current moment.

Complicating Confluence in the History of Contemporary Praise & Worship: A Case Study from the International House of Prayer in Kansas City

Jonathan Ottaway, Regent University

In *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship*, Ruth and Lim narrated the historiographical development of Contemporary Praise and Worship (CPW) through an analogy of two streams that formed a confluence in the 1990s. The first stream was the Praise & Worship movement, a Pentecostal movement whose core liturgical foundation was shaped by their understanding of God's inhabitation of praise. The second was the "Contemporary Worship" stream, an evangelistically and pragmatically-oriented development in evangelical and Mainline Christianity. While initially marginal, both streams grew in scope and have, through their confluence formed "the new liturgical normal." Ruth and Lim's narrative has provided a critical revision to the Jesus People-centered historiography that had dominated musicological studies of CPW (for a critique, see Perez, "All Hail King Jesus"). This paper will argue that although Ruth and Lim are broadly correct in their historical revisionism, their treatment of the period of confluence failed to sufficiently reckon with significant exceptions and divergences to their narrative. One significant exception is the International House of Prayer Kansas City (IHOPKC). Although IHOPKC was founded in the confluence period (1999) in order to practice a newly-

devised liturgical format of Harp and Bowl worship, the hermeneutical and theological underpinning for IHOPKC's worship had already taken shape in the pre-confluence Praise & Worship movement. Ultimately, this case study cautions against an overly-hegemonic understanding of the confluence that occurred in the formation of CPW. New liturgical streams and old continued to flow together in unpredictable ways.

From Sacrament to Musicking: Contemporary Praise and Worship as Aesthetic Mediation of Presence

Emily Snider Andrews, Samford University

Contemporary praise and worship (CPW) has become one of the most influential ritual forms within Evangelical Protestantism, yet it is still often interpreted through sacramental lenses shaped by other liturgical traditions. This paper argues that such frameworks do not always adequately describe how divine presence is mediated, perceived, and named in music-centered CPW. Rather than assuming that CPW must be measured against a premodern or Liturgical Movement framework, as is often the case in sacramental retrieval discourse, I propose reading it through Lieven Boeve's postmodern sacramental theology. Boeve's account is useful because it reframes sacrament not as a static location or practice of divine presence, but as a communally nourished, aesthetically mediated event of interruption. In his work, transcendence and immanence, objectivity and subjectivity, ritual tradition and lived experience are not treated as opposites, but as interwoven dimensions of how grace is encountered within concrete practices and narratives. This provides a productive analytic grammar for describing CPW, where song, affective intensification, embodied participation, and shared interpretive scripts often render divine presence experientially credible for participants. Drawing on this, I argue that CPW should be taken seriously as a ritual ecology in which music functions not merely as accompaniment or expression, but as a medium through which worshipers interpret themselves as encountering God. Such an account does not resolve every sacramental-theological question surrounding CPW, but it does offer a more fitting way to describe why these practices function for many communities as meaningful sites of divine encounter, transformation, and communal formation.

Lessons from Close Listening

Tuesday, July 28, 4:00–5:30

Synth Pad as Interface in CWM

Abigail Byrd Glidewell, Indiana University

Christian Worship Music (CWM) is one of the fastest-growing genres in the United States, and is marked by a distinct sound that affectively moves worshippers in their public and private relationship with God. Although published accounts of CWM rarely mention it, no timbre is as central to the sound of CWM as the "pad" (short for synth pad), a synthesized drone on a tonic note or chord that continues throughout an entire song, and often lingering before and after. "Pads" are not played by

