

## ABSTRACT

“The Choir Is Dead, Long Live the Choir”:  
Contemporary Worship Music and the Transformation of the Church Choir

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Church choirs in North America have undergone substantial transformations in the early twenty-first century due to the steady increase of informal worship practices and the continuing decrease of formal worship elements within North American congregations. These changes have resulted in conflicting narratives concerning the state of the church choir with some believing that the rise of informal worship is bringing about the death of the ensemble and others witnessing the church choir taking on new life within informal worship spaces. This dissertation investigates North American church choirs in evangelical communities whose repertoire is predominantly contemporary worship music (CWM), a rock-pop based genre of congregational song that is arguably one of the most informal worship elements utilized by North America congregations. The thesis which arises from this research finds that *the establishment of church choirs in contemporary worship within evangelical churches and networks is fraught with a central tension between establishing a sustainable choral practice, on the one hand, and keeping up with the rapidly changing genre of CWM, on the other* – a dynamic which this

dissertation contends is the “fault line” that is bringing about the conflicting narratives concerning the North American church choir.

Using ethnographic participant observation methods from the perspectives of an insider and an outsider coupled with techniques emanating from stylistic analysis associated with the fields of musicology, music history, ethnomusicology, and music theory, this dissertation provides four case studies of CWM church choirs in contrasting environments and posits that the CWM genre has produced two distinct types of North American church choirs, namely the *praise and worship choir* and the *worship-leading choir*. Through the lens of the four case studies and through the grounding CWM’s two choral types to various stylistic periods within the CWM genre, this dissertation addresses the hotly debated question: Is contemporary worship “killing” the church choir? By providing the first explicit consideration of church choirs in CWM, this dissertation contributes to church music scholarship and submits the church choirs as another viable vantage point from which contemporary worship music may be analyzed.

"The Choir Is Dead, Long Live the Choir":  
Contemporary Worship Music and the Transformation of the Church Choir

by

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A Dissertation

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of  
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## DEDICATION

To r.n.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction: An Account of Church Choirs in the Contemporary Worship Genre

Church choirs in North America have undergone revolutionary developments in the early twenty-first century which have resulted in conflicting narratives of death and revitalization of the North American church choir. Due to the increasing informality of worship, some claim to observe a steady death of the church choir, a mainstay of formal worship.<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon has likely been exacerbated in the 2020 decade by the COVID pandemic which has rendered choral singing a significant spreader event and so resulted in the suspension and tentative reopening of many choral ministries.<sup>2</sup> Contrary to the perceived decline of church choirs, others have witnessed a transformation and revitalization of these ensembles throughout the 2010s within worshipping communities that are highly informal.<sup>3</sup> Instigating this resurgence are the ever-evolving genres of

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Roso, Anna Holleman, and Mark Chaves, “Changing Worship Practices in American Congregations,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 59, no.4 (December 2020), 675-684, documents that choirs in “main services” have declined from 54% in 1998 to 46% in 2018 (678). This reduction is attributed to the increase of “enthusiastic and informal worship” and the decrease of “formal, traditional...Christian worship.”

<sup>2</sup> The following journalistic sources capture the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacted upon choral singing. Peter Dobrin, “Two Years Until We Hear a Live Choir? In COVID-19 Pandemic, Choral Music May Be Too Risky for a Very Long While,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 18, 2020, accessed February 22, 2022, <https://www.inquirer.com/arts/choir-coronavirus-covid-19-cdc-report-philadelphia-mother-bethel-the-crossing-reaction-20200517.html>. Harriet Sherwood, “Distraught Choirs Forced Back to Zoom After Late COVID Rule Change in England,” *The Guardian*, May 23, 2021, accessed February 22, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/23/distraught-choirs-forced-back-to-zoom-after-late-covid-rule-change-in-england>. Alison Bowen, “COVID-19 Closed Choirs. Now, Singers are Getting Back Together and Realizing What They’ve Been Missing,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 6, 2021, accessed February 22, 2022, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/coronavirus/ct-covid-choirs-rehearsal-church-chorus-singing-tt-20210806-ylh33yzkunbilivnl36dgdh4jy-story.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of transformation and revitalization of church choirs in informal worship settings throughout the 2010s is given later in chapter one in the section entitled “The Unsung Role of the Choir in CWM” (contemporary worship music).



congregational song that accompany American Christian corporate worship. As these musical genres morph, so do the nature and dynamic of their group singing, both chorally and congregationally. As a result, vocality, directorship, liturgical function, along with many other aspects of group singing, are subject to significant shifts.

This dissertation probes these changing dynamics as they pertain specifically to church choirs that sing contemporary worship music (which will commonly be referred to as CWM<sup>4</sup>). It offers the first exploration of church choirs that have been transformed by this particular genre of congregational song, which is readily associated with its solo-voice worship leaders and rock-pop based worship bands but rarely affiliated with church choirs. In fact, it is often assumed that contemporary worship is facilitating the demise of the church choir.<sup>5</sup>

The various issues outlined above point towards the thesis of this dissertation, namely that *the establishment of church choirs in contemporary worship within evangelical churches and networks is fraught with a central tension between establishing*

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<sup>4</sup> Scholarship on Contemporary worship music which utilize the CWM abbreviation as an umbrella term for this song repertory include Monique Marie Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Communities* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018) and Mark Porter, *Contemporary Worship Music and Everyday Musical Lives* (London, Routledge, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> The following online articles, blog posts, and podcast episodes capture the concern held by many concerning the survival of the church choir. Mike Harland, "Will Contemporary Worship Kill the Choir," *Charisma Leader*, March 15, 2016, accessed May 27, 2018, <https://ministrytodaymag.com/life/worship/22682-will-contemporary-worship-kill-the-choir>. Jim Sweeney, "Why Are Church Choirs on the Decline," *Boxcast*, December 12, 2017, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.boxcast.com/blog/why-are-church-choirs-are-on-the-decline>. Mike Harland, "The Disappearance of Choirs," *Church Answers* featuring Thom Rainer #226, May 20, 2016, accessed September 21, 2019, <https://churchanswers.com/podcasts/rainer-on-leadership/the-disappearance-of-choirs-rainer-on-leadership-226/>. Will Whittaker, "The Unfortunate Decline of the Choir," *Intergenerational Worship*, May 18, 2021, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://intergenerationalworship.com/2021/05/18/the-unfortunate-decline-of-the-choir/#comments>. Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Many Church Choirs are Dying. Here's Why," *Religious News Service*, September 17, 2014, accessed January 7, 2017, <https://religionnews.com/2014/09/17/many-church-choirs-dying-heres/>. Jeff Burmley, "Debate: What (If Anything) to Do About Choir Decline," *Baptist News Global*, October 3, 2014, accessed February 22, 2022, <https://baptistnews.com/article/debate-what-if-anything-to-do-about-choir-decline/#.YhXDPi-B3yg>.

*a sustainable choral practice, on the one hand, and keeping up with the rapidly changing genre of CWM, on the other.* The process is neither in its infancy, as an account of the oft-overlooked history of the contemporary worship choirs will demonstrate, nor in an advanced state, as the documentation of contemporary worship's most recent choral types emerging in the 2010s will indicate. This thesis suggests that choirs are not intrinsically opposed to the CWM genre. It also challenges the commonly held assumption that contemporary worship is "killing" or will eventually "kill the choir."<sup>6</sup>

Contributing to the irregular, sporadic, and intermittent nature of choral activity in CWM is a level of dissension within the development of the CWM genre itself. Although the church continues to exert a powerful influence on the genre through the preferences expressed by its congregations,<sup>7</sup> the recording industry has continued to exert an ever-increasing influence, especially since the emergence of the stylistic subgenre of "modern worship" at the turn of the century, an influence which arguably now eclipses that of the church itself.<sup>8</sup> As one might expect, the sheer amount of musical commodities as well as

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<sup>6</sup> The title of the following online article utilizes the evocative word "kill" in its questioning of contemporary worship's supposed effect on the church choir, Mike Harland, "Will Contemporary Worship Kill the Choir?" Lifeway, November 17, 2015, accessed May 27, 2018, <http://www.lifeway.com/worshipministry/2015/11/17/will-contemporary-worship-kill-the-choir/>. Vince Wilcox, "The Critical Importance of Church Choirs," Discover Worship, October 10, 2017, accessed February 20, 2018, <http://blog.discoverworship.com/articles/the-case-for-importance-of-church-choir>, opens with the following rhetorical questions which further reflect this prevailing supposition. "Is the verdict in final? Are church choirs going the way of pay phones and Blockbuster video stores?"

<sup>7</sup> Tanya Riches and Tom Wagner, "The Evolution of Hillsong Music: From Australian Pentecostal Congregation into Global Brand," *Australian Journal of Communication* 39, no. 1 (2012): 24-25, discuss how the worship songs promoted through Hillsong's global brand and mission are those which have been vetted by the level of congregational response and engagement by its primary church in Australia. Similar vetting processes are used by other churches with song writing and recording traditions that support a global brand such as Bethel Music in California and Elevation Worship in North Carolina.

<sup>8</sup> Dave Perkins, "Music, Culture Industry, and the Shaping of Charismatic Worship: An Autobiographical/Conversational Engagement" in *The Spirit of Praise: Music and Worship in Global Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity*, ed. Monique Marie Ingalls and Amos Young, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Park, 2015), 230, argues that worship music has been "commodized" by a deluge of "culture industry," the collected output of "entertainment businesses" and "mass technology."

the rapid rate of stylistic change injected into CWM by the recording industry has become too voluminous and too accelerated for the average church to emulate and integrate. In response, contemporary worship choirs, like the genre's worship bands, are either caught between the perpetual conveyor belt of new songs and singing techniques in order to keep up, or the abandonment of cultural "relevance" by perpetuating yesterday's styles and increasingly aging worship songs. This dissertation will chart contemporary worship choirs along this response continuum, which accounts, in part for the lack of a unified or sustained tradition among contemporary worship choirs. In other words, it will show how each short-lived subgenre development within CWM necessitates the development of a new choral practice which exists almost exclusively for and within that particular subgenre.

This opening chapter will orient this study on contemporary worship choirs in three ways: one, by presenting a brief description of the ensemble through vignettes and musical examples that feature the four contemporary worship choirs which will be examined later in more detail; two, by differentiating contemporary worship choirs from the other two main types of North American church choirs, namely the traditional church choir and the black gospel choir; and, three, by establishing a working definition to differentiate the two types of contemporary worship choirs (the *praise and worship choir* and the *modern worship choir*) based on their varying activities within the contemporary worship genre.

### *Setting the Stage: Four Contemporary Worship Choirs*

To set the stage for this study, the following vignettes and musical examples offer a snapshot of four contemporary worship choirs in four contrasting environments. These choirs are the subjects of case studies provided in subsequent chapters, namely chapters two through five. Despite their divergent surroundings, each of these church choirs are exemplars of the *contemporary worship choir* which this study defines as follows:

*Contemporary worship choirs* are church choirs which function either as principal or subsidiary members of the contemporary worship band or contemporary worship ensemble. They serve the principal purposes of enlivening congregational participation in singing contemporary worship music, and occasionally for inspiring the congregation through the performance of choral anthems chiefly from the contemporary worship music genre.

#### Vignette 1: Christ Church (Brentwood, TN), Saturday Evening, December 2017

*At 6:47PM, amidst the hustle and bustle of a gathering audience to an oversold concert, the associate pastor of Christ Church takes to the platform to issue a welcome and gift giveaway. In a warm, conversational tone, he shares that this concert, "Christmas with the Christ Church Choir," began some twenty years ago in the mid-nineties and had become a Christmastime staple for the city of Nashville. Furthermore, the Christ Church Choir itself had begun way back in the mid-seventies, yet another twenty years before the inception of its acclaimed Christmas concert tradition. Over its several decades of existence, the choir has attracted a substantial number of national and international admirers and choral ministries; as a bass singer in the choir recalls to me during the break after the pre-concert rehearsal, "We've been invited to lead choral workshops all across the country, and even to many countries abroad. Since it's difficult to mobilize a choir of our size, we haven't been able to visit most places we've been invited to. Luckily, during most summers, choirs will often just come to us to visit and learn from us here in Nashville." After the associate pastor kindly asks us to "scootch" more closely together to make room for the growing audience, he begins to give away prizes to those who had travelled from the farthest destinations. In reply, shouts of "California, China, Oregon, England and India" are heard around the sanctuary over the escalating noise of the crowd. At 7:00PM, all becomes silent in anticipation of the first sounds of the concert program which features SATB choir, vocal soloists (who all sang in the choir as well), orchestra and rhythm section in a staggering display of musical diversity that seemingly echoed in part the diversity of the international audience in attendance. The concert includes modern contemporary worship selections, such as Chris Tomlin's "Noel," (2015) yet the musical gamut of the concert takes us on a journey far beyond modern contemporary worship, which includes grandiose symphonic-styled arrangements*

of pieces like “The Little Drummer Boy,” jazz arrangements of secular Christmas classics such as “Winter Wonderland,” and adaptations of intricately difficult gospelized versions of Christmas carols such as the “Joy to the World” arrangements by Broadway Inspirational Voices (2004). An excerpt of the contrapuntal climax of this particular adaptation is provided in figure 1.1 below.<sup>9</sup>

**Jubilant** ♩ = 90-92

The musical score is for four voices: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. It is in 4/4 time with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The tempo is marked 'Jubilant' with a quarter note equal to 90-92 beats per minute. The score consists of two systems. The first system has two measures. The Soprano part starts with a whole note E7 chord, followed by a half note G#4, a quarter note A4, and a half note B4. The Alto part has a whole note E4, followed by a half note F#4, a quarter note G#4, and a half note A4. The Tenor part has a whole note E3, followed by a half note F#3, a quarter note G#3, and a half note A3. The Bass part has a whole note E2, followed by a half note F#2, a quarter note G#2, and a half note A2. The lyrics for the first system are: Soprano: 'Sing joy! God's great joy! Let ev - e - ry - bod -'; Alto: 'Joy! God's joy!'; Tenor: 'Joy! Great joy!'; Bass: 'Great joy! Great joy! Ev - 'ry bod -'. The second system has two measures. The Soprano part starts with a whole note E7 chord, followed by a half note G#4, a quarter note A4, and a half note B4. The Alto part has a whole note E4, followed by a half note F#4, a quarter note G#4, and a half note A4. The Tenor part has a whole note E3, followed by a half note F#3, a quarter note G#3, and a half note A3. The Bass part has a whole note E2, followed by a half note F#2, a quarter note G#2, and a half note A2. The lyrics for the second system are: Soprano: '- y sing joy to the world.'; Alto: 'Let ev - e - ry - bod - y sing joy to the world.'; Tenor: 'Joy! Sing joy to the world.'; Bass: '- y joy, ev - 'ry - bod - y sing.'

Figure 1.1. An Excerpt of Christ Church Choir’s Adaptation of Broadway Inspirational Voices Gospelized Version of *Joy to the World*.

#### Vignette 2: Gateway Conference (Grapevine, TX), Tuesday Evening, October 2014

*The 4,000-seat worship auditorium is already brimming with anticipation an hour and a half before the culminating worship extravaganza event for the Gateway Conference. As the gathering continues to grow, a comedian rattles off Christian-themed jokes on a worship platform affixed with the quintessential designated*

<sup>9</sup> Christ Church’s staff arranger, Phil Nitz, created the transcription and adaptation of the Broadway Inspirational Voices’ gospel version of *Joy to the World* seen in figure 1.1. Phil’s role in Christ Church Choir’s ministry is discussed at length in Chapter two. The primary reworking executed by Phil was the addition of a bass line as shown in figure 1.1. This bass line allowed for the inclusion of Christ Church Choir’s bass section, a section which is often excluded in the SAT format commonly adopted by black gospel choirs and as featured by the arrangement by the Broadway Inspirational Voices. Broadway Inspirational Voices, Joseph Joubert, and Michael McIlroy, “Joy to the World,” recorded 2005, on *Great Joy: A Gospel Christmas*, Ghostlight Recordings, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/36rpQ9VhSpMrzM3LOA6w6D?si=JMKSgtuaTS2b1vyabFIbBA>.

front-central areas for worship leaders and vocalists, and mid-peripheral areas for guitarists, keyboardist, and caged drummer. Less typical are the numerous choral risers positioned deep center on the platform. As I slowly give up hope of finding a seat, I receive a text from a choir officer inviting me to their preservice rehearsal. There I find well over a hundred casually dressed young adults (primarily) in attendance partaking in what seemed less like a choir rehearsal and more like a seamless interweaving of ecstatic group prayer and the singing of songs from Gateway's latest live worship album, "Forever Yours" (2013) such as "Be Lifted Higher" and "All He Says I Am" (Figure 1.2 provides an excerpt from the climactic bridge of "All He Says I Am." In the top staff, the excerpt gives the primary melody sung by the worship leader. The bottom grand staff shows Gateway Choir's counter-melodic layer sung against the worship leader's primary melody. When the Gateway Choir is included on platform with the Gateway worship band, they typically add such countermelodies at the climaxes of worship songs.)<sup>10</sup> I ask a tenor near me if the rehearsal has actually begun. "Of course!" he says with a kind smile, yet with a tone that reveals a measure of confusion concerning my question. He goes on to clarify that rehearsals are often less about nailing the right harmonies (which they were doing wonderfully) and more about attuning their hearts to the Holy Spirit to allow true worship to emanate from their beings. Only then can the choir lead in what he describes as "authentic worship of God Almighty." During the service, whether the Gateway Choir is buried under lead vocals, electric guitars, and drum set, or projects moderately in the house mix through soaring descants, rhythmic vocalises, climactic shouts and moving a cappella sections, the choir remains as a consistent visual depiction of unbridled, joyous, animated singing. During the aftermath of the event, many congregants who stood with me in the back share their take on the extended worship set we had just experienced. With little to no prodding, they comment on the choral ministry in particular, which they found to be "novel and refreshing," "unique," "magnetic," and "full of worship-leading power." As questions abound concerning how Gateway managed to develop their choir, many express disappointment for not having chosen the choral sessions given earlier in the conference in favor of more "mainstream worship band-focused breakout sessions."

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<sup>10</sup> The choral parts shown in figure 1.2 were arranged by the first choral pastor of the Gateway choir, Kelly Allsopp, as well as by Gateway worship leader, Jill Brewer. Both Kelly and Jill's roles within Gateway's music ministry are discussed in chapter three. Gateway Choir and Anna Byrd, "All He Says I Am" recorded 2016, on *We Cry Out*, Integrity Music, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/4mhri7UeSN8JWa6pKOZcfQ?si=2eec839e23a24775>.

Figure 1.2. An Excerpt from Gateway’s Choral Arrangement of *All He Says I Am*.

### Vignette 3: Bayou City Fellowship (Cypress, TX), Weekend, January 2017

*Bayou City Fellowship, then, a two-campus non-denominational church north of Houston averaging 2,300 on a Sunday morning, decides in fall of 2016 to start a worship choir. They advertise the choir in their services and social media and create a sign-up option on the church mobile app where interested participants can register. The church leadership brings me in to rehearse and direct the new choral ensemble. On a late Saturday afternoon, after weeks of hype, anticipation, and eager registration, some of Bayou’s worship leaders and I meet with a varied, multigenerational group of about fifty enthusiastic churchgoers to prepare them to lead worship as a choir for three Sunday morning services the following day – all for the very first time. The newly minted choir huddles closely together on a slightly raised platform behind the band (which was usually reserved for the drum set) and sings modern contemporary worship songs, such as “Great are you Lord” (All Sons and Daughters 2013) and “O Praise the Name” (Hillsong 2015), from memory with high, full-bodied energy and rhythmic articulation. During the entire weekend, novelty, coupled with a tinge of anxiety, sustains a vividly tangible level of excitement that can be felt the whole church over. To most congregants that the Bayou worship leaders and I speak with afterwards, the choir’s impact on Sunday worship was palpable, and the volume of the congregation’s singing seemed patently louder than they had ever witnessed before. Since I had little idea of the collective vocal capacity of this new choir prior to this weekend, I arranged primarily simple choral parts that featured ample unison singing. However, by the third and final worship service that Sunday morning, the choir’s excitement had empowered them to such a degree that they all but demanded the addition of three-part choral harmonies to a modern contemporary worship version of the hymn “Jesus Paid It All” (Passion*

2006).<sup>11</sup> In roughly seven minutes during the frenzied pre-service transition time, the choir and I relish the added excitement of working out the desired parts in a pinch. An excerpt of these parts is given below in figure 1.3. In an exhilarated tone, one of the worship leaders commented after that third and final service, “What was that extra kick from the choir? It transformed the whole feel of that song!” After the post-service hugs, laughter and fellowship, the members of the choir return home enthusiastic and eagerly anticipating the time they might be called upon to help lead worship as a choir again.

Choir

Oh praise the One who paid my debt and raised this life up from the dead.

Figure 1.3. An Excerpt of Last-Minute Choral Harmonies for Passion’s Version of *Jesus Paid It All* Sung by the Bayou City Fellowship Choir.

Vignette 4: Breakaway at Texas A&M University (College Station, TX), Tuesday evening, January 2018

*On an early Tuesday evening at 5:30PM, I join a makeshift group of sixteen singers comprised of current students, prospective students, recent alumni, and even some college-aged singers unaffiliated with the university, to make our way through the hustle and bustle of the center of campus to arrive at the entrance to Kyle Field, the revered football stadium of Texas A&M University. Once inside, the group passes the visitor locker room area to take residence in a small equipment office in the basement of the stadium. The purpose of our gathering – to rehearse as a choir for Breakaway worship, a massive campus ministry which routinely draws the attendance and online viewership of several thousands of college students every Tuesday evening throughout the semester. As we focus to*

<sup>11</sup> The simple, intuitive choral parts shown in figure four represent the choral harmonies created by the BCF worship choir and me. The parts harmonize the modern contemporary-styled chorus section which Passion added to the verse-refrain structure of Elvina M. Hall’s original composition of *Jesus Paid It All*. Passion and Kristian Stanfill, “Jesus Paid It All,” recorded 2006, on *Passion: Everything Glorious*, Six Steps (SIX), streaming audio, <https://open.spotify.com/track/73EIpn5AcedCWPOmxWMxH9?si=8b6fa89e5a024069>. The addition of a modern styled chorus is a common arranging technique found in modern contemporary worship which infuses older hymns with the sensibilities of modern contemporary worship. Other examples of hymns which have been modernized by the addition of such choruses are Chris Tomlin’s *Amazing Grace* (*My Chains are Gone*) and Kari Jobe’s *Be Still My Soul* (*In You I Rest*).



*prepare five worship songs in a mere one-hour rehearsal, an additional 300+ student volunteers also work under a time crunch to prepare the stadium for Breakaway and the large influx of students. The worship set includes staple rock-pop styled modern worship songs such as “Worthy of Your Name” (Passion 2017) and “King of my Heart” (Bethel’s version released in 2017) as well as a recent homegrown modern contemporary worship song written and produced by Breakaway ministries entitled “Jesus, No Other Name.” However, the most unique selection and featured song that initiates the worship set was a remixed version of “Resurrecting” arranged by the songwriters at Elevation Worship and the urban contemporary gospel group, The Walls Group. As the choir situates itself on the large, professional, portable stage, they sing out the chorus of “Resurrecting,” – “Your Name is Victory. All Praise to Christ our King.” – in powerful, a cappella, mixed three- and four-part harmony to the patent and demonstrated excitement of the Breakaway production team and the premier worship leaders and instrumentalists of the worship band who had traveled from all over Texas, such as Austin Stone Church in Austin, TX, and Watermark Community Church in Dallas, TX, and even out-of-state such as from Passion Church in Atlanta. This a cappella choral rendering would serve as the first sounds of the worship set, setting the tone and tenor for the remainder of Breakaway that night. An excerpt of this choral introduction is provided in figure 1.4 below.<sup>12</sup>*

The vignettes and musical examples shown above feature four church choirs that are within the contemporary worship genre yet hailing from varied origins and environments, from the decade’s long lineage of the Christ Church Choir, to the younger mega church context of the Gateway Choir, to the local church setting of the intermittently performing Bayou City Fellowship Choir, to the college ministry environment of the Breakaway Choir. Each of these choirs belongs to a singular category of church choir, which this study will refer to as the *contemporary worship choir*. The contemporary worship choir, found primarily in charismatic or Pentecostal evangelical

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<sup>12</sup> I arranged the choral parts shown in figure 1.4 in fulfillment of my role as the director and arranger for the Breakaway Choir. My involvement with the choir is discussed later in throughout chapter five. Elevation Collective and The Walls Group, “Resurrecting,” recorded 2018, on *Evidence*, Elevation Worship Records, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/3eaduvfM8hqcN9h9nS3tDR?si=XGFONqeOQJCpWA9sZAHAtg>.

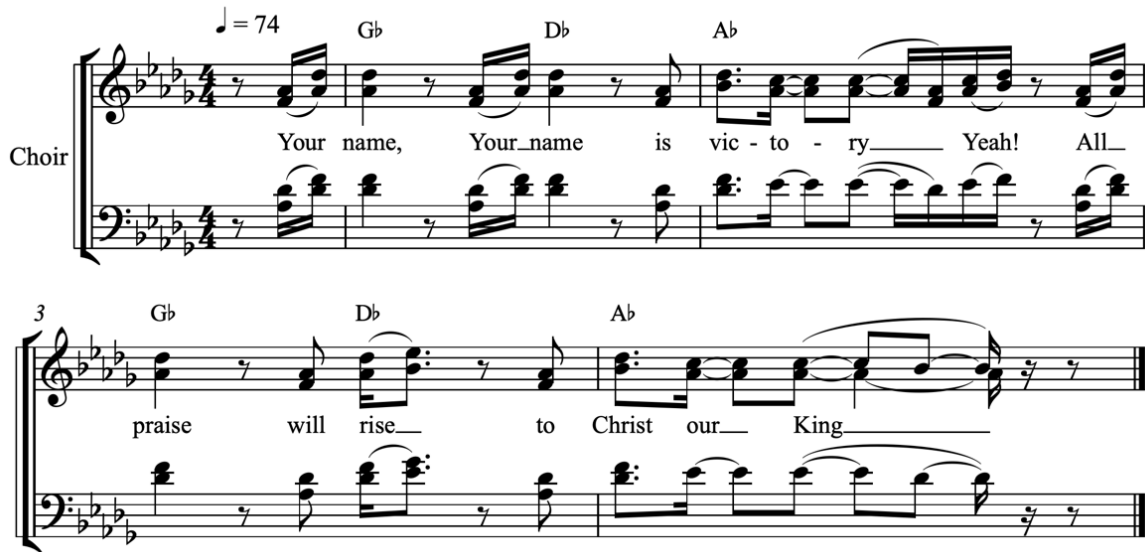


Figure 1.4. An Excerpt of Breakaway Choir’s A Cappella Choral Introduction Arrangement of Elevation Worship and The Walls Group’s Remixed Version of *Resurrecting*.

worship communities, is one of the three types of North American church choirs which include the traditional church choir associated with “traditional” Protestant worship and the black gospel choir.

The vibrancy and dynamism portrayed by the contemporary church choirs in the vignettes above defies the common presumption that contemporary worship is killing the church choir. As such, through the lens of these choirs, this dissertation aims to correct this presumption by examining how choirs contribute to the contemporary worship genre. Secondly, this study seeks to clarify how each type of church choir fits within the distinct subgenres of contemporary worship music in order to track whether the activity of church choirs along the genre’s timeline represents development, decline, or both.

The vignettes of the last three choirs, namely the church choirs at Gateway, Bayou City Fellowship, and Breakaway, imply significant differences in age, worship style, song selection, and function in worship from that of the first vignette of the Christ

Church Choir. These differences are underscored further by comparing the simple chordal style featured in the musical examples for the first three choirs to the performance-oriented polyphony of the Christ Church musical example. The sum of these differences indicates two types of choral ensembles amongst church choirs who sing contemporary worship music. The Christ Church Choir exemplifies what this dissertation suggests should be called the *praise and worship choir*, whereas the other three church choirs at Gateway, Bayou City Fellowship, and Breakaway illustrate what this dissertation suggests should be termed the *worship-leading choir*.<sup>13</sup> Figure 1.5 below summarizes the categorization of North American choirs proposed thus far.

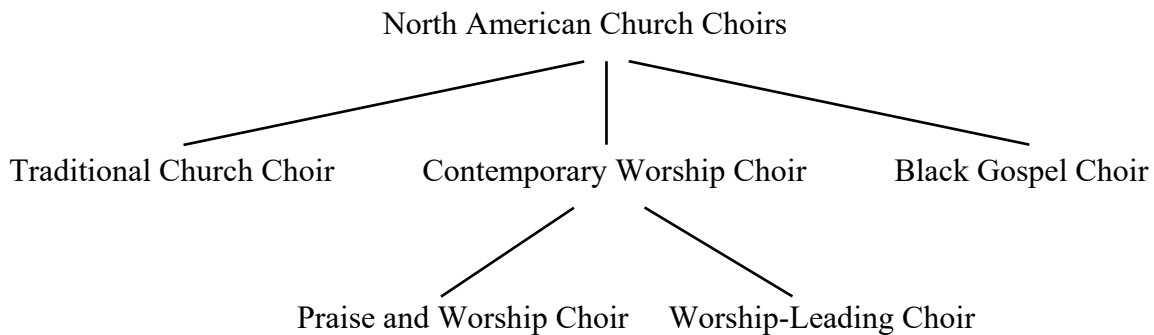


Figure 1.5. A Proposed Categorization of North American Church Choirs.

Before expounding on the foregoing typology of North American church choirs, it is first important to understand the context in which the Contemporary Worship Choir grew: the musical characteristics and scholarly depictions of Contemporary Worship Music.

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<sup>13</sup> The term *worship-leading choir* was first provided in Dave Williamson, *God's Singers: A Guidebook for the Worship Leading Choir in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Director's ed. Nashville, TN: in:ciite media, 2010).

## *Scholarship on Contemporary Worship Music*

Although there is to date no scholarship that specifically addresses the role of choirs in contemporary worship, this dissertation seeks to address this gap by drawing upon and contributing to the burgeoning scholarly literature on contemporary worship music.<sup>14</sup> By engaging scholarly literature on contemporary worship music,<sup>15</sup> the dissertation situates the development of contemporary worship choirs within a wider historical narrative that will lend context and perspective to the seeming resurgence of choral activity that occurred in the genre during the 2010s.

The academic field of CWM studies was described previously as a burgeoning field because the CWM genre itself is all but a few years over a half century old. Only within the last decade has a historical trajectory for the genre begun to come into focus. Just as CWM has borrowed and adapted much of its musical style from secular commercial music, so too has its emerging historical narrative been modeled after the

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<sup>14</sup> One notable exception is Monique Marie Ingalls, "Singing Heaven Down to Earth," in *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 72-105, which discusses the Unity Choir at the Urbana conference, a choir that is similar to the multicultural gospel choirs explored in Gerardo Martin, *Worship across the Racial Divide: Religious Music and the Multiracial Congregation*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Whereas Ingalls associates the Unity Choir with CWM and Marti seemingly identifies this choir with black gospel, this dissertation proposes a categorization of North American CWM choirs which positions multicultural choirs like the Unity Choir and the Brooklyn Tabernacle as well as choirs like the Christ Church Choir described above as *praise and worship choirs*. Praise and worship choirs are defined later in this chapter and illustrated in chapter two's case study on the Christ Church Choir. Differences between the praise and worship choir and black gospel choir are discussed briefly in chapter six.

<sup>15</sup> Such as Anna Elizabeth Nekola, "Between This World and the Next: The Musical 'Worship Wars' and Evangelical Ideology in the United States, 1960-2005" (PhD., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2009). Terry W. York, *America's Worship Wars*, (Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003). Swee-Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017). David Aaron Lemley, "Liturgies of word and turntable: Social and Sacramental Effectiveness of Contemporary Worship Music," (PhD., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2013). Monique Marie Ingalls, Carolyn Landau, and Thomas Wagner, *Christian Congregational Music* (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013). Monique Marie Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

roughly decade-by-decade progression of subgenres commonly used to frame the historical development of other genres of popular commercial music such as jazz and rock.<sup>16</sup> The subgenres of contemporary worship music within evangelical Christianity are now understood to have progressed from the Jesus music of the late 60's and 70's, to the praise and worship music of the 80's and 90's, to the emergence of modern worship around the turn of the century and continuing through the 2000's and 2010's.<sup>17</sup>

Although the catch-all usage of “contemporary” by church leaders and congregation members continues to perpetuate confusion amongst the three subgenres of contemporary worship music, the growing historical understanding of the genre, with its distinguishing nomenclature for various subgenres, allows for greater analytical precision in this study and in scholarship on contemporary worship music in general. However, to achieve greater focus and consensus, scholars have thus far focused necessarily on the exemplars of each subgenre, such as its most popular songs, artists, venues, and publishers, leaving many important developments, such as the role of contemporary worship choirs, “largely untitled.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Theo Cateforis, *The Rock History Reader*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York; London: Routledge, 2013). Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Monique M. Ingalls, Andrew Mall, and Anna E. Nekola, "Christian popular music, USA," *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2017, accessed February 25, 2022, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/c/christian-popular-music,-usa>. Monique Marie Ingalls, “Style Matters: Contemporary Worship Music and the Meaning of Popular Musical Borrowings,” *Liturgy* 32, no. 1, November 7, 2016: 7-15. Ruth and Lim have recently proposed a two-stream approach to contemporary worship. In tracing contemporary worship as a liturgical practice rather than a musical genre, they argue for the confluence of Pentecostal/charismatic and evangelical streams, Lester Ruth and Swee-Hong Lim, *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship: Understanding the Ideas That Reshaped the Protestant Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing), 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Swee-Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017), ix.

Additionally, much scholarship on pop-rock based Christian music has paid greater attention to contemporary Christian music (CCM) and its legitimacy in the marketplace of secular commercial music rather than on contemporary worship music (CWM) and its incarnation in corporate worship settings.<sup>19</sup> As such, the contemporary worship choirs featured in this study span across the local church, worship conference and worship concert, three primary sacred spaces in which CWM constructs and negotiates various religious identities.<sup>20</sup> It is likely that contemporary worship choirs have been keen participants in these critical identity-forming sacred spaces<sup>21</sup> and have likely contributed to a unique experience of religious identity formation through community building and effective, affective singing.<sup>22</sup>

Although a more thorough account of the historical narrative of CWM is still developing, there has been significant work done on the music itself. Many have

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<sup>19</sup> For example, the following two-volume history of Contemporary Christian Music (CCM), Bob Gersztyn, *Jesus Rocks the World: The Definitive History of Contemporary Christian Music*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Monique Marie Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>21</sup> As the opening vignettes demonstrated, the worship-leading choir at Gateway was a significant contributor to their major annual worship conference, the praise and worship choir was featured in a worship concert, and the worship-leading choirs at Breakaway and Bayou City Fellowship were involved in local worship gathering. Beyond the choirs featured in this dissertation, contemporary worship choirs have collaborated with worship artists like Michael W. Smith, Michael W. Smith, “Michael W. Smith and 250-voice choir perform at Juneau,” July 14, 2014, accessed September 1, 2017, <http://michaelwsmith.com/michael-w-smith-and-250-voice-choir-perform-in-juneau/>.

<sup>22</sup> Gordon Alban Adnams, “The Experience of Congregational Singing: An Ethno-Phenomenological Approach,” (PhD., University of Alberta, 2008) as well as Gordon Alban Adnams, “‘Really Worshipping,’ not ‘Just Singing’” in *Christian Congregational Music: Performance, Identity and Experience*, ed. Monique M. Ingalls, Carolyn Landau, and Tom Wagner (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2013), 185-200, detail categories of ineffective singing – “meaningless words,” “un-minded singing” and “unpassionate singing” and classifications of effective congregational singing as “feeling the word,” “familiar words” and “repetition.”

commented on the sacramental properties of corporate worship involving CWM<sup>23</sup> as well the varied ethical dynamics experienced by worshippers within CWM spaces.<sup>24</sup> Others have sought out a thorough theological analysis of its lyrical content<sup>25</sup> and still others have explored the use of digital branding and marketing for the purpose of enhancing congregational participation.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, the global presence and impact of the genre appears to be a rising area of interest within the field.<sup>27</sup> Despite these many viable, crucial vantage points on CWM, none of this work has interfaced with the contemporary worship choir.

The worship wars provide another critical area of research on contemporary worship music. Although many publications on the worship wars abounded during its most tense period in the 1990s and early 2000s, a period which coincided with the shift within the contemporary worship music genre from the praise and worship subgenre to

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<sup>23</sup> Sarah Koenig, “This Is My Daily Bread: Toward a Sacramental Theology of Evangelical Praise and Worship,” *Worship* 82, no. 2 (2008): 141–61. David Aaron Lemley, “Liturgies of word and turntable: Social and Sacramental Effectiveness of Contemporary Worship Music” (PhD., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> Mark Porter, “Moving Between Musical Worlds: Worship Music, Significance and Ethics in the Lives of Contemporary Worshippers,” in *Christian Congregational Music: Performance, Identity and Experience*, ed. Monique M. Ingalls, Carolyn Landau, and Tom Wagner (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2013), 201–216. Nathan Myrick and Mark Porter ed., *Ethics and Christian Musicking* (Milton: Taylor and Francis, 2021).

<sup>25</sup> Robert Woods and Brian Walrath eds., “The Message in the Music: Studying Contemporary Praise & Worship,” Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007. Nelson Cowan, “‘Heaven and Earth Collide’: Hillsong Music’s Evolving Theological Emphases,” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 39, no. 1/2 (March 2017): 78–104, accessed February 22, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700747-03901001>. Martyn Percy, “Charismatic hymnody,” *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*, Canterbury Press, 2010, accessed February 22, 2022, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/c/charismatic-hymnody>.

<sup>26</sup> Tanya Riches and Tom Wagner, “The Evolution of Hillsong Music: From Australian Pentecostal Congregation into Global Brand,” *Australian Journal of Communication* 39, no. 1 (2012), 17–36. Anna Elizabeth Nikola and Thomas Wagner, *Congregational Music-Making and Community in a Mediated Age*, Ashgate Congregational Music Studies Series. Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Monique Marie Ingalls and Amos Young ed, *The Spirit of Praise: Music and Worship in Global Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015).

the modern worship subgenre, the first-hand experiential documentation by York, the sociological, theological, and historical analysis offered by Nekola and Dueck's ethnographic account of the meaning and effect of the worship wars within Canadian Mennonite churches have arisen as standard accounts.<sup>28</sup>

After noting the metaphorical oddity of the term “worship wars” and grounding the conflict as an aftermath realization of the rampant cultural shifts rooted in the sixties, York goes on to cover three broad areas in his work, namely the “winds” or instigators of the war, the war itself and, finally a section on the negotiation of peace. Amongst the various influences he claims triggered the war, he places the para-church Youth Movement, with its youth musicals – which may likely have been among the first instances of choral singing within CWM and CCM. At the end of the millennium, Edwards sought to “right the ship” by denouncing the youth musical as a hindrance to true choral singing and promoting the riches to be found in the traditional Western approach to youth choirs.<sup>29</sup>

In the second section of York's text, he describes the tenuous journey of CCM and CWM songs into the traditional church choir as having passed warily through the enthusiastic contemporary soloist, who would share heart-felt, performative renditions of the latest songs as special music items during corporate worship, very much akin to the choral anthem. It is reasonable to assume that this occurrence is among the first that fused

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<sup>28</sup> Terry W. York, *America's Worship Wars*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003). Anna Elizabeth Nekola, “Between This World and the Next: The Musical ‘Worship Wars’ and Evangelical Ideology in the United States, 1960-2005,” (PhD., University of Wisconsin–Madison, WI, 2009). Jonathan Dueck, *Congregational Music, Conflict, and Community*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>29</sup> Randy Edwards, *Revealing Riches and Building Lives: Youth Choir Ministry in the New Millennium* (Fenton, MO: Morning Star Music Pub, 1999).



traditional church choirs and their traditional choral arrangers with CWM and has continued to the present day as evidenced by the choral catalogues of leading publishers of choral sheet music for the church.<sup>30</sup>

For Nekola, the causes and effects of the worship wars extend far beyond the cultural shifts of the sixties and the walls of the church, respectively, into matters of far reaching epistemological, theological, political, and sociological import. Although this dissertation will remain within the church, and more minutely, within its worship music practice, the broad and profound strokes charted by Nekola suggest that the seemingly simple act of singing within a contemporary worship choir, and experiencing this ensemble in corporate worship, may likely resonate on critical matters of contention and identity. She considers these issues to be both ancient and insoluble, and so, although she admits the particularly severe, *sui generis* intensity of the wars over worship in the 90s and early 2000s, she also claims this period to be indelibly connected to all past worship conflicts as well as all worship schisms which will inevitably occur in the future.

Among the irresolvable tensions she explores is one surrounding the identity of the church's music as either an evangelical tool or as a facilitator of corporate worship.<sup>31</sup> Since contemporary choirs are commonly considered powerful enliveners of congregational singing, it is possible that they may serve as a counterbalance, lending to contemporary worship music and its strong evangelical objective a presentation within corporate worship that promotes and facilitates congregational participation.

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<sup>30</sup> Publishers such as Word, Lifeway, and Hope feature extensive lines which cater to church choirs that engage CWM.

<sup>31</sup> Tension between evangelism and worship was also explored extensively in Marva Dawn, *Reaching out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B Eerdmans, 1995).

Another tension scrutinized by both Nekola and Dueck is the struggle for religious authority between the body of ecclesial leaders and the individual worshipper. Presently, the empowerment of individual choice in the “free religious marketplace”<sup>32</sup> coupled with the emphasis on personal conversion and religious experience projected by the evangelical theology undergirding most CWM,<sup>33</sup> has seemed to tip the power balance in favor of the individual. Within this spiritual environment, the authority of corporate worship has become less central, and now hovers only ever so slightly over the myriad church related activities outside of Sunday worship. The fact that congregants are routinely told to ignore those around them during corporate worship to facilitate their focus on Jesus may lead to an interpretation of corporate worship as just one of a host of spiritual activities whose primary purpose is to enhance the authority of spiritual individualism. The rise of the solo singer-songwriter worship leader in CWM also attests to this ascendancy of the self that now powers the genre through prevalent individualism. However, worshippers do gather *together* around CWM, its solo leaders, and its evangelical brand of worship. The nature of these assemblies, and particularly that of the contemporary worship choir, may conceivably reveal distinct attributes of evangelical group identity. In some instances, the contemporary worship choir may be interpreted as a challenger to this rampant individualism by including more voices, literally and figuratively.

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<sup>32</sup> Usunier, Jean-Claude Usunier and Jörg Stolz, *Religions as Brands: New Perspectives on the Marketization of Religion and Spirituality* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014). Lynn Schofield Clark, *Religion, Media, and the Marketplace* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill. Intervarsity Press Academic, 2006).

Studies on the worship wars and the lived implications of the war itself are not isolated to the last decade of the 1990s and 2000s, however. In 2011, Mark Galli declared the war as ended, albeit still within a “tense truce.”<sup>34</sup> Scholarship also continues its examination of the war, or more specifically, the so-called post-war, as recently as the thirty-second volume of *Liturgy*, which was released in early 2017, and included articles such as “The Curious Longevity of the Traditional–Contemporary Divide: Mainline Musical Choices in Post–Worship War America” by Deborah Justice, and “Worship in an Age of Reconstruction: Introduction” by Lester Ruth.<sup>35</sup> Although these titles suggest that the war has ended while declaring that the church is dealing with the residue or aftermath of the war, small scuffles and skirmishes continue to impact local contexts.

This study considers the contemporary choir a particularly rich site in which the tensions of the worship wars are still being played out and where post-war currents can be observed. These choirs often combine disparate singers from multiple generations, who invariably import their diverse proclivities, beliefs, and backgrounds into the fabric of the ensemble. Many singers who gravitate to contemporary worship choirs once sang in traditional church choirs, black gospel choirs, various youth choirs and/or university chorales, and have developed a strong nostalgic yearning for choral singing. After all, the choir is commonly considered a hallmark ensemble of the so-called “blended” worship style. It is feasible then that the choir continues to blend various responses and positions precipitated by the worship wars.

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<sup>34</sup> Mark Galli, “The End of Worship Wars,” *Christianity Today*, March 11, 2011, accessed September 8, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2011/march/endworshipwars.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Lester Ruth et al, “Worship in the Age of Reconstruction,” (Washington, D.C.: *Liturgy* 32, volume 1, 2017).

### *The Unsung Role of the Church Choir in CWM*

By defining and describing evangelical contemporary worship choirs, this dissertation also aims to lend these ensembles much needed independence and separation as a clear subcategory within the North American church choir that stands alongside more widely recognized subcategories, namely the traditional church choir and the black gospel choir.

Admittedly, the underrepresentation of contemporary worship choirs in scholarly literature and popular information sources on CWM may reasonably reflect the comparatively low representation of such choirs within the genre's best-selling musical commodities when compared to the representation of solo artists, megachurch worship bands, and the like. Nonetheless, a basic assertion of this dissertation is that contemporary worship choirs have contributed and continue to contribute significantly to how CWM is experienced in numerous worship settings, such as the disparate settings featured in the four opening vignettes above. The power of this choral prototype to enhance congregational participation with contemporary worship is evidenced by the four case study choirs, as well as others within corporate worship services at a number of prominent modern contemporary churches who also employ church choirs alongside their

worship bands.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, these choirs contribute to CWM's commercial culture through choral resources, such as promotional recordings, practice recordings and sheet music produced by publishers like Praise Charts and Word, which cater specifically to the worship-leading choir niche market.<sup>37</sup>

Songwriters, influential churches, worship bands, recording artists, recording labels, and leading publishers have generated the worship songs which have molded CWM since its inception in the late 1960s, yet this document seeks to bring attention to the unique contribution that choirs in contemporary worship have had to the output and significance of the genre. For instance, few would deny the palpable influence and sustained output of the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir, arguably the most widely recognized standalone praise and worship church choir in the CWM genre.<sup>38</sup> These choirs also produce contemporary worship music in conjunction with contemporary worship artists.

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<sup>36</sup> The following YouTube videos feature CWM choirs other than those featured in this dissertation that are at prominent evangelical megachurches. Lakewood Worship, "Night of Worship and Prayer," Lakewood Worship, Houston, TX, October 4, 2019, YouTube video, 1:39:27, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VCXtcDU47xw>. Passion City Worship, "Let the Light In" Passion City Church, Atlanta, GA, June 7, 2020, YouTube video, 5:53, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTFppWToZbU>. Elevation Worship, "My Testimony: Live," Elevation Worship, Charlotte, NC, April 3, 2020, YouTube video, 4:51, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7NyH9mDYEck&list=PLGvkktFFaDOM9gpvY5eojl0BFFULYcoxc&index=1>. Austin Stone Worship, "King of Love: Austin Stone Worship Live at Austin Music Hall," Austin Stone Worship, Austin, TX, January 15, 2014, YouTube video, 4:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WsHyhvqs74>. Examples can also be found among smaller CWM churches as shown by the following YouTube videos. Christ Fellowship, "Christ Fellowship" Nick Bowen, Kingsport, TN, March 6, 2018, YouTube video, 2:19 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYgZpVlwBGY> (The choir can be viewed at timestamp 1:01). Highland Baptist Worship, "Sunday Morning Gathering," HBCWaco, Waco, TX, November 14, 2021, YouTube video, 1:14:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxp8Om2sNIQ&t=1693s>.

<sup>37</sup> One example of the resources generated by CWM publishers that are geared towards the worship choir market is the following post on Praise Chart's website which provides the top sixty songs in their library used by their worship choir clientele, "Top Songs for Worship Choirs," Praise Charts, October 30, 2017, accessed January 7, 2018, <https://www.praisecharts.com/blog/top-songs-for-worship-choir/>.

<sup>38</sup> In chapter two, the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir is discussed in more detail in conjunction with the Christ Church Choir.

For example, iconic artists Michael W. Smith and Tommy Walker have routinely pursued live, onstage collaborations with praise and worship choirs throughout their careers.<sup>39</sup> Shane & Shane, arguably the most prolific contemporary worship artists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century whose extensive output exemplifies aspects of both the praise and worship and modern era of contemporary worship, partner considerably with the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir.<sup>40</sup> In recordings of contemporary worship squarely within the genre's modern era, the sound of the worship-leading choir can also be found.<sup>41</sup>

Beyond the impact that contemporary worship choirs have had and continue to have on evangelical worship services, recordings of contemporary worship music, and niche markets that provide resources for such choirs, this document focuses on these ensembles at a time when the latest contemporary worship choral ensemble, the worship-leading choir, seems to be emerging more frequently since the 2010s than they were in the 2000s. This apparent increase in choral activity has also been observed by

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<sup>39</sup> Examples of such live collaborations include Michael W. Smith's appearance with the praise and worship choir at First Baptist Dallas, First Baptist Dallas, "'Agnus Dei' with Michael W. Smith & The First Dallas Choir & Orchestra," First Baptist Dallas, Dallas, TX, YouTube video, 6:43, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=db0t\\_NUq5bw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=db0t_NUq5bw), and Tommy Walker's "Generations Hymns 2" album which he recorded live with two worship choirs, the Generations Gospel Choir at Christian Assembly in Los Angeles, California and the Community Bible Church Choir in San Antonio, TX, Tommy Walker, "Generation Hymns," Tommy Walker Ministries, Los Angeles, CA, March 21, 2014, YouTube video, 9:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLjZxS9nDNo&list=PLPGu26Phm0qnZp752E9MZnWY9-K8P9mMg>.

<sup>40</sup> Shane & Shane and the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir, "Psalm 23 (Surely Goodness & Mercy) – Brooklyn Tabernacle LIVE," Shalom Music, July 27, 2021, 6:42, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgyXUhw9Ie8>.

<sup>41</sup> One example is the modern contemporary worship song, *Your Great Name*, whose most recognized recording was by modern contemporary worship artist Natalie Grant in 2010. The recording includes strong choral harmonies in the final chorus and a pronounced choral vocalise in the preceding bridge as well as the tag which concludes the final chorus. Natalie Grant, "Your Great Name," recorded 2010, on *Love Revolution*, Curb Records, streaming audio, accessed October 23, 2018, [https://open.spotify.com/track/5pdYFUzu94cFVCqOFCd3lk?si=1RwtBKwwT\\_moL0zdKv\\_hEw](https://open.spotify.com/track/5pdYFUzu94cFVCqOFCd3lk?si=1RwtBKwwT_moL0zdKv_hEw).

contemporary choir arranger and publisher, Dr. Luke Gambill. In a personal interview in 2017, Gambill stated that:

“Most people have assumed for quite some time that contemporary worship is killing the church choir, however, now, more than ever, there are actually more churches—cutting-edge, modern churches—that also have worship choirs. They find it hard to believe me when I say that Passion Church in Atlanta has a worship choir.”<sup>42</sup>

Further supporting the notion that worship-leading choirs may be experiencing a surge in the 2010 decade is that the worship-leading choir at Passion City Church (Atlanta, Georgia), which Dr. Gambill referenced above, as well as the three worship-leading choirs illustrated in the opening vignettes, namely the choirs at Gateway, Bayou City Fellowship, and Breakaway, began within the 2010 decade. Seemingly responding to this flurry of activity of worship-leading choirs, Praise Charts, a major supplier associated with modern contemporary worship resources, introduced their choral line of products and music scores in November 2018.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, throughout the 2010s, various websites geared towards providing resources for contemporary worship have brought about an apparent proliferation of online articles, blogs, and podcast episodes on modern

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<sup>42</sup> Luke Gambill, interview by author, Brentwood, TN, December 1, 2017. At the time of this interview, Luke Gambill served as the artistic director of Brentwood Benson publishing, a company that once was a leading publisher of music for contemporary worship choirs. In this role, he facilitated the publication of choral music by two of the choirs in this study, namely Christ Choir and the Gateway Choir. Luke Gambill’s role with these two choirs is given in chapter 2 and chapter 3.

<sup>43</sup> The following link on Praise Charts website contains the blog post introducing their choral line, “Introducing the Praise Charts Choral Collection,” Praise Charts, November 2, 2018, accessed January 14, 2019, <https://www.praisecharts.com/blog/introducing-the-praisecharts-choral-collection/>.

contemporary worship choirs which have elicited notable discourse in the form of online comments and responses, a portion of which will be cited throughout this dissertation.<sup>44</sup>

Another significant occurrence of the worship-leading choir within the 2010s is the “Fan Choir” at the Dove Awards, a major annual award ceremony for both contemporary worship music and contemporary gospel music. Begun at the forty-seventh award proceedings in 2016, the fan choir allows attendees special backstage passes as well as the opportunity to sing on stage alongside the featured performing worship artist. Since 2016, some of the participating artists have included Steven Curtis Chapman, Reba McEntire, and Big Daddy Weave. The first two initial Dove Award Fan Choirs were organized by True North Presents, a company which specializes in producing Christian concerts that combine renowned gospel and contemporary artists with full orchestras and large choirs in grand venues such as Carnegie Hall. As with the foregoing observation, True North Presents is also a product of the 2010s, launching in 2009 and beginning their concert series in 2010.<sup>45</sup> The block quotes below capture the excitement of two participants of the 2019 Dove Awards Fan Choir in an exchange

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<sup>44</sup> Jonathon Jonas, “Choirs in Modern Worship,” *Experiencing Worship*, September 21, 2010, accessed March 3, 2017, <https://www.experiencingworship.com/articles/general/2015-10-choirs-in-modern-worship.html>. Mark Condon, “Do We Still Need Choirs?” *The Worship Corner*, accessed February 17, 2017, <https://twocorner.wordpress.com/2012/08/29/do-we-still-need-choirs-by-mark-condon/>. Bob Kauflin, “Choirs in Worship,” *Worship Matters*, June 6, 2008, accessed December 29, 2018, <https://worshipmatters.com/2008/06/26/choirs-in-worship/>. Wisdom Moon, “Leading with a Choir – Michael McNeal & Charles Billingsby,” *We are Worship*, March 24, 2016, accessed April 7, 2019, <https://www.weareworship.com/learning/articles/we-are-worship-podcast-22-leading-worship-with-a-choir-michael-neale-and-charles-billingsley/>. Vince Wilcox, “The Critical Importance of Church Choirs,” *Discover Worship*, October 10, 2017, accessed December 2, 2020, <http://blog.discoverworship.com/articles/the-case-for-importance-of-church-choir>. Greg Brewton, “Fourteen Reasons to Have a Worship Choir,” *Worship Leader*, March 20, 2016, accessed May 2, 2018, <https://worshipleader.com/spiritual-development/team-leadership/14-reasons-to-have-a-worship-choir/>.

<sup>45</sup> The following link on True North Presents’ website gives all their past events including the 2016 and 2017 fan choir events at the Dove Awards, “Past Events,” True North Presents, accessed September 10, 2018, <https://www.truenorthpresents.com/past-events>.



posted on the Discover Worship blog in response to an article entitled, “The Critical Importance of Church Choirs.”<sup>46</sup> The posts also bear evidence to the vibrancy of the praise and worship church choir ministries in which they take part.

Alicia

9/14/2019, 7:50:02 PM

“I’m a proud member of Green Acres Baptist Church Celebration Choir in Tyler, Texas, and they are a family like no other! Rehearsals on Wednesday evenings are the best part of my week, and worshipping on Sunday mornings together brings us right into the presence of God. We just got back from a 260-member-strong choir tour in Italy and a large group from our choir is headed to Nashville in October to participate in a concert celebrating the Dove awards. Choir is not dead yet and never will if we have anything to say about it!”

Cathy

9/17/2019, 2:49:30 PM

“I will be in Nashville too. I’m so excited for the opportunity to sing praise with a large choir. I sing with the Florida Worship Choir and Orchestra too. There is nothing like a choir to bring out passion and emotion in our churches and other venues when the opportunities arise. See you at the Ryman!”

### *The North American Choral Landscape: A New Church Choir Typology*

In figure 1.6 below, this chapter now revisits the chart which was devised to make sense of the choral landscape within 21<sup>st</sup> century North America. A church choir within the North American context is commonly understood to be a vocal ensemble that sings primarily within the context of corporate church worship services, and less so in other worship gatherings such as Christian concerts and conferences. As shown in figure 1.6, in North America, the three most conspicuous choral traditions within the church are the

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<sup>46</sup> This exchange can be found in the comment section of the following post on the Discover Worship website, Vince Wilcox, “The Critical Importance of Church Choirs,” Discover Worship, October 10, 2017, accessed December 2, 2020, <http://blog.discoverworship.com/articles/the-case-for-importance-of-church-choir>.

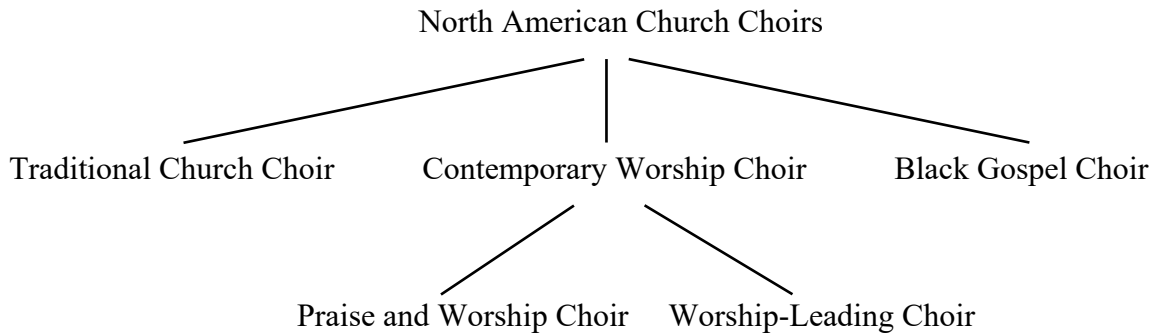


Figure 1.6. A Proposed Categorization of North American Church Choirs.

traditional church choir, which is associated with traditional worship,<sup>47</sup> the black gospel choir, which is connected to Pentecostal worship contexts,<sup>48</sup> and the contemporary worship choir commonly affiliated with charismatic evangelical communities. This dissertation recognizes two subtypes within contemporary worship’s choral category, the first occurrence being the *praise and worship choir* and the latest, more recent occurrence being the *worship-leading choir*. There are most certainly subtypes within the North

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<sup>47</sup> The worship style of traditional worship in North America is described as “formal” revolving around music led by a traditional church choir and pipe organ, pastors and music leaders in liturgical garb, and congregational use of printed bulletins and hymnals. An apt description of North American traditional worship can be found in Deborah Justice, “Mainline Worship and Contemporary Versus Traditional Worship Music,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and World Christianities*, Jonathan Dueck and Suzel Ana Reily ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, January 2015), 488.

<sup>48</sup> Ovell Hamilton, *Sanctified Revolution: The Church of God in Christ: A History of African-American Holiness* (Itapira, SP, Brazil: UPBooks, 2021) highlights the many influential gospel musicians who emanated from the Church of God in Christ (C.O.G.I.C) Pentecostal denomination, the world’s second largest African-American Christian institution. Amos Yong and Estrela Alexander, “Crossing Over Jordan: Navigating the Music of Heavenly Bliss and Earthly Desire in the Lives and Careers of Three Twentieth-Century African American Holiness-Pentecostal “Crossover” Artists” In *Afro-Pentecostalism Black Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in History and Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2011, details the Holiness-Pentecostal gospel roots of artists Sam Cooke, Donny Hathway, and Marvin Gaye and their crossover journeys into secular music. Melvin L Butler, “Performing Pentecostalism: Music, Identity, and the Interplay of Jamaican and African American Styles,” In *Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World: Rituals and Remembrances*, Mamadou Diouf and Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo ed Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 41-54, and Ekaette Clement Udok and Adeola Funmilayo Odunuga, “Music and Pentecostalism: The Nigerian experience,” *American Research Insitute for Policy Development* 5, no. 1 (2016): 52-60, both describe the transnational flow of African-American Pentecostal gospel music to Jamaica and Nigeria.

