Contextual Dimensions of Evangelical Worship in the United States:
An Overview of Current Research

Michael Sharp, Ph.D.

Christian worship encompasses many dimensions. As a result, the disciplines which attempt to answer questions regarding worship have different approaches and goals. Theological studies naturally focus on the nature of God, the object of our worship, while historical studies investigate influences and ecclesiastical worship practices across time. Additionally, philosophical studies attempt to articulate an organized way of thinking about the moral, ethical, and epistemological questions related to worship. At times these modes of inquiry naturally overlap. Although many important facets of worship are approached from theological, historical, or philosophical perspectives, another group of studies highlights the contextual dimensions in which worshipers engage with God. These socio-psychological studies seek to explore specific contextual factors with the goal of discovering their impact on how human beings worship God. The purpose of this article is to overview some of the current research related to the contextual dimensions of worship in evangelical churches in the United States. In addition, this article will attempt to initiate a starting point for categorizing areas of descriptive research related to worship in its embodied human context.

While the point of worship is to honor God, no one would disagree that worship expressed by human beings is embodied in a particular context. For those in church leadership, there is value in research which addresses such questions as to how people give glory to God and, to the extent it may be measured, how various sociological and contextual factors affect worshipers. Empirical studies related to the contextual dimensions of worship may yield rich

insights for ministry leaders which may in turn enable those leaders to become more effective in understanding and leading their congregations.

Even from the earliest biblical records, the worship of God has always been expressed contextually. The first Christian worshipers transitioned from synagogues to house-churches and other meeting places. As the gospel found its way to the various Gentile communities throughout the Roman Empire, the worship of Christ found expression within a variety of unique communities. Though God's character is immutable, the worship of him has always occurred in a specific setting, in a given place and culture, and thus has been embodied in a dynamic human context.

Particular worship expressions throughout the history of the church were certainly introduced as a result of some theological understanding and/or reaction. On many occasions, however, the variety of expression in worship surfaced due to the specific cultural contexts and locations. For example, even as the Western Church in the early centuries of Christianity made every effort to assure conformity to worship content, geographical expressions were inevitable.

The contextual dimensions of worship are obviously rooted in a given environment. Sometimes that environment remains relatively stable for a long period of time. At other times, the environment undergoes rapid change with respect to a number of variables. Given the sea-change of culture which evangelical churches in the United States have undergone in the latter part of the twentieth century to the present, it is not surprising to observe a multitude of effects these cultural changes have had on worship practices expressed by those congregations. More than a few scholars and practitioners have offered widely-diverse commentary on some of the forces which have brought us to our current condition regarding worship practices.[1] With

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[1] Samples of works addressing this issue include John Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003); Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. &Sue A. Rozeboom, *Discerning the Spirits* (Grand Rapids:

insightful analysis, Robb Redman has identified several important social and cultural factors which he believes have shaped the worship environment today: ethnic and cultural diversity, generational dynamics, a changing worldview, pop culture, and technological innovation.[2] Each of the areas outlined in his book provides potential topics for descriptive research which may help church leaders as they navigate the varied worship approaches observable among present-day evangelical congregations. Though some researchers have begun to take an interest in this type of study, empirical research in this field is in its infancy. As the body of literature related to worship within the evangelical church community slowly emerges, the possibilities for additional descriptive research are virtually endless.

The outline as follows is an attempt to highlight the current state of research, as it now stands, related to the contextual dimensions which affect evangelical worshipers in the United States. The primary categories included are by no means exhaustive and are not listed in any particular order. Each of these areas has been addressed in one or more recent studies related to worship: (1) generational, ethno-cultural, and gender factors; (2) individual preferences, temperament, and learning styles; (3) spiritual formation; (4) architectural environment and technology; and (5) the arts.

Generational, ethno-cultural, and gender factors

Congregational demographics related to gender, generation, and ethnicity provide an important area for worship research in that the representation of these population groups within a given church body may affect how that congregation expresses its worship. Worship leaders

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Eerdmans Publishing Company); Terry York, *America's Worship Wars* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003); and Frank Burch Brown, *Inclusive Yet Discerning* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009).
    [2] Robb Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 95-169.

might benefit from studies which provide insight into effective leadership of diverse populations in corporate worship. Observing specific trends related to these population groups could also be helpful to worship planners. Understanding generational differences, gender differences, and cultural differences in regard to worship expression might help church leaders in planning for and leading meaningful worship services in which these groups are present.