instrumentalists, but are tracks activated by a click of a button on a synthesizer, phone application, or guitar pedal. The “pad” and its washy, major mode ambient textures are present in almost all of the top songs in the genre from the past fifteen years. In spite of its timbral centrality to CWM, the “pad” has received little to no scholarly attention; it was omitted from the 2025 special issue of the *Yale Journal of Music & Religion* titled “The Power of Timbre in Religion.” Drawing on frameworks from critical organology (Dolan 2012, Moseley 2016), I argue that while the “pad” is less than an instrument and more than merely a timbre, it is best understood as an interface by which people engage with the practice and genre of CWM. Like the keyboard, I argue the form and shape of the “pad” as a technology has shaped the development of style, musical practice, and experience within this genre. I also argue the “pad” influences pedagogy, theology, and the textures, instrumentation, and formal trajectory the genre is known for. Because of the slipperiness inherent to timbre, especially one so difficult to hear and not connected to the gesture of a musician, its influence goes mostly unnoticed. Drawing from Joshua Busman’s work on worship resource commodities, Worship Leader Research’s work on the megachurch networks, and ethnographic interviews, my work attempts to grasp the full impact of the “pad” on worship practices today. Analysis of repertoire, performances, and mixing interfaces position the “pad” at an exciting juncture of sound studies, space, affect, timbre, religion, and technology in popular music.

Gungor’s Vocal Distortion: Pushing the Limits of CWM’s Cover Culture

Dylan Crosson, Purdue University

Despite its record sales lagging behind those of established CWM artists in 2010, arguably no album shook up the contemporary worship world that year more than *Beautiful Things* (2010) by the newly formed collective Gungor. Whether the result of its broad instrumentation, wide stylistic palette, or periodic displays of virtuosity, *Beautiful Things* resonated with CWM fans. Naturally, fan-made covers and performances—mostly in the context of corporate worship—followed. Yet in this deluge of covers that eagerly replicated many sonic components of *Beautiful Things* such as drum fills, guitar tones, vocal inflections, and fingerpicking patterns, one noteworthy sound engineering technique failed to make the transition: vocal distortion. Despite the prevalent role that vocal distortion plays throughout the album, it is absent in covers. This paper aims to theorize reasons for this exclusion. To do so, I first summarize the nature of the vocal distortion employed throughout *Beautiful Things* while highlighting its programmatic role in the album. Then I demonstrate its absence in covers recorded both in private and corporate worship settings. This paper concludes with possible explanations as to why Gungor’s vocal distortion failed to “catch on” in covers or establish itself as an available timbre in CWM practice. As a result, this paper offers a better understanding of how musical style and meaning are mediated in CWM’s “cover culture,” thus adding to pre-existing literature on the social mediation of timbral meaning in CWM (Busman and Myrick 2025) and the tripartite relationship between timbre, technology, and the sacred (Provenzano 2025).

Grouping, Meter, and Meaning in His Mercy Is More: The Hymns of Matt Boswell and Matt Papa

Samantha M. Inman, Stephen F. Austin State University

The 2019 album *His Mercy Is More: The Hymns of Matt Boswell and Matt Papa* employs a wide range of rhythmic devices across its thirteen tracks. As with much contemporary worship music (CWM), some passages on this album are rhythmically unremarkable, featuring four-bar phrases, familiar meters, and quadruple hypermeter. However, other passages depart from this baseline in grouping, meter, or both. This project applies tools originally developed for Western art music to identify rhythmic patterns in this contemporary album. Specifically, this study demonstrates how Boswell and Papa employ five rhythmic techniques in varying combinations across this album. Phrase overlap, phrase expansion, and hypermetric reinterpretation abound, particularly at the start of instrumental interludes. Metric reinterpretation features on more than two-thirds of the tracks, often highlighting the title and core idea of the song. Three tracks use meter to differentiate verse from chorus, expressively aligning with contrasts in the text. Grouping and meter contribute to both style and meaning in this album by Boswell and Papa. Analysis of individual songs uncovers how these devices align with the message of the text. Comparing tracks uncovers patterns in how and where the rhythmic techniques most often combine in relation to form. Awareness of these patterns enriches hearing of this album and suggests applications when composing songs of a similar style. Overall, this presentation demonstrates the expressive impact of grouping and meter in songs by Boswell and Papa, analyzing one album by two prominent artists and documenting rhythmic strategies available in CWM more broadly.