American traditional church choir and black gospel choir, as well as numerous hybrid church choirs which merge the choral types and their associated worship styles represented in figure 1.6, however exploration of these subtypes and hybrids is beyond the purview of this study due to its expressed focus on choral activity within the genre of contemporary worship music.<sup>49</sup>

The foregoing classifications and titles assigned to the various North American church choirs in this study tether each choral group to its predominant worship style and genre of worship music, however they are not intended to express characteristics exclusive to those choirs. For instance, classifying the more recent choral subtype within CWM as the *worship-leading* choir does not mean to assert that the other North American church choirs do not *lead worship*. Rather, the label, *worship-leading choir*, simply identifies the singular function of this church choir within its modern CWM context. Likewise, few would claim that *traditional* church choirs are the only church choirs that sing from a chancel or that these choirs are the only type of church choir that perform traditional worship music such as sacred choral music within or derivative of the Western classical tradition. Similarly, few would assert that *black gospel* choirs are the only type of church choir that sings gospel music nor that they are the only North

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<sup>49</sup> For a description of American traditional church choirs as well as their historical precedents, see David Music, "The Singing School, The Oxford Movement, and the Church Choir in America," *The Choral Journal* 48, no. 12, 2008: 32-29. Leonard Ellinwood, *The History of American Church Music* (New York: Morehouse-Gorham Co., 1953). John Ogasapian. *Church Music in America, 1620-2000*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007). The following two sources illustrate the black gospel choir and track its history, Robert M. Marovich, *A City Called Heaven: Chicago and the Birth of Gospel Music* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 71-111, 260-280. Viv Broughton. *Black Gospel: An Illustrated of the Gospel Sound* (Poole, Dorset, England: Blandford Press), 1985.

American church choir in which black church singers may be found. Finally, few likely believe that the *praise and worship choir* is the only church choir to facilitate expressions of praise or worship within church worship services, or that they are the only church choir type to sing worship songs and choral anthems from CWM's praise and worship era.

Common terms that are used to describe choral ensembles within contemporary worship music are *praise choir*, *worship choir*, *celebration choir*, and *praise and worship choir*. This document utilizes the latter term to describe CWM's first choral type since it tethers these ensembles to the praise and worship subgenre, the era of CWM which these choirs are most associated. Praise and worship choir categorizes choirs like the Christ Church choir described above, the Prestonwood Choir in Plano, Texas,<sup>50</sup> and the celebrated Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir in Brooklyn, New York.<sup>51</sup>

The term *worship-leading choir*, the name proposed for CWM's second and more recent choral type, is far less known than terms like praise choir or worship choir. The name of this newcomer to the CWM choir family was coined by the late choir director and arranger of contemporary worship music, Dave Williamson, in his how-to manual entitled *God's Singers: A Guidebook for the Worship Leading Choir in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.<sup>52</sup> Williamson's term is suggested in this dissertation because he invented the term in the 2010s, squarely within the era of *modern* contemporary worship – the style of

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<sup>50</sup> "The Prestonwood Choir," Prestonwood, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://prestonwood.org/connect/music-worship/adult-choir/>.

<sup>51</sup> "Music," The Brooklyn Tabernacle, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://www.brooklyntabernacle.org/music/>

<sup>52</sup> Dave Williamson, *God's Singers: A Guidebook for the Worship Leading Choir in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Director's ed. Nashville, TN: in:ciite media, 2010).

worship with which the churches and ministries at Gateway, Bayou City Fellowship, and Breakaway affiliate. Due to the relative recentness of the term worship-leading choir, it is far less known or recognized in charismatic evangelical spaces than terms like praise choir and worship choir. To further distinguish the *praise and worship choir* and the *worship-leading choir*, the section which follows provides a definition for each ensemble and explicates the key terms within each definition. The differences set forth by these definitions and explications are then illustrated more fully in chapters two through five by way of case studies that depict these two types of choirs in contemporary worship.

Before embarking on defining and explicating each of contemporary worship's choral ensembles, it should be noted that although the foregoing categorization of North American choirs is driven by widely recognized genres and subgenres within North American churches, many choirs may occasionally step outside of the stylistic norms of their affiliated genre or even do so with such frequency which may prove them intractable to a singular classification. Metamorphosis from formal, traditional choral types to informal choirs in contemporary worship also plays a part in the obfuscation of choral categories,<sup>53</sup> as does hybridity from the incorporation of numerous genres as was shown by the vast styles of music featured in the vignette above of the Christ Church Choir's Christmas concert. This variance in choral ensemble and style is due in part to the uniqueness and changeability of each worshipping body's musical palette, the proclivities of church music directors and worship leaders, and the various expressions of choral

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<sup>53</sup> The transition from formal to informal church choirs is observed in Doug McComas, "The Changing Role of the Choir in Worship," April 8, 2013, accessed June 2, 2019, <https://blogs.jwpepper.com/the-changing-role-of-the-choir-in-worship/>. Strategies for promoting the transition from formal to informal choirs are given in Kenny Lamm, "Transitioning – Part 8 – Cast Vision for the New Role of the Choir," accessed June 2, 2019, <https://www.renewingworshipnc.org/transitioning-8/>.

singing which singers in church choirs may seek to take part. The opening vignette for the Breakaway Choir also illustrated this choral fluctuation. Although this choir's repertoire was predominantly from the modern subgenre of contemporary worship, they also included a remixed, "gospelized" version of Elevation worship's *Resurrecting*, an excerpt of which was given in figure four. And as the Breakaway Choir case study in chapter four will illustrate, this choir would incorporate elements of the black gospel choral ensemble at subsequent worship events.

### *Definitions and Explications of Contemporary Worship's Two Types of Choral Ensembles*

The definitions of CWM's two types of choral ensembles given below aim to further clarify these ensembles beyond the illustrations given in the opening vignettes as well as lend context to the four case studies which follow in the next four chapters. To ground the contemporary worship choir in its origin and historical precedent, the first case study depicts the choir at Christ Church, an example of the genres' first choral ensemble, the *praise and worship choir*. Yet, since this study's focus is on CWM's most recent church choir, the *worship-leading choir*, three case studies are devoted to this ensemble that span chapters three through five, namely the choirs at Gateway, Bayou City Fellowship, Breakaway, respectively. To sharpen the intent and meaning of each definition, their key phrases are italicized and then explicated in the prose that follows.

*Praise and worship choirs* are church choirs that function as *principal members* of the *contemporary worship ensemble*. They serve the *dual* purposes of enlivening *congregational participation* with *praise and worship styled CWM* and *inspiring the congregation* through the performance of *praise and worship styled choral anthems*.

*Worship-leading choirs* are church choirs that function as *subsidiary members* of the *contemporary worship band* for the *sole* purpose of enlivening the *participation of the congregation* mainly with *modern CWM*.

### *Contemporary Worship Music – From Praise and Worship to Modern Worship*

The most salient distinguishing characteristic that separates the praise and worship choir and the worship-leading choir from the other North American church choirs is the genre of congregational song from which they derive: *Contemporary worship music* (CWM), a rock-pop derived genre of congregational song. The repertoire and style of contemporary worship choirs exudes a penchant for the “present-day” and thus exhibits a bias for “current” and “culturally relevant” phenomenon as intimated in the term “contemporary” of their genre’s namesake. As such, the standards for the repertoire of contemporary worship choirs are often more acutely “of the present” than those of traditional church choirs or black gospel choirs which routinely sing worship music that is several decades-old or even centuries-old. Although the level of contemporaneity of style and song selection differs between praise and worship choir and the worship-leading choir, they both differ more significantly from the traditional church choir whose repertoire is drawn primarily from hymns and sacred choral music associated with or derivative of the art music of the western European classical tradition, and also the black gospel choir whose repertoire stems from spirituals as well as gospel songs, hymns, and anthems from the traditional and contemporary gospel eras.

The difference between the two contemporary worship choirs relates to distinctions in style periods of contemporary worship music itself. Worship-leading choirs often sing modern CWM songs exclusively or at least predominantly, often emphasizing the latest song releases of the genre, usually within the last year or two. On

the other hand, the praise and worship choir largely sings older CWM songs and anthems from the praise and worship era (c. 1980–2000) or more current songs and anthems written within the older praise and worship style. Due to these two large sources of praise and worship music, praise and worship choirs often have less room for songs from modern CWM. When these ensembles do sing modern songs, the arrangements are squarely within the praise and worship style, or at the very least, highly influenced by it. Although there is a notable difference in the standard for “present-day” status between the repertoires of the worship-leading choir and the praise and worship choir, both choral types seek “current,” “contemporary” worship music.

Although there are three eras of contemporary worship<sup>54</sup> – the Jesus People’s praise music, praise and worship music, and modern worship music, this study asserts that only the latter two eras brought forth CWM church choral types. The Jesus People Movement lacked church choirs primarily because this era, fueled by the subcultural hippie groups of the baby boomer generation, was preoccupied with initiating contemporary worship and ingratiating their acoustic, folk-like music of the late sixties and the seventies within their worshipping bodies.<sup>55</sup> CWM choirs would come later in the

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<sup>54</sup> The segmentation of CWM into these three distinct eras or stylistic periods is found in a number of sources including Monique Marie Ingalls, “Awesome in This Place: Sound, Space, and Identity in Contemporary North American Evangelical Worship,” (PhD., University of Pennsylvania, 2008), Anna Elizabeth Nekola, “Between This World and the Next: The Musical “Worship Wars” and Evangelical Ideology in the United States, 1960-2005.” (PhD., University of Wisconsin–Madison, WI, 2009). Wen Reagan, “A Beautiful Noise: A History of Contemporary Worship Music in Modern America,” (PhD., Duke University, 2015). Monique M. Ingalls, Andrew Mall, and Anna E. Nekola, “Christian Popular Music, USA,” (*The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2017). Monique Marie Ingalls, “Transnational Connections, Musical Meaning, and the 1990s ‘British Invasion’ of North American Evangelical Worship Music,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and World Christianities*, ed. Suzel Reily and Jonathan Dueck (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>55</sup> Definitive scholarship on the music of the Jesus People are Larry Eskridge, *God’s Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America*. (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2013). David W. Stowe, *No Sympathy for the Devil: Christian Pop Music and the Transformation of American Evangelicalism*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).



latter two eras of contemporary worship once the genre was more established. Although the worship songs of the Jesus People were recorded by professional praise teams and choirs such as those from Maranatha's various vocal groups, the simplicity of their vocal parts was easily achievable and amenable to church congregations. Ingalls identifies two of the most iconic worship songs of this era as Karen Lafferty's *Seek Ye First*<sup>56</sup> the recordings of which include part-singing in the form of a women's descant and a men's unison melody, and Terrye Strom's *Father I Adore You*<sup>57</sup> the recordings of which often feature an instinctive three-part round of the melody.<sup>58</sup>

Emerging in the eighties and nineties was *praise and worship*, the second era of contemporary worship dominated by Christian networks associated with Pentecostal-charismatic evangelicalism featured in the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir and the Christ Church Choir which is explored further in chapter five. Praise and worship expanded the scope of the genre beyond the acoustic, folk style of the Jesus People to include musical influences such as soft rock, adult contemporary-styled ballads, and early contemporary gospel influences, particularly of gospel artist Andraé Crouch. Praise and worship also gave rise to the "worship set," an extended period of worship singing during corporate gatherings which featured a minimum of three consecutive worship songs.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Maranatha! Praise Band, "Seek Ye First," recorded 2010, on *Top 40 Praise & Worship Classics Disc 2*, Maranatha (MRA), streaming audio, accessed February 17, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/67IaFINOZtrWnx2CeLpj7o?si=4b708e38b0ce4b5d>

<sup>57</sup> Maranatha! Praise Band, "Father I Adore You," recorded 2017, on *The Praise Album*, Clavary Chapel Music, streaming audio, accessed February 17, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/1CX2Zvedo5FmD2bL9kn4B?si=158EvKV6Q16d9DfplITi6Q>,

<sup>58</sup> Monique Marie Ingalls, "Awesome in This Place: Sound, Space, and Identity in Contemporary North American Evangelical Worship," (PhD., University of Pennsylvania, 2008), 57-66.

<sup>59</sup> Swee-Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017), 67, 70-71. Other sources on praise and worship include Lester Ruth and Swee-Hong Lim. *A History of Contemporary Praise & Worship: Understanding the Ideas*

Two songs identified befittingly by Ingalls as representative of the praise and worship era are Rick Founds' *Lord, I Lift Your Name on High* and Darlene Zschech's *Shout to the Lord*.<sup>60</sup> In contrast to the simple part-singing of the Jesus People, the recordings of both songs foreground a praise team, a small ensemble of singers on microphones, singing tight SAT harmonies akin to those found in black gospel music. Medium to large choirs, the larger variety of which are akin to the mass choirs prevalent in black gospel music, are added to these close-knit praise teams, as can be found in the YouTube clips provided in the footnote for *Shout to the Lord* given above. In this example, both the praise team and the large mass choir appear to sing similar SAT harmony parts, however, each praise team singer possesses an individual microphone whereas the microphone technique for the choral ensemble utilizes fewer microphones for the purpose of capturing the group altogether as one entity. What results is a tighter, cleaner rendering of the SAT harmonies from the praise team that is placed more forward in the mix while the large mass choir provides a looser, fuller realization of the SAT harmonies which lends depth and breadth to the vocal aggregate of solo worship leader/song leader, small vocal ensemble praise team and large choir. Depending on the

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*That Reshaped the Protestant Church*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2021). Lester Ruth ed., *Essays on the History of Contemporary Praise and Worship*. (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2020). The following source describes praise and worship in the African American black gospel church, Birgitta Joelisa Johnson, "'Oh, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing': Music and Worship in African American Megachurches of Los Angeles, California," (PhD., University of California, LA, 2008).

<sup>60</sup> Monique Marie Ingalls, "Awesome in This Place: Sound, Space, and Identity in Contemporary North American Evangelical Worship," (PhD., University of Pennsylvania, 2008), 119-131. Maranatha! Praise Band, "Lord I Lift Your Name On High," recorded 2017, on *Top 25 Decade – Lord I Lift Your Name on High*, Maranatha (MRA), streaming audio, accessed February 17, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/31CGGe7xC3cIVex5eOTKVQ?si=bfl8l6nZQ0aXiZrMeyEqnQ>. Darlene Zschech and Hillsong Worship, "Shout to the Lord," recorded 2017, on *In Jesus' Name: A Legacy of Worship & Faith*, Integrity Music, streaming audio, accessed February 17, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/4Ma9gBNyCW8tr8NMMPyEs?si=YrJ0yxKhSCWfqh8XVBLjwg>.

context, praise and worship may be presented by all three of these vocal factions or also by various subset groupings.

The third and current stage of the genre is referred to as the *modern* worship era.<sup>61</sup> Begun in the early 2000s, modern worship incorporates edgier forms of rock than the soft rock, adult contemporary style of praise and worship. Some of the edgier rock genres incorporated into modern CWM were post-grunge, alternative, metal and punk. These genres had already influenced the Christian world previously through the contemporary Christian music genre (CCM) which provided a Christian alternative form of entertainment to secular rock/pop music. CCM ran alongside yet existed separate and apart from CWM which was geared towards the church worship service. Around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when the CCM industry consumed the CWM industry by having its solo voice artists release worship albums intended for church use instead of for entertainment,<sup>62</sup> the group singing proclivities established by the music of the Jesus People and the church choir sensibilities ratified by the praise and worship period were suddenly sidelined within the resulting modern worship era.

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<sup>61</sup> Swee-Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017), 15. Monique Marie Ingalls, "Transnational Connections, Musical Meaning, and the 1990s 'British Invasion' of North American Evangelical Worship Music," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and World Christianities*, ed. Suzel Reily and Jonathan Dueck, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>62</sup> In Monique Marie Ingalls, "Awesome in This Place: Sound, Space, and Identity in Contemporary North American Evangelical Worship," (PhD., University of Pennsylvania, 2008), 137-140, and in Monique Marie Ingalls, "Transnational Connections, Musical Meaning, and the 1990s 'British Invasion' of North American Evangelical Worship Music," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and World Christianities*, ed. Suzel Reily and Jonathan Dueck, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), Ingalls identifies the "British invasion" as the key mechanism for the takeover of CWM by CCM.

Staple modern worship songs from the 2000s, the era's first decade, are Hillsong's *Mighty to Save*<sup>63</sup> and Tomlin's *How Great is our God*,<sup>64</sup> whereas Matt Redman's *10,000 Reasons*<sup>65</sup> and Hillsong's *What a Beautiful Name*<sup>66</sup> were hallmarks of the earlier part of the 2010s, the second decade of the era. The group singing foregrounded in the given representative songs of the previous two eras is conspicuously absent in those of the modern era. In the vocal space group singing previously occupied, the solo voice of the worship leader now assumes full residence and precedence. The congregation as unison choir can be heard at times, yet not normally in the foreground of the mix unless for special "drop out" or "breakdown" effects.<sup>67</sup> The praise team of singers is sometimes present; however, they are often a smaller group of singers than the praise teams of the praise and worship era. Besides being smaller, the sound of the modern praise team is buried in the mix when compared to the foregrounded praise teams in praise and worship. Only strands of the harmonies of modern praise teams sporadically appear in the middle ground of the mix in both live and recorded settings. This study suggests that these strands of middle ground harmonies of the modern praise team be

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<sup>63</sup> Hillsong UNITED, "Mighty to Save: LIVE," recorded 2008, on *The I Heart Revolution (LIVE) Disc 2*, Hillsong (HIL), streaming audio, accessed February 17, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/2XVluRr8S9WV0ku8gH05hP?si=4ffff4c99eac4973>.

<sup>64</sup> Chris Tomlin, "How Great is Our God," recorded 2011, on *How Great is Our God: The Essential Collection*, Six Steps (SIX), streaming audio, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/0jOSpB2zK2O0SNxj8ZT5lp?si=ea1690a798854e78>.

<sup>65</sup> Matt Redman, "10,000 Reasons (Bless the Lord): Live," recorded 2011, on *10,000 Reasons (Live)*, Six Steps (SIX), streaming audio, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/0fxpHpK3aw2nFWII6yveDD?si=b8f57a00eba245e1>.

<sup>66</sup> Brooke Ligertwood and Hillsong Worship, "What a Beautiful Name: Live," recorded 2016, on *Let There Be Light (Deluxe)*, Hillsong (HIL), streaming audio, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/1yYUljT3bZ9RB9vejQYy9f?si=2a1cdb1ddcde4275>.

<sup>67</sup> Dropouts and breakdowns are illustrated and discussed in chapter four.

termed “shadow harmonies” since their primary effect is to lightly thicken the lead vocal of the worship leader with background depth.<sup>68</sup> This light thickening is an entirely different effect than the conspicuous triadic block of vocal harmonies produced by praise team in praise and worship. Praise team harmonies in praise and worship are weighted much more heavily than the background “shadow harmonies” of modern worship and are placed prominently in a secondary tier of volume and presence, just slightly less than the weight ascribed to the primary melody of the solo worship leader. What emerges in the modern era is a stripped-down vocal harmonic style which pivots primarily on a two-part sensibility<sup>69</sup> – a significant contrast to the three-part SAT proclivity of praise and worship and the easy, congregationally-friendly polyphonic rounds and descants of the Jesus People Movement.

The dominance of soloistic modern worship music phenomenon explains in part the apparent scarcity of worship-leading choirs in the 2000s, the first decade of modern worship, and it adds intrigue to the seeming increase of CWM choirs throughout the 2010s documented earlier in this chapter. Taken together, these observations seem to simultaneously confirm and contradict the widely held belief implied by the central query

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<sup>68</sup> Chris Tomlin, “Our God,” recorded 2010, on *And If Our God Is For Us...*, Six Steps (SIX), streaming audio, accessed February 20, 2018, <https://open.spotify.com/track/40lKptao1hxVqA7fd1OOGp?si=2f2215ebb3c04b8b>, provides clear examples of modern CWM “shadow harmonies.” After Chris Tomlin’s voice articulates the first two verse sections and the first chorus, a singular male “shadow harmony” pitched a third interval below Chris Tomlin’s solo appears in the second chorus at time stamp 1:40. Later in the song during the climactic double-chorus, a praise team “shadow harmony” emerges which emphasizes a third interval above the main melody. In both instances, the harmonies are significantly less pronounced than Chris Tomlin’s solo vocals.

<sup>69</sup> The two-part sensibility of modern CWM was exemplified by Chris Tomlin’s “Our God” given in footnote 66 above. The first appearance of vocal harmony at the second chorus reflects TB two-part harmony, T as the melody and B as the lower third harmony underneath. The second occurrence of vocal harmony at the song-ending double chorus features AT two-part harmony, with A as the third above the T melody. Since the vocal range of most solo worship leaders in modern CWM is either in the tenor or alto range, AT is the most common two-part vocal harmonic model in modern CWM.

of this study, that is, whether or not contemporary worship is in fact “killing” the church choir.

Situating the church choirs of this study within the timeline of the contemporary worship genre, the three worship-leading choirs at Gateway, Bayou City Fellowship, and Breakaway, were birthed in the 2010s, squarely within the modern worship era. These modern worship-leading choirs will be set in contrast to the Christ Church Choir, a worship choir that is still highly active in the modern era, yet began in 1975, during the time of the Jesus People, and came of age in the eighties and nineties, during the praise and worship era.

#### *Membership Status – Subsidiary vs. Primary*

Within modern CWM, the solo voice worship leaders and instrumentalists in the contemporary worship band serve as the *primary* musical ensemble at the core of the subgenre whereas the worship-leading choir serves as a *subsidiary member* of the contemporary worship that aids and supports the primary musical ensemble’s endeavors to lead the congregation in worship singing. That modern worship bands routinely function without worship-leading choirs bears evidence to the secondary status of these choirs.

Whereas the other North American church choirs are often featured and so are “accompanied” by the other members of their worship ensembles, the worship-leading choir almost always plays the role of modelling to the congregation how to “accompany,” join in, participate, and “lose oneself” in the loud, “surround sound” atmosphere provided by the modern contemporary worship band. Just as the sound of the worship-leading choir is often enveloped to a near inaudible degree by the worship band, so too does this

model represent the customary singing experience of each member of the congregation, who is often surrounded with so much sound that the congregant can scarcely hear the singing of the congregants nearby.<sup>70</sup>

The rich and varied vocal textures typical of the other North American church choirs are scarcely required by modern worship bands, and when they are required, they are more easily achieved in these ensembles by a small praise team of solo worship leaders on microphones than they are by a choir. Even though the worship-leading choir is subsidiary and auxiliary in modern contemporary worship, as the opening vignettes of these choirs depict, they have a uniquely effective ability to enhance congregational engagement by increasing the worship band's capacity to lead congregations into an affective experience of worship singing.

The subsidiary status of worship-leading choirs differentiates the worship-leading choir considerably from each of the other North American church choirs included on the diagram in figure five and six. Whereas the worship-leading choir is subsidiary within its worship context, the traditional church choir, black gospel choir, and the praise and worship choir are often *primary* in theirs. The centrality of traditional and black gospel choirs is reflected in the skills of their respective music leaders. Collegiate degrees in choral conducting or significant experience and skill in choral leadership are often required of music directors of traditional, gospel, and praise and worship choirs;

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<sup>70</sup> Joshua Kalin Busman, "(Re)sounding passion: Listening to American Evangelical Worship Music, 1997-2015," (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2015), 1, 107, 119-120, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

however, such skills are scarcely required by the worship leaders that lead modern contemporary worship bands.

Additionally, traditional, gospel, and praise and worship choirs are accustomed to performing choral anthems for which they serve as the primary vocal force, whereas the worship-leading choir rarely sings feature choral anthems and rarely sings without the presence of the solo voice worship leader. Even when traditional, gospel and praise and worship choirs collaborate with soloists, both soloist and choir often take their direction from the director of the choir. In many of these cases, the soloist will sing in the choir when that person is not actively singing a solo. In modern contemporary worship, however, worship-leading choirs sometimes sing without the direction of a choir conductor and hence take their direction from the solo vocals of the worship leader who rarely, if ever, sings as a member of the choir.<sup>71</sup> Even when a choir conductor is involved with worship-leading choirs, the authority of the worship leader remains primary.

#### *Contemporary Worship Band and Contemporary Worship Ensemble*

Since modern CWM borrows much of its musical identity and structure from secular rock-pop music, the modern *contemporary worship band* in turn appropriates the instrumentation and vocalization of secular rock-pop bands. As such, modern CWM solo voice worship leaders often feature a belt-shout vocal timbre that utilizes straight tone more than vibrato. Also, the instrumental textures of modern CWM centralize a powerful,

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<sup>71</sup> Among the three worship-leading choirs in this study, the only instance of solo worship leaders singing as choir members was in the recording of Gateway choir's sole album, *We Cry Out*. Gateway's choir director at the time, Kelly Allsopp, explained that Gateway worship leaders were used to supplement the choir during the recording process mainly because several choir members could not attend all recording sessions. Gateway Choir's studio album is discussed in chapter three.



hard-hitting style on the drum set and normally emphasize the harmonic-rhythmic drive and lead melodic layers of the various guitars over that of the keys/synths which usually provide background chordal, special effects, and light melodic support.

Ordering the *rock* and *pop* genres as *rock-pop* as opposed to *pop-rock* intentionally reflects the more prevalent rock influence found in modern worship when compared to the predominance of softer pop sensibilities of former eras of CWM, such as the characteristics of adult contemporary, soft rock and the power ballad featured in praise and worship. Due to the supremacy of pop-rock influence over rock-pop in praise and worship, its associated vocal-instrumental groups promote lighter vocals that commingle straight tone and vibrato, rely much less on belt-shout techniques, and incorporate solo and group vocals (in the form of praise teams and choirs) more equally. The drumming has a lighter overall volume and quality than that found in modern CWM, and the keys/synth provide the central harmonic-rhythmic drive with the acoustic and electric guitars offering auxiliary support often with only the higher registers and frequencies of the instrument making an audible impression within the mix.

The strong influence of group vocals and keyboard instruments in praise and worship also emanates from its association with contemporary gospel which has and continues to centralize the combination of these two entities. Praise and worship choirs are supported further by praise and worship's involvement of string, woodwind, and brass orchestral instruments which have a longstanding combination with choirs in traditional worship and western classical art music. The inclusion of orchestral instruments in the vocal-instrumental groups associated with praise and worship leads this study to label such groups as contemporary worship *ensembles*. The term *contemporary worship bands*

is then reserved for the rock-pop styled groups of modern worship as well as the small acoustic groups of the Jesus People Movement.

Shouty, chest voice resonance through belting techniques and limited use of vibrato underscores the rock sensibilities of modern CWM.<sup>72</sup> The tone is much grittier than that featured by the Jesus People Movement or the praise and worship era; however, the degree to which this bold vocality is utilized is much tamer than the screams, growls, and other electric guitar styled distortion effects found in the vocals of secular hard rock genres such as punk, grunge, post-grunge, garage, metal, and alternative rock. Even so, the milder form of rock vocals found in modern CWM influences the vocal production of worship-leading choirs to a degree that differentiates their tone quite radically from that of the praise and worship choir – a choral tone which normally combines head voice techniques associated with the bel canto vocal tradition typically employed by traditional church choirs with the full-bodied, chest voice generated vibrato regularly used by black gospel choirs.

The guitar-dominated instrumentation and conception of modern worship songs, which, along with loud dynamics from the drum set, often includes four resonant guitar layers in live performance, namely two electric guitars [one lead, one rhythm], one acoustic rhythm guitar and a bass guitar. Multiple additional layered electric guitar countermelody and effects tracks are often included in studio recordings and even in some live settings. The result of these layers of drum set and guitars is a loud and thick texture which allows for little space in its volume range and EQ spectrum for the church

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<sup>72</sup> The rock sensibilities of modern CWM are mentioned throughout Joshua Kalin Busman, “(Re)sounding passion: Listening to American Evangelical Worship Music, 1997-2015,” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2015), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

choir or the ensemble's longstanding keyboard and orchestral instrumental associates. Even when keyboard and orchestral instruments are present, their parts and roles in the modern contemporary worship band are usually less central than those of the guitars, thereby requiring the choir to source the guitars as its harmonic-rhythmic reference rather than the keyboard or orchestra.

### *Worship-Leading*

As stated in the section on church choirs above, given the assumption that the express purpose of any type of church choir within a worship setting is to facilitate *worship* through *leading worship*, the term *worship-leading*, when taken at face value, might be rightly criticized for doing little to truly distinguish modern CWM's worship-leading choir. Yet, when understood within the context of modern contemporary worship, the intended meaning comes forth. Within this context, *worship* commonly refers to extended periods of uninterrupted congregational singing through the seamless chaining of multiple modern CWM songs,<sup>73</sup> a trend begun in Pentecostal and charismatic congregations and spread to evangelical churches through the introduction of the worship set in the praise and worship era. As such, the worship leading is largely understood in modern CWM circles to refer to the leading of extended stretches of corporate singing. As this is the near sole purpose of music in modern CWM contexts, the term worship-leading choir adheres this ensemble to this *sole* purpose as stated explicitly in the definition for the worship-leading choir given at the beginning of this section. The exclusive worship leading role of the worship-leading choir sets it apart from the praise

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<sup>73</sup> Swee-Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017), 6.

and worship choir (as well as the other two North American church choirs) whose ideal function is to fill the *dual* roles of leading the corporate singing of worship songs and performing presentational choral anthems which are normally intended for congregational listening rather than congregational singing.

Within the modern era of CWM beginning in the 2000s, the critical responsibility of worship leading is rarely ascribed primarily to the choir but is commonly given to a solo voiced worship leader or worship artist, a song leader who often accompanies herself or himself in a harmonic rhythmic style on the acoustic rhythm guitar and less frequently on the keyboard. By labeling the modern contemporary worship choir with the term *worship-leading choir*, the ensemble is imbued with the momentous responsibility of leading worship. The term also attests to the choirs' ability to engage congregations and to increase the fervor with which they participate in worship singing.

### *Participation of the Congregation*

Like Pentecostal worship, charismatic evangelicalism habitually gauges the participation of the congregation by the volume of the congregation's singing and the fervor of the congregation's bodily expression, which is often indicated by the raising of hands.<sup>74</sup> The worship-leading choir enlivens this participation from the platform by demonstrating to the attending congregation what an ideal participatory congregation

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<sup>74</sup> Joshua Kalin Busman, "(Re)sounding passion: Listening to American Evangelical Worship Music, 1997-2015," (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2015), 119, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. The claim here is not that the volume of congregational singing or the fervor of congregational bodily expression are adequate units of measurement for congregational engagement, however, the claim is that these units of measurements are the prevailing ones among churches that employ CWM primarily.

looks like.<sup>75</sup> In the instances when the worship-leading choir's singing can be heard, they can also model what an ideal congregation sounds like. The effect is somewhat like the audiences planted at music award shows like the American Music Awards or the Billboard Music Awards. These planted audiences, comprised almost solely of highly animated individuals who are particularly hyped for the event and its musical performances, are placed strategically close to the stage to portray a vivid performance-audience interaction which in turn increases the interest and attention of those seated farther away from the stage.<sup>76</sup> Since worship-leading choirs, like black gospel choirs, often sing songs from memory, they are free to utilize their entire bodies to express worship, often with hands raised. Through their vocal parts and harmonies, they support the singing of congregation members within a variety of vocal ranges. All three types of North American church choirs support the singing of the congregation through their organized singing; however, the context of the traditional church choir does not typically support the sort of bodily engagement promoted by the other North American church choirs.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Monique Marie Ingalls, "Singing Heaven Down to Earth," in *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 72-105.

<sup>76</sup> Britney Spears, "Britney Spears - Megamix (Live from the 2016 Billboard Music Awards)," Britney Spears, May 25, 2016, YouTube video, 7:41, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-H31vvgj8ys>.

<sup>77</sup> Anna Bull, "Rehearsing Constraint: How the Body is Transcended," in *Class, Control, and Classical Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 93-111, describes the mechanisms of "controlled excitement" which includes the cultivation of "strong emotions" that are always kept "under (bodily) control" by performers of western classical music (93). This particular kind of embodiment is exemplified often by congregation members of traditional worship.

### *Choral Anthems and Inspiration of the Congregation*

Whereas congregational hymns and worship songs are participatory, created for congregational singing led by members and musicians of the leading worship team which may include a church choir, the choral anthem is usually presentational, designed to be performed by church choirs to enhance the congregation's experience of a worship service. Choral anthems usually employ more intricate musical structure and design than the choral arrangements created for leading congregations in the singing of congregational hymns and worship songs. Above all, choral anthems are geared towards providing a musical experience which inspires the congregation,<sup>78</sup> akin to the way preaching pastors fashion their sermons to encourage, inform and admonish their congregations.

Although a presentational offering of special music is the common connotation or understanding of the choral anthem, this dissertation considers the choral anthem more generally as worship music that necessitates the choir thereby rendering the church choir as a preferred, integral, or even indispensable component. This looser interpretation of the choral anthem accounts for the fluid status of these pieces within worship communities. Commonly, choral anthems are first experienced as presentational special music, yet they can become so ingratiated with congregations that they are accorded participatory status often by way of frequent performance, congregational preference, and accessibility to the level of a given congregation's musicianship.

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<sup>78</sup> Jonathan Arnold, *Sacred Music in Secular Society*, Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2014, describes the inspirational affect that Anglican choral even song has on sacred and secular audiences.

A notable example of this phenomenon, of choral anthem traversing from presentation to participation, was observed during the fieldwork for this dissertation with Richard Smallwood's gospel anthem, *Total Praise*.<sup>79</sup> This anthem was favored at Christ Church and was performed so frequently by the Christ Church Choir that the congregation learned the anthem and customarily sang along with the choir whenever *Total Praise* was sung.<sup>80</sup> Whether *Total Praise* at Christ Church was considered presentational, participatory, or both, the choral proclivities of the musical design of *Total Praise* remained. Technically, other vocal factions such as the worship leader, praise team, or congregation, could substitute for the choir; however, it is likely that such non-choral renditions would miss a significant portion of *Total Praises*'s timbre and character. This dissertation suggests that such choral anthems, that is, those which began as presentational music and later gained participatory stature, be labelled *choral worship music*.

Another nuance concerning the interaction between the church choir, the choral anthem, and contemporary worship is the "choralization" of CWM. Although most contemporary worship songs are designed to be led by a solo-voice worship leader and not by a choir, various worship communities with church choir ministries "choralize" CWM songs. One result of this practice is a choral version which is performed in a manner that may seem presentational yet is for the purpose of teaching CWM songs to

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<sup>79</sup> Richard Smallwood and Vision, "Total Praise - Live," recorded 1996, on *Adoration*, Jive, streaming audio, accessed March 19, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/3eGrTHQnpSE0LRrNrMxMRr?si=c3505c0c8f444c87>.

<sup>80</sup> Phil Nitz, interview by author, Brentwood, TN, December 1, 2017

congregations. This occurrence is described in the following response to Bob Kauflin's online article entitled "Choirs in Worship."<sup>81</sup>

Thomas Clay

June 30, 2008 at 12:50PM

Another wonderful way that we use our choir here at Grace Life Church (formerly First Baptist Church of Muscle Shoals) is using the choir to introduce new congregational songs as specials. Then, when they are sung as congregational songs, there is rich, confident, four-part harmony supplementing the congregation as it sings. Several examples would be arrangements of In Christ Alone, Be Unto Your Name, and My Chains Are Gone that are very powerful additions to a congregational set when a choir of 100 are singing along! The congregation heard them as choir specials several times before I asked them to sing as congregational songs.

Another result of this practice is the conversion of CWM or CCM into a choral anthem.

One such example is the Christ Church Choir's conversion of CCM artist Steve Green's rendition of *We Believe* into a praise and worship choral anthem. This conversion is discussed at length in chapter two. Whether a church choir's worship music resides in the presentational anthem category or as choral worship music or even as "choralized" CWM or CCM, such pieces are routinely sung by the traditional church choir, black gospel choir, and praise and worship choir whereas they are scarcely sung by the worship-leading choir.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Bob Kauflin, "Choirs in Worship," *Worship Matters*, June 26, 2008, accessed March 22, 2022, <https://worshipmatters.com/2008/06/26/choirs-in-worship/>.

<sup>82</sup> A visual representation of this difference is reflected in the lack of choral garments such as robes often found in worship-leading choirs when compared to the frequent wearing of robes by traditional church choirs, black gospel choirs, and praise and worship choirs. Since modern CWM has sought to render its choral ensemble as akin to their congregations as possible for the purpose of establishing maximum relatability and self-identification between congregation and choir, the worship-leading choir routinely dresses like a typical congregation member. Additionally, since congregations do not sing choral anthems, the worship-leading choirs also refrain from this repertoire. As such, setting the worship-leading apart from the congregation by dress and repertoire as an exclusive vocal faction is counterproductive to the goals of modern CWM.



Traditional church choirs possess the longest association with the choral anthem spanning back to the Anglican church's inception of the genre in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>83</sup> Traditional church choirs have a wealth of anthem repertoire to draw upon which may be organized by the various stylistic eras of Western European art music, namely Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century. This vast repertoire can also be arranged by worship style, that is, between the complex choral works which reflected the "high church" accoutrement such as elaborate liturgy, vestments, and sacraments, and the more accessible choral works which accompanied the freer worship style of "low church" which emphasized congregational involvement and deemphasized the ornate trappings of "high church" worship. As such, a traditional church choir in North America may be just as likely to sing a piece like Mozart's *Ave Verum Corpus*,<sup>84</sup> a Classical era Latin motet associated with Catholic worship, as it is to sing John Ness Beck's *Offertory*,<sup>85</sup> a late 20<sup>th</sup> century scriptural setting of Micah 6:6-8 featuring a simple, yet elegant melody and arresting mediant modulations.

Black gospel choirs can also sing anthems which vary widely, such as Richard Smallwood's majestic, presentational anthem *Total Praise* mentioned earlier in this

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<sup>83</sup> Donald J. Grout et al, *A History of Western Music*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2006, 222.

<sup>84</sup> Bavarian Radio Chorus, Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, Leonard Bernstein, "Ave Verum Corpus K.618," recorded 1991, on *Mozart: Great Mass in C Minor K.427*, Deutsche Grammophon, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/5IMALEjPNRGPeBcjBHFQvN?si=39aa580744934668>.

<sup>85</sup> "Offertory-John Ness Beck (Beckenhorst Press) – Wheaton College Men's Glee Club," WheatonCollege, October 5, 2017, YouTube video, accessed March 22, 2022, 2:56, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efnlQ\\_iodM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efnlQ_iodM).

section or Mississippi Mass Choir's choral worship song *When I Rose this Morning*<sup>86</sup> which is designed to incite congregational participation in the form of handclapping, foot tapping, and spirited singing. Praise and worship choirs often emulate black gospel choirs, and so, sing several gospel anthems which are converted to fit the sensibilities of the praise and worship ensemble, such as the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir's rendition of Judith McAllister's *Hallelujah You're Worthy*.<sup>87</sup> Praise and worship choirs also sing choral anthems of praise and worship songs that do not feature the influence of black gospel, such as Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir's version of Darlene Zschech's *Worthy is the Lamb*.<sup>88</sup>

Choral anthems are a mainstay element of corporate worship in worship contexts associated with the traditional church choir, black gospel choir, and praise and worship choir. As such, the presence of the choir is necessitated at most, if not all, worship gatherings. Exclusion of the choral anthem in modern contemporary worship coupled with the peripheral role it assigns to the worship-leading choir within the worship band, causes this choir to appear occasionally in worship, singing only sporadically when they so happen to be called upon, such as twice a year, or once every quarter, or for special worship events such as conferences or concerts, or in some rare cases, as regularly as once per month.

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<sup>86</sup> Mississippi Mass Choir, "When I Rose this Morning," recorded 1996, on *I'll See You in the Rapture*, Malaco Records, streaming audio, accessed December 7, 2019, <https://open.spotify.com/track/11dkIaVR8Mx27Polm9U8wE?si=cff942bfe9b544eb>.

<sup>87</sup> Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir, "Hallelujah You're Worthy," recorded 2017, on *I'll Say Yes*, Brooklyn Tabernacle Music, streaming audio, accessed February 10, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/1GUhbxMYoAGU8lbKcaFmNj?si=27ece60f0d9e40c9>.

<sup>88</sup> Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir, "Worthy is the Lamb (feat. Onaje Jefferson)," recorded 2017, on *I'll Say Yes*, Brooklyn Tabernacle Music, streaming audio, accessed March 22, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/6XuEmyIYuyFKAnbnJ4Ba4j?si=eb1ec5d95909445a>.

The traditional church choir, black gospel choir, and the praise and worship choir incite *dual* forms of congregational engagement by providing *inspiration* for the congregation through choral anthems while also leading the congregation's *participation* in the singing of hymns and worship songs. In contrast, the worship-leading choir has only one *sole* function: to serve as a vehicle that incites congregational participation in singing. As expressed by the quote below, a comment in response to a repost of Mark Condon's article, "Do We Still Need Choirs?" on the Renewing Worship website, presentational, performance-oriented music like choral anthems is deemed as "entertainment" which is in direct opposition to congregational singing and hence "worship" itself.<sup>89</sup>

Chris Gray

April 27, 2017 at 5:42 pm

Choirs, like praise teams and rock bands, can become all about performance if the director, leadership, and choir members are not careful to be intentional that the choir is used to lead in worship instead of falling into the act of, what one worship leader phrased as "worship-tainment." I have been in churches where the same folks who criticize modern churches as rock concerts and whose attendees just go to be entertained are the same ones who complain that if the choir hadn't sung them a special music piece, they just haven't been to worship. What one calls soup the other man calls stew, but it's the same thing. I love to be led in worship by a choir; however, to me, the most beautiful choir is the congregation singing together, not just a group of people singing to another group of people.

This quote foregrounds two critical discrepancies between the worship-leading choir and its affiliated modern contemporary worship style versus the other North American church choirs and their affiliated genres. The first is the difference in what each group considers to be viable congregational engagement. In traditional liturgical worship, Black Pentecostal worship, and contemporary praise and worship,

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<sup>89</sup> Mark Condon, "Do We Still Need Choirs?" The Worship Corner, accessed February 17, 2017, <https://twcorner.wordpress.com/2012/08/29/do-we-still-need-choirs-by-mark-condon/>.

congregational engagement includes both active *participation* with worship music and the garnering of *inspiration* from worship music through a more reflective posture; whereas ,in modern contemporary worship, the only viable form of congregational engagement is active *participation* through singing and moving the body. It is desirable in modern worship for congregants to be inspired by the presentation of modern contemporary worship music, however, this inspiration is manifested in active participation in singing as opposed to a reflective posture of listening.

The second critical difference is what each worship style considers to be within the bounds of worship music and what it considers to be music for entertainment and hence outside of the bounds of worship music. For those who choose not to participate within the modern worship context, rock-pop styled worship music will scarcely be recognized as worship music and will more likely be considered music for entertainment. On the other hand, such individuals will rarely consider a performance-oriented choir anthem to be entertainment but rather will consider such pieces to be the epitome of worship music. For worshippers socialized within modern worship settings, the opposite represents their perception. For such worshippers, rock-pop styled worship music is the unadulterated sound of worship and the choral anthem exists outside of the realm of worship and hence, within the sphere of entertainment.<sup>90</sup> As such, the choral anthem violates two crucial constraints of modern worship: namely modern worship's restriction on any congregational interaction with worship music other than active participation, and

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<sup>90</sup> Mark Porter, "Evangelicals, Authenticity, and Sacrament" in *Ecologies of Resonance in Christian Musicking*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 71-92, explores how specific sounds of contemporary worship music expresses ideas of evangelical authenticity and sacrament through a sonic interaction between worshippers and leaders of contemporary worship music.

modern CWM's restriction on the particular genre and sound of music that qualifies as worship music.

The foregoing discussion on the roles of congregational engagement and worship style within modern worship may shed some light on one of the oft-contended critiques of modern worship, namely that some modern worship songs are difficult for congregations to sing because they are written to feature the more advanced vocal qualities of professional worship leaders instead of the more modest vocal capacity of a typical congregant. Although some modern worship songs may be ear unsingable by certain congregants, these songs are still likely perceived by modern contemporary worshippers as more “worshipful” than a choral anthem since an unsingable modern worship song violates only one of the above of constraints, namely, the constraint of congregational participation. In summation, due to its dual violations of the modern CWM style, the choral anthem, the bedrock of church choral ministry in traditional worship, gospel-based worship, and contemporary praise and worship, is seemingly unredeemable within the context of modern contemporary worship.

### *Chapter Summary and Methodological Foundations*

Vibrant descriptions of contemporary worship choirs began in the four vignettes which opened this introductory chapter and will continue in the form of case studies that will span the interior chapters of this study, chapters two through five. To reflect the diversity amongst contemporary worship choirs, the four choirs selected for this study are from disparate environments, namely a megachurch, a college campus, and two mid-sized local churches, one of which is involved in the Christian music recording industry.

Although this dissertation examines both of CWM's choral ensembles, it seeks to focus attention on the worship-leading choir, the younger, more recent choral member of the contemporary worship genre that is associated with its modern subgenre. This emphasis has been chosen to provide counterpoint to the widely held assumption that church choirs bear little association with modern contemporary worship. This emphasis also responds to the seeming acceleration of choral activity throughout the 2010s within networks associated with modern worship. As such, three of the four CWM choirs in this study are worship-leading choirs, that is, the choirs at Gateway, Bayou City Fellowship and Breakaway. The first choir, the Christ Church Choir, is the sole representative of praise and worship choir. Christ Church is included to highlight the many differences between CWM's two choirs which were explored in the definition and explication of each choral ensemble given above and which will be examined further in the sixth and final chapter.

The four case studies are presented accordingly. Chapter two features the only praise and worship choir of the study, the Christ Church Choir in Nashville, TN. Hailing from the praise and worship era, the Christ Church Choir is naturally the oldest of the four choirs of this study. Christ Church choir began in the mid 70s, matured throughout the 80s, and in the 90s, initiated what would become a dynamic recording and publishing ministry within Nashville's vibrant Christian music publishing industry. Chapter three showcases the Gateway Choir in Grapevine, TX, which began in the early 2010s and reveals the workings of a worship-leading choir in a modern CWM megachurch environment. Chapter four depicts the Bayou City Fellowship Choir which was created in the mid 2010s in the northwest Houston, TX, suburban environs of Cypress, TX, and

highlights the intermittent, “one-and-done” worship-leading choir which does not rehearse weekly, or even monthly, but only in preparation for special “Choir Sundays” held sporadically throughout the year. Finally, the student choir at Texas A&M University, College Station, TX, emerging within the Breakaway college ministry in the mid 2010s, is the focus of chapter five and contributes to the perception and involvement of worship-leading choirs amongst college-aged students.

Each case study is balanced differently in order to reflect the uniqueness of each CWM choir. Vignettes begin each case study and continue the vignettes that were presented at the onset of this chapter. The case studies then continue with an account of each choir’s inception and development, background information on each choir’s worship community that includes a description of their musical leaders, examination of each choir’s role within worship services and events, observations concerning the experience of the choristers, and analysis of the musicianship of each choir. To support description of choral musicianship, numerous score excerpts, choral transcriptions, footnoted weblinks to recordings, and analysis of musical examples are included. Since these musical examples are selected primarily to foreground the activity of each CWM choir and not necessarily to showcase the most well-known and representative worship songs of the CWM subgenres that they implicate, the musical examples feature widely varying degrees of popularity and renown including those which may be quite obscure to the reader.

Alongside these common elements, each case study is balanced differently in order to reflect to the uniqueness of each CWM choir. Beyond the diversity engendered by the various environments of each CWM choir in this study, further diversity is

achieved by varying the orientation of the researcher, that is, by assuming observational positioning as both an insider and an outsider. The insider/outsider, or emic/etic distinction, is one that has been long invoked within discussions of ethnographic participant observation.<sup>91</sup> In the case of Christ Church Choir, I am an outsider who is not an active member of the musical life of the choir. My outsider perspective has been developed through relationships with their music minister and piano accompanist, Christopher Phillips, and lead choral and orchestral arranger, Phil Nitz, both of whom are alumni of Lee University and their university's virtuoso a cappella contemporary vocal ensemble, Voices of Lee.<sup>92</sup> For the Christ Church Choir case study, I also engaged choral conductor and assistant, Beth Kolwyck, and the choir's primary publishing partner, Luke Gambill, who at the time served as the artistic director of Brentwood Benson Publishing. With Gateway Choir, I am also an outsider who fostered connections with their first two directors, Kelly Allsopp and Loisa Mattys, along with Yami and Todd Fields, who served as the choir's coordinator and as one of the choir's sound engineers respectively. In contrast to my outsider status within the first two choirs, I was an insider in the final two choral case studies. I am an insider with the Bayou City Fellowship choir where I was hired by nationally recognized worship artist and Bayou City Fellowship's worship

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<sup>91</sup> Gregory Barz and Timothy Cooley, *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). James P. Spradley, *Participant Observation*, (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2016). James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview*. (Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth Group/Thomson Learning, 1979). Billie R. DeWalt and Kathleen M DeWalt, *Participant Observation: A Guide for Fieldworkers* (UK: AltaMira Press, 2011).

<sup>92</sup> One of Phil's arrangements with the Voices of Lee is the following: Voices of Lee, "What a Beautiful Name" recorded 2017, on *What a Beautiful Name (single)*, Voices of Lee, streaming audio, <https://open.spotify.com/track/1AeAa4lCaa4lWAv7ZhLA11?si=66bc6dfdb27f44ad>.



pastor at the time, Robbie Seay, to help start a choral ministry from the ground up.<sup>93</sup>

Lastly, my interaction with the Breakaway student choir is as an insider who was hired by Breakaway's head worship leader, Jack Thweatt, to help revive and relaunch the Breakaway student choir.

The multi-musical approach I adopted towards the worship-leading choir was exhibited by the choir leaders at Gateway Choir and Christ Church introduced in above.<sup>94</sup> This approach allows the participant observer to function within disparate worship styles while also exploring the gaps between worship genres and subgenres. The resulting perspective from being a church music practitioner within and between various worship genres and their affiliated church choir types has driven the explicit classification of church choirs featured thus far in this study as well as the reliance of this categorization to add subtlety to the essential inquiry of this study, namely, to appraise the veracity of the commonly held notion that contemporary worship is killing the church choir.

Since the following four case studies are written with the intention of enhancing the definition and explication of CWM's two choral ensembles through real-life illustrations, reader are encouraged to hold the definitions and explications of the previous section foremost in mind as they read the case studies. By so doing, the reader

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<sup>93</sup> Jack Thweatt and Robbie Seay entrusted me with the responsibility of developing the worship-leading choirs within their ministries in part for three reasons: the first being my competency in and familiarity with modern contemporary worship; the second, my ability to complement their worship teams with choral expertise honed through directorship of traditional church choirs, black gospel choirs, and praise and worship choirs as well as graduate collegiate instruction in conducting, piano performance, and music theory; and third – and most importantly – my enthusiastic and enduring interest in adapting and customizing my experience with other types of church choirs to the context of modern contemporary worship.

<sup>94</sup> Multimusicality in church music was first discussed in Randall C., Bradley. *From Memory to Imagination*. Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies Series. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2012).

will better comprehend the commentary in chapter six which concludes the study with further comparison of CWM's two choral types and discussion of the perception of contemporary worship's assumed deleterious effect on the church choir.

Beyond supporting the trajectory of this study, the four case studies also seek to provide a more in-depth view into these contemporary worship choirs than may be possible from a visit to a worship service or attendance at a conference which features these choirs. As shown in the vignette of the Gateway Choir above and in the case study of this choir to come in chapter two, the generous access graciously afforded me by Gateway's choir leaders greatly transcended the level of exposure which they could offer in their choral breakout session at the Gateway conference. Church choirs often present polished, finished presentations during worship services and conferences which inadvertently belies the highs and lows which they experienced on the road to a polished and finished delivery. The four case studies seek to detail these successes and challenges for the edification and betterment of worship musicians, worship teams, and church choir ensembles. Such successes and challenges are the very real-life dynamics that the case studies seek to illuminate which are only implied between the lines of the definition and explication of contemporary worship's two worship choirs given above.

The four case studies also seek to support national consensus and recognition among worship-leading choirs. The other three types of North American church choir benefit from national community builders such as choral conferences and publishers, yet the worship-leading choir seemingly lacks such infrastructure. It is yet to be seen whether the lack of such national resources is because the worship-leading choir is in its infancy and such resources are yet to come or because the vanguards of modern

contemporary worship have determined that support and development of such national community builders are not within the direction and future of modern contemporary worship or some other unforeseen reason.

As stated previously in this section, this study's effort to shed light on whether contemporary worship is indeed eradicating the church choir pivots on the clear classification of church choirs which this study has attempted to produce thus far. The foregoing categorization aligns with stylistic analysis, a commonly employed analytical tool utilized within all forms of musicology, namely music history, ethnomusicology, and music theory.<sup>95</sup>

As best as possible, stylistic analysis seeks to provide a complete descriptive account of the musical elements of a given genre which includes the extra-musical dynamics which impact the genre's function within its affiliated communities. The customary training of graduate and undergraduate music students to identify the genre and period of a musical work through listening and score study bears witness to the impact and importance of stylistic analysis on collegiate instruction in music. For the purposes of academic research, the musicological disciplines utilize stylistic analysis to foreground the idiosyncrasies of a genre during precise periods of time and to track the

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<sup>95</sup> The methodology behind stylistic analysis in the study of music is detailed in Leonard B. Meyer, *Style and Music : Theory, History, and Ideology*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989). Examples of stylistic analysis in music theory and musicology include Shaugn O'Donnell, "What to Listen for in Rock: A Stylistic Analysis," *Music theory spectrum* 28, no. 1 (2006): 132–140. Sunjoo Lee, "A Stylistic Analysis of Reinhold Glière's 25 Preludes for Piano, Op. 30," (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2020). Ben Grant, Francis Knights, Pablo Padilla, and Dan Tidhar, "Network-Theoretic Analysis and the Exploration of Stylistic Development in Haydn's String Quartets," *Journal of mathematics and Music* (2020): 1–11. Jason Yust. "Stylistic Information in Pitch-Class Distributions," *Journal of new music research* 48, no. 3 (2019): 217–231. Simon P. Keefe, *Mozart's Viennese Instrumental Music: A Study of Stylistic Re-Invention*. (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2007).

micro and macro developments within a genre over a given time span. The methodological reliance on genre-based categorization of church choirs to address the notion of whether contemporary worship is doing away with the church choir stems from musicology's regular use of stylistic analysis to shed light on similar analytical queries.

Chapter six concludes the work by considering the role of power in contemporary worship's two church choirs, the praise and worship choirs and the worship-leading choir. The sense of power from which these two choral types are evaluated is the particular kind of power accorded to musical ensembles by the worshipping contexts in which they operate. To foreground the role of this power, the four case studies are compared along five categories, namely origin, rehearsal time, personnel, song selection, and audio projection. The conclusion of this comparison finds that although the praise and worship choir is most similar to the worship-leading choir rather than to the traditional church choir or black gospel choir in terms of musical style and genre, when the power of these ensembles is considered, the praise and worship choir is found to be more similar to the traditional church choir and black gospel choir than its genre affiliated worship-leading choir. In the light of these observations, the chapter takes on the central question of this dissertation, namely whether contemporary worship is "killing" the church choir. The answer revolved around the following hypothesis:

*The establishment of church choirs in contemporary worship within evangelical churches and networks is fraught with a central tension between establishing a sustainable choral practice, on the one hand, and keeping up with the rapidly changing genre of CWM, on the other.*

The chapter then ends with a look to the future, both in regard to whether contemporary worship will "kill" the church choir and avenues for further research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Historical Praise and Worship Choir

Having established a working definition for the two church choirs within the contemporary worship genre, the current chapter now provides a case study of the Christ Church Choir, an exemplar of the first of contemporary worship's two choral types, the praise and worship choir. The Christ Church Choir, located at a large church in Brentwood, TN, a southern suburb of Nashville, is one of the oldest church choirs in contemporary worship whose ministry endures into the present day. An image of the ensemble from Christ Church's website is given below in figure 2.1.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 2.1. An Image of the Christ Church Choir.

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<sup>1</sup> The image provided in figure 2.1 can be found at the following link on Christ Church's website, [https://www.christchurchnashville.org/ministries/christ\\_church\\_choir](https://www.christchurchnashville.org/ministries/christ_church_choir).

The “choir first” culture<sup>2</sup> that permeated Christ Church, and which perpetuated its choral ministry for nearly a half century, is demonstrated throughout this chapter which is based on observations from fieldwork, in-person interviews and email correspondences with members of Christ Church’s music ministry during the weekend of their Christmas concert in 2017.<sup>3</sup> This chapter will first continue with a scene from that Christmas concert, the ensemble’s pinnacle ministry event which was introduced at the outset of chapter one. The scene below begins at the conclusion of the vignette from the introduction, at the closing moments of the concert.

*After an eclectic selection of twenty-five expertly arranged Christmas tunes were performed continuously over a two-hour span, the current senior pastor, Dan Scott, a white sixty-something man wearing a conspicuously clerical Roman collar, takes to the stage for the first time to issue the benediction. The Pentecostal-styled delivery which followed, complete with gospel infused piano and Hammond-B3 organ interjections belied his traditional pastoral garb. To the delight of the audience, he transitioned seamlessly and frequently between fiery-toned calls emphasizing the “reason for the season” and the soulful singing of phrases from the famed Christmas carol, “O Holy Night.” The energy in the room escalated as Pastor Scott’s calls broadened the audience’s responses in the form of enthusiastic vocal interjections, shouts of “Amen,” and fervent clapping and singing. This atmosphere was primed to usurp the brief two-minute allotment for the benediction as indicated on the leadership’s written timeline sketch for the evening. An extended coda to the concert in the form of a sermonette or even a full-fledged sermon seemed imminent. However, Pastor Scott’s preaching somehow remained on schedule, and he spent the latter portion corralling the energy he generated within the sanctuary and directing it back towards the choir as the band began the intro to their soulful, gospel rendition of Händel’s*

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<sup>2</sup> The term “choir first” is used to denote the choir centric orientation of Christ Church’s worship ministry and other such praise and worship choral ministries. “Choral first” originates from the phrase “choir first” which CCC’s director, Christopher Phillips, and arranger, Phil Nitz, used during correspondences with me on the weekend of their 2017 Christmas concert. Whereas Christopher and Phil utilized “choir first” to describe their approach to arranging music for worship and for selecting congregational worship songs, this study utilizes “choral first” to describe the choir centric orientation of the entire worship ministry which prioritizes the choir in many more ways than arranging practice and song selection. The “choral first” culture of the CCC and other praise and worship choirs accounts for the most significant differentiation between the praise and worship choir and the worship-leading choir. To highlight this contrast, the auxiliary role of the worship-leading choir is illustrated in the case studies in chapters three through five.

<sup>3</sup> The Christ Church Choir 2017 Christmas concert dress rehearsals and performances took place between Thursday, November 30, 2017, and Sunday, December 3, 2017.

*Hallelujah Chorus. This electrifying transition between pastor and choir spurred virtually the entire audience to rise out of their seats and join the choir in melodious dancing, clapping, and singing.*

The Christ Church Choir, in conjunction with their pastors, produced such moments regularly in their special concerts and weekly Sunday morning worship services. Their efficacy and style bore strong affinity with the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir, another longstanding praise and worship choir that is arguably the most widely recognized of such choirs.<sup>4</sup> Given Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir's widespread notoriety and popularity, this chapter first orients the Christ Church Choir (hereafter referred to periodically as "CCC") by locating the ensemble in reference to the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir. Additionally, the shared musical style of both choirs is then illuminated through analysis of their adaptations of Händel's *Messiah*.

The chapter continues with a brief account of the beginnings of the Christ Church Choir in the seventies which is followed by a more recent view of the ensemble's ministry that is based on an introduction to the worship musicians that led the ensemble around the time of my fieldwork in December 2017. Observations on the experience of singers in the choir at that time are also included. The defining characteristics of CCC's arranging and publishing is then featured through a spotlight on one of the choir's defining musical arrangements. Finally, the chapter examines the CCC's "choral first"

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<sup>4</sup> An overview of the ministry of the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir can be found at "Music," The Brooklyn Tabernacle, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://www.brooklyntabernacle.org/music/>. The widespread acclaim of the choir is evidenced in the following article which documents their performance at President Barack Obama's second inauguration, Lore Croghan, "Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir to Sing at President Barack Obama's Swearing-in." *New York Daily News*, January 21, 2013, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/brooklyn-choir-sing-obama-swearing-in-article-1.1243767>. The choir's performance at the inauguration can be viewed at Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir, "Inauguration 2013| Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir – 'Battle Hymn of the Republic'| The New York Times," The New York Times, Washington, DC, January 21, 2013, accessed October 4, 2019, YouTube video, 5:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w5rb833WnOQ>.

function and dynamic within the overarching worship philosophy of Christ Church, and how this philosophy is realized within the flow of a typical Sunday morning worship service and in the group's annual apex ministry event, the Christmas concert.