Generational studies and worship

Many American evangelical churches have recently faced some difficult challenges regarding the generation gap in worship. Leaders might be aided by studies which focus on generational profiles and needs within the congregational family. Several years ago one author noted: "Today's church leaders understand that ministry must take place among a mosaic of groups and subgroups—most notably generational cohorts."[3] The need is even more pronounced in the church today, particularly in worship. How can leaders plan worship in such a way to be meaningful to intergenerational congregations? A first step might involve understanding the respective ways that the generations see and experience their world.

To the present, some work has been done in this area. Most prominently, two separate iterations of the National Congregations Study (NCS), the first of which appeared in 1998 and the second in 2006, provided significant data related to church demographics.[4] A comparison of the data between the two studies revealed an aging demographic related to worship attendance, specifically noting an increase in the number of attendees over age 60 while the number of

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[3] Gary McIntosh, *One Church, Four Generations: Understanding and Reaching All Ages in Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 9.

[4] Mark Chavez and Shawna L. Anderson, "Continuity and Change in American Congregations: Introducing the Second Wave of the National Congregations Study" in *Sociology of Religion,* vol. 69, no. 4 (2008):437.

attendees under age 35 decreased. In general, recent data suggest that congregations in America are aging faster than their surrounding communities.

Other descriptive research has investigated the trends regarding the worship service attendance of specific generational cohorts. Church leaders are aware of challenges related to the retention of younger generations in the life of the church. Some studies have helped to shed light on how worship structures may contribute to positive results in this regard. An example of this type of study investigated the effect of intergenerational worship participation during high school on the level of faith maturity of students compared with other forms of church participation.[5] Other examples of generation-oriented research include an investigation of the drop-out rate of older teens in corporate worship and the reasons behind their absence[6], and a descriptive study of two congregations with a substantial proportion of Gen-Xers which investigated how the worship approaches of these churches contributed to a large Gen-X presence within a multigenerational congregation.[7] Additional foundational work in this area has been done by researchers who have focused on the differing generational needs in worship.[8] Other research is represented by a growing number of dissertations which have focused on the generations and worship in specific congregations, several of which have focused on a strategy for planning and implementing

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[5] Kara E. Powell and Chap Clark, *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011). This resource reports the findings of the Fuller Youth Institute's College Transition Project, a series of comprehensive studies of more than five hundred graduating seniors.

[6] Scott McConnell, "LifeWay Research finds reasons 18- to 22-year-olds drop out of church," Lifeway Research, http://www.lifeway.com/ArticleView?storeId=10054&catalogId=10001&langId=-1&article=LifeWay-Research-finds-reasons-18-to-22-year-olds-drop-out-of-church.html (accessed May 1, 2012).

[7] Marlea M. Gilbert, "Incorporating a Rising Generation: A Study of Worship" (PhD diss., Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, 2006), in ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, http://search.proquest.com/pqdthss/docview/304951970/abstract/136A86B0CA133FECCD9/1?accountid=12829 (accessed March 22, 2012).

[8] See Rainer & Rainer, *The Millennials,* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2011); Howard Vanderwell, "Worship across the generations." *Liturgy*, 24 (3): 4-10; Pete Menconi, *The Intergenerational Church* (Littleton, CO: Mt. Sage Publishing, 2008), 179-186; and McIntosh (2002), 202-206.

intergenerational worship for a specific congregation.[9] In general, an expanding interest in this

area by ministry practitioners needs more support through generational worship research. This

type of research might provide practical insight for church leaders faced with generational

challenges in worship.

Incidentally, interest in this type of generational research has not been limited to the local

church and the corporate worship environment. A number of studies have been done concerning

how the generations interact with one another in the workplace.[10] Many of the findings in this

literature may have a broader application for worship. As church leaders continue to plan for the

generational cohorts which gather for worship in segregated or intergenerational assemblies,

much more research is needed which will seek to investigate worship perceptions and

expectations which are driven by profile characteristics of the various adult generations.