Case Studies in CWM

Wednesday, July 29, 9:00–10:30

Praise, Protest, and the Presence of God: South African Pentecostal Worship and Friends First as an Archetype of Liturgical Resistance

Travis Gandy, Independent Scholar

This essay examines the emergence of Pentecostal–Charismatic praise and worship in South Africa during the 1980s and early 1990s as a distinctive form of liturgical resistance under apartheid. While scholarship on resistance in South Africa has largely emphasized political activism and ecumenical protest movements, this study argues that worship itself functioned as a powerful mode of confrontation with oppressive structures. Drawing on Restorationist theology rooted in the Latter Rain movement—particularly the typological interpretation of the Tabernacle of David—Pentecostal worship leaders understood praise as a site of divine encounter, prophetic witness, and spiritual confrontation with the “powers.” In this framework, worship was not merely expressive but formative, shaping communities whose primary allegiance was

to the reign of God rather than to racial or political identities. The essay situates South African praise and worship within the broader global development of contemporary worship theology while highlighting its unique contextual significance within the apartheid system. Particular attention is given to Rhema Bible Church in Johannesburg and the training of worship leaders who practiced what might be described as “liturgical noncompliance” by fostering multiracial worship communities in defiance of segregation laws. The study then focuses on the multiracial worship collective Friends First and the leadership of Malcolm du Plessis, whose concept of “Praise and Protest” articulated a theology in which worship itself became a prophetic act of resistance and reconciliation. By examining the integration of indigenous musical forms, multiracial leadership, and Pentecostal spirituality, this essay proposes praise and protest as an archetype of worship that confronts injustice without capitulating to partisan ideology or nationalist theology.

Bring the Choir Back: The Reappearance of the Black Gospel Choir in Popular Media

Sylvia D. Jones, doctoral candidate at Baylor University

In recent years, many church musicians have lamented the disappearance of choirs from churches and mainstream Christian music. While the gospel choir remains an icon of Black American worship, Black gospel choirs are no exception to this narrative of decline. A variety of factors have contributed to the dwindling participation and visibility of gospel choirs, including the emergence of the Praise and Worship music genre, the “Worship Wars” within Black church contexts, and the COVID-19 pandemic’s disruption of congregational life. Although attendance in many U.S. congregations has since rebounded, the call to “bring the choir back” persists. This paper explores where the choir “went,” arguing that though it has disappeared from many local churches, it has reappeared in secular mainstream media. Using mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative), I analyze the appearance and reception of the Black Gospel Choir and its aesthetic in secular mainstream media from 2014 to 2023 through general media reception. This scope will encompass Nick Jonas’ gospel version of “Jealous” (2014), the Sunday Service Choir’s collaboration with Kanye West (2019), and the emergence of Maverick City Music (2019–2023). These musical examples will demonstrate that calls to “bring the choir back” point to broader struggles within Black worship and the Christian music industry over who gets to lead, who gets to participate, and what counts as a “gospel choir” in an era of streaming platforms and crossover stages. By tracing the gospel choir’s movement between sanctuary and stage, I argue that its perceived disappearance and strategic reappearance can contribute to broader debates on World Christianity in boundary-making and the fragile possibilities of conviviality in increasingly diverse publics.

Abstracts

BRockin’ for Jesus: Transnationality, Cosmopolitanism, and Counterculturality in Brazilian Christian Rock

Marcell Silva Steuernagel and Fernando Berwig, Southern Methodist University

The rise of Brazil’s modern rock scene (also known as BRock) is well-documented in scholarship (De Ulhôa 2004; Idelber and Dunn 2011; Alexandre 2017). What remains underexamined, particularly in English-language bibliography, is the birth and proliferation of Brazilian Christian rock. Following the transnational spread of North

American rock music throughout the Americas in the wake of World War II, Brazil developed its own rock scene starting in the late 1950s. In the decades that followed, and replicating the formula of the North American Contemporary Praise and Worship Music (CPWM) industry, Brazilian Christians began experimenting with their own mixtures of rock music and Christian message. Using phonographic and bibliographical sources, paired with ethnographic tools and oral history, this paper examines the work of three of Brazil's foundational Christian rock bands: Oficina G3, Resgate, and Fruto Sagrado. Hailing from the phonographic Mecca of Brazil's Rio de Janeiro-São Paulo axis in the late 1980s, these three bands present a microcosm of the development and reception of Christian BRock to the English-language scholarly community interested in the CPWM phenomenon in its global expressions. It therefore contributes to how scholars understand the rise, diffusion, and reception of CPWM transnationally, as well as its impacts and consequences in contexts across the Global South.