### *Historical CWM Choirs: Christ Church and Brooklyn Tabernacle*

Christ Church Choir began in 1976<sup>5</sup> just a few years after the inception of CWM in the late sixties; therefore, this choir claims the unique distinction of being among the first worship-leading choirs to arise within the first decade of CWM. Further distinction comes from the fact that CCC's ministry was one of only two among these choirs whose ministry continued into the time of this research project in the 2010s and early 2020s and which had achieved national and international recognition.<sup>6</sup> The only other such choir to attain these milestones was the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir in Brooklyn, New York.

The notoriety of these two choirs stems largely from their discographies, with the Brooklyn Tab (as they are often called) amassing a copious list of albums produced continuously as early as 1980,<sup>7</sup> and the CCC, a considerable, yet less extensive album

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<sup>5</sup> The inception date of the Christ Church Choir along with an overview of the choir's ministry can be found at "Music," Christ Church Nashville, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://christchurchnashville.org/worship/music/>.

<sup>6</sup> As described in the opening vignette of chapter one, the audience at Christ Church Choir's 2017 Christmas concert included several fans from around the world. The choir also tours internationally. As the following link to the choir's archives shows, recent tours include Japan in 2013 and Norway in 2015, "Music," Christ Church Nashville, accessed June 22, 2017, <https://www.christchurchnashville.org/category/christ-church-choir/>.

<sup>7</sup> The complete discography of the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir can be found at "Music," The Brooklyn Tabernacle, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://www.brooklyntabernacle.org/music/>. Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir albums feature CWM and CCM artist such as Shane & Shane who appeared as guest soloists on their latest album, Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir and Shane & Shane, "Psalm 23 (featuring Shane & Shane) [Live]," recorded 2018, on *I am Reminded (Live)*, Brooklyn Tabernacle Church, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/36rpQ9VhSpMrzM3LOA6w6D?si=JMKSgtuaTS2b1vyabFIbBA>.



output which began a little over a decade later, in 1991.<sup>8</sup> These recordings distinguish themselves from other contemporary worship albums by remaining grounded predominantly in a local church context whereas many other recording efforts of the burgeoning contemporary worship genre of the time were gravitating increasingly towards professional music industry models. For instance, the recordings of Brooklyn Tab and CCC feature a large choral sound rather than the smaller, leaner praise team sound of professional studio singers preferred by the CWM recording industry.<sup>9</sup> This notwithstanding, the quality of musicianship and production of the recordings by the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir and the Christ Church Choir rivaled that of Christian professional record labels. It should be noted, however, that due to existing within prime professional music centers such as New York and Nashville, Brooklyn Tab and CCC also overlapped with the professional Christian music industry in ways that supported the musicianship and quality of their recordings.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> A partial list of CCC's discography can be found at the following link, "Discography Christ Church Choir," AllMusic, accessed April 2, 2018, <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/christ-church-choir-mn0000096226/discography/all>. More recent CCC albums not listed here which I was made aware of by CCC director at the time, Christopher Phillips, include *Start it Up and Give Him Praise* (2007), *Christmas Tapestry* (2007), and *The Best of Christ Church Choir* (2009). CCC's latest album effort, Christ Church Choir, *Your Spirit* recorded 2019, Starsong (STR), streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, [https://open.spotify.com/album/6CSfBNNfEkILe2ZmqJG6ux?si=5qlgDgmXSWmoYDnUIwWP\\_Q](https://open.spotify.com/album/6CSfBNNfEkILe2ZmqJG6ux?si=5qlgDgmXSWmoYDnUIwWP_Q), a six-song EP that includes a medley of "Our God" and "How Great is Our God," two popular modern CWM songs by Chris Tomlin from the 2010 and 2011 respectively. Beyond their standalone albums, CCC has recorded as a guest choir various projects such as Gaither Homecoming, *Christmas Favorites (Live)* recorded 2012, streaming audio, Gaither Music Group LLC, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/album/0DVvmF6GE4u2ma3dCiGIEs?si=ZexwoODmSXi2-3oV2rLLyA>.

<sup>9</sup> Examples of the professional praise team sound referenced here are the Maranatha! Singers and the Integrity Worship Singers.

<sup>10</sup> Two examples that demonstrate the effect of Nashville's professional music industry on the CCC is their constant access to highly talented singers drawn to Nashville's music scene and their publishing relationship with Brentwood Benson. Both are explored later in this chapter.

Both choirs evolved independently, yet their pastoral and musical leadership as well as their Pentecostal denominational affiliation were certainly connected. As Beth Kolwyck, longtime conductor and assistant to the Christ Church Choir recalls, Brooklyn Tabernacle's pastor, Jim Cymbala, served as a guest speaker for Christ Church's Word and Spirit Conferences during the conference's heyday in the 80s and 90s. Jim's wife, Carol, the pioneering conductor and arranger for the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir, was a good friend and a substantial inspiration for Landy Gardner, the first conductor and founder of CCC.<sup>11</sup> Additionally Christopher Phillips, the current worship pastor at Christ Church, noted that the same musical producer and visionary, Lari Goss, spearheaded the production and orchestration of a number of the recordings of both choirs.<sup>12</sup>

Despite developing their choral ministries in environments as disparate as east coast New York and Bible Belt Tennessee, it is of little surprise that both foundational worship-leading choirs articulated a similar musical style which combines CWM, particularly its praise and worship subgenre, black gospel idioms, and traditional church choir influences. Their unique style was likely a byproduct of the times in which they were created. In the seventies, CWM was young and sophomoric, in comparison to the colossal and chorally rich worship genres associated with the gospel choir and the traditional church choir. That fragments from these more established traditions would find their way into the new, emerging choral expressions in contemporary worship seems to be a natural, plausible, and likely occurrence.

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<sup>11</sup> Beth Kolwyck, email message to author, July 24, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Phillips, interview by author, Brentwood, TN, November 30, 2017.

Although the Christ Church and Brooklyn Tabernacle choirs were supported by the standard contemporary worship band formation of solo singers on microphones, drums and percussion, acoustic pianos and electronic keyboards, as well as acoustic, electric and bass guitars, they also incorporated vast, fully wrought orchestral ensembles of strings, woodwinds, brass and percussion commonly associated with traditional worship.<sup>13</sup> Quintessential black gospel instrumentation, such as the Hammond B3 organ, along with the distinct playing styles and articulation of black gospel were also included.

The sound that resulted was grandiose and producing it was often quite expensive since it requires highly trained orchestrators, conductors, and musicians as well as individualized music scores for each faction of the ensemble. Such scores must either be purchased from established publishing firms<sup>14</sup> or created in-house by a skilled arranger. Even the rhythm section players must possess the skill to read music, and beyond this, they must read within a hybrid performance style that combined this reading centric approach with “by ear” playing techniques. Rhythm section players capable of executing such a variety of approaches are often those trained for professional studio work as well as other genres which combine orchestra and rhythm section, such as musical theatre, film scoring and adult contemporary.

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<sup>13</sup> Depending on the accommodations of a given ministry event, each choir may perform with various renderings of the orchestra, from a fully wrought orchestral ensemble to pre-recorded orchestral backing tracks. In the case of the 2017 Christmas Concert which was featured in the opening vignette of this chapter, the choir sang alongside a chamber orchestra that was often supplemented by orchestral tracks.

<sup>14</sup> Such scores can be found by several publishers such as Word, Lifeway Worship and Lillenas to name a few. CCC published their arrangements through Brentwood Benson, a relationship that is explored later in this chapter.

*Infusion of Traditional, Gospel and CWM Influences in Händel's "Hallelujah Chorus"*

Each choir's adaptation of Händel's *Hallelujah Chorus*, the choral conclusion to Part II of *Messiah*, exemplifies their singular potpourri of musical styles, namely traditional, gospel, and CWM. Christ Church's rendition uses this chorus exclusively whereas Brooklyn Tab's version creates a riveting mashup of musical material from *Worthy is the Lamb*, the ending chorus of Part III.<sup>15</sup> CCC closed each of its pinnacle Christmas concerts with their arrangement of the *Hallelujah Chorus*, and Brooklyn Tab's rendition appeared on their compilation album entitled *Hallelujah! The Very Best of the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir*. These arrangements are undoubtedly among the magna opera of each choir's repertoire of "showstopping" choral anthems which facilitated each church's "choir first" celebrations during the seasons of Advent and Christmas. As such, they are viable sites from which to analyze the musical style of these choirs.<sup>16</sup>

The selection of Händel's oratorio choruses, the ample use of orchestral textures, and the substantial use of notation scores and notation-centered arranging tactics demonstrate the influence of traditional choral music on both choirs' repertoire and style. The recorded version of CCC's arrangement further integrates traditional influence by beginning with a near two-minute excerpt of Händel's original score. This direct quotation of Händel's original material serves as an extended introduction that precedes and prepares for the introduction of CWM and gospel elements.

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<sup>15</sup> A performance of Brooklyn Tabernacle's rendition can be found at Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir, "The Hallelujah Chorus (Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir)," bcimasschoir, April 7, 2008, YouTube video, 5:47, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M9glxzl-s5c>.

<sup>16</sup> Christ Church Choir's rendition of Händel's *Hallelujah Chorus* bears affinity to the well-known gospel adaptation by Andrae Crouch and other notable gospel artists that is featured on the Grammy Award winning album, Various Artists, *Handel's Messiah: A Soulful Celebration*, recorded 1992, Reprise Records, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, [https://open.spotify.com/track/7nuW6IIOP5kxsv4C2vrOOf?si=v5ttp\\_pDTC6Xem7rCA59AA](https://open.spotify.com/track/7nuW6IIOP5kxsv4C2vrOOf?si=v5ttp_pDTC6Xem7rCA59AA).

Although Brooklyn Tabernacle’s arrangement does not include any of Händel’s original score, it does reference extensively its melismatic singing, a commonplace characteristic of the Baroque period of Western European classical music, the time in which *Messiah* was composed. Whereas Baroque melismas typically feature clear articulation, intonation and bell-toned head voice resonance within straight, even rhythmic subdivisions, Brooklyn Tab’s integration of these melismatic gestures are commingled with gospel and CWM vocal aesthetics, namely riffs and glides sung primarily with chest voice resonance. Figure 2.2 below provides one of the many daunting melismas from Brooklyn Tab’s arrangement.

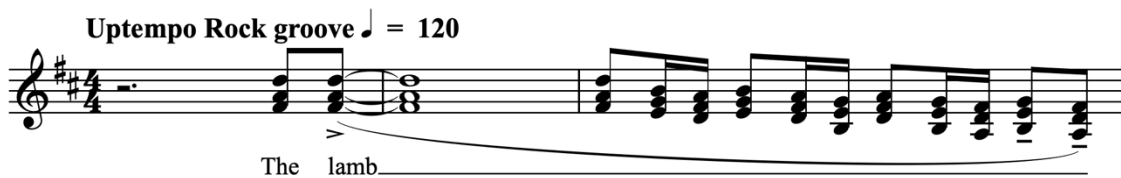


Figure 2.2. An Example of Melismatic Singing in Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir’s Rendition of Händel’s *Worthy is the Lamb/Hallelujah Chorus*.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> The notation of figure 2.2 is a transcription by the author.

Although melismas are absent from the syllabically driven arrangement by CCC,<sup>18</sup> figure 2.3 presents a prominent neumatic gesture utilized within the arrangement which bears some affinity to Brooklyn Tab’s dexterous melismas.

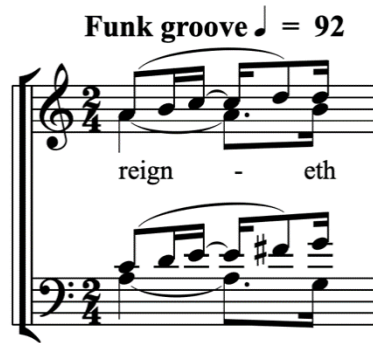


Figure 2.3. An Example of Neumatic Singing in Christ Church Choir’s Rendition of Händel’s *Hallelujah Chorus*.<sup>19</sup>

Gospel and CWM’s penchant for homophony is reflected in the reduction of non-subject based polyphonic material in Christ Church Choir’s arrangement.<sup>20</sup> To make clear the musical material which CCC omitted, consider Händel’s original setting of the text, “and He shall reign forever and ever,” provided in figure z below.

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<sup>18</sup> CCC’s preference for a syllabic setting rather than a melismatic one likely reflects the predominantly syllabic nature of parts that are sung by gospel choirs and CWM choirs more generally. Additionally, although the arrangements of both choirs are stylistically similar, they differ in their congregational effect, which then influences the inclusion or exclusion of melismas. The live recording of Brooklyn Tab’s rendition provided by the YouTube link in footnote 15 presents a “show stopping” anthem. The congregation does not sing along, but listens. They clap on the back beats (beats 2 and 4) only once the “Hallelujah” motive makes its entrance. The absence of congregational singing is likely due in part to the arrangement’s varied, through-composed vocal parts as well as the dexterous melismas sung by the choir – musical elements which typical congregations can likely follow or replicate. Alternatively, when CCC performed its arrangement at the end of the 2017 Christmas concert as described in the opening vignette, the congregation sang while clapping throughout. CCC’s simple syllabic parts, parts that are much easier to follow than Brooklyn Tab’s melismas, facilitated congregational singing.

<sup>19</sup> This excerpt was taken from the sheet music for the arrangement published by Brentwood Benson.

<sup>20</sup> Since this chapter is featuring the Christ Church Choir, the remaining examples concerning *Messiah* will feature contrasts with CCC’s arrangement. However, the points of comparison illuminating these remaining examples apply to Brooklyn Tabernacle’s arrangement more generally.

As is customary for the fugue, each choral section takes turns singing the subject, in this case, in the order of the lowest to the highest voice, from bass to soprano. These subjects are marked with brackets in figure 2.4. As is also typical of fugues, each section continues with polyphonic material after their presentation of the subject. This polyphonic material, the product of fragmentation of the subject, is notated in figure 2.4 with diamond note heads. In sum, the passage results in a musical texture that initiates monophonically and aggregates towards increasing polyphonic density and busyness through stratified additions of each choral section. In contrast, an excerpt of Christ Church Choir's adaptation is provided in figure 2.5 below.

As shown in figure 2.5, the homophonic sensibilities of gospel and CWM are implemented in Christ Church Choir's arrangement by supporting Händel's initial monophonic texture with a groovy, syncopated, chordal accompaniment. This homophonic texture is then maintained throughout the excerpt by sidelining the wealth of polyphonic variations found in Händel's fragments of the subject. What remains then are simply four iterations of the subject each sung in turn by a section of the choir – a texture that exemplifies the simplicity, clarity and accessibility typical of gospel and CWM.

41 **Allegro**

SOPRANO

ALTO

TENOR

BASS

*f* *subject in bass*

and He shall reign for ev - er and ev - er, for ev - er and ev - er and He shall

*f* *subject in tenor*

and He shall reign for ev - er and ev -

46

*f* *subject in alto*

and He shall reign for ev - er and e - - ver, for ev - er

ver, and He shall reign for ev - er and ev - - er.

reign, and He shall reign for ev - er, for ev - er, for ev - er, for

49 *subject in soprano*

He shall reign for ev - er and ev - - ver.

and ev - er, for ev - er and ev - er.

and He shall reign for ev - er and ev - er.

ev - er and ev - er for ev - er for ev - er and ev - er.

Figure 2.4. Händel’s fugal setting of the text “and He shall reign for ever and ever” in mm. 41.2 – 51.2 of the *Hallelujah Chorus*.



The musical score is arranged for the Christ Church Choir (CCC Choir), Piano, and three vocal parts: LADIES, TENORS, and ALTOS. The piano accompaniment is marked "Funky groove". The lyrics are: "And He shall reign for-ev - er and ev - er. And He shall reign for-ev - er And He shall reign for-ev - er".

Figure 2.5. Christ Church Choir's homophonic adaptation of Händel's fugal setting of the text "and He shall reign for ever and ever" from the *Hallelujah Chorus*.

The final predilection of gospel and CWM influencing CCC's arrangement that will be discussed is the use of sheer repetition. This type of repetition relies on verbatim restatements and slight variation and contributes handily to the catchy hooks and choruses found within gospel and contemporary pop-rock based worship songs. Minimal variation typifies gospel and CWM and differs vastly from the significant variation in the excerpt of Händel's *Messiah* in figure 2.4 which was just described above. This significant variation was produced through fragmentation, rhythmic diminution, and inversion of the melodic contour – commonplace Baroque techniques that drive the increasing development of polyphonic motives.

Examples exemplifying the differing use of repetition and variation in Händel's original score and Christ Church Choir's adaptation can be found in comparing their openings and endings. The choir in Händel's original begins with just two phrases that introduce the primary "Hallelujah" motif, the first in the tonic and the second in the dominant, after which the chorus moves immediately on to other motivic ideas. However, CCC's arrangement extends Händel's introduction with an additional phrase reiteration of this opening motif yielding a tri-phrase harmonic plan of tonic-dominant-tonic. Similarly, Händel's original version concludes his anthem with just five triumphant tutti repetitions of "Hallelujah," the first four at tempo followed by the final repetition that is broadened significantly to produce a climactic ending. Yet, before CCC arrives at this broadened ending in their arrangement, the choir repeats "Hallelujah" sixteen times by way of two eight measure gospel-styled shout choruses, the second of which intensifies these repetitions by shifting the groove to double time.

*A Pastor's Vision: The Beginnings of the Christ Church Choir* <sup>21</sup>

With the historical significance and distinguishing musical style of the Christ Church Choir now established through comparison with the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir, the remainder of this case study focuses exclusively on the CCC – a choir whose ministry resonates at the epicenter of Christ Church's worship identity. As such, the CCC benefits from a "choir first" culture that prioritizes the ensemble in numerous ways such as in its selection of music staff, musical arrangements for worship, and in the corporate expression of the church's distinct theology. Each of these facets of the "choir first"

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<sup>21</sup> This short historical account of the Christ Church Choir stems from a Skype interview held in December 2018 with longtime CCC conductor, Beth Kolwyck.

culture is discussed below, following a discussion of the origins of this “choir first” culture, at the ensemble’s beginnings.

Constant pastoral support, affirmation, involvement, and deference have been afforded the Christ Church Choir since its inception and throughout its near five decades of existence, from the mid-seventies to the early 2020s. As the opening vignette of this chapter demonstrated, Pastor Dan Scott complemented, invigorated, and even participated in, yet did not overshadow, the choir’s final concert number, CCC’s version of Händel’s *Messiah* discussed in the preceding section. This memorable musical interaction between pastoral leadership and choir is an excellent demonstration of their relationship more generally.

Even the very idea of the choir came from pastoral leadership, from the church’s late founding senior pastor and pastor emeritus, Lawson Hugh Hardwick, Jr., whose Pentecostal upbringing developed within him a strong appreciation for the power of music in corporate worship. He, like the current senior pastor, Pastor Dan Scott, was also a practicing musician, who sang in a vocal trio with his two sons, Mike and Steve. After experiencing the dynamic ministry of a black gospel choir of the Pentecostal Church of God denomination during a trip to Chicago, he returned to Christ Church in Brentwood, Tennessee, to share his choral vision with church member, Landy Gardner, and to request that he begin a similarly styled choir at their church. Landy was apprehensive about this request, yet the pastor, who was so taken by his vision for this choral ministry, continued pleading. After about a year of consideration, Landy finally conceded to pastor Hardwick’s request, and the Christ Church Choir was born in the mid-seventies.

Landy Gardner took on the choral project but with one crucial stipulation – that the choir not sing in corporate worship until he deemed that they were good enough to do so. This prioritization of excellence from the outset has remained with the choir ever since. Weekly rehearsals ensued for months before the choir began singing “specials” in worship periodically. This focus on excellence developed into a choir that routinely sang two to three choral anthems at each Sunday worship service, and also sang improvised three-part harmony on all congregational worship songs, gospel songs and hymns. Landy’s penchant for excellence was exacting, as was his intense and charismatic leadership persona, yet he was integral in establishing the choir’s seminal Christmas concert and in securing recording and publishing contracts from the nineties onwards.<sup>22</sup>

Whereas Landy served the choir as its founding director, his wife, Joy, also figured prominently in the development of the ensemble as a choral singer, arranger, and accomplished soloist, appearing most prominently as a frequent gospel artist at Gaither homecoming events.<sup>23</sup> Figure 2.6 below shows the cover of a published collection with Brentwood Benson of Joy and Landy’s finest arrangements with the Christ Church Choir.

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<sup>22</sup> Beth Kolwyck, interview by author, June 2018. Beth is the longtime conductor of the CCC and served alongside Landy Gardner for many years.

<sup>23</sup> The following YouTube link shows Joy Gardner performing at a Gaither homecoming held in Alaska, Joy Gardner, “Joy Comes in the Morning – Lyric Video),” Gaither Music TV, October 23, 2018, YouTube video, 3:50, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9\\_x7eCuk8NM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_x7eCuk8NM). Joy Gardner also performed at these events with the CCC as shown in the following video, Joy Gardner and the Christ Church Choir, “Joseph, What a Wonderful Child (Live),” Gaither Music TV, accessed February 20, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLTbDVNpowc>.

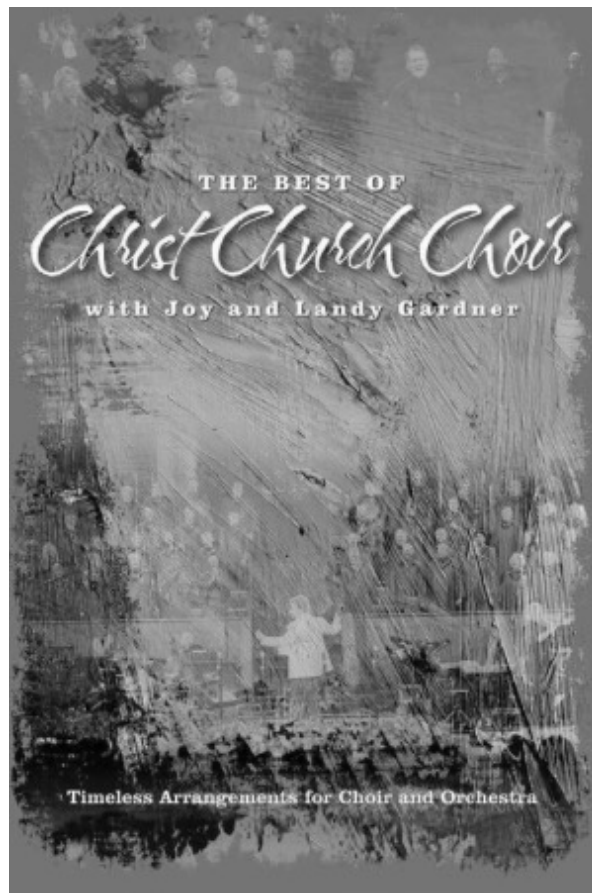


Figure 2.6. The Cover of *The Best of Christ Church Choir with Joy and Landy Gardner* (2009) as published by Brentwood Benson.

*Coach, Composer, and Conductor: CCC's "Trinity" of Choral Leaders*

During the time of my fieldwork in 2019, a “trinity” of choral leaders – Christopher Phillips, the coach; Phil Nitz, the composer; and Beth Kolwyck, the conductor – perpetuated the tradition of choral excellence established by Landy Gardner. These leaders were selected for their choral prowess and dedication to Christ Church’s “choir first” culture. To this trinity of choral leaders could be added staff worship leader, Jenn Crider, who at the time served as a chorister and caretaker of the CCC. The

particular musical expertise of each member of the leadership team shaped the ministry of the ensemble as a whole; therefore, the ministry of each leader will be discussed.

I first became acquainted with Christopher Phillips, the director of worship and arts, and Phil Nitz, the worship leader and staff arranger, through email correspondences throughout the summer of 2017. That fall, Phil invited me to attend their renowned Christmas concert on Saturday, December 2, 2017 (which was described in the opening vignettes of chapter one and again in the current chapter) as well as the dress rehearsal that took place two days prior to the concert. During that trip, I had the pleasure of meeting Christopher and Phil in person as well as Jenn Crider and Beth Kolwyck. I experienced the choir's unique musical identity in action, conducted several extended formal interviews, and engaged in informal conversation.

### *Christopher, The Coach*

Christopher Phillips began his directorship of the worship and arts program at Christ Church in 2003.<sup>24</sup> With notable musical versatility, he led primarily as an arranger for the choir, worship band, orchestra, and the five-piece in-house brass quintet. He also produced prerecorded click and backing tracks and operated these tracks from the piano while issuing conducting cues and signal calls.

Christopher's piano playing was the chief impetus of the worship ensemble and featured an adept feel for idioms associated with Pentecostal-styled praise and worship, southern gospel and meditative hymn improvisation. He was the primary rehearsal

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<sup>24</sup> "Christopher Phillips Music," accessed December 10, 2018, <http://christopherphillipsmusic.com/about>. "Christopher Phillips," Christ Church Nashville, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://christchurchnashville.org/im-new/who-we-are/christopher-phillips/>.

conductor for the weekly two-hour choir rehearsal each Wednesday evening from 6:30-8:30PM. Although he considered himself primarily an arranger and pianist and not a solo singer, he had the ability to sing high alto-ranged vocal parts which allowed him to instruct the altos in choir rehearsal through vocal modeling. On occasion, he also served as an alto on microphones within an SAT vocal trio that supported congregational singing during Sunday services.<sup>25</sup>

Christopher's musical development and eventual directorship at Christ Church was catalyzed by his undergraduate music studies at Lee University which emphasized piano performance skills and small ensemble singing in the sixteen-voice virtuoso a cappella worship group, the Voices of Lee.<sup>26</sup> The group routinely pilgrimaged approximately two and a half hours north-west within the state of Tennessee from Cleveland to Nashville to deliver ministry performances at Christ Church. During these visits, he and the church developed a bond that led to his eventual hiring after graduation. As an alumnus, Christopher continued to facilitate the ministry performances of Voices of Lee at Christ Church, which allowed him to connect with the group's new incoming members. One of these new members was Phil Nitz who Christopher would later hire as a worship leader and staff arranger.

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<sup>25</sup> Christopher serves in this role only if necessary since he is normally involved with playing the piano, giving cues, and running backing tracks from his computer (Backing tracks are prerecorded music which are played alongside a live performance for the purpose of supplementing live performance).

<sup>26</sup> "Voices of Lee: Directed by Dan Murray," accessed February 20, 2021, <http://www.voicesoflee.com>.

### *Phil, The Composer*

In 2013, Phil graduated from Lee University with a Master of Arts in church music and moved to Nashville to serve the music ministry at Christ Church.<sup>27</sup> His musicianship complemented that of Christopher's in many ways which strengthen the choral program – whereas Christopher was a pianist, Phil was a guitarist; while Christopher had the ability to sing alto, Phil was a fine tenor with lead solo voice capacity.

Since Christopher fulfilled the role of worship pastor which, beyond the creation of music, included oversight, vision casting, and pastoral duties pertaining to all aspects of the worship life of the church, Phil supplemented Christopher's pastoral role by focusing solely on the musical needs of the church, primarily through performance and arranging. As such, he was the default Sunday morning male soloist, and he assumed the largest portion of the arranging duties for the music program.

Phil, like Christopher, could navigate multiple genres, yet he brought a particular command of jazz grooves and harmonic idioms, modern rock-based worship styles, and choral textures beyond those derived from standard SAT homophonic logic – a technique that he honed by not only singing in the Voices of Lee, but by arranging for them as well.<sup>28</sup> Phil's guitar playing, like Christopher's pianism, also had the versatility to span numerous genres, yet he was particularly at home in contemporary worship, country, and

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<sup>27</sup> "Phil Nitz," Christ Church Nashville, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://christchurchnashville.org/im-new/who-we-are/phil-nitz/>.

<sup>28</sup> The following video provides one of Phil Nitz's arrangements for the group, a mashup of Hillsong's *What a Beautiful Name* and Elevation Worship's *Resurrecting*. Voices of Lee, "What a Beautiful Name," Voices of Lee Official, July 2, 2017, YouTube video, 5:32, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tiIMtID54K8>. Phil's arranging was also pivotal in the Voices of Lee's television appearance in the NBC network's first ever Sing-Off competition in 2009.



rock, both classic and modern, with the inclusion of nuanced chordal extensions derived from a jazz-based sensibility.<sup>29</sup>

### *Beth, The Conductor*

Beth Kolwyck held a master's in music education with a choral emphasis and served as a music assistant for the Christ Church choir since its early, formative years in the mid 70s and early 80s. Having had the experience of conducting works such as Fauré's *Requiem*, she benefited the choir with her formal training while also providing a tangible connection to its long and storied past – her family was well acquainted with the founding pastor, Lawson Hugh Hardwick, Jr., even before he began Christ Church. In the choir's early days, she would conduct the choir when its founder, Landy Gardner, was out of town. At the time of this fieldwork, she continued to conduct the group during worship services, a role which freed Chris to lead from the piano, and Phil and Jenn to sing as soloists or in the choir. For large concerts, Beth served as the default conductor with Phil as a secondary option.

Beyond addressing the musical needs of the choir, Beth, with her deep historical and relational attachment to choir members past and present, emerged naturally as the primary nurturer and caretaker of the choir and its alumni. She served as an intermediary between choir members and the worship pastor and attended to the feedback and needs of the singers in the choir.

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<sup>29</sup> Phil Nitz, email message to author, July 9, 2018.

*Additional Choral Support – Jenn, The Chorister and Caretaker*

Jenn Crider served Christ Church primarily as a worship leader and an assistant missions director. She was ordained as a deacon in 2012<sup>30</sup> and she also delivered sermons on occasion.<sup>31</sup> Her preaching experience and theological training equipped her to deliver salient and sometimes extended spoken preludes, interludes and postludes during congregational worship and at CCC's Christmas concerts.

As one of the daughters of acclaimed Christian artist Sandi Patty, Jenn learned and honed her ability for worship leading from an iconic artist who is widely considered to be one of the best.<sup>32</sup> Beyond her family-based apprenticeship that included travelling on the road during Sandi Patti's many tours across the world, she developed her musicianship through a degree in music business from Anderson University in Anderson, IN, and she continued to hone her abilities by pursuing a Masters of Divinity at Liberty University Online.

Jenn was the default female solo vocalist each Sunday providing the soprano line which rounds out the SAT vocal trio with Phil on tenor and a volunteer or Christopher on alto. When Jenn was not singing on microphone, she sang in the choir thus providing vocal leadership to the soprano section. At the dress rehearsal for the 2017 Christmas concert, Jenn could be seen exiting the rehearsal and returning with items such as bottles

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<sup>30</sup> Jenn Crider's ordination at Christ Church is mentioned in her personal blog, "Jenn Crider: Wife. Mother. Pastor." accessed December 16, 2017, <https://jenncrider.com/about/>, and was also mentioned during informal conversation with Beth Kolwyck.

<sup>31</sup> The following link on the church's YouTube channel provides a sermon by Jenn Crider, Jenn Crider, "Sermon," Christ Church Nashville, August 13, 2017, YouTube video, 29:33, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WR1aC5CIVRs>.

<sup>32</sup> Sandi Patti's connection with Christ Church through her daughter has facilitated Sandi's ministry appearances at Christ Church, for instance as the featured soloist for Christ Church Choir's 2018 Christmas concert.

of water that were needed by various choir members. In conversation with her after the dress rehearsal, she shared that she considers it within her pastoral role to serve the choir as a caretaker.

### *The Experience of CCC's Singers*

#### *Recruitment*

Christ Church Choir sustained its “choir first” choral excellence by attracting quality singers while also adopting the “all-singers-are-welcome” approach typical of most church choirs. Although all singers were accepted into the choir, each singer was required to complete a mandatory audition. This audition allowed the leaders of the CCC detailed knowledge of each singer’s vocal capacity. Additionally, each singer had to agree to a yearlong commitment. The mandatory audition and required commitment allowed the Christ Church Choir to attract strong singers from the vast pool of professional and semiprofessional singers in Nashville, a city which claimed the title of the nation’s music capital. CCC’s considerable reputation throughout Nashville, which resonated particularly within the city’s substantial Christian music industry, certainly positioned the choir as an ever-present vocal outlet for these aspiring singers.

Singer and music business professional Ginger Eldridge was a prime example of the type of aspiring musician that Nashville afforded the CCC. What follows is a summary of the experiences with the CCC and with Nashville’s “music row” that Ginger shared in an extended podcast episode in April 2018.<sup>33</sup> In 1986, she moved from Miami

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<sup>33</sup> Grefory Byerline, host, “Ginger Eldridge: Mother, Survivor, Honorer.” Collected Clan (podcast), April 30, 2018, accessed September 20, 2018, <http://collectedclan.libsyn.com/-8-ginger-eldridge-mother-survivor-honorer>.

to Nashville to pursue the music industry. She matriculated at Belmont University<sup>34</sup> after being recommended to do so by Christian artist Scott Wesley Brown during a post-concert conversation with the artist. Her studies at Belmont immersed her in the music business and she landed a position at Sony Music's Columbia Records. She held this position as a student and continued with the label after graduating from Belmont in 1990.

Ginger sang with the CCC for twenty-five years beginning in 1987, her sophomore year at Belmont University. During her tenure with the choir, she served as an occasional solo vocalist and helped teach parts to various sections of the choir. She was drawn to the CCC because of its small church feel and its notable connections and accomplishments in the Christian music industry. She was amazed by Landy's choral leadership and "how soulful of a sound that choir would put out when it was 99% white."<sup>35</sup> She was also attracted to the choir because of the presence of gospel artist Joy Gardner, who mentored her as a soloist and sang alongside her in the choir. A highlight event afforded Ginger through the CCC was when legendary country artist Dolly Parton requested a select group of women from the CCC, which included Ginger and Joy, to sing "Eagle When She Flies" with her at the 1991 Country Music Awards (CMA).<sup>36</sup>

Although there were other pro and semi-pro level singers in the Christ Church Choir who, like Ginger, moved to Nashville to pursue a career in music, there were also

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<sup>34</sup> Belmont University was called Belmont College at the time.

<sup>35</sup> Grefory Byerline, host, "Ginger Eldridge: Mother, Survivor, Honorer." Collected Clan (podcast), April 30, 2018, accessed September 20, 2018, <http://collectedclan.libsyn.com/-8-ginger-eldridge-mother-survivor-honorer>.

<sup>36</sup> Ginger posted a video of the CMA 1991 performance with Dolly Parton, Dolly Parton, "Eagle When She Flies," Ginger Eldridge, YouTube video, accessed January 7, 2019, 4:11, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1qLP3RcjM>.

several singers whose aspirations were simply to sing in an excellent worship choir. One such singer is Roy Martin, a middle-aged African American man at the time who sang in the tenor section. In a conversation before the choir's dress rehearsal for the 2017 Christmas concert, Roy revealed an additional point of attraction for the choir – "Have you heard the YouTube videos? This choir sounds so tight. I just wanted to be a part of it..."<sup>37</sup> Roy went on to mention that the videos that attracted him were both those that featured the choir's anthems as well as the church's weekly video postings of their Sunday morning worship services.

### *Rehearsals*

Once singers agreed to the one-year commitment, they experienced weekly two-hour long rehearsals that, albeit exacting in their musical demands, were concurrently a dynamic act of worship and fellowship. This sense of communal worship singing fostered in rehearsal carried over to the choir's Sunday morning ministry. As many as fifty out of fifty-two Sundays were led by the choir with respite being given only during the couple Sundays in Advent after the demanding annual Christmas concert that was held in early December, within the first or second week of the Advent season.

Even though choral singers were held firmly to their commitments, these standards were mitigated somewhat for special populations such as seniors and single parents. As Chris shared, "Sometimes, it is a true victory that they make it through the door!"<sup>38</sup> For these choral singers, he earnestly sought to fashion choir practice as a life-

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<sup>37</sup> This quote was given during a conversation before the 2017 Christmas concert dress rehearsal.

<sup>38</sup> This quote was given from a conversation after the 2017 Christmas concert dress rehearsal.

giving, uplifting time of worship rather than as another burdensome activity of the day demanding their time and energy.

### *Soloists*

Although Phil and Jenn handled many of the vocal solos required of Christ Church Choir's choral arrangements, they were just two soloist options amongst an elite subgroup of solo capable singers from within the choir. Beyond the high musical quality of the choir, the commitment and investment of the soloist subgroup was likely enhanced further due to these solo opportunities. In turn, the choir benefitted from the vocal strength and leadership that these solo singers lent to their respective sections.

Solo opportunities also contributed to the vocal strength of the choir through another subgroup within the ensemble, namely the aspiring soloists. Since auditions for solo slots were open to the entire choir, aspiring soloists were incentivized to hone their voices outside of choir rehearsal to deliver strong auditions. Through audition preparation, aspiring soloists benefitted the choir with their ever-improving vocal tone and musicianship.

One such aspiring soloist was soprano Amy Morrow whom I met serendipitously in mid-June 2018 in northern Colorado at a worship service at her mother's home church. Amy's mom had recently passed and so Amy and her family had flown in from Nashville to attend her mother's funeral that would take place later that afternoon. After the worship service, we talked extensively and enthusiastically about the Christ Church Choir, and I had the pleasure of hearing her fine, well-trained solo voice during a pre-

funeral sound check rehearsal. The polish with which Amy sang bore evidence to the quality of voice that contributes the stellar choral tone of Christ Church Choir.<sup>39</sup>

### *Basses*

Another aspect affecting the experience of the choral singers was that Christ Church Choir included a sizeable bass section. This differentiated them from Brooklyn Tabernacle, along with several other church choirs that adhered to the standard SAT gospel choir trichord formation, and so, did not have bass sections. The bass section allowed entry to more male singers into CCC since the majority of male choral singers possessed lower set voices rather than the high tenor voices typical of male soloists within the praise and worship style of CCC's music. On the other hand, since these bass singers were often called upon to sing in the extended bass range of Eb4-F#4, they functioned more as a baritone section rather than a true bass section.

Soloists were rarely, if ever, pulled from the bass section, a fact which might have contributed to why CCC's bass section was marginally weaker than the other sections of the choir. Due to the absence of bass solos, bass singers were not inclined to improve their vocal musicianship through solo audition preparation. The lack of bass soloists precluded the section from benefitting from the vocal strength and leadership that soloists provide to the other sections of the choir. Even the musical leaders on staff at Christ

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<sup>39</sup> Although Amy has not served as a soloist with the CCC, the following Christ Church video features her as one of the vocal leads in a jazz trio arrangement of "Love Lifted Me" by Steve Maulden, Christ Church Nashville Band, "Love Lifted Me," Christ Church Nashville, YouTube video, accessed January 7, 2019, 4:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxTxo9SfwAc&list=LL7CGxbNmZdU5hlwoE1m6tKA&index=6&t=0s>

Church, namely Jenn (soprano), Christopher (alto), and Phil (tenor), were without bass representation.

Nevertheless, even though a bass section was included in the CCC, the choir's gospel roots and style often invested the heart of their sound within the upper SAT voices. The bass section was usually felt, but not truly heard, as a thickening agent that doubled the bass instruments of the rhythm section and orchestra.

The inclusion of a bass section did allow CCC to produce traditional SATB hymnic textures where the sound of a bass section needed to be heard and not just felt. One such example was their arrangement of the creedal anthem *We Believe* which is discussed later in this chapter. The bass section of the Christ Church Choir represented a site of negotiation in which gospel choir and traditional church choir heritages were fused while concurrently all male voices, both high and low, were allowed to contribute to the choir's dynamic music ministry.

#### *“Choir First” Arranging and Publishing at Brentwood Benson*

From the preceding sections orienting the Christ Church choir in its past and also the time of this fieldwork, it became apparent that the vibrancy of this choral ministry was due to its “choir first” culture. This “choir first” mindset was expressed by the perpetual supportive role of its pastoral leadership, the collective commitment to choral excellence held and cherished by all from the pastors to the choral singers to even the congregants, and also by the choral skill set possessed by the team of musicians that led the ensemble. Although varied in musical background and training, each staff member of Christ Church's music ministry possessed some level of familiarity and skill with the choral ensemble: Christopher, with his ability to coach the choir didactically from the



piano; Phil, with his prowess in choral arranging; Beth, with her formal, graduate training in choral conducting; and Jenn, with her pastoral presence and excellence as a soprano vocalist. Another key ingredient that contributed to the vitality of the CCC was the commitment of the music ministry to prioritize the choir in its worship arrangements – a process which this case study terms “choir first” arranging.<sup>40</sup>

The pastoral and musical leadership unrelentingly prioritized the choir even in the phases prior to arranging, worship visioning, programming, and selecting songs. In conversation with Christopher about vetting recent worship songs, he was quick to dismiss several such songs simply on the grounds that they did not provide the potential for what he described as “intuitive SAT gospel choral parts.” This stricture was upheld fastidiously because it was not only choral excellence from the choir on the platform that was cherished by Christ Church, but also vocal involvement by the congregation in each worship song. No matter the particular song being sung, the sound of congregational singing at Christ Church, the combined voice of pastor, choir and congregation, was characterized by a perpetual, 3-part SAT gospel sound which was either improvised or sung by memory through the repetition of a given song over years of church attendance. Worship songs without the potential for this perpetual SAT gospel “choir first” treatment would likely disrupt the congregational voice fostered at Christ Church.

“Choir first” arranging of worship music distinguished itself from other approaches to the worship-leading choir by considering the choir and its significant

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<sup>40</sup> Christopher Phillips, interview by author, Brentwood, TN, November 30, 2017. Christopher utilized “choir first” as a descriptive phrase to illustrate Christ Church’s approach to arranging music for worship. This study appropriates his phrase in order to coin a principle central to the Christ Church’s music ministry and church at large. “Choir first” arranging at Christ Church is but one phenomenon which feeds the overall “choir first” culture of the church.

choral moments within a worship song from the outset. Only after these featured choral moments were carefully crafted and considered were the roles of vocal soloist, worship band, orchestra and even pastoral interjections considered. An example of the latter was at play in the opening vignette of this chapter. Within the highly intentional design of the Christmas concert, the fiery pastoral benediction, although itself a featured element of the concert's punctuated ending, served primarily as a secondary feature the purpose of which was to augment the anticipation of the choir's dynamic closer – the electrifying gospel arrangement of Händel's *Hallelujah Chorus*.

*Brentwood Benson*<sup>41</sup>

The perpetual arranging ministry of both Christopher and Phil evidenced the commitment of the program to “choir first” arranging. Although the choir purchased and performs arrangements other than those created by these two leaders, the lion's share of the choir's repertoire, including their most iconic arrangements, were sourced from their in-house arrangers. Beyond fueling a unique sound and feel of choral ministry at Christ Church, the arrangements of Christopher and Phil were published at Brentwood Benson, a major publishing house of choral CWM arrangements; and so, their arrangements participated in a national and international platform of praise and worship-styled, chorally-driven churches.

This publishing relationship was fostered by the professional quality of the arrangements themselves as well as Chris and Phil's “membership” among the select

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<sup>41</sup> Citing the COVID-19 pandemic, Brentwood Benson closed at the end of 2021. Mark Wingfield, “Historic Brentwood Benson Music Announces Sudden Closing,” *The Christian Century*, December 27, 2021 accessed January 5, 2022, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/news/historic-brentwood-benson-music-announces-sudden-closing>

choral arrangers published at Brentwood Benson. Long time, well-known Christian choral and orchestral arranger Russell Maudlin had been associated with Christ Church and Brentwood publishing for a number of decades. Additionally, beyond Phil's expert arranging for the high-level vocal group, the Voices of Lee, he interned extensively with Bradley Knight, another alumni of the Voices of Lee who also arranged for the group and arranged for Christ Church prior to Phil's tenor.<sup>42</sup> At the time of my fieldwork, Bradley was working closely with the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir orchestrating and producing their 2018 *I am Reminded* album.

The publishing relationship between Christ Church and Brentwood Publishing was also fostered by their proximity, just a fifteen-minute drive from each other. Luke Gambill, who concluded a decade-long tenure as artistic director of Brentwood publishing in 2018, figured prominently in promoting the choral arranging ministry at Christ Church. One such avenue for promoting Christ Church was by attending their annual Christmas concert and publishing the pieces driving what Phil Nitz recalled was termed the concert's "augenblick moment" by pastor Dan Scott. In other words, the "augenblick moment" was the moment which the Christ Church staff craft carefully in the hopes that attendees would encounter the "reason for the season" in a powerful way.<sup>43</sup> The entire concert projected to this moment, by first traversing the carefree, secular joy of Christmas then moving to the sacred theological significance of the season which

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<sup>42</sup> As the following link shows, in addition to mentoring Phil Nitz, Bradley Knight also returns to his alma mater, Lee University, to provide special workshops for church music students, "Lee School of Music to Host Bradley Knight," Cleveland Daily Banner, November 11, 2015, accessed February 28, 2022, <http://clevelandbanner.com/stories/lee-school-of-music-to-host-bradley-knight,21906>.

<sup>43</sup> Phil Nitz recalled Pastor Dan Scott's used of the term "augenblick moment" at our lunch interview on Friday, December 1, 2017, the day after the dress rehearsal for the 2017 Christmas concert.

climaxes and coalesces into the “augenblick” moment. This section will now turn its attention to Christ Church’s arrangement of the worship anthem *We Believe* which was utilized as the “augenblick” piece at the 2016 Christmas concert.

### “*We Believe*”

Through his own songwriting, pastor Dan Scott continued the legacy of pastoral agency within the Christ Church Choir as demonstrated by his song *We Believe* written in 1981.<sup>44</sup> In the 2010s, the song was arranged for the choir by Christopher Phillips and orchestrated by Phil Nitz as the “augenblick” centerpiece for the 2016 Christmas concert and afterwards, for publication through The New Christ Church Choir Anthem Series at Brentwood Benson Publishing.<sup>45</sup> The title page for this new arrangement and publication is provided in figure 2.7 below.

*We Believe* is an exemplar of the creedal song, a subset within congregational worship music that enlivens seemingly prosaic statements of Christian faith with inspiring and trumpeting melody. This fresh choral reworking gave new life to the older creedal song. To appreciate the choral dynamic of CCC’s arrangement of *We Believe*, it is

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<sup>44</sup> Pastor Dan Scott co-wrote *We Believe* with Christian songwriter Nathan DiGesare.

<sup>45</sup> A performance of the arrangement by Christ Church can be viewed at, Christ Church Choir, “We Believe,” Christ Church Nashville, January 5, 2017, YouTube video, accessed January 7, 2019, 5:59, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxTxo9SfwAc&list=LL7CGxbNmZdU5hlwoE1m6tKA&index=6&t=0s>. Although *We Believe* was written in the eighties, its new choral arrangement around the mid-2010s resonates with several other creedal songwriting efforts within that same period, such as the song by the same title popularized by the Newsboys and nominated for Dove Award Song of the Year in 2015, Hillsong’s *This I Believe (The Creed)* from 2014 and the Getty’s *We Believe (Apostle Creed)* from 2016.

useful to understand the structure of the initial solo version recorded in 1991 by CCM veteran artist, Steve Green.<sup>46</sup>

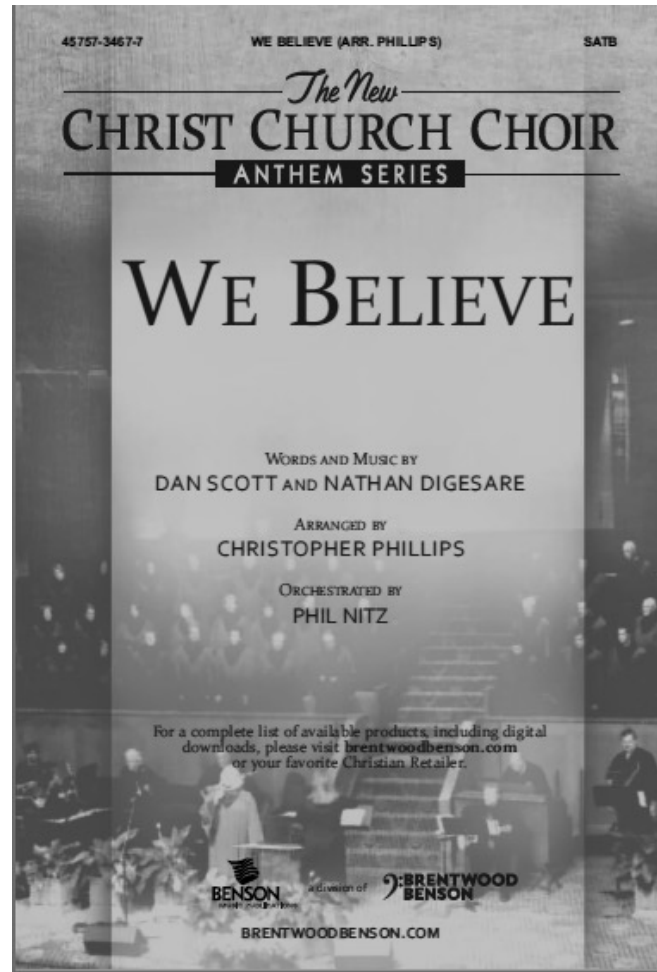


Figure 2.7. The Title Page of Christ Church Choir's Arrangement of *We Believe*.

Table 2.1 provides the vocal and lyrical song form of Steve Green's version. The lyrical flow of this version forms a bipartite (AB) structure whose initial (A) section

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<sup>46</sup> Steve Green, "We Believe," recorded 1991, on *We Believe*, Sparrow, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, the be heard at the following links, <https://open.spotify.com/track/7ogS5W2KwoVu2CYW8pxnyO?si=2T3QwECcTROsg4X2aRy5Ew>,

features objectively stated tenets about each member of the Trinity that then give way to impassioned affirmations of the eternity of these tenets in the ending (B) section.

**Table 2.1. A Vocal and Lyrical Form Table for Steve Green’s Solo Version of *We Believe*.**

Section	A			B		
	a Verse 1	a' Verse 2	a'' Verse 3	b Chorus	c Bridge	b' Chorus with Ending
Lyrical Theme	Father	Son	Holy Spirit	Eternity of truth	Eternity of faith	Eternal promise of God’s return
Vocal Section	Steve Green solo voice throughout →					

The melody dramatizes this lyrical progression from section A to section B. Predominantly slow-moving descending long notes in the low-mid vocal range for the objective statements of section A while faster-moving ascending melodic notes from the mid to high vocal range are used for the impassioned affirmations of section B. Additionally, section A features primarily descending diatonic chord progressions with keyboard and orchestral accompaniment while section B is driven by the rhythm section and ascending chromatic chord progressions infused with secondary dominant harmonies.

Christ Church Choir’s choral rendition from 2016 provided several contrasts to Steve Green’s solo vocal rendition.<sup>47</sup> Table 2.2 below gives the arrangement’s vocal and lyrical song form.

<sup>47</sup> Christ Church Choir, “We Believe,” Christ Church Nashville, January 5, 2017, YouTube video, accessed January 7, 2019, 5:59, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxTxo9SfwAc&list=LL7CGxbNmZdU5hlwoE1m6tKA&index=6&t=0s>.

Table 2.2. A Vocal and Lyrical Form Table for CCC's Version of *We Believe*.

Section	A				B		
	a Verse 1	a' Verse 2	b Chorus	a'' Verse 3	b Chorus	c Bridge	b' Chorus with Ending
Lyrical Theme	Father	Son	Eternity of truth	Holy Spirit	Eternity of truth	Eternity of faith	Eternal promise of God's return
Vocal Section	Baritone Solo (Pastor Dan Scott)	Alto Solo (Jenn Crider)	Choir	Tenor Solo (Phil Nitz)		Choir	

A comparison between Green's original solo rendition and CCC's choral arrangement reveals that Christ Church's arrangement had a more grandiose effect which entrusts the choir with the entirety of the climactic, impassioned affirmations of section B. As such, the choir assumed the role of primary message bearer, and the arrangement placed the choir in a more integral role than that of the individual soloists.

CCC broke away from Green's original recording by giving a precursor to the choir-driven B section by introducing section B's chorus subsection, labeled "b" in figure 2.8.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, although the A section relied primarily on vocal solos, the attention to a particular soloist was diffused by dividing the section's three verses amongst three different soloists. Finally, whereas Steve Green's rendition ended with two repetitions of

<sup>48</sup> It should also be noted that the insertion of this chorus allows the song's form to resemble those typically found in worship songs from the 2000s and 2010s. In such songs, it is rare to find a tri-verse block, that is, three verses presented in succession. As in the case of CCC's arrangement as well as recent worship song repertoire, tri-verse blocks are normally prevented by an intervening chorus section after the first or second verse.

the song's title, CCC included these repetitions at the beginning of their ending and then continued with a dramatic choral fanfare as shown in figure 2.8 below.

The musical score is divided into three systems, each featuring a Choir part and a Piano accompaniment. The first system (measures 1-4) begins with a *f unis.* instruction for the choir and a *SOLOIST(S) may ad lib* note. The choir sings "A - - - men. A - - - men." The piano accompaniment features chords: Fm/Ab, C/G, Fm<sup>6</sup>, Bb<sup>7</sup>/F, C/E, and C. The second system (measures 5-8) starts with a *ff* dynamic. The choir sings "A - - - men" followed by a rest and then "We be -". The piano accompaniment includes chords: Dm<sup>7</sup>(b<sup>5</sup>), B<sup>o7</sup>, Am<sup>2</sup>, Am/C, Dm<sup>7</sup>, and G unis. The third system (measures 9-12) begins with a *molto rit.* instruction. The choir sings "lieve! We be - lieve! A - men!" The piano accompaniment features a series of chords: Ab/Bb, Bb/Ab, Ab/Gb, Ab/Gb, Bb/F, Cm/Eb, Bb/Eb, Eb/Db, Db/G, and C, ending with a *fff* dynamic.

Figure 2.8. Choral Fanfare Conclusion of CCC's rendition of *We Believe*.

### *Christ Church Choir's Versatility and "Three Streams" Theology*

The musical versatility of Christ Church Choir spanning traditional, gospel and contemporary styles of church music contributed significantly to the church's diverse



expression of corporate worship which intentionally combined “three streams” of worship, namely liturgical, evangelical, and Pentecostal. Though gospel is strongly associated with Pentecostalism, there is not an abiding one-to-one correlation among music and the other two streams of Christ Church’s distinct worship culture. Rather, the diversity of the church’s corporate worship and the versatility of its music ministry existed in a cyclically affirming relationship in which the diversity of corporate worship gives license for – and even demands – the versatility in the choir’s ministry. In another

**Table 2.3. The Three Streams Table from “Let the River Run.”**

<b>Worship Tradition</b>	<b>Liturgical</b>	<b>Evangelical</b>	<b>Pentecostal</b>
<b>Biblical source</b>	<b>Temple</b>	<b>Synagogue</b>	<b>Prophetic</b>
<b>Central activities</b>	<b>Sacrament</b>	<b>Study</b>	<b>Celebration</b>
<b>Mode of Worship</b>	<b>Ceremony</b>	<b>Exposition</b>	<b>Spontaneity</b>
<b>Ministry model</b>	<b>Priest</b>	<b>Rabbi</b>	<b>Prophet</b>
<b>Central concern</b>	<b>Reverence</b>	<b>Understanding</b>	<b>Experience</b>
<b>Central focus</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Son</b>	<b>Holy Spirit</b>

expression of the “choir first” culture at Christ Church, the CCC could be understood to be one of the most potent articulators of the unique worship culture.

The way that “three Streams” merged within Christ Church is detailed in “Let the River Run,” a historical account of Christ Church written by pastor Dan Scott.<sup>49</sup> The church’s understanding of these three streams was crystalized in a table that gives contrasting one-word descriptions for each worship style across six comparative categories. Table 2.3 bolds the most noteworthy comparative category which maps the

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<sup>49</sup> Dan Scott, “Let the River Run,” Christ Church, Nashville, accessed December 5, 2017, <https://christchurchnashville.bandcamp.com/album/let-the-river-run-audiobook>. Table 2.3 appears on page 145 of the book.

Trinity unto these three worship styles, namely liturgical worship expressing the Father, evangelical worship, the Son, and Pentecostal worship, the Holy Spirit.<sup>50</sup>

The combination of worship backgrounds at Christ Church were already evidenced in part by pastor Scott's delivery of an impassionate, Pentecostal-styled improvisatory benediction within liturgical clerical garb as depicted in the opening vignette of this chapter. Additionally, his effort to distill the creedal bedrock of the church within the song *We Believe* that was analyzed previously, demonstrates their evangelical commitment while also affirming their diverse worship backgrounds through their understanding of the Trinity.

Though the three streams of Christ Church's music often ran together and complement one another, a worshipper at Christ Church could likely discern a hierarchy of styles. Even though gospel congregational songs and choral anthems may not have necessarily been the most prevalent selections at a given worship service or choral concert, from a musical perspective, gospel arose above both traditional and contemporary worship music as the most revered musical expression. Perhaps its centrality was due to the strong connection between gospel music and Pentecostalism, the stream that was most closely connected to the historical roots of Christ Church.<sup>51</sup> As shown in the analysis of CCC's rendition of Händel's *Hallelujah Chorus* given

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<sup>50</sup> The "three streams" worship philosophy emanates from Convergence Movement initiated by Robert E Webber in the mid-eighties. Dan Scott served as a contributing writer on a number of Webber's most influential books.

<sup>51</sup> Ovell Hamilton, *Sanctified Revolution: The Church of God in Christ: A History of African-American Holiness* (Itapira, SP, Brazil: UPBooks, 2021) highlights the many influential gospel musicians who emanated from the Church of God in Christ (C.O.G.I.C) Pentecostal denomination, the world's second largest African-American Christian institution. Amos Yong and Estrela Alexander, "Crossing Over Jordan: Navigating the Music of Heavenly Bliss and Earthly Desire in the Lives and Careers of Three Twentieth-Century African American Holiness-Pentecostal "Crossover" Artists" In *Afro-Pentecostalism Black Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in History and Culture*. New York: New York University

earlier in this chapter, gospel vocal and instrumental articulation was ever-present, constantly informing the musicality used to present non-gospel congregational music such as traditional hymns and contemporary worship songs.

### *Liturgical Positioning of the Christ Church Choir in Sunday Morning Worship*

Whereas the “choir first” culture at Christ Church along with the church’s traditional influences resulted in the singing of three choral anthems per service,<sup>52</sup> the bulk of the service’s evangelical influence was non-musical (*We Believe* being a notable exception) stemming from a sermon style that, albeit Pentecostal in delivery, was characterized more by its expositional, didactic, and Bible-study based emphasis. Even so, the sermon was given a liturgical, ceremonial significance by being framed by two of the three choral specials, one as a segue to the sermon after the Offertory, and the other as a response after the sermon. Figure 2.9 below gives the typical, default flow of Sunday morning worship at Christ Church. The three choral anthems are bolded.

The first choral special of the service features a choral call to worship that provided a formal initiation of the worship proceedings. The choir normally sang this selection alone, but at times, it may also be sung by the congregation. A popular call to

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Press, 2011, details the Holiness-Pentecostal gospel roots of artists Sam Cooke, Donny Hathway, and Marvin Gaye and their crossover journeys into secular music. Melvin L Butler, “Performing Pentecostalism: Music, Identity, and the Interplay of Jamaican and African American Styles,” In *Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World: Rituals and Remembrances*, Mamadou Diouf and Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo ed Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 41-54, and Ekaette Clement Udok and Adeola Funmilayo Odunuga, “Music and Pentecostalism: The Nigerian experience,” *American Research Institute for Policy Development* 5, no. 1 (2016): 52-60, both describe the transnational flow of African-American Pentecostal gospel music to Jamaica and Nigeria.

<sup>52</sup> Choral anthems are more often referred to as “specials” by Christ Church’s music team.

worship of the congregational variety was the gospel song “Every Praise” by Hezekiah Walker.<sup>53</sup>

**Choral Call to Worship**  
Praise and Worship: 1-2 Praise Songs; 1-2 Worship Songs  
Communion and Prayer  
Offertory and Announcements  
**Choral Anthem**  
Scripture Reading  
Sermon  
**Choral Response**  
Benediction

Figure 2.9. The Typical Flow of Sunday Morning Worship Service at Christ Church (Brentwood, TN).