Ethno-cultural studies and worship

The data from the NCS report also reveal that congregations are generally becoming

more ethnically diverse.[11] The landscape of American evangelicalism appears to be increasingly

multi-cultural. As people from differing ethnic backgrounds gather in worship, either in

segregated or combined settings, their cultural identities form a backdrop for their worship

experiences. Since cultural background plays a significant role in how people understand and

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[9]Examples include William H. Davis, "Creating a Climate for Intergenerational Worship at Thomasville Road Baptist Church," (DWS diss., Institute for Worship Studies, 2007); David Hasker, "Developing a Strategy to Transition First Baptist Church, Melbourne, Florida, from Venue Worship to a Multigenerational Worship Model," (DMin project report, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010); Gary L. Hall, "Developing Cross-Generational Worship Planning and Worship Leadership in the Monterey Baptist Church, Lubbock, Texas," (DMin project report, Truett Theological Seminary, 2003); Calvin D. Austin, "Implementing Intergenerational Corporate Worship in the Oak Park Baptist Church of Gainesville, Florida," (DWS diss., Institute for Worship Studies, 2010);

[10] Lynne C. Lancaster and David Stillman, *When Generations Collide* (New York: Collins Business, 2005).

[11] Chavez and Anderson, 437.

interact with their world, church leaders will likely benefit from knowing how to plan for worship ministry within an increasingly diverse context.

How does ethnic background affect the worship experience of worshipers? One study explored the nature, practice, and benefits of worship within and across several ethnic groups.[12] The purpose of that study was to examine how worship is experienced on a subjective level and to identify key antecedent and facilitating conditions which contribute to worship experiences. Other ethno-cultural worship research has focused on the use of ethnic musical materials for worship.[13] Additional studies have investigated how liturgical learning can take place to strengthen and shape the identity of Christian worship in international communities of worship.[14] While some studies have specifically compared different ethnic populations with respect to worship and faith issues,[15] other work has focused on worship experiences within specific cultural groups.[16] Given the trend toward multiculturalism in the local church, more studies are needed which may help worship leaders better understand the issues relevant to multicultural worship in American evangelical churches.

Gender studies and worship

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[12] Alexis D. Abernethy and Charlotte vanOyen Witvliet, "A Study of Transformation in Worship" in *Worship That Changes Lives* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 197-206.

[13] For examples, see Mark P. Bangert, "Liturgical Music, Culturally Tuned," in *Liturgy and Music: Lifetime Learning,* ed. Robin A. Leaver and Joyce Ann Zimmerman (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 363-378; and Carlton R. Young, "Ethnic Minority Hymns in United States Mainline Protestant Hymnals 1940-1995: Some Qualitative Considerations," *Hymn* 49, no. 3 (July 1998): 17-27.

[14] See Dietrich Werner, "Worship in Global (Diverse) Communities or: Intercultural Liturgical Learning and the Identity of Christian Worship in International Communities in Mission" in *International Congregational Journal*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Fall 2008):61-82.

[15] The Barna Group , "Major Faith Shifts Evident Among Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics Since 1991" in State of the Church Series, 2011: Part 4 Racial/Ethnic Differences. 510-major-faith-shifts-evident-among-whites-blacks-and-hispanics-since-1991 (accessed April 10, 2012).

[16]For examples, see Robert Taylor et al, "Organizational religious behavior among older African Americans: Findings from the national survey of American life" in *Research on Aging*, vol. 31, no. 4 (Jul 2009):440-462; and Korie L. Edwards, "Race, Religion, and Worship: Are Contemporary African-American Worship Practices Distinct?" in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 48, no. 1 (Mar 2009):30-52.

Do men and women have different needs when it comes to meaningful participation in corporate worship? Sociologists have long argued that gender plays a significant role in how people interact with others and with their environment, including the church environment. To date, studies focusing on gender and worship in the evangelical church have compared gender differences in worship attendance[17] as well as the types of congregational participation the gender groups demonstrated.[18] Gender perceptions and preferences in worship have also been targeted in some studies, including an investigation of the male perception of contemporary worship song lyrics which may be considered "romantic" in nature.[19] Other gender research in the context of worship has investigated gender gaps with regard to other factors, such as the use of technology in worship.[20] Expanded research regarding the gender gap might be helpful for ministry leaders seeking to effectively shepherd men and women in corporate worship.