Commodity and Nostalgia in CWM

Wednesday, July 29, 9:00–10:30

"An Oldie But a Goodie": Throwbacks, the Church, and the Industry

Shannan Baker, Baylor University

In the church, the phrase "an oldie but a goodie" is frequently used to describe when an older song is used in worship. While this happens at the local level, YouTube videos of popular worship artists singing these songs in worship have accumulated millions of views. Kelsey Kramer McGinnis has described how the use and promotion of older songs may have a hidden industry component. Through the purchase of worship artist's back catalogues, the music industry has accumulated a financial interest in the use of artist's older songs. While money may guide the industry, what songs has the church considered worthy of singing for decades or more? This paper will identify what the church's "throwback songs" are using the CCLI Top 100. Throwback songs will be determined based on meeting either of two criteria: the song has been consecutively in the top 100 for at least 20 years or the song returned to the list after at least 20 years. After determining the church's classic throwback songs, the paper will conclude with a case study on a recent album of throwbacks, *House of Worship* (2026). The album was performed by mostly the original artists (e.g. Matt Redman) with newer artists (e.g. Charity Gayle). The paper will conclude by examining who was involved and the purpose for the album. Lastly, it will compare the songs selected for this album to the CCLI throwbacks list to discern whether these songs are truly the church's classics or what the artists/industry wanted to include.

The Riches of Worship, or How Everything Became Commodity and Commodity Became Everything

Joshua Kalin Busman, University of North Carolina at Pembroke

Much ink has been spilled over the first sentence of volume one of Karl Marx's *Capital*, which in the brilliant new translation from Paul Reitter reads: "The wealth of societies dominated by the capitalist mode of production appears in the form of an enormous accumulation of commodities" (Marx 2024). To begin his famously technical and exhaustive analysis of capitalism as a historical and dialectical system, Marx implores his readers to simply look around at the enormous piles of commodities that seem to surround them in the increasingly consumer-driven culture of the mid-nineteenth century. In this paper, I want to take Marx's invitation as an opportunity to reflect on contemporary practices of Christian worship. Why does the wealth of twenty-first-century worship—especially contemporary worship music—so frequently appear as an "enormous accumulation of commodities" bought and sold by churches and worship leaders? What can the commodity form help us to understand about the unique role that music plays in contemporary worship practice, and how could analyzing these musical commodities as commodities in the Marxian sense give us a deeper understanding of their function? To be clear, my point is not to simply call out or critique the inevitable grifters and charlatans who seek to enrich themselves at the expense of the church. Rather, I suggest that Marx's analysis of the capitalist mode of production might place the worship activities of faithful Christians in a richer context and provide essential tools to the scholars and practitioners whose labor sustains the church.

Do It Again: Tracing Nostalgia in Recent Contemporary Praise and Worship Music

Hilary Ritchie, Independent Scholar

As Contemporary Praise and Worship Music (CPW/CPWM) has developed, new demands have been placed on it both to be a vehicle of God's presence and to achieve popular commercial success. Scholars such as Andrew Mall and Anna Nekola point out that these two goals of Christian music—one spiritual and one commercial—are often perceived as being in conflict with one another. In this paper, I will explore how current CPW artists engage with the musical tradition of CPW to navigate the tension between the worship music industry and the spiritual intent of the music. Following Svetlana Boym's work on nostalgia, I argue that current CPWM engages in restorative nostalgia, which presents not as nostalgia, per se, but as "truth and tradition." By invoking the past through musical sampling and covers, recent CPW songs connect themselves to a nostalgic sense of the past in order to bridge the disconnect between the current worship industry and CPW's origins. This paper will use Phil Wickham's "What an Awesome God" (2025) and Passion's recording of "Agnus Dei" (2024) to demonstrate how nostalgia functions in recent CPWM. I argue that by covering or "mashing up" older songs from the CPW tradition with new recordings, current CPW artists leverage nostalgia to legitimize the authenticity and broad appeal of their music, despite the perceived discrepancy that comes with expectations of commercial success.

