

Liberty University

**The “New Normal” of Post-Covid Worship in a Renewed Atmosphere
of Spiritual Cooperation**

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of the School of Music
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Worship Studies

by

Donna Marie Cain

Lynchburg, Virginia

March 2023

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APPROVED BY:

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Dedication/Acknowledgments

I am eternally grateful for the gift God has given me, a heart of and for worship. As a young teenager, I came to know Jesus as my Lord and Savior during the Jesus Movement of the 1970s. I was caught up in a decade of revival-inspired Jesus music and miraculous answers to prayer. It was at the Mustard Seed Coffeehouse during these high school and early college years that I first dipped my toes into worship leadership and was privileged to be mentored by others who were just a bit older and wiser. (Thank you, Barry Gretz, Jack Haberer, Larry & Lynette Stephan, Linda Foody, Linda Coppee, Laura Templeton, Bob Steele, and Kenny Stuhr!) During this time of revival, I also experienced a taste of the unity that Jesus prayed for in John 17. The very atmosphere of the room where we gathered on those New Jersey Saturday nights always seemed charged with God's love for us and our love for each other. It was palpable. We were (still are) family in the best sense of the word, and there was always room to invite more to the table!

I am so thankful to my lovingly patient husband of almost 40 years, Ricky, who has inspired me to keep pursuing my educational and ministerial goals, even when that meant many nights of me working late into the night and him having to go to bed alone. My seven kids, Michael, Kristin, Rebecca, Shannon, Stephen, Caitlyn, and Erin, and my ten (soon to be eleven...and probably still counting) grandkids (you know who you all are) have also been very supportive and understanding of my time constraints over the past few years. Thank you, Caitlyn, for all your proofreading help!

My mother, Joan, before she passed in 2020, was always telling me how proud she was of my educational journey, and my dad Henry (also passed), was my inspiration to go back to

school and begin this journey in the first place. My sisters and brother, Gail, Dawn, Lorrie, and Hank, and all my in-laws on both sides, thank you for your encouragement as well!

Thank you also, Jeffery Schroeder, Park Street Christian Church family, pastor Colleen Swingle-Titus, and our music team, for all your interest in this project and all your support.

A special expression of gratitude to every pastor and worship leader who took the time to complete the survey questions, especially all who participated from the Liturgy Fellowship. Your insights and experiences were invaluable as they helped to form and inform this study.

Finally, thank you to all my professors at Liberty School of Music and Rawlings Seminary, who helped me to develop the spiritually cooperative theology of worship that has inspired this thesis.

Abstract

The Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020 was a clarion call to the church in America. The crisis illuminated existing challenges and introduced new ones while offering unprecedented opportunities. Almost overnight, church doors were closed, and services had to be either canceled or creatively reinvented to be shared across digital platforms. In a Christ-like display of unity, a wide array of church leaders who were more adept at technology offered their wisdom to help others struggling to keep their worshiping communities connected online. Information on the widespread effects of this Pandemic on the church and its worship is still unfolding. To this end, this study utilizes a qualitative approach combined with an interpretive phenomenological approach to survey American pastors and worship leaders to discern the main practical and theological issues facing them today, as well as discover how churches can work together more effectively to display an incarnational lifestyle of worship to both their faith communities and their local communities. This study further contributes to this body of evolving knowledge by highlighting the church's God-ordained redemptive role, especially in times of crisis. Therefore, this study aims to uncover a spiritually cooperative worship theology and promote further dialogue among 21st Century church leaders to bring a renewed and sustainable sense of unity to God's people as God leads the church through its "New Normal" to its "Next Normal."

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Terms:

Coronavirus: An infectious disease caused by the Sars-CoV2 virus.

Covid-19: According to the World Health Organization Covid-19 refers to the new coronavirus that broke out in 2019. CO for corona, VI for virus, D for disease, and 19 for the year the outbreak was first recognized, late in 2019.

Ecumenical: from the Greek (*oikumene*) any effort promoting the unity of the church.

Ecumenism: Christians intentionally learning and growing together guided by the Holy Spirit.

Epidemic: The outbreak of a rapidly spreading disease. (Generally localized).

Globalization: Describes the interconnectedness and interdependence of peoples and countries. However, this is often accompanied by huge environmental costs, exploitation of people groups and unfair distribution of profits and wealth.

Hybrid broadcasts: The practice of churches to continue livestreaming their church services after returning to inperson worship after the Covid-19 church lockdowns.

Incarnational ministry: Bringing Jesus message of love, redemption, reconciliation and healing to those outside the walls of the church. Engaging with the culture by living out the good news and meeting the practical needs of others as well as sharing the good news of the gospel with them. "The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood." (John 1:14, The Message)

Intergenerational worship: Simply means all ages worshiping together and not being segregated into age groups. It was how many families experienced corporate worship times while viewing their church service online during the church lockdowns.

Lifestyle worship: a response by worshipers to the ongoing revelation of God's love that motivates and spiritually activates acts of service in Jesus name.

Liturgy: A corporate work of the people in which every member of the body of Christ contributes according to their gifts, abilities, and passions.

Livestreaming: Churches broadcasting their worship services live using digital platforms such as Facebook or Youtube.

Micro-churches: also known as simple, organic, or home churches.

Missional: Embracing God's redemptive mission in the world, living incarnationally to be able to introduce others to the love of God, helping to restore relationships and the health of the planet.

New Normal: The post covid re-emergence of the church.

Pandemic: An epidemic that spreads across borders of countries or continents and causes extreme loss of life.

Phygital Ministry: The use of technology to further the mission of the church in both the physical and digital arenas.

Worship: from the Old English word meaning “worth-ship” From the Greek (*proskuneo*) meaning to prostrate oneself as an act of devotion.

Worship Wars: Generally refer to the internal struggle churches have experienced through the centuries of church history over strongly divisive options regarding the style of music used during the churches’ corporate worship.

Foundational Scripture Passages:
(New Revised Standard Version-Updated Edition)

1 Corinthians 12:3 “Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.”

Deuteronomy 6:5 “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

John 4:23 “But the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.”

Matthew 7:12 “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”

John 15:13 “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

John 17: 21-24 “That they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”

Luke 10:7 He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.”

Mark 12:30-31 “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Matthew 5:14-16 “Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”

Matthew 7:12 “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”

Matthew 28: 19-20 “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything

that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Micah 6:8 “He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?”

Psalm 133:1 “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!”

The “New Normal” of Post-Covid Worship in a Renewed Atmosphere of Spiritual Cooperation

Chapter One: Introduction

Navigating the Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020 was challenging for everyone. Muccari and Chow recall, “By the first week of January 2020, this unknown disease had been labeled as a new strain of coronavirus effectively named COVID-19. Travel bans, economic declines, event cancelations, lockdowns, and stay-at-home orders ensued as the virus spread worldwide and the death toll rose.”¹ Faced with the pandemic lockdowns, shelter-in-place orders, and the deadly virus, church leaders had to provide online worship services to replace in-person worship services. This allowed the more tech-savvy churches to lend aid to the less tech-savvy. This spirit of cooperation birthed amid the adverse circumstances of a worldwide pandemic fostered a new attitude of ecumenical unity or, as Jean-Daniel Pluss describes it, “a spiritual ecumenism”² as churches banded together to meet the theological and practical needs of their congregations and local communities.

The coronavirus crisis was a clarion call to the church to overcome its divisive issues and reevaluate the meaning of biblical worship within its universal redemptive mission. As a result of the crisis, a spirit of ecumenical unity has begun to grow and gain momentum. Brett McCracken believes that the coronavirus crisis provided the church with an opportunity to be a

¹ R. Muccari, & D. Chow “Coronavirus Timeline: Tracking the Critical Moments of Covid-19,” NBC News, March 10, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/coronavirus-timeline-tracking-critical-moments-covid-19-n1154341>.

² Jean-Daniel Pluss, “Covid 19, The Church, and the Challenge to Ecumenism” *Transformation* 37, no. 4 (2020): 286, <https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions> DOI: 10.1177/0265378820961545journals.sagepub.com/home/trn.

countercultural example of God’s love. He states, “In such a precarious and polarizing environment, how can churches move forward in beautiful unity (Psalm 133) rather than ugly division? It won’t be easy. But by God’s grace and the power of the Holy Spirit working to unify us in ways our flesh resists, the opportunity is there for us to be a countercultural model for the rest of the world.”³

Trevin Wax believes that for the church to become that countercultural model, we must first learn to love God with all our hearts and then love others with that same love. He emphasizes the need for church leaders to prioritize worship over all other missions saying:

When we prioritize the mission of the church over learning to love and adore our Maker, we engage in more and more efforts at growing the congregation, serving the community, and “furthering the kingdom” while running the risk of making God a means to some other end. “God wants worshipers before workers,” wrote A. W. Tozer. “Indeed, the only acceptable workers are those who have learned the lost art of worship.”⁴

This study analyzes survey results and focuses on the most common theological and practical issues facing pastors and worship leaders today. It explores the unity found in biblical lifestyle worship and shared by all true worshipers of God and the dangerous and polarizing effects of the church, as Tozer wrote, “losing the art or *foundation* of biblical worship.”⁵

Highlighting these common issues and unifying perspectives provides a spiritually cooperative worship theology that transcends divisive denominationalism and paves the way for churches to impact this nation and the world in the name of Christ.

³ Brett McCracken, “Church, Don’t Let Coronavirus Divide You,” The Gospel Coalition, May 15, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/church-dont-let-coronavirus-divide/>.

⁴ Trevin Wax, “The Remedy for the Church’s Post-Covid Malaise,” The Gospel Coalition, February 17, 2022, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/post-covid-malaise/>.

⁵ Ibid.

Background

The church in America was in crisis long before the covid health crisis hit with issues including race, gender, and church polity, generational barriers, shrinking church attendance, polarizing political affiliations, shifting worldviews, and a general sense of malaise by the American public towards the relevance of the church to their everyday lives. Therefore, the coronavirus pandemic has served as a clarion call to the church, especially here in America. It illuminated issues that already plagued the church and added additional challenges, providing it with new opportunities. For example, Karen Wilk comments on a growing movement known as Micro-Churches that existed before the pandemic but is taking full advantage of post covid opportunities. She writes,

While recent studies reveal that some people won't come back to church post-pandemic and that the consequences of this decline in congregational life might be fatal, initiatives like micro churches remind and reassure us that God is still at work in the world and in us, his people. Micro churches and other ancient/modern expressions of God's people on God's mission invite us to trust the Spirit, recognize signs of God at work in unexpected ways and places, and discover how we might also participate in the "new thing" the Spirit is doing (Isa. 43:19).⁶

The pandemic and the resulting lockdowns threw American churches and society into the digital age. Not all churches readily embraced this opportunity to enter the digital age and interact using social media platforms. With the proverbial rug pulled out from underneath them, many churches quickly had to orient themselves to the 21st-century world. As they faced this worldwide health crisis, all churches had to re-evaluate their mission, message, and, most

⁶ Karen Wilk, "What is a Micro-Church and is it a Good or Bad Development?" Banner Magazine, December 2021, <https://www.thebanner.org/columns/2021/12/what-is-a-microchurch-and-is-it-a-good-or-bad-development>.

especially, methods. This study reveals that this re-evaluation process produced a renewed spirit of ecumenism and a resurgence of biblical/lifestyle worship.

The coronavirus changed the ministry landscape for churches here in America. The church's mission to “go and make disciples” in Matthew 28:19 now includes reaching and interacting with individuals using social media platforms. During the church lockdowns, online church services provided comfort and avenues of engagement to those watching from home, many of whom might have never attended a church service without the impetus of the pandemic. These online services also allowed intergenerational worship as whole families worshiped together, often with several generations present. Bryson et al. described the advantages of online services during the pandemic, saying, “Even small churches are seeing online attendances well into the hundreds. Online services enhance inclusivity as the ill, and those who have moved beyond the parish, are able to engage with intersacred space.”⁷

Sergio Rebelo, Portuguese economist and Professor of International Finance at Kellogg School of Management in Illinois, projects that “COVID-19 will leave a lasting imprint on the world economy, causing permanent changes and teaching important lessons. The pandemic crisis has accelerated the pace of digital transformation, with further expansion in e-commerce and increases in the pace of adoption of telemedicine, videoconferencing, online teaching, and fintech.”⁸ One of these important lessons is that the digital age is here to stay.

⁷ John R., Bryson, Lauren Andres, and Andrew Davies, "COVID-19, Virtual Church Services and a New Temporary Geography of Home," *Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Sociale Geografie* 111, no. 3 (2020): 360-372.

⁸ Jean-Daniel Pluss, “Covid 19, The Church, and the Challenge to Ecumenism.”

⁸ Sergio Rebelo, “Life Post-COVID 19: Six Prominent Thinkers Reflect on How the Pandemic has Changed the World,” The International Monetary Fund, June 20, 2020, <https://www.imf.org/Publications/fandd/issues/2020/06/how-will-the-world-be-different-after-covid-19>.

The digital age became a reality for churches during the pandemic. Churches either began or expanded their digital ministries. Now post covid, many churches are discovering the benefits of melding their physical service with digital outreach opportunities. This melding takes advantage of current successful business and marketing trends. Dr. Ed Love explains, “Across our culture, retailers, and organizations have embraced the idea of Phygital marketing and business models that meld physical and digital experiences. It’s no longer a matter of either/or; it is both/and.”⁹ Love continues, “...Phygital ministry is not a replacement of community, but a birth of a new kind of community. Physical ministry uses technology as a tool to complement the mission of the church in both the physical and digital realms- to grow across multiple contexts and to multiply everywhere that people gather, online or in person.”¹⁰

Leonard Sweet stresses that this propulsion into the digital era has opened a “new front door to the church,” reaching a whole community of online worshipers and providing unprecedented opportunities for spiritual formation, service, and community via the internet.¹¹

He states:

The church is now online. It is slowly learning to be the church in its now native digital culture. What was at first condemned as a ‘front’ for white privilege and elitism (progressives) and an affront to the faith once and for all delivered to the saints (traditionalists) is now an ecclesiological imperative (Woods 2020). Jesus invites us continually into new relationships with reality, and a Twitter/TikTok, Google, Instagram, and Facebook (TGIF) world is our new reality.¹²

⁹ Ed Love, quoted in Josh Gregoire (blog) “Welcome to the Era of the Phygital Church,” Aspen Group, October 22, 2020, <https://www.aspengroup.com>blog>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Leonard Sweet, "From Semiotic Exegesis to Contextual Ecclesiology: The Hermeneutics of Missional Faith in the COVIDian Era," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 77, no. 4 (2021), 5.

¹² Sweet, "From Semiotic Exegesis," (2021), 5.

Anna Cho urges churches to consider the digital ministry opportunities created by the covid pandemic. “After COVID-19, our life may retain aspects of a non-face-to-face lifestyle in that many of our activity spaces will be online. If so, we need to actively use online to maintain and build the life and gatherings of the church community. So how can we establish and maintain the life and gathering of the church community online, and can these things help build and maintain a church community?”¹³ These are essential questions for all churches to consider. The covid crisis has provided new opportunities for churches to reach a whole segment of people who identify as a digital community of faith. Anna Covarrubias firmly believes the church today must embrace digital technology. She actively promotes the concept of a “digital reformation” for effective outreach. She explains, “Digital Reformation is one that focuses on new means of community, communication, personal relationships, and collaboration rather than on dogmas, politics, and structural leadership. Drescher (2011) claims that the integration of digital resources and connectivity to others impacts the spiritual lives of people well beyond the brick-and-mortar church.”¹⁴

The Covid crisis forced church leaders to be innovative and creative in using digital media. It made the embrace of digital technology mandatory for church members who wished to participate in the worship life of the church. Kelly O’Connor argues that the post covid church must be willing to continue to be innovative and creative in outreach. Using the thoughts of Leonard Sweet to emphasize this point, O’Connor states, “Leonard Sweet believes that the church has entered a “perfect storm” of postmodernity, post-Christendom, and post-Scale. With

¹³ Anna Cho, “For the Church Community after COVID-19,” *Dialog*. 60, no.1 (February 2021):14-21.

¹⁴ Anna Covarrubias, "The Church in a Fast-Changing World," (PhD diss., Azusa Pacific University, 2021), 35, Order No. 28543924.

fewer people coming to the church to feed their spiritual hunger, it is up to the church to find new and innovative ways to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ.”¹⁵

In instance after instance, the Covid crisis brought church leaders together in an almost unprecedented display of support and cooperation. The survey results show that churches worked together as the unified body of Christ to meet the congregation's and community's everyday needs while displaying lifestyle worship.

Covid-19 brought the incarnational meaning of worship to the forefront. This shared experience of worship that goes beyond the church doors forms the foundation of this thesis's spiritually cooperative worship theology. The spirit of ecumenism that has emerged post covid is a positive reminder that God’s people are the vessels of God’s loving presence, especially during times of tragedy. The church, as the body of Christ, is the conduit of that love. When worship is understood, expressed biblically, and lived incarnationally, God is glorified, lives are transformed, and people are drawn to embrace God’s love.