As can be seen on numerous video recordings of Christ Church’s worship services available on the church’s YouTube channel, whether the congregation sang along or not, they actively participated throughout the call to worship by instinctively standing to attention, clapping, and raising their hands.<sup>54</sup>

Another peculiar liturgical element for a church of Pentecostal roots was weekly communion – which was celebrated concurrently with prayer which they termed as “healing prayer.” A non-musical liturgical practice that was also included each Sunday is the corporate reading of Scripture. However, even this element was sometimes

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<sup>53</sup> Pre-Christmas concert rehearsal interview with Phil Nitz, Thursday, November 30, 2017

<sup>54</sup> Virtually any shots of the congregation during the opening call to worship choral anthems of full-service videos on the church’s YouTube channel will show a congregation standing to attention, clapping, and raising their hands. One such examples is given in the following YouTube link at timestamps 4:41, “Full Service,” Christ Church Nashville, September 22, 2019, YouTube video, accessed January 18, 2021, 1:36:07, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvS9q-FEk9o>.

commingled with music if a portion of the Scripture for a given service had been set in a song within Christ Church's congregational repertoire.<sup>55</sup>

Bridging the call to worship and communion-prayer time was a worship set that adheres loosely to the praise and worship format popularized in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>56</sup> Following the powerful and ceremonial call to worship, the praise portion of the worship set exhibited one to two medium to fast tempo songs which sought to extol the virtues of God objectively. The worship portion of the worship set then sets the stage for communion by way of one or two slower, softer songs that aimed to draw the congregants into a more subjective, one-on-one conversation between themselves and God.

The leaders of the music ministry, particularly Christopher and Jenn, were particularly selective about the selections sung at Christ Church. Beyond a rigorous theological vetting of all songs, particularly more recent ones, they aimed to balance the selection of congregational music in the worship set to include at least one song from the following categories – (1) an older, “familiar-to-all” worship song from five to twenty years ago, (2) a recent, modern worship song from the past five years, and (3) a hymn.<sup>57</sup>

The typical music team on a given Sunday was a subset of the large ensemble featured at the annual Christmas concert. Whereas these concerts amassed a choir of at

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<sup>55</sup> An example of sung Scripture can be found in the “Full Service,” Christ Church Nashville, February 10, 2019, YouTube video, accessed October 02, 2021, 1:33:16, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jxaj\\_4zPiCg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jxaj_4zPiCg). After the choir completes a rousing rendition of Richard Smallwood's *Total Praise*, Pastor Dan Scott begins his sermon by reading Isaiah 6:1-8 and leading the choir and congregation in the singing of a gospel song setting of the passage (timestamp 52:22).

<sup>56</sup> Swee-Hong Lim and Lester Ruth, *Lovin' on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017), 14-15, 70-71.

<sup>57</sup> Post-Christmas concert rehearsal interview with Jenn Crider, Thursday, November 30, 2017

least eighty strong, a typical Sunday averaged around sixty choir members. There were also fewer soloists on microphones than at the Christmas concert, around three to four versus the eight to ten activated for the concert. When it came to the rhythm section, however, the instrumentation was relatively unchanged, featuring the electric drum set, bass guitar, Hammond organ, and Christopher at the piano, which Christopher plays while simultaneously programming click, cue, and backing tracks. Electric and acoustic guitars were included as well; however, since they usually added harmonic rhythmic support and rarely provided lead melodies and special effects, their contribution was more felt than heard. Finally, an orchestra was not usually utilized each Sunday as they were at the Christmas concerts, however, Christ Church did host an in-house, volunteer brass quintet who played faithfully each Sunday for much of the past three decades.<sup>58</sup>

*“Choir First” Strategies: Stage Design,  
Soloist-Choir Interaction, and Sound Amplification*

Many factors were employed to ensure that the choir was the primary musical feature throughout Christ Church’s worship services and choral concerts. The Christ Church platform positioned the choir in a steep chancel sailing high above the band, orchestra, and soloists on the stage floor. Beyond this, most of the video shots of the ensemble projected on the sanctuary screens were of the choir. Several gospel-styled *call* and *response* interactions, which were normally led by the soloist’s *call* followed by the choir’s *response*, were actually led by a *call* by the choir with soloist following with the *response*.

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<sup>58</sup> Post-Christmas concert rehearsal interview with Christopher Phillips, Thursday, November 30, 2017.

For concerts, soloists aimed the audience's attention to the choir. Although impressive, attention-grabbing soloists were utilized throughout the concert, these soloists routinely turned their faces towards the choir during the interludes within their solos and during the preceding or following choral sections. Several transitions between solo and choral sections included the soloist giving a verbal exultation, such as "C'mon choir!" which further corralled the attention of the audience towards the choir. In both worship services and concerts, the connection between the choir and congregation was observed in the cues that the audience customarily took from the choir concerning when and how to clap and applaud after or during worship songs and anthems.

From an aural standpoint, the Christ Church Choir managed to balance masterfully with the rhythm section, orchestra and soloists, a noteworthy feat considering that choirs can frequently be overbalanced or even rendered inaudible in such environments. The steep chancel area mentioned previously allowed the choral sound to project above the instrumental ensemble. The substantial separation between choir and instrumental ensemble allowed the audio engineer team to amplify the choir with several high sensitivity, wide-angled condenser microphones with minimal instrumental interference. Whereas one or two of such microphones are commonly used to amplify choirs, Christ Church used as many as eight to ten of these microphones. The seating arrangement of the choir was handled meticulously to allow stronger singers to be positioned nearer to these microphones.<sup>59</sup> Further enhancing the choir's amplified sound were the prerecorded choral backing tracks which Christopher would operate live from

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<sup>59</sup> Post-Christmas concert rehearsal interview with Jenn Crider, Thursday, November 30, 2017.

the computer positioned at the grand piano.<sup>60</sup> Finally, Christ Church utilized an electric drum set rather than an acoustic one, a decision made to ensure that the choral sound did not compete with both the orchestral brass section as well as a loud acoustic drum set.

### *Summary*

The Christ Church Choir is a historic choir for the CCM genre. It is one of the first church choirs in contemporary worship and an exemplar of the genre's first choral type, the praise and worship choir. Most notable was the all-pervading "choir first" culture at Christ Church which was demonstrated in numerous ways. One expression of this "choir first" culture was the pastoral authority that was accorded to the choir routinely, as in the ensemble's origin and also in the frequent interaction in worship services between the pastor and choir which even included songwriting and singing. Secondly, Christ Church's trio of choral leaders, Christopher Phillips, Phil Nitz, and Beth Kolwyck, demonstrated the emphasis which the church placed on its choral program. In turn, the resulting excellence of the CCC allowed it to attract talented singers from its musician-laden surrounding of Nashville's "music row." Thirdly, in its approach to arranging and publishing of worship music, the choir was considered first and foremost. Fourthly, the sound design and architecture of the sanctuary were all geared towards projecting the choir prominently in the audio mix for services and concerts. Lastly, the choir was further wedded to the life of the church by reflecting the church's three streams theology through its musical diversity which incorporated influences from traditional, gospel and CWM. The next three chapters will demonstrate a worship-leading choir, a

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<sup>60</sup> Backing tracks are prerecorded music which are played alongside a live performance for the purpose of supplementing live performance.



contrasting model of contemporary worship choir of which the choral ensemble is a secondary consideration within its worship environment.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Megachurch Worship-Leading Choir

In contrast to the praise and worship choir at Christ Church, a historic contemporary worship church choir begun in the mid-seventies that was showcased in the previous chapter, the current chapter highlights the worship-leading choir at Gateway Church (Grapevine, TX), the first worship-leading choir in this dissertation which is within the context of a mega church birthed and developed in the twenty-first century. This case study focuses on how Gateway, known for excellent rock-pop based modern worship music, equipped its choir to operate at the high level of quality and flexibility exemplified by all factions of the church's music ministry. This account is based on conversations with various leaders and members of the choir at the 2014 Gateway conference as well as emails with choir leaders.

An image of the ensemble from the televised feed of the 2014 conference is provided below in figure 3.1.<sup>1</sup> The image is from the Tuesday night extravaganza ministry event and captures Gateway worship leader, Rita Springer, singing *This Blood* – the “showstopper” anthem of the evening that was also sung as the Easter special two years later, in 2016.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Gateway Conference,” Daystar Television, accessed November 19, 2018, <https://www.daystar.com/events/gateway-conference/>, televised the 2014 Gateway Conference exclusively. This link also includes snippets from the 2014 conference.

<sup>2</sup> The choral arrangement of Rita Springer's “This Blood” is discussed in this chapter. Easter 2016 service, “Gateway Church Easter 2016 Special” Gatewaychurchtv, Grapevine, TX, March 27, 2016, YouTube video, 4:46, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGbWIZUSbLU>.



Figure 3.1. An Image of the Gateway Choir.

A general depiction of the Tuesday night extravaganza ministry event and the pre-event choir rehearsal for the 2014 conference were given at the beginning of chapter one. This chapter will now provide a sketch that highlights a specific moment from that final staging rehearsal which occurred earlier that day.

#### Gateway Conference (Grapevine, TX), Tuesday Afternoon, October 2014

*After a long nine to five schedule of worship gatherings and breakout sessions, thousands of conference attendees settle in small groups around the grounds of Gateway's Southlake campus or at offsite destinations in the surrounding DFW area to decompress over dinner and then return for the feature worship extravaganza event later that evening. As I walk towards the Panera take-out dinner line in the lobby, I receive a text invite from Yami, one of the choir breakout session leaders, to observe the choir's final staging rehearsal that was to start in less than fifteen minutes. Turning away from the dinner line, I gobble down the remainder of the snacks in my computer bag while hurrying to the worship auditorium. Amidst the large, bustling gathering of choir members, I get caught up in a lively conversation with five of them who had to talk loudly in order to be heard over Kari Jobe who is on stage in the middle of a sound check to gauge levels for her full belt vocal. They retell, or rather shout, the fascinating choral experience that took place at last year's Gateway conference. The choir had spent three months learning to sing a set of Portuguese worship songs for a guest Brazilian worship artist only to have the set list changed the day of the event! In a frenzied two-hour rehearsal in the eleventh hour, the choir miraculously managed to learn the new song list. More captivating than the story itself is the positive, enthusiastic attitude in which those choir members remember and retell this last-minute choral exploit. I skeptically think to myself, "Could any choir truly remember such a stressful and potentially catastrophic situation so*

*fondly?” As the choir takes their position on the platform, I witness a microcosm of the joy-in-flexibility which they likely portrayed through the under-the-wire experience at the 2013 conference. Soon after the band strikes up a high tempo, four-on-the-floor groove, the choir matches the band’s intensity with an animated, two-part vocalise. The phrases beginning with guttural vocal glides and ending with edgy major second harmonies as shown in figure one below.<sup>3</sup> The choral vocalise then ends with an even more penetrating major second made all the more pungent by its approach from yet another dissonant major second. Adding to the tension of these dissonant intervals were the vocal leaps employed in both men and women’s sections (namely women from scale degrees 2 to 5, and men from 5 to 4 as shown in figure one first ending).<sup>4</sup> Upon hearing this ending harmonic gesture, lead worship arts pastor, Thomas Miller, cues down the music and has a private conversation with choir leader, Kelly Allsopp. After this quick powwow, Kelly turns to the choir and simply shouts out, “Women, end our intro on four, men on one”(shown in figure two).<sup>5</sup> I keenly watch the body language of the choir for any sign of annoyance or protest to this last minute alteration of their parts, yet I find none. Rather, choir members high-five each other while uttering a groundswell of vocal affirmations such as “Not a problem!” and “We got this!” Without a choir-only run through of the change, the band restarts the high-energy beat and the choir sings the correction effortlessly, convincingly and powerfully.*

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<sup>3</sup> Although the D+E major second harmony produces dissonant phrase endings at mm. 2 and 4 in figure 3.2, the perception of the dissonance is attenuated and, to a degree, resolved by the function of “E” as a descending passing tone within the F#-E-D melody which occurs across phrase boundaries.

<sup>4</sup> Whereas the phrase endings at mm. 2 and 4 are less pungent due to their treatment as a passing tone, the ending of the final phrase at mm.7-8 is more dissonant due to the accumulation of three unresolved dissonant gestures marked on figure 3.2. The gestures are as follows:

1. The unresolved D+E major second,
2. A large leap which is itself a dissonant vocal gesture in relation to small skips and stepwise motion, and which is normally resolved by steps in the opposite direction of the leap, and,
3. Another unresolved major second, G+A.

<sup>5</sup> As shown in figure 3.3, the correction made by Thomas Miller and Kelly Allsopp from the end harmony of m.8 from figure 3.2’s D+E to figure 3.3’s D+G, eliminates two of the three unresolved dissonances mentioned above in footnote 4. Although unresolved dissonance 1 remains, dissonance 2 is eliminated in the men’s section. The men now remain on the tonic note, D, instead of leaping from D to G. As for the women, they still sing a leap, however the leap is no longer a large fourth interval but a customary skip of a third, from E-G. Finally, dissonance 3 is eradicated by replacing the ending G+A dissonant major second with a perfect fourth consonant interval.

Figure 3.2 is a musical score for a choral vocalise, featuring two staves labeled SA and TB. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes, with glissando markings over several phrases. The lyrics "Oh" are written under the first two phrases. The score includes several annotations: "Unresolved major 2nd" with a bracket and the number "1." under the first phrase; "Two vocal leaps" with a bracket and the number "2." under the second phrase; and "Another unresolved major 2nd" with a bracket and the number "3." under the third phrase. The final phrase ends with a double bar line.

Figure 3.2. Initial Choral Vocalise at Gateway Conference 2014 Dress Rehearsal.

Figure 3.3 is a musical score for a corrected choral vocalise, featuring two staves labeled SA and TB. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes, with glissando markings over several phrases. The lyrics "Oh" are written under the first two phrases. The score includes several annotations: "Unresolved major 2nd" with a bracket and the number "1." under the first phrase; "Dissonant major 2nd replaced by consonant 4th" with a bracket and the number "4" under the second phrase; and "One leap eradicated, the other reduced from a leap to a less dissonant skip" with a bracket and the number "1." under the third phrase. The final phrase ends with a double bar line.

Figure 3.3. Corrected Choral Vocalise at Gateway Conference 2014 Dress Rehearsal.

Despite being a gargantuan choir of two hundred and thirty-members,<sup>6</sup> instances of such expedient flexibility were the *modus operandi* of the Gateway choral ministry.

<sup>6</sup> The two-hundred and thirty membership number of the Gateway choir is provided in an interview in 2016 concerning the choir at Brentwood Benson publishing, "Q&A with Gateway Choir," Brentwood Benson, January 8, 2016, <http://blog.brentwoodbenson.com/qa-with-gateway-church/>.

This case study seeks to promote a keener understanding of Gateway Choir’s adaptability and efficacy by presenting a number of perspectives of the ensemble and its worship environment. To this end, chapter three first establishes the culture in which the choir operates by providing a general stylistic description of Gateway’s overall music ministry including the particular pop-rock based vocal approach utilized and actively taught throughout the music ministry, including the choir. The chapter then continues with an account of how the choir was birthed at Gateway, which shows how the choir is influenced by pertinent values of the church’s worship culture, namely its sense of family, excellence, and penchant for what is deemed as “cutting edge.”

Next, the chapter introduces the leadership of the choir which demonstrates how these leaders perpetuate the values of Gateway’s worship culture and how they resource the choir to function flexibly and effectively. Observations of the experience of the choral singer are also included which describe their audition process, musicianship training, and experience on the Gateway platform. With the culture of Gateway worship and its choir established, the chapter concludes by taking a closer look at the choir’s music, including the ensemble’s arranging techniques, coordination with the church’s praise team and front vocal worship leaders, and an analysis of the choir’s sole album with Brentwood Benson publishing entitled “We Cry Out.”<sup>7</sup> This focus on the choir’s music reveals ways in which the ensemble kept pace with the cutting-edge character of the church’s worship culture.

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<sup>7</sup> Citing the COVID-19 pandemic, Brentwood Benson closed at the end of 2021. Mark Wingfield, “Historic Brentwood Benson Music Announces Sudden Closing,” *The Christian Century*, December 27, 2021 accessed January 5, 2022, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/news/historic-brentwood-benson-music-announces-sudden-closing>.

### *The Emergence of Gateway Church and Gateway Worship*

Begun in the year 2000 with a few people in Pastor Robert Morris's living room and burgeoning to a self-reported membership of over thirty thousand in 2019,<sup>8</sup> Gateway can easily be considered one of the largest and fastest rising mega churches<sup>9</sup> in the United States in the 2000s and 2010s. Among its many campuses spread out throughout the United States, the Gateway choir was housed at the flagship Southlake Campus in Grapevine, Texas.<sup>10</sup>

Gateway's choir was but one faction under Gateway Music, the church's worship and arts wing, which also included Gateway Worship Voices, Gateway Kid's Worship, and Gateway Worship, a collective of worship leaders that rotated among the church's many campuses and events while also leading worship at numerous national worship venues and conferences around the globe.<sup>11</sup> Gateway Music was led by executive worship pastor, Thomas Miller,<sup>12</sup> and included many widely recognized worship leaders such as international worship artist sensation, Kari Jobe, and veteran worship leader, Mark Harris, former lead singer of Christian male vocal group 4 Him.

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<sup>8</sup> More information concerning the growth of Gateway Church from 2000 to 2019 can be found at the following link on the church's website, "Our History," Gateway Church, accessed February 24, 2017, <https://gatewaypeople.com/about/history>.

<sup>9</sup> In this study, the megachurch is defined as a worshipping body that gathers two thousand or more congregants each week, "Megachurch," *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> "Locations & Service Times," Gateway Church, accessed February 24, 2017, <https://gatewaypeople.com/campuses>.

<sup>11</sup> An overview of the various subgroups within Gateway's worship program can be found at the following link on the church's website, "Artists," Gateway Church, accessed February 24, 2017, <https://gatewayworship.com/artists>.

<sup>12</sup> More on Thomas Miller's role at Gateway can be found at the following link to his profile page on the church's website, "Thomas Miller," Gateway Church, accessed February 24, 2017, <https://gatewaypeople.com/staff/thomas-miller>.

### *The Mainstay Sound and Stage Design of the Gateway Worship Band*

The customary sound and style of Gateway Music was rooted in a big arena, modern rock worship style whose composite sound was often saturated with multiple layers of commanding electric guitar tones. The large production stage at the South Lake Campus assisted in sound isolation by allowing the various instrumental and vocal factions ample distance from each other.<sup>13</sup> Despite this spacing, the drum set, which was played loudly as is typical of stadium-filling, modern rock worship, still required complete encasement in a drum room in order to encapsulate its deafening sound. A keyboardist was often present on team; however, the keyboard was usually only heard or perceived when the guitars and drums were nearly absent or altogether absent, normally during quieter portions of a worship song.

Whereas the instrumentalists were positioned on the rectangular back half of the platform, Gateway's worship leaders occupied the front half of the stage which was designed in a semi-circle. Usually, each worship leader took turns serving as the primary vocalist on a song within a worship set. When a given worship leader was not leading, they supported the designated song leader with harmonies that had a thickening effect on the lead vocal yet were not always heard with explicit clarity in the mix. Since the seating sections throughout the worship auditorium fanned out from the front stage semi-circular design, each worship leader connected the congregation with the platform by focusing his or her attention and body gestures on a specific seating section. As shown in figure one,

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<sup>13</sup> The following article describes the opening of Gateway's Southlake Campus. It states that the worship auditorium can seat four thousand congregants and it also lists some of the vast audio-visual technology included in this state-of-the-art worship space. "Gateway Church Opens New Campus." My South Lake News, November 25, 2010, <https://mysouthlakenews.com/2010/11/community/gateway-church-opens-new-campus>.



when the choir was on platform, choral members were placed centrally on the back rectangular portion of the stage with the instrumentalists, nestled between the drummer and guitarists to their right and the keyboardists and auxiliary instruments such as a string ensemble, to their left.

### *Worship Set Sound and Ideology*

An understanding of some of the principles that governed the sound and construction of worship sets at Gateway can lend insight into how the choir was incorporated into worship. The principles discussed below concerning worship set construction were taught at the Gateway conference in 2014 in the breakout session entitled, “A Musical Canvas: The art of producing a worship service.”<sup>14</sup>

Exciting, medium to up-tempo worship songs and slow worship ballads which swelled to loud climaxes represented the lion’s share of Gateway’s corporate worship song repertoire heard at weekly weekend services. The loudness of these songs emanated from heavy drumming and multiple layers of electric guitar tones as described above. Distorted, driving power chords formed one of the foundational layers that added density to the tapestry of electric guitar tones and also influenced the harmonic tendencies of Gateway’s worship song repertoire. An example of the influence of guitar-derived power

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<sup>14</sup> Walker Beach, Gateway’s Executive Pastor of Worship Production, taught the breakout session, “A Musical Canvas: The art of producing a worship service.”

chords can be found in figure 3.4 below which featured these chords in succession in Gateway's choral parts<sup>15</sup> for their up-tempo, driving worship song, *Be Lifted Higher*.<sup>16</sup>

The image shows a musical score for two vocal parts: Soprano Alto (SA) and Tenor Bass (TB). The SA part is in treble clef with a key signature of two flats (Bb and F). The TB part is in bass clef with the same key signature. The lyrics are: "Your name be lift - ed high - er." Above the SA staff, a bracket labeled "successive 'power chords' vocal harmonies" spans the measures. Chord symbols are placed above the SA staff: Bb, F, Gm, Eb, and Bb. The TB staff has a melodic line with notes corresponding to the SA part. The final measure shows a complex harmony with notes from Bb, F, Gm, and Eb.

Figure 3.4. Successive Power Chords in Gateway's Choral Score of *Be Lifted Higher*.

<sup>15</sup> Adam Perlmutter, "Workshop: Guitar and Keyboard – Powering up with Power Chords," *Teaching Music* 18, no. 6 (2011): 59-60. The command of power chords is due in part to their exclusive reliance on highly stable perfect intervals, such as, P5ths and P4ths. The first power chord in figure 3.4 features a P5th between Bb and F which is an example of the default two-string power chord performed on the guitar. The remaining power chords in figure 3.4 are three-note power chords with a P5th below and P4th above bound within a perfect octave. This voicing of the power chord is the default formation of three-stringed power chords performed on the guitar. Two-note and three-note power chords played on the lower three strings of the guitar, namely the E2, A2 and D3 strings, are usually within the lower 2-3 octaves (unless they are played in the uppermost fret positions), and so, often outline the bass of root position triads. Since the third of the chord is not utilized, these lower octave power chords are often referred to as open fifth chords, e.g. G5, C5 etc. Two-note and three-note power chords played on the upper four strings of the guitar, namely the D3, G4, B4 and E5 strings, are usually within the upper 3-5 octaves (again, unless they are played in the uppermost fret positions), and so, often add upper non-harmony tones atop the low octave, chord-defining power chords which thicken the overall texture. The choral power chords in figure 3.4 serve this thickening function. Take for example the final measure of the figure. The underlying harmony is Eb major, which would typically be supported by a lower octave Eb5 power chord in the electric guitar. However, the upper power chords in the choir provide power chords Bb-F-Bb and G-D-G both affirm chord tones Bb and G while also introducing non-chord tones F and D which add harmonic thickness to the overall texture.

<sup>16</sup> A recording of Gateway's *Be Lifted Higher* featuring executive worship pastor, Thomas Miller, can be found at Thomas Miller and Gateway Worship, "Be Lifted Higher - Live," recorded 2012, on *Forever Yours*, Gateway Music/Fair Trade/Columbia, streaming audio, accessed December 2, 2018, <https://open.spotify.com/track/2gSo7GRa97IOqX10tfl8nh?si=BYq13dv1TSec5oaQp6KwFA>. The choir also recorded the song on their 2016 album release entitled "*We Cry Out*." The score excerpt in figure 3.4 is from the printed publication by Brentwood Benson which supported the album release. The links below provide this choral rendition, and the album is discussed later in this chapter. Although the choir's rendition is only one of two songs recorded on Gateway Choir album that were sung entirely by the choir without the use of vocal soloists, Thomas Miller led this song along with the choir at Breakaway Conference's Tuesday night extravaganza event in 2014. Gateway Choir, "Be Lifted Higher," recorded 2016, on *We Cry Out*, Integrity Music, streaming audio, accessed December 2, 2018, [https://open.spotify.com/track/66S0YfRAeuF4V0uV7CeqId?si=7cfTFMoxRh28Q\\_dQA-hPYA](https://open.spotify.com/track/66S0YfRAeuF4V0uV7CeqId?si=7cfTFMoxRh28Q_dQA-hPYA).

Within Gateway's approach to worship set construction, fast and medium tempo were privileged over slow ballads. As such, consecutive ballads violated Gateway's worship set ideology. It was believed that the often-used three-song worship set worked best when it employed the default tempo design Fast-Fast-Slow or Fast-Medium-Slow. Fast-Slow-Slow and Slow-Fast-Slow were strongly avoided while Slow-Slow-Slow was considered an absolute non-option for three-song worship sets for weekend services. Another reason for the frequent inclusion of loud, up-tempo worship songs taught in the breakout session was the belief that such songs require less focus from the congregant than softer, slower worship songs. The loud and fast are thought of channels through which to prepare congregants to maintain focus through the soft and slow.

To further assist worshippers to participate in the increased focus Gateway believed was required of slower songs, the transition or initial launch into these slower songs was often altered from the typical soft instrumental introductions of its studio versions to live introductions comprised of an immediate launch into its climactic choruses and bridges. Since these choruses or bridges were usually the loudest portions of slower songs, they matched the volume of the loud outro endings of fast or medium worship songs much better than soft instrumental introductions. A more seamless, less awkward, and less distracting transition resulted which was believed to enhance congregational focus.

Impactful chorus or bridge introductions to soft, slow songs were not only intended to improve entry into slower songs, they are also thought to improve the trajectory of the slow song itself. As such, soft, slow songs were often initiated in this way even when they were sung as standalone songs outside the context of a set, and

hence, not preceded by fast, up-tempo worship songs. By experiencing the climax of the song from the outset, the congregation's anticipation for the return of these climactic sections was thought to be heightened and thereby enhance congregational focus through the softer, intervening sections, such as the verses, pre-choruses and initial portions of bridges. Visible, outwardly congregational participation in the form of full-bodied singing and charismatic body gestures, such as the raising of outstretched hands, were most noticeable during these returns.

The Gateway Choir contributed to a unique execution of this technique for the live performance of Cory Asbury's popular worship song *Reckless Love* at the 2018 Bethel Conference.<sup>17</sup> Before the soft, swaying instrumental introduction of the original recording,<sup>18</sup> a three-minute fifteen-second live introduction was appended before the recorded introduction. This live introduction included a video-supported, extended, declamatory spoken word followed by the climactic bridge of the song sung by a child soloist who was supported by the Gateway Choir. The choir added to the captivating effect of this bridge by building from soulful "oo" backgrounds to bright "ah" backgrounds and ending with bold singing of the bridge melody in powerful choral harmonies. As the drum cymbals swelled into the instrumental introduction of the original recording, the congregation could be heard clapping enthusiastically and seemingly prepared to be immersed in the singing of *Reckless Love*.

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<sup>17</sup> The live performance of *Reckless Love* featured at the conference can be found at Cory Asbury and Gateway Choir, "Reckless Love," Bethel Music, June 8, 2018, YouTube video, accessed January 23, 2019, 9:24, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EdotlFTkhTY>.

<sup>18</sup> Cory Asbury's original recording of *Reckless Love* can be found at Cory Asbury, "Reckless Love," recorded 2018, on *Reckless Love*, Bethel Music, streaming audio, accessed July 10, 2019, <https://open.spotify.com/track/0rH0mprtecH3grD9HFM5AD?si=EA11BnrETmuKNOX59UXRUw>.

Although the Gateway Choir sang choral parts in both Gateway's exciting medium to up-tempo worship songs as well as their slow worship ballads, the effect and influence of these parts was more palpably heard and felt in the slow ballads. Despite being a large choir, it was often difficult to hear the choir during the perpetual loudness of up-tempo worship songs. Although slower ballads also achieved high volume levels, large portions of these songs were at lower volumes that allow the choir to be heard more clearly on the musical surface.

### *Gateway's Vocal Approach*

Gateway's vocal approach was employed across all factions of Gateway's music ministry, including its choir. The technique complemented the sheer volume of their modern rock music by generating high volume levels through extreme forward, nasal placement of the voice coupled with a preponderance of chest voice resonance, belting, and straight tone.<sup>19</sup> Kari Jobe, who repeatedly belted above C5 during the climactic portions of her most iconic worship anthem versions of songs such as *Revelation Song* and *Forever*,<sup>20</sup> served as an exemplar of the Gateway vocal style.

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<sup>19</sup> Due to vocal microphones and sound amplification, Gateway's vocalists do not sing at high volume levels from the necessity of counterbalancing the loud *volume* of the instrumentalists. Rather, they do so to match the loud *articulation* of the worship band. Loud volume not only affects the *dynamics* of musical sound. It also affects the *character* or *timbre* of musical tone. It is this character which Gateway vocalists seek to emulate in their vocal production in order to complement Gateway's big arena, modern rock worship style.

<sup>20</sup> Both of Kari Jobe's versions of these two songs can be heard at Kari Jobe and Passion, "Revelation Song - Live," recorded 2013, on *Passion: Let the Future Begin (Deluxe Version)*, Six Steps (SIX), streaming audio, accessed July 15, 2019, <https://open.spotify.com/track/35msHwn81uKQS5Jn783oSU?si=H2gdsTdDQriShIEhJf7rTQ>, Kari Jobe, "Forever- Live," recorded 2014, on *Majestic (Live)*, Sparrow and Bethel Music Publishing, streaming audio, accessed October 12, 2020, [https://open.spotify.com/track/1z5xgcRgxxGEKrXUCEFpA9?si=y1YpGUFuSzeBPVXvzamP\\_w](https://open.spotify.com/track/1z5xgcRgxxGEKrXUCEFpA9?si=y1YpGUFuSzeBPVXvzamP_w).

Beyond projecting the dynamic vocal technique utilized at Gateway, Kari Jobe was also skilled at maximizing this vocal approach with microphone placement. While conducting her sound check as described in the opening vignette of this chapter, she sang at differing levels of considerable volume while experimenting with varying positions and distances between her mouth and her handheld wireless microphone in order to avoid clipping her channel on the sound board and to also gain a sense of the varying degrees of size that her voice could inhabit and saturate the worship auditorium.

### *Professional Vocal Coaching for Gateway Vocalists*<sup>21</sup>

To cultivate the high-volume vocal tone preferred at Gateway, the church invested in professional vocal training to teach all vocalists serving each Gateway campus and subsets of the music ministry, including the Gateway Choir. This training resulted in a homogenous singing style across all of Gateway's ministry platforms, and it equipped the Gateway Choir to sing in a manner that was congruous with Gateway's cutting-edge rock-pop worship style.

After an extensive search, professional baritone and voice teacher, Brian Schexnayder, was hired by Gateway for several years throughout the 2010 decade as the principal vocal coach for its worship ministry.<sup>22</sup> His extensive background, which included training at Juilliard and lead operatic roles at the MET and many leading opera

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<sup>21</sup> The information in this section was taken from the following podcast, Jon Nicol. "Episode 025: The Vocalist Episode with Gateway Worship Leaders Anna Byrd and Jill Brewer." *Worship Team Coach: The Exceptional Worship Podcast*, June 2, 2017, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://directory.libsyn.com/episode/index/show/exceptionalworship/id/5412459>.

<sup>22</sup> More information concerning Brian Schexnayder's vocal background and accomplishments can be found at Brian Schexnayder Vocal Studio," accessed August 2, 2018, <https://www.besvocalstudio.com/about-brian>.

houses around the globe, allowed Brian to garner the respect of Gateway's many talented singers.<sup>23</sup> Throughout his illustrious classical training and career, Brian learned from world-class vocal instructors and coaches both inside the operatic genre and also outside of the genre. One coach of the latter category that had a substantial impact on Brian is Celine Dion's longtime vocal coach, William Riley.<sup>24</sup>

Brian Schexnayder assimilated the principles of these diverse vocal coaches into his own method that features a particular knack for identifying the specific vocal techniques needed for a number of non-classical genres. With this knowledge, he founded a vocal studio in Allen, TX, that caters to professional singers across widely disparate genres. Brian customized and fine-tuned the Gateway vocal technique alluded to thus far into a system based on five vocal exercises each with a number of components. These exercises set out to develop loud, powerful vocals through extreme forward, and even nasal, placement of the voice in order to create a chest-head resonance mix that retained near maximum vocal power in the mid to upper registers.

Gateway's approach to vocal training as well as the overall culture of its music program was on full display in the twenty-fifth episode of the Exceptional Worship Podcast that was produced by Jon Nicol between 2015 and 2017. The vision of the podcast was to focus on the "nitty gritty aspects of planning songs, set lists, and whole

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<sup>23</sup> Gateway worship leader, Jill Brewer, described Brian Schexnayder as a "legit singer" on episode 25 of the Worship Team Couch podcast. This provides an example of the respect garnered by Brian amongst Gateway's vocalists. Jon Nicol. "Episode 025: The Vocalist Episode with Gateway Worship Leaders Anna Byrd and Jill Brewer." *Worship Team Couch: The Exceptional Worship Podcast*, June 2, 2017, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://directory.libsyn.com/episode/index/show/exceptionalworship/id/5412459>.

<sup>24</sup> More information on William Riley's career as a professional vocalist and vocal coach can be found at "William Riley," accessed August 2, 2018, <http://www.williamriley.org/>.

worship services” while also digging into “music and musicianship issues” that assisted in the leading of worship bands and vocal teams.<sup>25</sup> Gateway worship leaders, Jill Brewer<sup>26</sup> and Anna Byrd<sup>27</sup> were featured in this twenty-fifth episode, which itself was one of two episodes in the Exceptional Worship Podcast library devoted exclusively to vocal training for worship teams. Despite being singers of differing vocal timbres and sensibilities, Anna and Jill were both Gateway front vocal worship leaders whose singing tones were unified under the Gateway vocal approach.

### *Contrasting Vocal Backgrounds and the Journey Towards Gateway’s Vocal Approach*

Since the disparate vocal backgrounds of Jill Brewer, a trained classical singer, and Anna Byrd, a self-taught pop-rock singer, reflected in part the diverse vocal backgrounds found among the singers in the choir, delving into the process Jill and Anna underwent towards Gateway’s homogenous vocal approach will also reveal some of the many paths that members of the Gateway Choir took towards the Gateway vocal

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<sup>25</sup> The quoted text describing the Exceptional Worship Podcast is taken from the podcast’s paragraph-long description found on its website, Jon Nicol. “The Exceptional Worship Podcast” *Worship Team Coach: The Exceptional Worship Podcast*, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://directory.libsyn.com/shows/view/id/exceptionalworship>.

<sup>26</sup> Jill Brewer and her husband, Robb, have both served on the Gateway worship team. Jill led as a front vocal worship leader and praise team singer, but also served as the head of vocal development and as an organizer and arranger for the praise team and the Gateway Choir. More information on Jill is provided later in this section. The following link shows Jill Brewer serving as front vocal worship leader during a Gateway worship service, Jill Brewer and Gateway Worship, “Love Has Done It,” Conectados com Deus, March 25, 2015, YouTube video, accessed February 26, 2019, 6:06, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIbbZKZNRcI>.

<sup>27</sup> Information about Anna Byrd’s music and performances are provided at “Anna Byrd,” accessed October 2, 2018, <http://annabyrdmusic.com/>. The following link on Anna Byrd’s YouTube channel shows Anna leading worship at a Gateway worship service, Anna Byrd and Gateway Worship, “Good, Good Father (Housefires),” Anna Byrd, December 28, 2015, YouTube video, accessed April 24, 2018, 5:32, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DaVShX83NGA>. Further information on Anna is provided later in this section.



approach. To that end, the journey of each worship leader shared on Jon Nicol's Exceptional Worship Podcast is discussed separately below.

*Gateway Worship Leader, Jill Brewer*

Jill, a millennial approaching her forties at the time of the interview, was reared on classical voice lessons, which led to undergraduate studies in music education at Texas Christian University, numerous NATS (National Association of Teachers of Singing) competitions, and a post-collegiate career as a private vocal instructor. Soon thereafter, she began leading modern, contemporary worship from the piano with her husband on guitar at a number of small churches throughout Fort Worth.

Although she relished utilizing her vocal gifts and training in this new ministry environment, she grew increasingly frustrated that her voice could not produce the types of sounds she believed represented the "true emotions that she was feeling." More specifically, she recognized that the head voice she had trained to navigate her vocal range through and above her break around Ab<sub>4</sub> was woefully unable to replicate the chest voice power utilized in this range by countless modern worship songs and female worship artists like Kari Jobe, Kim Walker-Smith, and Lauren Daigle, to name a few. Jill felt that she had "reached this wall that (she) couldn't get past." To compensate, she would lower the key significantly which had the benefit of avoiding the head voice in her upper mid register, yet at the cost of dampening the vocal range of a given worship song and divesting it of its "power."

On the podcast, Jill shared that this placement necessitates the nose be "scrunched up a bit" so that the placement results in a tone akin to a "ridiculously immature two-year-old toddler." To solidify her description, she demonstrated the sound by shouting,

“Eww, I don’t want to. That’s gross!” in a loud, obnoxious tone. Due to her longtime classical vocal training, Jill described her path to mastering the vocal technique taught by Brian as not necessarily difficult from a vocal perspective. However, she noted that Brian’s technique was challenging for her from a mental standpoint. As such, her physical ability to produce the modern worship tone came much sooner than her mental comfort and acceptance of the technique. Even though she longed to create the powerful vocal sounds of modern worship, her longtime training and upbringing in classical bel canto style made it difficult for her to find beauty in the modern worship vocal approach. As she practiced Brian’s technique, she struggled to embrace the “ugly sounds” coming from her mouth and to accept “hearing her voice in a different way.” Her path to mastering the technique was a spiritual journey that wrestled with what she described as “laying down control over her voice and allowing the Lord to do a new thing.”

*Gateway Worship Leader, Anna Byrd*

On the other hand, Anna, a Gen Zer in her early to mid-twenties at the time of the interview, experienced a vocal journey that featured a raw talent for rock-pop related genres, which despite being much closer to Gateway’s sound than Jill, was entirely untrained until arriving at Gateway. Anna described her untrained voice as existing in the “shouting range.” She struggled to perform consecutively over short three-to-four-day periods. She would frequently lose her voice and the recovery time she needed after a performance was rather long. To survive through a singing engagement, she often drank many cups of throat coat tea to mitigate vocal pain. Given the different vocal developments of Jill and Anna, each singer faced differing challenges as they submitted

their vocal technique to the deconstruction and reconstruction of professional vocal coach, Brian Schexnayder.

For Anna, the chief challenge with Brian's instruction was pride in the form of refusal to relinquish the way she felt naturally inclined to sing. As opposed to Jill, Anna's vocal style already matched the Gateway sound. Beyond this, she felt strongly that her raw, "shouting range" vocal delivery embodied the deep, personal feelings that made her a unique individual and singer and, by extension, a unique worship leader. Although Brian's technique allowed her to produce the Gateway sound with greater ease, which in turn increased her longevity and decreased her recovery time, the feeling of singing with his technique felt out of sync with her inner feelings. She wanted to sing the way she felt as opposed to "stewarding her gift" in a way that would lead worship more effectively. Her path to mastering the Gateway technique was in allowing the needs of the wider Gateway worshipping community and congregation to take precedence over her own personal vocal preferences.

#### *Gateway's Worship Culture: Conformity, Humility, and Vetting*

The church's worship leaders and choral singers have taken similar paths towards the Gateway vocal sound as those taken by Jill and Anna. Humility to conform to the Gateway sound was expected of all worship team members, both vocal and instrumental. The following example from the instrumental side was given in the 2014 breakout worship session referenced earlier entitled, "A Musical Canvas: The art of producing a worship service." Conformity among electric guitarists across Gateway's many campuses included large training sessions gathering of each guitarist and his or her accompanying guitar rigs. Instead of featuring the unique backgrounds and playing styles of each

guitarist, these sessions ensured that each guitarist learned to replicate exactly the riffs, licks, and guitar tones used in Gateway's worship songs.

Another means that Gateway employed to foster a worship team culture of conformity and assimilation was to ensure that Gateway was positioned for prospective team members to pursue the church rather than the other way around. This created a power dynamic in which a given team member needed the church more than the church needed the team member thereby safeguarding from diva-like behavior that can often beset worship teams. As Jason Fields, one of the sound engineers for the Gateway choir, told me at the 2014 conference, "Gateway wants your help, but they don't need it. They don't chase you. You come to them."

Yet the mere fact that a musician approached Gateway for opportunities to lead worship did not itself guarantee access to such opportunities. The next step in the process to worship leadership on the Gateway platform was a long one- to two-year vetting period devoted to learning the Gateway culture, relationship building, and evaluation. Since Gateway's worship culture was upheld as the primary standard for all team members, it serves as a means of "leveling the playing field" amongst a large group of musicians of varying skill levels. Slogans such as "toxic before talent" and "core and character before craft"<sup>28</sup> represent the many talented musicians who had not been invited to Gateway's platform due to failure by various means during the one- to two-year evaluation period.

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<sup>28</sup> These phrases were mentioned by Jill Brewer and Anna Byrd on Jon Nicol's Exceptional Worship Podcast, Jon Nicol. "The Exceptional Worship Podcast" *Worship Team Coach: The Exceptional Worship Podcast*, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://directory.libsyn.com/shows/view/id/exceptionalworship>.

The conformity and assimilation at the heart of Gateway’s worship culture was sustained by first nurturing a strong love for Gateway worship within each member of the worship team during the one-to two-year vetting period. This sense of family motivated team members to perform the necessary personal sacrifices and practice time for the good of Gateway worship. Additionally, the deep relationships fostered among worship team members and leaders facilitated the reception and acceptance of correction and constructive criticism.

*Worship Pastor, Kelly Allsopp:  
The Engine of Gateway Choir’s Inception and Continuance*

The inception of the Gateway Choir was the story of two launches, the first of which was eclipsed handily by the second. In an interview conducted by Luke Gambill, former Brentwood Benson artistic director, in support of Gateway Choir’s album project, “*We Cry Out*,” (which is discussed in later in this chapter), executive worship pastor, Thomas Miller, recited the nature of the first launch.<sup>29</sup>

We started with a small ensemble choir...with about ten people and grew it over the course of a few years. As our church became larger and larger, there were more people than there were places on the platform. At first our choir was more of a, ‘If you’re interested in Jesus and love to worship, join our choir.’ There weren’t really any musical requirements to be involved. After a few years, I realized that probably wasn’t the best route, so that choir dissolved after a little bit.<sup>30</sup>

Thomas then went on to give an account of the second launch.

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<sup>29</sup> Pastor Thomas Miller’s profile page can be found at “Thomas Miller,” Gateway Church, accessed February 24, 2017, <https://gatewaypeople.com/staff/thomas-miller>. Pastor Miller also served as director of Christ for the Nations Institute in Dallas, TX. Both Pastor Kelly Allsopp and Gateway Choir chief volunteer coordinator, Yami Fields, attended Christ for the Nations Institute as students of Christian ministry.

<sup>30</sup> Brentwood Benson publishing, “Q&A with Gateway Choir,” Brentwood Benson, January 8, 2016, <http://blog.brentwoodbenson.com/qa-with-gateway-church/>.

“Then Pastor Kelly (Allsopp) joined our staff and our choir became amazing because she’s an amazing director. She started really developing excellence, not just in musicianship, but in character and unity...She developed a culture more than she developed a singing group.”<sup>31</sup>

A cursory comparison of these two launches clearly shows that the second was more congruous with the culture of Gateway worship than the first. This was likely one of the reasons contributing to the greater success and productivity of the second launch relative to the first launch.

As Thomas stated above, much of the success of the second launch also rested on Kelly’s expert choral leadership, leadership skills that she honed during her studies at Christ for the Nations Institute in Dallas, Texas, followed by over a decade-long ministry as a worship pastor in her home state of North Carolina. At the 2014 conference, I attended the first of two Monday afternoon breakout sessions on worship choir ministry entitled “Worship Choir: Increasing the Impact and Influence of your Worship Ministry.” After the session, I had the pleasure of meeting Kelly which sparked a long conversation about her journey to Gateway and the current state of worship choirs.

Kelly recalled that the word “family” was burned on her mind when Gateway’s leadership exposed her to Gateway’s worship culture and invited her to head its fledgling choral ministry in 2010. As such, the initial choir “rehearsals” she led in the first year were focused on fellowship and prayer instead of Gateway’s vocal technique. This instilled a strong bond among choir members as well as a love for the vision of Gateway’s choral ministry. Despite not leading worship on platform for the entirety of

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<sup>31</sup> Brentwood Benson publishing, “Q&A with Gateway Choir,” Brentwood Benson, January 8, 2016, <http://blog.brentwoodbenson.com/qa-with-gateway-church/>.

that first year, the choir “rehearsed” together frequently and built lasting connections that became the bedrock and foundation of the ensemble.

Another factor that Kelly attributed to the success of the second launch of the Gateway Choir was pastoral advocacy and intervention. As discussed previously, Gateway worship specialized in high-energy, rock-pop derived worship music that is driven by electric guitars, drums and powerful belting solo vocals – a style that was scarcely associated with choirs. Members of Gateway worship were cognizant of this disparity and naturally some resistance ensued. Claims were made that choir was outdated and antiquated, a veritable step back in Gateway worship’s mission towards a cutting-edge modern sound and feel. Yet, the elders, in deference to their understanding of the Bible, counteracted these claims on the authority of Scripture and its many references to choirs. The elders mandated that Gateway worship include choral ministry as one of their factions, and in support of this mandate, created a full-time worship pastor position for the choir that was then filled by Kelly Allsopp.

In her leadership, Kelly sought to appease both the pastoral leadership’s mandate for a thriving choral ministry while also developing a choir that was compatible with a modern, rock-pop, cutting edge worship program. As her choir absorbed the themes of “family” and “excellence” that she adopted from the culture of Gateway worship and invested into each choir member, another variable arose, namely the connection of the choir with the congregation. The pastoral and musical leadership began to notice and experience the palpable elevation of congregational participation that took place when the choir was involved on the platform. The congregational responses seemingly validated the pastor’s mandate, and the music leaders, despite their concerns, grew in their

appreciation of the choir as shown by the following quote from executive worship pastor, Thomas Miller –

One of my favorite passages in the scriptures is Psalm 133 which says, ‘Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!’ The end of the chapter says God commands his blessing and he commands his blessing where there is unity. When people are in unity together, I believe God can bless it. I think the choir is an accurate representation of the body of Christ. Where brothers and sisters are fit and joined together in their place...there’s just such a great sense of unity, and I think it really translates to the congregation. *As much as I want a relevant fresh sound*, I’m even more interested in making sure that our church is in unity.”<sup>32</sup>

*Successor to Kelly Allsopp – Pastor Loisa Mattys*

In 2016, Kelly returned home to North Carolina, and the Gateway Choir was then led and pastored by choir member Loisa Matthys, which was itself evidence of the maxim concerning choral leadership that Kelly shared with me in 2014 – “Don’t do all the fun stuff yourself. Lead and equip others to do the fun things too.”

When I met Loisa at the 2014 conference, the “fun things” that Kelly had equipped and empowered her to do were some of the choral arranging and resource production. Loisa had a vocal intensive background that included living in a motor home with her family so they could travel from church to church to lead worship together in what she described as a “quasi von Trapp family” vocal group. This extensive singing experience resulted in worship leading at Saddleback Church and a career as a session singer in Los Angeles. She did not consider herself to be the “most qualified musician” for her arranging role for Gateway Choir although her background also included

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<sup>32</sup> Brentwood Benson publishing, “Q&A with Gateway Choir,” Brentwood Benson, January 8, 2016, <http://blog.brentwoodbenson.com/qa-with-gateway-church/>.



collegiate instruction in music theory taught primarily through choral arranging, which she credited as the source of her penchant for avoiding parallel fifths and her preference for voice leading principles, such as the power of contrary motion to promote individuality among the various sections of the choir.

As Kelly encouraged Loisa with opportunities to fulfill her desire to serve the choir, she fine-tuned her method which included the creation of one- to two-paged choral “scores” containing lyrics above which are three parallel vocal lines for soprano, alto and tenor comprised of Nashville numbers. The Nashville numbers system is a shorthand notation utilized by commercial musicians to represent the functional harmony of a song.<sup>33</sup> An example of Nashville number notation in a Gateway Choir score is given below in figure 3.5. Loisa preferred Nashville numbers because she found it easier for editing choral parts than standard music notation. Simply changing numbers rather than notes on a staff could change choral harmonies. Additionally, number scores did not require the notation of rhythms. Lastly, number scores could be produced in simple word documents rather than notation which required unwieldy notation software programs such as Sibelius or Finale.

Along with this printed score, Loisa created a practice recording for each section of the choir that featured her singing their respective vocal parts over tracks recorded by the Gateway worship band and worship leaders. She described her recording setup as “rather lo-tech in-home studio equipment” and the recording process as enjoyable yet

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<sup>33</sup> More on the Nashville number system and how it compares to Western Classical Music’s Roman Numbers system is provided in Trevor De Clercq, “The Nashville Number System: A Framework for Teaching Harmony in Popular Music,” *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* 33 (2019): 3–28.

“tedious and time-consuming.” Despite the time commitment, she fulfilled this role as a volunteer for over two years before taking the reins in 2016 as the fulltime choir pastor. As choir pastor, she empowered select volunteers to assist with arranging in the same as she was empowered by Kelly.

Loisa disseminated her choral resources through Planning Center’s Services Application<sup>34</sup> and also used this program to collect attendance information for

**THIS BLOOD (Female G) Choir pg 1 of 3**

**Verse 1: No choir**

**Chorus: (1:08)**

S	3' 3'	3' 3'	1'	7	6
A	1' 1'	1' 1'	1'	7	6
TB	5 5	5 5	6	5	4
	I come	Alive	Oooo	Oooooooooo	Oooo
L	1' 3' 3' 21' 1' 4' 3' 2'	1' 321' 1' 4' 3' 2' 1'	1' 1' 7 7 7 7 1'		
	So I co-ome to tell you He's ali-ive, to tell you that He dries every tear that fa-alls				
S	3' 3'	3' 3'			
A	1' 1'	1' 1'			
TB	5 5	5 5			
	I come	He saves			
L	1' 3' 3' 21' 1' 4' 3' 2'	1' 321' 1' 4' 3' 2' 1' 7			
	So I co-ome to tell you that He saves, to shout and to proclaim				
S		2' 1' 1' 5' 1'			
A		6 5 5 3 5			
TB		4 3 3 1 3			
		Coming back for you			
L	2' 1' 5 6 5 5 3 5				
	That He is coming back for you; this Life, this Price, this Blood, this One				

Figure 3.5. An Excerpt of Gateway Choir’s “Nashville Number” Choral Chart of Rita Springer’s *This Blood*.

weekend worship dates and special events. At the beginning of each season, she presented the choir with the worship date and special event schedule and allowed each choral singer to gauge his or her commitment level by granting each singer the

<sup>34</sup> Planning Center’s Services app is one of the leading programs for organizing details for worship services. It is the most widely used of such programs amongst ministries that employ modern CWM.

opportunity to select the events in which to participate. Although attendance to all rehearsals was encouraged, commitment to a given ministry date required the attendance of at least the two rehearsals prior.

*Yami Fields – Chief Volunteer Coordinator*

Throughout the tenure of Kelly and Luisa, Yami Fields, who, like Kelly, also attended Christ for the Nations Institute, had served as the chief volunteer with the choir as the volunteer coordinator, a position that combined a litany of administrative and organizational tasks. Despite the busyness of the 2014 conference, she found the time to send me text invites for “off book” choir gatherings and connections such as the final staging rehearsal depicted in the opening vignette of this chapter. She headed a connect team which catered to new members, as well as a hospitality team which took attendance and provided support to choir members. Yami also oversaw the constant updating of an excel attendance spreadsheet that categorized the status of members as either active, in hiatus, or absentee, and also adds personalized information for each member pertaining to his or her attendance status.

*Jason Fields – Member of the Choir’s Sound Engineer Team*

Yami connected me with her husband, Jason, who was also on staff as one of the chief sound engineers of a Gateway campus. He was also among a select group of Gateway sound engineers who were passionate about amplifying choirs and were willing to endure the frustration and experimentation needed for gaining the specialized skills for amplifying the Gateway Choir amidst a platform bathed in the loud sounds of rock-pop worship music. I had the opportunity to interview Jason after the Tuesday afternoon

staging rehearsal. He recalled conducting hours upon hours of research to locate the perfect microphone setup for the choir. Yet, at every step of his research journey, he mentioned being granted the permission to utilize budget money to purchase whatever he needed. This in turn emboldened him in his quest to amplify the choir because he knew as he shared with me that, when it comes to the choir and other endeavors which impact corporate worship services, “To impact worship and our church’s ministries, Gateway will spend the money first and ask questions later.”

At the time, his experimentation led him to the realization that the small, omnidirectional, “pin-spot” microphones often used for amplifying choirs were incapable of handling the massive choral sound from the two hundred thirty-member choir. In spite of their Omni directional orientation, their small diaphragms could not capture the entire ensemble, nor could it handle the mass sound they received without producing feedback. Their Omni direction also picked up other stage sounds and instruments that resulted in mixing problems. Jason solved these issues by employing the AKG c3000, a microphone often used for studio recordings rather than for live productions. Three AKG c3000 microphones were used, one for each section of the choir; soprano, alto and tenor. This arrangement allowed each microphone to be less Omni directional than typical choral microphones, which minimized the pickup of undesired, extraneous stage sounds.

Additionally, the wider diaphragm of the AKG c3000 was better suited to deal with higher volume levels, and hence, was less likely to feedback than the standard choral microphone. Beyond this, the durability of these microphones allowed Jason to “ring out the mics,” which was basically a technique geared towards achieving a microphone’s maximum input level. The preamp of the microphone was maxed out until feedback

occurred. Then, the frequencies causing the feedback were equalized out of the microphone's pick up. Although the amplified choral sound would lose these frequency bands, it allowed the microphones to operate at its highest limits without feedback. Jason noted that this equalizational (EQ) tactic was aggressive, but he compensated for it by selecting microphones with an EQ pre-set that closely resembled the EQ landscapes that he believed were typical of choral recordings.

Despite the great strains and efforts to amplify the choir put forth by Jason and other members of the sound engineer team, assigning a singular solo microphone to one singer from each choir section was often needed as a supplement. These choral singers with microphones were mixed in a manner that allowed them to highlight and amplify their respective choral sections without being heard as individual singers. Microphone duties were rotated equally among the members of the choir who were interested in this role.

### *The Experience of Singers in the Gateway Choir*

So far, this case study has demonstrated the aspects of the connection between the Gateway Choir and the church's worship culture as well as the preparation of the choir for participation in Gateway worship through professional vocal training and the pastoral leadership of Kelly Allsopp. The case study now explores the ministry of the choir further by presenting observations on the experience of choir's singers. These observations center on the choir's audition process, musicianship training, and experience on the Gateway platform.

### *Choral Auditions: “The Gauntlet”*

The Gateway Choir is an auditioned ensemble. Admitted singers were required to undergo an audition process that Kelly named “The Gauntlet.” Even though Pastor Allsopp intended to admit all auditioned singers despite their musical ability, she established this audition during the second launch of the choir for the primary purpose of adding value and meaning to choral membership. She believed that if all were able to join the ensemble without initiation or rite of passage, choir membership would lack value and achievement, as had been the case during the first choir launch.

Initially, prospective members submitted their auditions in the form of video recordings. Kelly would then assess the videos and render a decision. By 2014, the “Gauntlet” was undergoing adjustments to allow the audition to be more personable and less threatening. Auditions began to be conducted live, which allowed singers to have personal interaction with the choir director before singing for them and a panel of music staff and lead choir members. Prospective singers were also encouraged to sing alongside a section leader. This was intended to relieve some of the pressure of the audition as well as simulate an actual choral singing experience.

### *Gateway Choir as Landing Place, not Launching Pad*

Auditions allowed the choir to maintain a level of vocal quality suitable for attracting highly talented singers, some of which had had professional experience as lead vocalists for various bands and ensembles and as studio session singers, as was the case of Kelly Allsopp’s successor, Loisa Matthys. Although some of the most talented choral singers were recruited to join the rotation of Gateway’s core of worship leaders that led at the various Gateway campuses, these promoted singers often continued to sing in the

choir. More typically however, choral singers, including those with the vocal expertise required for joining Gateway's rotation of worship leaders, remained dedicated to the choir exclusively. This is, in part, due to the leadership sown by Kelly and continued by Loisa as noted by Gateway worship leader, Sion Alford:

The thing that Kelly's done such a great job at is that she hasn't approached the choir as a stepping stone to a greater ministry. Our choir is a landing place. There are people in our congregation who are called to it. Other platform ministries are great – like singing with a microphone and leading worship...but the choir is not a place where you step into to get to there.<sup>35</sup>

Although the choir was predominantly Caucasian, it was also a landing spot for a noticeable number of Latino, Asian, and African American congregants. Ethnic diversity allowed the choir to be a keen partner in the church's efforts to promote global consciousness. Examples of such efforts were the collaboration between the choir and the featured Brazilian worship leader at the 2013 conference mentioned previously, and also the special arrangement of *Revelation Song* at a "Bless" weekend ministry event that involved the choir and eleven worship leaders from around the world.<sup>36</sup>

### *Harmonic and Rhythmic Aural Acuity – The Skills of Choir Singers*

Although most singers admitted to the choir may not have possessed the solo vocal quality of the solo singers that headline Gateway Worship, they were capable of essential harmonic and rhythmic skills needed to function on a worship team. The essential harmonic skills referred to a facility with most recurring harmonies found in

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<sup>35</sup> Brentwood Benson publishing, "Q&A with Gateway Choir," Brentwood Benson, January 8, 2016, <http://blog.brentwoodbenson.com/qa-with-gateway-church/>.

<sup>36</sup> The performance of Revelation Song at the Gateway Bless Conference can be viewed at Gateways Worship, "Bless Weekend – Revelation Song – International Worship," Bukun Isabanal, October 5, 2015, YouTube video, accessed September 4, 2018, 5:56, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0wVIyxIjWNI>.

modern worship music repertoire, namely the I, IV, V and vi. Choir members were not required to demonstrate their ability to play these chords on an instrument, but they were expected to demonstrate a sensibility for these harmonies. As mentioned previously, prospective singers were encouraged to sing along with a choir leader who would sing a harmony part, or even sing melody while the auditioning singer sang harmony. This allowed the panel to gauge the prospective singer's ability to maintain the integrity of the melody against a diatonic harmony part, or also to sing a harmony part against a diatonic melody.

The essential rhythmic skills referred to a sensibility for and familiarity with pop-rock grooves and rhythms. Since Gateway's choral "scores" were comprised of a slew of Nashville numbers or scale degrees for each choral section, rhythmic notation was absent. Choir members had to rely on their aural acuity to acquire the rhythm of their parts, an acuity which most choir members honed and acculturated through abundant exposure to modern rock-pop based worship music from participation in Gateway worship and often from an early age of immersion in charismatic or Pentecostal evangelical communities. Figure five above provided an example of a Gateway "Nashville Number" choral chart.<sup>37</sup>

#### *Choral Musicianship: Flexibility and Training*

The "family" culture of Gateway Choir figured prominently in achieving the expedient flexibility noted at the outset of this chapter. The many changes required of them, such as those mentioned previously in the opening vignette, namely altering a harmony "on a dime" mid-rehearsal, and learning Portuguese worship songs two hours

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<sup>37</sup> In conversation at the Gateway 2014 Conference, both Kelly and Loisa, the past and present directors of the Gateway choir respectively, used the term "Nashville number choral chart." Kelly went on to mention that the term "Nashville numbers" was preferred to "scale degrees" because the choir found it to be less intimidating.



before an event, were done as a “family” in an attitude that together, they could accomplish anything for the sake of Christ.