Communal Negotiations of Evolving Practices

Wednesday, July 29, 1:30–2:30

Advice for “Will/ow”: Insights from the Young People and Christian Worship Study

Nelson Cowan, Samford University

In late 2025, Worship Leader Research introduced “Will and Willow,” the composite profile of a contemporary worship leader in the United States. While Will/ow leads faithfully each week, they may or may not have time to hear the perspectives of younger worshipers whose values are deeply formed by their local worship traditions. This paper analyzes advice from young evangelical worshipers (mostly Gen Z and some Gen Alpha) given to their local Will/ow. Across 32 individual interviews and 7 focus groups with highly religious evangelical young people, we asked: “What advice would you give to your pastor or a worship leader?” This subset of data is rooted in the Young People and Christian Worship (YPCW) study, a mixed-methods, multisite, binational, and ecumenical research project that listens deeply to how teenagers and emerging adults (aged 13–29) experience public Christian worship (95 qualitative interviews, 25 focus groups representing approximately 215 participants, and participant observation at 45 worship services, alongside a 1,420-person national survey). Through inductive and deductive coding, this paper identifies key themes within this advice and puts them in conversation with project-wide analysis of the values of young people in Christian worship.

Hands Raised and Voices Lifted: Embodied Participation in Contemporary Praise and Worship

Seonghyun Park, PhD candidate at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

Contemporary praise and worship is frequently analyzed through the lenses of musical style, cultural production, or the global worship industry. While these approaches provide valuable insights, they often overlook a defining feature of contemporary worship gatherings: the embodied participation of the congregation. Practices such as raising hands, standing, kneeling, clapping, and singing collectively are ubiquitous in contemporary praise and worship services, yet their theological and liturgical significance has received comparatively limited attention. Scholars of contemporary worship have emphasized the communal and participatory nature of congregational singing (e.g., Ingalls (2018), Lemley (2021)). At the same time, recent work on ritual and liturgical formation has highlighted the role of bodily practices in shaping Christian identity and desire (Smith (2009), Taylor (2023)). These insights invite a closer examination of the physical actions that characterize contemporary praise and worship. Within this framework, this paper asks: Are such gestures merely spontaneous emotional expressions, or do they function as patterned responses within the dialogical structure of corporate worship? This paper argues that embodied participation functions as a liturgical response to the proclamation of God’s Word within contemporary praise and worship. Building upon David O. Taylor’s theological framework on the use of the body in corporate worship, which integrates both prescriptive and spontaneous uses of the body in corporate worship, the study focuses on two characteristic practices of contemporary worship—raised hands and

congregational singing. By interpreting these practices within the proclamation and response dynamic of Christian worship, the paper demonstrates how these embodied actions function as corporate responses to divine revelation. In doing so, the study proposes that contemporary praise and worship should be understood not merely as a musical style but as a participatory form of worship in which the congregation responds to God through embodied action.