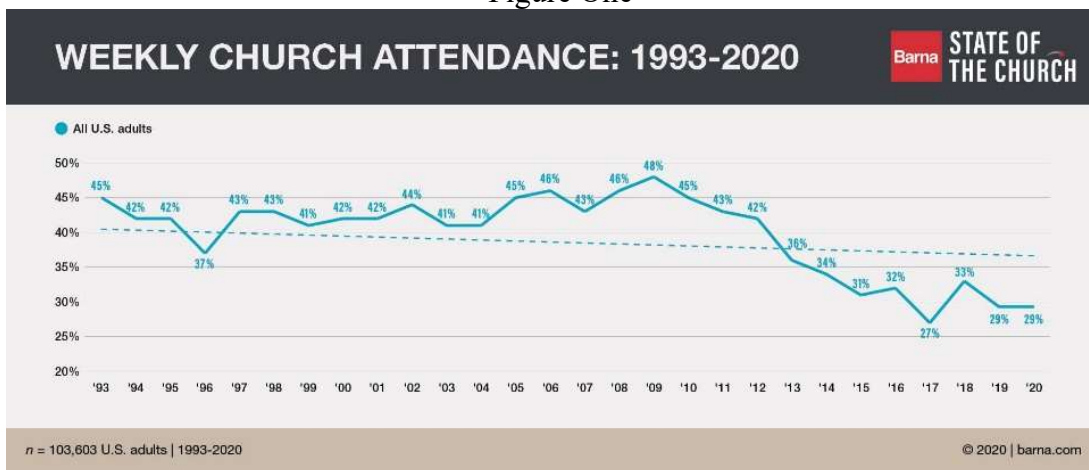
The “New Normal” for churches to embrace is that this is a time full of potential opportunities for ministry and outreach. This is not a time for churches to retreat to their comfortable pre covid crisis existences. As Gregory Hunt reminds his readers:

Your crisis isn’t just an unfortunate interruption or inconvenient detour, and your goal isn’t just to get back on track or return, as much as possible, to the way things were before. God intends to use your crisis to draw you further along toward your full potential as a partner in God’s mission. Your goal is to look for lessons that will allow you to emerge from your crisis not only different—which is inevitable—but better.¹⁶

¹⁵ Kelley O’Connor, "Surviving the Storm: Church Online 24/7," (PhD diss., Drew University, 2016), 5. Order No. 10106243.

¹⁶ Gregory Hunt, “Leading Congregations through Crisis: Pursuing God's Purpose Through Perilous Times,” (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 2012, Accessed January 27, 2022), 93, ProQuest E-book Central.

Figure One



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The available statistical data on the state of the church in America is a wake-up call to the church of the 21st century to emerge from this health crisis as a much better version of itself. Even before the coronavirus appeared in 2020, Barna’s surveys indicate that church attendance numbers in the U.S. had steadily declined over the past two decades. Just before covid, the number of Americans attending church services was about three out of ten surveyed.¹⁸ David Kinnaman, the president of Barna, raises some very relevant issues, especially in the aftermath of Covid-19, “The U.S. population is undergoing major religious, social, demographic, and digital change. The rise of digital life, including social media, the economic crisis, changing attitudes about social issues, and the emergence of younger generations on the scene are some of the factors that are likely to form undercurrents recalibrating Americans’ connection to faith and to

¹⁷ David Kinnaman, “Signs of Decline and Hope Among Key Metrics of Faith,” Faith and Christianity in State of the Church 2020, March 4, 2020, www.barna.com/research/changing-state-of-the-church/.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Christianity.”¹⁹ Kinnaman goes on to pose questions that directly impact the future direction of the church and its worship practices:

Generational change is certainly taking place, but older generations (Boomers and Elders) are drifting away from conventional church attendance at roughly the same pace as younger generations (Gen X and Millennials). Why is that? What can church leaders do to engage the one-quarter of Millennials who remain active in Christian practice? How can the Bible-loyal readers continue to form the bedrock of a resilient Church? In what ways can prayer—the most universal of spiritual activities—be sparked to create spiritual renewal in this society?²⁰

Many factors account for the steady decline in church attendance over the past two decades. However, the good news is that the worldwide covid crisis has produced a renewed atmosphere of spiritual cooperation among churches, locally and globally. Thus, opening the door for churches to work together to effect change and meet the needs of their communities on a larger scale than they ever could have by simply working alone. Pluss comments on this attitude of ecumenical unity gaining ground today:

A new awareness of belonging to the Body of Christ on a global level is indeed growing. It focuses on what believers of all shapes and colors have in common, their faith in Jesus Christ; it can be expressed in common prayers, their hope in common witness, and their love in common concern. This attitude can be subsumed as spiritual ecumenism. It is expressed by praying together with Christians of other denominations, for instance, by video conferencing for weekly prayer meetings and support, or by having joint church services, online or physically distanced but socially and spiritually united.²¹

This spiritually cooperative worship theology is a perspective that brings a renewed sense of unity to the whole body of Christ. This unity is crucial to the future of the church. To achieve this unity, the church must rediscover the basic tenets of true biblical worship. To “worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24, English Standard Version), worship must become a lifestyle of love

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ David Kinnaman, “Signs of Decline and Hope.”

²¹ Pluss, “Covid -19, the Church, and the Challenge to Ecumenism.”

for God filled with a passion for God’s transformational presence and a compassionate love for others that is seen in visible acts of service. The Message translation of Romans 12:1-2 clearly explains lifestyle worship in words every person can readily understand.

So, here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going to work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you and develops well-formed maturity in you.

By biblical standards, according to Romans 12: 1-2, worship is to become the lifestyle of every person indwelt by God’s Holy Spirit. Every believer has gifts to share and a part in reaching humanity. Lamin and McClymond explain,

Worship – the offering of praise and prayer towards God – has been an almost universal practice throughout recorded human history. Christian “liturgy” is a “public work” performed on behalf of humankind, a “corporate endeavor” in which every member of the body of Christ has a part to play, according to a distribution of gifts and tasks. Throughout all the constancies and varieties of history, geography, and the human condition and cultures, the ritual and symbolic forms vary, while theologically, the consistent Christian intention is to worship the Father in Spirit and in Truth (see John 4:23–26), while sacramentally receiving “all the good gifts that come down from the Father of lights” (James 1:17–18), which are mediated by the incarnate Son and Lord (1 Corinthians 8:4–6) and reach humankind under the seal of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13–14).²²

In his classic book R.C. Sproul asks, “How then shall we worship?”²³ Sproul says, “We are living in a time when there is a manifest crisis of worship in the church. It is almost as if we

²² Sanneh Lamin and Michael McClymond, *Wiley Blackwell Companion to World Christianity* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2016), 318, doi:10.1002/9781118556115.

²³ R.C. Sproul, “How Then Shall We Worship?” (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2013), 14.

are in the midst of a rebellion among people who find church less meaningful. They are bored. They see the experience of Sunday morning as an exercise in irrelevance.”²⁴

He continues, “The issue is not what stimulates or excites us. Though that is not an insignificant or unimportant issue, our overriding issue needs to be what is pleasing to God?”²⁵

Rory Noland agrees that worship must be pleasing to God. He states,

I can’t help but notice that most everyone’s concept of worship, including my own, mirrors our personal experience and preferences. But what about God? What does God think about worship? We assume that if the worship feels right to us, it must feel right to God, which is presumptuous. How do we know for sure how God feels about our particular brand of worship? Does God have a favorite style of music? Is the style of music even important to God?²⁶

Unfortunately, this heatedly debated topic of worship has caused more division than unity throughout the church’s history. Yet Marva Dawn has hope for the future of God’s worshipping church.

Worship is a much-debated subject in twenty-first-century North America. In the past three or four decades, many churches have had bitter fights over worship issues, and many congregations have split internally or externally. In the present, thank God, it seems that more church leaders and congregations are trying to ask deeper questions and to think through the issues more biblically and theologically and ecclesiologically.”²⁷

Thinking through the issues surrounding worship is especially relevant in this “new normal” reality of post covid life. It is the path to the “next-normal” era and discovering God’s future plans. In the churches, “next-normal” worship must unite God’s people and no longer remain an issue that divides them. Dawn believes that the “worship wars” of the past few

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Rory Noland, *Transforming Worship: Planning and Leading Sunday Services as if Spiritual Formation Mattered* (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 14. *ProQuest E-book Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=6638714>.

²⁷ Marva Dawn, *How Shall We Worship? Biblical Guidelines for the Worship Wars* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 2003), xiii.

decades have done much internal damage to individual churches and external damage to the world's perception of the church as a whole. She states, "Many formerly powerful churches have fallen apart or have become seriously weakened either from snapping at the crooked places or from festering wounds that can't be healed."²⁸ She asks a question that every church leader needs to ask today, "Why don't our churches seem to be affecting our culture? Why do so many who say they are "spiritual" want nothing to do with our churches' worship?"²⁹ The pandemic has provided new opportunities for the church in America to affect the culture. This effect is directly proportional to the unity experienced internally, and the unity displayed to the world. A unity centered on a biblical and experiential understanding of worship as Jesus described it. "And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22: 37- 40, English Standard Version).

Worship, therefore, is both an attitude of the heart and a resulting action. It is devotion (personal and corporate piety) and action (individual and corporate acts of charity). This is why Robert Webber describes worship as a verb.³⁰ Vernon M. Whaley teaches that *worship* is a form of the old English word translated: "*worth-ship*."³¹ He explains, "The word implies that one

²⁸ Marva Dawn, *How Shall We Worship?* 9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Robert E. Webber, *Worship is a Verb* (Carol Stream: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 2.

³¹ Vernon M. Whaley, *The Dynamics of Corporate Worship* (Virginia Beach: Academx Publishing Services, Inc., 2009), 20.

should attribute worth to an object worshiped. It comes from the Greek word *proskuneo*, meaning to prostrate oneself in reverence. It is the word Jesus used for worship in John 4:24.”³²

These writers agree that worship is neither music nor any one musical style. Therefore, music, especially singing, is just one method of expressing an individual or corporate response to God’s invitation to know and be known (see Galatians 4: 8-11). Gwen Sellers writes, “In the New Testament, we see Jesus ask many questions. He did not just tell people who He was. He didn't even just tell them whom He knew they were. He invited them to relate in a real way. He invited them to know Him and to be known by Him. It is in our relationship with God that we are most known. And it is in knowing Him that we have the fullness of life.”³³ As Noland explains, “The ultimate goal is for worshipers to encounter the life-altering, character- shaping presence of God”³⁴ Therefore, Biblical worship is a transformational lifestyle of devotion to God combined with humble and loving service to others. Schiefelbein and Kenneth add, “One thing that must be addressed before reflecting on particular issues is to define worship from a theological perspective or to use John Witvliet's (2006) modes of liturgical discourse, in terms of “deep meaning and purpose.”³⁵ This study explores worship’s deep meaning and purpose and the theological perspectives and practical challenges regarding worship shared by the pastors and worship leaders surveyed.

³² Vernon M. Whaley, *The Dynamics of Corporate Worship*, 20.

³³ Gwen Sellers, “The Desire to Know and Be Known” Blogos: Blogging God’s Word, June 22, 2015, <https://www.blogos.org/christianlifeandgrowth/being-known.php>.

³⁴ Rory Noland, *Transforming Worship*, 14.

³⁵ Kyle Kenneth and Guerrero Schiefelbein, "Whether One May Flee from Digital Worship: Reflections on Sacramental Ministry in a Public Health Crisis," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 59, no. 2 (2020): 49-77.

Regarding worship as a musical expression, Deborah Justice believes that all individual churches need to embrace greater diversity in musical styles if they wish for Christian worship to continue to impact shaping the culture around them.

Congregations need to feel a sense of identity through their musical expressions. In some cases, the weekly practice of worship is hanging in this balance: congregations that have struggled to reach a point of equilibrium do not want to shake that boat only recently righted. Having reached an understanding through the traditional–contemporary arrangement, some of these congregations are just content to have weathered a cultural storm. Other congregations have emerged from the worship wars with fewer wounds. The wars have helped them gain greater insights into deeper currents of overlapping streams of American culture. These congregations position the traditional–contemporary configuration as an active point of strength. They experience positive feelings about supporting diverse, yet compatible, expressions of worship that tie them to larger American discourses on culture and society.³⁶

This study highlights the unity among all believers who understand that worship in spirit and truth is an authentic response to the gospel message of redemption, resulting in lives set free to worship God and serve others. This emergent spiritually cooperative worship theology emphasizes the church’s responsibility, including every individual member, to carry the transforming message of the gospel beyond the church halls or digital walls where God is corporately worshiped and out into the community. The pandemic caused churches to close their doors but could not stop believers from worshiping God in spirit and truth. Because God can be worshiped anywhere and anytime, personal worship was never hindered by the church lockdowns. Corporate worship took on new digital forms, and believers still gathered to worship God, albeit using their computers and other electronic devices. Shelter-in-place mandates prompted churches to care for their neighbors, especially the elderly. The survey results show that God’s people found many creative ways to worship God. Their lifestyle worship overflowed

³⁶ Deborah R. Justice, “The Curious Longevity of the Traditional–Contemporary Divide: Mainline Musical Choices in Post–Worship War America,” *Liturgy* 32, no. 1 (2017), 16-23, DOI: 10.1080/0458063X.2016.1229438.

into caring for the genuine physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of their church fellowships and surrounding communities.

J. Ligon Ducan III extols the importance of corporate worship. Still, at the same time, he warns of the hypocrisy that can come from compartmentalizing worship by not surrendering one's *whole* life to God. He writes,

Christian corporate worship both requires and shapes our understanding of the Bible's teaching about God. The doctrine of God informs our corporate worship, and, in turn, our corporate worship refines our practical comprehension and embrace of the doctrine of God. It is true, of course, that worship in all of life impacts our corporate worship. Those who do not "present (their) bodies a living and holy sacrifice" are both unprepared to enter into the fullness of corporate worship as it is envisioned in the word and are not expressing one of its principle intended ethical effects. In fact, the person in whom there is an experiential dissonance between activity in gathered worship and worship in the rest of life is in danger of creating a parallel but juxtaposed life, the breeding ground of a fatal spiritual hypocrisy."³⁷

Edmund P. Clowney shares Ligon Ducan's high view of corporate worship, "Above all, we must prize the blessing of corporate worship. The church of the Lord, gathered for worship, marks the pinnacle of our fellowship with the Lord and with one another. The church is the people of God, the new humanity, the beginning of the new creation, a colony of heaven (Heb. 13:14)."³⁸

This is why Robert Webber taught that biblical worship must be understood in terms of content (the Gospel/redemption), structure (the form used to communicate), and style (open, flexible, and relative to the culture).³⁹ He believed this was how worship becomes the narrative that draws God's people together as one body, allows God to communicate through the service

³⁷ Philip Graham Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan III, eds., *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2011), Chapter 2. Accessed February 22, 2023, ProQuest E-book Central.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Chapter 4.

³⁹ Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 263.

of the Word, and narrates the response of thanksgiving at God's table.⁴⁰ Vernon Whaley agrees that worship integrates acts of service. He states,

Worship is a lifestyle that begins with worship to the Lord and concludes with service to and with fellow servants. Paul commends Epaphroditus as one who ministered to his needs (Phil. 2:25). Ministered in this passage is the same word used for ministry in the temple by the high priest. It implies much sacredness. The implication is that serving God's people and ministry unto the Lord are one and the same. We have a responsibility to serve God's people with an attitude of love coupled with actions that illustrate genuine love of God as Lord.⁴¹

While the history of the Church is fraught with horrific accounts of unconscionable behavior in the name of Christ, history reveals that there has always been a remnant, however humanly imperfect, who has acted justly, loved mercy, and walked humbly with God (see Micah 6:8). A deeper dive focused on their story shows that God's people often served the needs of their neighbors during times of crisis bringing spiritual, emotional, medical, and financial relief to those in need. Sarah Yeomans illustrates this in her research regarding the Antonine Plague of the Second Century AD. She posits this plague was the first health crisis facing the early Christians.⁴² J.D. Pluss further adds that this health crisis and the loving response of Christians in ministering to their neighbors added to the church's growth at that time. Pluss states, "The first pandemic that affected Christianity was probably the Antonine Plague (165–180 AD). It is commonly argued that Christianity grew during that time because Christians made a point to care for the sick."⁴³ This prevailing attitude of caring for others in the church and the community was manifest not only in times of crisis but was a foundational practice of the early believers. Susan

⁴⁰ Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New*, 263.

⁴¹ Whaley, "The Dynamics of Corporate Worship," 170.

⁴² Sarah K. Yeomans, "Classical Corner, The Antonine Plague and the Spread of Christianity," *Biblical Archaeology Review*, January 20, 2022, <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/daily-life-and-practice/the-antonine-plague-and-the-spread-of-christianity/>.

⁴³ Pluss, "Covid -19, the Church, and the Challenge to Ecumenism."