Individual preferences, personality, and learning style profiles

Do factors such as individual style preferences (related to music, communication, and leadership, etc.), personality temperament, or individual learning style preferences have an

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[17] David Murrow's book, *Why Men Hate Going to Church* (Thomas Nelson, 2011) addresses the gender gap and the absence of men in corporate worship. Additionally, the research report *A Field Guide to Presbyterian Congregations* (Research Services, Presbyterian Church, USA, 2001, 83), found that women in the pew outnumber men almost two to one. For other related data, see The Barna Group, "Twenty Years of Surveys Show Key Differences in the Faith of America's Men and Women" in State of the Church Series, 2011: Part 3 Gender Differences. http://www.barna.org/faith-spirituality/508-20-years-of-surveys-show-key-differences-in-the-faith-of-americas-men-and-women.htm (accessed April 10, 2012).

[18] Cynthia Woolever, "The gender ratio in the pews: consequences for congregational vitality," in *Journal of Beliefs and Values: Studies in Religion and Education* 27, no. 1 (Apr 2006):25-38.

[19] For example, see Keith Drury, "I'm Desperate for You: Male Perception of Romantic Lyrics in Contemporary Worship Music," in *The Message in the Music*, ed. Robert Woods and Brian Walrath (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 54-64. Also, Robert Myers developed a rubric for evaluating intimate songs in worship in his article "The Development of a Rubric for the Evaluation of Intimate Songs in Contemporary Christian Worship," (DWS diss., Institute for Worship Studies, 2006).

[20] Scott Thumma, "Virtually Religious: Technology and Internet Use in American Congregations" in Fact 2010 Research Report. http://www.hartfordinstitute.org/research/technology-Internet-use.html (accessed May 3, 2012).

impact on how worshipers are able to participate in a corporate worship gathering? If these

factors do make a difference, what are the implications for those who plan and lead corporate

worship gatherings? Research into variables of preference, temperament, and learning style

could be of great interest to church leaders in their pursuit of effectively leading their diverse

groups. To date, studies of this nature are relatively few.

Preference and worship

Many evangelical church leaders today agree that quite a few of their congregants have

personal preferences regarding a variety of factors in corporate worship, including musical

styles, ambient of the worship space, service structure, level of formality, etc. But how do

personal preferences and expectations impact the worshiper's ability to engage in corporate

worship? How might a more-informed knowledge of the congregation's collective and individual

preferences aid worship planners? Are there specific trends in preference which are discernible?

How might these trends affect worship expression? A few studies have noted changes in

congregational worship expressivity across time. For example, the NWS compared data and

trends in U.S. congregations from 1998 to 2006 and found that congregations were experiencing

changes regarding their expressivity in worship.[21] Another major congregational study found

several trends from 2001 to 2008, which indicated a diversifying effect in worship preferences

and styles. Among the trends, the study found that, overall, preference for traditional music

decreased; fewer congregations included singing by a choir or soloist; and fewer congregations

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[21] Chavez and Anderson, 433-34. For example, the authors reported increases in the worship activities of greeting one another; applause as congregational response; spontaneous jumping, shouting or dancing; and raising hands in praise. They reported a decrease in reading or reciting as a congregation.

preferred hymnals or written bulletins or service guides.[22] Few, if any, in-depth studies have explored preference and expressivity in worship.

Temperament and worship

Personality type has been studied in relation to many aspects of human activity. One of the most widely used type indicators, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), has been applied to many fields of research, including career counseling, marriage counseling, group dynamics, team building, and leadership development since the 1960s. In the last few years this personality type indicator has also found application in ministry contexts. Even though some research has been done in this area, investigations of this type are relatively few.[23] Some studies have focused on utilizing the MBTI as an aid to developing worship strategies within a given church context.[24] Since personality type deals with psychological preferences, the study of personality as related to worship activities might provide useful insights for congregational leaders.

Learning styles and worship

In the field of education, learning styles are studied in great detail in order to engage learners in ways that are meaningful to them. Just as individuals in a classroom setting process

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[22] Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations: Who's Going Where and Why*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 111-112. This was the largest survey of American congregations to date, including 500,000 worshipers from 5,000 U.S. congregations.