Discourses of History

Wednesday, July 29, 1:30–2:30

From “Soulmusic” to “Sournotes”: Evangelical Cultural Negotiation Through the Musical Discourse of Christianity Today

Bruce Benedict, Hope College

From politics to aesthetics, from the boardroom to the funeral parlour, evangelicals continually narrate their cultural life through music—through the songs they celebrate, debate, and sometimes lament. Across the past six decades, *Christianity Today* has served as one of the most influential journalistic venues in which these musical conversations have unfolded. This paper seeks to map the mosaic of more than 400 articles, editorials, interviews, and obituaries published by *Christianity Today* that engage questions of music, worship, and the Christian music industry. Rather than treating these pieces merely as commentary on musical trends, the study reads them as a form of cultural narration within evangelicalism. Through reporting on worship practices, industry developments, aesthetic debates, and the lives of influential musicians, *Christianity Today* has repeatedly framed music as a key site where evangelicals negotiate theology, identity, and cultural engagement. Drawing on bibliographic mapping and thematic analysis, the paper identifies the major narrative arcs through which evangelical music has been interpreted: the rise of contemporary worship, tensions between commerce and ministry, generational conflicts over style, the global expansion of worship music, and the memorialization of artists and leaders through journalistic obituary. Particular attention is given to how these narratives function as forms of evangelical self-interpretation. By assembling and analyzing this extensive corpus, the project provides both a curated bibliography and a thematic map of how evangelical culture has been narrated through music in one of its most prominent publications. In doing so, the paper suggests that journalistic discourse about music offers a unique window into the evolving theological imagination and cultural self-understanding of modern evangelicalism.

Christian Camp Rock: Forming Servants, not Rockstars

Ellie Grace Lashier, student at Yale Divinity School

Every summer since 2007, thousands of teenagers have flocked to Nashville to “jam with the pros” of the contemporary praise and worship industry at Camp Electric. Founded by premier Christian artist TobyMac and culturally regarded as a “Christian Camp Rock,” Camp Electric offers students the opportunity to learn instrumental,

vocal, and production skills from industry artists and insiders. On a single advertising page, Camp Electric promotes both “concerts from the biggest names in Christian music” and the faith formation of “servants, not rockstars.” There is an inherent tension in the rhetoric presented here: a friction between celebrities and ministers, industry and mission, production and praise. While theological reflections on worship leading may emphasize humility and congregational singing, the sound of popular Christian music today is undeniably shaped by celebrity solo voices. I contend that Camp Electric represents a microcosm of how musicians in the contemporary praise and worship space navigate these tensions in industry and liturgy. This paper also explores the dynamic, co-constitutive relationship between the industries of Christian summer camps and contemporary praise and worship. Histories of American evangelicalism often trace the impact of the rise of youth culture on developments in worship format, from Explo '72 to youth-group culture. These histories can be enriched through sustained reflection on the role of youth summer camps in shaping both worship leaders and worship music. Drawing on methodologies from the fields of liturgical studies, musicology, and religious studies, I evaluate the formation of worship industry celebrities at Camp Electric and through American Christian summer camp ministries.

Evaluative Frameworks for Worship Music

Wednesday, July 29, 2:45–4:15

Dialectic Dynamics: How Worship Musicians Traverse the Dialectic of the Contemplative and the Charismatic in Gospel and Contemporary Worship

Jayden Anderson, Princeton Theological Seminary

Music does theology. As music directors, we use dynamics, chord structures, and rhythms to facilitate both expression of charisms as well as attention to the Holy Spirit. If we want the congregation to lean into a contemplative moment, we will use pads and potentially synth bass to create an atmosphere focused on attention to the voice of the Spirit. Conversely, if we want to invoke a charismatic response, we conduct our drummers to use drive with the kick drum as the guitarists kick on more overdrive. Music creates meaning for congregants as their ears and body are immersed in soundscapes that symbolize and speak of otherworldly and interworldly realities that Pentecostals experience in the liminal space that is the altar. The Pentecostal liturgical experience is often disparaged as emotional and lacking in theological depth, but I want to posit that Pentecostal worship musicians (whether intuitively or explicitly) in both the white church and the Black church do theology as they traverse the dialectic of both the contemplative and the charismatic through the use of dynamics. This paper defines the contemplative as an interworldly attention to how the Spirit is at work in the congregant. The charismatic is defined as the expression of otherworldly possibilities, namely the charisms of the Spirit. I will specifically trace the way in which bass and the Hammond organ are utilized to accomplish the charismatic and contemplative through the dialectical relationship of dynamics.