Wessel agrees: “The early Christians were deeply engaged with every facet of compassion. They defined it, argued about it, urged people to practice it, and described in graphic detail how and when it must thrive. With a shared moral concern for human flourishing, they articulated the meaning and relevance of compassion for the Christian life.”⁴⁴

The Hebrew nation understood its responsibility to care for its neighbors. The following two verses illustrate this principle: “Treat them like native-born Israelites and love them as you love yourself. Remember that you were once foreigners living in the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 19:34) and “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8, NLT). Bob Kauflin applies this biblical foundation for worship to modern-day experience: “Sunday may be the high point of our week, but it’s not the only point. During the week, we live lives of worship when we love our families, resist temptation, courageously speak up for the oppressed, stand against evil, and proclaim the gospel. In all these things, we are the worshipping church scattered.”⁴⁵

However, even a cursory exploration of the history of corporate worship throughout the ages reveals that *worship’s deep meaning and purpose* have often been overshadowed and obscured by personal preference, ambition, and fear of change. As a result, “worship wars” have existed since the Garden of Eden and sadly persist. When the true meaning of biblical worship has been perverted to serve human egos and agendas, worship and *disunity* are often more likely to be associated with each other, especially by those on the outside of the church looking in.

⁴⁴ Susan Wessel, "The Setting," In *Passion and Compassion in Early Christianity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 1-2, doi:10.1017/CBO9781316408841.003.

⁴⁵ Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters: Leading Others to Encounter the Greatness of God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 210.

However, there are positive consistencies that do exist in the worship history of the church. These commonalities are especially apparent in times of crisis, as evidenced by how many churches served their members and their surrounding communities during the recent Covid crisis. This study uncovers the biblical perspectives that have united God's church in the past and continue to unite God's church today in this digital age. As such, identifying these common beliefs and practices is an essential ingredient for a renewed ecumenical dialogue among churches. To this end, Wendlinder insightfully states the reason for Christian unity, "The focus of ecumenism is, after all, not on how big Christianity is, but on how well it manifests the body of Christ in the world."⁴⁶

A spiritually cooperative worship theology is also discovered in this study by reviewing the works of several theologians. Loreli Fuchs wrote that church unity or an "ecumenical ecclesiology" could be achieved within and among churches through (Koinonia) fellowship.⁴⁷ In reviewing the work of Fuchs, N. H. Taylor comments, "The author herself emphasizes, the goals of ecumenism will not be realized by the reading and writing of theological texts, but by the realization of unity among Christians, founded on a shared sense of the essential characteristics of the universal Church."⁴⁸ Kim Nakjung also concurs that Koinonia is foundational for unity, but her study expands to include four more foundational pieces. In her research focused on the essence of online worship among Northern Virginia Korean churches during the Covid-19

⁴⁶ Anastasia Wendlinder, "Ecclesia and Ecumenism in the Body of Christ: Unity from the Ground-Up," *Religions* 9, no. 12 (2018): 390.

⁴⁷ Loreli F. Fuchs, *Koinonia and the Quest for an Ecumenical Ecclesiology: From Foundations through Dialogue to Symbolic Competence for Communionality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2012; Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2008), 565.

⁴⁸ N. H. Taylor, "Koinonia and the Quest for an Ecumenical Ecclesiology Book Review," *The Heythrop Journal* 53, no. 6 (2012): 1044. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2265.2012.00769_17.x.

Pandemic, Nakjung identifies five unifying and foundational characteristics of a worshipping congregation, which she refers to as “the five marks of the church.”⁴⁹ These are Koinonia (fellowship); Kerygma (preaching); Didache (teaching); Diakonia (service); and Liturgia or Liturgy (public worship).⁵⁰ Nakjung states, “Preserving the essence of worship encompasses maintaining the five marks of the church. This means that worship is conducted in a liturgical sense and in a worship lifestyle that includes Kerygma, Didache, Koinonia, Diakonia, and Liturgia whether in public, private, in person, or online worship.”⁵¹ Bryan Chapell believes that these worship patterns established by the early church still influence most churches today and unite them not only with each other but with centuries of believers who have come before.⁵²

This research reveals that the elements of worship that bring unity to the body of Christ have existed from the beginning of the New Testament church and find their roots in the Hebrew scriptures. These elements coalesce in Jesus’ command to love God with passion and others with compassion (See Matthew 32: 34-40). A brief study of the history of the church as it has responded well in past times of crisis is a further focus of this research as it is another indication of the way the body of Christ is fulfilling and has fulfilled Jesus’ prayer for unity:

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me (John 17: 20-23, ESV).

⁴⁹ Kim Nakjung, “A Study on the Essence of Worship in Online Groups Under Covid-19 Pandemic: Focus on Korean Ministers in the Northern Virginia Area” (PhD diss., Liberty University, 2021), *Doctoral Dissertations and Projects*. 3163. <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/doctoral/3163>.

⁵⁰ Nakjung, “A Study on the Essence of Worship in Online Groups.”

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Worship: Letting the Gospel Shape Our Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 19.

The covid crisis brought Biblical/lifestyle worship to the forefront. As devastating as it was, the pandemic provided many opportunities for the church to worship God through acts of service to others. It was a wake-up call to get on board with what God was doing. The post-Covid world is being called the “new normal.” The atmosphere has changed, and there is no going back. The lessons learned by so many during the church lockdowns were invaluable, and the opportunities for developing new ministries, especially in the area of ministry to a growing digital community, are laden with purpose and potential.

Lifestyle worship can continue to unify the body of Christ and positively affect the post-Christian cultural landscape here in America.

And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect (Romans 12: 1-2, New Living Translation).

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Doing all to the glory of God is lifestyle worship.

Statement of the Problem

The post-Covid world is a different place than it was before the pandemic. The lockdowns, loss of loved ones, fear, masks, isolation, sheltering in place, and social distancing have affected virtually everyone on the planet. There is no going back to “normal” for individuals, and certainly not for the church. Leonard Sweet comments, “In the providence of God, we are in this moment by an arranged marriage between the God who made us and the mission field in which we find ourselves – a 21st-century world with 22nd-century children and

grandchildren.”⁵³ Sweet further comments, “The Covid-19 pandemic is yanking the church out of its stuckness in the status quo and kick-starting some creativity and imagination for the Jesus mission of high expectations, big thrills, and expansive dreams. Crisis can be a shock treatment that exposes our bad default settings and opens us up to resets and reboots for new encounters with burning bushes, smoking mountains, and eureka lightbulbs.”⁵⁴

The challenge to the church is to recognize the “New Normal” and effectively teach and guide this and future generations to the “Next Normal” through an understanding of true biblical worship. Therefore, there is an increased need for cooperation among churches to function as one body in the name of Christ to advance the healing and liberating message of the gospel in both word and deed. The worshiping body of Christ in the twenty-first century must embrace a spirit of ecumenism and demonstrate unity rooted in a biblical and incarnational lifestyle of worship.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study is to identify the practical and theological challenges facing church leaders today and to discover ways that church leaders can continue in the spirit of unity to display an incarnational biblical lifestyle of worship more effectively to their congregations and their respective local communities and spread the message of the gospel to the world.

To this end, this study develops a cooperative worship theology to stimulate ongoing dialogue among church leaders and promote a continued atmosphere of spiritual cooperation. This unified worship theology is drawn from the input of the pastors and worship leaders

⁵³ Leonard Sweet, "From Semiotic Exegesis to Contextual Ecclesiology: The Hermeneutics of Missional Faith in the COVIDian Era," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 77, no. 4 (2021), 2.

⁵⁴Ibid., 8.

surveyed. It includes biblical foundations of worship in the Old and New Testaments and traces how historically the church has responded to crises.

Significance of the Study

The Covid-19 pandemic presented many challenges to pastors and worship leaders. Chief among them, initially, was the need to move to online worship services instead of in-person services. Every facet of the body of Christ was affected, from the highest liturgical expressions to informal home church or meta-church gatherings. Currently, one of the issues that many churches are navigating is the question of how to minister effectively to the post covid digital worshipping community, many of whom wish to permanently participate in the life and ministry of the church via online or hybrid platforms. In light of this “new normal” opportunity, David Brown stresses that churches must offer interactive platforms moving forward. He states:

To maximize effectiveness, the virtual experience must always be complete. To do so, the virtual experience must at least replicate all essential aspects of the physical interaction. A distinction that must not be lost is that internet users create community by directly sharing experiences through simulated computer presences using interaction without reciprocity, one does not have to give anything to participate. By contrast, audiences for broadcast media build community through reciprocity without interaction. Therefore, pastors and church leaders must not lose sight of the fact that savvy internet audiences have come to expect and thrive on the ability to interact, if only through an avatar. The inability of an internet audience to interact may alone cripple the best intentions to go virtual.⁵⁵

Most churches have reopened three years after the first wave of Covid-19 and the subsequent church lockdowns. Still, the threat of future variants and a new growing digital community have solidified the need for churches to continue offering hybrid worship services and to expand their technology-mediated communication with an increased and interactive social

⁵⁵ David K. Brown, "The Contribution of Technology in Church Revitalization among Churches Cooperating with Acts 2 Journey between 2010 and 2018, with Implications for the Future of Church Growth" (PhD diss., Southwestern Assemblies of God University, 2021), 146-147, Order No. 28652907.

media presence. As a result, many churches are embracing a new way to “have church,” combining physical and digital ministries known as “Phygital church.” Ed Love states, “A digital church experience may not provide the hugs, high fives, and holy kisses that churches have come to appreciate...virtual church experiences may not be for everybody, but there is a high likelihood that a growing percentage of individuals...will only be reached through a virtual church experience and virtual discipleship.”⁵⁶

When Covid-19 first arrived on the scene early in 2020, creating technology-mediated worship services was more of a challenge for some churches than others. Before Covid-19, only churches, primarily more significant in size and budget, had a thriving social media presence and broadcast their church worship services weekly. However, even for them, the church lockdowns presented new challenges. Important choices had to be made concerning the content and length of a completely online worship service. Among the challenges was that the pastors had no physical congregation to interact with as they preached. With the church buildings on lockdown and singing proven to be a superspreader of the virus, no choir could safely perform together, no worship team or band could safely facilitate a worship set, there was no way to share communion elements, and dare it to be mentioned, no way to physically pass the collection plate. The playing field was leveled almost overnight as every pastor and worship leader was united in a quest to provide meaningful and engaging worship services to their “sheltering-in-place” congregations.

By utilizing survey questions and analyzing the survey results, this study uncovers ways that churches can continue with a spirit of unity to display biblical lifestyle worship more

⁵⁶ Tricia Rife, “Enter Phygital Church,” Weslife Newsletter of the Wesleyan Church, February 15, 2021, <https://www.wesleyan.org/enter-phygital-church>.

effectively to their congregants and their local and global communities. Further, this study explores lifestyle worship from a historical and biblical perspective as it traces the church's responses during past crises. This study supports that the solidarity shared among many American churches during the Covid crisis was based on practicing lifestyle worship. Lifestyle worship is a perspective that is both spiritual and practical and it provides a spiritually cooperative worship theology applicable to all churches moving forward in the digital age of this 21st – century world.

Research Questions

Research Questions:

1. How can pastors and worship leaders continue in the spirit of unity to display lifestyle worship more effectively to congregants and the outside community?
2. What are the practical and theological challenges facing pastors and worship leaders that the Covid crisis illuminated within the church?

Hypotheses

Research Question 1 may be answered with the following hypothesis:

Pastors and worship leaders can continue in the spirit of unity to display lifestyle worship more effectively to congregants and the outside community by focusing on teaching and demonstrating biblical lifestyle worship to their congregations, engaging in worthwhile community projects with other denominations, and addressing relevant issues by dialoguing together regularly with other church and community leaders.

Research Question 2 may be answered with the following hypothesis:

The practical and theological challenges facing pastors and worship leaders highlighted during the Covid crisis may include counteracting declining in-person attendance, ministering

effectively to a growing online worshipping community, fostering intergenerational relationships, and teaching biblical lifestyle worship.

Core Concepts

The core concepts of this study are unity and biblical/incarnational lifestyle worship. The renewed spirit of ecumenism that began during the coronavirus Pandemic in 2020 is evidence that unity can be achieved when churches focus on promoting God's agenda and spreading God's message of love for the whole world. Biblical lifestyle worship should be every believer's chosen response to the revelation of the gospel message. This worship lifestyle begins with the worship of God. As God's presence renews and transforms lives those very same loved-by-God people become the "sent ones" who go from their worship gatherings and serve the needs of people around them...physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. Webber emphasized that an essential component of corporate worship is the sending forth of God's people. "It (the sending) narrates the people's movement out of worship and into the world to love and serve the Lord."⁵⁷ He further states, "Worship...has the power to minister to the worshipping community and to the world beyond. The challenge for pastors and worship leaders is to become sensitized to the way in which worship may touch the lives of the worshipping people and at the same time reach out to a hurting world."⁵⁸

Lifestyle worship then is a healing and unifying force that can carry the church forward in relevance, authenticity, and power in this century and into the future. As churches continue

⁵⁷ Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 263.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

practicing biblical lifestyle worship, the world will see God's love manifested. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study is to highlight the unity among all who practice true biblical lifestyle worship. This is achieved by examining the practical and theological challenges facing church leaders post covid. The results of the survey questions form and inform this study. The collective understanding of worship leaders and pastors regarding the issues illuminated by the covid crisis provide the foundation for a spiritually cooperative worship theology. This ecumenical perspective can encourage renewed dialogue and promote further unity in the body of Christ. This is especially relevant as the church moves forward in the "new normal" of this increasingly digital age. Covid-19 has changed the shape of worship to increase digital and interactive platforms to reach a whole new community of online worshippers. While most churches have returned to in-person worship, many are also embracing hybrid worship with platforms for participation for continued ministry to this online community. The survey responses of church leaders discuss both digital ministry opportunities as well as some of the potential pitfalls.

The perspectives of the pastors and worship leaders surveyed bring into focus a shared theology of a biblical lifestyle of worship that can be traced back through the churches' earliest history. This paper supports that true biblical worship is a lifestyle that includes both piety and charity. Derek Webber explains this concept by saying, "Historically, the church has talked about the spiritual disciplines in two directions. There were works of piety or what we might call the inward attention to ourselves, and there were works of charity or the outward living and working in the world around us. Like the great commandment, these two sides of the same coin cannot

ultimately be separated.”⁵⁹ Lifestyle worship is a response by worshipers to the ongoing revelation of God’s love that motivates and spiritually activates acts of service to God in Jesus’ name. Acts of service, many of which in today’s digital age, have the potential to reach more people than ever before with the redemptive message of the gospel. As such, there is an increased need for cooperation among churches to act as one body in the name of Christ and effect significant change for the betterment of their neighbors, and of this planet, both locally and globally.

Following the research guidelines of John Creswell and J. Creswell, a qualitative methodology was used to collect and analyze data provided by online survey questions, discover existing literature dealing with themes and concepts relevant to the study, trace historically relevant themes and outcomes, and explore possible implications of the results as they relate to the mission of the church in this post-Covid Digital Age.⁶⁰ This data establishes common perspectives of worship and unity and informs related practical and ideological applications to pedagogical practice.

Chapter Summary

The widespread effects of the 2020 pandemic on church unity and biblical worship are still unfolding. However, a renewed spirit of cooperation within and among churches is evident today. The Covid-19 pandemic was a clarion call to the church, propelling the body of Christ out of its complacency and forward into new areas of ministry, including online ministries. Buhle

⁵⁹ Derek Webber, “The Fast We Choose: Learning to Live Inside Out,” Discipleship Ministries (Nashville, TN, March 2023), <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/learning-to-live-inside-out/ash-wednesday-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes>.

⁶⁰ John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th ed., (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, Inc., 2018), 180-182.

Mpofu observes, “Whilst presenting the church with new challenges, COVID-19 also presented new opportunities through digital platforms.”⁶¹ This study explored common issues faced by church leaders in America today. It focused on the practical and theological challenges they hold in common. The study also highlighted ways churches could work together more effectively to display lifestyles of worship that honor Christ and draw others to Him. Therefore, this study contributes to forming a spiritually cooperative worship theology that can promote further dialogue and cooperation among church leaders. It can also help the church be better prepared for the next crisis.

An ecumenical understanding of incarnational biblical worship is needed to bring healing and unity to the whole body of Christ. Covid-19 has brought many worship-related issues to the forefront. These include a need to prayerfully explore the current understanding of the *gathered community* to include those who choose to be a part of a worshipping community via digital platforms. Current and future worship leaders and pastors will need training in practical matters such as becoming familiar with the ever-developing technology available for both in-person and online worship. Therefore, this study has significant pedagogical application. Pastors and worship leaders need worship training that is biblically based and historically rooted, technology training that keeps ahead of the curve and is practical in application, and theological training that embraces this refreshing wave of spiritual ecumenism. Lifestyle worship is, by nature, incarnational. It is missional. It is how God’s people worship in spirit and truth and the glue that binds them together in love and service for God and others. This study reveals that biblical lifestyle worship has the potential to unite believers across all denominational barriers and

⁶¹ Buhle Mpofu, "Transversal Modes of being a Missional Church in the Digital Context of COVID-19," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 77, no. 4 (2021), 2.

display God's love in tangible ways to influence the surrounding culture for the Kingdom of God effectively.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Section One: How Christians in the Past Reacted to Major Health Crises

The Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020 was not the first major health crisis to affect the Church. Therefore, the purpose of this section is to revisit the existing literature regarding similar situations and discover the principles that guided the Church as it navigated through them.

