

Not Contemporary to Me:  
Memphis Churches and the Power of Musical Reformations

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## Now You're Speaking My Language: Musical Reformations

In the early sixteenth century, as the Protestant Reformation was working its way through German towns, Martin Luther had a problem. Luther was looking to democratize religion, to get the Bible into the hands of the common people. Translation of the Bible into German allowed a greater number of people to read the text, but for the large number of illiterate Germans, a different medium was required. One of the main solutions Luther utilized was a musical reformation. If Luther and his fellow Reformation leaders could create hymns accessible enough that they could be recited at home and in church, people who had never read the Bible could have a clearer understanding of its teachings.

Charlotte Methuen writes that Luther's "hymns became one of the central means of spreading his theology to a largely illiterate population."<sup>1</sup> Luther himself summed up the importance of this reformed music most succinctly with his well-known assertion that "music is the handmaiden of theology."

As Friedrich Blume documents in the seminal *Protestant Church Music*, Luther and other early Protestant hymn writers drew their melodies for these musical handmaidens from well-known folk tunes. Church leaders found that the more they could use existing music for their new hymns, "the more clearly could something new be expressed with the vocabulary of an established and commonly intelligible language."<sup>2</sup> Singing in a language they spoke to a tune they knew, early Protestant Christians gained direct access to scripture for the first time.

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Methuen, "Luther's Life," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 18.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Blume, *Protestant Church Music: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1974), 3.

In this survey of Memphis churches, I will track the ongoing validity of this Reformation principle: that theology coupled with “reformed music” offers a powerful and disruptive force for drawing congregates to institutional religion.<sup>3</sup> While the churches I visited for this research vary widely in their theology, racial makeup, and music, they have all been affected by movements of theological and musical reformation.<sup>4</sup> As the movements established their own denominations or influenced existing ones, the reformed music became the accepted and traditional musical language of the church community. However, declining church attendance—especially among millennials—in America shows that these accepted traditions have lost their appeal. So-called “contemporary” services, designed by churches to appeal to young people that are turned-off by institutional religion, are no longer effective means of appealing to youth culture.

### **Hope, Hippies, and the Problem with “Contemporary”**

This story of Memphis church music begins in the suburbs. Hope Presbyterian Church in Cordova reports an average weekly attendance of around 7,000 and is one of the 100 largest churches in America, according to a survey conducted by OutReach magazine.<sup>5</sup>

Walking into Hope on a Sunday morning does not feel like you’re walking into a church at all. The sanctuary, which seats 5,000 people, has three levels of auditorium-style seating focused on a stage. The one large cross hanging 30 feet above the stage is

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<sup>3</sup> I certainly was not able to visit every church in Memphis for this research. However, the churches I did have access to cross denominational, racial, and geographic lines within the city. Also, for each institution, music plays an important part in their weekly worship.

<sup>4</sup> While for each movement the music accompanied a theological renovation, for this paper I will speak mostly about this music, not the theology

<sup>5</sup> “History Test,” Hope Presbyterian Church, accessed July 5, 2017.

the only indication that this is a religious space. A fifteen-piece praise and worship band is the focal point of the space and the services at Hope. Their performance, which accounts for about 80% of the service, is accented by a sophisticated light show and multiple cameras which project onto two 25'x14' screens. According to Hope's website, "it takes 8 volunteers and 3 staff to run video and lighting on a given weekend."<sup>6</sup> Also on Hope's campus is a state-of-the-art recording studio, The Grove, that has recorded Darius Rucker and multiple Dove Award winners (think Christian Grammys). Needless to say, music is a large part of Hope's ministry.



*The bottom two levels of the three-leveled sanctuary at Hope Pres<sup>7</sup>*

An important facet of the music ministry is a Sunday evening service called The Stirring. The description of The Stirring on Hope's website highlights the musical and production elements that have come to define contemporary worship services:

It is the opportunity to interact with culture, scripture and have something to take with you to live with and execute yourself during the week. The music you'll hear

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<sup>6</sup> "Our Facility," Hope Presbyterian Church, accessed July 5, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> "Hope Presbyterian Church," Auerbach, Pollock, Friedlander, accessed July 12, 2017.

inside sounds a lot like the music you listened to in your car on the way over. The lights and the video you see might remind you of a concert you recently attended.<sup>8</sup>

This description of the service shows the guiding principle of reformation music: you don't go to The Stirring to get away from culture. You go to The Stirring to "interact" with culture. While there is actually very little interacting—most of the congregates sit and watch as the musicians perform the songs—Hope presents an opportunity to see the church and popular culture combined. There is no real difference, according to the website, between the music you play in your car and the music playing in the church. The message of God is, as the website goes on to say, "fed in a familiar and practical language" and, they may add, melody.<sup>9</sup>

Jacob Church, a regular singer at The Stirring and a Memphis-based musician, described the attitude of The Stirring towards secular music:

What we call the "worship set" is stuff we've done before, and then we'll do the special at the end, which is usually something we probably haven't done before. And that's one thing I really enjoy about doing The Stirring is that all music can be a worshipful experience in its own way...it's like creating art and creating music is worshipful and praise in its own right. So on the special we generally get to do like some secular stuff that has some sort of like meaning along that line.<sup>10</sup>

On Sundays where The Stirring plays secular songs (they don't always),<sup>11</sup> they invoke an even more pronounced understanding of the power of churches using music familiar to their congregates. Relying not only on the sounds of culture, they search out songs with messages that, although not explicitly Christian, express Christian values and the message of the sermon.

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<sup>8</sup> "The Stirring," Hope Presbyterian Church, accessed July 6, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with author 6/19/17.

<sup>11</sup> I have been to The Stirring two times, and have only heard them sing a contemporary version of the hymn "Be Thou My Vision" and the praise and worship staple "Come to the River – River of Life" during the closing section of the service.

In reality, however, there are many different kinds of music that people listen to in their cars. And it can sound very different. To pinpoint the “you” that Hope is talking about on The Stirring’s website, it is important to understand Church’s reference to the “worship set.” The three songs the musicians lead before the sermon are taken from the praise and worship music genre. And to understand this genre, we have to start with hippies.

Starting in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, the Jesus Movement brought Evangelical Christianity to the hippies, and they ran with it. The Movement spread across the country and created a huge youth culture invested in Evangelical Christianity. Arguing the continued importance of the Jesus Movement in contemporary Evangelical culture, Larry Eskridge writes that the coffeehouse rock that was the soundtrack to the movement had a direct influence on the Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) market as well as the genre of praise and worship music.<sup>12</sup> Eskridge writes that the praise music became popular in the megachurches like Hope that “leaned toward pop-sounding contemporary choruses to attract otherwise nonchurchgoing (*sic*) Baby Boomers and their generational successors.”<sup>13</sup> The problem for Hope is that contemporary services continue to be tailored towards Baby Boomers, and their generational successors are not into it.

In the three times I have gone to Hope for The Stirring or the Sunday morning service, I have not seen another person who looked in their 20s. The majority of the congregates were white people in their 40s and up. While The Stirring seemed to skew

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<sup>12</sup> This history and the differences between the genres will be developed later in the paper.

<sup>13</sup> Larry Eskridge, *God’s Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 269.

slightly younger than the morning worship service (which also relies heavily on praise and worship music), it could not be said that it draws a younger crowd. The reason, at least in part, stems from the “you” in The Stirring website. Just as there are many different kinds of music that can be listened to on the radio, there are many different definitions of contemporary. And as praise and worship music grew quickly into the Evangelical churches in the 80s and 90s to keep former “Jesus freaks” and their children in the church, there is no reason to assume that the genre would change to fit a new definition of contemporary. As a result, contemporary worship services—a service developed and either criticized or embraced for presenting the Bible through non-traditional music—has created its own set of traditions and rules prescribing what can and cannot be played in a church setting.