I witnessed the “family in the face of change” attitude in display yet again during the choir-only, pre-event rehearsal to the Monday gathering for the 2014 conference. A highly syncopated rhythm the choir had learned from one of Loisa’s practice recordings had to be changed at the last minute. Without a fuss, the choir listened intently to Kelly’s alteration and adapted the corrected rhythm in less than five minutes. Each challenge that the choir faced was immersed in a choir rehearsal culture that prioritizes “family” fostering activities. As the choir embarked on the “We Cry Out” project, its first ever recording and publishing effort, the group relied more on collective prayer rather than in increased musical training as shown in the following answer from Kelly when asked about the choir’s favorite experience in the rehearsing and recording process for the album –

I think what our choir enjoyed the most (from the *We Cry Out* project) was the preparation for the project...This sense of purpose and prayer has really risen up in our group. We’ve started doing prayer before rehearsals. Originally, we were thinking this would be for the project, not for us, but praying for those who would be listening and doing those songs in their churches. We’ve found even now, when the project is over, we’re going to keep it going because they love it so much.<sup>38</sup>

Even so, Gateway Choir’s culture of musical “excellence” also contributed greatly to the expedient flexibility typified by the Gateway Choir. As stated previously, the “Gauntlet,” the Gateway Choir audition process, ensured that the choir was comprised of singers with harmonic and rhythmic flexibility. Yet, beyond this audition standard, in choir rehearsal, singers were trained to aurally detect and identify scale degrees – training

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<sup>38</sup> Brentwood Benson publishing, “Q&A with Gateway Choir,” Brentwood Benson, January 8, 2016, <http://blog.brentwoodbenson.com/qa-with-gateway-church/>.

which allowed for the quick harmony changes detailed in the opening vignette. The choir directors actually utilized the term “Nashville numbers” as opposed to “scale degrees” since the former term was less intimidating to the choir than the latter.<sup>39</sup> Beyond the musical training offered in choir rehearsals, over one-third of the choir opted to undergo a six-week training program that further honed their harmonic and rhythmic ability. By the end of this program, choir members were able to execute the following on the piano – reproduce the melodies of worship songs by ear, play all twelve major scales, and even play choral parts in multiple keys.

*On the Gateway Platform: Monitors, Amplification and Conducting*

Aural acuity of choir members for pop-rock harmony and rhythm became even more necessary on the Gateway platform. In order to provide maximum amplification of the choir while avoiding feedback issues, the choir’s floor wedges included the bare essentials, namely bass and snare drums from which the choir had to sing with tight rhythmic accuracy, and keyboard and lead vocal from which the choir had to attune their intonation. These bare minimum aural guides were further compromised by the many loud sound sources emanating from the Gateway platform and worship auditorium.

Kelly openly admitted that the choir’s stage situation wasn’t ideal. She mentioned that she had had several discussions with other Gateway music leaders concerning the purchase of wired in-ear monitors for each choir member. Although the unprecedented, improbable proposition of providing in-ear monitors for a two hundred thirty-member

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<sup>39</sup> As Kelly and Loisa explained their Nashville number choral system to me at the 2014 conference, I mentioned their system’s similarity with scale degrees theory. Upon hearing me mention scale degrees, in an amused yet insistent manner, they beckoned me to avoid using this term since they did not want choir members who were volunteering for the conference to become intimidated by overhearing the term “scale degree” in our conversation.

choir may have been within the church's financial capacity, the technical audio support required to implement such a feat was clearly understood to be beyond the capabilities of the Gateway Choir's sound engineer team. There was also the impediment of how these wired in-ear monitors would be installed within the choir's platform setup. To this, Kelly mentioned – "If some audio engineer figured out how to wire in-ear monitors into portable choir risers, they would make a whole lot of money!"

The challenging aural environment from which the choir had to function on the Gateway platform validated the critical need for a choir director. Since the director was the only member of the choir resourced with an in-ear monitor system, their physical representation of the choir's rhythms was the most accurate source available. Even so, choral conducting techniques geared towards rhythmic accuracy were secondary to those that represent a bodily posture of worship leadership. Kelly conducted rhythmic patterns when necessary, and she scarcely, if ever, used traditional beat patterns. Rather, Kelly preferred to represent the feel of the music and their choral parts in an animated, free-body conducting that aimed to "worship with the choir" rather than "lead the choir" – seemingly a manifestation of the "family first – excellence second" culture instilled by Kelly Allsopp.

#### *Arranging Musical Differentiation Between Praise Team and Choir*

Gateway Choir's flexibility allowed the group to function effectively as a band member alongside mainstay band positions such as the lead guitarists, drummer, bassist, keyboardist, praise team and front vocal worship leaders. In order to interlock with each other's parts, band members share the musical surface by performing simple parts that alternate dynamically between various musical roles, such as lead melodic lines and

figures, harmonic-rhythm support, spacious padding, and even silence. Alternation of these musical roles normally coincides with formal divisions and subdivisions within a worship song. At each formal section, each band member fulfills a unique, differentiated role and as such, may sound incomplete when heard in isolation. Each band member is therefore dependent on the rest of the band for completeness and context. Gateway's choral parts operated similarly, particularly in their coordination with the other sources of vocals within the worship band.

Within the vocal faction of the worship band, the choir arrangers carved out a niche or space for the choir that interacted effectively with the front vocal worship leader and praise team, namely the remainder of the worship leaders on platform with microphones. The choir and praise team both served the same role however, which was to support and augment the front vocal worship leader. Since the praise team was utilized more regularly than the choir, the formation of front vocal worship leader with praise team has more opportunity to practice and establish their coordination within the context of the worship band. When the choir was added to the praise team and front vocals, the choir's arrangers strove to find distinct, differentiated ways to fulfill their support role in order to avoid colliding and conflicting with the praise team.

Although the choir's arrangers sought to differentiate the choir from the praise team, some differentiation occurred naturally. For one, the sound of a large choir of singers amplified through a few choir microphones possessed a distinctly different sound than a small vocal group each with a microphone. Secondly, the choir and praise team were separated by stage position and body posture. The choir resided in the center of the rectangular, backstage area flanked by the instrumentalists. Close proximity due to tight

formation on choral risers restricted the choir from free-flowing bodily expression other than the raising of hands. On the other hand, the praise team was spaced widely on the semi-circular front stage that protruded into the congregational area which lessened the perceived distance between worship leader and congregation and allowed each praise team member to freely raise hands, jump, tap thighs, pump fists in the air, and sway from side to side. Beyond these constant motions, praise team members animated further by taking turns “storming” the edge of the front stage to seemingly interject energy into the section of the auditorium that they faced.

#### *Vocal Arranging of Gateway Praise Teams*

In order to understand how the choir arranged its parts around the praise team, it is important to understand how the praise team functioned. Vocal directors, who are normally members of the worship leader contingent of Gateway worship, organized the praise team. It was their job to communicate all music and service details from the leaders of Gateway worship to the worship leaders on the praise team. From these details, they devised a vocal plan usually working out parts from the piano. The praise team members were expected to practice the vocal plan individually during the week.

Twenty to thirty minutes of pre-service preparation before weekend services was the first opportunity that the praise team had to meld their vocal parts together. Due to time restrictions however, this “rehearsal” was less of a rehearsal and more of a quick, one-time-per-song “run-through.” For this run-through to work effectively, praise team singers arrived with their harmony parts prepared and roadmaps memorized. Vocal directors, with written vocal charts in hand, an immediate knowledge of the entire

worship set in mind, and a strong analytical ear, detected and corrected errors expeditiously.

The low amount of rehearsal time devoted to praise team vocals indicated that the execution of praise team parts relied heavily on the individual vocal talent of Gateway's worship leaders. This vocal talent allowed for simple parts from the praise team since the effectiveness of these parts arose not from the ingenuity of the vocal arrangement, but from the high-caliber vocal tone and stylistic phrasing of each praise team singer along with the ability of the praise team to synchronize tightly with the unique melodic articulation of the front vocal worship leader. As such, the vocal parts included basic instructions such as doubling the lead melody or singing two- to three-part harmonies which planed homophonically alongside the lead melody in parallel and similar motion.

Another reliance on the individual vocal talent of the praise team could be seen in the intuitive construction of their parts that were modeled closely to the harmonies that praise team members naturally heard and intuited in their mind's ear. Oftentimes, the combination of instinctive harmonies allowed the praise team to effortlessly coordinate their parts into dynamic praise team vocal textures. Yet, at times, the combination of two or more perfectly viable, intuitively contrived harmonies could create pungent dissonances. At these times, the vocal director who was the designated decision maker eliminated these dissonances by choosing the harmonies that would be sung.

#### *Arranging Around the Praise Team: Gateway Choir Techniques*

The choir arrangers employed a number of tactics that allowed the choir to occupy alternate vocal spaces than those of the praise team. A number of these techniques were highlighted in the choir breakout given by Loisa at the 2017 Gateway

conference.<sup>40</sup> Loisa illustrated each technique with examples from pop-rock secular music and modern worship music. Interestingly, many of the examples did not usually feature the sound of recorded choirs, but rather utilize vocal studio techniques associated with backup vocal (BGVs) parts and overdubbed vocals that were used to add depth, dimension, and thickness to vocals tracks. In Gateway’s approach to choral arranging, these techniques, which were normally used by solo or small vocal ensembles, were appropriated for mass choir use.

*The “Mob” Vocal.* One of the techniques Loisa described was termed the “Mob” vocal. Often sung in robust unison, the goal of the mob vocal was to add instant energy to a vocal line through a choral tone that is “more shouty and less pretty.” The mob vocal was also used to give the effect of a clamoring throng celebrating within the background of a song. Examples given to represent the mob vocal technique included the boisterous vocal tones used to sing the title lyrics throughout Queen’s *We Will Rock You*<sup>41</sup> and *It Ain’t Me* by Kygo and Selena Gomez,<sup>42</sup> as well as the bridge of Kari Jobe’s live version of *Let the Heavens Open*.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> I was not in attendance at the 2017 Gateway conference, however, in an email sent on November 17, 2018, choir assistant, Yami Fields, provided me with a private link to an audio recording of Loisa’s choral breakout session.

<sup>41</sup> The “Gang” Vocal of in Queen’s *We Will Rock You* can be heard at timestamp 0:23 in Queen, “We Will Rock You”, recorded 1981, on *Greatest Hits*, Hollywood Records, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/0z4ZkIPi5VXJksMtd18seX?si=VaNRnjJCQQO6bJAtlcB6aA>,

<sup>42</sup> The “Gang” Vocal of in Kygo and Selena Gomez’s single, *It Ain’t Me* can be heard at timestamp 0:38 in Kygo and Selena Gomez, *It Ain’t Me (with Selena Gomez)*, recorded 2017, on *It Ain’t Me – Single*, Interscope, Kobalt Music Publishing, Reservoir Media Music, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/album/4VNy5ifZtW3E9SgffbGEti?si=ps2ovuw5QneQPBA3YgPNeg>.

<sup>43</sup> The “Gang” Vocal in Kari Jobe’s live version of *Let the Heaven’s Open* can be found during the bridge section at timestamp 3:26 in the following links, Kari Jobe, *Let the Heavens Open – Live*, recorded 2014, on *Majestic (Live)*, Sparrow (SPR), streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/7AxuxTWtq6kVj1Jnnk0n8N?si=1APFEPp6RM64nmEK0I0mHA>.

*The “Descant” Vocal.* Another technique employed by the Gateway choir was what they called the “Descant vocal.” To execute this effect, the choir thickened and intensified the melodic structure of a worship song by adding an entirely unique counter-melody line against the primary melody. Loisa shared that this technique truly energizes the choir as they “owned their little unique part” to a worship song. Choir members would even sing their descants in the congregation on Sundays when they were not leading on platform. Examples cited for the descant vocal were the melody of “Got this feeling in my body” which was added to the ending vamp of Justin Timberlake’s *Can’t Stop the Feeling!*<sup>44</sup> and the melismatic “Oh” background vocal layer added to the ending chorus of *Rise Up* by Andra Day, a song which the choir sang for a Gateway women’s conference.<sup>45</sup> Descant vocals could also be heard throughout much of the choir’s arrangement of *This Blood*, a song written by Gateway worship leader, Rita Springer.<sup>46</sup> Since the song was used as the Easter special in 2016, the descant vocal technique was utilized much more than usual in order to lend the song a marked level of enhancement and intensification.

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<sup>44</sup> The “Descant” Vocal in Jim Timberlake’s *Can’t Stop the Feeling* can be found during the ending vamp section at timestamp 3:25 in Jim Timberlake, “CAN’T STOP THE FEELING (from Dreamwork Animation’s ‘TROLLS’” recorded 2016, on *TROLLS (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack)*, Villa 40/RCAS Records, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, [https://open.spotify.com/track/1WkMMavIMc4JZ8cfMmxHkI?si=ormg2gk3SLGp0z9AN4\\_T1Q](https://open.spotify.com/track/1WkMMavIMc4JZ8cfMmxHkI?si=ormg2gk3SLGp0z9AN4_T1Q).

<sup>45</sup> The “Descant” Vocal in Andra Day’s *Rise Up* can be found during the final chorus at timestamp 3:36 in Andra Day, “Rise Up” recorded 2015, on *Cheers to the Fall*, Warner Brothers/Buskin, BMG Publishing, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/0tV8pOpiNsKqUys0ilUcXz?si=AcbNVlIjTxuFSjN7brlmcw>,

<sup>46</sup> The “Descant” Vocal can be heard throughout Gateway Choir’s arrangement of Rita Springer’s *This Blood* which can be heard in Rita Springer, “This Blood” recorded 2016, on *We Cry Out*, Integrity Music, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, [https://open.spotify.com/track/7D9TpEJCewkUI5lhM6XboC?si=eRpXNQcmSweI9P\\_q5Z0yIQ](https://open.spotify.com/track/7D9TpEJCewkUI5lhM6XboC?si=eRpXNQcmSweI9P_q5Z0yIQ).



*The “Stacked” Vocal and “A Capella” Vocal.* The next two techniques were presented together because they both feature three-, and on occasion, four-part harmony and were often the only times that these harmonic textures occurred in Gateway choral arrangements. They were the “stacked vocal” and the “a capella vocal.” The stacked vocal was reserved for the most powerful melodic moments such as those found in climactic choruses or double choruses, or when the refrain of an old, treasured hymn was appended to a modern worship song. All sections of the choir were in their mid to upper vocal ranges thereby allowing the choir’s resonance to ring out loudly in the mix. This technique was used in the chorus of Zach Williams’s *Chain Breaker*<sup>47</sup> and in the appending of the Gaither hymn, *Because He Lives*, to Rita Springer’s *This Blood* mentioned previously.<sup>48</sup> The “A cappella vocal” occurred when all band members except four-on-the-floor drums suddenly dropped out to make way for full-bodied three- to four-part choral vocals. This technique could be heard in the ending of *One Step Away* by

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<sup>47</sup> The “Stacked” Vocal can be heard during the first chorus of Zach Williams’s *Chain Breaker* at timestamp of 0:26 in Zach Williams, “Chain Breaker” recorded 2017, on *Chain Breaker (Deluxe Edition)*, Essential Records, Essential Music Publishing LLC, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/17GmwQ9Q3MTAz05OokmNNB?si=ere-K9wzTtOIWzHG7fnoDA>.

<sup>48</sup> The “Stacked” Vocal occurs during the hymn quotation of the famed gospel hymn, *O The Blood of Jesus*, in Gateway Choir’s arrangement of Rita Springer’s *This Blood*. The effect can be heard at timestamp 4:15 in Gateway Choir and Rita Springer, “This Blood” recorded 2016, on *We Cry Out*, Integrity Music, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, [https://open.spotify.com/track/7D9TpEJCewkUI5lhM6XboC?si=eRpXNQcmSweI9P\\_q5Z0yIQ](https://open.spotify.com/track/7D9TpEJCewkUI5lhM6XboC?si=eRpXNQcmSweI9P_q5Z0yIQ).

Casting Crown<sup>49</sup> and also in the first chorus of the ending double chorus of Building 429's *Where I Belong*.<sup>50</sup>

*The "Pad" Vocal.* Finally, the last technique utilized by the Gateway Choir that will be discussed is the "pad" vocal. Although Loisa did not mention this particular technique in her breakout session, Kelly shared it with me during conversation at the 2014 Gateway conference. The "pad vocal" referred to sustained, vowel-based backgrounds textures, normally sung on Oos, Ohs, and Ahs, which provided bedding for the lead vocal. Background singers in myriad genres, beyond modern pop and rock, utilize this technique. Gateway Choir used pad vocals in the first verse and throughout the remainder of their version of executive worship pastor, Thomas Miller's song, *New Day*.<sup>51</sup>

"Pad vocals" bore strong affinity with the instrumental pad textures generated by synthesizers and electric guitars and used ubiquitously in modern worship bands. The technique was also used on occasion as a musical bedding for spoken moments within worship sets, such as dramatic spoken words and contemplative prayer times, thereby serving as a veritable vocal substitute to the instrumental pad textures that normally fulfilled this role.

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<sup>49</sup> The "A Cappella" Vocal can be heard at the ending of Casting Crown's *One Step Away* at timestamp of 3:10 in Casting Crowns, "One Step Away" recorded 2016, on *The Very Next Thing*, Reunion Records, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/5hOYQACuJVKPsVcTHjaeEH?si=sd2E3jG-T5uueZ4Vrul6vQ>.

<sup>50</sup> The "A Cappella" Vocal can be heard at the beginning of the final double chorus of Building 429's *Where I Belong* at timestamp of 2:08 in Building 429, "Where I Belong" recorded 2011, on *Listen to the Sound*, Essential Records, Essential Music Publishing LLC, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/1N2fNKIIJJ6PQgcVD1GrBP?si=84YGld71RF23wQ-HSBn0Hw>.

<sup>51</sup> The "Pad" Vocal can be heard in the first verse of Gateway Choir's version of *New Day* at timestamp of 0:48 in Gateway Choir, "New Day" recorded 2016, on *We Cry Out*, Integrity Music, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/76nxd2fJdAwyEd4FANJXr6?si=270445c2549c4a5d>.

### *The Effect of Choir-Praise Team Differentiation*

As the foregoing description concerning the arranging process for the praise team and choir has shown, both vocal groups shared the role, namely of supporting and augmenting the front vocal worship leader. Despite this similarity, the differentiation of praise team and choir allowed them to support the front vocal worship leader in differing vocal spaces. Interestingly, the operation of each group applied and adapted techniques more commonly associated with the other's vocal ensemble size. As shown above, the Gateway Choir, a large vocal ensemble, pulled a number of its arranging techniques from those associated with comparatively smaller, leaner and more flexible vocal ensembles, such as the two- to four-singer back-up vocal groups that are frequently found in pop bands. Alternatively, Gateway's praise teams, which were also small vocal ensembles like pop band back-up vocal groups, limited their arrangements to simple unison and homophonic harmonic textures that excel at promoting cohesion and were found ubiquitously in large vocal ensemble writing.

One reason for this interchange between praise team and choir may have been to mitigate the performance-oriented sound often associated with a small group of singers on microphones, in other words, to ensure that the praise team did not sound like a performance oriented back up pop vocal group. Another reason may have been to use the performance-oriented techniques of small vocal groups to promote the mass vocal sound of the Gateway Choir, which in turn promoted the sound with which it is most analogous, namely the congregation. The power of the mass vocal sound of the choir came partially in its ability to represent the mass voice of the congregation more compellingly than any other faction of the worship band. The choir became a veritable aural (and visual) mirror

of the congregation that embedded them “inside” of the worship music thereby giving them true membership in the worship band while also providing a constant reflection and modeling of how to engage in worship.

Energizing congregational engagement in worship worked primarily because of the strong connection that had developed between Gateway’s choir and congregation. As Gateway worship leader, Sion Alford, stated –

It’s a place (the Gateway Choir) where people (choral singers) arrive and realize there’s a great thriving ministry and the opportunity they have to influence our congregation. When they’re on platform, they influence our congregation into a higher level of intimacy with the Lord. The interaction between our choir and congregation is amazing.<sup>52</sup>

A particular choral gesture that had a profound impact on many congregation members and which served as a quintessential example of the strong choir-congregational connection was when, during a given worship song, choir members stretched out their hands towards the congregation and proclaimed a blessing on them. Whereas the congregation could often become “star struck” by the Gateway worship leaders, they could identify more readily with the choir both audibly and visually. The visual likeness extended beyond the group affinity between a mass choir and a mega church congregation to even individual affinity. As the former pastor of the Gateway Choir, Kelly Allsopp shared with me during conversation at the 2014 conference, Gateway congregation members had often mentioned to her that they were brought into a deeper worship experience through the identification and connection they felt from seeing a single choral singer in the choir.

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<sup>52</sup> Brentwood Benson publishing, “Q&A with Gateway Choir,” Brentwood Benson, January 8, 2016, <http://blog.brentwoodbenson.com/qa-with-gateway-church/>.

*Gateway Choir's Album Project: "We Cry Out"*

To close this case study on the Gateway Choir, this chapter now turns to the choir's sole album project to date, "*We Cry Out*," which was produced in partnership with Brentwood Benson publishing in 2016.<sup>53</sup> The observations on this album reveals keen differences between the praise and worship inclination of Brentwood Benson's catalogue at the time and the modern CWM sensibilities of Gateway Worship. In several ways, this album represents a negotiation between these two stylistic periods of contemporary worship. The album track titles are given below in figure 3.6.

"*We Cry Out*" represented the first collaboration between Brentwood Benson and Gateway worship and broke new ground for both entities. For Brentwood Benson, this project expanded the scope of their catalogue through arrangements that incorporated influences from the Gateway Choir which existed outside of the typical, in-house style and approach of Brentwood Benson, as typified by the Christ Church Choir. For Gateway Choir, this project was their first professional recording and publishing venture. Luke Gambill, Brentwood's artistic director at the time, captured the newness of this collaboration in the following quote that he shared with me in an interview on December 1, 2017 –

When we published the music of Gateway's choir, it was not because our clients already know who they are. They are learning about Gateway's choir through our resources for the very first time.

Be Lifted Higher (Gateway Choir only)  
All He Says I Am (feat. Anna Byrd)  
Grace That Won't Let Go (feat. Mark Harris)  
O the Blood (feat. Rebecca Hart)

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<sup>53</sup> Gateway Choir, *We Cry Out*, recorded 2016, Integrity Music, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/album/61e1K1Zw4PkQULRMkYVFmI?si=jFjH53boQg2a3hEJyMNZiQ>,

Undone (We Cry Out) [feat. Levi Smith]  
Face to Face (Peter's Song) [feat. Michael O'brien]  
This Blood with O the Blood of Jesus [feat. Rita Springer]  
Walls (feat. Josh Coad)  
The Love of God (feat. Michael O'brien)  
God and King (feat. Rebecca Hart)  
New Day (feat. Rebecca Hart)  
Come Thou Fount, Come Thou King (feat. Thomas Miller)  
Praise Him (Gateway Choir only)

Figure 3.6. A List of Tracks in Gateway Choir's Album Project – "*We Cry Out.*"

Kelly also reflected the newness of the experience in a follow-up phone call in the spring of 2017. When I asked her about the album project, she reflected saying,

Our choir really rallied around 'We Cry Out,' and the opportunity for our ministry to serve churches worldwide that we didn't even know. We prayed so much together, especially for those churches who are like us but don't have a choir...Although the album may sound a bit less cutting edge than our normal ministry at Gateway, our spirit is definitely there.

Kelly's comment identified somewhat differing positions to cutting edge music ministry between Gateway and Brentwood Benson at the time. A cutting-edge music ministry was held as a primary priority at Gateway as has been demonstrated throughout this case study such as the account of the choir's emulation of numerous back up vocal arranging techniques featured by various current pop-rock vocal groups at the time. On the other hand, as Brentwood Benson's catalogue showed, Brentwood Benson aimed to provide arrangements and resources for a wide variety of worship contexts, including those similar to Gateway as well as those that espoused less cutting-edge praise and worship sensibilities like the Christ Church Choir.

More specifically, whereas Gateway's cutting-edge sensibilities rendered their choir peripheral to the main worship leaders, the worship-leading choir was given central consideration and focus within Brentwood Benson's context. As such, several of

Brentwood's arrangements featured the choir as the sole, primary vocal medium. Yet although choir-only arrangements were customary throughout Brentwood's catalogue, in worship at Gateway, the choir always supported and augmented the front vocal worship leaders, and so, never sang on its own without them. "*We Cry Out*" struck a balance between these differing uses of the church choir. The majority of the tracks on the album utilized the Gateway Choir in their customary role as a backup vocal group; however, the choir was recorded as the sole, primary vocal lead in two songs, namely *Be Lifted Higher* and *Praise Him*, the first and last track of the album respectively.

Another example of choir-only leadership on the album was in the track of *Undone (We Cry Out)* that called on the choir to lead the first verse and chorus on its own before the front vocal worship leader assumed vocal leadership at verse two onwards. Examples of the choir-before-lead singer arranging gesture could be seen in other tracks on the album and throughout a number of Brentwood's published works. However, at Gateway, the choir almost always reserved their entrance until after the front vocal worship leader had set the tone for the worship song, such as first chorus, second verse or even as far into a song as the second chorus.

Selections on the Gateway Choir album that were designed as standalone anthems rather than as congregational worship songs were worship ballads *New Day* and *This Blood (with O the Blood of Jesus)*. Both were used as Easter specials at Gateway, in 2014 and 2016 respectively.<sup>54</sup> Although the soloist's vocal parts were more essential than that

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<sup>54</sup> The Easter performances of *New Day* and *This Blood* can be viewed at Gateway Worship, "Gateway Easter Worship 2014 – New Day" Rafaela Souza, YouTube video, accessed January, 20, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_EXMQLkpr5E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_EXMQLkpr5E). Easter 2016 service, "Gateway Church Easter 2016 Special" Gatewaychurchtv, Grapevine, TX, March 27, 2016, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGbWIZUSbLU>.

of the choir, the choir fulfilled a more substantial backup role than that found in the remainder of tracks on the album which featured the choir similarly. It is likely that the elevated usage of the choir in these two selections allowed them to resonate more strongly with the wide variety of churches represented among Brentwood's clientele.

Another point of divergence between Gateway and Brentwood Benson was in their approach to accompaniment design. To ensure that the sound of the choir was central and heard clearly, Brentwood Benson's recordings routinely employed softer keyboard- and orchestra-dominated accompaniments as a substitute for the loud and dense electric guitar soundscapes that often paired with front vocal worship leaders at Gateway and in much modern contemporary worship music. "*We Cry Out*" struck a balance by relying more heavily on electric guitars than a typical Brentwood Benson recording, particularly on the more up-tempo tracks such as *Be Lifted Higher*, *Praise Him*, and *Walls*. However, the album was dominated by worship ballads, which accounted for almost a half of its tracks, that is, six of thirteen, namely *All He Says I Am*, *Grace That Won't Let God*, *O the Blood*, *Undone (We Cry Out)*, *Face to Face (Peter's Song)*, *New Day* and *This Blood (with O the Blood of Jesus)*. These worship ballads relied less on electric guitars, were more driven by keyboards, and were more amenable to the string orchestra. Even so, the strings were the only orchestral family to appear on the album, although scores for complementary woodwind, brass and percussion parts were made available on Brentwood Benson website as was customary throughout the entirety of Brentwood's choral catalogue. To further accommodate the expectations of Brentwood's clientele, the choral score published for *We Cry Out* included standard



music notation as opposed to the Nashville number scores used by Gateway Choir as shown in figure 3.5.

### *Summary*

The Gateway Choir, a large worship-leading choir, was created because the pastoral team at Gateway mandated that the ensemble be created. This despite the mild hesitancy held initially by some of the music leaders who wondered how a passé church choir would fit into Gateway's modern, cutting-edge CWM ministry. What resulted was a church choir that developed a culture and musicianship that was formed profoundly by Gateway's megachurch-driven modern CWM sensibilities. Although Gateway's choral ministry was secondary to its worship leaders and artists, Gateway Choir was subjected to the same cultural and musical standards as all other members of the church's music ministry. For instance, membership in the Gateway Choir required the same standards of conformity, humility, and vetting, as an instrumentalist, worship leader, or worship artist in Gateway worship bands. Gateway choral singers also experienced the same world class rock-pop vocal training as Gateway worship leaders and artists. Additionally, the choir was trained in the same Nashville number system utilized by Gateway band members. As such, Gateway Choir exhibited (and was expected to exhibit) a level of cultural and musical flexibility as any other member of the Gateway worship band.

Before realizing the modern CWM choral culture summarized above, Gateway first attempted to build its choral ministry on what may be called the "Spontaneous Choir" model, a model which prepared choral singers minimally before participation in the leading of worship. This approach dissipated likely because it fell below Gateway's cultural standards and expectations of musical excellence. The restart of Gateway's

choral ministry developed once Gateway hired choral pastor Kelly Allsopp, who in turn mentored Loisa Mattys, and Yami and Jason Fields to continue the ministry beyond her tenure. Under Kelly's leadership, Gateway Choir developed choral arranging tactics which stayed out of the way of the worship leaders, artists, praise team, and instrumentalists, yet developed choral gestures that added significant layers to the modern CWM sung at Gateway. These arranging tactics, which had a notable impact on the worship experience, included the "mob" vocal, "descant" vocal, "stacked" vocal, "a cappella" vocal, and "pad" vocal. The next chapter will demonstrate another worship-leading choir which exists within a medium-sized local church.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Intermittent Worship-Leading Choir

The preceding chapter examined the Gateway Choir, a large worship-leading choir in a megachurch context in Grapevine, TX. The current chapter will now provide a case study of a worship-leading choir within the much smaller local church environment of Bayou City Fellowship's (BCF) Cypress Campus on the northwest side of the Houston Metropolis. The account that follows is based on my experience as the choir's sporadic director from January 2017 to November 2019. Soon thereafter, the ministry of the BCF Choir was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In contrast to the CCC which had an entrenched "choir first" praise and worship culture and the worship-leading choir at Gateway which had the vast resources of a large megachurch at its disposal, this case study on the worship-leading choir at BCF Cypress will show how such choirs are initiated within the context of a medium-sized local church. The local church context of this case study is a critical contribution to this dissertation because it features how worship-leading choirs operate within a worshipping environment which is likely the most ubiquitous across the landscape of North American churches and most similar to the average North American worshipper. This chapter also highlights the ways that the BCF Cypress choir strove to contribute "choral moments" within the context of corporate worship and how the choir was sustained in the context of intermittent deployment.

The outset of chapter one presented a sketch of the very first time the BCF Cypress Choir led worship. This chapter will now begin with a vignette describing a more recent ministry of the choir two years later, in April 2019.

*Early Friday morning, I flew into George Bush Intercontinental Airport to conduct a Friday evening choir rehearsal at Bayou City Fellowship's Cypress Campus, the first of four ninety-minute rehearsal slots in preparation for Choir Sunday later that weekend. With an additional three rehearsals spanning over the following Saturday, from the mid-morning to the early evening, each choir member could choose whichever rehearsal slot best suited his or her schedule. Some even chose to attend two rehearsals, the Friday evening rehearsal and one of the Saturday rehearsals. This was now our sixth Choir Sunday together since our inaugural one in January 2017. I rushed over to the ballroom-turned-worship space excited to catch up with veteran singers of our choir and to meet the new recruits that had been emailing back and forth with me over the preceding weeks. With an average of just around seven attendees per rehearsal, there was ample opportunity for one-on-one and small group conversation, connection, and vocal instruction. Rehearsals began and ended with the singing of familiar choral parts that I had written to complement Austin Stone's "Singing in the Vict'ry" and All Sons and Daughter's "Great are You Lord." The singing of these arrangements prompted experienced choir members to share fond memories and inside stories from previous Choir Sundays, which the new singers appreciated hearing since a number of them had been inquisitive congregation members on those Choir Sundays and were rather curious about the choir's inclusion in worship. In the middle of each rehearsal session, the choir was keen to tackle our new songs, namely my round-based arrangement of Austin Stone's "Jesus is Better" and a gospel version of "What a Beautiful Name" created by Hillsong – an arrangement that a former member of the choir and the worship team shared with me over a year prior. Early Sunday morning, while the band set up in the worship space, all twenty-six singers lumbered into the barroom-turned-coffee station gathering room so we could sing as a united group for the first time that weekend. Another first that hadn't occurred at any prior Choir Sunday was that the drum set was nowhere to be found! This time around, the choir would sing with a much thinner worship band consisting of two male worship leaders on acoustic guitars, a female worship leader, a cello and double bass and myself playing piano on the Nord keyboard while conducting the choir. "I can hear myself...and my neighbor...and the whole choir even...and even everyone in the band!" remarked a choir member in an excited, facetious tone. The sound techs, Glenn and Jeremiah, worked to get my in-ear monitor mix just right, however I ended up just removing my ear buds because I could hear the choir in the open air right there in front of me without any monitor assistance. Their vocal tone, intonation and expression was better than I had ever heard from them before, which was confirmed by Ryan, the worship pastor, who commented, "This was the best Choir Sunday yet, yo! Keeps getting' better." While catching up with*

*congregation members after the last morning service, I found it interesting that most of them didn't recognize the missing drum set until at some point midway through the sermon, well after the opening worship set.*



Figure 4.1. An Image of the Bayou City Fellowship Choir.

A cursory comparison between the preceding vignette from 2019 with the one from 2017 given at the beginning of chapter one demonstrates a number of differences and developments in the choir ministry at Bayou City Fellowship Cypress Campus over that two-year span. To understand the choir's evolution more acutely, this chapter will first give a general stylistic description of the music ministry at BCF's Cypress Campus followed by a detailed retelling of the choral ministry's birth and an introduction to the choir's leadership. The chapter then concludes by taking a closer look at some of the "choral moments" produced by the BCF Cypress choirs as well as the evolution of the music presented on Choir Sundays at BCF Cypress. The experience of a number of the singers in the choir as well as choral arrangements utilized throughout the choir's development from 2017 to 2019 are included.

### *The Emergence of Bayou City Fellowship and BCF Worship at the Cypress Campus*

Under the leadership of Pastor Curtis Jones, Bayou City Fellowship began in the summer of 2011 with four hundred members at their first campus in Spring Branch, TX, northwest of Houston. Since then, the church experienced exponential growth. Just two years later, their weekly attendance more than doubled, burgeoning to one thousand congregants and prompted the birth of their second campus in Cypress, TX, farther northwest. By 2016, Bayou's attendance more than doubled yet again, peaking at two thousand three hundred. Yet, it wasn't until Easter 2019, when attendance ballooned to approximately three thousand, that the church embarked on their third campus farther north in the city of Tomball.<sup>1</sup>

Quality music ministry and worship were valued heavily at Bayou since its inception. From the church's beginnings, the music program of each campus relied on a number of paid musicians who were organized and directed by professional, full-time worship pastors. Rather than mandate a uniform musical style across each location, the worship music at each campus was allowed to develop uniquely, driven primarily by the musical proclivities of their respective worship pastors.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The history of Bayou City Fellowship provided here was sourced from the church's website, "About," Bayou City Fellowship, accessed, January 28, 2018, <https://bayoucityfellowship.com/about/#story>. The attendance numbers were provided through conversation with a number of BCF's pastors, staff and congregation members. Although attendance peaking at 2,300 in 2016, which surpassed a 100% increase in just three years, the third campus in Tomball, TX was not launched until three years later in 2019.. The launch of this third campus was delayed for several factors, the most significant being the natural disaster of Hurricane Harvey which hit Houston in the late summer of 2017. The impact of this storm on the choral ministry at the Cypress Campus is discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Since the Tomball campus had been in existence for just a few months at the conclusion of this case study, this chapter focuses on the Spring Branch and Cypress Campuses.

### *Worship at Cypress*

The worship band at the Cypress campus normally featured two to four singers. These lean band formations allowed for more operational flexibility than at the Spring Branch campus whose worship bands normally involved many more musicians and singers. On March 4, 2018, William, a former singer in the BCF choir and a former attendee of both Cypress campuses, described the flexibility of Cypress's music ministry as having a greater ability than the music ministry at the Spring Branch campus to "responsive to what's happening in the room." Additionally, Cypress's flexibility supported an overall "feel" that former BCF teaching pastor, Derek Harden,<sup>3</sup> described as "more chill" than the other campuses. Harden interpreted Cypress' chill vibe as a natural reflection of the campuses' founding worship pastor, Robbie Seay, a nationally recognized worship artist at the time<sup>4</sup> who served at Cypress for almost six years, from its founding in the summer of 2013 till January 2019.

Whereas the Cypress worship band's presentation of music may have been more flexible and relaxed compared to the other BCF campuses, the worship genres and song repertoires at Cypress were actually more fixed and regulated. Cypress relied almost inclusively on a consistent diet of the most widely recognized modern worship songs and arrangements from popular labels, with songs drawn from Hillsong and Passion in

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<sup>3</sup> Pastor Derek Harden served at Bayou City Fellowship before he took a lead pastor position at Christ Fellowship in Kingsport, Tennessee in 2017. His profile page can be found on the church website at "Leadership Team – Derek Harden: Lead Pastor," Christ Fellowship, accessed February 22, 2022, <https://christfellowship.me/staff/derek-harden/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Robbie Seay Band," accessed February 22, 2022, <http://www.robbieseayband.com>. "Robbie Seay Worship Leader & Singer-Songwriter," DMK Artist Management, accessed February 22, 2022, <http://www.dmkartistmanagement.com/robbie-seay-1>.

particular.<sup>5</sup> Several original worship songs from Austin Stone Church in Austin, TX, were also utilized. Beyond these song sources, a few homegrown songs written and arranged specifically for the Cypress campus by their primary worship leaders were also included.<sup>6</sup> In sum, the music ministry programs at BCF Cypress reflected an inverse relationship between the parameters of chill presentation of worship music and more regulated song selection.

### *Musical Leadership at the BCF Cypress Campus*

Robbie Seay's role as worship pastor at the Cypress campus came on the heels of a prolific 2000s decade as the founder, front man and songwriter of the Robbie Seay Band (RSB). Begun in 2001, the RSB then released self-funded, yearly albums that culminated in a signing with EMI Music later that decade.<sup>7</sup> His relatable song writing style attracted audiences both inside and outside of the church, resulting in features on a

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<sup>5</sup> For more information on Hillsong and Passion, see Tanya Riches and Thomas Wagner, *The Hillsong Movement Examined: You Call Me Out Upon the Waters* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). Joshua Kalin Busman, "(Re)sounding passion: Listening to American Evangelical Worship Music, 1997-2015," (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2015), ProQuest Dissertations & These Global. Martrell Harris, "Praising on the Net: A Study of Hillsong, Elevation Worship, & Bethel Music's Social Media Content and Comments," (M.S., Middle Tennessee State University, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> The BCF Cypress worship choir's song repertoire from 2017 to the summer of 2019 shown in table 4.1. provides a representative sample of the worship songs sung at the Cypress campus more generally. Of the fifteen songs on the list, as many as eleven of them are sourced from the primarily outlets mentioned above, namely, two from Hillsong and three each from Passion, Austin Stone, and BCF Cypress. Additionally, these song sources are the only ones on the table which contributed multiple songs to the choir's repertoire.

<sup>7</sup> Robbie Seay Band's list of albums through the 2000s and 2010s is as follows: 10,000 Charms (2002), Robbie Seay Band Live (2003), Better Days (2004), Better Days (2005) with Sparrow records, Hallelujah, God is Near (2006), Give Yourself Away (2007) Miracle (2010), Rich & Poor (2011) independent. Psalms, Vol. 1 (2013), Psalms, Vol. 2 (2014), Psalms, Volume 3 (2014), Psalms LP (2015), O Great Love, A Best Of Album (2019).



number of television shows such as *One Tree Hill*.<sup>8</sup> The unique melodious grit of Robbie's vocal style also sets his music apart – a style that longtime friend and colleague David Crowder,<sup>9</sup> memorably described as an “otherworldly combination of angel and dirt.”<sup>10</sup> Robbie's music achieved substantial positioning on various Christian and secular song charts, peaking with his hit worship song, *Song of Hope*,<sup>11</sup> which peaked at #10 on R&R's (Radio & Records) and at #53 on R&R's yearly ranking for 2007.<sup>12</sup>

Since Robbie's tenure at Cypress came after a productive period as a recording artist, members of the RSB at the time found natural roles at Cypress. Bassist Ryan Owens, and drummer Dave Keil, anchored the worship band, providing the foundation on which a number of contracted and volunteer musicians could participate in the music ministry of the campus. After Robbie's departure in 2019, Ryan Owens continued on as a bassist for Cypress, and Dave, who also served as the music agent and manager for the RSB, went on to lead all campuses as Director of Production and Gatherings. To assist in the growth of BCF, Dave was deployed from the Cypress campus to organize the music ministry at the new Tomball campus.

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<sup>8</sup> “Robbie Seay Worship Leader & Singer-Songwriter,” DMK Artist Management, accessed February 22, 2022, <http://www.dmkartistmanagement.com/robbie-seay-1>. *One Tree Hill* ran from 2003 till 2012.

<sup>9</sup> “Crowder,” accessed February 22, 2022, <http://www.crowdermusic.com>. Robbie and Crowder both met while attending Baylor University.

<sup>10</sup> David Crowder gave this entertaining insight during his workshop session at the inaugural occurrence of Baylor Worship Lab, a four-day summer camp held on Baylor campus geared towards discipling high school aged worship leaders and sharpening their musicianship. “Worship Lab,” accessed February 22, 2022, <https://sites.baylor.edu/worshiplab/>.

<sup>11</sup> Robbie Seay Band, “Song of Hope (Heaven Come Down),” recorded 2007, on *Give Yourself Away*, Sparrow, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/6Rm5ZKVTNJLVgpZirxVyum?si=2a1b5314ffa349b6>.

<sup>12</sup> “R&R Magazine Radio & Records,” accessed February 22, 2022, [https://worldradiohistory.com/Archive-All-Music/Radio\\_and\\_Records.htm](https://worldradiohistory.com/Archive-All-Music/Radio_and_Records.htm).

Another notable worship musician closely associated with RSB that was deeply involved with the Cypress campus at the time in which their worship-leading choir emerged was worship leader–songwriter, Ryan DeLange.<sup>13</sup> Robbie met Ryan when he was just twenty-one. To avoid confusion, bassist Ryan Owens was referred to as “Ryan” while Ryan DeLange was endearingly called “Dirk,” in reference to his deep blue eyes and facial affinity with the former Dallas Maverick’s basketball star, Dirk Nowitzki. Right at the outset of the new Cypress campus in 2013, Dirk began a residency at the church under the leadership of Robbie, commonly complemented Robbie’s gritty tenor voice and acoustic rhythm guitar playing with an angelic high tenor, alto-ranged voice, and keen electric guitar skills. Eventually, Dirk became the primary lead vocal worship leader for Sunday morning worship gatherings thereby freeing Robbie to fulfill other key pastoral duties such as new member orientation, teaching, and marriage counseling. Upon Robbie’s departure in 2019, Dirk assumed fully the position of worship pastor.

### *The Birth of the BCF Cypress Choir*

The idea for the BCF Cypress choir arose in the summers of 2015 and 2016, yet the idea was not birthed at Bayou City Fellowship. Instead, it originated at Baylor University in Waco, TX, during the first two years of Worship Lab, a summer camp sponsored by the university’s Center for Christian Music Studies (CCMS) that was held at the university which mentored high-school aged worship musicians through the combined efforts of nationally recognized worship artists and Baylor church music

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<sup>13</sup> “Ryan DeLange Worship Leader & Singer-Songwriter,” DMK Artist Management, accessed February 22, 2022, <http://www.dmkartistmanagement.com/ryan-delange-1>.

graduate students.<sup>14</sup> Robbie Seay, a fervent advocate of Baylor who at the time served on the board of the university's Center for Christian Music Studies,<sup>15</sup> filled the role of “camp worship pastor” and maintained a palpable presence throughout the entirety of the four-day camp. He was pivotal in securing commitments from other nationally recognized worship artists such as David Crowder,<sup>16</sup> Leslie Jordan,<sup>17</sup> Sandra McCracken<sup>18</sup> and Shaun Groves<sup>19</sup> who were contracted to be present at the camp for shorter periods. Additionally, Robbie also recruited many budding youth worship musicians from his home church, BCF Cypress. This group of students represented the largest contingent among camp goers.

I, along with a team of Baylor church graduate music students, served as chief, on-the-ground organizers for Worship Lab. Registrations over those two years provided the camp with an abundance of talented, aspiring singers with the capacity to fulfill front vocal worship leadership. Unfortunately, with Worship Lab being a four-day camp, there wasn't sufficient time to accommodate each of these singers in that specific vocal role. This dilemma elicited choir as a solution for engaging these singers more fully. The result was something that many of the campers enjoyed and which Robbie observed that he had “never quite seen before.” He offered the following description concerning the worship choir directorship at Worship Lab and at BCF Cypress which followed –

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<sup>14</sup> “Worship Lab,” accessed February 22, 2022, <https://sites.baylor.edu/worshiplab/>.

<sup>16</sup> “Crowder,” accessed February 22, 2022, <http://www.crowdermusic.com>.

<sup>17</sup> “Leslie Jordan,” We Are Worship, accessed February 22, 2022, <https://www.weareworship.com/worship-leaders/leslie-jordan/>.

<sup>18</sup> “Sandra McCracken,” accessed February 22, 2022, <https://www.sandramccracken.com>.

<sup>19</sup> “Shaun Groves,” accessed February 22, 2022, <https://shaungroves.com>

"When I first heard Joe Noelliste play piano and lead a choir [at Worship Lab], I knew immediately we needed his help at Bayou City Fellowship. We are a young, fast-growing church with a thriving music ministry. But we did not have a choir, nor could I have imagined what that could look like at BCF. We brought Joe in for a test run Sunday and had 60 people in our church community not just singing but leading in worship. It was powerful! In a single weekend, a Praise Choir was born in our church. We have had him return multiple times and I cannot state enough what an impact this has had on our church..."<sup>20</sup>

### *The First Instance of BCF Worship Choir – from Plans to Practice to Platform*

A significant portion of this chapter will now be spent detailing the inception of the BCF Cypress Choir because this occurrence offers two new perspectives to this dissertation. The first is that the CCC and Gateway Choir ministries each began not on the platform, but within insulated periods which allowed each choir to construct its culture and musicianship prior to their deployment as music leaders within corporate worship. The BCF Cypress Choir on the other hand offers an alternative model where the birth of the choir happened simultaneously with its musical leadership on the platform. Secondly, the initiation of the CCC and Gateway Choir were described from the perspective of an outsider whereas the BCF Cypress Choir's beginnings will be illustrated from the insider perspective of an observer participant. What follows seeks to highlight some of the successes and challenges that can occur when a worship-leading choir is initiated within the context of a local modern CWM church.

From the end of Baylor University's Worship Lab 2016, plans were set in motion to launch a worship choir at the Cypress campus. These plans culminated in the group leading congregational singing for the first time on January 22 the following year, as depicted in the opening vignette of chapter one. After Robbie connected Dirk and I, under

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<sup>20</sup> Robbie Seay, email to the author, July 7, 2018.

Robbie's supervision, we began ironing out the fine details for Cypress's first Choir Sunday. From amongst the three of us, a choral vision arose that combined a large group of congregants supplemented by seasoned praise team of worship singers, a patent negotiation between the casual flexibility and the high quality of musical worship exhibited at the Cypress campus.

*Best-Laid Plans: The Complicated Beginnings of the BCF Choir*

Robbie and Dirk began the recruiting process in late September 2016. A throng of fifty eager singers registered enthusiastically as prompted by Robbie's Sunday morning announcements and through push promotions on the church app. The ten praise team singers that supplemented the choir were recruited through personal invitations from Dirk and me. They included front vocal worship singers at Cypress, talented youth singers from the campus that had attended Worship Lab, Baylor voice and church music majors, and other experienced singers that I knew from other ministry contexts.

The first choral Sunday was originally planned for early November 2016, however due to an unforeseen event, choral plans were stalled and decisions on the set list and other crucial details could not be completed until after the Advent-Christmas 2016 season. As such, the set list was not finalized until early January 2017, just a week prior to the first choral Sunday. With a choir who had never sung together before, whose vocal and musical capacity was unknown, who would have just one rehearsal the day before the first choral Sunday, and who now had less than a week to learn their parts, the choral writing was simplified significantly from its initial conception in an attempt to alleviate the anxiety of this debut choir and to facilitate a positive initial experience. The parts were simplified to render memorization more manageable and to minimize harmony

parts. To retain the initial choral vision, the praise team learned more intricate choral arrangements. Dirk and I positioned the praise team in front of the choir on a lower platform and amplified them separately as a unit, with three condenser microphones, one per each section, namely soprano, alto and tenor. The choir was amplified behind the praise team with two choral microphones positioned to the left and right of the ensemble.

### *Dilemmas within the First Choir Practice: The Problem of Aural Balance*

To maximize our two-hour rehearsal, the first hour was spent in sectionals with the choir rehearsing sing-along style with Robbie in the worship gathering room and the praise team ironing out harmony parts with me in the coffee station gathering room. After a short break, the groups combined together in the worship space for the second hour. The energy and excitement generated within the rehearsal counteracted the problems that arose from attempting to position a sixty-member choir on a platform intended for a four-to-six-member worship band. Regardless, choir singers graciously squeezed together, paid keen attention to vocal and musical instruction, and sang loudly and joyously.

With such close proximity to the choir's vocals bellowing from behind, the praise team struggled to hear themselves and project their parts. However, with each repetition the praise team eventually locate themselves within this vocal space and sang effectively. We left rehearsal uplifted and enthused, yet with mild worry concerning how our choral singing would pair with the worship band the following morning.

As the band loaded in and conducted sound check bright and early at 6:30AM Sunday morning, the choir and praise team assembled in the coffee gathering room for a half-hour vocal warm up and a review of their vocal parts. At 7AM, we joined the band on platform and rehearsed with them for the first time. As the band started in, their power

and volume animated the body posture of the choir and praise team beyond that experienced at our Saturday rehearsal.

While the worship band stimulated the choir and praise team's body posture with their power and volume, they overpowered the choir's vocals, rendering them virtually inaudible on multiple fronts. The choir and praise team were barely present in the front of house speakers providing sound to the congregation. They were only marginally discernible in my in-ear monitors despite aggressive boosting of their vocal channels. Nor could I hear them on stage despite standing in the conductor's spot just five feet in front of them. Similarly, the choir struggled to hear themselves and to hear each other despite being closely packed together. The praise team struggled most of all since they had to contend with both the high volume of the worship band as well as the mass choral vocals coming directly from behind.

The sound engineers, worship band, praise team and choir spent some of the short forty-five-minute pre-service rehearsal to seek improvements to our aural balance. Due to the choir and praise team's close proximity to the band and the front of house speakers, the sound engineers could not feasibly increase their amplification without creating feedback issues. The only option that the choir and praise team could contribute was to alter their vocal parts. In order to unify the choir and praise team vocals for extra volume and power, I considered instructing the praise team to abandon their parts and simply double the simplified choir parts. Yet, I was reticent to issue this instruction for fear of harboring confusion and uncertainty among the singers. I also decided against this option because it seemed to discredit the efforts the praise team had made that entire week to sing their parts. It was up to the worship band to adjust.

*Platform Predicament – Negotiating Aural Balance through Band Dropouts*

The most effective adjustment the band could make to improve our balance was to seek out the momentary relief of band “dropouts.” The dropout is a common gesture among modern contemporary worship bands that pulls back the volume of the band in a sudden and dramatic manner at a formal transition point within a worship song. Two typical examples of dropouts occurring at the first chorus are Passion’s *Even So Come* led by Kristian Stanfill<sup>21</sup> and Lauren Daigle’s *Peace Be Still*.<sup>22</sup> Even more frequent are dropouts that occur during the after-chorus, that is, an additional chorus added after the instrumental outro that normally concludes the song. Examples of the after-chorus dropout can be found in Hillsong’s *Oceans*<sup>23</sup> and Passion’s *Worthy of Your Name*.<sup>24</sup>

Dropouts are utilized so that the band can get out of the way of the group vocal sound of the choir and congregation vocals thereby allowing the mass vocal tone to shine through clearly. In these moments, the congregation may sing unassisted by the worship band, or with little more than the front lead vocal singing a cappella or with thin band accompaniments which may include light acoustic rhythm guitar, digital piano, and/or

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<sup>21</sup> Passion and Kristian Stanfill, “Even So Come, Radio Version/Live,” recorded 2015, on *Single – Even So Come, Radio Version/Live*, SixSteps (SIX), Essential Music Publishing, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/2yCf80rx fz3Dk7OCAnQvz1?si=vD6pyY6YRYm3i4RycZraDA>.

<sup>22</sup> The Belonging Co., and Lauren Daigle “Peace Be Still,” recorded 2017, on *All The Earth (Live)*, TBCO Music, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, [https://open.spotify.com/track/6zvSkAEtFZIJ7kVeo5by4?si=OzhMc0\\_kTOiEiryaM2Z1za](https://open.spotify.com/track/6zvSkAEtFZIJ7kVeo5by4?si=OzhMc0_kTOiEiryaM2Z1za).

<sup>23</sup> Passion and Sean Curran, “Worthy of Your Name (Live),” recorded 2013, on *Zion (Deluxe Edition)*, SixSteps (SIX), streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/5Mw9bXG1dLNhb jofkVS2oR?si=426f36a1b8534e0f>.

<sup>24</sup> Hillsong UNITED, “Oceans (Where Feet May Fail),” recorded 2013, on *Zion (Deluxe Edition)*, Hillsong (HIL), streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/5Mw9bXG1dLNhb jofkVS2oR?si=325a9141a9a847ce>.



synth pads. With a choir involved, the choir can be allowed to lead the congregation in dropout moments thereby taking the place of the front lead vocal.

Five dropouts were utilized on that first BCF Cypress Choir Sunday. Three were led by Dirk on front led vocals and the choir led the other two. Only two of those dropouts preexisted on the original recording after which the worship band's arrangement was modelled. These two dropouts, led by the front vocals, took place during the first chorus and final chorus of Passion's version of *Jesus Paid It All*.<sup>25</sup> The other front vocal-led dropout was a short dropout tag at the end of *Great are You Lord* by All Sons and Daughters<sup>26</sup> that was sung over the outro of the original recording.

On Hillsong's *O Praise The Name*,<sup>27</sup> the choir led a dropout chorus after the dynamically low, rapture-based lyrics of the fourth verse. This choir dropout referenced both the studio and live recording yet was crafted uniquely. At this point of the song, the studio version proceeds with a band build up into a double chorus which ends the song, whereas the live version articulates two separate double choruses – the first with full band and congregation's voice only, and the second with the reentry of front vocals. At Bayou, only one double chorus was used as per the studio recording, however, akin to the live

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<sup>25</sup> Passion and Kristian Stanfill, "Jesus Paid It All," recorded 2006, on *Passion: Everything Glorious*, SixSteps (SIX), streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/73EIpn5AcedCWPOmxWMxH9?si=3eb2c3f6f1134cab>.

<sup>26</sup> All Sons & Daughters, Leslie Jordan, and David Leonard, "Great Are You Lord," recorded 2014, on *All Sons & Daughters*, Integrity Music, Essential Music Publishing LLC, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/1Hv54MWloXiAZDam1ez840?si=ecf6642f7b274e10>.

<sup>27</sup> Hillsong Worship, "O Praise The Name (Anastasis) - Live," recorded 2015, on *OPEN HEAVEN/River Wild (Deluxe Version)*, Hillsong (HIL), streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/0FBm7M8icvVmPWDmyUNCGy?si=0b01354b7e424b79>. Hillsong Worship, "O Praise The Name (Anastasis)," recorded 2015, on *O Praise The Name (Anastasis)*, Hillsong (HIL), streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/0QtYlr0TOfrEU4ONDUNA29?si=deec05268d044a31>.

recording, the front vocals dropped out so that the group vocal sound of the choir could lead the first chorus of the double chorus. The unique element differentiated from the live recording was that the band also dropped out, only returning at the end of the first chorus of the double chorus in order to build up towards the second chorus of the double chorus.

The second song that provided a dropout opportunity for the choir was *Awesome* by Charles Jenkins.<sup>28</sup> The original version of the song does not utilize a dropout, yet after the song-ending verse, Robbie led us to append an additional chorus which allowed the choir to lead the congregation with strong, gospel-styled, three-part harmony as shown in figure 4.2 below.

Worship Choir

My God is\_ Awe-some, Awe-some, Awe-some, Awe some.

E B C#m A

Figure 4.2. Choral Harmonies of the Chorus of Awesome (Charles Jenkins).

#### *Worship Songs from the Platform: A Closer Look at the First Performance of BCF Choir*

*Awesome*<sup>29</sup> stood out among the song selections because, being a gospel worship song, it was squarely outside of the standard pop-rock modern CWM worship repertoire

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<sup>28</sup> Charles Jenkins & Fellowship Choir, “Awesome,” recorded 2013, on *Awesome (Remixes)*, Inspired People LLC, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/6b1RS3RtYHYbZK1DQUjpvB?si=b401812bebd4028>.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Jenkins & Fellowship Choir, “Awesome,” recorded 2013, on *Awesome (Remixes)*, Inspired People LLC, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/6b1RS3RtYHYbZK1DQUjpvB?si=b401812bebd4028>.

of the Cypress campus. Even so, it was selected specifically for its choir centric features, features which are also veritable hallmarks of the gospel music. These choir-centric elements are namely the powerful three-part gospel harmonies of the chorus, the choral melody of the verse prompted by anticipatory interjections from the front vocal, and the dynamic call and response interaction between the front vocalist and the choir which serves as the foundation of the song's extended bridge section. These three elements ensured that the sound of the choir was ever-present throughout all formal sections of the song. Additionally, since these choral parts were so clearly defined on the recording, the choir and praise team could easily sing the same parts, thereby allowing for maximum unification throughout the vocal group. *Awesome* was used to open the service with the intent of introducing the choir from the get-go as a new worship-leading ensemble.

Despite being outside of the worship genre and song repertoire adopted at Cypress, *Awesome* was adapted rather easily by the worship band. For one, Robbie, was able to approximate the front vocal parts since he had prior experience with gospel having covered gospel songs and hymns throughout his career.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, the chordal structure of the song is triadic and diatonic, revolving around a basic I-V-vi-IV (E-B-C#m-A) harmonic progression that is commonly found in modern CWM songs. As such, although the original version was more keyboard and synth centric, the guitar driven modern CWM worship band at Cypress was able to adapt the chord progression within a more rock-pop aesthetic with relative ease. Finally, the band adapted the tempo and rhythmic feel of the song. The 64 bpm, R&B influenced, swinging, back beat groove of

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<sup>30</sup> For instance, Robbie led *Soon and Very Soon*, Andrae Crouch's famous gospel chorus, at Worship Lab in both 2015 and 2016.

the original was slower and more swung than the typical pace and feel of the moderate rock-pop worship songs utilized at Cypress, so the worship band adapted *Awesome* to a modern rock feel by playing it at around 74 bpm, ten bpm faster than the original, and with straighter, markedly less swung feel.

Even though *Awesome* allowed the choir to be featured at the beginning of the service, and throughout all portions of the song's form,<sup>31</sup> due to the overbearing volume of the worship band, many congregation members still found it difficult to hear the choir. Both *Great are You Lord*<sup>32</sup> and *Jesus Paid It All*<sup>33</sup> obfuscated the choir further since the choir was not featured in those songs as perpetually as they were in *Awesome*, yet still had to contend with the loud volume of the worship band.

Following *Awesome*, *O Praise The Name (Anástasis)*<sup>34</sup> by Hillsong was the second most successful song for creating moments of balance between the choir-praise

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<sup>31</sup> It should be noted that during the verses of *Awesome*, instead of performing front vocal anticipatory gestures as on the original recording, Robbie elected to double the choral melody which resulted in some covering of the choir by his front vocal.

<sup>32</sup> The choral arrangement of *Great are You Lord* did feature a choral countermelody across its final double chorus. However, the countermelody was sung by the praise team only at the first choral Sunday. Given the difficult singing conditions, the countermelody was barely audible. All Sons & Daughters, Leslie Jordan, and David Leonard, "Great Are You Lord," recorded 2014, on *All Sons & Daughters*, Integrity Music, Essential Music Publishing LLC, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/1Hv54MWloXiAZDam1ez840?si=ecf6642f7b274e10>.