Lyman Stone believes that how believers responded to past health crises was a testimony to their faith in God. Writing at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, he postulates that modern-day Christians were less prepared emotionally or spiritually than their predecessors might have been to handle the Corona-19 health crisis.⁶² He bases this on the fact that this pandemic was, for many, the first significant disease outbreak affecting all of humanity to occur in their lifetimes. With the initial lack of vaccines, rising death tolls, and the confusing and conflicting information from the media, he believes it gave rise to an insidious epidemic of fear and despair that has both infected and is still affecting the presently recovering church.⁶³

Given this reality, there is much to be gained from tracing the ethic of self-sacrifice and service that history records of Christian behavior and response to past epidemics. The lessons learned may provide insight into the best way forward for the Church of the 21st Century as it recovers from the Covid-19 pandemic and faces similar crises in the future.

Stone states, “The Christian response to plagues begins with some of Jesus’ most famous teachings: ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,’ (Matthew 7:12) ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ (Mark 12:31) and ‘Greater love has no man than this, that he should lay

⁶² Lyman Stone, “Christianity has been Handling Epidemics for 2000 Years,” Foreign Policy, March 13, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/liberty.illiad.oclc.org>.

⁶³ Ibid.

down his life for his friends.’ (John 15:13).⁶⁴ Put plainly, Stone believes the Christian ethic historically displayed in a time of plague is regarding one’s life as less important than that of one’s neighbor.”⁶⁵ He notes that in 1527 when the Bubonic plague came to Wittenberg, Martin Luther urged fellow Christians not to flee from the plague but rather to stay and minister to their neighbors.⁶⁶ Luther advocated for responsibility in self-care and hygiene. Still, his motivation in doing so was not so much focused on self-preservation as it was on not spreading the disease to others.⁶⁷

In commenting on Luther’s pamphlet, “Whether Christians Should Flee from the Plague,” Clive Pearson explains that Luther defended this position as a biblical and ethical responsibility of service to others based on a firm belief in Christ’s promised reward of life after death.⁶⁸ That choice to stay, however, came at a tremendous personal cost to Luther as his daughter Elizabeth died during the plague.⁶⁹

Stone further explains this prevalent attitude of putting others before self, “We wish to care for the afflicted, which first and foremost means not infecting the healthy. Early Christians created the first hospitals in Europe as hygienic places to provide care during times of plague, on the understanding that negligence that spread disease was, in fact, murder.”⁷⁰ Stone traces this

⁶⁴ Scripture references are provided by the researcher for emphasis and were not included in the original quote.

⁶⁵ Stone, “Christianity Has Been Handling Epidemics for 2000 Years.”

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Clive Pearson, “Framing a Theological Response to COVID-19 in the Presence of the Religious Other,” *The Ecumenical Review* 72, no. 5 (Dec 2020): 849-860.

⁶⁹ Stone, “Christianity has been Handling Epidemics for 2000 Years.”

⁷⁰ Ibid.

motivation of Christian service throughout several major epidemics faced by believers over the centuries, such as the Antonine Plague of the second century, The Plague of Cyprian in the third century, and the waves of the Bubonic Plague of the 1300s and 1500s. He and other historians believe Christians demonstrated Christ's compassion by caring for the sick, aiding Christianity's spread.⁷¹ Sara Yeomans agrees with this position:

It is not difficult to understand, then, the apparent shifts in religious practices that came about as a result of the Antonine Plague. While civic architectural projects were put on hold, the building of sacred sites and ceremonial ways intensified. Marcus Aurelius is said to have invested heavily in restoring the temples and shrines of Roman deities, and one wonders whether it was in part due to the plague that Christianity coalesced and spread so rapidly throughout the empire at the end of the second century.⁷²

The Justinian Plague of 541 created conditions that helped Christianity to spread. "The plague changed the course of the empire, squelching Emperor Justinian's plans to bring the Roman Empire back together and causing a massive economic struggle. It is also credited with creating an apocalyptic atmosphere that spurred the rapid spread of Christianity."⁷³

Clive Pearson applauds the ways Christians responded during the Antonine Plague, saying:

It has been claimed that a quarter of the Roman empire was killed off during the Antonine Plague. One of the things that stood out in this period was the ethical example and conduct of early Christians. They stood for their care of the sick: they acted out an exemplary life whereby plagues were not to be seen as the work of angry and capricious gods. They were, rather, the consequence of a broken creation, an imperfect creation yet to be reconciled to a loving God.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Stone, "Christianity Has Been Handling Epidemics for 2000 Years."

⁷² Sarah K. Yeomans, "Classical Corner, The Antonine Plague and the Spread of Christianity," *Biblical Archaeology Review*, January 20, 2022, <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/daily-life-and-practice/the-antonine-plague-and-the-spread-of-christianity/>.

⁷³ Editors of History.com, "Pandemics That Changed History," *History*, Dec. 21, 2021, <https://www.history.com/topics/middle-ages/pandemics-timeline>.

⁷⁴ Pearson, "Framing a Theological Response to COVID-19," 849-860.

J.D. Pluss believes that studying the records of war, famine, and death recorded in the Old Testament may help to clarify how severe illness, epidemics, and pandemics have impacted both the biblical writers and the church.⁷⁵ He contends that because this triplet of disasters has continued to repeat itself throughout history, the study focus needs to be on how God's people responded to these disasters to benefit those around them.⁷⁶ For example, he commends the brethren from history for helping to organize the first hospitals and infirmaries.⁷⁷ Throughout the following historical plagues, he credits believers with demonstrating the love of Christ and elevating a dedication to the common good as they stayed and ministered to the needs of the sick and the dying, even at their peril. He begins with the Plague of Cyprian (249-262 AD).⁷⁸ This plague was so named because it was documented extensively by Cyprian, the Bishop of Carthage at the time, and therefore it became commonly known as the Plague of Cyprian.⁷⁹ Cyprian wrote in his *De Mortalitate*,

Beloved brethren...pestilence and plague which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the righteousness of each one, and examines the minds of the human race, to see whether they who are in health tend the sick; whether relations affectionately love their kindred; whether masters pity their languishing servants; whether physicians do not forsake the beseeching patients. . .⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Jean-Daniel Pluss, "Covid 19, The Church, and the Challenge to Ecumenism," *Transformation* 37, no. 4 (2020): 286, <https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions> DOI: 10.1177/0265378820961545journals.sagepub.com/home/trn.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 293.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 286.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Cyprian, "On the Mortality (or Plague) De mortalitate," quoted in The Electronic Bible Society, "On the Mortality (or Plague) de mortalitate," *Catholicism*, 1996, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/on-the-mortality-or-plague-de-mortalitate-11412>.

Pearson adds further historical context to this plague by adding the testimony of Dionysius, the bishop of Alexandria:

The bishop reflected on how Christians, "heedless of danger... took charge of the sick, attending to their every need." They did so in a way that marked them out as different. In subsequent centuries, the pagan Emperor Julian observed how "the impious Galileans" would care for even non-Christian sick people: "their benevolence to strangers and their care of the graves of the dead" stood out in exemplary fashion. The church historian Pontianus likewise noted how Christians ensured that "good was done to all men, not merely to the household of faith."⁸¹

Perhaps the next most devastating plague to ravage the then-known world was the Bubonic Plague or The Black Death, which first began (1347-1351) and brought death to one-third to one-half of the population throughout Europe, leaving "in its wake" according to Pluss, "famine, economic hardship and general upheaval in the Late Middle Ages."⁸² He writes that Christians, especially those in religious communities like Catherine of Sienna, the Beguines, and the Benedictines, responded by caring for the sick, in many cases forfeiting their own lives:

As people at that time had little or no understanding of how viral infections spread and how important hygiene and physical distancing were in combatting disease, they frequently exacerbated the problem by bringing the sick into their homes. The Plague was especially deadly, where people lived together in cramped spaces like cities, fortresses, monasteries, and convents. At the Benedictine convent in Engelberg, Switzerland, one hundred and sixteen sisters died in the period of four months. For many monasteries, the large number of deaths meant a break in fellowship and an economic collapse. Christian compassion played an important role in the life of the religious.⁸³

However, not all who professed to be *religious* were equally compassionate, which negatively affected the perception of the church by the public at that time. In 1351, after the plague had taken its toll, Pope Clement had to reprimand many Roman Catholic priests and bishops for leaving the poor to fend for themselves while they sought parishes with more money

⁸¹ Pearson, "Framing a Theological Response to COVID-19," 849-860.

⁸² Pluss, "Covid-19, The Church, and the Challenge to Ecumenism," 287.

⁸³ Ibid.

to pay them.⁸⁴ James C. Giblin writes, “Once people began to question the Church’s actions, they kept on questioning them. This eventually led to attempts to reform the Catholic Church and, in the sixteenth century, to the establishment of the first Protestant churches.”⁸⁵

Overall, however, history reveals that true followers of Christ acted admirably in crises’ serving others and spreading the message of Christ’s love and compassion. For example, Pluss argues that the values of the Age of Enlightenment combined with strong Christian morals led to the establishment of the first “International Health Care Initiative,” 1803-1806.⁸⁶ It was commissioned by the King of Spain, King Charles IV (whose daughter had died from smallpox), to carry the milder Cow Pox infection, (which provided immunity to the deadly smallpox epidemic) and the smallpox vaccine to Latin America, and later the Philippines and China.⁸⁷ As an example of Christ-like unity in a time of crisis, Pluss cites an ecumenical movement that occurred when evangelical free churches in Switzerland were not allowed to reopen after the Spanish Flu (1918-1920), in which a government lockdown for churches and public meeting places had been lifted, for all except the independent free churches.⁸⁸ These churches united to protest and eventually overturned the unfair ruling.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ James Cross Giblin, *When Plague Strikes: The Black Death, Smallpox, Aids* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), 43.

⁸⁵ Giblin, *When Plague Strikes*, 43.

⁸⁶ Pluss, “Covid-19, The Church, and the Challenge to Ecumenism,” 288.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

In 1918-1919, the Spanish Flu ravaged America, unknowingly carried by soldiers returning home during the conclusion of World War I.⁹⁰ The first cases of this flu were openly reported from Spain, which had remained a neutral country during the war.⁹¹ It is believed that the news of other confirmed cases was initially suppressed to maintain military morale.⁹² The epicenter of the virus is believed to have been Europe, with its point of origin a matter of historical debate.⁹³ The Spanish Flu, a strain of H1N1, killed over 650,000 people in the United States, adding to the estimated worldwide death toll of 50 million.⁹⁴ Kyle Pope addresses many similarities churches and church leaders faced during the Spanish Flu pandemic over a hundred years ago with the most recent Covid-19 pandemic. He writes:

The first cases arose in military camps in the spring of 1918. By September, it was spreading throughout the country at alarming rates, and the Federal government advised state and local officials to limit public gatherings, including schools and churches. By mid-November, most restrictions were lifted, but during the fall months of 1918, just as now, churches of Christ confronted the challenging questions of how to obey the laws of both man and God and how best to show love and care for the physical and spiritual well-being of others.⁹⁵

At first, some church leaders were reluctant to close their churches' doors. Some found their solution in holding open-air or outdoor church gatherings. One such church was in Dallas, Texas, pastored by A.O. Colley. In his article, "How to Obey the Lord Under Difficult Circumstances," he wrote, "We have met each Lord's Day since, to 'remember the Lord's death

⁹⁰ Kyle Pope, "How Christians Responded to Spanish Influenza in 1918," *Faithful Sayings* 22, no. 16, (2020): 1.

⁹¹ Evan Andrews, "Why Was it Called the Spanish Flu?" *History*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.history.com/news/why-was-it-called-the-spanish-flu>

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Kyle Pope, "How Christians Responded to Spanish Influenza in 1918," 1.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

till he comes,' out on the lawn by the side of the church house. We are trying to help the city relieve the suffering, care for the sick, and bury the dead. This is a time for sober thinking and faithful acting."⁹⁶ The Russell Street church in Nashville, where those infected with the virus were being turned away from overcrowded hospitals, is credited with opening their church classrooms as alternative hospital space and staffing this hospital with volunteer nurses and doctors.⁹⁷ J.C. McQuiddy, the editor of the *Gospel Advocate* magazine, wrote and published articles during the Spanish flu pandemic that provided information on the flu, supported state and local government shutdowns of public gatherings, and encouraged Christians to continue to financially support their ministers during this difficult time.⁹⁸

History reveals that the church has been actively ministering through the many pandemics and epidemics that have spread their contagion over the centuries, including Leprosy in the Middle Ages, Cholera in the 19th Century, the 1975 Fiji Measles pandemic, the Russian Flu (1889) which claimed 360,000 worldwide, the Asian flu in 1957, HIV/AIDS first reported in 1981, and the SARS Virus (severe acute respiratory syndrome) which was first identified in 2003. Lessons learned from these outbreaks regarding disease control and containment recently helped curb the spread of the Coronavirus and other viruses such as Ebola and Zika.⁹⁹

This brief overview of the Christian response to past health crises illustrates that through repeated acts of sacrificial service to others, the message of Christianity grew and spread. God worked through believers to provide spiritual comfort and physical and emotional care. An

⁹⁶ A.O. Colley, "Obeying God Under Difficulties," *Gospel Advocate* 60, no. 45 (1918): 1060.

⁹⁷ Kyle Pope, "How Christians Responded to Spanish Influenza in 1918," 1.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Editors of History.com, "Pandemics That Changed History."

ecumenical unity was demonstrated by the way believers, regardless of denominational affiliation, consistently put the needs of others before their own, revealing their love for God by loving and caring for their neighbors. Preserving one's own life was not the primary motivation for practicing the known hygienic measures of the day; instead, it was to prevent one's neighbor from contracting the disease.

John Lennox notes that this same selfless motivation for practicing known hygienic measures, specifically quarantining, can be found in Leviticus 13: 1-46.¹⁰⁰ He interprets social distancing, masks, and other safety measures practiced during the recent pandemic as a similar show of believers' love for one's neighbor today.¹⁰¹ Lennox contends that the same principle of loving service that guided the Hebrew community guided the church through past pandemics and will continue to guide it today as it moves into the post covid future. The Covid-19 pandemic will one day be a matter for historical review. Information is still unfolding about the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the church and the church's response and consequent impact on society, especially any changes to society's perception of the relevance of the church. What will be explored in the next section is the state of the church in America before the Pandemic of 2020 and the theological and practical challenges that face the church and her worship as it moves into the post-pandemic future.

¹⁰⁰ John Lennox, *Where is God in a Coronavirus World?* (Epsom Surrey, England: The Good Book Company, 2020), Chapter 6.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Section Two: The Pre-Pandemic Church and the Collapse of the American Church Culture

In 2003, Reggie McNeal, a Missional Leadership Specialist, warned church leaders that “all is not well” with the church and that many churches were already on “life support.”¹⁰² McNeal spoke of the present reality of collapsing church culture and the need for churches to stop all the theological, political, and methodological infighting, stop denial about declining church attendance, lose their fortress mentality, and focus on fulfilling the great commission.¹⁰³ McNeal calls this intentional focus “being missional,” explaining that because God’s mission to humanity is redemptive, every church member must cultivate the mentality of being a missionary to their community. They should be given the freedom and support of their missionally-minded church to explore this calling and partnership with God creatively.¹⁰⁴ McNeal does not believe the *church* is dying or that God would ever let it die. However, he does believe that the American *church culture* birthed in twentieth-century modernity *is* dying. He states,

The imminent demise under discussion is the collapse of the unique culture in North America that has come to be called “church.” ... in reality, the church culture in North America is a vestige of the original movement, an institutional expression of religion that is in part a civil religion and in part a club where religious people can hang out with other people whose politics, worldview, and lifestyle match theirs.”

He says, “The missional renewal of the North American Church is essential to its future. I am convinced that most expressions of the institutional church will not survive the emerging world.”¹⁰⁵ He could not have predicted that the “emerging world” would include the practical and theological challenges of a worldwide pandemic, (coupled with the challenges posed by

¹⁰² Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (New York, NY: Wiley, 2003), 1.

¹⁰³ Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future*, 1.

¹⁰⁴ McNeal, *The Present Future*, 12.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 145.

postmodernism and secularism), whose subsequent economic hardships have forced many churches to shut their physical doors.