[23] See Kenneth C. Harper, "The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator: Some Implications for Worship, Piety and Spirituality" (paper presented at the Far West Regional meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Long Beach, CA, April 20, 1990); Tom Schwanda, "The Personality of Worship," in *Reformed Worship*, vol 23 (March 1992): 25-27; Gary L. Harbaugh, *God's Gifted People* (Augsburg, 1990); W. Paul Jones, "Myers-Briggs Type Indicator: A psychological tool for approaching theology and spirituality" in *Weavings*, vol 6 (May-June 1991): 32-43; and Roy M. Oswald and Otto Kroeger, *Personality Type and Religious Leadership* (Alban Institute, 1988).

[24] Thomas D. Eden, "Who We Are and How We Worship: Developing Appropriate Worship Utilizing the Theories of Personality Types and Multiple Intelligences at Woodruff Place Baptist Church, Indianapolis, Indiana," (DMin Project, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008).

information in a variety of ways, those who attend corporate worship gatherings appreciate the

opportunity to engage in worship via their individual learning style preferences. In terms of

worship research, a limited number of studies have focused on individual learning styles in the

worship experience.[25] Some researchers have written about the applications of perceptual

modality preferences (auditory, visual, etc.) to worship, brain hemisphericity, and Dunn's

Learning Style Elements and their relationship to how worship is experienced,[26] but the

application of educational theory to the corporate worship context is practically untouched as an

area of research. Multiple intelligence theory and its application to enhance congregational

participation in worship has been the focus of at least one study.[27] As more churches look at

finding ways to plan worship which is multisensory, more studies are needed which can provide

insight for leaders along these lines.

Spiritual formation and worship

Church leaders have long-held the view that the liturgical content of our corporate

gatherings matters for many reasons, not the least of which is its potential to impact the spiritual

formation of attendees. In addition to a number of works on the general topic,[28] researchers in

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[25]For examples of these type of studies see Michael Bausch, "Auditory and visual Learners in the Pew" in *Clergy Journal,* vol 82, no. 3 (Jan 2006):7-8; and C. Glynn Laing, "An Assessment of the Correlation Between Personality Style and the Preferred Style of Worship Exhibited by Christians in an Evangelical Context" (DMin diss., Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 2003).

[26] See Randall Bradley, "Worship and Learning Styles: Practical Applications for Worshipers and Worship Leaders" in *We'll Shout and Sing Hosanna: Essays on Church Music in Honor of William J. Reynolds* (Fort Worth: Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1998). Bradley has also contributed a chapter on the topic, "Learning Styles and Worship," in *Christian Worship: Its Theology and Practice,* 3rd ed. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006), 143-157.

[27] Huckaby, Susan Young, "Enhancing Congregational Participation in Worship at Arlington United Methodist Church through Educating and Engaging Multiple Intelligences," (DWS diss, Institute for Worship Studies, 2006).

[28] For examples of works which promote the idea of spiritual formation through corporate worship, see Tom Schwanda, *Celebrating God's Presence: The Transforming Power of Public Worship* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1995); Debra Dean Murphy, *Teaching that Transforms: Worship as the Heart of Christian Education* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004); Jeff Astley, ed., "Christian Worship and the Hidden Curriculum of Christian

recent years have begun to study the effects of attendance in corporate worship upon the spiritual development of Christians. For ministry leaders involved in worship planning, research which seeks to understand how different elements of corporate worship may contribute to spiritual maturity could prove very valuable.

While the prospect of measuring spiritual growth would seem to be much too subjective, some qualitative studies do exist which have attempted to answer such questions. One study surveyed members of Protestant U.S. churches in order to determine if spiritual transformation (as defined by a specific set of metrics) occurred as a result of corporate worship experiences.[29] Another research group has engaged in an ongoing series of studies of thousands of evangelical churches to gather data and measure correlations between certain congregational practices, including worship, and factors indicating spiritual growth of church members.[30]

Widely known for survey research related to church life, the Barna Group has investigated a number of topics which touch on the relationship of discipleship to corporate worship. Their work has provided descriptive snapshots regarding the worshipers' sense of connection to God in corporate worship, commitment to religious behaviors, and definition of

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Learning" in *The Contours of Christian Education*, (Great Wakering, Essex, England: McCrimmons, 1992),141-152; E. Bryon Anderson, "Worship: Schooling in the Tradition of Jesus" in *Theology Today* 66, no. 1 (April 2009): 21-32; and Kenneth Gangel, "Spiritual Formation through Public Worship" in *The Christian Educator's Handbook on Spiritual Formation* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1994), 111-129.