The lack of millennials at church is not a problem unique to Hope. A 2014 study by the Pew Research Center found that millennials<sup>14</sup> were increasingly identifying as “unaffiliated” with a religion—including from the Evangelical Protestant churches, the denomination most accustomed to using contemporary worship services. Even as the percentage of people who identify as Evangelicals stayed roughly the same—despite significant drops in Mainline Protestant and Catholic members—the Evangelical denominations saw a similar loss in millennials as their Mainline and Catholic counterparts.<sup>15</sup> While there are certainly a variety of reasons that millennials are leaving organized Christianity, including Evangelicalism, the church’s inability to allow space for multiple definitions of “contemporary” has shown that the musical reformation that

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<sup>14</sup> Pew defines millennials as people born between the years 1981-1996.

<sup>15</sup> “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015. This is also the source of the tables.

brought the long-haired Baby Boomers to Jesus does not have the same effect on their children.

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## Unaffiliated Make Big Gains Through Religious Switching; Catholics and Mainline Protestants Suffer Large Losses

*Share of U.S. adults ...*

	Raised in group	Left group	Entered group	Currently in group	NET change
	%	%	%	%	
<b>Christian</b>	85.6	-19.2	+4.2	70.6	-15.0
Protestant	50.2	-13.0	+9.4	46.5	-3.7
<i>Evangelical</i>	23.9	-8.4	+9.8	25.4	+1.5
<i>Mainline</i>	19.0	-10.4	+6.1	14.7	-4.3
<i>Historically black</i>	7.3	-2.2	+1.4	6.5	-0.8
Catholic	31.7	-12.9	+2.0	20.8	-10.9
<b>Unaffiliated</b>	9.2	-4.3	+18.0	22.8	+13.6

2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014.

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## Generational Replacement Helping Drive Growth of Unaffiliated, Decline of Mainline Protestantism and Catholicism

	Silent generation (born 1928-1945)	Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964)	Generation X (born 1965-1980)	Older Millennials (born 1981-1989)	Younger Millennials (born 1990-1996)
	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Christian</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>56</b>
Protestant	57	52	45	38	36
<i>Evangelical</i>	30	28	25	22	19
<i>Mainline</i>	22	17	13	10	11
<i>Historically black</i>	5	7	7	6	6
Catholic	24	23	21	16	16
Other Christian groups	3	3	4	3	3
<b>Other faiths</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Unaffiliated</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Don't know/refused</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014. Figures may not add to 100%, and nested figures may not add to subtotals indicated, due to rounding.

The "other Christian groups" category includes Mormons, Orthodox Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and a number of smaller Christian groups.

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Recently, religious leaders have attempted to find out just what will work to get millennials into churches. *Making Space for Millennials*, a 2015 study by the evangelical Christian research firm Barna, offers instruction to church leaders on how to design their church experience to create a welcoming environment for millennials. Their research shows that the rock concert, megachurch approach that has been popular for decades is no longer appealing to American youth. Only 23% of millennials in the survey—who crossed the gamut of regularly attending church to having not been raised in the church—chose the word “auditorium” over “sanctuary” when asked about their ideal worship space. The study also found that participants greatly preferred “quiet” and “classic” worship styles over “loud” and “trendy.”<sup>16</sup> The study shows that the millennial generation—the largest generation in American history—does not have the same idea of the ideal worship setting as their parents. And churches are not responding.

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<sup>16</sup> “Designing Worship Spaces with Millennials in Mind,” Barna Group, accessed July 17, 2017.



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### “We’re just here to have fun and worship Jesus”: Greater Harvest COGIC

When Damien Savage leads the worship team on Sunday mornings at Greater Harvest Church of God in Christ (COGIC), he knows that people will be paying attention. “This church is full of music lovers,” he says. “This is one thing that I can say about this church, they love music.”<sup>18</sup> And it’s not just the congregates. Savage, the minister of music, was in Isaac Hayes’s band from 1999-2008 and plays keys every Friday and Saturday night at Alfred’s on Beale. Lead pastor Renardo Ward is a jazz drummer and a former Kennedy Center/US Department of State Ambassador of Jazz to West Africa. And the choir has a musical background too: “there’s kind of a running joke that we have around here. I tell them all the time that I wasn’t aware there was another

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with author 6/22/17.

high school in Memphis,”<sup>19</sup> Savage says about the number of his musicians who went to Overton High School, the city’s performing arts high school, including himself and Ward.

Greater Harvest, located on Winchester Road just east of the I-240 loop, is everything that contemporary services have tried to avoid. When I went on a Sunday in late June, the service was about three hours long. In my tie, pants, and jacket, I was underdressed compared to the majority of men in three-piece suits. No screens lined the altar, and the only reference to technology was the pastor’s admittance during the sermon that he struggles with the GPS on his smartphone. Honestly, I had no idea what was going on, but it was great.<sup>20</sup>

“It’s a Sanctified church,” Savage says, “and so ‘Sanctified’ means ‘set aside, set apart.’ And so we are very mindful of being careful to make sure that we do set apart, and we’re not sounding like the world.”<sup>21</sup> Unlike The Stirring, people are not coming to a Sanctified church to watch scripture and popular culture be combined. They are coming to avoid popular culture.

The Sanctified or Pentecostal churches are an outgrowth of the Holiness movement, the working-class American’s mid-nineteenth century response to the increasing wealth and institutionalization of Protestant religion. Displeased with the perceived corruption of the church by modernity and money, members of the Holiness

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that this was my first time in a Pentecostal church.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

movement began to shun all worldly vices such as playing cards, dancing, and listening to secular music.<sup>22</sup>

From the Holiness movement grew Pentecostalism, an early-twentieth-century movement that gave birth to a number of denominations, including the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), founded in Memphis.<sup>23</sup> Pentecostals retained the separation from the world, but placed a special emphasis on the gifts of the Holy Spirit that are available to every Christian through baptism—especially speaking in tongues.

Despite the pressure to be removed from the world, the COGIC churches, starting with founder Charles Harrison Mason, knew the importance of pulling from culture when it came to music. Gayle Wald writes that COGIC churches encouraged the use of all instruments in worship, and “whereas mainline Protestant denominations set strict limits on rhythmic music, or anything that might stir the body to movement, COGIC admitted into its musical repertory elements of blues, work songs, and ragtime, cross-fertilizing these in a glorious hybrid with slave spirituals and traditional hymns.”<sup>24</sup>

Seemingly, Mason’s openness to secular music styles contradicts the Pentecostal doctrine to avoid popular culture. As John Thomas Nichol has argued, however, early Pentecostals “‘sanctified’ activities which would under differing conditions be construed as ‘worldly’—dancing, shouting, clapping, ‘jazzy’ singing and playing—with the

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<sup>22</sup> John Thomas Nichol, *Pentecostalism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 25-27.

<sup>23</sup> COGIC was founded and is still headquartered in Mason Temple in Downtown Memphis.

<sup>24</sup> This musical tradition would have a profound impact on the subject of Wald’s book: Sister Rosetta Tharpe. Gayle Wald, *Shout Sister Shout: The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 10.

explanation that they were now Spirit-directed.”<sup>25</sup> Within the church, those secular musical styles and instruments were repurposed as acceptable means for praising God.