Leonard Sweet agrees that a cultural shift occurred before the Pandemic of 2020, making the church irrelevant to the average person in the US today. He states, “The days of the church as the preferred backdrop for weddings, funerals, life events, or even worship itself are over. The Christian religion is disappearing from western societies.” He writes, “As of 2017, only 22% of US Americans had their wedding in a religious house of worship, which was down from 41% in 2000.”¹⁰⁶

Yet, Sweet believes the church is meant to bring Christ’s salvific healing to the world. He asks, “What if the pandemic is a shock treatment putting the world and the church back in a new and better equilibrium? What if there are goldmines on the other side of the landmines and minefields?”¹⁰⁷

Understanding the trends in culture and their impact on the nature of the church up to the present can help inform the church’s future direction and the potential impact God’s people will have on society. George Barna agrees:

Even a cursory understanding of cultural trends and patterns can help intentionally build a better bridge to an optimal future. Another way of seeing the value of trend tracking is to realize that the future doesn’t just happen; it is created by people committed to envisioning and facilitating specific outcomes in society. To have that kind of impact on the future, we have to understand where things are, glean lessons from the past, and then ascertain what it will take to generate a particular outcome or set of circumstances. The alternative is to let others create our future for us, rendering us victims of the future instead of shapers of tomorrow.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Leonard Sweet, “From Semiotic Exegesis to Contextual Ecclesiology: The Hermeneutics of Missional Faith in the COVIDian Era,” *HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies* 77, no. 12 (2021): 12.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ George Barna, *America at the Crossroads: Explosive Trends Shaping America's Future and What You Can Do About It* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 10, ProQuest eBook Central.

Barna's research from 2016 indicates that American values have been transitioning rapidly in the last twenty to twenty-five years from a primarily Judeo-Christian worldview to one predominately secular.¹⁰⁹ In just ten years, from 2005 to 2015, the number of Americans who said their faith was fundamental to them went from two-thirds to one-half.¹¹⁰ Less than half of all Americans believe Jesus Christ is alive today; half have no idea what they think about life after death, and many believe that the Bible, the Koran, and the Book of Mormon are essentially the same. Less than one-third of the US population attends church services.¹¹¹ Interestingly, media engagement accounts for one-third of born-again adults and twenty percent of all Americans' spiritual experiences.¹¹² Overall, half of the American population visits some form of media to find spiritual answers or nourishment.¹¹³ When Covid -19 forced church lockdowns and shelter-in-place orders, churches moved their services to digital platforms and discovered an audience was primed and waiting. This is one of the goldmines that churches found during the church closures caused by the pandemic. The pandemic caused church leaders, congregations, and individuals to reexamine their faith traditions, to face the "troubling" questions and to rethink what the church should or even *could* be in an increasingly digital world. Heidi Campbell states,

Churches should see the move to digital worship as an opportunity to create a unique space for conversation, care, and encouragement that focuses on affirming the relationships and people within their faith community. Instead of offering a one-way, broadcast-focused church service, the interactive features of social media and digital

¹⁰⁹ George Barna, *America at the Crossroads: Explosive Trends Shaping America's Future and What You Can Do About It*, 10.

¹¹⁰ Barna, *America at the Crossroads*, 10.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

platforms can be used to create intimate and empathetic communication, allowing both members and leaders to share words of encouragement and biblical insights...”¹¹⁴

Clearly, the Covid-19 crisis launched churches in America into the digital age right as the realities of an increasingly secular American culture (in which attending church has little relevance and regular attendance at church services is also shrinking) became impossible to ignore.¹¹⁵ According to the 2020 data gathered by Gallup researchers dating back to the 1940s, church membership in the U.S. had dropped to less than half, 50%, for the first time.¹¹⁶ An American Family Survey sponsored by the Institute for Family Studies supports the trend of declining religious attendance in the U.S., stating, “The share of regular churchgoers is down by six percentage points, from 34% in 2019 to 28% in 2021. Meanwhile, the share of secular Americans who have never or seldom attended religious services increased by seven percentage points.”¹¹⁷ The projections are that Americans who identify as “religiously unaffiliated” will significantly outnumber those who identify as Christians by 2070, the actual number of those who say they follow other religions is expected to double.¹¹⁸ Therefore, the challenge before and after the pandemic remains the same: envisioning the future and facilitating the mission of the church and its worship to reach an increasingly secular American society. Hopefully, the American church will heed the clarion call.

¹¹⁴ Heidi Campbell, *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online* (College Station, TX: Digital Religion Publications, 2020), 52, <https://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/187891>.

¹¹⁵ Wendy Wang, “The Decline in Church Attendance in Covid America,” Institute for Family Studies, January 20, 2022, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-decline-in-church-attendance-in-covid-america>.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Wang, “The Decline in Church Attendance in Covid America.”

¹¹⁸ “Modeling the Future of Religion in America,” Pew Research Center Report, September 13, 2022, <https://pewresearch.org>.

Adapting to Shifting Worldviews (from Modern to Postmodern)

John R. Franke, in his forward to Brian McLaren's "A Generous Orthodoxy," states,

Like the inhabitants of Middle Earth, followers of Jesus Christ from across the diverse ecclesiastical and theological spectrum of North American Christianity have a growing sense that the world they have known is changing...Residents of the liberal and conservative precincts of the church are engaging in respectful and constructive dialogue across the metaphorical divide that has separated them for nearly two centuries; Protestants are growing in their appreciation for ancient Christian tradition; Lutherans and Catholics have issued a joint declaration on justification; evangelicals and Catholics are working together and expressing mutual appreciation for each other. The maps of North American Christianity that not so long ago provided reliable orientation and guidance are being redrawn.¹¹⁹

This current era of postmodernity has produced new ways of perceiving knowledge and challenged old forms of thought and previously held modern assumptions. One such challenged remnant of modernity is foundationalism. Franke describes foundationalism as "a conception of knowledge that emerged during the Enlightenment and sought to address the lack of certainty... its goal of establishing certain universal knowledge came to dominate intellectual pursuit in the modern era."¹²⁰ Franke believes Foundationalism greatly influenced the church during the modern era of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, producing the left versus right theological divisions.¹²¹ Thankfully today these divisions are being reevaluated, and new paths of restoration and unity are being explored.

The Church has lived through three major worldview paradigm shifts since its conception—the Judeo-Christian premodern worldview, modernism, and postmodernism.¹²² As

¹¹⁹ John R. Franke, foreword in Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 13.

¹²⁰ McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 14.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹²² McNeal, *The Present Future*, 158.

a result of the Enlightenment, the premodern worldview (a God-centered worldview) found itself up against the teachings of the modern worldview, (a human-centered world-view) in which foundationalism expressed itself as rationalism (a belief in objective/scientific truth) and empiricism (trusting only that which one’s five senses can experience).¹²³ Chul Min Jun explains, “The age of western medieval thought is categorized as premodern, which characteristically involves faith in God and metaphysical reality, understanding the relationship between the natural and supernatural in dualistic terms, and revelation-oriented epistemology. In contrast, the Age of Reason is viewed as the beginning of the modern era.”¹²⁴ Most historians trace the roots of modernism, whose influence continued well into the twentieth century, to the 17th Century Age of Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution of the 18th Century.¹²⁵ However, some trace it back to the 16th-century Renaissance, which saw the initial rise of both empiricism and rationalism.¹²⁶ The naturalistic worldview of the modern period rejected the premodern beliefs of the ancient world. Faith was placed solely in science, technology, and education to guide humanity as they developed into higher moral creatures.¹²⁷

Milliard J. Erickson believes there are ten common characteristics of modernism, including two that have entered the postmodern era. These are ‘naturalism,’ ‘humanism,’ ‘scientific methods,’ ‘reductionism,’ ‘progressivism,’ ‘view of nature (that nature evolves, develops, and changes on its own),’ ‘certainty,’ ‘determinism,’ ‘individualism,’ and

¹²³McNeal, *The Present Future*, 158.

¹²⁴ Chul Min Jun, "The Paradigm Shift of Practical Theology and Theological Practice to Overcome Modernism and Postmodernism," *Pacific Science Review* 16, no. 2 (2014): 156-166.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ S.H. Han, *Postmodern Thought and Evangelical Theology* (Seoul: Christian Literature Crusade, 2008), 31.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 158.

‘antiauthoritarianism.’¹²⁸ He believes ‘that individualism’ and ‘antiauthoritarianism’ are the foundational roots of postmodernism’s relativism and pluralism.¹²⁹

The modern era has now transitioned into the postmodern era, or even the “post” postmodern era. According to Chul Min Jun, modernism began to lose considerable credibility after two world wars and an extended war in Vietnam. This led to a countercultural movement in the 1960s, which paved the way for postmodernism to emerge.¹³⁰ As a result, the postmodern worldview gradually began to replace the modern worldview. This cultural shift did not happen overnight. Some academics, such as Grenz, attribute the origins of postmodern thought to Friedrich Nietzsche, who later in the 19th century popularized the notion that God is dead.¹³¹ Regardless of its origins, by the 1970s, postmodern thinking was firmly entrenched in Western society.¹³² Post-modernism has a somewhat fluid definition, as it affects a variety of disciplines, but Britannica Encyclopedia broadly defines postmodernism as “in Western philosophy, a late 20th-century movement characterized by broad skepticism, subjectivism, or relativism; a general suspicion of reason; and an acute sensitivity to the role of ideology in asserting and maintaining political and economic power.”¹³³ Dirk G. van der Merwe appreciates along with many other post evangelicals that postmodernism has brought with it a new appreciation for spirituality and the sciences. He states, “The church of the 21st century shall have to adopt the contributions made

¹²⁸ S.H. Han, *Postmodern Thought and Evangelical Theology*, 158.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ S.H. Han, *Postmodern Thought and Evangelical Theology*, 159.

¹³¹ Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 10.

¹³² Ibid., 17.

¹³³ Britannica Encyclopedia, s.v. “postmodernism” accessed June 12, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/postmodernism-philosophy>.

by the sciences and adapt their message concerning the revelation of God and the salvation of humankind to remain relevant in their continuation of the *missio Dei* in a shattered world.¹³⁴

Postmodernism still poses many challenges for the church today. The influences of postmodernity are felt far and wide in American society and have not escaped impacting the church. Perhaps, the most significant challenge, even before the Covid-19 Pandemic, was for the church to accept that the world *has* changed. Brian McClaren's fictional character Neo is a teacher who gives the following advice to his evangelical university students regarding the changing culture,

I believe the modern version of Christianity you learned from your parents, your Sunday school teachers, and even your campus ministries is destined to be a medieval cathedral. It's over...will you continue to live loyally in the fading world, in the waning light of modernity? Or will you venture ahead in faith to practice your faith and devotion to Christ in the new emerging culture of postmodernity?¹³⁵

¹³⁶Alessandro Ferrari describes postmodernity as “the end of the old world.”¹³⁷ He states, “It is a question of “old bottles not up to containing the “new wine” of the super-diversity (Charles Taylor's “supernova of pluralization”) that the contemporary world has unleashed.¹³⁸

In other words, the old bottle of modernity is not built to hold the new wine of postmodernity. Therefore, McNeal believes the church needs to learn to *engage* the postmodern

¹³⁴ Dirk G. van der Merwe, “Rethinking the Message of the Church in the 21st Century: An Amalgamation Between Science and Religion,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 2, no. 4 (2019), section 7, DOI:10.4102/hts.v75i4.5472.

¹³⁵ Brian McClaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco, CA: Josey-Bass, 2001), 38.

¹³⁶ McNeal, *The Present Future*, 141.

¹³⁷ Alessandro Ferrari, “Towards Postmodernity: A Journey in Five Books,” *Religious Studies Review* 44, no. 3 (September 2018), 267.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

culture and discover how to communicate the gospel message effectively.¹³⁹ He explains that this is why the church today needs to regain its missional focus and combine orthopraxy with orthodoxy.

Most church leaders think that renewal has something to do with institutional revival, but this misses the point. The Christian movement, in its next phase, will be more missional, less institutional, and more in the street, and it will not conform to our current notions of what church should be like. But it will be the church of Jesus. And it will be a significant part of the spiritual landscape for America.¹⁴⁰

Chul Min Jun also believes the church today must return to its missional focus, which he describes as “the mission of sharing God’s love, as evidenced in Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross.”¹⁴¹ Jun firmly believes the church must “practice” or live out its faith.¹⁴² He states, “In the tradition of Hebrew beliefs and the good news of Jesus Christ, practice and life are one, and ... if one was to be prioritized, it should be practice... Hence, a newly reflected paradigm based on the threefold love of the Trinity is required in the postmodern era.”¹⁴³

The modern church in America has struggled to adapt to this new era of postmodernity for the past several decades. Communicating God’s truth when “truth” is generally considered a relative concept and pluralistic thinking is the dominant philosophy is a significant challenge.¹⁴⁴ Some churches have sadly given up trying to relate and retreated inward. The pandemic either woke them up to the diversity of needs just outside their doors, or it drove the final nail in the church closure coffin. Just six years before the covid crisis, Thom S. Rainer warns such

¹³⁹ McNeal, *The Present Future*, 141.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Jun, "The Paradigm Shift," 156-166.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Gibbs and Bolder, *Emerging Churches*, 133.

churches against surrendering to a self-preservation or fortress mentality stating, “When a church ceases to have a heart and ministry for its community, it is on the path toward death.¹⁴⁵ Therefore, he suggests four remedies for a struggling or dying church that are applicable today to all struggling churches post covid. They are:

1. The church must admit and confess its dire need.
2. The church must pray for wisdom and strength to do whatever is necessary.
3. The church must be willing to change radically.
4. That change must lead to action and an outward focus.¹⁴⁶

Richard J. Neuhaus counsels, “We cannot, we must not withdraw from the public square. I suggest that we firmly reject the counsel of those who say we live in a post-Christian age and should prepare ourselves for a return to the catacombs.¹⁴⁷

While some churches have rejected engaging with the postmodern culture altogether, thankfully, many have accepted the challenge to journey with those who are searching for a faith that is real and relevant. One that is loving and accepting, willing to dialogue with and to serve the needs of their communities. Emergent churches are one example, as are micro churches, also known as organic, simple, or home churches. Amy Oden observes that one essential way the church today is returning to practicing its beliefs is by embracing the early Christian understanding of being “sojourners and strangers in this world” (see 1 Peter 2:11 & 1 Chronicle 29:15) and then offering hospitality to strangers as if every stranger was Christ.¹⁴⁸ Oden writes,

The good news is that Christians are rediscovering hospitality as a virtue and a practice within the Christian life. Conversations, scholarship, and conferences on hospitality in the

¹⁴⁵ Thom S. Rainer, *The Autopsy of a Dead Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive* (Nashville, TN, B & H Publishing Company, 2014), 28.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 95.

¹⁴⁷ Richard J. Neuhaus, *Ancient & Postmodern Christianity: Paleo-Orthodoxy in the 21st Century, Essays in Honor of Thomas C. Oden* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 273.

¹⁴⁸ Amy Oden, *God’s Household of Grace: Hospitality in Early Christianity in Ancient & Postmodern Christianity: Paleo-Orthodoxy in the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press., 2002), 38.

last few years have brought attention to the ways a developed notion of hospitality might contribute to Christian community and identity as well as to mission, spiritual growth, and even contemporary worship.¹⁴⁹

Hospitality, or “welcoming the stranger,” is a critical practice in Emergent congregations. Emergent church leaders, Gibbs and Bolger state, “Modernity teaches its inhabitants to exclude and to conform. However, members of emerging churches display the hospitality of Jesus and include and welcome others who are different from them.”¹⁵⁰

According to Brandon O’Brien, one of the defining characteristics of the micro church movement is their desire to be missional, “to put the mission of the church before the institution.”¹⁵¹ Many simple churches meet in homes, but not all do. O’Brien reports, “Many folks are looking for a more pristine church experience stripped of the baggage of tradition and polity and church politics...micro methodology eliminates (or at least reduces the number of) passive observers in the church...in micro congregations...there may be fewer people, but all of them are actively engaged in the work of the church.”¹⁵²

Many missionally-minded congregations are reaching the culture today from within and outside the institutionalized church. Many do not label themselves as either postmodern or “emergent.” McNeal writes in his book “The Present Future,” “I did not say we need a postmodern church, nor did I say we need for the church to pursue its understanding of the culture in order to *mimic* it. The last thing we need is a postmodern church. We need a church for

¹⁴⁹ ¹⁴⁹ Amy Oden, *God’s Household of Grace: Hospitality in Early Christianity in Ancient & Postmodern Christianity: Paleo-Orthodoxy in the 21st Century*, 38.

¹⁵⁰ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolder, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 133.

¹⁵¹ Brandon O’Brien, “Explainer: The Micro Church Movement,” *Christianity Today*, July 24, 2009, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2009/july-online-only/explainer-micro-church-movement.html>

¹⁵² O’Brien, “Explainer.”

postmodern people (like we've had a church for people in the centuries of modernity).” Emergent author Dan Kimball writes, “We are rethinking what form Jesus’ church in our emerging culture will be like ... this task of designing the emerging church, new worship gatherings, and different ministries must drive us to our knees.”¹⁵³ Kimball continues, “I believe the emerging church will look and feel a lot different from most contemporary churches. I think there will be not just one emerging church approach but dozens, even hundreds, of beautiful faith communities, each unique to its context.”¹⁵⁴ Further supporting this thesis, Emergent churches tend to define every aspect of life as an act of worship, with the definition of worship not limited to a worship gathering. Gibbs and Bolger give this example, “Doug Pagitt (from Solomon’s Porch, Minneapolis) believes that for him and his community, worship is more in the streets than in the so-called worship service. ‘I believe in Romans 12:1 worship. Praise from the lips is not what worship is supposed to be. Rather it consists of lives offered up to the agenda of God. That is how we worship God.’”¹⁵⁵

What many postmodern congregations have in common is that they are missionally focused. Gibbs & Bolger state, “Emerging churches are drawing attention to the dysfunction of churches shaped by modernity and are drawing fresh inspiration from the early church in terms of becoming a missional presence in the contemporary context.”¹⁵⁶ They say, “Members of emerging churches use ancient practices to give all of their lives to God in worship. Such practices move beyond individualized forms of spirituality and tie people to the historical church,

¹⁵³ Dan Kimball, *Emerging Worship: Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 21.