<sup>33</sup> Passion and Kristian Stanfill, "Jesus Paid It All," recorded 2006, on *Passion: Everything Glorious*, SixSteps (SIX), streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/73EIpn5AcedCWPOmxWMxH9?si=3eb2c3f6f1134cab>.

<sup>34</sup> Hillsong Worship, "O Praise The Name (Anastasis) - Live," recorded 2015, on *OPEN HEAVEN/River Wild (Deluxe Version)*, Hillsong (HIL), streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/0FBm7M8icvVmPWDmyUNCGy?si=0b01354b7e424b79>. Hillsong Worship, "O Praise The Name (Anastasis)," recorded 2015, on *O Praise The Name (Anastasis)*, Hillsong (HIL), streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/0QtYlr0TOfrEU4ONDUNA29?si=deec05268d044a31>.

team and the worship band. This was in part because it included a chorus dropout after the fourth verse which was led by the choir as mentioned in the previous section. Additionally, the choir's first entrance between the end of verse two and the first chorus, a "choral moment," which several congregation members mentioned as being particularly impactful, occurred. The lyrics of the second verse and the beginnings to the following chorus are given as follows:

His body bound and drenched in tears  
They laid him down in Joseph's tomb  
The entrance sealed by heavy stone  
Messiah still and all alone  
O Praise the name...

In the space between verse 2 and the first chorus, the choir sang a gesture akin to the buildup which worship bands routinely execute towards a chorus. The choir's version of such a buildup came in the form of a long, whole-note crescendo on "Oh," which heightened the congregation's anticipation of "O," the first lyric of the coming chorus. This choral "oh" build up arose seamlessly from "alone," the front vocal's final note on verse two. The seamless quality of this transition between front vocal and choir was due in part because the final vowel of "alone" and the vowel of "Oh" were aligned, and also because the choir matched the soft volume and character of the front vocal's singing of "alone." The effect was analogous to a clean baton change in a relay race. The observations are demonstrated in figure 4.3 below. As the choir's "Oh" buildup grew in volume and intensity from this seamless transition, the choir heightened the congregation's anticipation of the "O" that they would soon sing. In some cases, congregation members joined in on the choir's long "Oh" and thereby began singing the chorus before the front vocal worship leader. The effect congregation-side was described

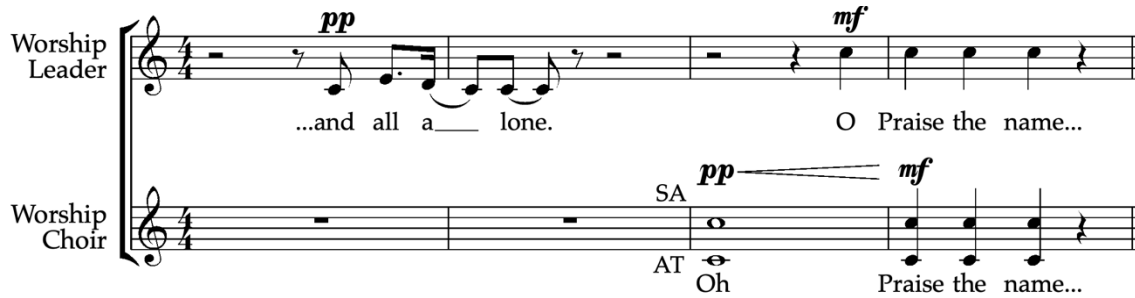


Figure 4.3. Choral “Oh” Buildup Between Verse 2 and the First Chorus of Hillsong’s *O Praise The Name (Anástasis)*.

as an earnest awaiting filled with a strong eagerness to join the choir’s throng of heavenly voices, who were already enthusiastically en route to a marvelous chorus.

*O Praise The Name*<sup>35</sup> provided another “choral moment” in the resurrection-themed third verse. The lyrics of the third verse and the beginnings to the following chorus are given as follows:

Then on the third at break of dawn  
 The Son of Heaven rose again.  
 O trampled death where is your sting?  
 The angels roar for Christ the King.  
 O Praise the name...

On the original recordings, both studio and live, the third verse was the most dramatic of the four, starting softly yet increasing in intensity suddenly with the ascending stepwise, high register, melody on the lyrics “O trampled death.” The choir further intensified this verse with a countermelody that incorporated dramatic word painting on the words “rose” and “sting” as shown in figure 4.4 below. To dramatize “rose,” the choir approaches the

<sup>35</sup> Hillsong Worship, “O Praise The Name (Anastasis) - Live,” recorded 2015, on *OPEN HEAVEN/River Wild (Deluxe Version)*, Hillsong (HIL), streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/0FBm7M8icvVmPWDmyUNCGy?si=0b01354b7e424b79>. Hillsong Worship, “O Praise The Name (Anastasis),” recorded 2015, on *O Praise The Name (Anastasis)*, Hillsong (HIL), streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/0QtYlr0TOfrEU4ONDUNA29?si=deec05268d044a31>.

word through ascending steps on “heaven,” the word prior. On “sting,” the choir elongates the word for six beats, four of which are spent on a tense G/C chord whose voicing featured a thick clash of a 2<sup>nd</sup> in the tenor section and a biting 7<sup>th</sup> between the second tenor and soprano.<sup>36</sup>

The image displays a musical score for a choral counter melody. It features two staves: 'Worship Leader' and 'Worship Choir'. The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The score is divided into two systems. The first system covers the lyrics 'And then on the third, at break of dawn, the Son of heaven rose a-'. The second system covers 'gain. Oh tram-pled death, where is your sting? The an-gels roar.' and 'a- gain. Oh death, death where is your sting?'. Chord symbols (C, F/C, C, G, Am, F, Am, G) are placed above the staff. The 'Worship Choir' part includes vocal line notation and chordal accompaniment. Annotations include 'SA' (Soprano Alto) and 'T' (Tenor) for the choir parts, and 'split tenor section' for the final measure. A bracketed note indicates '"rose" approached through ascending steps'. A final bracketed note indicates 'G/C dissonant chord on "sting"'. The score is numbered '4' at the beginning of the second system.

Figure 4.4. Dramatic Word Painting on “Rose” and “Sting” in the Choral Countermelody of Verse 3 of Hillsong’s *O Praise The Name* (*Anástasis*).

Despite the negotiations of band dropouts and the construction of “choral moments” as highlighted throughout this section, the majority of the BCF Cypress Choir’s singing experience at their inaugural Choir Sunday was smothered in the sound of a loud worship band. Inevitably, over-singing ensued. Despite compromising the group’s overall tone, blend, and intonation (though the band’s volume rendered these inaudible), the choir modeled passionate, “sold-out,” “sing-at-the-top-of-your-lungs” worship singing and bodily involvement which had a notable impact on the congregation.

<sup>36</sup> On the first choral Sunday, the praise team sang the full parts shown in figure 4 while the men in the choir doubled the low tenor in unison with the women an octave higher.

The unanimous consensus after the services was that the inclusion of choir had stimulated congregational engagement to an all-time high at the Cypress campus.

*After the BCF Cypress Choir Debut: Building the Choir*

With the success and challenges of the first Choir Sunday detailed, this section now describes how the BCF Cypress Choir grew from this initial worship event by outlining the reasons why some singers left and why others stayed with the group. To anchor this section and those which will follow, table one below charts each Choir Sunday of the BCF Cypress Choir during the time of my fieldwork. The song selections on each date are also included.

As the table shows, after the initial ministry in January 2017, two more choir dates followed in the first half of that year, soon after Easter. Although those two dates, April 23 and June 25, involved fewer singers than the inaugural one in January, the choral ministry grew in momentum and quality. The praise team was no longer needed, as those returning singers from the January choir were eager to sing harmony parts and special choral figurations all on their own. This desire was birthed in the Saturday rehearsal before the first choral Sunday when some choir singers expressed their eagerness to sing praise team-like parts at the next choral Sunday. This longing actually started to come to fruition at the first choral Sunday when some choir members all but



Table 1. Bayou City Fellowship Cypress Campus Choir Dates  
and Worship Song Selections from January 2017 to April 2019.

Worship Songs	BCF Worship Choir Dates					
	January 22	2017 April 23	June 25	May 13	2018 September 30	2019 April 7
All Creatures of Our God and King (Crowder)					✓	
Awesome (Jenkins)	✓					
Build My Life (Pat Barrett)				✓		
God has Spoken (BCF Cypress )		✓				
Great are You Lord (All Sons and Daughters)	✓		✓			✓
I Stand Amazed (BCF Cypress arrangement)			✓			
Jesus is Better (Austin Stone)						✓
Jesus Paid It All (Passion)	✓					
More Like Jesus (Passion)					✓	
Nothing but the Blood (Austin Stone)			✓			
Now to Him (BCF Cypress )		✓		✓		
O Praise the Name (Hillsong)	✓	✓	✓			
Singing in the Victory (Austin Stone)				✓		✓
What a Beautiful Name (Hillsong gospel version)						✓
Worthy of Your Name (Passion)		✓		✓	✓	

insisted on learned harmony parts for *Jesus Paid It All* to be sung at the last morning service, despite the short transition time between the second and last service. This scenario was described in the vignette at the beginning of chapter one.

### *The Loss of Eager Singers*

After the first choral Sunday in January 2017, some singers elected not to return to the choir. The majority of the singers who elected to not return for April 23 and June 25 were still supportive of the BCF Cypress Choir and were enthusiastic about the new ministry venture. However, they also shared concerns that figured prominently in their decision to enjoy the new choral ministry congregation-side as opposed to from the platform as a member within the choir. The main reason cited was the loud volume of the worship band. A typical expression of the volume problem was, as one choir member told me,

“I loved singing in choir, but I didn’t sign up this time around because I just couldn’t hear myself sing or anybody else! To this day, I don’t know if I sang the right notes (chuckle). It’ll take me a while to adjust to singing with that much volume going on. I think I’d need more practice with the band than just Sunday morning.”<sup>37</sup>

The challenge of not being able to hear themselves due to high band volumes was jarring enough for those with choral singing experience, yet for those choir singers who had no experience or limited experience singing in a choir, the challenge was virtually insurmountable. These newcomers to choral singing had to contend with learning how to sing in a choir and doing so devoid of the opportunity of hearing themselves or the other singers around them. Although these new singers sang

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<sup>37</sup> Informal conversation with member of BCF Cypress Choir, April 23, 2017.

passionately at the Saturday choir rehearsal, and left that rehearsal confident and empowered, the singing environment they contended with on Sunday morning was deflating. A number of these new singers simply quit by telling me “choir is too hard,” “choir is just not for me,” or “choir is just not my thing.”

The volume problem also presented challenges from the perspective of the congregation. When a sizeable choir is on the platform, the congregation may anticipate with excitement the audible contribution of the choir to the worship experience. However, when the choir is rendered nearly inaudible by the immense volume of the worship band, the congregation’s expectations are frustrated, and the resulting disappointment of a “voiceless choir” can constitute a distraction to worship. Examples of the disappointment and distraction created by an inaudible choir on a Choir Sunday can be seen in the following two messages. The first comes from Randy, a former tenor in the choir. His message is included in the “Here is the reason why” section of his planning center decline notification for the September 30, 2018 choral Sunday.

The band has gotten so loud, it’s impossible to hear any voices but the praise team. The last time choir sang, you couldn’t hear them at all. When I was working the coffee bar a few months ago, a 20 something guy came out and seriously asked me if we had ear plugs to give out.<sup>38</sup>

The second message comes from an email interview with Mike, another tenor in the BCF Cypress choir who had extensive ministry and choral experience as a former youth pastor, front vocal worship leader, avid church choir singer and collegiate chorister. He sang with the BCF Cypress choir just once and elected to discontinue. He writes:

The experience (of choir) at Bayou City is by far one of my favorite experiences.... it (was) fun, challenging, and rewarding! My family was more put-out that I was not able to be with them (due to Choir Sunday) but they

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<sup>38</sup> Randy, planning center email to the author, September 14, 2018.

understood it was what I wanted to do. My wife did say she could barely hear the choir over all the other instruments and microphoned singers, so it seemed pointless to go through the whole practice and 3 service stress. I didn't do more than the one choir session due to scheduling conflicts, but I thoroughly enjoyed the experience.<sup>39</sup>

In response to these messages and many other similar messages that I received through conversations, emails and texts with choir and congregation members, Dirk and I began thinking more earnestly about additional ways beyond the band dropout technique that could address the volume issue. However, thinking through hypothetical solutions only went so far. We needed to corroborate our ideas with onsite experimentation, particularly with the sound engineer team. Yet with only two to three choral Sundays dispersed intermittently across each year, opportunities for onsite experimentation were scarce.

Another reason that deterred choir members from continuing with the BCF Cypress Choir was insufficient platform space. At the first choral Sunday, the large group of choral singers was packed tightly on the back platform. Although the sight of this large choir elicited excitement and expectation from the congregation, their shoulder-to-shoulder proximity with each other was rather uncomfortable for the choir singers. Taller singers were placed in the back and shorter singers in the front, yet without tiered choir risers, eye contact with some singers was compromised and hence, their contribution was also compromised as their voice was absorbed by the back of the singer in front of them. A number of choir members understandably interpreted this lack of space as an indication that the BCF worship choir was intended to be smaller. The message received: Their involvement was not needed.

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<sup>39</sup> Mike, email to the author, April 4, 2018.

Still others were turned away by the long Sunday morning schedule of an early rehearsal followed by three, back-to-back services, a time commitment spanning around five hours. Adding in the two-hour Saturday rehearsal, involvement in BCF worship choir totals an exacting seven-hour weekend commitment. A few singers did shorten their mornings by leaving after the second service. And others, who were involved in other ministries such as teaching youth students or planning outreach events, would step out for one of the services in order to fulfill their ministry obligations. Those whose ministries required their presence for more than one of the services normally opted out of singing in choir.

### *The Emergence of a Dedicated Core*

The loss of choir members for the reasons given above notwithstanding, a dedicated core of around twenty-five singers emerged from the more than fifty singers who sang in January. As the following email from one of these singers shows, even when they couldn't attend a Choir Sunday due to a weekend conflict, they would often still practice the music just in case the arrangements were utilized at the next choral Sunday.

I'm sorry we have too many things happening that weekend including a wedding out of town and family coming into town! I will miss being a part of our choir this time but will practice the music...for next time!<sup>40</sup>

Many of these singers sang in various church choirs in their past and were blessed to have the joy of church choir returned to their lives within the context of BCF Cypress, their current home church. Others had sung as front vocal platform singers in the past, had a yearning to minister in this capacity again, yet were reticent to join the worship band for a number of reasons. Some felt that their voice was not suited to Cypress's pop-

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<sup>40</sup> Email from Meredith to the author, March 19, 2019.

rock style. Others felt that their musical experience and training were not on par with the quality and standard of musicianship of the Cypress worship band. Still others acknowledged that their current life situation did not have the requisite time to accommodate the rigors of front vocal worship singing. As such, the choir ministry gave these singers an apropos opportunity to utilize their vocal gifts.

Another subgroup within the core of the choir were youth singers who wanted to sing alongside their parents and siblings, who sang in choir at their middle school or high school and wanted to do so in their church choir, and who were developing youth worship singers who sang in the student ministry worship band and were aspiring to sing front vocals with the BCF Cypress worship band.

The final noteworthy subgroup of the core group of choir members is its sizeable number of male singers. On many choral Sundays, the male section would outnumber the female soprano or alto sections, which is atypical of church choirs in general. Some of the men could sing in a legitimate tenor range producing G4-A4 with relative ease, however, many of the male singers were baritones whose range peaked at F4/F#4. Even though I referred to the male section as the tenor section, I attempted to arrange the section's parts within parameters that split the difference between the tenors and baritones. The tessitura usually sat between A5 to E4, typical of tenor parts, yet the upper range was normally capped at the baritone upper limit of F#4. Instances that required notes beyond this range included the option for the baritones to sing an octave below if needed.

Most of the singers within this choir's core did not read music but sang "by ear." As such, choral lyric sheets were provided as well as practice recordings that consisted of

the various choral section parts sung over the original recording. The soprano and alto parts were not sung at pitch, but an octave below. They were instructed to sing along an octave higher, or simply to sing “in a comfortable range.” There were about one to two music readers per choral section, so I included a notated score as well. Even so, most of the readers appreciated the practice recordings since as one of them mentioned, “I was a little rusty at reading choral music since I had not done it for quite some time.”

Rehearsals revealed a symbiotic connection between the readers and non-readers that strengthened each section. The readers would remind the non-readers of various intricacies and nuances of the arrangement both through their singing and through verbal instructions between practice runs. The non-readers, whose reliance was on their ear instead of the printed score, established a culture of memorization in the choir that prompted the readers to sing “off book” much earlier than they were inclined to do so.

#### *Favored Choral Arrangements and One-and-Done Arrangements*

With momentum being generated in the choral ministry through the efforts of a core group of dedicated singers, choral favorites began to emerge, such as the choral parts to *O Praise The Name (Anástasis)* by Hillsong. The choral treatment of the song’s third verse described above became a favorite moment in congregational singing by the worship band, choir and congregation alike. As such, this song was the only one to be sung in all three Choir Sundays in 2017 as shown on table 4.1. Three repetitions represent the most of any song sung by the BCF Cypress worship choir.

As familiarity with the arrangement increased, the choir’s singing of *O Praise The Name* improved with each choral Sunday. On April 23, the next choral date after the ensemble’s inception, the choir was able to sing the entire arrangement on their own;

instead of the unison line they sang on the inaugural Choir Sunday, while the praise team sang the full arrangement and harmonies. On June 25, the third choral date of 2017, the choir was able to sing the arrangement with greater articulatory cohesiveness, tone, and anticipatory awareness, which allowed them to lead worship with increased power and solidarity.

One of the other songs sung three times due to the popularity of its choral arrangement is *Worthy of Your Name* (Passion).<sup>41</sup> The most impactful choral contribution to the dynamics of this worship song also occurs during a verse of the song, as it was in *O Praise The Name*. Here, the choir echoes the front vocal and congregation with energetic choral fills throughout the second verse, as shown in figure 4.5 below. From a choir-band balance perspective, and similar to the call and response bridge section in *Awesome*, these echoes allowed the choir's vocals to exist in a space separate and apart from the front vocal and congregation. By reiterating the lyrics that had just been sung by the front vocal and congregation, the choir sought to extend the congregation's focus and attention on these lyrics. Additionally, since the echoes weren't simply repetitions, but choral and melodic variations, they enriched the lyrics with an alternate musical interpretation, similarly to the effect that differing covers of the same song or settings of the same lyrics can have on overall feel, meaning and interpretation.

Although *Awesome* was chosen on the first choral Sunday to fulfill the role as the "choir's song," a song that would feature and also introduce the debut choral ministry to the Cypress campus, as table one shows, *Awesome* was neither selected for subsequent

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<sup>41</sup> Passion and Sean Curran, "Worthy of Your Name (Live)," recorded 2013, on *Zion (Deluxe Edition)*, SixSteps (SIX), streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/5Mw9bXG1dLNhbjoFkVS2oR?si=426f36a1b8534e0f>.



choral Sundays and additionally, nor was it discussed or requested as a future selection. This may be in part because the gospel style of the song rendered it an atypical selection for the campus, whose worship was confined for subsequent for subsequent choral Sundays and additionally, nor was it discussed or requested as a future selection. This may be in part because the gospel style of the song rendered it an atypical selection for the campus, whose worship was confined considerably to a specific subgroup of song sources within the contemporary worship genre. Additionally, since Robbie, one of the only front vocalists at the campus who regularly included gospel in his repertoire, was transitioning from the role of worship pastor to that of campus pastor, he wasn't available to serve as a front vocalist for any of the choral Sundays beyond the first one on January 22, 2017. Dirk served as the primary front vocalist for the remaining choral Sundays, and since gospel worship was utilized much less within his worship song repertoire, such songs were rarely selection on Choir Sundays.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> As table 4.1 shows, *Awesome* is not the only gospel styled song in the choir's repertoire. A song sung at the choir's latest ministry date was also gospel styled, namely, Hillsong's gospel arrangement of their hit worship song, *What a Beautiful Name*, a song squarely within the repertoire of BCF Cypress. Although *Awesome* and this version of *What a Beautiful Name* share the incorporation of gospel idioms, the essence of gospel within the latter is much less than that of the former – which may offer reasonable explanation concerning why the latter fits the worshipping context at BCF Cypress better than the former. Evidence of this preference can be gauged by the many requests for *What a Beautiful Name* to be sung again at future choral Sundays whereas no such requests have been made of *Awesome*. Besides being an arrangement of a well-established contemporary worship song, the approach to the front vocal singing in *What a Beautiful Name* also better fits the front vocal singing commonly heard at BCF Cypress. *What a Beautiful Name* uses less gospel styled techniques than that found in *Awesome*, techniques such as extensive call and response as well as anticipatory vocal gesticulations. This allows its front vocals to bear more affinity to that which is typically found in contemporary worship, and as such, was a more seamless fit for Dirk's front vocal singing.

Worship Leader

You did not speak you made no sound. You died for your ac cu-sers.

Worship Choir

*SAT unison as written, T 8vb as needed* You did not speak you made no sound... You

4

And as your blood fell to the ground, you

died for your ac-cu - sers. And as your blood fell to the ground, *gliss.*

7

re - de-fined my fu - ture. Yeah, and on the day that you a - rose,

you re - de-fine my fu - ture And

10

The dark-ness ran for co- ver For the

*SA T* on the day that you a rose *SA T* Dark-ness ran for co - ver *Alto with melody (stems up)*

13

King of Kings has claimed his throne Now un - til for-e - ver

*SA T* You have claimed your throne *SA T*

Figure 4.5. Choral Echoes in the Second Verse of Passion's *Worthy of Your Name*.

Regardless, *Awesome* wasn't the only song to be sung just once by the choir. As table 4.1 shows, ten of the fifteen songs sung by the choir thus far had been sung just once. A number of these one-and-done songs allowed the choir to keep pace with the rate of change of the worship song rotation at BCF Cypress. It was also the case that, with the exception of *Awesome*, the choral arrangements for these one-and-done songs contributed less impact than those sung more than once. In other words, the choral arrangements of the one-and-done songs were serviceable, allowing the choir to participate in the leading of the song, yet not necessarily providing substantial "choral moments." Conversely, the arrangements of the repeated songs were more distinct, positioning the choir to augment the congregational experience significantly.

The choral impact of two of the five repeated choral favorites, namely *O Praise the Name* and *Worthy of Your Name*, have been discussed previously. The other three, that is, *Great are You Lord* (All Sons and Daughters), *Singing in the Victory* (Austin Stone), and the hymn *Nothing but the Blood* (Austin Stone version), each featured the same type of choral impact – the choral countermelody during the climactic, final double chorus.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Describing this double chorus as "final" is not intended to suggest that the double chorus ends the song. Rather, "final" simply denotes the last double chorus to occur in the song. In some cases, the final double chorus is the song's sole double chorus, such as in *Nothing but the Blood* (Austin Stone version) and *Singing in the Victory* (Austin Stone). *Great are You Lord* (All Sons and Daughters) includes two double choruses, one at the second occurrence of chorus material, and another at the third occurrence, which is the final double chorus. Even though worship songs are not end with the final double choruses, the climactic character of these sections do amass the energy which governs over the flow of song ending sections. For instance, the punctuating outro of both *Nothing but the Blood* (Austin Stone version) and *Singing in the Victory* (Austin Stone) function as song sections that carry over the overflow of energy from the final double chorus. The final double chorus energy maintained through these outros is then expired through dramatic evanescence in order to set the stage for an affective, song-ending drop chorus. In the case of *Great are you Lord* (All Sons and Daughters), the diffusion of final double chorus energy occurs at the outro without a following drop chorus.

The song form of modern CWM typically peaks at the final double chorus for the purpose of inciting the congregation to its fullest, loudest and most full-bodied experience of congregational singing. To heighten the arrival of this final double chorus, worship songs often build up to the double chorus through a dramatized intensification of dynamics, from very soft to very loud. This dynamic intensification is often applied through a repeated bridge section as in the case of *Great are You Lord* and *Singing in the Victory*. Due to its verse-refrain hymnic structure, the fourth verse, instead of a bridge, is treated with the pre-double chorus dynamic intensification in Austin Stone's retuned version of *Nothing but the Blood*.

The addition of a choral countermelody at the culminating double chorus utilized melodic proliferation to deepen the experience of a song's climax. This technique was akin to the effect of the soprano descant which traditional church choirs often add to the final strophe of a hymn. The choral countermelodies of *Great are You Lord* and *Singing in the Victory* were constructed similarly. Each relied on energizing echo variations of the chorus' melodic sub phrases, sustained notes and chords to emphasize key words, and also the interjection of novel combinations of text fragments from the song's lyrics.

The first chorus of the final double chorus of *Nothing but the Blood* used the echo variation technique while the second chorus created a catchy, groove-based countermelody that carried the title of the hymn throughout as shown in figure 4.6. The choir's groovy countermelody during this second chorus of the final double chorus anticipates the 3+3+2 uneven triple division of the half note that the front vocal interjected later on in the outro. The energy of this groovy counter-melody spilled over into the outro through a fragmented variation and then culminated into a commanding,

outro-ending D2/F# fermata chord, one of the only instances of four-part harmony in the BCF Cypress choir's repertoire. When Dirk first heard this ending fermata chord in the pre-service Sunday morning rehearsal of June 25, 2017, he exclaimed,

“Woah, that’s a chord right there! Let’s bring that out. Guys (referring to the worship band), don’t crash out<sup>44</sup> on that last chord. Hit it then drop out so that that choir chord can come out! We’ll feed that energy right into the welcome!”

### *Fitting into Worship at BCF Cypress*

These repeated choral arrangements fit the worship culture of BCF Cypress because the choir's arrangements did not dominate the musical surface of the worship song, but rather asserted itself only at pivotal points in the song's form. These “choral moments” of assertion were designed to elevate the song's pivotal moments, such as the first instantiation of the groove at the second verse of *Worthy of Your Name*, or the dramatic resurrection-themed third verse of *O Praise the Name*, or the pinnacle, song-ending double choruses of *Great are You Lord*, as well as Austin Stone's *Singing in the*

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<sup>44</sup> Worship bands, and many other kinds of pop-rock-based bands, utilize “crash outs” most commonly to produce a sustained wash of sound for a climactic, fermata ending. An example of a crash out can be heard at the end of Hillsong's live recording of their hit worship song, *What a Beautiful Name*. In the context of contemporary worship, these crash outs are often accompanied by bold, loud celebratory gestures by the congregation, such as shouts and claps of praise, as can be heard on the recording. Crash outs sustain a loud wall of sound through repeated articulatory attacks and improvised riffs by each singer and instrumentalist in the band. Although the term “crash out” is used to describe the band's composite effect, it is derived more specifically from the pervasive presence of the crash cymbal – which is prolonged through repeated hits and single sticking rolls. The effect is that of a wash of high frequency, metallic energy that sails conspicuously on top of the sound spectrum. Although the recording of Austin Stone's version of *Nothing but the Blood* ends with a drop chorus, Dirk communicated to me in advance that a crash out would be utilized at the end instead. The choir's D2/F# fermata chord shown in figure six was written to allow the ensemble to contribute to the worship band's crash out.

*Victory*,<sup>45</sup> and Austin Stone's version of the hymn *Nothing but the Blood*.<sup>46</sup> By picking specific "moments" to drive the song, the arrangements weren't perceived as being overbearingly choral. If the choir's music were more chorally dominant, it would have likely rendered the choir a distraction within the worship context at BCF Cypress instead of the special, intermittent enlivener of worship which it had been two to three times per year over the last two and a half years. This subservient dynamic may add another layer of explanation concerning why *Awesome*, which was constructed with a choral core and was selected to feature the BCF Cypress choir due to its choral centrality, was then abandoned after the first choral Sunday, and supplanted by the repeated choral arrangements just mentioned.

This may indicate that songs and arrangements that were choral-centric, with a sustained drive from the choir from beginning to end, were likely outside of the worship culture espoused at BCF Cypress. When the Cypress choir wasn't asserting itself at a momentous juncture of a given worship song, the remaining portions of the choir's arrangements were left intentionally pedestrian in order to leave space for the other band factions to shape these portions of the song. For instance, the harmonies at most choruses either mirrored or provided subtle variation to those sung by the front vocals. In fact, at various sections of each song, the choir was simply devoid of assigned parts.

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<sup>45</sup> Austin Stone Worship, "Singing in the Victory," recorded 2017, on *Everflow*, Austin Stone Worship, accessed February, 22, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/42KURnH5D90yxWQWJfHdVY?si=79f2dc3d67104b04>.

<sup>46</sup> Austin Stone Worship and The Justin Cofield Band, "Nothing But The Blood - Live," recorded 2013, on *King of Love (Live)*, Austin Stone Worship, accessed February, 22, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/4svMnzzBgh5Z8XSCtsLef7?si=a27f26a98a86465d>.

The End of the Final Double Chorus

Worship Leader: No o - ther fount I know. No - thing but the blood of Je - sus.

Worship Choir: No - thing but the blood. No - thing but the blood. Oh No - thing but the blood. of Je -

Outro: Oh, no - thing but the blood. Oh, no - thing but the blood. Yeah! No - thing but the blood. No - thing but the blood. Yeah! No - thing but the blood. No - thing but the blood. in choir

Figure 4.6. Vocal Parts for the End of the Double Chorus and the Outro of Austin Stone's Retuned Version of *Nothing but the Blood*.

Each of the repeated songs, and a number of the unrepeatd ones as well, had nothing notated for the choir during the first verses and the first bridge. In the case of the first verse, the choir's absence granted the front vocal space to set the tone of the worship song from the get-go, unencumbered by the weighty mass vocal of the choir. Or

concerning the first bridge, the choir's absence allowed for their reentry on the second or third repetition, which contributed a layer of sound towards the building and intensification typical of bridge sections.

Moments of choral absence were not necessarily synonymous with moments of disengagement, or even singing, however. During these absentee sections, the BCF Cypress Choir was instructed to "sing as a congregation member, not as a choir." This congregation-styled singing was normally at a softer volume than that of official, notated choral parts since congregational singing was not usually subjected to the vocal projection of choral singing. In fact, actual singing was optional during these congregational moments since some choir members would take the opportunity to assume a prayerful posture that may have been accompanied by the mumbling of song lyrics or even sheer silence in order to appreciate the sound of the worship band, choir and congregation singing around them.

By fluctuating between moments of assertion or drive, moments of "laying in" or blend, or even "laying out" or silence, the BCF Cypress Choir contributed to the musical surface in the same dynamic manner employed by other members of the worship band. This allowed the choir to avoid distracting the congregation by dominating the musical surface with constant assertion or drive, but to participate innocuously within the constant interplay and turn-taking that is common amongst worship band members.

#### *Restart, Renovation, and Reengagement in the Wake of Hurricane Harvey*

Further complicating the progress towards better choir-band balance detailed above in the first Choir Sunday at BCF Cypress was the large time gap between the last Choir Sunday in 2017 that took place on June 25, and the first Choir Sunday in 2018 on



May 13, as shown in table 4.1. This gap resulted from the after-effects of Hurricane Harvey which struck Houston on August 17, 2017. The first choir date to be compromised by the hurricane was a very special service entitled “Vision Night,” which was to take place on the evening of September 10, 2017 and feature the choir prominently. The purpose of Vision Night was to celebrate the church’s sixth anniversary and to create a space for the Spring Branch and Cypress campuses to unite and express their collective identity in corporate worship both to themselves and to the surrounding community. This special celebration was designed to engender impetus and energy towards the birth of the new Tomball campus. A joint mass choir comprised of the Cypress choir birthed earlier that year and of interested singers from Spring Branch would serve as the aural and visual symbol expressing the unification of the two campuses.

Unfortunately, Vision Night was postponed, washed away by the utter devastation of hurricane Harvey. Vision Night was never rescheduled. Rather, in the year following the storm, Bayou City Fellowship sought to live into its church-wide mission statement, to represent “Jesus for the people of the city (of Houston) that they love.” Millions of dollars were raised towards hurricane relief and numerous teams were assembled to repair and rebuild homes. As Robbie put it, “Our church app became a dispatch center. The whole staff was devoted to full time dispatch rescue relief.”<sup>47</sup> In the words of head pastor, Curtis Jones which were shared with me by several members of the Cypress campus worship team, choir and congregation, “Vision Night is no longer needed. By

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<sup>47</sup> Robbie Seay, phone conversation with the author, November 10, 2017.

picking each other up and rebuilding our city in the wake of hurricane Harvey, we have already affirmed and expressed our identity as Bayou City Fellowship.”

After the massive ordeal of hurricane Harvey, the BCF Cypress choral ministry, along with a number of their other ministry programs, underwent a restart. With almost a year transpiring since the last choral Sunday, choir members were eager to reconnect with the momentum gained in the first half of 2017 before the storm. This eagerness led to multiple choir rehearsals prior to 2018 Choir Sundays instead of the singular choir rehearsal that had preceded Choir Sundays in 2017. On May 13, our first choir date in 2018, two identical choir rehearsals were offered on Saturday mid-morning and afternoon. This offered multiple rehearsal options for choir members, which allowed more singers to participate. Beyond these two Saturday rehearsals, a private rehearsal for an adult and three teenagers was held at a family residence that Friday early evening since they were unable to attend either of the Saturday rehearsals.

On September 30, two choir rehearsals were offered on Saturday mid-morning and afternoon similar to May 13, yet an additional two rehearsals were offered on the Monday evening prior as well. A number of choir singers attended two rehearsals, one of the Monday rehearsals as well as one of the Saturday rehearsals. In between the Monday and Saturday rehearsals, a few singers took part in individualized video chat practice sessions. Since each of the 2018 rehearsals catered to smaller numbers of singers than the singular rehearsals of 2017, each singer received more focused attention, which resulted in stronger, more confident singing on Sunday morning.

Coupled with the eagerness of the choir to resume the choral ministry in 2018, Dirk and I were keen to reengage the choir-band balance dilemma. From the choir’s end,

the multiple rehearsals offered in 2018 allowed each singer to sing with more confidence, which resulted in increased volume from the choir that improved choir-band balance. From the band's end, beyond the inclusion of band dropouts, the choral Sundays in 2018 featured drum sets pared down to a bare essential kit configuration of bass, snare, high-hat and ride cymbal played with softer mallets. The choir-band balance improved, however further adjustments were made at the last choral Sunday on April 7, 2019, which was described in the opening vignette of this chapter.

On April 7, 2019, the drum set was removed entirely, announced in the following planning center notification from Dirk:

Hey all!

This weekend is going to be fresh! We are replacing a drummer with a huge choir. Ha! Going to be sweet. Let's try and capture a more acoustic, but dynamic vibe and feature the choir big time! ...Love y'all and see you Sunday!

Dirk.<sup>48</sup>

To achieve the acoustic vibe that Dirk mentioned, acoustic string instruments, namely the cello, double bass, and two acoustic guitars, supplanted amplified electric and bass guitars. Three front vocalists and I on digital piano facing the choir in the conductor spot rounded out the ensemble. The result was that, for the first time, the choir could be heard completely throughout the service. Dirk aptly concluded that April 7 was the best Choir Sunday yet, a conclusion shared by many members of the choir and congregation.

Another step towards solving the choir-band dilemma was the inclusion of Hillsong's gospel arrangement of their hit worship song, *What a Beautiful Name*.<sup>49</sup> Since

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<sup>48</sup> Ryan "Dirk" DeLange, Planning center email, April 7, 2019.

<sup>49</sup> Hillsong Worship, "What A Beautiful Name – Gospel Version," recorded 2017, on *What a Beautiful Name*, Hillsong (HIL), accessed February, 22, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/5ABnPJhVaNfzwwFuyf3Nvb?si=2u4XuFtvTCWibaMleebdBA>, This gospel arrangement comes from a Hillsong album comprised of six separate arrangements of this iconic Hillsong worship song. The first two tracks include the original studio and live recordings, followed by an acoustic

the arrangement was recorded with lead male vocal, women's choir, and piano accompaniment, the remainder of the Cypress worship band, namely, the guitars, cello and double bass, played tacet for this song. Naturally, the exclusion of these instruments allowed the choir to be featured to an even greater extent. As Hillsong's SAA choir formation was being adapted for BCF Cypress's SAT choir, some falsetto singing was required of the tenor section. Dirk covered the lead vocal parts and I conducted the choir while on the digital keyboard.

Final sub phrase of Chorus 2

Worship Choir

Cm<sup>7(4)</sup> B $\flat$  Eb/G Ab<sup>2</sup>

The name of Je - sus

Pre-Bridge Choral Interlude

3 Ab<sup>2</sup>(#4) B $\flat$  Cm<sup>7</sup> Bbsus B $\flat$  Eb/G

7 Ab<sup>2</sup> B $\flat$  Cm(add<sup>2</sup>) Cm<sup>7(4)</sup> Bbsus B $\flat$

leap into dissonant  
add 2 note, D.

Figure 4.7. Choral Parts for the Ending Sub Phrase of Chorus 2 and the Pre-Bridge Choral Interlude of Hillsong's Gospel Version of *What a Beautiful Name*.

The arrangement was received enthusiastically. Congregation members commented specifically about the impact of the arrangement's pre-bridge interlude, the only section of the gospel arrangement absent from the formal design of the song's

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version and an explorative orchestral variation. The final two tracks feature the gospel version referenced here, followed by an EDM influenced version from Hillsong worship collective, Hillsong Young & Free.

original recording. The section was driven by expressive choral melodies and harmonies atop which the front male vocalist delivered gospel styled adlib exhortations. The choral parts of the interlude are provided in figure 4.7 below.

In preparation for the bridge, the choir initiated the interlude with an ascending, stepwise vocalise (mm. 1-4) that was then repeated, emboldened with triadic harmony (mm. 7-10) and a particularly affective trichord comprised of the upper voices of a C minor (add2), namely D, E<sup>b</sup> and G (mm. 8). The tension and pungency of this chord was increased by the melodic third in the lower voice which leaps into the dissonant add2 note, D (mm. 7-8).<sup>50</sup> Figure 4.7 also included the preceding melodic sub phrase that also ended the second chorus. This ending melodic sub phrase signaled the interlude that follows with an arresting A<sup>b</sup> (add 2) choral harmony, which required *divisi* in the alto section (mm. 2).

A chorally driven moment of this type was a new experience within the context of worship at BCF Cypress as it was created through the addition of an entirely new section to a familiar worship song. All other choral moments at BCF Cypress, a number of which have been detailed so far throughout this case study, had been created through the addition of choral parts to preexisting sections of worship songs.

### *Choral Intermittence – Flex and Flow with the Seasons of Bayou City Fellowship*

The choral ministry at BCF Cypress sought to contribute “choral moments” within a ministry that has been described as intermittent because Choir Sundays took

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<sup>50</sup> The vocal leap, which is itself a dissonant melodic gesture requiring resolution through stepwise motion in the opposite direction, increases the dissonance of the add2 tone, D, because it approaches this dissonance in an unprepared manner. Conventional approaches to dissonances include the common tone preparation of the suspension, or the stepwise approaches of the passing tone or neighbor tone.

place irregularly, in response to the evolving seasons of the life of the church. Further contributing to the variability of the choir ministry was the sporadic nature of its directorship, with choir rehearsals occurring only during the week leading up to a choral Sunday – most times, just the day or two prior. After each Choir Sunday, choir singers left enthused, yet with little to any indication as to when the next Choir Sunday would take place. Amongst the numerous issues raised by choir singers and congregants, the aural balance between worship band and choir that has been explored at length throughout this case study was the most notable.

Choral Sundays at BCF Cypress occurred randomly because they fluctuated with the worshipping life of the church and its response to external circumstances. Soon after the third choral Sunday on June 25, 2017 and before the initial planning phase of Vision Night had begun, Dirk proposed incorporating choir at least four times each year – a plan which fit the life of the campus and the momentum of the ministry at that time.<sup>51</sup> However, only two choral Sundays were attempted the following year due to the trauma of hurricane Harvey and the period of reparation and regrouping which followed – a period in which the church was devoted wholly to the outright manifestation of its core mission as “Jesus for the people of the city.”

On the heels of Hurricane Harvey, Bayou City Fellowship engaged another massive undertaking, namely the launching of their new Tomball campus on Easter 2019. In the period which followed, Pastor Curtis called for a “time of simplicity” across all Bayou City Fellowship campuses. This time of simplicity was focused most specifically

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<sup>51</sup> This plan was communicated through an email exchange with Ryan “Dirk” DeLange on June 27, 2017.

on providing relief and respite for the many BCF congregants and volunteers through whom the Harvey relief efforts and the launch of the new Tomball campus were achieved. In concordance, the BCF choir planned to move forward with just two choral Sundays per year in order to live into this new spiritual season of simplicity. Then, in early 2020, the COVID-19 exacted the greatest disruption and challenge which the BCF Cypress choral ministry had faced to date.

### *Summary*

In contrast to the “choir-first” praise and worship culture of CCC and Gateway’s cutting-edge modern CWM culture which is fueled by the resources of a massive megachurch, the worship context of Bayou City Fellowship’s Cypress campus features modern CWM in a medium sized church. Under the tutelage of Robbie Seay and Ryan “Dirk” DeLange, the modern CWM at BCF Cypress was excellent, yet it was achieved through small musical forces and in a “chill,” less “produced” manner than at CCC and Gateway. In this way, Bayou City Fellowship Cypress is likely much more similar to the average American church than the other three church choirs explored in this dissertation. It is probable that the documentation provided here concerning how Robbie, Dirk, and I established a worship-leading choir at Bayou City Fellowship on a small worship platform alongside a lean four- to seven-member worship band will bear affinity with such experiences at other medium-sized North American churches.

One of the unique challenges faced by this medium sized church when compared to the other choirs in this dissertation was the intermittence of its choral ministry. This was likely a reflection of the “chill” vibe of the BCF Cypress music ministry and yet may also have been a representation of the more moderate leadership structure of a medium

sized church when compared to the leadership mechanisms employed to organize the larger ministries represented in this dissertation. The intermittence of the BCF Cypress Choir likely did not allow for the choir culture to establish a “rhythm.” Even so, a dedicated core of singers emerged and a group of favored choral arrangements with effective and affective “choral moments” developed. The worship-leading choir at BCF Cypress managed to contribute profoundly to worship albeit through a markedly uneven schedule which flexed and flowed considerably with the life of the church.

Of the choirs in this dissertation, only the CCC developed audio projection techniques that were amenable to choral singing. Although audio struggles were pronounced at Gateway and at Breakaway (as will be demonstrated in chapter five), the larger platform areas of these ministries (particularly at Gateway) mitigated audio issues to a degree. Simply put, with more space on stage, stage positioning can produce a level of isolation which eludes smaller stages. As such, the BCF Cypress Choir on the church’s small platform likely endured the most difficult audio environment amongst the three worship-leading choirs in this study. The audio difficulties cause a number of eager singers to leave the choir and the congregation was distracted by a seemingly inaudible choir. With each Choir Sunday, the BCF Cypress worship band increased their number of band dropouts and also progressively pared down the band – moves which not only improved choir-band balance, but also suited the comparatively small worship gathering space of the church. The next chapter will illustrate another worship-leading choir which exists on a college campus.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Collegiate Ministry Worship-Leading Choir

The previous chapter presented a case study of the Bayou City Fellowship Choir, a worship-leading choir in a local church in the northwest suburbs of Houston, TX. The current chapter will now turn its attention to a worship-leading choir of college students at Breakaway Ministries – a non-denominational student ministry that operated on the campus of Texas A&M University in College Station, TX, most Tuesday evenings during the academic year. This account is written from my vantage point as the choral clinician, a role that I fulfilled with the ministry in order to prepare the student choir to sing two to four times per semester at Breakaway gatherings from the fall semester of 2017 to the beginning of the 2020 spring. The ministry of the Breakaway Choir was disrupted in the 2020 spring semester due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 5.1 below gives an image of the ensemble leading worship at Soldier Field, the football stadium facility on Texas A&M University's campus.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter one introduced the Breakaway Choir through a sketch from the choir's second ministry date during my tenure, in the 2018 spring semester. That sketch featured our experience with Elevation Worship's gospel and R&B infused remixed version of

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<sup>1</sup> The image provided in figure one can be found at "the following link on the Breakaway ministry website, [www.breakawayministries.pixieset.com](http://www.breakawayministries.pixieset.com).

“Resurrecting,” one of their most iconic worship songs.<sup>2</sup> The following vignette, which describes an event that took place later in the spring semester of 2018, demonstrates another undertaking of a gospel arrangement by Elevation Worship.



Figure 5.1. An Image of the Breakaway Choir.

*At approximately quarter to six in the evening, while entering Texas A&M University's Reed Basketball arena through the large loading dock area, I pass by about ten or so students on Breakaway's tech and roadie team unpacking truckloads of audio equipment. A couple of them greet me saying "Howdy!" with a large grin and an excited, projected, near-shouting voice – the customary Texas A&M University salutation, which would later be exclaimed in unison by thousands of Breakaway student attendees later that evening. Continuing into the*

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<sup>2</sup> The studio version of Elevation Worship's remixed version of "Resurrecting" can be found at Elevation Collective and The Walls Group, "Resurrecting," recorded 2018, on *Evidence*, Elevation Worship Records, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/3eaduvfM8hqcN9h9nS3tDR?si=XGFONqeOQJCpWA9sZAHAtg>. A live version from Elevation's *Code Orange Revival* in 2016 can be viewed at "Resurrecting Remixed," Elevation Worship, October 14, 2016, YouTube video, accessed January 23, 2019, 5:57, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgsaCS\\_YaFs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgsaCS_YaFs). See the opening vignette of chapter one for a description of Breakaway Choir's experience with this arrangement.

sporting complex, I run into student singers in Breakaway's worship choir as we walk the corridors towards our rehearsal room deep in the bowels of the arena. There is a peculiar feeling of excitement as Breakaway's choir of college students assemble to rehearse in a locker room. Amidst the rising sound of pre-rehearsal chatter, I can hear more gospel-based vocal gestures than usual, such as pentatonic riffs and runs, slides, glides, and even raspy grunts, which were often followed by varied expressions of approval and appreciation, one of which was, "That's so spicy!" – a comment coined by Lynsey, a singer in the alto section and one of the most charismatic members of the choir. From that rehearsal onwards this comment would occur at least once every time the group gathered together. While making pre-rehearsal preparations, I thought to myself that the impromptu, communal gospel riffing taking place among the choir was the perfect vocal preamble to our rehearsal as it was undoubtedly prompted by the anticipation of our set list that day. The song which the group was particularly hyped for was the near ten-minute gospel arrangement by Elevation Worship of their popular worship song, 'Do it Again,' the original version of which only lasted for approximately six and a half minutes. After setting up the practice keyboard and organizing the choral sheets, we prayed together and then dived right into the arrangement. Since we were very familiar with our other song, 'Worthy of Your Name' (Passion) as it was our third time singing it at Breakaway,<sup>3</sup> we spent over fifty minutes of our one-hour rehearsal on that gospel arrangement of 'Do it Again,' finessing our vowels, vibrato and other vocal articulations.<sup>4</sup> This detailed work spawned an abundance of questions concerning the melding of gospel and contemporary worship.<sup>5</sup> The singers were patently relishing the opportunity to explore the gospel genre in the context of worship leading, in their respective voices, and as a vocal collective. I reluctantly left a number of these questions unaddressed yet did so necessarily due to our tight time constraints as Breakaway was less than two hours away. The portion of the arrangement which the choir treasured the most, which relied most heavily on the choir, and which they sang continuously as we made our way from our choir rehearsal room to the stage for sound check and rehearsal with the band, were two choral variants of the song's

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<sup>3</sup> Table one on provides songs sung at Breakaway choir dates from the fall semester of 2017 to the 2019 spring semester.

<sup>4</sup> Comments concerning some of the articulations rehearsed by the choir are included in the discussion on the musical examples at the end of this chapter.

<sup>5</sup> Many of the choir's questions revolved around comparisons between the original song form of *Do It Again* to that of its gospel arrangement. Table 2, which gives the song form of the gospel version, as well as observations concerning the impact of gospel idioms on the form of the arrangement.

*bridge section that were used as the basis of an all-out, extended shout chorus<sup>6</sup> that brought the arrangement to a celebratory, exclamatory end.<sup>7</sup> Due to technical complications, sound check took longer than expected. Rehearsal with the band had to be shortened. Breakaway also had to be shortened since Silver Taps was taking place that night, a sacred Aggie tradition of honoring and remembering students of Texas A&M University who had passed away.<sup>8</sup> As such, the shout chorus section was all together cut! The feelings of incompleteness have lingered to this very day. In ensuing Breakaways, choir members continue to sing sections of the arrangement as they gather for rehearsal and they routinely ask, “When are we going to do ‘Do it Again’ again?” Addressing this desire of the choir at a rehearsal, Breakaway worship director, Jack Thweatt, commented, “We’re so with you! We all want to have another crack at that arrangement...we just need to figure out a way to shorten it, or mash it up with another worship song so we can get right to the sweet jam and choral parts at the end...the part of the version that we really want!”<sup>9</sup>*

Although both vignettes featuring the Breakaway choir highlighted the usage of gospel, the repertoire and worship genre normally encountered at Breakaway events (selected by Breakaway worship leader, Jack Thweatt)<sup>10</sup> are primarily recent modern CWM songs from leading worship collectives within the modern contemporary worship

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<sup>6</sup> The Shout Chorus is a song section within black gospel music which facilitates ecstatic dancing, vocal riffing and call and response of short vocal interpolations. As such, shout choruses are fast paced, with frequent snare hits, upbeat clapping, rising chromatic bass lines, and dominant 7<sup>th</sup> based riffing and harmonic rhythm coping on the piano and Hammond organ. According to Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), the Shout Chorus from Black American gospel is one of the many derivatives of the African “Ring Shout!” – which is described as combining “rhythmic movement with intense vocals to express deep religious feeling” in Richard Carlin, “Shout (Ring Shout)” in *Encyclopedia of American Gospel Music*, W. K. McNeil ed., (Milton Park, Oxfordshire, England: Taylor & Francis, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Excerpts of this shout chorus are provided in figure 5.4.

<sup>8</sup> A history of the Texas A&M’s Silver Taps tradition can be found at “Silver Taps,” Aggie Tradition, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://www.tamu.edu/traditions/remembrance/silver-taps/>.

<sup>9</sup> The difficulty of extracting this shout chorus is discussed in the prose after figure 5.4.

<sup>10</sup> Despite being in his twenties during the time of this fieldwork, Jack Thweatt is a seasoned leader of modern CWM. As a student at Texas A&M, he was mentored by Breakaway Ministries in worship leadership through his role as an electric guitarist in the Breakaway worship band. A few years after graduating with a degree in aerospace engineering, he took on the role as Breakaway’s primary worship leader. “About,” Jack Thweatt, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://www.jackthweattmusic.com>.

stylistic period such as Bethel, Elevation, and Hillsong.<sup>11</sup> The return and revitalization of Breakaway's choral ministry in the fall semester of 2017 happened to occur in close proximity to the release of Elevation Worship's *Evidence* album, a project which commemorated the twelfth anniversary of Elevation Church with an album project that featured the partnership of Elevation's in-house worship collective and a number of featured contemporary gospel artists, such as Israel Houghton, Tasha Cobbs Leonard, Travis Greene, Kierra Sheard, Tye Tribbet, and The Walls Group.<sup>12</sup>

With the vocal forces afforded Breakaway by their newly reestablished choral ministry, Jack saw it fit to explore the vocal ensemble-intensive arrangements on *Evidence*. These arrangements also generated considerable excitement in the Breakaway worship team and engaging material for the choir to delve into, as shown in the vignette above. Since *Evidence* was comprised of studio recordings, Breakaway preferred to reference the live recordings of the album which took place at Elevation's twelfth anniversary celebration at the Ballatyne campus in Charlotte, NC. Recordings of this event were released on the church's YouTube channel.<sup>13</sup> Breakaway's interaction with Elevation's gospelized version of *Do It Again* are discussed at the end of this chapter.

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<sup>11</sup> For more information on these worship collectives, see Tanya Riches and Thomas Wagner, *The Hillsong Movement Examined: You Call Me Out Upon the Waters* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). Emily Snider Andrews, "Exploring Evangelical Sacramentality: Modern Worship Music and the Possibility of Divine Human Encounter," (PhD., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2019). Martrell Harris, "Praising on the Net: A Study of Hillsong, Elevation Worship, & Bethel Music's Social Media Content and Comments," (M.S., Middle Tennessee State University, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Elevation Collective, "*Evidence*," recorded 2018, Elevation Worship Records, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/album/3X10R33baD5m8UJ0KeIfSo?si=GqHra50JSpCTJeTLBuAD-g>.

<sup>13</sup> "Do It Again feat. Travis Greene (Live from Ballatyne)," Elevation Worship, February 14, 2018, YouTube video, accessed January 29, 2019, 9:55, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAVzDPTE7Tc>.

The two vignettes of the Breakaway Choir illustrate a collection of young, talented worship leaders within a unique worship-leading choir. Before delving deeper into the characteristics of this choir, this chapter will first describe the unique collegiate worship setting in which the choir operates. Second, a concise history of Breakaway will be given followed by the role of college students within the ministry. Next, follows a brief description of Breakaway Worship with a more detailed account of its student choir. Finally, the chapter explores the unique characteristic of Breakaway's choral ministry through discussion of its repertoire sung from the 2017 fall semester to the spring semester of 2019.

### *Breakaway Ministries: Past to Present*

The 2019-2020 academic season marked the thirtieth year of Breakaway Ministries.<sup>14</sup> Throughout its history, Breakaway benefitted from the direction of pastors and worship leaders who went on to direct influential churches and other ministries. Breakaway began as a small Bible study in the dorm room of Gregg Matte in 1989. By the end of Gregg Matte's collegiate career, Breakaway had grown from a small Bible study to a gathering of over one hundred attendees. Upon graduating, he decided to remain in College Station, TX, and shepherd the ministry full time, doing so for little over a decade (1993-2004). In this time, the ministry moved its college community from the Texas A&M University dorms into a centrally located old Baptist church in

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<sup>14</sup> The information provided in this historical account of Breakaway ministries comes primarily through a number of formal and informal interviews with Jack Thweatt, the worship leader of Breakaway ministries at the time of this fieldwork. Breakaway Ministries has also produced and released videos that capture their history. The video at the following link was released in 2009 at their 20-year mark, "The History of Breakaway," Breakaway Ministries, Vimeo video, accessed March 4, 2018, 2:58, <https://vimeo.com/5409187>.

downtown College Station. Chris Tomlin and Shane Bernard from Shane & Shane, who became internationally recognized worship leaders, were up-and-coming worship leaders that supported Breakaway Ministries during these early days.

After over a decade of spiritual leadership at Breakaway, Matte was appointed head pastor of First Baptist Church of Houston 2004<sup>15</sup> and Ben Stuart took over as executive director of Breakaway Ministries in 2005. Under Stuart's leadership, Breakaway grew exponentially, drawing as many as twelve thousand students to Tuesday night Breakaway events. It is in this time that Breakaway matured from a college gathering into an international ministry through new and emerging internet-based tools, such as the Breakaway podcast, app, social media accounts and the release of Breakaway worship songs on Spotify and other streaming platforms. In this time, Breakaway outgrew their old Baptist church home and moved their gatherings back to Texas A&M University campus – this time at either Reed Arena or Soldier Field, the basketball stadium and football stadium, respectively. Aaron Ivey, who went on to become worship pastor at Austin Stone Community Church,<sup>16</sup> and Jeff Johnson, who then became a worship leader at Passion Church in Atlanta, were some of the key worship leaders during this period of growth. Ben pastored Breakaway for eleven years which ended in 2016 when he took on the lead pastor position at the Passion Church campus in Washington D.C.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> “Gregg Matte – Senior Pastor,” Houston’s First Baptist Church, accessed March 4, 2018, <https://houstonfirst.org/people/gregg-matte>.

<sup>16</sup> “About,” Aaron Ivey, accessed November 4, 2018, <http://aaronivey.com/2016/>.

<sup>17</sup> “Leadership of Passion City Church D.C.,” Passion City Church, accessed November 4, 2018, <https://passioncitychurch.com/dc/leadership/>.

Per Ben Stuart's invitation, Timothy Ateek, commonly referred to as TA, took on the reigns as executive director of Breakaway in 2016.<sup>18</sup> As an alumnus of Texas A&M University having graduated in 2003, TA's collegiate experience was influenced strongly by Breakaway. Upon graduation, he pursued pastoral ministry, which culminated in his tenure as the executive director of Vertical Ministries from 2012-2016, a collegiate ministry akin to Breakaway based on the campus of Baylor University in Waco, TX. Under TA's leadership, the vision and mission of Breakaway ministries moved increasingly towards assisting students in taking their first steps or their next steps in Christian faith. The Breakaway team strove to intentionally undergird all community building events and content creation on three objectives: namely, to elicit conversions towards Christianity, to connect students with local churches, and to equip students for ministry during and after their collegiate careers. An example of a Breakaway community-building event designed for the express purpose of discipleship was Breakaway's Track Night. Track Nights occur frequently throughout the year and were geared towards developing student volunteers into spiritual leaders.

#### *Breakaway's Engine – Student Volunteer Teams*

TA's emphasis on student development as prompted by the ministry's mission statement resulted in rapid growth of the student volunteer base. Over the three and a half semesters of my tenure at Breakaway, from the late fall semester of 2017 to the spring semester of 2019, the group of student volunteers that served the ministry grew by nearly one hundred, from two hundred and forties to a little over three hundred and thirty. The

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<sup>18</sup> John Rangel, "Meet Breakaway's Third Director," The Battalion, August 29, 2016, accessed November 4, 2018.



recruitment of incoming students for the 2019-2020 academic year had volunteer numbers nearing four hundred.<sup>19</sup> Since several thousand students attended each 9:00 P.M. Tuesday night Breakaway event and since access to Reed Arena or Soldier Field occurred just a few hours earlier (sometime between 6:00-7:30 P.M.), this large group of volunteers was needed to execute the event within these tight time constraints.

Breakaway student volunteers were organized into twelve teams that worked systematically to ensure that Breakaway ran smoothly each week and fulfilled its bedrock ministry objectives. In conjunction with Breakaway staff oversight, two student team leaders directed each team, comprised of fifteen to sixty student volunteers. The twelve teams and a description of their ministry are listed alphabetically in table 5.1.<sup>20</sup> The table does not include music teams because under the tenure of Timothy Ateek and Jack Thweatt, the decision was made to not allow college students to serve in the Breakaway worship band, that is, until Jack Thweatt decided to revitalize the Student Choir in the fall of 2017.

Although the choir was not an official volunteer team, it was comprised of volunteer students. A key differentiation supporting this distinction is that Breakaway choir occurred just two to four times per semester whereas the official student teams listed in table 5.1 above were subjected to ongoing weekly duties throughout each semester. Additionally, a semester-long commitment with minimal absences was

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<sup>19</sup> These volunteer numbers have been received through informal conversations with Breakaway worship leader, Jack Thweatt, his wife, Rachel, who at the time served as the Associate Director of Strategic Partnerships, and Kylen Perry, who at the time was the Associate Director of Volunteers and Equipping.

<sup>20</sup> The information concerning student volunteer shown in table one was provided in an email from Jack Thweatt on August 5, 2019.

expected of members of the official teams while choir members were allowed to rotate in and out of the ensemble as needed. Generally, since the busyness of collegiate semesters normally escalated as the semester progressed, choir attendance was higher at choir dates occurring early in a given semester as compared to later dates, a pattern that mirrored trends in Breakaway attendance more generally.

### *Breakaway Worship and the Revitalization of the Student Choir*

During the tenure of worship leader Jeff Johnson, a few college students were recruited and mentored to serve in the Breakaway worship band. One of these students was singer-songwriter Jack Thweatt, an engineering student at the time who played electric guitar in the band.<sup>21</sup> In the fall semester of 2017, Jack's role at Breakaway increased as he became the ministry's primary worship leader and music director. Beyond Breakaway, he served as a freelance worship leader at a number of Christian summer camps, ministry events, and churches, such as at Watermark Community Church, the home church of Shane & Shane.