This use of secular music and dancing within the church allowed Pentecostals to express themselves physically and musically in ways that would otherwise be considered sinful. Many scholars have pointed out the reasons for creating a space within the Pentecostal church where emotional release was possible. Charles Braden has argued that this release was important because the working class, predominately black Pentecostals did not have the same access to areas of leisure as the wealthier High-Church congregates.<sup>26</sup> Nichol, on the other hand, points out that it was necessary for alleviating the strict moral code that the Pentecostals subscribed to that condemned their participation in all “worldly” acts. But in addition to these two, it also was necessary for the same reason that Luther’s hymns helped foster a religious revolution.

By tapping into the rich secular musical tradition of its congregates, even as it shunned most other forms of secular culture, Pentecostalism created a style of reformed music that was more accessible to its members than the High-Church hymns of the Mainline Protestant churches they broke away from. They also made some really good music.

Like Hope, the service at Greater Harvest consisted mostly of music. Unlike Hope, it did not feel like a hyper-produced performance with a light show, camera crew, and lyrics projected on screens. Greater Harvest’s sanctuary is a much more modest space, holding no more than 350 people. The choir sits behind the altar and the band is to

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<sup>25</sup> Nichol, *Pentecostalism*, 65.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Braden, “Sectarianism Run Wild,” *Protestantism: A Symposium*, ed. William K. Anderson (Nashville: Commission on Courses of Study, The Methodist Church, 1944), 115.

the right, with crosses and potted plants lining the front of the sanctuary. While The Stirring may feel like “a concert you attended recently” in the sense that you can watch a band perform songs, the music at Greater Harvest reminds you that at most concerts, there are people. And those people like to have fun. In addition to congregates prophesizing, speaking in tongues, and falling out,<sup>27</sup> I saw some of the most impressive dancing in four-inch heels I could imagine. While mothers and elders were running around the church and dancing in the aisles, it was obvious that some spirit—or whatever you wish to call it—was alive and well in the sanctuary. As a woman assured me when I was walking into the church, “don’t be frightened by anything you see honey, we’re just here to have fun and worship Jesus.”



*Greater Harvest COGIC Sanctuary*<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “Falling out” or being “slain in the spirit” are phrases used in the Pentecostal tradition for when believers experience a moment of religious ecstasy so great, they are unable to stand and often pass out.

<sup>28</sup> Taken from “Greater Harvest Church of God in Christ,” YouTube video, 0:18, posted by “Greater Harvest Church Go,” October 14, 2015.

And this movement of the Spirit is not limited only to dancing. As mentioned before, Pentecostals separated from other Holiness congregations because of their belief in all people's ability to channel every power of the Spirit listed in the book of Acts, especially glossolalia, or speaking in tongues. For musicians, this manifestation of the Spirit through bodily acts results in musical improvisation and spontaneity when leading worship.

Savage says that while he and the choir prepare a set list before each service, it is not necessarily going to be the songs that they end up playing:

In preparations for Sunday, we do prepare for certain songs to be sung, and it's like, OK, this is what we're doing Sunday, unless there's another calling from the Holy Ghost that this song needs to be sung. This is what I need for my people. This is what the people need. This is what they need to hear today.<sup>29</sup>

By surrendering the direction of Greater Harvest's service to the will of God, Savage aims to create a creative space that encourages improvisation and spontaneity. Unlike Hope, where pre-rehearsed light shows, camera transitions, and screens with the lyrics superimposed on the picture dictate the set list, the lack of production at Greater Harvest allows for a movement of the Spirit to change the direction of the service. For me as a congregante, this organic nature was more exciting and more spiritual, as the music felt more like a spontaneous outpouring of musical ability than rehearsed songs that I was watching a band perform.

Charles Streeter, a drummer who grew up in Christ Missionary Baptist Church in South Memphis, describes the experience of being moved by the Spirit when he is playing in church:

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with author 6/22/17.

An anointing comes with playing at church. It has to come, you know, you're playing for God. Especially when the Holy Spirit moves and you start getting in tune with those things, and there's stuff that I've never played before in my life. Because the Holy Spirit compelled me, and I was flowing in an out-of-body experience. And I can't replay that again.<sup>30</sup>

While Christ Missionary is not a Pentecostal church, the Southern Baptist tradition is known for their spirited, "shouting" style of worship. Since his time at Christ Missionary, Streeter has toured with Chaka Khan, The Jackson's, Jenifer Lopez, and Tori Kelly. On those stages, however, he says he is never able to replicate the sensation of being led by the Spirit in his playing as he is in the church.<sup>31</sup>

This highly energetic and emotional style of music at Greater Harvest is a result of many factors—the musical ability of the congregates, musician, and pastor; the openness to allow creative space for movements of the Spirit to dictate the music; and the initial wedding of Pentecostal church music and secular styles. But just because Pentecostal music embraced secular sounds at its inception does not mean that it is still open to incorporating contemporary music. Pastor Ward described having to wait until his parents—his father is the founder of Greater Harvest—left his house before he could listen to non-gospel music on the radio as a child.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Savage's grandmother did not let her grandchildren listen to anything except for gospel, although his father is a "jazz guru."<sup>33</sup> At Greater harvest, Savage explains that there is pressure to keep the music of his Saturday night and Sunday morning gigs separate: "More than anything in Pentecostal churches, it needs to sound 'churchy.' So I do have to be mindful of that. Like, 'OK, I can't really put this lick right here, because it does need to stay in the

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with author 7/6/17.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with author 6/20/17.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with author 6/22/17.



confines of church.”<sup>34</sup> However, Savage finds that it is important to balance the call of tradition with the need for constant reformation in the name of ministry. In response to a complaint from a congregant that he is too interested in entertainment, Savage replied

I believe that there has to be some entertainment to draw people in. Because that's basically one of the main focuses and purposes of the church is to present Jesus Christ to people. Any church that's happy with who they have and that's it is doing something wrong. You got to be interested in outreach. That's what ministry is.<sup>35</sup>

The resistance to modern secular music and the idea of entertainment indicates that—just like with contemporary services—while the Pentecostal tradition was at one time open to converting secular music to the holy purpose of worshipping Jesus, that window has closed. Savage, however, attempts to fight against this trend by incorporating secular sounds and challenging the status quo of what is considered sacred—in his words, pushing the “confines of the church.” At the same time, he has to balance this outreach with a respect for the traditions of the institution that employs him. He does not make his music contemporary by completely changing how music is presented (as was done by many evangelical churches). But he does create space for the musicians to incorporate a variety of musical traditions into their playing each Sunday. By constantly trying to adapt the church's music while also finding a balance with what is considered acceptable by the church's members, Savage keeps true to Pentecostalism's—and Protestantism's—founding musical principle: that theology is always most accessible when it is in the music of the people.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

This constant evolution—without a full-scale revolution—of the music allows Greater Harvest to maintain a more generationally-diverse congregation than Hope. Despite being long, formal, and suspicious of the evils of popular culture—all the things that millennials are supposed to hate—Greater Harvest has millennials in their congregation. People under 40 were there with their children and participated in the service just as much as the older members. In addition to younger congregates dancing and getting emotional, there were millennials in the band and choir and performing in a dance group made up entirely of young women. While this may confound an evangelical youth pastor, it is perfectly in-line with the Reformation principle: if the worship is conducted in a musical language that is known, people will come.