¹⁵⁴ Dan Kimball, *Emerging Worship: Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations*, 182.

¹⁵⁵ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 231.

¹⁵⁶ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 156.

past, present, and future.”¹⁵⁷ Therefore, emergent congregations engage in worship practices that draw from early church worship expressions, giving them new meaning in a new context. The late Robert Webber greatly influenced the church in this regard with his writings on “Ancient-Future worship,” especially those churches seeking a more postmodern expression and active engagement with today’s culture. Joan Huyser-Honig and Darrell Harris credit Webber with inventing the descriptive terms “ancient-future worship” and “blended worship.”¹⁵⁸ They write, “In one version of *Worship Old and New*... Webber advised learning from “the entire worshipping community... liturgical worship, worship of the Reformers, the free church movement, Pentecostals, and charismatics.”¹⁵⁹ In the words of Robert Webber, “The challenge for evangelicals is to recover the content of worship, restore the ancient structure of worship, and integrate the evangelical style of worship.”¹⁶⁰ In the past few decades, Webber’s “Ancient-Future worship” and his emphasis on including the Eucharist in worship have unified churches of various denominational backgrounds. Webber states, “A renewed interest in worship has reopened old questions about the understanding, the structure, and the practice of the Eucharist in nearly every denomination. A considerable amount of agreement now exists among the churches.”¹⁶¹ Rory Noland gives some historical perspective on this growing phenomenon,

Historians observe that even though methods varied from one location to another, the four movements... (Gathering, Word, Table, and Sending) emerged early as a common structure among Christian gatherings. At first, a twofold Word and Table worship order

¹⁵⁷ Gibbs and Bolder, *Emerging Churches*, 237.

¹⁵⁸ Joan Huyser-Honig and Darrell Harris, “Robert E. Webber’s Legacy: Ancient Future Faith and Worship,” Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, May 18, 2007, <https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/robert-e-webber-s-legacy-ancient-future-faith-and-worship/>

¹⁵⁹ Joan Huyser-Honig and Darrell Harris, “Robert E. Webber’s Legacy: Ancient Future Faith and Worship,” Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, May 18, 2007.

¹⁶⁰ Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 264.

¹⁶¹ Webber, *Worship Old and New*, 247.

was standard practice. As chronicled in Acts 2:42, the New Testament church was devoted to the apostles' teaching and to the breaking of bread, among other things. The earliest believers, most of whom were Jews, continued their lifelong practice of meeting at the synagogue, where they would read selections from their Hebrew Bible and listen as someone commented on them. History's first Jews for Jesus interpreted those Scriptures in light of their belief that Christ is the Messiah. They also broke bread together daily (Acts 2:46). Following the Emmaus model in which Jesus was made known in the Scriptures and in the breaking of bread, God's Word and Communion quickly gained prominence as foundational elements for Christian worship. Two additional components, gathering and sending, were soon added to Word and Table as bookends. By the third century the fourfold worship service had become the norm for the Christian church and is still strictly followed by traditional, liturgical churches. However, an increasing number of non-liturgical churches are now adopting this format for their services.¹⁶²

The desire for unity has motivated believers for centuries. Examples of their common labor are The Apostles Creed and the Westminster Confession.¹⁶³ Colbert Cartwright observes, "Since the fourth century, most Christians around the world have affirmed the Nicene Creed, 'We believe in one holy *catholic* and apostolic church.' The church's unity is, for Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic alike, an essential mark of Christ's church."¹⁶⁴

Emergent and other missionally-minded congregations are diverse in expression but unified in purpose. Ed Stetzer observes the following characteristics of successful missionally-minded churches.

- Being unashamedly spiritual
- Promoting incarnational ministry
- Engaging in service
- Valuing experiential praise

¹⁶² Rory Noland, *Transforming Worship: Planning and Leading Sunday Services As if Spiritual Formation Mattered* (Honolulu: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 32-33.

¹⁶³ Stephen V. Sprinkle, *Disciples and Theology: Understanding the Faith of a People in Covenant* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 75.

¹⁶⁴ Colbert S. Cartwright, *People of the Chalice: Disciples of Christ in Faith and Practice* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 1987), 105.

- Preaching narrative, expository messages
- Appreciating and participating in ancient patterns
- Visualizing worship
- Connecting with technology
- Living Community
- Leading by transparency and team¹⁶⁵

Robert Webber wrote, “Postmodern trends are moving society toward a recovery of the supernatural, a desire to be connected to the past, a concern for intercultural affirmation, a longing for community, an openness to mystery, and an affirmation of a more visual and symbolic form of communication.¹⁶⁶ Therefore, Webber calls for “... the recovery of an ancient worship with a modern flair.”¹⁶⁷ By way of example, Steve Blasdel, a worship pastor and student at the Webber E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies, describes a Good Friday worship gathering at his church that exemplifies Webber’s “worship with a modern flair.”

An artist painted while the congregation read responsively, sang, and listened to the choir sing from the musical “He’s Alive Forever.” The artist started with a cloudy day, added three crosses, and merged that into a painting of Jesus’ face. Her painting brought home a fresh realization of what the cross meant and means. We usually serve communion to people where they are seated, but that evening asked them to come forward. Some came to receive communion with tears, others with quiet joy. It was stunning—and unifying—to see different nationalities, sizes, shapes, and colors of people coming forward as the body of Christ.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Ed Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 137.

¹⁶⁶ Robert E. Webber, “The Crisis of Evangelical Worship” in *Ancient & Postmodern Christianity: Paleo-Orthodoxy in the 21st Century, Essays in Honor of Thomas C. Oden*, ed. Kenneth Tanner and Christopher A. Hall (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 143.

¹⁶⁷ Webber, “The Crisis of Evangelical Worship,” 153.

¹⁶⁸ Huyser-Honig and Harris, “Robert E. Webber’s Legacy.”

God has been calling the church in America to return to a missional focus and genuinely care for the physical and spiritual well-being of others by living incarnationally. This includes caring for the planet, offering genuine hospitality to all, pursuing racial and political reconciliation, and returning to worship practices that link the church with its rich historical past. It is evident from this brief exploration of missionally-minded churches that for the past several decades, God has been preparing the church in America for its next steps in this pandemic-recovering world. Covid was the wake-up call and the push many churches needed. The Global Pandemic of 2020 shook the church from its proverbial slumber to face and embrace the future with a fresh vision.

Section Three: The Post-Pandemic Church: Facing and Embracing the “New Normal”

Two years before the church in America was impacted by a worldwide pandemic, Pastor Eric Innes asked, “Where is society heading? What would worship look like in a post-collapse, post-destruction environment?” What is the Holy Spirit trying to do in this situation?¹⁶⁹ He continues, “Some beliefs would no longer work, but we would also pick up other beliefs. Maybe we weren’t paying attention to some old ideas that need to be reclaimed.”¹⁷⁰

Thankfully, the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 did not leave a dystopian society in its wake as Innes may have envisioned. Still, it did change the theological and practical landscape for the church in America, in some cases deconstructing faith traditions while strengthening actual faith. Some refer to the post covid re-emergence of the church as the church’s “new normal.” Iman

¹⁶⁹ Eric Innes, “Incarnational Worship for the Twenty-first Century,” *International Congregational Journal* 17, no. 1 (2018): 87-88.

¹⁷⁰ Innes, “Incarnational Worship for the Twenty-first Century,” 87-88.

Jaya Zandroto illustrates, “The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major changes in various areas of life, including the life of the church; it has brought about a new normal.”¹⁷¹

The practical and theological issues facing the church before the covid pandemic of 2020 have not disappeared; in fact, the crisis may have accentuated many of them. Churches are currently struggling to regain momentum. Some questions that need to be asked are what has the Holy Spirit taught the church in America during the Covid crisis, and what does the church need to do now?

Rev. Mia Chang is one of the leaders of a NextGen church in Princeton, N.J. This church had an active food ministry for the community before the covid crisis and found ways to safely continue and expand that ministry during the covid lockdowns. Chang shares, “This is a golden time for the church. There is no doubt that the church faces challenges. However, the pandemic has offered unprecedented opportunities for churches to enhance reconciliation and unity through reconceptualizing their strategy to participate in God’s mission.”¹⁷²

A crisis often has a way of bringing people together, and in the case of the covid health crisis and ensuing church lockdowns, this crisis had that effect. For example, many pastors lacked the resources and expertise to broadcast their church services online. Many church leaders had no equipment for live streaming and no experience operating it or navigating the technology involved. Campbell and Osteen report, “One pastor from a United Church explained that he did not even have a website for his church pre-pandemic. He said they were “old school and proud of

¹⁷¹ I. J. Zandroto, “COVID-19 and the Mission of the Church: Some Notes on the New Normal,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 45, no. 4 (2021): 354, <https://doi.org/10.1177/23969393211034603>.

¹⁷² Afia Sun Kim and Chammah J. Kaunda, “A Mosaic Community Together in the Journey of Faith: NextGen Church as the Embodiment of Christ’s Love during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *The Ecumenical Review* 72, no. 4, (2020): 659. DOI: 10.1111/rev.12554.

it.” However, when COVID-19 shut down his church, he was thankful to be able to join free online workshops advising on creating high-quality online worship opportunities.¹⁷³

Many larger churches and organizations responded quickly when the lockdowns came and provided free and helpful resources to anyone who logged on to their websites. J.D. Pluss states, “It was evident that all churches and organizations were quick to connect to be proactive. They took advantage of social media and digital networks like never before.”¹⁷⁴ Added to the need to connect with church members and produce online services was the need to streamline those church services into an engaging online presentation. This reality forced church leaders to decide what was most important about their worship tradition and how that would translate to the gathered community now worshipping together online. Liturgical churches faced the most difficulty in deciding how to handle sacraments such as the Eucharist or Baptisms online.¹⁷⁵ Today, many church leaders are grappling with how to pastor and disciple the growing online community that has emerged post covid.¹⁷⁶

Intergenerational worship replaced age-segregated worship during the church lockdowns as a natural consequence of family members watching and worshipping together. Now that families are returning to the church, many church leaders are asking whether to keep them worshipping together or return to the age and generation-segregated model. Joan Huyser-Honig comments, “Splitting into age-divided worship each Sunday doesn't necessarily result in kids

¹⁷³ Heidi A Campbell and Sophia Osteen, “When Pastors Put on the ‘Tech Hat’: How Churches Digitized during Covid-19” (Report 1 from Tech in Churches during COVID-19 Research Project, The Network for New Media, Religion & Digital Culture Studies, 2021), 11.

¹⁷⁴ Jean-Daniel Pluss, “COVID-19, the Church, and the Challenge to Ecumenism,” *Sage Journals* 37, no. 4 (2020): 337, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378820961545>.

¹⁷⁵ Campbell and Osteen, “When Pastors Put on the ‘Tech Hat,’” 22.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

who go on to choose worship as adults. That's why pastors are talking about intergenerational worship."¹⁷⁷ There has been a trend away from age-segregated worship long before the coronavirus brought families home to worship together. Kara Powell, executive director of the Fuller Youth Institute, believes it is time to unite all ages.¹⁷⁸

The statistics are grim. Rainer Research estimates that 70 percent of young people leave the church by age 22. Barna Group argues that the figure increases to 80 percent by age 30. The Southern Baptist Convention, America's largest denomination, recently observed that growth in their churches is failing to keep up with the birth rate. Taken together, these findings suggest a startling fact: not only are we failing to attract younger worshippers, we're not holding on to the ones we have.¹⁷⁹

Dr. Lavon Grey agrees, "I do believe that we stand on the threshold of one of the most significant crises in the history of the modern church. And that is the unintended yet potentially devastating consequences of over two decades of age-segregated worship."¹⁸⁰

Another consequence of the Covid-19 church lockdowns was the live streaming of church worship services. Churches that had never considered live streaming discovered a whole population who needed or wanted access to their faith community. As a result, new ministries have been explicitly birthed to reach this online population, and many churches continue to live-stream their services, making it possible for every member of their congregation, including the infirmed or those who may be out of town or who have moved to another location to participate in the life of the community. Hybrid broadcasts also have proven outreach potential, especially

¹⁷⁷ Joan Huyser-Honig, "Let the Children Come," Calvin Institute of Worship Studies, August 3, 2022, <https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/let-the-children-come/>

¹⁷⁸ Kara Powell, "Is the Era of Age Segmentation Over?" Christianity Today, July 27, 2009, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2009/summer/istheeraofagesegmentationover.html>

¹⁷⁹ Kara Powell, "Is the Era of Age Segmentation Over?"

¹⁸⁰ Lavon Gray, "Multigenerational Worship" (Video Lecture in WRSP 840, Lynchburg: Liberty University), 2014.

for those searching for a church home, even if they prefer that home to be an online community.

Campbell and Osteen report,

80% of churches surveyed are still engaging in some form of hybrid worship services or other programming, with only 15% of churches meeting fully in person and a mere 5% meeting only online... churches meeting exclusively in-person have experienced the greatest decline in church attendance, which are often the smallest in membership and had the most difficulty transitioning to an online context. The churches who were utilizing hybrid ministries (both offline and online options) experienced the most growth.¹⁸¹

Recovery from the pandemic has been slow for many churches. The decreasing attendance numbers before covid are still a factor; in many cases, the attendance numbers have yet to return to what they were before the covid lockdowns. According to an article in Lifeway Research, “This means for the vast majority of still missing churchgoers, their absence is not so much an intentional decision. Rather, it’s the unintentional creation of a new habit. They’ve gotten out of the practice of churchgoing and haven’t made a decisive act to restart.”¹⁸² Sadly, this decline in attendance has led to less giving, economic hardships, and church closures for many churches. Chris Elisara and Rick Reinhard write, “

We have only begun to experience to what degree worshipers will return in person to their faith communities. In any case, thousands of houses of worship will be closing over the next several years, so the scale not only of closings but also of redevelopment projects will be several times anything we have experienced before. We need our houses of worship to be ready.”¹⁸³

At the writing of this thesis, David Kinnaman of the Barna research group predicts that as many as one in five churches could be faced with permanently closing their doors within

¹⁸¹ Campbell and Osteen, “When Pastors put on the ‘Tech Hat,’” 25.

¹⁸² “Some Previous Churchgoers are Still Missing Post-Covid,” Lifeway Research, June 3, 2022, <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/06/03/some-previous-churchgoers-are-still-missing-post-covid/>

¹⁸³ Chris Elisara and Rick Reinhard, “How to Plan for the Post-Pandemic Future of Church Buildings,” Faith and Leadership, Jan 11, 2022, <https://faithandleadership.com/how-plan-the-post-pandemic-future-church-buildings>

eighteen months.¹⁸⁴ Despite the dire church closing and church building repurposing trends, Jay Pillay believes there is still hope for the church if God's people reassess their God-given purpose on the planet. He sees the coronavirus as an opportunity to break away from dead and divisive traditions and practice lifestyle worship. Pillay writes, "The virus has provided a window of opportunity to reimagine a new theology for the church, which is not focused on institutionalism, structure, roles, and rites but being God's transforming presence in the world."¹⁸⁵

As more and more churches in America participate in God's mission post covid, a renewed spirit of unity is emerging. The next section of this review will explore this current move toward greater unity, its biblical precedent, the modern ecumenical movement, and the implications of the body of Christ embracing unity in diversity.

A Renewed Spirit of Ecumenism

A global resurgence of ecumenical unity is an encouraging outcome of the covid pandemic. Pluss agrees, "It might well be that the COVID-19 pandemic will go into the history books as an important puzzle piece that has contributed to a continual move toward greater unity within the global Church, the Body of Christ."¹⁸⁶ An example of this is the name of the recent World Council of Churches convention held in August of 2022: "Christ's Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity."¹⁸⁷ Sawako Fujiwara believes the next step for the global church is

¹⁸⁴ "One in Five Churches Facing Permanent Closure within 18 Months Due to Covid-19," *Millennium Magazine*, September 25, 2021, <https://www.millmag.org/1-in-5-churches-facing-permanent-closure-within-18-months-due-to-covid-19/>

¹⁸⁵ J. Pillay, "COVID-19 Shows the Need to Make Church More Flexible," *Transformation* 37, no. 4 (2020): 266–275, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265378820963156>

¹⁸⁶ Pluss, "Covid-19," 337.