[29] Ed Stetzer and Thom Rainer, *Transformational Church: Creating a New Scorecard for Congregations* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), 147-171. This study formed the basis for the creation of a church assessment tool which continues to be used in many church contexts.

[30] Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Follow Me: What's Next for You* (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Association, 2008); *Reveal: Where Are You?* (2007); *Focus: The Top Ten Things People Want and Need from You and Your Church* (2009).

spiritual maturity. [31] Other descriptive research has utilized transcript analysis of worship services in order to study specific content which reinforces spiritual formation.[32]

Another area of study related to spiritual formation concerns the doctrinal content of songs that are sung by congregations in worship. Given the relatively large emphasis placed on congregational singing in many evangelical churches today, one area ripe for future worship research would be an investigation of the lyrical content of song selection for corporate worship services. Though not much has been advanced in this area of inquiry, one study analyzed the content found in the contemporary songs used in congregational worship, as reported by the Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI), to discover the range of theological themes they covered.[33] The study also investigated how many of the song lyrics in the sample focused on individual experience versus a communal orientation.

Since most church leaders believe that an informed theology contributes to the process of spiritual formation, how do the lyrics of songs included in corporate worship promote such an understanding? Although not many in number, several studies have performed content analyses on specific bodies of sacred song. One such project focused on how four particular contemporary

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[31] The following reports (all found at barna.org) touch on some aspect of spiritual formation/development and corporate worship: "Focus on 'Worship Wars' Hides the Real Issues Regarding Connection to God," (Nov 19, 2002); "Worship Tops the List of Important church-Based Experiences," (Feb 19, 2001); "Barna Identifies Seven Paradoxes Regarding America's Faith," (Dec 17, 2002); "Surveys Show Pastors Claim Congregants Are Deeply committed to God But Congregants Deny It!" (Jan 10, 2008); "New Study Shows Trends in Tithing and Donating," (Apr 14, 2008); "New Statistics on Church attendance and Avoidance," (Mar 3, 2008); and "Many Churchgoers and Faith Leaders Struggle to Define Spiritual Maturity," (May 11, 2009).

[32] Jessica McMillan, Will Bishop, and Will Whittaker "Wonderful Words of Life: An Analysis of Spiritually formative Statements in the Worship Services of Three Selected Churches", unpublished paper presented in the Doctoral Seminar "Worship and the Task of Disciple-Making," (New Orleans: New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, December, 2010). This project analyzed verbatim transcripts of three worship services for several mega-churches in Texas, in regard to six aspects of spiritual formation (the character of God; the human condition/need for God; the provisions of God through Christ and the Holy Spirit; the process of becoming Christ-like; deepening commitment to kingdom values; and eschatology).

[33] Ed Steele, "Theological themes in contemporary hymnody." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society (San Francisco, December 2010).

songwriters portrayed Christology through their lyrics.[34] Another group of studies analyzed the

lyrical content of the 77 different songs appearing on the top twenty-five lists (songs most

reported) of the Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) site.[35] The lyrics of these 77

songs formed the raw data to be analyzed for thematic content along seven areas of inquiry,

including Trinitarian emphasis, use of the language of intimacy, young male perception of

romantic lyrics, evidence of God's concern for righteousness and social justice, lyrics of lament,

kerygmatic, koinoniac, and leitourgic function of the lyrics, and prayer types (such as

expressions of petition, thanksgiving, praise, and adoration). Pushing beyond the topics

addressed in their content analysis of contemporary worship music lyrics, the researchers

delineated various complementary areas of future worship research.

Church leaders are becoming increasingly interested in the process of spiritual growth of

church members. Studies such as these and others which investigate the role that corporate

worship may play in the process may be helpful to pastors and worship leaders in the task of

discipling their congregations. Though interest in this pioneer research area is growing, the field

is ripe with possibilities for future research regarding the relationship between corporate worship

and spiritual development of evangelical Christians.

Architectural environment and technology

Do the characteristics related to the physical space and surroundings for the gathered

worship experience have an impact on the ability of worshipers to worship meaningfully?