### **Lindenwood’s Intentional Integration**

When Ryan Twisdale and the Wing and a Prayer worship band step onto the stage Sunday mornings at Lindenwood Christian Church, they see something rare in churches across the country, and even more so in Memphis: an integrated congregation. In Memphis, there are a few diverse religions spaces, such as Fellowship Memphis, which was founded in 2003 to be a “multi-ethnic church,”<sup>36</sup> but they are intentional and explicit in their missions. For a church like Lindenwood—a historically white congregation—it is a more difficult task.

Now located on Union and East Parkway, the Disciples of Christ congregation was founded in 1843 by a group of white Memphians.<sup>37</sup> The church has long been known

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<sup>36</sup> “Our Story,” Fellowship Memphis, accessed July 12, 2017.

<sup>37</sup> “History of Lindenwood,” Lindenwood Christian Church, accessed July 10, 2017.

for its music, featuring an organ which has over 3,300 pipes filling the front of the sanctuary. Their annual “Lindenwood Concert Series” has presented the Memphis Symphony Orchestra and multiple famous opera singers in the sanctuary. The church’s music ministry is directed by Chris Nemeč, an opera-trained musician who has sung in Carnegie Hall eight times. Nemeč’s choir, the “King’s Choir,” and the organ anchor the 11:00 am Sanctuary Service, offering a selection of hymns steeped in the High-Church tradition that the Holiness movement broke away from. Seemingly, Lindenwood would be one of the last places that could attract a multi-racial congregation. But they have done just that by reforming their musical tradition.

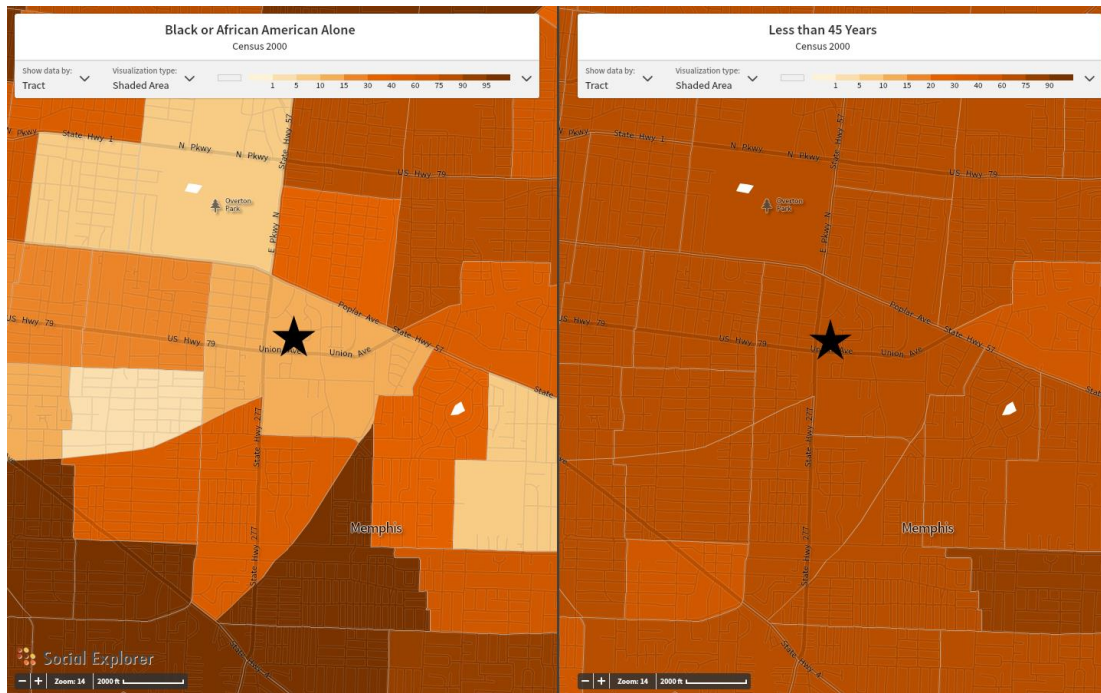
It all began in 1999, when Lindenwood’s church board unanimously approved Rev. Roy Stauffer’s movement to create a contemporary service, provided it did not alter the traditional service. In a presentation to the congregation about the need for a contemporary service, Dr. Stauffer:

included information in regard to Lindenwood demographics: Many members were coming from East Memphis and outlying towns; many were transferring to churches closer to their homes in East Memphis; the midtown area within a five-mile radius of the church was a likely audience for a contemporary service.<sup>38</sup>

According to 2000 US Census data (see image below), the five-mile radius that Stauffer was referring to was overwhelmingly young, with the majority of people under 45. It was also racially diverse, including census tracts that ranged from 15-97% African-American.

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<sup>38</sup> Nina P. Ross, *From the Archives: Lindenwood Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Memphis, Tennessee, 1828-2011* (Nina P. Ross, 2011), 134.



*2000 US census data for the area around Lindenwood Christian Church. The map on the left shows the percentage of the population that identified as black/African American alone. The map on the right shows the percentage under 45. Lindenwood is identified with a star.<sup>39</sup>*

In developing their W.O.W. (Wide Open Worship) contemporary service, Lindenwood looked for a praise band that could attract a young and diverse audience. Their solution was to go to one of Memphis’s most established acts. Kevin Paige, the son of former Lindenwood chancel choir director Richard Paige, had two Top 40 singles on the pop charts in the late 1980s and had been performing with his wife Bethany at Alfred’s on Beale St. for five years.<sup>40</sup> This experience brought Lindenwood a worship team that was well-known throughout the city for their energy and ability. They were also a good choice for appealing to a diverse congregation. In assembling the band, Kevin

<sup>39</sup> Prepared using SocialExplorer.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Author 6/27/2017.

Paige said that it came naturally to draw on a racially-diverse pool of musicians because the white singer had always been performing with black musicians.<sup>41</sup> Paige, now the worship leader at Incarnation Catholic Church in Collierville, TN, said that

The W.O.W. service brought people of color to Lindenwood that typically would never have entered the doors of a church that had historically been an affluent white congregation. The mixed band and the more “meet the people where they are” sermons made the service more welcoming to people of all walks of life.<sup>42</sup>

Seeing the progress made by the W.O.W. service, Lindenwood further invested in the idea of a racially-integrated congregation, adding a commitment to creating a “diverse” congregation to its five-year plan in 2003.<sup>43</sup>

Lindenwood’s ability to create a racially-integrated worship space through a contemporary service sets them apart from the much larger Hope Pres, which remains predominately white. Certainly, some of this has to do with location. Midtown is a much more integrated area of Memphis than suburban Cordova, but it also has to do with how the music and the service are presented and the intentionality of their mission.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Text message interview with author 7/13/17.

<sup>43</sup> Ross, *From the Archives*, 140-41.

<sup>44</sup> On a typical Sunday, Hope’s parking lot is full of cars from De Soto County, Mississippi, and Fayette County, Tennessee, so it is obvious that people drive from outside of Cordova to get to Hope.



*W.O.W. worship band, featuring Kevin and Bethany Paige in 2006<sup>45</sup>*

In “Congregational Segregation: A look at Memphis Evangelical Churches,” Natey Kinzounza argues that in order for churches to become racially-integrated spaces, they must be intentional about their selection of songs and musical styles, balancing the traditions of both the black and white churches in their formation of a service.<sup>46</sup> At Lindenwood, I saw the complexity of these intentional decisions.