¹⁸⁷ World Council of Churches, "Christ's Love Moves the World to Reconciliation and Unity: A Reflection on the Theme of the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Karlsruhe 2022," World Council of

to restore a sense of community and distance itself from “intolerance and nationalism.”¹⁸⁸

Fujiwara writes, “Even in this time of uncertainty, Christ’s love rekindles the flame of the ecumenical spirit and moves us toward God-given unity, not uniformity or the sacred flame of nationalism.”¹⁸⁹

The Covid-19 health crisis was a clarion call to the church of the 21st century to face both its internal and external issues head-on, especially the issues that divide. It was a call to all professing Christians around the globe to a renewed expression of ecumenism. An ecumenism that embraces unity in Christ accepts confessional diversity and promotes dialogue over debate. Pastor Jack Haberer states, “There is a world of difference between a debate and a dialogue. For one thing, a debate aims for victory, while a dialogue aims for insight...To put it succinctly, a debate drives weak arguments to the point of foolishness, whereas a dialogue invites participants to learn together.”¹⁹⁰

This idea of Christians learning and growing together guided by the Holy Spirit embodies the meaning and purpose of ecumenism (see John 14:16 -17). While the modern ecumenical movement began in the twentieth century, a spirit of ecumenism has always existed in the church.¹⁹¹ Jesus prayed for the unity of all believers in John 17. In his letter to the Corinthians in

Churches, July 2021, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/reflection-on-the-theme-of-the-11th-assembly>.

¹⁸⁸ Sawako Fujiwara, “The Church is Permanently Underway: Reflections on the COVID-19 Pandemic from Tokyo,” *The Ecumenical Review* 72, no. 4 (2020): 649, <https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=ec162288-e2a9-4e50-b53d-3f2aa6770320%40redis>, DOI: 10.1111/erev.

¹⁸⁹ Sawako Fujiwara, “The Church is Permanently Underway: Reflections on the COVID-19 Pandemic from Tokyo.”

¹⁹⁰ Jack Haberer, *God Views: The Convictions that Drive Us and Divide Us* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2001), 149-50.

¹⁹¹ “The Ecumenical Movement,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, ed. Foster, Dunnivant, Blowers, and Williams (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 289.

the first century, the apostle Paul reminded believers to consider themselves as Christ's body.¹⁹²

The word "ecumenical" is an adjective derived from the Greek word *oikumene*.

It originally referred to "the whole inhabited earth" but gradually came to mean "the whole faith of the church...any effort aimed at promoting the wholeness of the church—its faith, life, and witness."¹⁹³ Thomas Best remains hopeful for continued healing within and among denominations that can lead toward the unity Christ prayed for in John 17. Best states,

It is sometimes forgotten that the goal of church union is not to unite church bureaucracies; nor are they merely for the sake of efficiency or, indeed, survival. Church unions are not the end, but the beginning, of a process whose goal is to heal wounds, witness to the justice and reconciliation effected by Christ (in both the church and the world!), and enable more effective witness and service to the world.¹⁹⁴

The First World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910 is credited with the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement of the 20th century.¹⁹⁵ Its theme was centered around ways of sharing the gospel together in a global context.¹⁹⁶ It produced three "streams of ecumenical activity" that continue on today, "Faith and Order" (finding unity despite doctrinal differences), "Life and Work" (fostering common Christian response to crises), and "The International Missionary Council" (promoting a more cooperative approach to evangelism and church planting).¹⁹⁷ After World War II, the three streams combined and formed the World

¹⁹² Erin M. Brigham, *Sustaining the Hope for Unity: Ecumenical Dialogue in a Postmodern World* (Collegeville, PA: Liturgical Press, 2012), 56-57.

¹⁹³ "The Ecumenical Movement," 289.

¹⁹⁴ Thomas F. Best, unpublished quotation in Alastair Rodger, "Survey of Church Union Negotiations 1996-1999," *The Ecumenical Review* 52, no. 1 (2000): 29.

¹⁹⁵ "The Ecumenical Movement," 290.

¹⁹⁶ Brigham, *Sustaining the Hope for Unity*, 56-7.

¹⁹⁷ "The Ecumenical Movement," 290.

Council of Churches.¹⁹⁸ Gradually members of the Eastern Orthodox Church joined the WCC in 1948, with the remainder joining in the 1960s.¹⁹⁹ The Roman Catholic church has still not joined the WCC. However, their official position since Vatican II has been one of cooperation, calling for “the Catholic faithful to take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism.”²⁰⁰ Erin Brigham adds that understanding the church as Christ’s body has remained a foundational principle in Catholic ecumenism since the Second Vatican Council.²⁰¹

Evangelical churches often criticize the WCC for sacrificing biblical truth to obtain unity and participating in extreme left-wing causes.²⁰² Therefore, these churches are more comfortable aligning themselves with “The Global Christian Forum.”²⁰³ Brigham sees the World Council of Churches and the Global Christian Forum (which attracts primarily Evangelical & Pentecostal members) as organizations that can unite their approaches through discourse and collaboration.²⁰⁴ Brigham firmly believes in the process of dialogue and ongoing discourse. She states, “...when narratives come into contact with each other, transformation should be expected. Out of this space, a new language may emerge. In an ecumenical context, the new language should more adequately express the unity to which Christians are called.”²⁰⁵

¹⁹⁸ Brigham, *Sustaining the Hope for Unity*, 56-7.

¹⁹⁹ “The Ecumenical Movement,” 290.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Brigham, *Sustaining the Hope for Unity*, 57.

²⁰² “The Ecumenical Movement,” 293.

²⁰³ Brigham, *Sustaining the Hope for Unity*, 57.

²⁰⁴ Brigham, *Sustaining the Hope for Unity*, 57.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 153.

Therefore, Brigham advocates for efforts today that steer clear of political, cultural, and personal agendas. She promotes Habermas's fundamental principles of discourse for effective ecumenical dialogue because they are based on noncoercion, sustaining inclusivity, and granting equal access to the conversation.²⁰⁶ Haberer agrees, "Both political correctness ideologues and theological correctness ideologues commonly misguide the church's mission...It is the mutual pursuit of God's will from a variety of starting points and diversity of passionate mindsets---and the very, very, difficult task of working together across our lines of division---that ultimately build up the body of Christ."²⁰⁷

The news reports from around the world during the Covid-19 pandemic birthed a shared sense of commonality hence the covid mantra "we are all in this together." Still, those same global news agencies reported the ever-present realities of political, socio-economic, and informational inconsistencies and injustices. Therefore, Zygmunt Bauman states, "Globalization unites as much as it divides."²⁰⁸ Yet another challenge for the church as it emerges from the effects of Covid-19 is to navigate through the negative impacts of globalization and capitalize on its positive potential to bring Christ's healing presence to North America and the world.

Currently, the church in America is still assessing the impact that Covid-19 has had on the life and worship of the church. Many lessons were learned during the lockdowns, such as how to live-stream one's church service and the value of families worshiping together. Other implications were more theological in nature, such as being reminded of the missional purpose of the church and the incarnational aspect of worship as a lifestyle. The Covid-19 pandemic initially

²⁰⁶ Brigham, *Sustaining the Hope for Unity*, 83.

²⁰⁷ Haberer, *God Views*, 120.

²⁰⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 2.

brought members of the body of Christ together to help one another navigate the uncertainties of the virus and the complexities of live streaming and producing hybrid services. A post covid solidarity is what the church in America needs to overcome the many pre covid challenges and the challenges present in this time of recovery. This research shows that the future holds great promise for the incarnational missional church of the 21st Century. Based on the experiences of church leaders during Covid-19 it is evident that genuine love for one another can be cultivated, and respectful dialogue can lead to healing, reconciliation, and renewal for God's people. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly, we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our fellowship is in Jesus Christ alone, the more serenely shall we think of our fellowship and pray and hope for it."²⁰⁹

Chapter Two: Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic was a clarion call to the church in North America to face the present day head-on, embrace the future with a courageous vision and engage the current (post) postmodern culture with the gospel's good news. Covid-19 was not the first health crisis to confront the church; unfortunately, as history teaches, it will not be the last. In past plagues and pandemics, Christians are credited with ministering to the sick and dying, often at the cost of their own lives or the lives of their loved ones. As a direct result of this display of lifestyle worship, the message of Christianity spread. Similarly, churches in America also served others in their communities and spread the message of Christ's love and compassion during this recent pandemic. The effects of Covid-19 on the church in America and the results of the ministry of

²⁰⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 30.

the Church on American society are still unfolding. Live streaming of church worship services during the church lockdowns has led to the successful development of interactive social networking platforms that now reach a community of previously unreached online worshippers. Intergenerational worship, rediscovered as families worshiped together online, is replacing the old model of age-segregated worship, especially in smaller churches. Churches are rediscovering the value of working together as the body of Christ within and between denominations and faith traditions resulting in a renewed spirit of ecumenism. Churches are re-examining what it means to be the missional church Jesus commanded to “go” in the Great Commission. And they are rediscovering the importance of worship as an attitude (worship as adoring God) and an action (worship as a lifestyle). In this time of post-pandemic restoration, churches are learning from the lessons of the past and building bridges into the future. Richard Rohr comments, “I believe that we totally missed Jesus’ major point when we made a religion out of him instead of realizing he was giving us a message of simple humanity, vulnerability, and non-violence that was necessary for...the survival of humanity. We need to dedicate our lives to building bridges and paying the price in our bodies for this ministry of reconciliation (Ephesians 2: 13-18).²¹⁰

This bridge-building spirit of unity and reconciliation has led many congregations to embrace ancient-future worship practices and engage congregants in worship that connects the past, present, and future and motivates incarnational living. Many practical and theological challenges face the post covid church in America. Among them are declining church attendance, postmodernity’s challenges of relativism, pluralism, secularism, and a collapsing church culture. The post covid reality supported by the survey results of this study is that many churches are

²¹⁰ Richard Rohr, “Following Jesus Way,” The Center for Action and Contemplation, February 19, 2023, [https://cac.org/daily-meditations/following-jesus-way-2023-02-19/.](https://cac.org/daily-meditations/following-jesus-way-2023-02-19/))

struggling to regain former (pre covid) numbers, and many are facing the possibility of repurposing their church buildings or closing their doors permanently. Yet many remain hopeful for the future impact of the church in America as it regains its missional purpose and incarnational presence while engaging in the worship of God that transcends church buildings and fulfills Jesus' greatest commandment to love God passionately and others compassionately (See Matt. 22:37-39) and seeks with all who profess "Jesus as Lord" (1 Corinthians 12:3) to be the unified presence of the body of Christ. Currently, the church in America is assessing the impact that Covid-19 has had on the life and worship of the church. This process is ongoing as experiences are shared and evaluated and new statistical information is gathered. Despite the existing literature, many questions still persist concerning the church, its worship, and Covid-19. Chapter 3 explains the methodology of this study.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methodology used in this study. This study explores the initial effects of the recent covid pandemic on the American church, worship, and Christian unity. This study presents an overview of how the church handled health crises and pandemics in the past as both a comparison and a foundation for processing this recent health crisis and its implications for the future of the American church. It is presented systematically so that this study can be replicated by anyone wishing to do so. This study is not exhaustive, as new data concerning the Covid-19 pandemic and its effects on the church in America are continually unfolding. However, the pandemic has served as a wake-up call to the church, explored in the available literature and the data collected through surveying church leaders involved in worship leadership during the pandemic. Also included in this section are the survey questions and how they were analyzed and interpreted.

Design

The design of this study is primarily qualitative. Creswell describes qualitative research as “An approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem... those who engage in this form of inquiry support a way of looking at research that honors an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of reporting the complexity of a situation.”²¹¹ This study combines a qualitative approach with an interpretive or hermeneutical phenomenological approach. Using an interpretive or

²¹¹ John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Method Approaches 5th Edition* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2018), 4.

hermeneutical research approach allows the collected data to be understood from the vantage points of the people who have experienced a particular phenomenon.²¹² In this case, this includes the pastors and worship leaders who experienced the effects of Covid-19 on their congregations and communities. Neubauer, Witkop, and Varpio describe the goal of this approach as discovering both “*what* was experienced and *how* it was experienced.”²¹³ The hermeneutical phenomenological approach is based on the work of former theologian Martin Heidegger.²¹⁴ Neubauer et al. state, “In hermeneutic phenomenology, scholars describe engaging in a hermeneutic circle wherein the researcher reads the data, constructs a vague understanding, engages in reflective writing, then re-engages with the text with revised understandings.”²¹⁵

The effects of Covid-19 on the church in America are still unfolding and providing revised understandings. Historians will have compiled a more detailed and accurate appraisal in the future. However, surveying American pastors and others involved in worship leadership before and during the pandemic allowed unifying themes to emerge and be considered hermeneutically. These themes provide an impetus for necessary dialogue and, as such, may have significant ramifications for the church’s future in America.

²¹² B.E. Neubauer, C.T. Witkop, and L. Varpio, “How Phenomenology Can Help Us Learn from the Experiences of Others,” *Perspect Med Educ* no. 8 (2019): 90-97, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-019-0509-2>

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

Gender
25 responses

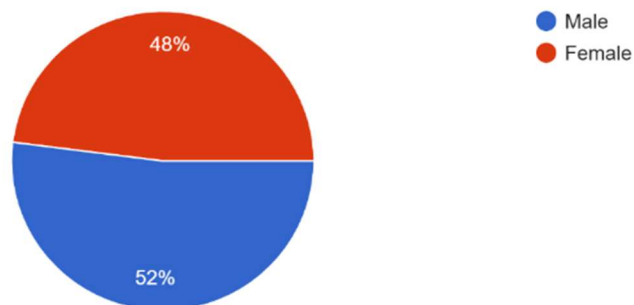


Figure 2

Participants

The 29 participants in this study were individuals 18 or older who were involved in worship leadership in their congregations during the Covid-19 pandemic. They were asked to complete an online questionnaire. The questionnaire was created on Google Forms, and the participants' responses were anonymous. The first half of the survey contained questions in a drop-down menu. The remainder of the questions were in essay form. The survey included men and women, split almost evenly (52% male and 49% female), and was open to all Christian denominations. (See Figure 2).

What is your denominational affiliation?
26 responses

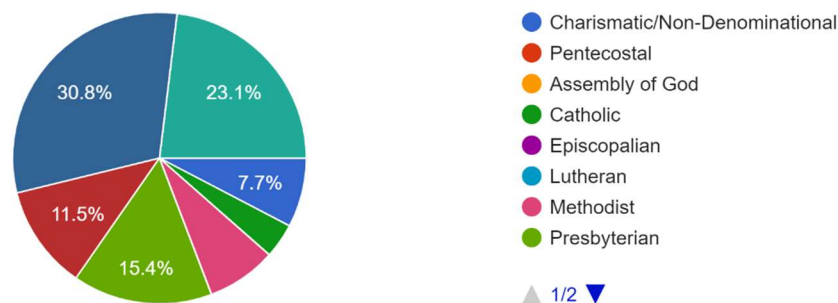


Figure 3

Disciples of Christ (not listed, list continued on a second page not shown) represented 30.8% of the participants, 23.1% described their affiliation as “other,” (listed on second page) 15.4% were Presbyterian, 11.5% were Baptist, (listed on second page) 7.7 % were Methodist, 7.7% were Charismatic/Non-Denominational, and 3.8% were Catholic.

60% of the participants had over 20 years of worship leadership experience, with 16% (11-20 years), 16% (4-10 years), and 8% with 1-3 years of ministry experience. 15.4% were pastors, 19.2% were worship leaders, 34.6% were music team members, and 15.4 % were liturgists, roughly 12% identified as worship planners. (See Figure 3).

What is your church’s current average physical attendance? (Add together number attending multiple services and multiple campuses.)

25 responses

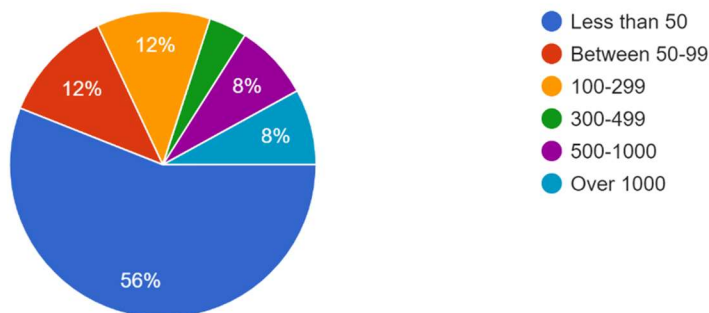


Figure 4

Most churches (56%) were smaller congregations with 50 or fewer regular attendees. 8% have an attendance between 500 and 1000, and 8% of those participating represented churches with over 1000 regular attendees. (See Figure 4).

Indicate number of persons viewing your weekly Sunday services electronically. (Facebook, Zoom, Streaming, Website, Television, YouTube etc.)

26 responses

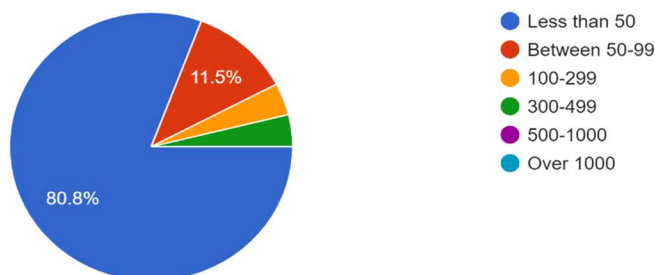


Figure 5

Not surprisingly, with mostly smaller congregations reporting, over 80% of the participants indicated that the number of people viewing online services was less than 50. 11.5% of the participants have between 50 and 99 online viewers, with 3.8% reporting 300-499 viewers and 3.8% with viewers between 100-299. (See Figure 5).