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[34] Andrew Goodliff, "'It's all about Jesus': a critical analysis of the ways in which the songs of four contemporary worship Christian songwriters can lead to an impoverished Christology" in *Evangelical Quarterly* vol. 81, no. 3 (Jul 2009): 254-268. This study analyzed all published and recorded works (through 2008) of Matt Redman, Tim Hughes, Martin Layzell, and Paul Oakley.

[35] Robert Woods and Brian Walrath (eds.), *The Message in the Music: Studying Contemporary Praise And Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007).

Factors such as architecture, artifacts, and furnishings in the worship space promote a certain

aesthetic quality as well as communicate the degree of formality in the worship ambient. The

seating type and capacity of the gathering place and the type of media technology used are

factors which influence how worshipers experience worship together. Additionally, a multi-site

approach to worship gatherings, some with preaching simulcasts, can affect how congregations

engage in corporate worship. Studies related to these aspects might be of interest to leaders who

are often called upon to make decisions concerning the worship ambient.

Architecture and worship

There is a growing body of publications which deal with architecture in worship. Works

such as these will be helpful in providing a philosophical orientation to leaders.[36] Church leaders

may need to consider how a culture shift from modernity to postmodernity will influence

gathering places for worship.[37] Yet with the sweeping changes concerning this area, very little

empirical research has been done to date. Among existing studies, the primary focus has been on

the preference of worshipers concerning worship facilities.[38]

Technology and worship

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[36] Mark A. Torgerson, *An Architecture of Immanence: Architecture for Worship and Ministry Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007); and Denis. R. McNamara, *How to Read Churches: A Crash Course in Ecclesiastical Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 2011).

[37] For a discussion of this topic, see Leonard Sweet, "Church Architecture for the 21st Century," *Your Church* (March 1, 1999), http://www.christianitytoday.com/cbg/1999/marapr/9y2010.html (accessed May 19, 2012).

[38] Tobin Perry, "Lifeway Research finds unchurched prefer cathedrals to contemporary church designs," Lifeway Research (April 4, 2008), http://www.lifeway.com/Article/LifeWay-Research-finds-unchurched-prefer-cathedrals-to-contemporary-church-designs (accessed March 20, 2012). This study investigated the preferences of non-churched individuals with regard to traditional versus contemporary worship facilities.

Given the increasing reach of technological development into almost every area of life, it would seem that the usage of technology in worship would be an important area of investigation for worship leaders. Does the usage of technology aid worshipers in their worship experience? If so, in what ways does it do so? How does a church's incorporation of technology affect the community's perception of the church in terms of cultural relevance? How does technology affect the growth potential of the church? Are worship leaders able to meet the need of varied learning style preferences through technology? How do the various generations respond to different usages of technology in worship? These are just a few of the questions which surface in discussions of worship and technology.

As the American social context is shifting to an increasingly visual preference, not surprisingly, several research projects have reported that the use of projection technology in worship services is rising significantly.[39] Which churches are making use of the available technology in worship? Some studies have used surveys to ask that question in investigating the relationship between the use of technology in worship and other factors, such as size of congregation, age structure of the congregation, gender gap, and racial groups.[40] Another study investigated the novelty effect that the incorporation of new media, such as computer graphics or animation, into worship can produce.[41] Other research has studied the worshiper's preferences

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[39] John C. LaRue and Chad Hall, "Multi-media worship becoming norm: video is no toy as more churches use projectors," in *Leadership*, vol. 24, no. 11 (Winter 2003), 11; Chavez and Anderson, 422; and Michael Bausch, "Auditory and visual Learners in the Pew," 7-8..

[40] Scott Thumma, "Virtually Religious: Technology and Internet Use in American Congregations" in Fact 2010 Research Report; also see Steven J. Koster, "Visual Media Technology in Christian Worship" (master's thesis, Michigan State University, 2003).

[41] Doug Gay and Ron Riestra, ""Veering Off the Via Media: Emerging Church, Alternative Worship, and New media Technologies in the United States and United Kingdom," in *Liturgy*, vol. 23, no. 3 (2008):39-47.

toward the utilization of technology in worship services.[42] Still, relatively little empirical

research has studied the effects of technology on worshipers.

       With the increase of churches utilizing simulcasts of worship services, along with the

heavy dependence on media in worship, more studies in this area are needed to help church

leaders answer questions concerning the results of such technology usage.