Keeping true to their original promise to the church board, Lindenwood’s traditional service seemingly has not changed. When I went on July 2, 2017, the Sanctuary Service included many patriotic songs and traditional hymns. The musical focus was always on the organ and the King’s Choir. About half of the congregation was singing along, but the acoustics were so good in the church that only the organ and choir

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<sup>45</sup> Taken from Ross, *From the Archives*, 135.

<sup>46</sup> Natey Kinzounza, “Congregational Segregation: A look at Memphis Evangelical Churches,” Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies, Rhodes College, 2015, 11.



(which are in the front of the church) could be heard. Additional orchestral percussion including timpani, snare drum, chimes, and clave were played by Stan Head. The congregation was almost entirely white, well-dressed, and the median age was easily over 55. I saw one black man and one other millennial, who sat in front of me with her parents and mostly was on her phone.

The W.O.W. Service on the other hand is held in Stauffer Hall, which seats around 250 people. The hall was renovated in 1999 specifically for the W.O.W. service, complete with lights, screens, and a new stage.<sup>47</sup> The stage includes background panels made to look like frosted glass with simple designs. While the hall is much smaller than Hope and does not use screens projecting the band or have a light show, it is similar in that it could not be immediately recognized as a place of worship.



*Rev. Virzola Law at the Lindenwood W.O.W. service*<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ross, *From the Archives*, 136.

<sup>48</sup> Taken from "2017 07 02 'Freedom—The World of Paradox' Pastor Law," YouTube video, 0:44, posted by "Lindenwood Christian Church Media," July 3, 2017.

The service is led by Ryan Twisdale and the Wing and a Prayer worship band, whose performance bookends the sermon and communion. They draw their songs from the same praise and worship genre as Hope—when I attended the W.O.W. service, they played such praise and worship staples as “I Can Only Imagine” by MercyMe and “I am Free” by Pr. Ross Parsley. Unlike Hope, however, the band uses the intimate space to foster more audience-performer interaction. When the band sang “I am Free,” Twisdale walked off stage and went through the audience, singing to them and asking them to complete the line “I am free to (verb),” which would then become the next verse of the song. While on stage, Twisdale would repeatedly call for the audience to stand up, sing along, and dance, and would individually thank people who were dancing. Through this use of space and performance, the band cultivated a sense of emotion and connection closer to what I experienced at Greater Harvest, while playing the same type of songs that are performed at Hope. The W.O.W. service had very few moments where they asked the congregation to stand, but many congregates stood and danced, clapped, or sang along voluntarily.

The congregation consisted mostly of people between 35-55, but there were a few younger people and many over 60. Some people were formally dressed, but many came in t-shirts and shorts. The congregation was racially-mixed with slightly more white people than black people (perhaps 60%/40%), and the band consisted of four white men and one black man, all except Twisdale looked over 50. The two services were almost diametrically opposed, and the only strain that connected them was the presence of Rev. Virzola Law.



In 2015, the church hired Rev. Law, their first female and first African-American lead pastor. Each Sunday, Rev. Law preaches at the W.O.W. service and then the Sanctuary Service. While she preaches the same message at both services, her delivery is telling of the intentional choices that churches have to make when navigating racially-integrated spaces.

At the beginning of the W.O.W. sermon, Rev. Law shared a story of growing up in her father's Pentecostal church. The anecdote of her hiding underneath the seats out of fear of the emotional congregation was amusing (and relatable, based on my time at Greater Harvest), but it was also telling of the religious tradition in which she grew up. If I had missed this detail, however, it would have become obvious as she began preaching. Wearing a dress, Law calmly and confidently talked about the daily gift of grace using a notably Pentecostal style of preaching. After delivering an especially relatable point, she told the congregation "you better say 'amen' or 'ouch.'" When she was vamping on a theme that was not receiving the level of response she was expecting, she would say "y'all aren't hearing this like I want you to" or "that was good and y'all missed it" and then repeat the line. And when she got to the key theme in her message, that baptism is a paradox of trying to avoid sin while knowing that God will forgive sin, she said the word "paradox" followed by "say that back to me, 'paradox.'"

While the sermon at the Sanctuary Service was almost identical in content, Rev. Law did not include the detail about her father or any of the verbal markers that identified her with the Pentecostal tradition. Wearing a robe over her dress and standing in a pulpit, Rev. Law looked stiff as she delivered her sermon.

The difference between these two sermons and the musical presentation is indicative of the challenges facing churches looking to make Sunday morning less segregated. As Kinzounza argued, integrating churches requires more than simply preaching a message of equality. Song selection and sermon presentation are necessary considerations that must be accounted for when attempting to create an integrated worship space.<sup>49</sup> In other words, it takes a musical reformation to create a worship style that is accessible to both white and black congregates.

Because of the church board's desire to not have their service changed, Lindenwood's Sanctuary Service can never attract a diverse and younger congregation like the W.O.W. service.<sup>50</sup> The presentation of the traditional service is rooted in the High-Church tradition that is typical of Mainline Protestant churches, a style that has been affiliated with affluent whites since the Holiness movement. To people outside of the High-Church culture, however, it is an inaccessible worship experience. Within the setting of the W.O.W. service, Lindenwood has broken away from this style and intentionally targeted a diverse audience. They have reformed the traditional musical and preaching styles in order to create a presentation method that is more suitable for a racially-diverse, younger congregation. The differences between these two services show how hard it would be for the Sanctuary Service to become a more racially-diverse space while also retaining its congregates.

This is not to say, however, that the W.O.W. service is a racial utopia. This was most evident when I attended the service in the beginning of Rev. Law's sermon when

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<sup>49</sup> Kinzounza, "Congregational Segregation," 11.

<sup>50</sup> Again, the W.O.W. service still was not attracting millennials—the median age was around 40.

she started talking about freedom in God and told the band “I thought you were gonna start singing ‘I feel better, so much better, since I laid my burdens down.’” The hymn, often called “Since I Laid My Burdens Down” or “Glory, Glory,” is a staple in the black gospel tradition and derives from a slave spiritual. The song has a similar message as “I am Free”—that through giving your life to God there is total emotional and spiritual freedom—and relies on the same call and response technique that Rev. Law uses in her sermon. The comment exposed a cultural divide that still existed in the W.O.W. worship: even as the contemporary service attempts to balance the traditions of the white and black church to create a diverse space, there are limitations to what they can achieve. By exclusively playing praise and worship music, the W.O.W. service does not create a space where black gospel hymns like “Glory, Glory” would be played.

What the W.O.W. service loses of the black church tradition in music, it makes up for in Rev. Law’s use of call and response. The technique of call and response has a long history in the black church and in black music. Brian Ward writes that the ongoing relationship between individual and community present in call and response helped soul music to become “the sound of a radical democratic vision of individual identities realized and proudly asserted within the context of a sustaining collective culture.”<sup>51</sup> The importance of the practice in the black church and culture makes the W.O.W. sermon more accessible and meaningful for congregates raised in that tradition. But almost all of the congregates—white and black—answered Rev. Law’s call for a response. For people who were raised outside the tradition where call and response carries the rich social and historical meaning, Rev. Law has repurposed the technique in a way that is still engaging.

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<sup>51</sup> Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (London: UCL Press, 1998), 201.

The W.O.W. service, like Hope, uses screens to project the key bible verses, words, and concepts in the sermon. This visual display helps to show the congregation (especially people who have already zoned out) the important ideas that need to be taken away from a message. The presence of these screens shows that churches understand the basic principle that people will not pay attention for an entire sermon, much less service. By using the screens, Hope and Lindenwood ensure that everyone can at least come away from the sermon with something to think about after church.