Jack and I first met in June 2017 while serving together at the Cypress campus of Bayou City Fellowship, he on electric guitar and I as choir director (a case study of the Bayou City worship-leading choir is provided in chapter 4). During the following fall semester, his first semester in leadership of Breakaway Worship, Jack thought about revitalizing the student choir as a means of further aligning Breakaway Worship with the ministry's overarching vision of mentoring and equipping students for current and future

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<sup>21</sup> "About," Jack Thweatt, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://www.jackthweattmusic.com>.

ministry. He reached out to me, and we embarked on our first Breakaway worship choir collaboration later that fall semester on Tuesday, October 10, 2017.

Table 5.1. Name and Description of Breakaway Student Volunteer Teams.

Team	Description
1. Care	Offer prayer and counsel after each Breakaway event
2. Connection	Connect students to local churches and ministries
3. Greeters	Facilitate greeting and seating
4. Hospitality	Prepare the green room and take care of invited speakers and the band
5. Link	Assist donors and host special outside groups
6. Media	Manage cameras, live stream and other media related tasks
7. Prayer	Pray throughout the week and during Tuesday night Breakaway events
8. Reach	Establish relationships with international students
9. Resource	Sell merchandise and resources
10. Roadie	Load in, set up and tear down of audiovisual gear
11. Street	Market on campus
12. Support	Assist in the Breakaway office

According to Jack, a student choir was first attempted at Breakaway in 2014. These initial forays into choral ministry occurred just once per year and featured an unamplified mass of students whose ministry was less aural and “mostly visual” as they were “not really a part of the band so to speak.”<sup>22</sup> Under Jack’s tenure, the choral ministry was revamped to occur three to four times per semester and to utilize an amplified group of student singers whose sound was incorporated with that of the band.

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<sup>22</sup> Jack Thweatt, conversation with author, College Station, TX, October 10, 2017.

The Breakaway worship-leading choir was unique because it was comprised primarily of college-aged students, many of whom also served as worship leaders and instrumentalists at local church ministries around College Station. The involvement of these students at both Breakaway and the local church reflected a key priority of Breakaway, which was to ensure that attendees not view the ministry as their home church, but rather as a launching pad for involvement at a local church. Each week, Breakaway's staff and volunteers actively funneled students to local churches and, in turn, these churches supported the ministry of Breakaway. This symbiotic relationship created the ideal environment for recruiting a worship-leading choir comprised of developing student worship leaders.

#### *Choir Recruitment and Volunteer Status*

To limit the number of singers to an amount which Jack and I could manage, he opted for “organic,” one-on-one, relational recruiting as opposed to a mass call-out campaign and official auditions. He invited fellow worship directors in town to refer student leaders under their direction. Beyond this, Jack and I reached out to students directly. Prompted by my encouragement, recruitment also occurred as the choral singers invited their friends to choir rehearsals. Lastly, some students sought out ministry opportunities with the choir by taking the initiative to approach Jack or me directly after Breakaway events. Through these recruitment efforts, the choir grew slowly and steadily with enough impetus to overcome the loss of graduating seniors. In the late fall of 2017, we began with around nineteen singers with an average of eleven attending each choir date. By the spring of 2019, there were thirty-five choir members involved with an average of eighteen singers at each choir date.

The vision of Breakaway choir as a means of developing student worship leaders was realized by some of the graduates who have continued in worship ministry. One such example is Daniel Zandstra who sang in the choir steadily since its revitalization in 2017 and continued with the group even after graduating in fall 2018. Although he completed an engineering degree at Texas A&M University, Daniel's involvement at Breakaway contributed to his pursuit of music ministry during college and after he graduated. He engaged in a number of formal and informal one-on-one meetings with Jack and me, he shadowed and observed worship rehearsals of the Breakaway band, and choir rehearsals offered additional opportunities for Daniel to hone his singing. These experiences positioned Jack to refer Daniel for the worship ministry position at Redemption City Church in Austin, TX which he went on to fulfill. Another example of a student who was honed in worship leadership through Breakaway choir is singer-songwriter John Marc Kohl.<sup>23</sup> During his student years with the choir, he led worship at a local church in College Station and upon graduation, assumed the role of bass player in the Breakaway band.

Choir attendance stabilized when Jack and I moved away from releasing choir with just one month's notice and began establishing all choral dates prior to the beginning of each semester. This change took place in the fall of 2018. For the first time, choir members could mark their calendars well in advance. The result increased and stabilized attendance of choir members at each choir date. Not only were dates set in advance, but some of the choir's songs were also selected before the start of the semester. A set of approximately six songs would be identified before the semester began which allowed

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<sup>23</sup> "About," John Marc Kohl, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://www.johnmarckohl.com>.

more time for choral arranging and the creation of choral resources. Another benefit was that the choir was then allotted more time to learn the arrangements.

The majority of choir members in spring of 2019 were not members of official Breakaway teams yet were avid attendees of Breakaway who were often present on Tuesday evenings that did not involve the choir. However, some of the choir members did serve on other Breakaway teams, which caused mild scheduling conflicts among team leaders, Jack, the students, and me. Since the fall of 2017, the level of organization of the choir progressed steadily towards that of the official student volunteer teams. Even so, the relative infrequency of the choir when compared to the weekly activities of the official teams likely barred Breakaway choir from becoming an official student volunteer team. Yet, if the choir involved an increased number of students from official teams as Jack anticipated, the choir would likely coordinate more effectively with the official teams if its status remained as an auxiliary or subsidiary volunteer team.

### *Organization of the Choir*

In the fall of 2018, Breakaway agreed to upgrade their Planning Center<sup>24</sup> membership to allow the scheduling of the choir and the dissemination of choral resources to be moved from ad hoc emailing, texting and file sharing to the more centralized organization which Planning Center afforded. This also allowed for more seamless organization of the choir, particularly the female sections. Although each female singer had her preferred vocal range, most of the women possessed the vocal range to sing in either the alto or soprano section. For the first time, the numbers and

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<sup>24</sup> Planning Center's Services app is one of the leading programs for organizing details for worship services. It is the most widely used of such programs amongst ministries that employ modern CWM.

strength of voices between soprano and alto sections could be gauged prior to each choir date. As such, two-way female singers could be assigned to either section accordingly to improve balance. These assignments were normally given within a week or two prior to each Breakaway Choir event.

The male singers were easier to organize since most could sing in the tenor range. The difference came between those who could sing in this range for extended periods of time and those who needed periodical respite from the high register. Male singers accustomed to singing as front vocal worship leaders were usually comfortable remaining in a high register whereas those who were primarily worship band instrumentalists, such as drummers, bassists, or lead electric guitarists, were often less inclined to remain in this register. Respite from the high register was offered by covering high notes with falsetto, dropping out for momentary high passages, or doubling the sopranos an octave lower.

### *Defining Characteristics of the Breakaway Choir*

Table 5.2 provides Breakaway choral ministry dates from the 2017 fall semester to the spring semester of 2019. Only the songs sung at each date that featured specifically arranged choral parts are given. Therefore, those songs without arranged choral parts are excluded. Table 5.2 will be referenced throughout the remainder of the chapter which will be spent discussing additional characteristics of the Breakaway Choir, the issues concerning the staging of the choir, as well as two of the choral arrangements that resonated the most within the context of Breakaway Worship.

### *“Free” and “Focused” Worship Singing*

From the outset, most of the singers in the Breakaway Choir possessed the solo vocal capacity for worship leading and for improvising harmony parts intuitively. These skills were utilized on the songs not listed in table 5.2, namely those songs without specifically arranged choral parts. Of the four to six songs sung at each Tuesday Breakaway event, on choral dates, one to three of these songs featured specific choral parts. These designated “choral” songs were the ones shown on table 5.2. The remaining songs were sung with improvised harmony parts – which were referred to as “*free* worship singing” – were utilized on two to four songs per each Breakaway. The post-sermon closing song for each choral Breakaway date necessarily involved the worship band only in order to avoid the distraction of filing an entire choir onto the platform while TA brought his sermons to a prayerful close, a process which the Breakaway team referred to as “landing” the sermon, and which was undergirded by a spacious, unobtrusive synth pad by the keyboardist of the band.

In contrast to the songs that utilized free worship singing, the specific choral arrangements indicated on table 5.2 required what I described as “*focused* worship singing.” Focus was needed to sing the parts from memory, to execute the specific articulations and musical instructions honed in rehearsals. Additionally, focus was needed since the choral arrangements often deviated from the instinctive parts that the singers would produce within free worship singing. The concept and singing posture of focused worship singing was foreign to the worship leading context and background of most of the singers. Despite this, they embraced, relished and dedicated themselves to focused



Table 5.2. Breakaway Choir Dates and Worship Song Selections from Fall 2017 to Spring 2019.

Worship Songs	Semester Dates									
	Fall 2017		Spring 2018		Fall 2018				Spring 2019	
	Oct 10	Jan. 23	Mar. 6	Sept. 4	Sept. 25	Oct. 23	Nov. 13	Jan. 29	Feb. 26	Apr. 9
<i>All My Hope</i> (Crowder)			✓	✓						
<i>Do it Again</i> (Elevation Remix)			✓							
<i>Great are You Lord</i> (All Sons and Daughters)										✓
<i>Great Things</i> (Phil Whickam)							✓	✓		
<i>Is He Worthy?</i> (Andrew Peterson)										✓
<i>Oh How I Need You</i> (All Sons and Daughters)					✓					
<i>O Praise the Name</i> (Hillsong)				✓						
<i>Nothing but the Blood</i> (Austin Stone)							✓			
<i>Stand in Your Love</i> (Bethel)						✓		✓		
<i>Resurrecting</i> (Elevation Remix)		✓								
<i>Revelation Song</i> (Kari Jobe version)	✓									
<i>What a Beautiful Name</i> (Hillsong Gospel Version)									✓	
<i>Who You Say I Am</i> (Hillsong)					✓	✓	✓			
<i>Worthy of Your Name</i> (Passion)	✓	✓	✓	✓						

worship singing in their private practice and in our choir rehearsals. The standard set for focused worship singing was to learn, internalize and become familiar with the choral

arrangements to such a degree that they could be sung in a free manner. Choir members often viewed free worship singing as a respite from and a reward for the effort exerted on choral arrangements that required focused singing.

### *Rapid Learning*

Because of their high level of musical talent and skill, the Breakaway Choir could learn choral arrangements with ease, and with only a week or less of access to choral resources such as lyric sheets and practice recordings. At this time, very few of the singers used notated vocal scores to assist their learning of choral parts. To direct the group in a way that was congruous with their preference for “by ear” learning and their speed of vocal part acquisition, I often memorized arrangements in order to direct them “off book.” Rehearsals were rarely spent teaching parts, but were rather focused on honing those aspects of the arrangements that were outside the default harmony parts that they produced instinctively during free worship singing. Drawing constant connections between the choral arrangement and the formal dynamics of its corresponding worship song enhanced memorization within the choir. Success of this technique was predicated on the acute facility and understanding each singer possessed of the typical song forms of modern CWM.

The Breakaway Choir’s speedy uptake and memorization of choral material was a necessity for a number of reasons. First, it was mandatory since a mere one-hour rehearsal was all that could be devoted for choir practice due to the Tuesday evening time crunch leading up to Breakaway’s start time of 9:00 P.M. Second, the choir’s speed allowed them to keep pace with the fast rate of song acquisition and song change at Breakaway worship. And finally, the choir’s speed allowed the worship set list to be

finalized within just a week of each Breakaway, which was needed to allow TA the freedom to adjust his sermon and request song changes in the eleventh hour. Conversely, as favorites arose among the choir's growing repertoire of arrangements, these favorites were selected increasingly beforehand, sometimes up to two to three weeks in advance.

### *Solo Singing vs. Ensemble Singing*

The challenge for the choir was not in learning the choral arrangements, but rather, in crafting collective, unified vowels, resonance, and articulations from a group comprised mostly of solo singers. The majority of the singers were more accustomed to shaping vowels and articulating melodies in a manner that suited the unique sound of his or her own voice than they were with consolidating these vocal parameters within a large ensemble of singers. Even for those with prior choral experience, such as those from the Voices of Praise Gospel Choir discussed in the following section, blending within the context of rock-pop based worship music was a new undertaking.

Initially, the Breakaway choral tone was a dynamic collection of impressive solo voices whose unblended vocal quality lacked the unity and cohesion to hold its ground within the front of house mix. To make the sound of the choir more homogenous and to promote a unified vocal collective, choir rehearsals focused increasingly on vowel blending with particular attention to vocal articulations such as stress and release, fall offs and the length of phrase endings. The resulting sound increased the unity and blend of the group, which in turn increased the cohesion, and power of the ensemble's position in the mix.

## *Challenges Concerning the Staging of Breakaway Choir*

### *Stage Volume and Over-Singing*

Several aspects of the choir's musical environment complicated the effort to produce an effective choral blend by constantly tempting the choral singers to over-sing. Instinctual over-singing occurred in response to the loud, arena-filling volume of the band. This instinct was also supported by the singers' penchant and habit for loud, full-bodied worship singing honed through years of charismatic congregational singing at services, concerts and ministry events. Regarding singing volume, the choir members defaulted to a raw, unrestrained congregational vocal sonority more than the refined, polished singing they often employed in their leadership as front vocalists. It is likely that the primary reason for their default to "all-out" congregational singing mode was that the aural environment surrounding the Breakaway Choir more closely resembled that of a charismatic megachurch congregation rather than what a worship leader in that church context might experience on the platform.

In many charismatic megachurches, the aural environment of a front vocal worship leader normally includes an in-ear monitor (IEM), which shields against the onslaught of stage volume. It allows worship singers a personalized mix that boosts exactly what he or she needs to hear in order to sing effectively while cutting away what is less important to hear. Additionally, since this singing is done with a microphone, all vocal dynamic levels, from the very soft to the very loud, can be projected effortlessly over the rest of the band.

Conversely, the aural environment of the flock of students at Breakaway was very similar to that of an arena rock concert, a mode of worshipping that Monique Ingalls has

termed the “concert congregation.”<sup>25</sup> High decibel levels of the worship band were blasted into the vast open spaces of Reed Arena or Soldier Field. This massive volume surrounds, energizes, and excites the attendees to such a degree that they are often incited to sing more loudly. Joshua Busman has commented on the loud volume of the worship band and the physicality of loud singing of attendees at Passion, a similar college-aged event. As Busman writes, Passion’s “pastors and conference speakers constantly conflate high levels of sound volume or density with high levels of spiritual intensity or sincerity.”<sup>26</sup> This phenomenon is similar to the overly loud speaking voice a person might use when she attempts to engage in conversation while listening to music through loud headphones. Yet despite these elevated vocals, attendees could often scarcely hear their neighbor, or even themselves.

Despite being amplified by two choral microphones and having access to one or two floor monitors, the aural environment surrounding the Breakaway Choir more closely resembled that of a Breakaway congregation singer than a worship leader. Due to the risk of feedback, the choral sound picked up by the choir microphones could not be fed back to the choir through their floor monitors sufficiently enough to allow them to hear themselves. As it was, only the three to four choir members in the front row closest to the floor monitor could actually hear the monitor feed. Therefore, similar to Breakaway attendees, choir members could scarcely hear their own singing or that of their neighbor.

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<sup>25</sup> Monique M. Ingalls, “Making Jesu Famous: The Quest for an Authentic Experience in the Concert Congregation” in *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 39-69.

<sup>26</sup> Joshua Kalin Busman, “(Re)sounding passion: Listening to American Evangelical Worship Music, 1997-2015” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2015), 109, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

To deal with this singing environment, the choir was coached to resist the temptation to sing over the wall of sound that surrounded them. They were also coached to anticipate singing in an environment where they could not hear their own voice or that of their fellow choir members. They learned to trust increasingly in the muscle memory and feeling of singing honed in choir rehearsal, where the tone was well blended, in tune, precisely articulated, and at an appropriate volume level for optimum tone quality. The goal became to reproduce this quality singing on platform in spite of the aural environment of the platform. Meanwhile, Grant, a tenor in the choir who also served on the Roadie team, took the initiative to figure out an effective, time-efficient means of resourcing the choir with in-ear monitors. Most times, due to the pre-Breakaway time crunch described previously, we often ran out of time to set up the system. However, amongst Jack, the choir, and me, existed a desire for an improved singing environment as well as a willingness to support and attempt various solutions and ideas.

### *Amplification of the Choir*

Another set of challenges resulted from the unique staging requirements of Breakaway. While the choir's tone became increasingly unified and compact, the two condenser microphones designated to the choir ended up being insufficient to amplify the choir's sound within the aural environment of the Breakaway platform. The primary problem restricting the effectiveness of these choir microphones was that they were also gathering unwanted stage sound. Amid the unwanted sources of stage sound, such as the large subwoofers and the uncaged drum set, were the choir's very own floor wedge monitors – which included the lead vocals, the bass and snare drums, and a minimal amount of the choir. A conductor keyboard was also fed into the choir's stage monitor.

On this keyboard, I would play parts that would assist the choir's recall and tuning. Although the channels fed to the choir monitors were intended to help the choir sing effectively with the worship band, in actuality, only a few singers in the front row of our two-row formation could truly hear the monitors effectively. Meanwhile, the monitors were contributing to the extraneous stage sounds being accumulated in the choir microphones, which severely limited the ability to project the choir in the front of house speakers. Though the monitors were originally thought to be necessary, it appeared that they were doing more harm than good.

Another related staging problem that inhibited the choir's aural effectiveness was the position of the singers relative to the position of the choir microphones. Without the assistance of risers, the ideal audio design scenario of more regulated equidistance between each choir member and the microphones was impossible to attain. With the choir all on the same level, we adopted the best formation possible for relative equality of sound production: a two-row setup with a slight convex curvature with taller singers in the back and shorter singers in the front. Yet, in an attempt to mitigate the effect of the loud stage noise, the choir microphones were positioned very closely to the central front row. Although this limited the effect of stage volume, it exacerbated the uneven distances between each singer and the choir microphones, which caused singers positioned closer to the microphones to be amplified considerably more than those who were farther away. Regardless, uneven amplification was deemed a better solution than increased stage noise and decreased choral tone that would have resulted from positioning the microphones farther away.

To improve the amplification of the choir, we began assigning dynamic vocal microphones to four singers, usually a soprano, a tenor, and two altos. Mixing these solo voice channels at lower level than that of the choral microphone channels resulted in the effect of boosting the sound of the choir in the front of house speakers with minimal compromise to the choral tone and blend. Additionally, since these singers were now already amplified by a dynamic microphone, they could be positioned farther away from the choir condenser microphones than the rest of the choir without the loss of their vocal contribution.

The choice of who would sing on the individual microphones was made in a democratic fashion. Each section would select who would sing on microphone based generally on two factors: one, which singer had the greatest familiarity and mastery of the choral parts, which became self-evident during choir rehearsal, and two, the sharing of the responsibility by allowing as many singers as possible to take turns fulfilling the role. Even though the use of dynamic microphones greatly improved the tone of the group in the front of house speakers, the resulting sound paled in comparison to the unamplified blend featured in choir rehearsals.

### *Visual Leadership*

The aural environment in which the choir sang presented numerous challenges; however, the Breakaway platform allowed the choir to excel naturally in “visual leadership.” With hands raised, constant body motion and passionate facial expressions often with eyes closed, the choir’s engaging visual presentation of worship singing was encouraged and appreciated by Breakaway’s artistic directors.



Within the fifteen minutes before the first time the revitalized Breakaway Choir led worship on October 10, 2017, Brent Monogue, one of Breakaway's artistic directors at the time, instructed the choir to "bring the energy" and "fill the stadium with their presence of worship."<sup>27</sup> During the worship set that followed, the choir incorporated these instructions above and beyond the expectation of the artistic directors. Brent expressed his excitement and appreciation to the choir after the gathering, and scarcely felt the need to instruct the choir similarly at subsequent Breakaway Choir dates.

The choir executed Brent's instructions adroitly because the energy he was calling for was already embedded in their customary practice of "*free* worship singing," which described not only a set of vocal practices but also of bodily postures. Freedom of improvising intuitive harmonies and melodic articulations associated with free worship singing also extended to the use of the body as an expression of worship. Although the audio setup could not effectively capture the choir's sound, Breakaway's visual equipment excelled at capturing the choir's bodily expressions of worship. Video images of the choir were frequently projected on the large screens, which served as an effective means of encouraging active involvement by the mass of student attendees.

In conducting the choir, I sought to strike a balance between incorporating the energized body postures encouraged by the artistic directors along with more traditional choral conducting motion and patterns geared toward promoting musicianship such as clean entrances, rhythmic accuracy, and melodic expression. Songs that were sung entirely with "free" worship singing were rarely conducted. During these songs, I would stand with the choir on the edge of the tenor section and sing alongside them. However,

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<sup>27</sup> Field notes, October 10, 2017.

conducting motions that assisted the choir in negotiating transitions between “free” to “focused” worship singing proved to be the most crucial. Such transitions were abounding in our choral arrangements that featured a mix of intuitive choral textures that the choir could more easily sing in a free manner with choral figurations that were less intuitive and required greater focus.

### *Two Contrasting Choral Arrangements*

To further illustrate the Breakaway Choir, this section now considers some of the dynamics described above within two contrasting choral arrangements, firstly, Hillsong’s *Who You Say I Am* which reflected the modern CWM sensibilities that were customary to Breakaway, and secondly, Elevation’s gospelized version of *Do It Again* which, due to its gospel elements, was less familiar at Breakaway Worship.

#### *“Who You Say I Am”: Countermelody-Infused Double Bridges and the Short Shelf Life of Modern CWM Worship Songs at Breakaway*

As table two shows, the choral arrangement of Hillsong’s *Who You Say I Am* <sup>28</sup> arose as one of the most repeated worship songs on choral Breakaway dates, second only to Passion’s *Worthy of Your Name*.<sup>29</sup> The structure of the song is somewhat unique because it includes two driving bridge sections instead of the singular bridge section typical of the song form of most modern CWM song. The additional bridge provides

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<sup>28</sup> Hillsong Worship and Brooke Ligertwood, “Who You Say I Am,” recorded 2018, on *Single - Who You Say I Am (Live)*, Hillsong (HIL), Hillsong Music Publishing, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/6nkJ6jerrO6S4V0kdc4KRp?si=Y-FvQ5EOSLGkjtUucHbEnw>

<sup>29</sup> Jack encountered my choral arrangement of *Worthy of Your Name* at Bayou City Fellowship Cypress campus when we met first met in the summer of 2017. He wanted the arrangement incorporated at Breakaway in the fall later that year. The arrangement is discussed in chapter 4.

more opportunities for worshippers to emphatically declare and reaffirm the lyrics therein which are as follows:

“I am chosen not forsaken. I am who you say I am.  
You are for me, not against me. I am who you say I am.”

These two bridges produce dual apexes within the song with the second bridge increasing upon the intensity of the first. Traversing a wide dynamic span, the second bridge initiates its steady climb to its climactic apex from the soft, reflective mood cast by the preceding interlude. The first bridge, on the other hand, is dynamically stagnant, initiating from a direct transition from the preceding chorus and primarily maintaining the intensity level inherited from this chorus. Furthermore, the intensity of the second bridge transcends that of the first by repeating the bridge lyrics three times instead of just twice, by including an additional tag of the last sentence, and by ending with a measure-long build-up to the final chorus. These formal differences are depicted in figures 5.2 and 5.3 below which provide the first and second bridge respectively. The two occurrences of the bridge lyrics in the first bridge are marked as 1A and 1B and the three occurrences in the second bridge as 2A, 2B and 2C. The tags are marked similarly, and the build-up measure is marked on the last measure of figure 5.3.

Figure 5.3 also provides the choral arrangement for *Who You Say I Am*. The choral parts were aimed toward further intensifying each bridge section while also mirroring the dynamics between the two bridge sections as described in the preceding paragraph. As such, both bridge sections were enhanced through the addition of a driving countermelody comprised of the chorus text fragment, “I’m a child of God. I am who you say,” and expressive vocalises were included in the second bridge to reflect its greater levels of intensity.

These bridge passages accounted for the popularity of this arrangement at Breakaway. When Jack heard them for the first time at pre-Breakaway band and choir rehearsal on September 25, 2018, he turned around to the choir and exclaimed, “That’s strong! Really strong!” The strength to which Jack alluded stemmed from the continuous choral countermelodies which spanned and intensified each of these expansive bridge sections while also managing to cut through the mix. The predominant use of unison or octave singing throughout the countermelody allowed for the collective voice of the choir to be as unified and as focused as possible, undiluted by the division of separate harmony parts. As such, the choir’s projection in the mix was as powerful as the choir could muster.<sup>30</sup>

Additionally, by occupying melodic spaces left open by the front vocal melody, the choir’s countermelody could ring through unhindered. Examples of this can be seen in the concluding measure of each four-measure melodic phrase, namely measures 4, 8, 12 and 16. In each of these measures, the front vocal melody comes to rest on the tonic, G<sup>b</sup>. Meanwhile, the countermelody springs into action with prominent melodic figures on the text, “I am who you say.” The only instance of choral harmonies occurs at the very end of second bridge in figure 5.3. Here, the front vocal melody again comes to rest on the tonic, thereby allowing space for the choir to articulate rising harmonies that increased the intensity through the end of Tag B and the following build-up measure.

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<sup>30</sup> Italicized text is included throughout underneath various staves of figures 5.2 and 5.3 which describe how unison and octaves are negotiated by each choral section, that is, soprano, alto and tenor.

Bridge 1A

Ebm Db/F Gb Cb

Worship Leader

I am cho - sen not for - sa - ken. I am who you say I am. You are

Worship Choir

*Tenors 8vb, Altos 8vb as needed*

I'm a child of God. I am who you say.

5 Ebm Db/F Gb Cb

for me not a - gainst me I am who you say I am. I am

I'm a child of God. I am who you say.

Bridge 1B

9 Ebm Db/F Gb Cb

cho - sen not for - sa - ken. I am who you say I am. You are

I'm a child of God. I am who you say.

13 Ebm Db/F Gb

cho - sen not for - sa - ken. I am who you say I am.

I'm a child of God. I

Tag

16 Cb Ebm Db/F Cb

I am who you say I am.

am who you say. I am who you say I am.

Figure 5.2. The Vocal Melody and Choral Arrangement of Bridge 1 of *Who You Say I Am* (Hillsong).

Bridge 2A

1 Second Half of Interlude *On repeat only* Ebm Db/F Gb

Worship Leader

Worship Choir

*Sopranos, Altos and Tenors in Unison*

Oo— > Oo— Oo— Oo—

*p* < >

8 Cb Ebm Db/F Gb Cb

You are for me not a- gainst me I am who you say I am. I am

*p* Oo— Oo—

13 Bridge 2B Ebm Db/F Gb Cb Ebm Db/F

cho- sen not for- sa - ken. I am who you say I am. You are for me not a- gainst me I

*f* Oh Oh Oh Oh Oh Oh

19 Gb Cb Bridge 2C Ebm Db/F Gb

am who you say I am. I am cho - sen not for sa - ken. I am who you say I am.

Oh Oh I'm a child of God Oo

*Sopranos in high octave, tenors in low octave. Altos in either as needed*

24 Cb Ebm Db/F Gb Cb

You are for me not a- gainst me I am who you say I am. Oh, I

Oo I'm a child of God. Oo Oo

29 Tag A Gb Db/F Cb Tag B Gb Db/F Cb Build-Up

am who you say I am. Yes, I am who you say I am.

Oh I am who you say. I am who you say. I am.

*Sopranos and altos in high octave, tenors in low octave.*

Figure 5.3. The Vocal Melody and Choral Arrangement of Bridge 2 of *Who You Say I Am* (Hillsong).

Besides occupying open spaces to seek differentiation from the front vocal melody, melodic range and trajectory were also used to further distinguish the choir's countermelodies. In the first bridge shown in figure 5.2, the general impulse of the countermelody reveals a steady upward trajectory through a full octave span, from the initial Eb4 of the first measure to Eb5 apex reached in measures 13 and 16. In contrast, the front vocal melody gravitates around downward resolutions to the tonic, G<sup>b</sup>, and within a narrow melodic band of a major third, between G<sup>b</sup>4-B<sup>b</sup>4.<sup>31</sup>

Another distinctive feature of the choir's countermelody of the first bridge is its solo-voice oriented embellishments. Small note heads in measures 3 and 6 indicate some of the subtler examples of such embellishments. The embellishments in measure 3 and the final small note of measure 6,<sup>32</sup> are the falloff, an embellishment that often occurs at the end of a melodic phrase or gesture. The small notehead reflects the aural character of the falloff, namely its shorter duration, and softer dynamic when compared to the preceding note. Further nuance of these particular falloffs is achieved through the syncopated feel that results from its weak metrical position, and from the fact that this rhythmic character mirrors those used in the front vocal melody at measures 4, 8, 12 and 16. Whereas the choir's counter-melody differentiates itself from the front melody through its occupation of vocal spaces and through its range and trajectory, the

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<sup>31</sup> Although Eb4 is notated in the front vocal melody, it is not included in the melodic range given here because it is a subtle vocal falloff from the phrase ending G<sup>b</sup>4 and hence, not a structural melodic note. Vocal falloffs are embellishments used ubiquitously by solo singers, and less typically in choral ensembles. The following paragraph shows how these vocal embellishments are incorporated in the choral parts used at Breakaway for *Who You Say I Am* (Hillsong).

<sup>32</sup> The first two small note heads of measure 6 feature another solo voice embellishment often referred to as a "turn" due to its down-down-up pattern, in this case formed by the notes B<sup>b</sup>-A<sup>b</sup>-G<sup>b</sup>-A<sup>b</sup>. Only the two interior notes of the figure are notated with note heads because these are the two notes of the figure that require subtler, more flexible articulation. Rhythm confirms this as the two outer notes fall on stronger beats than the interior notes, and also are of longer duration than the interior notes.

incorporation of this falloff gesture in the choral parts creates a subtle harmonization and connection between the vocal sound of the front melody and the choir. With a choir of solo singers and worship leaders, the ensemble had the capacity and skill to execute the fall offs with precision and cohesion.

The choral countermelody of bridge 2 in figure 5.3 commingles long, connected melodic lines with powerful, detached choral shouts. These differing vocal approaches not only create contrast within the countermelody, but they also differentiate the countermelody from the melody of the front vocalist. Additionally, these contrasting articulations mirror the dynamic trajectory of the bridge by utilizing the connected melodic lines on an “Oo” vocalise during the soft, reflective beginning established by the preceding interlude. The choral shouts on an “Oh” vocalise are introduced as the bridge begins to build and increases its intensity in the first repetition, marked as Bridge 2b in figure 5.3. Although the choral shouts are written as “Oh” on the score, the choir was instructed to begin with a “w” glide to produce a more powerful onset. To give power to the end of the shout gesture, the choir was trained to accentuate the off-glide ending vowel of the diphthong and to approach the off-glide with a downward glissando of indefinite pitch. These adjustments, coupled with the mid-high to high vocal register they employed in the tenor section, increased the percussive character of the choral shout, which in turn increased its ability to cut through the front of house mix.

Given the intricacy of the choral parts for *Who You Say I Am*, the arrangement is more key-specific, and thus, less amenable to transposition than most of the other choral arrangements utilized at Breakaway. On October 23, 2018, the second time that the arrangement was sung, due to availability, the lead vocal for the song was changed from



a female lead to a male lead a few days prior to Breakaway. However, this change also necessitated a substantial change of key from G<sup>b</sup> to C, which, due to the wide vocal range and articulatory variety of the choir's parts, would have required the complete reworking of the arrangement and relearning by the choir in a few short days. To avoid this, a female lead vocal was secured last minute, and the key was returned to G<sup>b</sup>. This reflected a unique and notable circumstance where the worship band adjusted for sake of the worship-leading choir.

As table two shows, *Who You Say I Am* was used continuously for the remainder of the 2018 fall semester. Additionally, as table two also shows, *Who You Say I Am* supplanted *Worthy of Your Name* as the de facto song selection on choral Breakaways, which was also due in part to the fact that *Worthy of Your Name*, having been released in 2017, had become a song of yesteryear, whereas *Who You Say I Am*, which was released in 2018, was at that time the song of the present – the latest hit worship song from Hillsong Worship.<sup>33</sup> This trend shows a preference for effective, affective choral arrangements of the most popular of recent worship songs. As such, Breakaway Choir required that choral arrangements were written expertly and expediently in order to capitalize on the ephemeral shelf life of such songs, which roughly amounted to the span of a single semester as per the repetition of *Worthy of Your Name* and *Who You Say I Am* shown in table two.

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<sup>33</sup> Daniel Silliman, "We've No Less Days to Sing God's Praise, but New Worship Songs Only Last a Few Years," *Christianity Today*, November 22, 2021.

*“Do It Again”: Breakaway Choir and the Voices of Praise Gospel Choir*

Whereas *Who You Say I Am* was a favorite at Breakaway and song within the wheelhouse of Breakaway’s worship band which was based on a steady diet of modern CWM from sources such as Hillsong, Bethel, and Elevation, Breakaway worship was less familiar with the gospel elements utilized in Elevation worship’s gospelized version of *Do It Again*.<sup>34</sup> To conclude this case study, this chapter returns to its beginning to analyze and contextualize the opening vignette which featured Breakaway’s interaction with this gospel arrangement.

Figure 5.4 provides transcriptions of some of the choral gestures that were alluded to in the opening vignette, and which were used in the extended shout choruses towards the end of Elevation Worship’s gospel arrangement of *Do It Again*. A double bar line separates each gesture since they do not necessarily occur sequentially. The repeating instrumental lick undergirding the majority of the shout chorus is also provided in the piano staff underneath.

As intimated in the opening vignette, much of the choir rehearsal on Elevation’s gospel version of *Do it Again* was spent fine-tuning vocal articulation such as those included in figure 5.4 above. The reason for this was that most of the choir members were more familiar with rock-pop based contemporary worship music than they were with contemporary gospel repertoire. Even so, their vocal talent and experience as worship

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<sup>34</sup> “Do It Again feat. Travis Greene (Live from Ballatyne),” Elevation Worship, February 14, 2018, YouTube video, accessed January 29, 2019, 9:55, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rAVzDPTE7Tc>.

The image displays a musical score for the song "Do It Again" by Elevation Worship. It consists of two systems of music, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked as  $\text{♩} = 88$ . The key signature has three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are: "I've seen you move seen you move!— Where there was no way I've seen you do it!". The piano part features a steady bass line with chords marked as  $\text{B}_{\text{sus}}^{13}$  and  $\text{B}^7$ . The vocal line includes glissando markings ("gliss.") and a wavy line indicating a sustained note or effect. The lyrics are written below the vocal line, with some words like "I've" and "seen" having a small 'x' above them, possibly indicating a specific articulation or breath mark.

Figure 5.4. Four Figures from the Shout Chorus of Elevation Worship's Gospel Arrangement of *Do It Again*.

leaders at churches and ministry in and around College Station, TX, allowed them to make notable adjust to articulate the gospel style.

Some of the particular vocal articulations in figure 5.4 that were addressed in the choir rehearsal were the intentional elevation of speech-like qualities of the voice over its sung qualities. In the fourth choral gesture of measure 4, the choir initially had a penchant for connecting the entire gesture instead of executing the emphatic, speech-like, detached notes indicated by the staccato articulations. A similar issue was faced in the first choral gesture in measure 1. The 'x' notehead on the word "I've" also called for a short, speech-

like quality. Yet, the singers initially had a propensity to subject this word to the same singing quality required by the remainder of the gesture instead of allowing the word to be detached and set apart through the short, percussive quality commonly experienced in its spoken form.<sup>35</sup> Another articulatory detail addressed in rehearsal was the allowing of the voice to produce a shout-like resonance and/or pronounced vibrato as indicated respectively by the tenuto and the wavy line on the word “move” in measure 2.<sup>36</sup> Initially, the choir found it awkward to release the entire voice to this note primarily because they had rarely done so from a preceding glissando in the context of modern CWM worship leading. Through discussing and internalizing the perceived expression of these articulations along with receiving technical instruction concerning the production of the vocal sounds, the Breakaway Choir quickly found comfort and facility with these gestures, as well as many others.

Beyond establishing a symbiotic relationship with local churches, which facilitated the recruitment of student worship leaders for the choir, Breakaway was also interested in developing a similar relationship with the Voices of Praise (VOP), the longstanding, student-run gospel choir of Texas A&M University that was birthed in the late eighties, around the same time as the inception of Breakaway.<sup>37</sup> The VOP, a

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<sup>35</sup> Whereas the ‘x’ notehead on “I’ve” in measure 1 calls for a predominantly speech-like quality, the three remaining ‘x’ noteheads at the beginning of the glissando gestures in measures 1, 2 and 3, refer to the indeterminate and variable quality of the pitch that initiates each glissando. This quality results from the individuality of each choir member’s unique vocal production of the glissando as well as the subtle differences that occur each time the glissando is sung. As such, the minor and augmented triads notated on these ‘x’ noteheads are merely an estimation of the composite sound of the choir.

<sup>36</sup> It should be noted that the shout-like quality indicated by the tenuto marking describes the overall sound of how the word “move” is sung on the live recording whereas the vibrato represented by the wavy line is more indicative of the singing of “move” featured on the studio recording. The choir members were allowed to explore and utilize both approaches.

<sup>37</sup> “Home,” Voices of Praise Gospel Choir, accessed January 4, 2018, <https://voptamu.wixsite.com/voicesofpraise>.

predominantly Black organization, was governed by a student board, conducted weekly rehearsals, and organized yearly gospel choir conferences that involved a number of gospel choirs across the state of Texas and engaged a guest choral clinician. Five black singers and one white singer from the VOP, sang with the predominantly white Breakaway choir at various times during the duration of this research. The choir's singing of Elevation Worship's gospel arrangements of *Resurrecting* and *Do It Again* was supported significantly by the VOP singers' experience with choral singing and their familiarity with contemporary gospel vocal gestures. In turn, the singers from the VOP appreciated the articulatory detail fostered in Breakaway choir rehearsals<sup>38</sup> as demonstrated in the explanation of vocal articulations which follows figure 5.4 above.

The Breakaway Choir and the members of the Breakaway worship band continued to express a desire to incorporate the shout chorus of *Do It Again* into Breakaway worship, however that shout chorus, or any other gospel arrangements for that matter, were not reattempted during the time of this fieldwork. Additionally, no one on the Breakaway team, neither worship leader, front vocalist, instrumentalist, choir director, choir member, nor artistic director answered Jack's charge to provide a worship

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<sup>38</sup> The appreciation of Breakaway choir rehearsals led Rhema, the president of the Voices of Praise at the time who was among the five black singers from the VOP who sang in the Breakaway choir, to invite me to serve as guest clinician for the 2018 spring semester gospel conference – particularly to workshop *Awesome Wonder* (Youthful Praise featuring J.J. Hairston) and the live version of *When The Saints Go To Worship* (Donald Lawrence & The Tri-City Singers). Since Jack was keen to develop a deeper connection between Breakaway and the Voices of Triumph, he authorized Breakaway funds to cover my travel costs for the conference. This gesture was greatly appreciated by the Voices of Praise despite the disappointment that ensued when my attendance was thwarted by wide scale, weather-induced flight cancellations. Although both scenarios are primarily independent of each other, the setback of missing out on VOP's spring 2018 conference and the opportunity this experience would have likely offered for fostering a more tangible connection between Breakaway and VOP echoes with the incompleteness of the ending shout chorus of *Do It Again* described in the opening vignette.

set arranging solution that would incorporate the shout chorus in a manner that was more expeditious than the path taken to the shout course in Elevation’s gospel arrangement.

The fact that the shout chorus of *Do It Again* was not easily isolated and detached from the remainder of the arrangement may provide one possible explanation for why Jack’s desired arranging solution was not materialized. Although the shout chorus is a discrete section with clear formal boundaries, it is also connected organically to the steady infusion of gospel idioms that become progressively more distinct across the arrangement’s timeline. The shout chorus is the culmination of this arranging process, fulfilling its logic in a manner which the Breakaway Choir found to be remarkably seamless to the point that many members were prompted to ask questions which amounted to variations of the following – “How did the arrangement, without us even recognizing it, transport us from the gospel-contemporary worship mix at the beginning to the full-on gospel feel at the end?”

Table 5.3 below captures the gospel idioms that were discussed by various members of the Breakaway Choir, and which contributed to their perception of the seamless intensification of gospel influence throughout the arrangement. The table provides the formal sections of the arrangement along with corresponding time points, as well as a description of the gospel idioms introduced at each section. A cursory glance at the description column depicts the steady intensification of gospel influences perceived by the choir. Several song sections in the top half of the table are devoid of description columns whereas descriptions in the middle and later parts of the table are lengthier. In general, the table shows that the interjection of increasingly idiomatic gospel chord

progressions across the song's timeline occurs in tandem with the increased gospel vocal influence of the choir.

A comparative listening progressing from the Bridge Sections to the Bridge Variations to the Shout Chorus reveals the intensification of gospel elements within the choir's vocal gestures which accounts in part for the difficulty of extracting the shout chorus from the arrangement and transplanting it to a shortened worship arrangement that would necessarily lack a progressive unfolding of gospel idioms, the very process which gave coherence and suitability to the shout chorus. Beyond the difficulties presented by this arranging dilemma, Breakaway's preference for current worship material serves as another potential obstacle whose influence increased with each passing semester, as Elevation Worship's *Evidence* project became older and less current.

### *Summary*

As a collegiate ministry at Texas A&M University, the Breakaway Choir possessed the youngest demographic of choral singers and attending worshippers of all the choirs represented in this dissertation. Among the three worship-leading choirs, it incorporated contemporary gospel the most, likely because Elevation Worship's *Evidence* album, a thorough collaboration between Elevation's worship collective and some of the leading contemporary gospel artists of the time, was released around the same time period that Jack Thweatt and I revitalized the Breakaway Choir. These explorations into modern CWM-contemporary gospel hybrid repertoire were assisted by the inclusion of singers from the Voices of Praise, Texas A&M University's student led gospel choir. The integration of Elevation's in vogue album at the time also underscores Breakaway's penchant for the latest modern CWM songs.

Table 5.3. Description of Gospel Idioms Utilized in Elevation Worship’s Gospel Version of *Do It Again*.

Song Section	Time Point	Description of Gospel Idioms
Intro – Chorus	0:00	
Verse 2	1:37	Introduction of three-part gospel-styled vocal harmonies <sup>39</sup>
Double Chorus – Bridge 2	2:21	
Bridge 3	4:21	Ascending half-step key change (A-Bb) typical, a typical gospel gesture that is accompanied by growing call and response between the lead vocal and choir
Bridge 4	4:44	Another half-step key change (Bb-B) with more frequent call and response <sup>40</sup>
Bridge Variation 1	5:04	Light gospel variation of the bridge melody with vii <sup>o7</sup> /vi (G <sup>o7</sup> ) gospel reharmonization and further intensification of call and response
Drop Chorus	5:51	Prominent gospel organ accompaniment
Chorus Tag	6:14	Steady build through repetitions of gospel chord progression Cadential <sup>6/4</sup> – V <sup>4/2</sup> – I <sup>6</sup> – ii <sup>o7</sup> (B/F# – F#7/E – B/D# – C# <sup>o7</sup> )
Bridge 5	7:18	
Bridge Variation 2	7:40	Return of light gospel variation of the bridge melody with vii <sup>o7</sup> /vi (G <sup>o7</sup> ) gospel reharmonization and ending in gospel ‘walk-up’ chord progression, ii <sup>o7</sup> – I <sup>6</sup> – ii <sup>o6/5</sup> – Cadential <sup>6/4</sup> (C# <sup>o7</sup> – B/D# – C# <sup>o7</sup> /E – B/F#) to signal the Shout Chorus that follows
<b>Shout Chorus</b>	<b>7:59</b>	<b>Heavily gospelized vocal gestures of bridge melody along with band accompaniment riffs based on I<sup>sus13</sup> – I<sup>7</sup> (B<sup>sus13</sup> – B<sup>7</sup>) progression as portrayed in part in figure 5.4</b>
Ending	9:29	An extended “crash out” fermata ending in the most complex gospel chord progression of the arrangement I <sup>13</sup> – V <sup>7(#5,#9)/vi</sup> – IV <sup>7</sup> – vii <sup>o7</sup> /V – V <sup>11(#5)</sup> – I <sup>13</sup> (B <sup>13</sup> – D# <sup>7(#5,#9)</sup> – E <sup>7</sup> – F <sup>o7</sup> – F# <sup>11(#5)</sup> – I <sup>13</sup> )

<sup>39</sup> The three-part gospel harmony stem tracks from the studio recording are utilized in the live recording. These studio parts feature an SSA formation, which was sung by the Breakaway choir as SAT.

<sup>40</sup> The ascending half-step key change is ubiquitous throughout the gospel worship music genre. One of the most emblematic examples can be found in Kurt Carr’s live recording of *In the Sanctuary*. The numerous key changes utilized in the song span a major seventh intervallic space. The transposition chain utilized in the song is as follows: Db – D – Eb – F (the sole whole-step key change) – F# – G – Ab – A – Bb – B – C. Kurt Carr, “In the Sanctuary,” recorded 2033, on *Gotta Have Gospel*, Integrity Music, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/17ii6Nnp1P4k9mJoikbhf3?si=7606c40f61834a39>.



As a choir of aspiring college-aged worship leaders, the Breakaway Choir fulfilled the ministry's objective of preparing college students for ministry service. Even so, Breakaway did not require the same level of commitment from its choir members as it did for the other student volunteer groups. This collection of solo voice-capable worship leaders brought a high level of vocal talent to the choir. The singers could improvise harmonies, learn choral parts rapidly, and replicate fine detailed articulations. The difficulty came in adjusting to singing as a choir in an arena-rock aural environment. Amidst the loud volume levels, the singers wanted to revert to all-out, congregation-style over-singing or "free singing" which compromised choral tone and choral blend. The singers learned to rein in the volume of their singing even if it meant that they would not be able to hear themselves. They also learned "focused singing" amidst this environment so that they could execute choral parts which added additional layers to worship. With the four case studies now complete, the final chapter considers the role of power in CWM's two choral ensembles and then directly addresses the central question of this dissertation: Is Contemporary Worship "Killing" the Choir.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Is Contemporary Worship “Killing” the Church Choir?

To challenge the widely held notion that contemporary worship is “killing” the church choir, this dissertation has shown that the CWM genre has actually generated two distinct types of choral ensembles. In the proposed typology of North American church choir given in figure one below, this dissertation has suggested that contemporary worship choirs be recognized as a category positioned alongside the traditional church choir and black gospel choir.

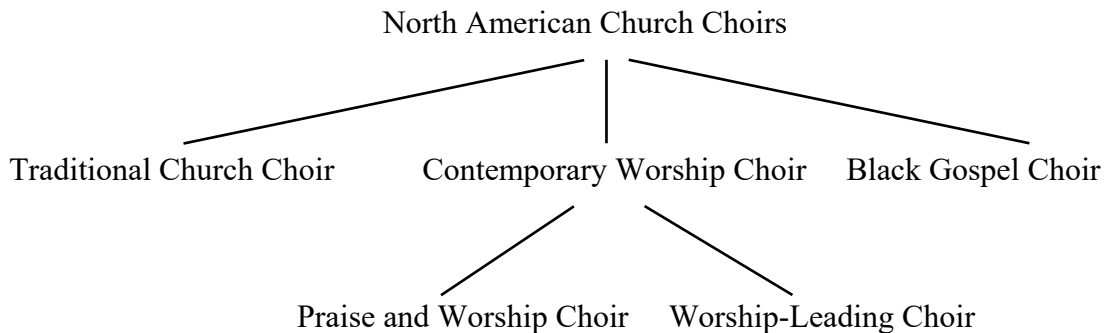


Figure 6.1. A Proposed Categorization of North American Church Choirs.

To illustrate these ensembles, four case studies were presented in the interior chapters. Two working definitions, one for each type of contemporary worship choir, were provided in the opening chapter to further distinguish each ensemble and are represented below.

*Praise and worship choirs* are church choirs that function as principal members of the contemporary worship ensemble. They serve the dual purposes of enlivening congregational participation with praise and worship styled CWM and inspiring

the congregation through the performance of praise and worship styled choral anthems.

*Worship-leading choirs* are church choirs that function as *subsidiary members* of the *contemporary worship band* for the *sole* purpose of enlivening the *participation of the congregation* mainly with *modern CWM*.

With the above choral categorization firmly established, this concluding chapter will first connect the categorization of North American choirs with notions of power within worshipping communities – specifically the type of power which is accorded to musical ensembles by the worshipping contexts in which they operate. Chapter six will then detail the stark power differential between CWM’s two choirs by comparing the notable level of power which praise and worship choirs possess within their worship milieu when compared to the modest level of power which worship-leading choirs are accorded in their modern CWM environments. To elaborate this power disparity, the following five vantage points profiling different types of power are used as lenses through which the four case studies are compared.

1. Power of Origin:  
Explores how the beginnings of each worship community are connected to the origin of its choir.
2. Power of Rehearsal Time:  
Examines the amount of rehearsal time each worship community allots to its choir outside of worship gatherings.
3. Power of Personnel:  
Delves into the staff which each worship community assigns to its choir.
4. Power of Song Selection:  
Investigates the degree to which each worship community considers its choir in its song selection process.

5. Power of Audio Projection:

Probes the level to which each worship community accords prominence and presence to its choir within the audio mix utilized during worship gatherings.

Secondly, after contextualizing the usage of the word “killing,” this chapter uses the dynamics of the power disparity between praise and worship choirs and worship-leading choirs to engage the central question— whether the CWM genre is “killing” the church choir. Drawing on the case studies, chapter six first considers this question around the time of this dissertation and then turns its gaze towards the future of church choirs in CWM. Finally, the chapter ends with a discussion about avenues for further research.

*“Choir First” Culture and the Role of Power*

Although the role of power within contemporary worship’s two choral types will come into greater focus in this chapter, the power differential between these two choirs has already been suggested in their corresponding definitions. The definition of the praise and worship choir given above describes it as *primary* within its context whereas that of the worship-leading choir characterizes it as *subsidiary* in its environment. “Choir first” is the phrase which CCC’s choir director at the time, Christopher Phillips, used to describe the church’s approach to arranging music for worship. The “choir first” approach imbued within the praise and worship culture of the CCC case study will be compared to what can be construed as the “choir second” culture exhibited in the case studies of the three worship-leading choirs.

To offer an additional example of a “choir first” culture, consider the operation of the Heavenly Army singers within various non-mainline Haitian Pentecostal churches as

described by Butler.<sup>1</sup> The ministry of these singers lies at the heart of the underlying principles governing these worshipping communities and as such represents the most vivid portrayal of the community's distinct religious identity which differentiates them from mainline Pentecostal counterparts. One of the distinct spiritual practices of these Haitian Pentecostal churches is the wielding of musical worship as a weapon against enemies and evil spirits (*lwa*).<sup>2</sup> The frontline warriors in this practice are the heavenly army singers (*manm solda*), an elite vocal group that is carefully selected by the pastor. At the climax of worship gatherings, the *manm solda* wage war by "heating up," a term used for feverish, transcendent singing and dancing conducted from a sacred inner square at the center of the gathering room.<sup>3</sup> The perceived effectiveness of the war these churches wage on evil is tied inextricably to the performance of the heavenly army singers and as such, the culture of these churches places the ministry of these warrior choirs first and foremost thereby rendering them powerful emblems within the community.

CCC fulfills a similarly central role at Christ Church as the heavenly army singers do in their Haitian Pentecostal communities. As depicted in the Christ Church Choir case study, by highlighting black gospel sensibilities within praise and worship CWM, these choirs affirm and sustain the Pentecostal roots and Three Streams Theology of Christ Church. At most worship gatherings, the CCC demarcates the flow of the proceedings with three choral anthems which are placed at the beginning, middle, and end of the

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<sup>1</sup> Melvin L. Butler, "Nou Kwe nan Sentespri (We Believe in the Holy Spirit): Music, Ecstasy, and Identity in Haitian Pentecostal Worship," *Black Music Research Journal* 22, No. 1, Spring 2002: 85-125.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 89.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 98.

worship service. Increasing the relevance of these anthems is the fact that the latter two frame the sermon with a prelude and postlude.

Finally, another critical aspect of the “choir first” mentality at Christ Church and at Haitian Pentecostal churches which utilize Heavenly Army singers is the conspicuous involvement of the presiding pastor with the choir. In Butler’s description of Heavenly Army singers, the pastor not only carefully selects these singers, undoubtedly a high honor which accords those singers power within their churches, but also, during their sessions of “heating up” as described above, the pastor participates with the heavenly army singers and even leads these climaxes by signaling song changes and dance moves. Similarly, Hardwick, the founding pastor of Christ Church, played a pivotal roll in the establishment of the CCC, and Dan Scott, the pastor of Christ Church at the time of my fieldwork, collaborated with the choir routinely on stage as shown in the opening vignette to the case study for the CCC and also in the description of the choral arrangement and presentation of Dan Scott’s praise and worship anthem, *We Believe*. This pastoral involvement undoubtedly increases the authority and power of these choral ensembles. That the three worship-leading choirs in this dissertation are mostly devoid of this level of pastoral engagement points to the significant power discrepancy between them and praise and worship choirs like the CCC – a power differential which will now be made explicitly clear by consideration of the power which can be assigned or withheld through origin, time, personnel, song selection, and audio projection.

### *1. Power of Origin*

The first consideration related to power is the origin of each choir relative to the establishment of the worship style utilized at its respective church or ministry.

Considering these origins provides a crucial differentiation of power between the praise and worship choir at Christ Church and the three worship-leading choirs featured in this dissertation. That the worship-leading choir is scarcely utilized to help in the initial establishment of modern contemporary worship in churches and ministries that employ this worship style is a manifestation of their subsidiary role within their modern CWM contexts. Rather than foster church choirs, the initial focus of modern CW ministries seems geared towards more primary aspects of the style, namely the establishment and sustenance of high-level worship bands and audio-visual technology teams. It is significant that each of the modern worship environments of this dissertation began choral ministries only after their modern CWM identity was solidified and after they were able to sustain large congregations generally numbering above a thousand.

The case studies illustrate this observation thoroughly. Gateway Church had already become a large megachurch with a nationally, if not internationally, recognized CWM worship brand and recording and publishing wing before it began its choir. Even though the Gateway Choir has a conspicuous connection to the wishes of its pastoral staff which is somewhat akin to the connection between CCC and their former late senior pastor, Pastor Hardwick, the pastoral mandate which resulted in the birth of the Gateway Choir came only *after* the music and worship identity of the church was firmly secured through the Gateway Worship brand. As for the other two worship-leading choirs, over a decade before Breakaway began their student choir in the mid 2010s, Tuesday night

gatherings were routinely attracting several thousand students, and the lineup for its worship band ministry included preeminent worship artists such as Chris Tomlin. Before the choir at Bayou City Fellowship's Cypress campus began, its worship program was anchored and nurtured by nationally recognized worship artist Robbie Seay, and the church already had a firmly established second campus with murmurings circulating about a third.

Embarking on a worship-leading choir program only *after* a church has established its congregation and its modern CWM worship identity is completely inverse to how the CCC came into existence. Whereas those worship-leading choirs began "after the fact," the Christ Church choir began "on the ground floor." As such, the CCC was allowed to serve as the primary vehicle through which Christ Church's praise and worship style was established and its recording and publishing activity spearheaded. As such, CCC had the opportunity to set its roots and growth within the church's unique three-stream theology and liturgy which primed the ensemble to become the primary musical entity that articulates and galvanizes the church's unique worship identity at each worship gathering.

Growing alongside the beginning of the church's expression of praise and worship renders the CCC a valued, living chronicle of Christ Church thereby according to the ensemble a historic authority and gravitas which the other worship-leading choirs in this study cannot access. This stature contrasts significantly with the Bayou City Fellowship Choir where the usage of the choir is highly intermittent, tossing and turning to the ebb and flows of the church instead of serving as a steady presence through peaks and valleys as the CCC has done for Christ Church. Although the worship-leading choirs



in this study are less powerful than the CCC, it must be noted that they are valued by the pastors which lead their worship communities, the worship leaders and worship bands they serve alongside, and the congregations which they serve. However, regardless of whether some may even prefer worship when the worship-leading choir is involved, the worship-leading choir is still treated as a non-routine, special occurrence in worship, as an auxiliary to the worship leader and worship band. The worship-leading choir's status as a "latecomer" to modern CW worshipping communities limits its power substantially.

Due to the "late" origination of the three worship-leading choirs, they are not as integrally connected to their church's theology, liturgy, history, and pastoral vision and authority, as the CCC is within Christ Church. However, the three worship-leading choirs do assist their ministries in articulating aspects of their mission statements. At Gateway, the choir supported the biblicism of its evangelical worship style. The pastoral mandate for the creation of a choir which countered the reservations of their modern CW musical leaders was issued solely because the pastors desired to realize the various roles of the choir illustrated throughout the Bible. In the case of Breakaway, the choir allowed Breakaway to live more fully into its mission to mentor and equip college students for ministry. As for Bayou City Fellowship, it eventually focused on the capacity of its choir's group vocal sound to catalyze the singing of the congregation. To foreground this capacity, Bayou City Fellowship progressively reduced the instrumentation of its worship band at each Choir Sunday until the band utilized on the last documented choral Sunday eliminated the drum set and was comprised of only a cello and double bass, a couple acoustic guitars, and a keyboard.

Beyond assisting the missions of their churches, these worship-leading choirs were sustained in part by their capacity to provide opportunities for leading worship to the many eager volunteers who are easily and inevitably generated from their ministry's numerous congregants and attendees. Since the high level of quality and professionalism exhibited by the worship ministries at Gateway, Bayou City Fellowship, and Breakaway, precludes many of these willing, yet amateur, volunteers from participation, worship-leading choirs address this issue in part by offering a degree of inclusion to these volunteers. Despite being a latecomer to modern CW ministries, worship-leading choirs enhance congregational participation both on and off the platform, albeit in a subsidiary role.

## *2. Power of Rehearsal Time*

The second consideration related to power is the amount of time which each worship community grants its choir to develop and rehearse both before it is expected to contribute to worship services and also leading up to each worship gathering. From the outset, akin to the preparations which preempt the launching of a new church, such as the establishment of core values and the recruitment of the launch team and initial congregation,<sup>4</sup> the CCC was granted an extended time of insulation within which the ensemble could sing together and pursue choral excellence devoid of the pressures of weekly performances for Sunday morning services. Although Gateway's first launch of its choir did not include an insulation period, Gateway intentionally included an

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<sup>4</sup> Aubrey Malphurs, *The Nuts and Bolts of Church Planting: A Guide for Starting Any Kind of Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 40, 57, mentions the importance of establishing a "launch team" or "launch group" to serve as the "initial congregation" before embarking on the official launch of a new church.

insulation period in its second launch in order to foster group culture and synergy. On the other hand, Bayou City Fellowship and Breakaway, ministries which are admittedly much smaller in scope than the large megachurch context of Gateway, were not granted a time insulation and as such, had to “learn on the job,” so to speak. An insulated, pre-launch period would have likely enhanced the energy, excellence and vitality of the choral ministries at Bayou City Fellowship and Breakaway. Despite this disadvantage, these choirs still managed to register meaningful contribution to their respective worship communities along with a palpable excitement and engagement fostered through the vulnerability of laying the process of development bare for the entire church to witness.

Whereas the BCF and Breakaway choirs were still able to contribute meaningfully to corporate worship despite lacking an insulation period, what they did lack initially relative to the CCC and Gateway choirs was time for community building and group synergy. At CCC and Gateway, the insulation period assisted in setting the roots for sustained community before the group ever sang in a worship gathering whereas the choirs at Breakaway and BCF began as “one-one-done” occurrences with social connection occurring later. In the case of Breakaway, it developed social connection by updating its recruiting procedure and adding additional rehearsals per event to allow more time and space for social interaction. As for BCF, the choir developed a sense of community identity which revolved around the emergence of a core of regular participants in Choir Sundays.