The arts and worship

       For many evangelical churches, music and visual art figure prominently in their weekly

corporate worship gatherings. But how might the arts be used meaningfully in corporate worship

to meet the purposes of the worshiping assembly? There is a growing body of literature which

deals with the use of art in worship,[43] most of which can be helpful in providing a philosophical

orientation for leaders. Additionally, other works addressing worship and the arts have focused

on art aesthetics.[44] As far as empirical studies are concerned, not much research regarding visual

art in worship has been done to date. One notable exception, building on foundational work

which investigated the relationship between the arts and faith by various scholars, explored

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[42] Daniel D. Fultz, "Style Matters: Worship Preferences of University Students Regarding the Use of Music and Technology," (PhD diss, Bowling Green Statue University, 2011).

[43] See John Witvliet, "The Worship: How Can Art Serve the Corporate Worship of the Church" in *For the Beauty of the Church: Casting a Vision for the Arts*, ed. W. David O. Taylor (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010); Don E. Saliers, *Worship Come to Its Senses* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006); Eileen Crowley, *A Moving Word: Media Art in Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006); Debra Rienstra and Ron Rienstra, *Worship Words: Discipling Language for Faithful Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009) and Robin M. Jensen, *The Substance of Things Seen: Art, Faith and the Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

[44] See Harold M. Best, *Music through the Eyes of Faith* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993) and *Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 111-222; David Morgan, *Visual Piety* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998) and *The Sacred Gaze* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Robert Wuthnow, *All in Sync: How Music and Art Are Revitalizing American Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

questions regarding worshipers' attitudes toward the arts and the relationship of the arts to their faith and worship practice.[45]

Regarding recent studies of music in worship, a fair amount of survey-type data as to the type of music used in evangelical congregations has been collected. The past couple of decades have witnessed an enormous amount of change within many churches regarding musical styles, so it is not surprising that comprehensive surveys of congregational life would include information of this type. Most of the survey data has been descriptive in nature, primarily dealing with the style of the congregational music employed (generally in the three broad categories of traditional, contemporary, and blended),[46] the usage of choir versus no choir,[47] the type of musical instruments employed,[48] or the amount of time allotted to musical aspects within the service.[49] Given the many debates that have taken place in the last few years over musical style in worship, it is surprising that very few empirical studies have investigated how worshipers are aided or inhibited by various aspects of music in the context of corporate worship.[50] More research in this area might be particularly helpful for church leaders seeking to provide effective vehicles for worship expression within their congregational contexts. Studies which might focus on any of the musical variables, such as style, amount and diversity of music used in a service, medium of instrumentation, sound level (volume), role of choirs and ensembles, and musical

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[45] This study by William A. Dyrness (*Senses of the Soul: Art and the Visual in Christian Worship.* Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008) investigated the relationship of art to worship in ten Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox congregations.

[46] Examples include Marjorie H. Royle, "FACTs on Worship: 2010," in *Faith Communities Today American Congregations 2010 Research Report*, Hartford Institute for Religion Research. http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/report-facts-on-worship (accessed May 3, 2012); and Cynthia Woolever and Deborah Bruce, *A Field Guide to U.S. Congregations: Who's Going Where and Why*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 41-47.

[47] Chavez and Anderson, 433.

[48] Marjorie H. Royle, "FACTs on Worship: 2010," in *Faith Communities Today American Congregations 2010 Research Report.*

[49] Chavez and Anderson, 433.

[50] A notable exception is the previously-noted dissertation by Daniel Fulz which studied musical style preferences of college students in worship services.

participation (soloist, choir, congregation), could provide valuable insightful for worship planners.

Conclusion

Although one can find at least a few studies related to any one of the research areas highlighted throughout this paper, the field of socio-psychological worship research is indeed pioneer territory. As was noted time and again, the relationship of worship to the topics of generations, ethnic culture, gender, preference, temperament, learning styles, spiritual development, technology, architecture, and the arts barely have been given any research attention. Even so, there is a growing interest in the field. A limited number of articles and dissertations gradually are becoming available, but the potential for empirical study in this field virtually remains untapped. Though the purpose of this article was not to cite every study available, hopefully the brief overview of current research provided here might encourage future research in a further exploration of important topics related to the contextual dimensions of evangelical worship in the United States.

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