Law's verbal cues for the congregation to respond to what she is saying operate in a similar way. If people are responding with "amen" or "ouch," you know that they are listening. By asking for an "amen" or telling the congregation that they are not hearing what she is saying, Law organically creates an environment in which congregates are more inclined to listen. Similarly, the band's presentation of the music cultivates the congregation's engagement with the service, and therefore increases their attention span. As Twisdale ran around and asked people to participate, the congregation was forced to pay attention to the songs, even if it was just out of anxiety over getting singled out by the singer (I fell into this camp).

Yet even as I was engaged by the service presentation and appreciated the racially-diverse congregation at the W.O.W. service, I still did not feel like the music was tailored to my definition of contemporary. And I was not alone. The lack of people under 40 at the service shows that even when it is performed in a compelling way, praise and worship music is not the music of millennials.

## Church Music Outside the Sanctuary: A Quick Overview of the CCM Market<sup>52</sup>

The services at Hope and Lindenwood show the lasting musical effect of the Jesus Movement on evangelical churches. But a look at the Billboard charts of top Christian songs and artists reveals the parallel impact that the church has had on the Jesus Movement's musical export: the Contemporary Christian Music industry. What has been for decades the worship music of evangelical churches is taking over the commercial Christian charts and exerting a powerful influence on the CCM industry. But long before CCM was driven by praise and worship music, it was a fringe subculture led by Larry Norman.

Norman was raised in the San Francisco area by an evangelical family. Commonly referred to as the founder of Christian rock, Norman's philosophy was simple: "I want the people to know that He saved my soul, but I still like to listen to the radio."<sup>53</sup> He was a rocker at a time when rock was the Devil's music, but he saw the potential power of putting the gospel into a rock and roll vernacular.

In 1969, he released *Upon This Rock* for Capitol records. Too religious for the rock scene and too hard for the gospel market, the record flopped. Capitol sold the rights to Impact Records, a Southern gospel record label that had no more of a market for Norman than Capitol.<sup>54</sup> Capitol released Norman after *Upon This Rock*, but he came back

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<sup>52</sup> The history of the Christian music industry is much more comprehensive. For more information, see Andrew Beaujon, *Body Piercing Saved My Life: Inside the Phenomenon of Christian Rock* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2006) or Barry Alfonso, *The Billboard Guide to Contemporary Christian Music* (New York: Billboard Books, 2002).

<sup>53</sup> Larry Norman, "Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music," *Only Visiting this Planet*, Verve, 1972.

<sup>54</sup> Eskridge, *God's Forever Family*, 224-228.

in 1972 to release *Only Visiting This Planet*. Again, the album failed to find a market large enough to excite Norman's new record label, Verve (a subsidiary of MGM).

The failure of Norman's records to sell resulted less from the quality of the music—*Only Visiting This Planet* especially is often regarded as the best Christian rock album ever—and more from early Christian rock's outsider status.

During the 70s, Christian rock was on the outskirts of both the Christian and rock cultures. As Barry Alfonso has pointed out, CCM did not come out of institutionalized religion, but rather “grew out of splinter sects and street ministries, where oversight by established churches often didn't exist.”<sup>55</sup> Developing their music outside the traditions of the church, early Christian rockers were often scorned by evangelical pastors. But they used their fringe status to make compelling and controversial music. In *Only Visiting This Planet*, Norman combines a rock and roll rebellion with conviction-based evangelizing to attack both his fellow drug-obsessed rockers (“Why Don't You Look Into Jesus”) as well as the evangelical ministers who judge him based on his love of rock and roll (“Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music”).

Nowhere was this evangelizing rebellion more prevalent within the Christian rock genre than in Steve Taylor. Taylor, the son of a Baptist preacher, released his first EP *I Want to Be a Clone* in 1983. The title track offers a harsh lampoon of American evangelical culture, describing the pressure felt by a recent Christian convert to conform to an ideal evangelical:

I've learned enough to stay afloat  
but not so much I rock the boat

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<sup>55</sup> Barry Alfonso, *The Billboard Guide to Contemporary Christian Music* (New York: Billboard Books, 2002), 31.

I'm glad they shoved it down my throat  
I want to be a clone<sup>56</sup>

“I Want to Be a Clone” was basically the evangelical youth’s more satirical version of “Another Brick on the Wall” in its lambasting of the institutional overlords attempting to control minds. But Taylor does not shy away from attacking the counter-culture either. “Bad Rap (Who You Trying to Kid, Kid)” takes aim at the anti-religious youth, calling them hypocritical and uninterested in anything but the bottom line, “me, me, me”:

Convictions make your skin to crawl  
You act like you're above it all  
You say faith is a crutch for a mind that's closed?  
You guzzle your crutch and shove it up your nose<sup>57</sup>

Between the lyrics attacking evangelicals and hippies in turn and the new wave, electronic-influenced rock, *I Want To Be A Clone* encapsulates the combination of rock and roll rebellion with evangelical theology that made early Christian rock so exciting for like-minded products of the Jesus Movement. Unlike Norman, Taylor did find some commercial success with his EP, selling 85,000 copies.<sup>58</sup>

As Eskridge has pointed out, the growing market for Christian music was due in large part to the increase in evangelical publishing houses and then bookstores. Once the bookstores started carrying Christian music, record labels were able to more efficiently and effectively target their evangelical market.<sup>59</sup> By the 1980s, CCM began to really take off thanks to Amy Grant. Grant experienced the kind of cross-over appeal with the general market that Christian musicians and record labels had only dreamed of when her

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<sup>56</sup> Steve Taylor, “I Want to Be a Clone,” *I Want to Be a Clone*, Sparrow, 1983.

<sup>57</sup> Steve Taylor, “Bad Rap (Who You Trying to Kid, Kid),” *I Want to Be A Clone*.

<sup>58</sup> Bob Gersztyn, “Steve Taylor,” in *Encyclopedia of American Gospel Music*, ed. W.K. McNeil (New York: Routledge, 2005), 395.

<sup>59</sup> Eskridge, *God's Forever Family*, 230.

1983 album *Age to Age* went platinum. By the time she began shifting her songs to appeal to a more secular audience with 1985's *Unguarded*, which also went platinum, Grant had helped to make CCM into a formidable genre in the secular music industry and had started the career of CCM's next star to achieve crossover appeal, Michael W. Smith.<sup>60</sup> By the year 2000, CCM accounted for 7% of all records sales.<sup>61</sup> This was led by adult-contemporary stars like Smith, but also rock bands like Jars of Clay and the metal band P.O.D.

As CCM grew, so too did the genre of praise and worship. Initially, praise and worship music was simply the music sung in evangelical churches influenced by the Jesus Movement. The music has its root in the evangelical Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, California, a traditional church that began attracting many hippies who were interested in Jesus but turned off by the traditional hymns led by an organ. To appeal to their new members, Calvary began to incorporate the guitar-led songs found in Jesus communes in California into their worship.<sup>62</sup> Scripture-based and melodically simple, many of the early praise and worship songs resembled Luther's hymns, but in a 1970s Southern California musical dialect.

Seeing the influx of new Jesus Movement members in other evangelical churches, Calvary Chapel opened a publishing group, Maranatha! Music, Inc., to offer their new praise and worship songs to other churches. Once the number of evangelical churches using praise and worship music increased, the music began to seep out of the church and

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<sup>60</sup> "Amy Grant," *Billboard*, accessed July 18, 2017.