Another source of time investment is the amount of rehearsal time allotted to the choir along with the consistency of the attendance of its singers. All four choirs encouraged their singers to practice individually prior to rehearsals. Singers were

provided with practice sheets, either in the form of a music score or annotated lyric sheet, and practice recordings. All four choirs also conducted a pre-service rehearsal which was often the only opportunity for the choir to rehearse with the worship band and the audio-visual technology team. In addition, the CCC required a weekly commitment to a two-hour rehearsal throughout the choral season along with attendance at most weekly worship services. This plan is typical of most traditional church choirs and many gospel choirs and represents the most rigorous rehearsal policy amongst the choirs in this study. The Gateway Choir possessed the second most rigorous rehearsal procedure. It rehearsed biweekly for an hour and a half, yet only required singers who planned to sing on a given choral Sunday to attend the previous two rehearsals leading up to that choral date.

Whereas CCC and Gateway established a regular rehearsal schedule, no regular rehearsal plan in the form of a weekly or biweekly rehearsal was put in place for either of the choirs at Bayou City Fellowship or Breakaway. This is a reflection in part of the contracted guest choir directorship of these choirs in comparison to the full time and multiple staff leadership employed at Christ Church and Gateway. It also reflects that the average chorister of the CCC and Gateway choirs had the ability and willingness to commit to a more rigorous rehearsal schedule than the average chorister of the BCF and Breakaway choirs. Only one rehearsal was required at the inception of these two choirs. In the case of Bayou City Fellowship, a two-hour rehearsal took place on the weekend of a choral Sunday. For Breakaway, the only rehearsal was the pre-event rehearsal occurring a few hours beforehand, that is, a one hour to ninety-minute choir-only rehearsal followed by a fifteen to twenty-five-minute staging rehearsal with the worship band and audio-visual technology team. Although the church leadership considered the choir's

performance successful despite minimal practice time, there was a palpable pressure felt by all. As a director, I found rehearsals fun and exciting, yet they also felt like a perpetual race to get the choir to sound as good as possible in as little time as possible.

As the BCF and Breakaway choirs developed, the rehearsal schedule became more involved, albeit not to the level of the regular rehearsal schedule of CCC and Gateway. Although the rehearsal commitment did not change for Bayou City, the number of available weekend rehearsal slots increased from one to four. This quadrupled the time commitment of the contracted choir director yet also increased the recruitment of singers for each choral Sunday. Four rehearsals also increased their level of preparedness due to smaller rehearsal sizes and the more individualized attention and instruction each singer received as a result. At Breakaway, a choir-only rehearsal was eventually added on the Monday evening prior to Tuesday Breakaway events. This rehearsal took place in the home of Breakaway's worship director, Jack Thweatt. These ninety-minute rehearsals increased the preparedness of the choir; and the post-rehearsal hang outs, which often lasted an additional two hours, allowed the choir much desired social time and also allowed Jack and me to mentor members of the choir one-on-one or in small groups.

The resource of rehearsal time is relatively minimal among the worship-leading choirs because their appearance in worship is infrequent. They do not need to rehearse as often because they are not required to sing as often in worship, and when they do, they rarely are expected to present challenging feature pieces such as choral anthems. Finally, as the discussion below will further detail, since the sheer volume of the worship band often minimizes the aural impact of the choir, their visual leadership as a throng of ecstatic worshippers is often all that remains. This visual leadership requires far less

attention to accuracy of choral execution and may explain why rehearsals for worship-leading choirs are often geared more towards discipleship rather than musicianship. Even so, in many instances, the allotted rehearsal time still seemed insufficient for establishing adequate preparation and group solidarity. The argument can be made that more time should be allotted to these pre-event rehearsals in order to compensate for the absence of a regular rehearsal schedule and the lack of group synergy engendered by regular rehearsals. However, this proposed increase in rehearsal time would likely result in an overwhelmingly concentrated experience which would be unsustainable by volunteer choir singers. Additionally, leaders of ministries that practice modern CWM often prefer that the time of congregants be spent in a number of alternative endeavors which are deemed more worthwhile than choral ministry. The inevitable result of the relegated use of the church choir in worship and the subsequent diminished rehearsal time allotted to the ensemble is a substantial divestment of the power held by the ensemble.

### *3. Power of Personnel*

A third power difference between praise and worship choirs and worship-leading choirs relates to the number of church music staff assigned to the choir. Here again, the CCC is invested with preeminent resources in relation to the three worship-leading choirs. At Christ Church, Christopher Phillips, who serves as the primary, full-time musician governing over the entire music ministry, also serves as the chief director of the choir. Since the director of the Gateway Choir is a full-time position, it ranks as the second most prominently staffed choir in this study. The choirs at Bayou City Fellowship and Breakaway display the least staff support since they are led sporadically by a privately contracted choir director. For these two choirs, it may not be incorrect to label

their choral leadership as that of a choral technician rather than as a choral director since technicians are normally sporadic and privately contracted guest conductors for special choral events whereas directors normally govern over the week-to-week operation of choral ensembles.

The leadership model of choir director as chief leader of the entire music and worship program employed at Christ Church is the model typical of traditional church choirs, black gospel choirs and many praise and worship choirs.<sup>5</sup> It allows for the choir to be considered at the fore of all musical decisions, including what is to be sung or when and how the choir is utilized in worship services. Worship-leading choirs and their choral directors often do not possess the power to make such decisions. They must wait for worship leaders to make these decisions, while hoping that they are made with enough advanced notice for the choir to be organized and mobilized. Many modern worship leaders are used to making decisions for worship bands that usually possess a small number of highly skilled musicians and singers who can adjust on the fly and who can

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<sup>5</sup> The power of choir directors to spearhead the American traditional church choir are exhibited by the Lutheran choirmaster, F. Melius Christiansen and the Presbyterian choral pioneer, John Finley Williamson. Goessl credits Christiansen's tenure at St. Olaf College for having founded the "Luther Choral Tradition" in America's Midwest and for instigating the choral stature of the choirs at the Lutheran "Power 3 schools," namely, St. Olaf College, Luther College, and Concordia College, Ryan Steven Orlando Goessl, "The Lutheran Tradition: A Study on the Historical Progression of the Principles, Choral Sound and Philosophy," (D.M.A., Hansei University, 2016). Beck documents the invention and influence of John Finley Williamson who established the Westminster Choir at Presbyterian Church in Dayton, Ohio, and cofounded Westminster Choir College which would relocate to New Jersey and become one of the most iconic institutions of the state. Joseph Beck, *America's Choral Ambassador: John Finley Williamson*, (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2014). The pivotal role of the choir leader in black gospel choirs was established by the ensemble's preeminent founder, Thomas Dorsey, who went on to form the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses. Dorsey's leadership model would be carried on in subsequent generations, for instance by acclaimed gospel choir directors like James Cleveland and Edwin Hawkins. As director with central authority, Dorsey initiated collaboration with famed gospel soloists such as his partnership with Sallie Martin in the 1930s and with Mahalia Jackson in the early 1940s, an alliance which Aeseng claims brought about the "golden age of gospel music," Nathan Aaseng, *African-American Religious Leaders*, (New York: Facts on File Inc., 2014), 58. As keen emulators of the black gospel choir, praise and worship choirs also feature choir directors as chief musical leaders. Examples include Christopher Phillips at CCC as depicted in chapter two of this dissertation and Carol Cymbala of the famed Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir.

learn music quickly. Given the flexibility of these small, highly-skilled ensembles, worship leaders are enabled to make prominent decisions affecting worship gatherings within a week to a half-week's notice.

To varying degrees, each of the primary worship leaders—namely Thomas Miller, Jack Thweatt, Robbie Seay, and Ryan “Dirk” DeLange—governing the music ministries associated with the three worship-leading choirs in this study, strove to schedule the choir with plenty of advanced notice. At Gateway, the Planning Center confirmations of choral singers for a date two months away were gathered well before the confirmation of worship band instrumentalists and worship leaders which were often made just two weeks away. This dynamic of choir confirmations occurring well before worship band confirmations also took place at Bayou City.

As the Breakaway Choir developed, the advanced planning of choir dates increased. At first, dates were scheduled four to six weeks in advance whereas by the one-year mark of the ensemble's existence, Jack began scheduling all choral dates within a given semester period three weeks prior to the beginning of that semester. This shift resulted in a significant increase in choral attendance since it gave the college student singers ample time to take care of their coursework, work schedule, and other extra-curricular activities so that these responsibilities did not get in the way of their attendance at Breakaway choir dates. As a point of comparison, the schedule for traditional church choirs, black gospel choirs, and praise and worship choirs is markedly more stable as they are a weekly staple in the life of the church, with weekly rehearsal facilitating appearance at weekly worship gatherings.



#### 4. Power of Song Selection

A fourth area in which the power of praise and worship choirs is proven to be significantly more potent than that of worship-leading choirs is the consideration which the choir is given in the process of song selection for worship gathering. Choral anthems for church choirs, be they the traditional church choir, black gospel choir, or praise and worship choir, represent the pinnacle repertoire of these choirs and provides them unique opportunities to greatly impact their worship contexts outside of their role of supporting congregational singing. The impact of the choral anthem is multiplied within the choral productions of such choirs, such as the annual Christmas concert by the Christ Church Choir, the many cantatas and oratorios like Händel's *Messiah* often performed by traditional church choirs, and the ubiquitous choral festivals and mass choir events within the black gospel choir tradition.<sup>6</sup> Yet, it is the choral anthem and the resulting choral production, the choir's sources for powerful musical impact within worshipping communities, which the modern contemporary worship style has minimized and mostly stripped away from its worship-leading choir as demonstrated in the three case studies featuring worship-leading choirs. The Easter choral special at Gateway provides an exception to this phenomenon, however, most of the choral activity depicted in the case studies for the worship-leading choir revolves around arrangements supporting congregational singing.

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<sup>6</sup> W. K McNeil, *Encyclopedia of American Gospel Music*, (Milton Park, Oxfordshire, England: Taylor & Francis, 2013) documents several black gospel festivals such as the American Spirituals and Gospel Festival (140, 334), the Negro Gospel and Religious Music Festival (46, 276), Cornell University's Festival of Black Gospel (141) and the Golden Jubilee Year Celebration of Gospel Music (103), as well as several mass gospel choirs like the Colorado mass choir (147), the Mississippi mass choir and Florida mass choirs (263), and the Pentecostal mass choir (419).

In addition to lacking choral anthems and major productions, the architecture of buildings for modern worship and the flow of modern worship services largely prevent worship-leading choirs from enjoying the opportunity to participate in the closing of worship services. There is no worship-leading choir equivalent to the post-sermon choral anthem of the Christ Church Choir, the post-sermon praise break or shout of which the black gospel choir frequently partakes, or the choral benediction sung by traditional church choirs. In the modern worship style, the post-sermon worship song is approached carefully, usually with the keyboard player providing a bed of pensive, unobtrusive synth-based pad sounds during the latter portion of the sermon. This contemplative sound bed is intended to promote thoughtful and heart-felt response to the sermon which is then culminated in the post-sermon closing song.<sup>7</sup> Due to the lack of a chancel, the worship-leading choir does not have a viable way to remain in place on the platform during the sermon and so, usually exits the platform pre-sermon. As such, in order for the choir to participate in the closing song, the choir would need to reenter the platform during the keyboard pad-led meditative time at the end of the sermon. The logistics of ensuring that this choral reentry be quiet and unobtrusive enough to not disturb this highly sensitive part of the worship service proved too difficult for Bayou City Fellowship and Breakaway. Due to Gateway's large platform, large green room spaces, and ability to use lighting to obscure activity in the back of their stage, they alone possessed the ability to execute this transition. Even so, it was rarely employed.

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<sup>7</sup> Joshua Kalin Busman, "(Re)sounding passion: Listening to American Evangelical Worship Music, 1997-2015," (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2015) expounds on the affective role of keyboard synth pads in CWM in his dissertation (169, 181, 184-185, 214).

Beyond losing access to choral anthems, choral productions, and involvement in the closing of services, worship-leading choirs are also deprived of repertoire that is designed to feature and accommodate the choir primarily. Rather, the choral parts for the worship-leading choir must be arranged carefully around the rest of the worship band. This arrangement strategy differs greatly from the “choir first” culture of the praise and worship choir at Christ Church and in particular its “choir first” arranging tactics. These tactics were on full display in its creedal anthem “We Believe,” which was arranged to feature the CCC more than its vocal soloists and was positioned as the all-important culminating piece of the church’s Christmas concert in 2016. In contrast, the worship-leading choirs in this study must sing choral parts to modern contemporary songs that are already written and recorded as full, complete, polished productions that are devoid of choral involvement and without consideration of the choir. As such, the parts for the worship-leading choirs must seek to carve out and secure spaces within these songs which are often already filled. The additional choral layers which result must also be arranged in a manner that avoids interrupting or encroaching upon the song’s original design. Above all, these parts cannot overwhelm the arrangement of modern CWM songs to a degree that risks distracting the congregation’s focus on worship singing.

Arrangements for worship-leading choirs are truly *subsidiary*, walking a fine line by picking a few spots for choral impact carefully and judiciously and excluding designed choral parts throughout many portions of the song’s form to ensure that the choir does not overshadow the worship band or the congregation. Even under these severe restrictions, limitation which the traditional church choir, black gospel choir, and praise and worship choir seldom face, creative solutions were demonstrated throughout

the case studies. To name a few, all three worship-leading choirs made use of the breakdown for pockets of time within a given song which allowed the choir the opportunity to serve as the primary musical force that leads the congregation. At Gateway, the front-line worship leaders sang simple, straightforward harmonies which allowed the choir space to include more involved parts. All three worship-leading choirs appropriated several techniques from background vocal singing (BGVs) such as echoes, descants, and vocalises and ingratiated these choral gestures within the ensembles to such a degree that members of the choir started partaking in arranging for the choir.

Just as the worship-leading choirs' arrangements tended to revolve around the worship-band-centered recordings of modern CWM songs, similarly, these choirs were expected to be conditioned by other aspects of the genre. Such aspects included the increasingly short shelf-life of congregational songs, due to the penchant of churches practicing modern CWM to include the latest songs and exclude those just a few years old.<sup>8</sup> This impacts the worship-leading choir in a couple of significant ways. Due to this relentless influx of new songs, arrangers for worship-leading choirs must constantly prepare new material. And since worship-leading choirs do not sing in worship regularly, these arrangements are short-lived and often discarded just at the time when the choir has finally gained comfort, mastery, and high degree of familiarity with the arrangement. When a particular choral arrangement becomes a favorite among the choir, worship band, and worship leaders, the sense of loss of repertoire is often exacerbated. Speaking of Breakaway's choral arrangement of Passion's *Worthy of Your Name*, Jack Thweatt

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<sup>8</sup> For more information and statistics on the shrinking shelf life of CWM songs in terms of their usage in corporate worship, see Daniel Silliman, "We've No Less Days to Sing God's Praise, but New Worship Songs Only Last a Few Years," Christianity Today, November 22, 2021.

expressed on numerous occasions that “I can’t even hear the song in my head without those choral echoes.”<sup>9</sup> Yet since the song was written in 2017 and as such is half a decade old at the time of this writing, the song is now squarely outside of Breakaway’s congregational song canon and only viable for “throwback” services which featured the favorite worship songs of yesteryear. In contrast, the repertoire of other types of North American church choirs has much more permanence due to the frequent inclusion of older anthems and songs. These choirs benefit from singing perennial favorites, like Händel’s *Messiah*, which members of traditional church choirs know intimately since they often have sung such productions year after year, over periods spanning several decades of their lives. Similarly, black gospel choirs and praise and worship choirs continue to sing frequently Richard Smallwood’s powerful gospel choral anthem, *Total Praise*, despite its having been written and recorded in the 1990s.

##### *5. Power of Audio Projection*

The fifth and final consideration concerning the power difference between praise and worship choirs and worship-leading choirs is the level of projection of the choir. The power of audio projection entails the choir’s place within the audio mix of the worship band or worship ensemble, along with the audio technology and sound engineer personnel devoted to sound reinforcement of the choir. Generally, the traditional church choir, black gospel choir, and the praise and worship choir exist primarily in the front ground of the audio mix of the worship ensemble with occasional middle ground

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<sup>9</sup> Jack Thweatt, conversations with the author, 22 October 2018, 6 January 2019, and 8 April, 2019.

positioning. In contrast, the worship-leading choir often finds itself in the background or middle ground of the mix of the modern CWM worship band.

Although the traditional church choir, black gospel choir, and praise and worship choir share dominant levels of audio projection within their worship ensembles, traditional church choirs normally prefer to achieve this audio projection architecturally through the natural acoustics afforded by the vaulted ceilings, choir lofts and steep chancels of their sanctuaries. Black gospel choirs and praise and worship choirs may also often make use of steep chancels; however, they rely more heavily on microphones, speakers, and other audio technological devices to foreground their sound within the overall musical soundscape.

The praise and worship choir normally produces less vocal volume than the black gospel choir because it relies less on chest-voice based vocality. Therefore, praise and worship choirs must utilize audio technology to a greater degree to achieve the same auditory effect.<sup>10</sup> The CCC case study depicts this heavy reliance on audio technology through its customary use of eight to ten choral microphones and pre-recorded choral backing tracks. On the other hand, due to the stage design of most modern CWM spaces for worship gatherings, worship-leading choirs usually lack the architectural acoustic advantages of traditional church choirs and the audio technological resources of black

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<sup>10</sup> Attesting to the greater volume of black gospel choristers than those of praise and worship choirs, Christ's Church's worship pastor, Christopher Phillips, would often hire soloists and choir singers from the black Pentecostal denomination, Church of God in Christ (C.O.G.I.C). As Christopher shared with me in our interview after the 2017 Christmas concert dress rehearsal, "You'd be amazed at the volume boost that just one pro C.O.G.I.C. singer can add to a section of the choir. Just one of them can produce the volume of say twenty or more of our choir members."

gospel choirs and praise and worship choirs.<sup>11</sup> None of the three worship-leading choirs in this study sang from a chancel. Instead, they sang on either flat stages or portable choir risers which were on or near the same stage level as the rest of the worship band. As such, sound isolation and the resulting placement of choral microphones were quite difficult. With significant stage noises bleeding into the choral microphones which compromised the amplification of the choir, there was also little to no room in the volume on stage to provide choral monitors that could allow the choir to hear themselves within the loud volume of the rest of the worship band. Inadequate monitoring resulted in compromised intonation of the choir as well as the ever present and virtually unavoidable temptation to over sing in order to hear oneself and to balance the choir's volume against that of the rest of the worship band.

Instead of the abundance of choral microphones featured at Christ Church, the three worship-leading choirs used only three microphones, one per choral section, soprano, alto, and tenor/men, or just a two microphone right-left stereo pair for the entire choir. For several reasons, these worship-leading choirs used fewer microphones than those commonly used in praise and worship choirs. Sometimes there were not enough available channels on the mixing console for additional choral microphones, or there was not enough pre-service time to set up and sound check a sub-mixer for the choir. Yet, most of the time, the high amount of stage noise bleeding into the choral microphones precluded the addition of more choral microphones. One effective technique that

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<sup>11</sup> Jeanne Halgren Kilde, and Joseph J Hobbs, "Church Becomes Theatre," in *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) provides a discussion of how evangelical sanctuaries adjusted to accommodate large, professional musical ensembles.

addressed this issue was to assign dynamic solo vocal microphones which could reject stage noise to one strong singer in each choral section. These individually amplified choral singers, who used microphones like those used by the solo worship leaders, added more weight to the overall choral sound yet were set within the background of the mix so that their solo voices were not projected to a degree that would degrade a blended choral sound. Additionally, for the three worship-leading choirs in this study, choral backing tracks were not available to further amplify the sound. Since these choirs featured in-house choral arrangements, such backing tracks would have needed to be produced in-house as well – a time-consuming endeavor which, though technically possible within the modern CWM context of each choir, was not attempted.

Gateway did employ a few sound engineers with choral experience; however, Bayou City Fellowship and Breakaway had sound engineers who specialized in worship bands but had little to no experience with choral amplification. As a result of the relative inexperience of their sound technicians, all three worship-leading choirs experienced similar problems with choral amplification: namely, amplifying the choir to an audible level and providing choral monitors to increase the choir's ability to hear themselves and thereby sing with musical accuracy. To the latter issue, under Gateway's first choral pastor, Kelly Allsopp, Gateway was seeking out some radical and highly expensive ways to allow choir members to hear themselves, such as providing in-ear monitors to each choir member. These solutions were well beyond the music budgets of Bayou City Fellowship and Breakaway.

The several professional sound engineers at Christ Church with choral specialization were given control of the sanctuary and the audio mix of the entire worship



ensemble, whereas the few sound engineers for the Gateway Choir were only in control of the sound design and needs of the choir. As such, the Christ Church engineers were in a better position to balance and foreground the choir than the engineers at Gateway. Beyond having total control of the mix, the sound engineers at Christ Church benefitted from week-in and week-out opportunities to fine tune their choral mixing techniques due to the weekly presence of the Christ Church choir at Sunday services. Yet because of the sporadic to monthly involvement of worship-leading choirs, the engineers for these choirs had far fewer opportunities to hone their craft.

Given the abundance of challenges posed by the inclusion of a worship-leading choir alongside a modern contemporary worship band, some modern contemporary churches elect to bypass the audio amplification of the choir altogether. They thereby render the ensemble as an inaudible member of the band whose contribution to the leadership of worship is purely visual. According to Jack Thweatt, the primary worship leader at Breakaway, Austin Stone Church in Austin, TX, the former church of renown worship artist, Chris Tomlin, and a church which exerts considerable influence on both Bayou City Fellowship and Breakaway, employs this visual-only type of worship-leading choir.<sup>12</sup> Another example of this visual-only choir is given in the following comment to Vince Wilcox’s online post entitled “The Critical Importance of Church Choir” –

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<sup>12</sup> The visual impact of contemporary worship choirs, namely the ability to reflect an ideal congregation to the attending congregation in real time during corporate worship singing, has been illustrated in the second chapter of Ingalls’ monograph, *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community* (2018). In the following quote, she describes the visual effect of the racial and ethnically diverse Unity choir at the Urbana conference. “During the choir’s performance, the video cameras that throughout the conference had focused almost exclusively on the members of the worship team onstage scanned the uplifted and often rapturous faces of the choir. As choir members of varied racial and ethnic backgrounds stood beside one another with faces uplifted and hands raised high, the colorful faces and hands that stood out against the choir members’ uniform white tops became at once a representation of the Urbana conference to itself, an icon of unity across ethnic and racial barriers, and a foretaste of the eschatological gathering at the end of time” (92).

Grant Norsworthy

October 10, 2017, 8:36 AM

...I did some training for a church in NC who used a choir with their praise band, but they were largely unrehearsed and hardly in the mix. They were thrown up on the platform right before the service, with no rehearsal, and sang (very loosely) each song. They added a good visual leadership for the congregation, but very little else. Maybe that was just a step heading towards losing the choir all together. I hope not.

Vince Wilcox

October 10, 2017, 8:43AM

Great observations, Grant. When the choir is used as "window dressing"--the results will be poor. But when singers and musicians are trained, encouraged, rehearsed, and respected--then the outcome can be vastly improved. I see some churches heading in a positive direction and others heading the other way...<sup>13</sup>

The audio amplification of worship-leading choirs in modern worship is inferior to that of the other three North American church choirs in their respective worshipping contexts. As such, this disparity may lead singers in worship-leading choirs to value their choirs and their individual contributions far less than singers in the other north American church choirs. This can create an environment where the only singers that seem to be valued are those who are worship leaders, who are furnished with individualized monitors, and who are amplified by dynamic, solo-voice microphones. Further augmenting this difference in perceived worth is that the worship leaders in each of the modern worshipping contexts in this study scarcely sang in the choir. This contrasts starkly with the CCC whose solo singers routinely sing in the choir which raises the

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<sup>13</sup> Vince Wilcox, "The Critical Importance of Church Choirs," Discover Worship, October 10, 2017, accessed February 20, 2018, <http://blog.discoverworship.com/articles/the-case-for-importance-of-church-choir>

overall value and importance of the choir. The foregoing disparity is expressed in the following response to Bob Kauflin's online post entitled "Choirs in Worship."<sup>14</sup>

Sarah May 13, 2009 at 11:47 AM

How might one deal with the issue of choir versus praise team?

We have had praise teams for years leading worship at our church, but in front of a choir...we have lost many members. And the members we do have are not consistent. Most don't see their value – that they are “dispensable” since the praise team are the ones more out front and with a mic in their hands. (Basically you have to have a good voice for praise team – in a choir you can “hide” your vocal inconsistencies) True, some choir members are showing pride in their feeling of being “upstaged,” but on the other hand the choir seems left with a lack of a purpose. How do you deal with this apparent competition conflict of values?...Any other ideas as to how we can maintain our worship choir and recruit even more members, keeping the praise team elitist threat at bay? Thank you

Bob Kauflin May 13, 2009 at 11:47 AM

Sarah, great question. A few thoughts...Make sure that everyone understands the purpose of the choir clearly. They're not simply an “add-on.” They contribute visually, musically...Make sure all your up-front vocalists serve as part of the choir first. Most of our solo vocalists continue to serve in the choir on various occasions...

### *Conclusion*

The foregoing considerations bring about a notable paradox which challenges the typology of North American church choirs suggested in this study. On one side of the equation, in terms of musical style and genre, the worship-leading choir is patently closer to the praise and worship choir than it is the traditional church choir or black gospel choir. However, on the other hand, in terms of “choir first” culture and the power possessed by the various North American church choirs, the power given to the praise

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<sup>14</sup> Bob Kauflin, “Choirs in Worship,” *Worship Matters*, June 6, 2008, accessed December 29, 2018, <https://worshipmatters.com/2008/06/26/choirs-in-worship/>.

and worship choir is actually more similar to that given to the traditional church choir and the black gospel choir than that which is given to the worship-leading choir. The seeming ambiguity and inconsistency within the contemporary worship genre as demonstrated by the power differences in these two CWM choirs will now be considered through the question of whether the CWM genre is “killing” the church choir.

### *Is Contemporary Worship “Killing” the Church Choir?*

This dissertation now arrives at an explicit consideration of its central question, “Is contemporary worship ‘killing’ the church choir?”<sup>15</sup> Taking this question literally, this dissertation, with its depiction of CWM church choirs over the majority of CWM’s time span, from the mid 1970s to the time of this document’s publication in the early 2020s, can register a definitive “no” as an answer. However, the word “killing” has been placed in scare quotes because when this word and others like it, (for instance “demise, disappearance, death, or decline”) are evoked concerning the church choir and contemporary worship, it is generally not being used to claim that contemporary worship is literally “abolishing the church choir entirely.” Instead of this literal usage, it may be that these severe terms are being chosen in order to represent the significant sense of loss which is being experienced by advocates of older traditions of the church choir. For many, modern contemporary worship may have changed the church choir into something

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<sup>15</sup> For other outlets grappling with the notion of the “killing” of the church choir, see Mike Harland, “Will Contemporary Worship Kill the Choir,” *Charisma Leader, Ministry Today*, March 15, 2016, accessed January 15, 2018, <https://ministrytodaymag.com/life/worship/22682-will-contemporary-worship-kill-the-choir>, Cathy Lynn Grossman, “Many Church Choirs are Dying. Here’s Why,” *Religious News Service*, September 17, 2014, accessed December 3, 2018, <https://religionnews.com/2014/09/17/many-church-choirs-dying-heres/>, Mike Raiter, “The Slow Killing of Congregational Singing,” *The Gospel Coalition, Australia Edition*, November 9, 2018, accessed March 21, 2019, <https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/slow-killing-congregational-singing/>.

which is beyond recognition. By relegating the church choir to a subsidiary place, modern CWM has altered the function of the ensemble beyond what some may believe the church choir's function "should" be. This sense of loss, a perception that something has been "killed," is expressed in the following response to Vince Wilcox's article, "The Critical Importance of Choirs in Contemporary Worship."<sup>16</sup>

Gail Freeman

September 16, 2019, 2:46 PM

Our pastor and elders just eliminated the choir, which has been a part of the church since the beginning. It has hurt a lot of people, even those who are "spectators." No explanation, it is just gone... No explanation, except for the "vision" which has never been explained...Almost 100 people now without a way to serve and use their talents and to top it off, there is now an age limit set for those who wish to participate as part of the "worship team." That eliminates 3/4 of the choir members. Tells me at a certain age, I am no longer needed. We have people who looked forward to our Christmas programs because we were one of the few, if not the only one who had a (Christmas) program.

It is likely that feelings such as these were less severe during the praise and worship period of the 1980s and 1990s since this period fostered significant choral ministries like those at Brooklyn Tabernacle and at Christ Church. Yet, as modern CWM assumed a firmer grip on evangelical communities throughout the latter 2000s and 2010s thereby transforming church choirs within its reach, it is likely that feelings such as those expressed above have increased and intensified. Considering the seeming downward trajectory of the power of church choirs through these two stylistic periods of CWM, it might be reasonable for those who have lived through this period to expect the future of the genre to further relegate the church choir until it is literally "abolished." To examine this assumption more deeply, this section will consider contemporary worship choral

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<sup>16</sup> Vince Wilcox, "The Critical Importance of Church Choirs," Discover Worship, October 10, 2017, accessed February 20, 2018, <http://blog.discoverworship.com/articles/the-case-for-importance-of-church-choir>.

activity in the context of some choral traditions throughout church music history. After considering this historical backdrop, the next section turns to the future by grappling with the future tense of the central question, namely, “Will contemporary worship kill the church choir?” To address this query, the section extrapolates from observations in and around the case studies to prognosticate the future of church choirs in contemporary worship.

Church music history documents numerous examples which illustrate the extensive time required for establishing a choral tradition. Although black gospel, begun in the late nineteenth century alongside ragtime, jazz, and blues, is highly associated with its choral tradition, it wasn’t until decades later, in the early 1930s, that the first gospel choir came into existence, a gospel choir at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Chicago under the direction of Magnolia Butts, Theodore Frye, and Thomas Dorsey.<sup>17</sup> In parallel fashion, it took an entire century for the eighteenth-century American singing school to blossom into the more sophisticated traditional church choir spearheaded by nineteenth century American musical behemoths Lowell Mason and Thomas Hastings.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, sixteenth-century protestant reformer, Martin Luther, nested his neophyte Lutheran choirs within the congregation to better reflect his emerging Lutheran theology and to avoid the centuries old choral enterprise of the Catholic Church which he deemed to be alienating and elitist. Yet it was not until the beginning of the seventeenth century, an entire century

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<sup>17</sup> Horace Clarence Boyer, “A Contemporary Analysis of Traditional and Contemporary Gospel Music,” in *More Than Dancing: Essays on Afro-American Music and Musicians*, ed. Irene V. (Jackson, Wesport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985).

<sup>18</sup> John Ogasapian, *Church Music in America, 1620-2000*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007).

later, that his reforms truly began to take hold.<sup>19</sup> As a final example, it is noteworthy that it took a couple centuries for the Schola Cantorum, the first catholic singing school and precursor to the preeminent Sistine Chapel Choir, to first develop as an institution, and then regulate chant singing throughout medieval Western Europe.<sup>20</sup> In the light of these historical precedents, it seems reasonable to assume that the choral trends within the mere fifty-year old CWM genre charted in this study may very well still be in their infancy.

Although CWM's young age obscures the central question for the time being, gauging choral activity within the genre from one stylistic period to the next can shed light on whether movement towards the "killing" of the church choir is indeed taking place. Even though the music of the Jesus People of the 1970s was congregational rather than choral, it did feature an easy, participation-based style of vocal polyphony which was inherently conducive to choral music.<sup>21</sup> As a result, the music of the Jesus People initiated CWM with a musical identity which possessed the potential for choral growth and the establishment of a choral tradition. Few of the stylistic characteristics of this initial period of CWM would carry over to the praise and worship era which followed in the 1980s and 1990s, however. This period, primarily through its incorporation of the choral-centric worship style of contemporary gospel, brought about the maturation of the genre's first two choirs, the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir and the Christ Church Choir. Yet

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<sup>19</sup> Herbert R. Pankratz, "Luther's Utilization of Music in School and Town in Early Reformation." *Covenant Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (August 1, 1984): 3-13.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Dyer, *Boy Singers of the Roman Schola Cantorum*, (England: Boydell & Brewer, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> The choral adaptability of *Seek Ye First*, arguably one of the most representative CWM songs of the Jesus People movement in the 1970s, is noted in the following arrangement which the publisher claims "choirs will enjoy singing" because of its "beautiful choral lines," Karen Lafferty, *Seek Ye First*, (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing, 2009), accessed February 22, 2022, [https://www.hopepublishing.com/W2988\\_SEEK\\_YE\\_FIRST/#](https://www.hopepublishing.com/W2988_SEEK_YE_FIRST/#)

again, few of the stylistic components of praise and worship would be adopted by the modern contemporary worship era beginning in the 2000s. As such, the worship-leading choir has emerged as a very different type of church choir than the praise and worship choir, most notably in how much less power it has within its modern CWM context than the praise and worship choir has in its associated worship environment.

A recap of the choral activity within each style period of CWM demonstrates that its initial period possessed choral potential although the music was primarily congregational. This gave way to an intermediate period which seemingly realized the potential of the initial period through its formation of a significant choral tradition, even though it did so in an updated pop-based musical style. Finally, in CWM's current period, its rock-influenced musical style is very much divorced from the previous two eras and thus far has generated the least choral potential amongst the three style periods. The result has yielded a version of church choir which is less robust than that of the previous period. In terms of choral vitality, CWM's choirs increased from the music of the Jesus People to the praise and worship era and then decreased from the praise and worship era to the current modern era. The up-and-down movement of choral activity within the genre renders an inconclusive assessment as to whether contemporary worship is in fact "killing" the church choir. Like the conclusion reached above concerning the consideration of church music history and the church choirs in contemporary worship, this study suggests that the current time is simply too early to render an answer to this pressing question. However, this study does posit the following hypothesis concerning the formation of choral ensembles and traditions within the contemporary worship genre:

*The establishment of church choirs within churches employing contemporary worship music is fraught with a central tension between establishing a*



*sustainable choral practice, on the one hand, and keeping up with the rapidly changing genre of contemporary worship music, on the other.*

The rate of change within the contemporary worship genre, a rate which is patently more rapid than that of the traditional and gospel worship genres, creates an unstable environment for its corresponding church choirs.<sup>22</sup> Contemporary worship has the church constantly “on the run” so to speak. The sheer amount of product as well as the rapid rate of stylistic change injected into CWM by the recording industry is ostensibly too voluminous and too accelerated for the average church or worship ministry to emulate and integrate within a choral ensemble. If it takes notable adjustments by the expert musicians in small, flexible modern worship bands to adapt to the ever-shifting sensibilities and worship song repertoire of modern CWM, it follows that these adjustments will be more difficult for the church choir due to its larger size, less pliable structure, and less experienced amateur singers.

Contemporary worship choirs, like contemporary worship bands, are caught within a perpetual quandary. On one end of the dilemma, they can elect to “keep up” and so subject themselves to the perpetual conveyor belt of new songs, singing techniques and the like. On the other end, they can choose to abandon cultural “relevance” and contemporaneity and instead maintain a “yester-style” and body of worship songs that may be from three, five, eight, ten, or fifteen years in the past. CWM choirs can likely be charted along a continuum of cultural relevance, which may account for the lack of a

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<sup>22</sup> To further illustrate CWM’s rapid rate of change, consider its comparison to black gospel, which has had only two primary stylistic periods over roughly the past century, namely traditional gospel from the 1920s-1970s, and contemporary gospel, from the 1970s to the time of this dissertation in the early 2020s, Portia Maulsby, “A Map of the Music,” *African American Review* 29, no. 2 (1995): 183-184, accessed February 22, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3042289>. CWM on the other hand has existed for just the latter half of this period and is already on its third stylistic period. For more information on the rapid turnover of CWM songs used in contemporary worship, see Daniel Silliman, “We’ve No Less Days to Sing God’s Praise, but New Worship Songs Only Last a Few Years.” *Christianity Today*, November 22, 2021.

sustained tradition among CWM choirs throughout the genre's relatively short history. In other words, each short-lived style period within CWM seems to necessitate the development of a new choral practice which exists almost exclusively for itself and within itself alone.

*Will Contemporary Worship "Kill" the Church Choir?*

In the modern stylistic period of CWM at the time of this dissertation, it is safe to say that church choirs in contemporary worship possess less power now than ever before. Moving forward into the future from this position of little power can likely indicate an even more precarious future. For several modern contexts, worship-leading choirs emerged in part due to the nostalgia for these ensembles held by church members who had experienced or participated in more powerful church choir traditions in times past. Given the relegation of church choirs in modern CWM, the culture of worship-leading choirs will likely generate fewer church goers who will have nostalgia for choral ministry than by past church choir traditions. As such, in the decades to come, future iterations of contemporary worship choirs may not be privy to the nostalgia which has fueled current ensembles.

On the other hand, church choirs in contemporary worship may receive a marked resurgence if the next stylistic period of the genre evolves to a style that is more conducive to choirs than that of the current modern period. Given the isolation of each stylistic period thus far, the contemporary church choir of the future will likely have to "start from scratch" similarly to the fresh starts depicted in the case studies of the choirs at Gateway, Bayou City Fellowship and Breakaway. However, if the period that they are born into is more favorable than that of modern CWM, it can be expected that church

choirs in these contexts may surpass the worship-leading choir in terms of the vitality of its cultural vitality.

Given the short duration of the previous eras of CWM, another shift may soon be on the horizon.<sup>23</sup> It is difficult to predict which direction or directions the genre will take, however, possible candidates are the more pop- and EDM- (electronic dance music) oriented worship music which came to the fore in the 2010s by Hillsong Young & Free, the third extension of Hillsong's worship ministry.<sup>24</sup> This style's reliance on electronic drum sets and keyboard synth layers provides it with a leaner, less dense texture that is more accommodating to choral group singing than that of the live drum set, electric guitar driven rock style of modern contemporary worship. Another possible candidate currently garnering notable attention and influence is the mixture of contemporary gospel and modern CWM championed by Maverick City Music. With much greater reliance on keyboards than guitars, especially the piano and Hammond B-3 organ, and with an SAT gospel inspired choral ensemble included as a mainstay ingredient, the unique stylistic hybrid of Maverick City Music has seemingly rejuvenated the sensibilities of the praise and worship era, contemporary worship's most accomplished choral period.<sup>25</sup> Although

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<sup>23</sup> The first period of CWM, the music of the Jesus People Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, lasted for about a decade. The second period of CWM, the praise and worship era, lasted about two decades, through the 1980s and 1990s. The third stylistic period, the modern era, has already lasted two decades through the 2000s and 2010s. As such, it is possible that another stylistic shift is imminent.

<sup>24</sup> Two representative songs of Hillsong Young and Free are Hillsong Young & Free, "Alive – Live," recorded 2013, on *We Are Young and Free (Live)*, Hillsong (HIL), streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/2mYreCutf85FtKOUVJOKT4?si=93bb62490900416e>. Hillsong Young & Free, "Highs & Lows," recorded 2018, on *Album III*, Hillsong (HIL), streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/4ZYs36pYTEIML33GLE64ig?si=dd7c9e578b7943ff>.

<sup>25</sup> A representative song of Maverick City is Maverick City, Elevation Worship, Chandler Moore, and Naomi Raine, "Jireh," recorded 2021, on *Old Church Basement*, Elevation Worship Records, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/1goiRWxiG3GTIODrdDZ7NR?si=433c98b7410b4bce>.

these two possible candidates vying for the future of contemporary worship bode well for the contemporary church choir, it is equally as possible that the future trends of the genre may become even less considerate of the choir than the current modern era.

Although the worship-leading choir possesses far less power than the other American church choirs, three observations from the case studies indicate that the ensemble may carry on. First, the worship-leading choir's capacity for promoting modern worship's tenet of congregational participation by enlivening congregational singing may likely prove essential enough to sustain the choir's existence. Stepping outside of the worship service experience, worship-leading choirs can also promote congregational engagement in the form of tightly knit "small group" communities, which supports yet another key goal which many modern CWM churches have in regard to mobilizing their congregations.

Second, worship-leading choirs may linger because, as was seen at Gateway, such modern CWM contexts can often feel compelled to support choral ministries due to their commitment to evangelical biblicism and the numerous references to choirs in the Bible. Further, megachurch environments can usually garner resources to support the formation of choirs, namely, substantial finances and a high number of volunteers. Many megachurch communities have highly skilled modern contemporary worship ensembles. The fact that these large churches have demonstrated the ability to reproduce and sustain themselves indicates that the environments which are most conducive to promoting worship-leading choirs will likely continue.

Third, the CWM choir may remain if younger generations understand it to be culturally relevant. It remains to be seen how choirs will be viewed in future eras of

CWM, whether the perceived cultural relevancy of choral ensembles will increase, decrease, or stay fixed. Gauging this perception will be critical to addressing the question posed by this concluding section. As a contribution, this study has documented the enthusiastic interest and presence in this choral ensemble and choral music in general by members of modern worship's younger generation. From the college students at Breakaway and the high school students at Bayou City Fellowship who partook eagerly in their respective worship-leading choirs, many of these young choir members will go on to lead worship in other worshipping contexts and may aspire to continue integrating choirs in worship after their positive experience as students.

The final consideration concerning the future of church choirs in contemporary worship is the power and influence of songwriting. The ability of modern worship songwriters to advocate for the involvement of church choirs in modern contemporary worship music and future iterations of the genre cannot be overstated. In many cases, the opportunities of such choirs to contribute substantially within modern worship settings are generated by songs written and produced with prominent parts for the contemporary worship choirs. An example of such a song is Andrew Peterson's choral-centric worship song, *Is He Worthy?*<sup>26</sup> The song's meteoric rise is evidenced by its prominent covers on Chris Tomlin's "Holy Roar" live album<sup>27</sup> and Shane and Shane's "Hymns Live" album,

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<sup>26</sup> Andrew Peterson co-wrote *Is He Worthy* with Ben Shive and was the featured artist in the song's original recording which also showcased the Nashville Youth Choir, Andrew Peterson, "Is he Worthy?" recorded 2018, on *Resurrection Letters Vol. 1*, Centricity Music, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/2re4s98HNIkhVZzGSeRVHb?si=9bfe915542844a74>.

<sup>27</sup> Chris Tomlin, "Is he Worthy? – Live" recorded 2019, on *Holy Roar: Live from Church*, Sparrow (SPR), streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/4GE7okHBIqiSCW3TAqBiaL?si=c98fe69e9aa4fb1>.

both occurring within just a year of the song's release in early 2018.<sup>28</sup> That Peterson's song gained such notoriety through modern contemporary worship communities is remarkable given its non-modern CWM musical texture. "Is He Worthy?" is piano-driven, excludes the acoustic or electric guitar, and incorporates orchestral string and percussion sections. Further, it features the Nashville Youth Choir singing with a vocal technique more reminiscent of the pure, straight tone classical style of sacred Renaissance and Baroque choral music which is employed by a traditional church choir than of the vocal belt orientation utilized by most worship-leading choirs. Despite these stylistic incongruities, *Is He Worthy?* was thrust into the fore of modern worship's latest and greatest worship songs, which likely prompted its rerecording by other artists in versions that adhered more closely the modern CWM format, namely by substituting the orchestral sections with guitars and live drum set and replacing Peterson's classical-styled choir with a more congregational, worship-leading choir.

*Is He Worthy?* spread its choral influence amongst numerous modern CWM worship settings such as at Breakaway Ministries which table 5.2 shows sang the song on April 9, 2019. *Is He Worthy?* impacted the Breakaway choir in three key ways. Firstly, the song afforded the choir an opportunity to step out beyond its oft-assumed auxiliary role and fill a more primary role on the Breakaway worship team. Secondly, the song allowed Breakaway's perpetually loud electric guitar and drum set- led, arena-rock worship style to explore quieter dynamics which had a refreshing, novel and profound effect on the flow of worship. And thirdly, the difficulty of the song's choral parts

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<sup>28</sup> Shane & Shane, "Is he Worthy? (Live)" recorded 2019, on *Hymns Live*, Well House Records, streaming audio, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/track/2biU8EO9TFZ6lMz8q6A92W?si=5c6f4e81a1454b0f>.

relative to Breakaway's typical choral arrangements in turn allow the song to challenge the choir's musicianship and expand its vocal technique.

### *Avenues for Further Research*

This dissertation has sought to address the specific question regarding the “death of the church choir” through several selected case studies of novel forms of choral singing within North American evangelical and charismatic churches. In doing so, it has opened many avenues for further research. A common theme emerging throughout this dissertation is the need for greater flexibility in the church choirs in modern CWM contexts. Musical flexibility is one of the key areas within this desired flexibility, particularly in terms of coveting choir members who can calculate vocal harmonies aurally and improvise choral gestures fluently. A yet unexplored connection can be made between the informal dynamics taking place within worship-leading choirs and the field of informal choral pedagogy. Whereas there are choral pedagogies arising that are driven by aural and informal approaches which do not rely on score-based formal tactics, due in

great part to the pioneering work of music educator Lucy Green,<sup>29</sup> these approaches have yet to be imported into CWM and customized for its church choirs.<sup>30</sup>

Another untapped avenue is the development of a rigorous taxonomy for the vocal gestures of CWM worship leaders. Various articulatory symbols which have been used to capture vocal gestures commonly employed by CWM worship artists, such as the fall off, have been featured in the notated musical examples for the contemporary worship choir given throughout this dissertation.<sup>31</sup> These gestures increase the contemporary worship choir's level of vocal congruence with the worship leaders that they sing alongside and enhances the choir's overall stylistic integrity with the rock-pop genre from which CWM originates. Although the CWM choir directors in this study, and likely many others, have developed ad hoc methods to notate and communicate these crucial vocal gestures to their choral singers, a more thorough taxonomy of vocal gestures in CWM is certainly needed to buffer these pedagogical efforts. Beyond teaching applications however, such a taxonomy would bolster the analysis of contemporary worship music in myriad ways, for instance by making a clear delineation between those vocal gestures which are shared

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<sup>29</sup> Lucy Green set a foundation for informal pedagogies in the music classroom in Lucy Green, *Music, Informal Learning and the School*, Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series, (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008), Lucy, Green, *Hear, Listen, Play!: How to Free Your Students' Aural, Improvisation, and Performance Skills*, (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2014) and Lucy Green, *Music Education as Critical Theory and Practice*, Ashgate Contemporary Thinkers on Critical Musicology, (Abdingdon, England: Routledge Ltd, 2017).

<sup>30</sup> An application of Lucy Green's informal pedagogies is given in Frank Abrahams, Anthony Rafaniello, Jason Vodika, Jason Westawski, and John Wilson, "Going Green: The Application of Informal Music Learning Strategies in High School Choral Ensembles" in Frank Abrahams and Paul Head ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Choral Pedagogy*, (New York, New York State: Oxford University Press, 2017), 65-86. Contemporary worship choirs could benefit from an application such as this. An example of the customization of choral research to the contemporary worship can be found in the application of vocal health principles to singers who sing contemporary Christian music in Neto, Leon, and David Meyer, "A Joyful Noise: The Vocal Health of Worship Leaders and Contemporary Christian Singers," *Journal of voice* 31, no. 2 (2016): 250.e17-250.321.

<sup>31</sup> See chapter five for a description of the vocal fall off and also for a choral score that uses small noteheads to symbolize this gesture.



amongst CWM worship leaders and those idiosyncratic practices which are employed to set one apart from other worship artists. An example of the sort of work being called for here is exemplified in the following quote by Andrew Legg in his proposed taxonomy of black gospel music:

The taxonomy of musical gestures for African American gospel music introduced in this article was originally developed as a means by which the author could record, recall and communicate the essential elements of this vast and complex performance style into an Australian musical context, where the contextual touchstones of gospel music were not present to any significant degree...The taxonomy therefore also provides the conductor/director, researcher, and performer with a defining, instructive and very usable reference tool which graphically represents cross-reference and codifies the essential gospel singing techniques...<sup>32</sup>

It is also worth digging deeper into the vocal connection between solo CWM worship leaders and their congregations as well as that between the worship-leading choir and the congregation. How do the vocal gestures of worship leaders and worship-leading choirs impact the worship singing and overall participation of congregation members specifically? Given that worship leaders “lead” the congregation and that worship-leading choirs are purported to increase the level of singing and participation of congregation members, what exactly does the vocality of worship leaders and worship-leading choirs prompt the congregation to do with their voices, and how does it contribute to the congregation’s overall involvement? How does the vocal delivery of worship leaders and worship leading choirs compare to that of the congregation? Comparing audio tracks of these three factions may likely answer these questions and crystallize this particular

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<sup>32</sup> Andrew Legg, “A Taxonomy of Musical Gestures in African American Gospel Music,” *Popular Music* 29, No.1, (January 2010), 124. Another resource that seeks to clarify the teaching of gospel singing by categorizing its various elements and styles is Trineice Robinson-Martin, *Journal of Singing* 65, no. 1 (May 1, 2009), 595+.

interaction, which is akin to the analysis of improvisational interaction in the study of jazz music.<sup>33</sup>

This study has identified the praise and worship choirs at Brooklyn Tabernacle and Christ Church as the oldest and first of their kind whose ministries have continued to the time of this dissertation. Many other significant praise and worship choral ministries have formed throughout North America, and their ministries have endured similarly such as the Prestonwood Choir (TX), the choir at The Pentecostals of Alexandria (CA), the Mount Paran Church Choir (ATL), and the Florida Worship Choir and Orchestra (FL). Scholarship on the praise and worship period would be enriched greatly by mapping these substantial choral networks and documenting their impact within CWM. It is important to capture these networks soon since it seems that networks associated with the praise and worship choir are experiencing decline at the time of this dissertation. More specifically, the community of arrangers and the system of publishers which catered to the praise and worship choir marketing are shrinking as shown by the following response from Luke Gambill, the former artistic director of Brentwood Benson, a primary publisher of content for contemporary worship choirs which ceased its operations at the end of 2021<sup>34</sup>-

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<sup>33</sup> Benjamin Givan, "Rethinking Interaction in Jazz Improvisation," *Music Theory Online* 22, no. 3 (2016), 1-24, identifies "micro-interaction" (8), "macro-interaction" (10) and "motivic interaction" (11) as three essential types of interaction that take place amongst jazz performers. Similarly, as suggested in Mark Porter, "Evangelicals, Authenticity, and Sacrament" in *Ecologies of Resonance in Christian Musicking*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 71-92, detailing the types of interactions which take place between worship bands and congregants may lead to further insight into how religious identity is constructed within worship gatherings.

<sup>34</sup> Mark Wingfield, "Historic Brentwood Benson Music Announces Sudden Closing," *The Christian Century*, December 27, 2021 accessed January 5, 2022, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/news/historic-brentwood-benson-music-announces-sudden-closing>

Luke Gambill

Honestly, I believe it was the societal shift from orchestra/choir-led to praise band-led experience that brought on the saddening demise of these gentlemen [the greats of praise and worship choir arrangers]. Gratefully, there are many churches still around who use this type of music presentation, but it's definitely not as frequent as it once was. Also, I suppose, people's tastes change.

If the decline of praise and worship networks is indeed taking place, this has ramifications for the types of resources that will be available for the CWM choir.

Whereas print-based outlets may be on the decline, which the closing of Brentwood Benson documented in this dissertation seems to indicate, non-print, audio-based, modern CWM outlets like Multitracks seem to be offering more and more backing tracks that include choral stems.<sup>35</sup> Trends such as these will likely affect how CWM choirs operate and are resourced in the future and as such, need to be studied carefully.<sup>36</sup>

Building on the typology of North American church choirs suggested in this dissertation, further research on the interactions between the various choir types would be a logical next step. For example, while approaching prospective choirs for case study subjects, I met Steven Plotts in 2017, a contemporary worship leader who had taken over leadership of the traditional church choir at Trinity Church in Burlington, North Carolina.

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<sup>35</sup> "Welcome to the Connected Stage," Multitracks, accessed February 27, 2022, <https://www.multitracks.com>, is a company based in Austin, TX, which provides the original individualized tracks (such as for drums, bass, electric guitar or synth), also referred to as stems, of a large library of modern CWM songs. These individual tracks or stems are made available in a format that can be remixed and utilized alongside a worship band in live performance. Several of the songs in Multitracks' library include choir stems, most of which are primarily "shadow harmonies."

<sup>36</sup> Prior to the pandemic, Breakaway worship leader, Jack Thweatt, was in contact with Multitracks to explore the possibility of placing some of the Breakaway choir arrangements on their platform. Whereas Multitracks was interested in stems/individualized tracks, they were not interested in providing printed music scores on their platform.

At that time, Steven had plans to convert this ensemble into a worship-leading choir.<sup>37</sup>

The examination of cases like these is pivotal to the enduring narrative of the worship wars and on how change is continuing to be negotiated within worship communities.

Finally, the fieldwork in this dissertation has happened upon several interactions between CWM and contemporary gospel which deserve further analytical attention. The first is the possible contention between this study's classification of the choirs at Brooklyn Tabernacle and Christ Church as praise and worship choirs despite their being considered gospel choirs in certain arenas.<sup>38</sup> This study asserts such nomenclature to be an error, yet an understandable error given that these choirs approximate black gospel singing to a noteworthy degree, and since black contemporary gospel has exerted considerable influence on the praise and worship genre through artists like Andrae Crouch. However, the vocal tone of the black gospel choir utilizes chest voice resonance and full-bodied vibrato much more exclusively and consistently than the praise and worship choir whose default vocal resonance mixes head and chest voice as well as straight tone and vibrato to a greater degree. Also, the vibrato of most praise and worship choirs is more subtle and less intense than the weighted, "full-bodied" vibrato of most black gospel choirs. Musicmaking within the black gospel choir and the gospel soloists and instrumentalists with which they collaborate also rely much more on aural transmission and improvisation than the praise and worship choir which depends more

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<sup>37</sup> A resource which describes the sort of transition that Steven Plotts had in mind for his church choir is given in Kenny Lamm, "Transitioning – Part 8 – Cast Vision for the New Role of the Choir," Music Academy: Outstanding Practical Worship Training, accessed September 5, 2018, <https://www.musicacademy.com/transitioning-cast-vision-for-the-new-role-of-the-choir/>.

<sup>38</sup> For the category of "Best Gospel Choir or Chorus Album," "Awards Nominations & Winners," Recording Academy: Grammy Awards, accessed December 10, 2020, <https://www.grammy.com/awards>, the Grammy's have nominated and awarded the praise and worship choirs at Christ Church and Brooklyn Tabernacle alongside black gospel choirs like the Potter's House Mass Choir and the LFT Church Choir.

heavily on written notation. As such, the praise and worship choir is much more likely to be accompanied by sections of orchestral instruments than a black gospel choir since orchestral instrumentation normally requires notated scores in order to participate in an ensemble. For these reasons, this dissertation contends that “praise and worship choir” is a more accurate classification than “gospel choir” for choirs like Christ Church. Even so, these reasons among other observations germane to this topic need to be tested against further analytical attention and debate.

Nonetheless, it must be noted that there has been a sustained pattern of musical borrowing between praise and worship choirs and gospel choirs. Indeed, interactions between contemporary gospel and modern CWM have taken place in all three worship-leading choirs in this dissertation. At Gateway, the Easter 2016 special which involved the choir utilized gospel elements in its rendition of *This Blood* (Rita Springer) The first song sung by the inauguration of the Bayou City Choir was the contemporary gospel staple, *Awesome* (Charles Jenkins) and the group also performed Hillsong’s gospelized version of *What a Beautiful Name*. Finally, the Breakaway Choir represented the most significant interaction with contemporary gospel amongst the three worship-leading choirs by including the remixed versions of *Resurrecting* and *Do it Again* from Elevation Worship’s gospelized *Evidence* album.

Whereas praise and worship choirs like the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir and Christ Church Choir sought to *emulate* black gospel as closely as possible, the worship-leading choirs seemed to *integrate* rather than emulate black gospel elements. This dynamic may indicate that the level of codification of modern CWM is possibly more distinct than that of the praise and worship era. Therefore, modern CWM may be less reliant on gospel as a

model from which to define itself. It also may be less willing to stray too far away from its aesthetical tenets. As such, modern CWM may be more inclined to *integrate* contemporary gospel rather than *emulate* it. Inquiries such as these and likely many others can be found by perusing the interactions between modern CWM and contemporary gospel.<sup>39</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The contribution that this dissertation has sought to provide is clarity concerning church choirs in contemporary worship. It has identified two church choir types within the genre, that is, the *praise and worship choir*, and the *worship-leading choir*. It has defined each of these ensembles and illustrated them throughout four ethnographic participant-observer case studies. To lend further precision to the understanding of these ensembles, stylistic analysis was employed to consider how the repertoire and musical characteristics of CWM's latter two style periods, namely the praise and worship era and the modern era, shaped and formed their respective church choir types. As such, numerous musical examples were included throughout as well as detailed accounts of the musicking of these two choral groups.

The diligent classification and categorization of CWM choirs pursued in this dissertation was prompted by the widely held belief that contemporary worship is “killing” the church choir. This dissertation has presented these two types of CWM choirs

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<sup>39</sup> Although the observations mentioned here are primarily aesthetical, that is, considering the various musical dynamics at play as various modern CWM and contemporary gospel become comingled, these aesthetic observations may likely inform the sort of “aesthetic-ethical” (148) questioning explored in Tonya Riches and Alexander Douglas, “‘Hillsong and Black’ the Ethics of Style, Representation, and Identity in the Hillsong Megachurch” in *Ethics and Christian Musicking*, edited by Nathan Myrick and Mark Porter, (Milton, Taylor and Francis, 2021), 145-163.

to both challenge this notion and to provide a more informed consideration of this popular claim. The praise and worship choir has demonstrated that CWM can foster a vibrant “choir first” culture. Alternatively, the worship-leading choir has showed that CWM can also divest the church choirs of much of its power thereby transforming it into something that is much less than what it has been. What CWM will do next to the church choir is difficult to estimate, especially since the genre is still quite young when compared to other worship traditions which fostered church choirs. As such, this dissertation claims that CWM has not “killed” the church choir, however, it does not provide a definitive answer concerning CWM’s ultimate effect on the ensemble. Regardless, this dissertation does draw upon the information provided from the participant-observer case studies and the stylistic analysis of CWM’s two choirs to prognosticate the future of church choirs in contemporary worship.

*“The Choir is Dead!”  
“Long Live the Choir!”  
Which will it be?  
We will all have to wait and see...*

### *Epilogue*

The explicit purpose of this document has been to cast church choirs in CWM in a descriptive, rather than a prescriptive, light. As such, although I have inserted myself as a participant-observer, I have refrained from providing my personal value judgment concerning these ensembles. Yet, given the high level of contention between those who advocate for the church choir and those who support contemporary worship in its *sans* choral forms, I believe that, considering this environment, it is important that I reveal my stance for the purposes of full disclosure and transparency.

In the methodology section of chapter one, I invoked the concept of multi-musicality as the approach which the other choir directors represented in this study and I have taken concerning the CWM church choir. For me, this term not only describes the type of musicianship I seek to invest in CWM church choirs, but it also defines the nature of my personal preference. I love worship music in all its varied forms and am genuinely enthusiastic when new worship genres emerge and when preexisting genres cross-pollinate. For me, they all reflect the never-ending creativity of the divine, and I consider it my lifelong calling to utilize my musicianship and ministry to foster as many worship styles as I am able. I love that I have the opportunity to serve the church by playing pipe organ at traditional services, electric guitar for contemporary gatherings, and piano for gospel selections.

Although church music history reveals the rise and fall of various styles of worship, an ebb and flow which transcends the influence of a single individual, I strive to promote the flourishing of all worship styles to the best of my ability. For those styles which might be on the decline, I lend my involvement to support their sustenance. For new, emerging worship styles, I approach them with study and engagement to support them with understanding and creativity. I believe that this approach to church music best assists the church in navigating change in worship.

For relatively new worship phenomena like the worship-leading choir, it is inevitable that new practices will emerge which should be scrutinized. For instance, is it appropriate for worship-leading choirs to be incorporated in modern CWM solely for their visual appeal? Given the subsidiary status of worship-leading choirs and the divestment of power of these ensembles relative to other North American church choirs,



how can modern CWM ensure that the experience and ministry of its choral singers are invested with adequate meaning, value, and importance? Should worship-leading choirs be made to keep pace with modern CWM's rapid turnover of worship songs? What are the long-term auditory implications of singers in worship-leading choirs given the high decibel environments in which most worship-leading choirs sing? These questions represent just some of the critical issues facing the worship-leading choir – issues which I hope to play a role in solving in the future.

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