Beyond Theme Tags: A Speech Act Taxonomy for Congregational Song

Lawrence Chen, Independent Scholar

Service elements perform liturgical functions, and how they are sequenced shapes a congregation's transformational journey. To sequence intentionally, worship leaders need to see what songs do liturgically, not just what they say theologically. Yet, digital worship catalogues organize songs through theme tags that collapse function, theology, and affect into a flat taxonomy. A song declaring God's faithfulness to the congregation and one voicing the congregation's trust in that faithfulness perform different liturgical work, yet both land under "Faithfulness," rendering their sequencing invisible. Speech act theory provides the framework for separating what these systems conflate. Through its lyrical component, every congregational song does something, is about something, and carries an emotional register. Building on Benjamins (2021) and Calvert (2018), I apply speech act theory across more than 13,000 English-language congregational songs spanning hymnody, praise and worship, and gospel. Twenty worship actions (e.g., Declaration, Deliverance, Invocation, Wrestling) capture what a song does within a service. AI-assisted classification demonstrated inter-run consistency (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.79$); human inter-rater validation is underway. 165 AI-classified systematic theology tags (e.g., Atonement, Faithfulness, Indwelling) identify a song's theological loci without evaluating its doctrinal position. A lexicon-derived affect score (valence, arousal, and dominance) captures the emotional register the language carries into the sung moment. With these dimensions, worship leaders planning a service on God's faithfulness can distinguish a declaration of God's character from the congregation's response of trust. The taxonomy offers not a new instinct but a new instrument: a way to sequence where each song belongs in the Sunday journey their people take together. That sequencing is an act of pastoral care.

Sing, Sing, Sing: Examining the Psalms and Contemporary Worship Music's Lyrical Usage of the Word "Sing"

John P. Chilcote, Cedarville University

This paper investigates the biblical directive to sing in worship by comparing the Psalms' use of the term translated as "sing" with the lyrical use of "sing" and related terms in contemporary worship music (CWM) over the last fifty years. After framing singing as an essential, though not exhaustive, expression of biblical worship, the study analyzes the three primary Hebrew terms rendered as "sing" in the Psalms—*rānan*, *zāmar*, and *šār*—and compares their functions with two representative CWM corpora: the WoW Worship albums (1999, 2000, and 2001), which represent prominent songs from roughly 1972–2000, and a second corpus drawn from CCLI's most-sung songs from 2010–2020. Using lexical and contextual analysis, the paper examines how singing language functions as a command, an invitation, a proclamation, a joyful response, and a unifying act of communal praise. This proposal illustrates how singing language is deeply embedded in the Psalms, where these key terms appear across nearly half the collection and most often signal calls to worship, thanksgiving, rejoicing, and corporate praise. By contrast, around a quarter of early CWM often emphasized praise and devotion without directly foregrounding singing itself. In the later CCLI sample, however, a slight majority of songs include "sing"

language or related expressions, suggesting a significant shift toward more explicit lyrical encouragement of congregational song. The study also finds that whereas the Psalms balance first-, second-, and third-person perspectives, CWM is overwhelmingly first-person, especially after 2000. Overall, this paper argues that contemporary worship music has moved toward greater alignment with the Psalms' theology of vocal, joyful, and communal praise, while still reflecting modern emphases on personal expression and interior devotion.

Contemporary Worship and Placemaking

Wednesday, July 29, 2:45–4:15

"Listening" Modernity: Timbre, Musicolony, and Contemporary Praise and Worship Music