<sup>61</sup> Lorraine Ali, "The Glorious Rise of Christian Pop," *Newsweek*, July 15, 2001, accessed July 18, 2017.

<sup>62</sup> Larry Eskridge, "The 'Praise and Worship' Revolution," *Christianity Today* 52.10 (2008), accessed July 13, 2017.



onto commercial charts and airwaves. More praise and worship labels followed, and by 1998, the most successful of these—Integrity Media—made \$35 million in sales, the second most of record labels in the CCM industry behind Sparrow Records.<sup>63</sup> Praise and worship had become both a big-money market in its own right and a significant part of the growing CCM industry.

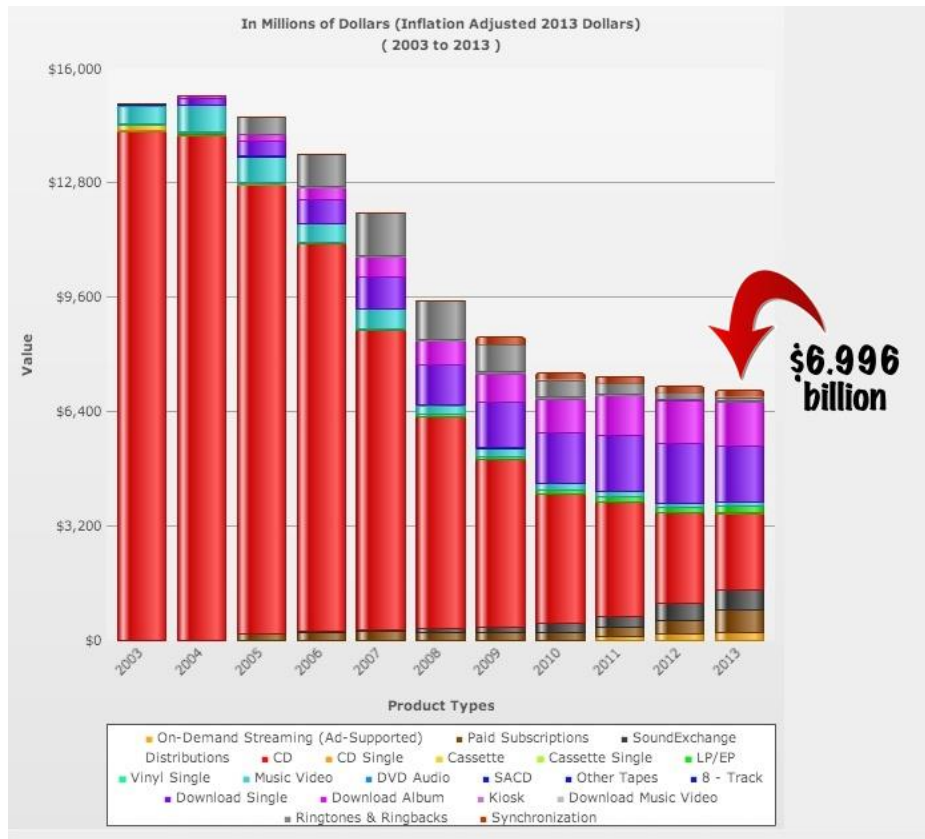
As the millennium turned, however, the general music industry saw a decline in sales and revenue, and the Christian industry was no exception. The industry's response was to turn to its most stable cash crop: praise and worship music. Because so many evangelical churches were using praise and worship music, the genre offered a market with a low risk of drying up or using piracy software to get their praise music. In 2004, praise and worship accounted for about 10% of all gospel sales—a large genre which includes black gospel, adult contemporary, Christian rock, Southern gospel, and other genres.<sup>64</sup> By 2015, praise and worship had surpassed Christian rock as the third-best-selling subgenre within gospel music, behind adult contemporary and black gospel.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Steve Rabey, "The Profits of Praise," *Christianity Today* 43.8 (1999), accessed July 17, 2017.

<sup>64</sup> Christian Music Trade Association Industry Overview, 2005.

<sup>65</sup> Gospel Music Association Industry Review, 2015.



*Decline in revenue for the entire music industry from 2003-2013<sup>66</sup>*

Praise and worship music went from something played in churches during contemporary services to being a commercial entity that can be bought, downloaded, and heard on the radio. It now a main driver of the CCM industry, with many songs by praise and worship bands like MercyMe and Hillsong appearing on the Top 20 Christian charts.<sup>67</sup> But even as praise and worship music develops its standing as a commercial entity, it remains a genre produced by and for churches.

While most bands are judged primarily by record labels and then the market, the main judge of praise and worship music is a church's music minister. Steve Wiggins, the contemporary worship pastor at Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis and former lead

<sup>66</sup> Recording Industry Association of America 2013 Annual Report

<sup>67</sup> For the week of July 22, 2017, the #1 Christian song on the Billboard chart was the Hillsong Worship hit "What a Beautiful Name."

singer for Christian rock band Big Tent Revival, described his role as that of a gatekeeper between the praise and worship industry and his congregation.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, many churches have followed Calvary Chapel's lead and formed praise and worship bands and labels of their own. Hillsong Church from Australia has created a multitude of praise and worship bands (including Hillsong UNITED, Hillsong Worship, and Hillsong Young & Free, among others), and frequent chart-topper Elevation Worship comes out of Elevation Church in North Carolina. By dominating the market on both the creative and market ends, evangelical churches control the genre's direction and revenue.

This control has largely resulted in a musical sameness within the praise and worship genre. And as Tyler Huckabee has argued, as the music in contemporary worship services has frozen, so too has the CCM industry.<sup>69</sup> The increased importance of praise and worship has dried up funds for Christian artists looking to take risks outside of the proven formulas of what sells. This leaves little room for the modern-day Larry Norman or Steve Taylor, people who want to write songs founded in their faith, but are not comfortable with the cookie-cutter standards praise and worship music and the CCM industry generally have established.

While there are bands such as the Memphis-based hard-rock group Skillet that combine a Christian message with a sound that would not be found anywhere near a praise and worship set, most of these groups have gone down the Amy Grant path and are no longer within the CCM music industry. Releasing on general market labels (Skillet is currently on Atlantic Records, after getting their start at Ardent in Memphis), their lyrics

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<sup>68</sup> Interview with author 6/28/2017.

<sup>69</sup> Tyler Huckabee, "Who killed the contemporary Christian music industry?" *The Week*, February 17, 2016, accessed July 10, 2017.

speak to Christian themes without directly invoking Christian symbols or language. This creates space for Skillet, and many other bands, to make music that can speak to a Christian audience while still attracting a larger market. But Skillet was only signed to Atlantic after they proved their abilities within the Christian market in the mid-90s. At this time, the market was more open for a band that wanted to take creative risk to start out in CCM. Now, however, there is little room for Christian artists to make music that does not conform to the proven formulas of praise and worship or adult contemporary in the vein of Amy Grant and Michael W. Smith. Except for Lecrae.

The first hip hop artist to receive a Grammy for Best Gospel Album, Lecrae is one of the rare artists in the last decade who has succeeded within the CCM industry while exploring outside CCM's musical boundaries. While Lecrae signed a distribution deal with Columbia Records in 2016, he is still on the Christian hip hop label he cofounded, Reach Records. The leader of a growing Christian hip hop movement—whose artists are staying within the Christian music industry—Lecrae has gained attention from critics and fans both within the Christian market and in the general market. His 2017 hit “Blessings” features the secular hip hop artist Ty Dolla \$ign. The song reached #2 on the CCM charts and #18 on the secular R&B/Hip Hop Airplay charts using lyrics that unabashedly pronounce the artist's faith:

Won't take that credit, I know where we get it  
Them blessings be comin' from God above  
I was doin' all kinda bad  
Where the choir at? Tell 'em I need a verse  
Hit the pew and tell God He's first  
Hit the studio to body a verse<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Lecrae ft. Ty Dolla \$ign, “Blessings,” Reach Records and Columbia Records, 2017.

Even as he collaborates with secular rappers and producers—a fact which has enraged many in the Christian music market—Lecrae’s lyrics clearly define his status as a Christian rapper. His emphasis that he “won’t take that credit” for the blessings he has received from God counter much of the hyper-masculine discourse of secular hip hop that often emphasizes monetary wealth and personal abilities.<sup>71</sup> Instead of stressing his own strength, Lecrae’s belief that everything he has comes from God clearly separates him from much of the secular rap world. His reference to the church choir also serves as a signifier of his musical origins in the church. Similar to the way early hip-hop artists sampled soul recordings to connect their music with the Civil Rights Movement, Lecrae is part of a growing movement of using gospel sounds and references to tie his hip hop with the black gospel tradition.<sup>72</sup> This clearly marks his music as “Christian” at a time when bands like Skillet are finding success by using a more universal rhetoric.

Even as Lecrae publicly states his Christianity and does well on the CCM charts, Christian hip hop (often abbreviated CHH or HHH—Holy Hip Hop) holds an outsider status within the Christian music industry similar to that of early Christian rock. Free from the pressures of the church-controlled side of CCM, Lecrae has used his spotlight to call out the church. On the title track of his 2012 mixtape *Church Clothes*, Lecrae offers a critique of organized religion that would make Steve Taylor proud:

Some of these folks won’t tell the truth,  
Too busy tryna get them racks man,  
Church tryna rob my paycheck,

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<sup>71</sup> Mark Anthony Neal, “I’ll be Nina Simone Defecating on Your Microphone’: Hip-Hop and Gender” in *That’s the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, ed. Ed. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2012), 345-347.

<sup>72</sup> The most relevant artist to do this currently is Chance the Rapper, who is not included in the body of this paper only because he has never operated within the Christian music industry.

Choir members probably having gay sex  
Pastor manipulatin, hurtin women,  
I wonder what he's gon' say next  
Bookstores pimpin them hope books,  
Like I don't know how broke looks<sup>73</sup>

Lecrae's condemnation of the institution of the church and its leaders—in addition to the general “pastor,” Lecrae calls out Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson specifically earlier in the song—is typical of both hip hop and rock and roll culture.<sup>74</sup> But he saves his most biting criticism for the Christian market. He specifically calls out the increased role of the church in the industry, an effect of praise and worship music. References to the church “tryna rob my paycheck” and Christian bookstores are a rebellion against the aforementioned gatekeepers, which act as a buffer between an artist and the audience. When confronted between staying within the Christian music industry or extending into the secular market, Lecrae makes his choice clear:

Yeah I know what's right from wrong,  
But that there ain't gon' sell a song  
I'd rather sell my soul than save it,  
If that's what makes my money long

More powerful than Lecrae's decision to expand outside of the CCM industry in order to make more money is his assertion that he will not be able to make money within Christian music. While the Christian music industry certainly has a smaller market than the general music scene, Lecrae's lyrics are also speaking against the increased closure of

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<sup>73</sup> Lecrae, “Church Clothes,” *Church Clothes*, Reach Records, 2012.

<sup>74</sup> For more on hip hop's role in challenging power structures, see Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994), 100.

the Christian market to new sounds.<sup>75</sup> Just as the music in Christian churches becomes traditional and sacred over time, the church's influence on the CCM market has had a similar effect on commercial Christian music. And for artists like Lecrae and Skillet who do not conform to the praise and worship definition of Christian music, this creates a need to expand outside of the Christian industry to make music and money.

### **Conclusion: Time for Another Reformation**

As a millennial who regularly attends church, I always feel a bit like an endangered animal: my presence usually incites gawking and a concerted effort to preserve my existence. The *Making Space for Millennials* research shows that church leaders—especially the evangelical ones—are very invested in figuring out who millennials are and how to get them into churches. And they're not alone. Numerous articles and studies have been published by marketing firms, political candidates, and higher education institutions about how to understand America's largest generation. Buzzwords like "authenticity" and "collaboration" are constants in the instructions for how to reach millennials.<sup>76</sup> But churches should not pretend that having to change to reach a different demographic is a new problem. And they should also remember the solution that has always worked.

If this survey of Memphis church music has shown anything, it should be that no music is inherently sacred. The music played in every church included in this study at one time was controversial. It drew on the secular styles of the time and disrupted what was

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<sup>75</sup> For more on rock bands who have gone outside of the CCM industry to make music for the same reasons, see Andrew Beaujon, *Body Piercing Saved My Life: Inside the Phenomenon of Christian Rock* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2006).

<sup>76</sup> For instance, go to the Forbes sight, search "millennials," and read some of the over 10,000 results

thought to be music fit for worship. Only later did it become sacred. As Friedrich Blume argues, even the earliest Protestant church music “was never an independent musical genre” separate from the music of the culture in which it originated.<sup>77</sup> But as the reformed music has become accepted in the different churches and considered the traditional music of worship, it has been closed off from the changes in popular music.

The power of the reformation principle has always been its ability to create access. Through hymns with melodies based on German folk tunes, early Protestants who could not read had access to theology. The Holiness movement began because the Protestant churches, and their music, were no longer accessible to rural and working-class Christians. Praise and worship music and Christian rock put the gospel into a melody that was comfortable and accessible for newly-converted hippies.

When I went to Lindenwood’s W.O.W. service, I thought that they did everything right. They used elements of both the black and white church to create a welcoming and engaging service. The atmosphere was energetic, yet relaxed. Unlike Hope, the majority of the congregates were clapping along with the music and some were even dancing. The band looked like they were having fun as well and were genuinely enjoying the music and the service. Rev. Law’s sermon was engaging and substantive. The service was even short. It was obvious that it worked with people over 35. It even worked to attract a racially-diverse congregation.

But for me, it just was not an accessible medium.

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<sup>77</sup> Blume, *Protestant Church Music*, 3.



The problem again goes back to the “you” on Hope’s website. While the W.O.W. service was successful in exciting many people twenty years older than me, I very much doubt that we enjoy listening to the same music.

One way to appeal to younger generations might be to simply create another worship service that uses, for instance, hip hop music. I think that would be successful in drawing at least some millennials into services. But the problem with this solution is that over time the music in that new service would inevitably become understood as sacred and not to be changed. It would fossilize just as contemporary worship services have and in 40 years it will not be accessible to kids. Churches will continue to be fragmented spaces where generational and racial groups do not interact.

What is really needed is a change in mindset. The strategy employed by Damien Savage at Greater Harvest offers a more inclusive and sustainable option. By balancing a respect for the traditions of the church with a constant evolution of the music, Greater Harvest creates a space where music is both sacred and changing. While there is occasional backlash to this method by older members, it is nonetheless effective in attracting millennials while retaining older members.

Whatever method churches choose, if they want to have access to the millennial generation, they first need to ask themselves how accessible their music—and by extension their message—is to millennials. They need to stop pretending that praise and worship music developed in the 70s is any more accessible than an organ, much less “contemporary” for a generation raised on hip hop and Taylor Swift. And they need to be willing to buck the sacred and offer a reformed music that puts theology in the musical language of the people.

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