Fernando Berwig, PhD candidate at Southern Methodist University

In this paper, I argue that Contemporary Praise and Worship Music (CPWM) sounds in Brazil function as a form of sonic occupation when musicians adopt particular timbres without critical or musical resistance. By examining how CPWM sound constructs whiteness, modernity, gendered narratives, and cosmopolitan belonging, I suggest that CPWM sounds form a colonial ear. Leaning methodologically on timbre studies and my ethnographic fieldwork in three Brazilian megachurches, my argument is threefold: first, I engage with the decolonial concept of musicolony (Whitla 2020) to describe processes of cosmophobia—acts of domination and extermination of heterogeneous ways of being, rooted in an anxiety of difference (Bispo dos Santos and Goldman 2024, 91)—and practices of hungry listening—"normative and unmarked forms of listening, privileged within the settler colonial listening positionality," which perpetuate musical epistemological erasure (Robinson 2020, 10). Second, I frame CPWM practices in Brazil through Byung-Chul Han's notion of hyperculturality—the detachment of culture from place, history, and land (Han 2021). I argue that CPWM sounds produce an aesthetic of hyperculture through reverberant, acoustically placeless soundscapes that deterritorialize listening environments and reduce contact with localized cosmologies. Lastly, I draw on Paulo Freire's idea of conscientization to suggest that CPWM scholarship has overestimated an assumed transparency of sound and the capacity of "unconscientized" listeners, worshippers, and musicians to rationally grasp its ideological work (Freire 1968). In essence, I contend that unconscientized engagement with CPWM sustains cosmophobic structures that marginalize local, noisy, land-based sounds.

Abstracts

Welcome Home to Nowhere: Non-Place Worship, the Interchangeable Room, and the Portable Liturgies of Contemporary Worship

Brad Campbell, Fuller Theological Seminary

Marc Augé's concept of "non-place" names environments optimized for circulation, interchangeability, and temporary occupancy. These spaces that are functional and affectively persuasive, yet thin in local memory and historical density. This paper

argues that contemporary praise and worship music often operates as a ritual of belonging within non-place conditions: portable stages, screen-mediated lyric space, multi-site templates, and a translocal song economy that makes worship feel immediately accessible almost anywhere. Rather than dismissing this as “inauthentic,” I treat non-place as a cultural condition that shapes worship’s implicit ecclesiology of how belonging is negotiated, how memory is carried, and what kind of home worship promises. The argument is developed through two micro-case studies. First, I analyze a representative “anywhere sanctuary” (visual regime, circulation cues, scripted transitions, and the felt immediacy of “right here, right now”) to show how non-place worship generates intimacy while remaining architecturally repeatable. Second, I examine a common flashpoint where non-place belonging is pressured to become “thick” belonging: a patriotic-weekend service in which worship music and spoken moments borrow civic-religious cues (heritage, land/home metaphors, victory language, and the moral “we”) that can subtly shift from ecclesial identity toward national identity. This case illustrates how Christian nationalist affect can enter not only through explicit slogans, but through the emotional grammar of belonging and destiny. The paper concludes with a practitioner-facing diagnostic tool for leaders and a “place-thickening” toolkit that deepens ecclesial belonging without rejecting the accessibility and reach that non-place conditions can provide.

Global Songs, Local Spaces: Contemporary Worship Songs as Tools for Placemaking

David (Caleb) Castro, PhD candidate at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

AbstractsThroughout the centuries, Christian songs have served as a means of theological expression, spiritual formation, and communal identity within the Christian faith. As the gospel has crossed linguistic and cultural borders, songs have too. The history of song translation is rich and complex. Many modern American music labels promote nearly instant translations of songs, a plethora of which have been popularized by Christian artists like Marcos Witt in Latin America. Song translation was originally shaped by missionary movements and while some view it as a positive thing, there are some who align the practice with colonization and prefer indigenous songs only. In God’s sovereignty, he knew that people would be displaced and various ethnicities would mingle together in daily life. He has gifted the church with music and singing together can help with re-implacement efforts for those feeling disconnected from their current location. While the lyrics may be different, the shared experience of singing and the recognition of a familiar tune can create a sense of connection between people of different ethnicities, serving as a bridge to foster a sense of place and belonging in a new location. The purpose of this presentation is to consider how translated contemporary worship songs can be helpful as displaced peoples navigate the displacement process and seek to be re-implaced. By considering the history of song translation, as well as arguments for and against the practice, the goal is to challenge scholars and practitioners to see translated songs as a tool in the re-implacement process.