Where is your church located?

26 responses

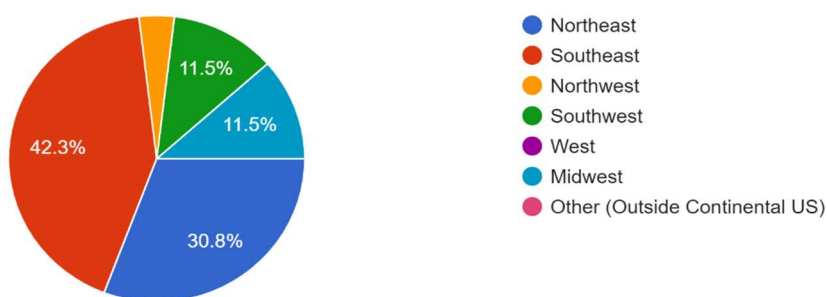


Figure 6

The churches represented in this survey were from all over the country, with the most significant number participating in the survey located in the Southeast (42.3%). The next largest

group was from the Northeast (30.8%), Southwest, and Midwest, each representing (11.5%) and the Northwest comprised (3.8%) of those responding. (See Figure 6).

The remaining survey questions were in essay form.

- Please describe how your church navigated the Covid crisis in terms of ministering to the needs of your congregation and possibly meeting some of the needs of your surrounding community.
- During the Covid crisis, did your church collaborate with or benefit from sharing experiences with other church or ministry leaders either in your immediate locality or online? Please elaborate.
- What are the practical challenges facing your church since Covid?
- What are the theological challenges facing your church since Covid?
- How do you envision navigating these challenges and moving forward in the current post-Christian and Post-modern world in which we find ourselves?
- In your opinion, how can churches work together more effectively in the 21st Century to display the worship as described in (Romans 12:1-2, Mark 12:30-31, Luke 10: 27, & Duet. 6:5.)
- In your own words, please describe biblical worship.

Procedure

The procedure for this qualitative research study included archival retrieval, a historical analysis of the churches' response to past pandemics and health crises, an overview of the condition of the church in America before, during, and after the Covid-19 crisis, and an anonymous online survey of participants 18 years of age or older who were involved in worship

leadership in their congregations during Covid-19. Once it was decided that an online survey would be utilized, IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval was applied for and granted.

The anonymous online survey was written to help evaluate the effects of Covid on the American church and its worship. It was intended to discern demographic information and gather real-life stories and experiences to find emerging and unifying themes that could provide beneficial information for churches seeking dialogue together moving forward. It was distributed online to a Facebook group, "The Liturgy Fellowship." This Facebook group was chosen because most members are involved in worship leadership in their churches or the wider church. The membership represents many denominations and non-denominations. The survey was also posted on this researcher's Facebook page, and a request for participation in this anonymous survey was sent to this researcher's friends, co-workers, and ministerial associates as an email attachment.

Data Analysis

Google Surveys organized the descriptive data from the drop downs menus of the first five questions into pie charts. The remaining data from the essay questions were analyzed using thematic analysis. Survey participants could express in essay form their personal views on the practical and theological challenges they currently face after covid and the most pressing challenges that existed before the impact of the covid pandemic. They were also asked to comment on the meaning of worship and the issue of unity in the church. The first step in analyzing the survey results was reading and re-reading the answers to the survey questions to become thoroughly familiar with the data to interpret it. The next step was to highlight the main points and any reoccurring phrases in the essay answers and code them using different colored highlighters. The overlapping themes and patterns, as well as singular themes, were reviewed

and then defined according to Braun & Clark's six-phase framework for doing thematic analysis.²¹⁶

Summary

This chapter describes the methodology for conducting this qualitative, interpretive research study. Reasons were stated as to why this research approach was beneficial to this study. The criteria for participating in the survey were described. Data analyses contained the demographic results from the first half of the anonymous online survey, including the survey questions and corresponding pie charts generated by Google Surveys. The essay questions from the remainder of the online survey were also included. The procedure of thematic analysis applied to interpreting the essay questions was explained. Data analysis, including the pie charts and thematic analysis, are consistent with the hermeneutical research approach. The results of this analysis will be disclosed and discussed in Chapter Four.

²¹⁶ Moira Maguire and Brid Delahunt, "Doing a Thematic Analysis: A Practical, Step-by-Step Guide for Learning and Teaching Scholars," *Dundalk Institute of Technology* 8, no. 3, (Autumn 2017): 3354.

Chapter Four: Research Results & Analysis

Introduction

This chapter reveals the results of a post covid online survey completed in November 2022. This survey was open to anyone involved in worship leadership, primarily during the Covid lockdowns and beyond. It was shared through social media, and the answers were anonymous. Some of the topics discussed were the theological and practical challenges faced by ministry leaders during the Covid crisis and now moving forward. Ministry leaders reflected on these challenges and shared their experiences, frustrations, and insights. Many expressed that they worked with other area churches to navigate the crisis. Finally, in light of what was experienced by ministry leaders during the covid crisis, the meaning of worship was explored as both a response of devotion to God and the resulting action of caring for the spiritual and physical well-being of others.

Collaborating During Covid

Early in 2020, the world was forever changed. The covid virus spread from China and caused a worldwide pandemic. Almost overnight, lockdowns were issued, affecting all businesses, schools, and churches. People everywhere were urged to shelter-in-place, as hospitals were overrun with those severely affected by the disease. Medical researchers worked feverishly to find a vaccine to prevent the disease from spreading and to provide the best treatments for those infected and struggling to survive. In this climate of so many unknown variables, church and ministry leaders scrambled to minister to the needs of their congregations and local communities. Survey respondents were asked to describe how their churches met these needs. This was the specific question: “During the Covid crisis, did your church collaborate with or

benefit from sharing experiences with other church or ministry leaders either in your immediate locality or online?”

Many churches reported already participating in a network of local churches before the covid lockdowns. Because of this, a relational infrastructure was in place that facilitated sharing of ideas and resources. One response read, “A network of all the area pastors already existed, and many worked together through communication, prayer, sharing resources (like digital communications), and tried to express unity through video with multiple churches represented.” Another ministry leader recounted, “We discussed how each church was dealing with the crisis, how they were live streaming, etc. One church I discussed these issues with every week in the early stages, and we compared experiences.” Another survey responder wrote, “I believe during covid, most if not all churches banded together to come up with ways that allowed us to continue worshipping. Collaborating ideas from other sources allowed us to create the safest possible conditions for our friends and families.”

In one case, a survey responder reported that covid collaboration led two congregations, each representing a different denomination, to come together and form one new congregation because they shared resources during the lockdown.

“That first couple of weeks, when things started to shut down, we did much swapping of notes with other churches to decide what to do. We didn’t own a building at the time and connected with a Baptist church in the neighborhood. We started meeting in their parking lot (and using their equipment) ...and are now even worshipping together as one congregation. The connection really began when the shutdown started.”

Other church leaders could take advantage of grants for technology development and online assistance offered by their denominations. For example, one ministry leader explained, “Our presbytery did provide grant funding for technology development to help with live

streaming and Zoom.” Another wrote, “Information was shared in our diocese in learning how to do online worship.”

The church lockdowns posed the most difficulties for smaller or more autonomous churches that needed to learn how to stream their services and use Zoom, Facebook, or YouTube. The learning curve included researching and purchasing the necessary equipment (often on a limited budget) and successfully operating it to produce a meaningful worship experience. Churches also learned new ways to provide or improve social media options that could help keep their people connected to God and each other. In lieu of denominational training or funding options, many of these churches reported turning to online resources that offered technical advice and support for churches. One responder wrote, “Many websites offered technical help to churches.” Many pastors and staff said they got the technical help they needed by contacting friends and acquaintances in other ministry settings for guidance and to share ideas. Ministry leaders mentioned that they also found encouragement and technical support by participating in Zoom training meetings offered by the Center for Healthy Churches and North Star Church Development or by participating in interactive online fellowships such as the Liturgy Fellowship.

Ministering to the Congregation

Church leaders were asked in the survey to describe how their churches navigated the covid crisis in terms of ministering to the needs of their congregations and possibly meeting some of the needs of their surrounding communities. During the covid lockdowns, all the churches surveyed reported shifting from in-person to online services. Many initially prerecorded a worship service that they then put on YouTube on Sunday mornings. Some took advantage of YouTube’s chat feature, but not all did so. Additionally, one church reported using a service

called GroupMe. Zoom was primarily utilized for Sunday school, prayer groups, and other small group meetings. For example, this responder wrote, “We moved to worship on Zoom and then on YouTube. We also had some outdoor services with social distancing and masking.” Another response read, “We closed at the height of covid, but when it was safe to reopen, we did. Our pastor used the covid tracker for our area to know the number of covid cases and kept the congregation aware of the number, and giving the reason to why we opened or closed. We also used Facebook Live to invite those who could not attend in person as a means to worship.” This ministry leader shared,

(The) worship service moved to live stream, which has remained in place. Occasional outdoor gatherings when it became appropriate. Phone and digital connections with individuals and families to “check in” throughout. Small groups were encouraged to care for each other. Care ministry and prayer ministry continued hand-in-hand for our congregation—creative mission/service opportunities to care for our neighbors and serve our frontline teams.

Most churches in the survey eventually added parking lot church services where families could listen in their cars or sit safely distanced outdoors. Churches with weekly communion switched to individually prepackaged communion cups to alleviate the fear of spreading the virus. One church reported using an old drive-in movie theater to meet safely for worship. This ministry leader expressed how challenging this time was: “We met virtually for 1.5 years and then in person with masks. It was very hard.”

Facebook Live and YouTube Live were the most frequently mentioned services used to stream these outdoor services to those at home. One survey responder succinctly summarized how the needs of the church community were met, saying, “Online worship, virtual meetings, outdoor services, and outdoor visits with the pastor.” One church held a creative VBS that kept family units safely separated. They wrote, “As for Sunday mornings, we were thankfully already live streaming at that point, so we were able to serve our congregation and a lot of folks outside

of our congregation through the stream. We also sought to keep doing as much as we could, so little things like a modified VBS that summer that kept families separate but still gave opportunities for both guests and members to be a part.” They also used the VBS opportunity to raise financial support for a financially struggling ministry in Mexico.

Beyond streaming church services, pastors, ministry staff, and volunteers reported visiting members at home but staying on porches or in driveways, making regular phone calls to every member, working to improve all their social media sites, recording videos, or producing weekly emails to help inform, encourage, ask for prayer requests and generally to keep people connected. This responder wrote, “The Pastoral Team drew up lists of parishioners age 64+, and volunteers called them to ask what their needs were: were they able to get food and medication delivered? Would they like regular phone contact? Would they like to receive home Communion?” One church even provided online games to help raise people’s spirits; when it was safer to do so, they offered small, masked gatherings. Some churches reported setting up ministries to provide meals and yardwork for those unable to leave their homes due to quarantining, illness, or advanced age. One survey answer included “...phone calls, prayer, doing errands or things such as yard work and house cleaning...and plenty of chicken soup).” A creative choir director offered voice lessons free of charge to every choir member and recorded and produced online choir collaborations to add to their churches’ online service. The responder commented on those voice lessons calling them “invaluable.” All the churches came together in one community for a collaborative Christmas Eve Service.

Ministering to Local Community

Churches already in a local network of churches found various ways to minister to the needs of their local communities, often by combining resources. Some partnered with local food banks to provide food, with one church reporting serving as many as 250 families at the height of the pandemic. Another church donated over \$50,000 towards rent assistance to those in need in their local community. A small group of neighborhood school children met in a local church sanctuary, masked and socially distanced, with a teacher provided to help monitor their online learning, all free of charge.

Moving forward, the survey results emphasize prayer and putting God first even in the simplest tasks, improving social media platforms and interaction, and loving one's neighbor by going beyond the church walls to where one's neighbor lives. Other thoughts about moving forward after covid included "building intentional intergenerational friendships," "focusing less on increasing church membership and more on making sure every person who attends knows God loves them," and "being open and affirming to all persons." One church reported, "they were finally making the church more physically accessible by adding a wheelchair ramp and an electric chair on their steep entrance stairs."

Another church noted that they were focusing on "being smaller, kinder, more creative, and weirder." They explained,

1. Smaller: Worship that is personal...familial needs to be joined with heavy relationship-based ministry, where people have safe spaces to belong and ask questions.
2. Kinder: we need to pursue humility that looks like Jesus-and the church needs to practice that together in an embodied way.
3. More Creative: The arts need to be elevated in our life together to help us cultivate a more faithful imagination. The Gospel is so much more than just sin-forgiveness, and we want to become agents of restoration together in an embodied way.
4. Weirder: The church is not of this world, so we need to resist the temptation to model ourselves after successful businesses where pastors are CEOs and budgets, and

attendance drives our initiatives, and marketing is more important than faithfulness. Instead, we need to cross boundaries, live with those who are unlike us, serve without anything to gain, and unleash our people's gifts.

Another response read,

You can't pour new wine into old wineskins! This time is an opportunity. The old order is passing away. We need to be open to the Spirit! This is a time ripe for evangelization, but in ways "beyond the walls"- intentionally building relationships, caring for people at the most basic level *before* inviting them to church, and learning how to communicate the Gospel in ways compatible with ...technology.

Continued Collaboration Moving Forward

Regarding worship and continuing collaboration among churches, the following question was asked, "In your opinion, how can churches work together more effectively in the 21st Century to display the type of worship described in (Romans 2:1, Mark 12: 30-31, Luke 10:27 & Deuteronomy 6:5)?

Survey results reflected the consensus that local churches should collaborate or continue to do so post covid to significantly impact their local communities. Many believed churches needed to become more involved in their communities in practical ways to help to improve community conditions. "It's about loving your neighbor, and that works best when we go to where our neighbor is," was one response to the question. One church reported belonging to a network of churches in their area named *Impact*. Through participation in this network, they became aware of one of the greatest needs in their community, affordable housing. This inspired them to lease some church property to build Affordable Housing Units. Another practical idea was that churches could share their buildings, outdoor spaces, and other resources with the community. Other survey suggestions were to hold community worship events and collaborative retreats and for local churches to come together for community service projects. This responder wrote, "I believe in a community-wide worship experience once a month or at least on the 5th

Sunday of the month. Fellowship experiences also need to be created to more completely be the Body of Christ.”

The survey revealed that many ministry leaders shared the desire for churches to learn to work together. One responder said that for this to happen, “There needs to be a radical change of attitude and a great moving of the Holy Spirit.” Hope was expressed “that churches would focus more on their similarities and less on what separates them.” For example, “unity can begin by recognizing others as members of God’s kingdom.” Several responders also shared “churches need to end political partisanship in the pulpit, end the political stone-throwing, denounce Christian nationalism, and preach the Good News of God’s kingdom.” It was also suggested “pastors act more like shepherds and less like CEOs, stop seeing other churches as competition, and that all believers demonstrate the joy of the gospel with acts of kindness and compassion.” In the words of one survey responder, “Working together is the key. We need to be willing to work together as one.”

One ministry leader was very candid in their answer concerning church collaboration efforts.

In my opinion, it will always be a challenge to work together if the two or more churches in question have different views on who is inherently worthy or not worthy of God’s love and equal treatment within the church. As long as greed is celebrated, but homosexuality is condemned, it will be difficult for churches to work together. A church that believes women are unfit to preach the word of God will have a problem collaborating with churches that are women-led.

Perhaps, the following survey response holds the key to where churches might begin their collaborative efforts. “I feel like we need to meet people where they are as opposed to where we want them to be. This also means sharing our time with others of different faiths and having community events where we learn from each other.” This responder suggested that the path to

displaying lifestyle worship could begin “By checking our dogma and differences at the door and focusing on our similarities.”

Practical Challenges Post Covid

Another question in this survey was, “What are the practical challenges facing your church since Covid?” The number one answer was decreased attendance. The churches in this survey report that only 50% - 60% of their pre-Covid membership has returned. One survey responder answered, “Attendance, maintaining proper balance between online/in-person events. Families with young kids and those who were in a season of “deconstruction” have not returned, even if they feel that we’re still their church home.” Another response illustrates this problem. “Post-covid seems like replanting the same church. Much energy and time are required to renew face-to-face relationships and connections. Covid provided some folks an exit path from being part of the congregation.”

This problem of members “ghosting” or exiting their congregations ties directly into other reported and related challenges, such as fiscal deficits and diminished volunteer bases. While most churches in the survey found live streaming beneficial and continue streaming their services, two reported downsides exist. One negative aspect of live streaming is the difficulty churches are experiencing in encouraging people to return to physically attending church services. They note that people seem to have lost the “habit” of attending church services in person. This response illustrates the problem, “So many people have gotten out of the habit of regular church attendance, and some have drifted away.” This responder lists the following practical challenges their church is experiencing post covid “Getting people back in the habit of attending church on Sunday morning, collecting tithes and offerings and sanitizing all of the spaces.”

Another challenge related to live streaming is that during the covid lockdowns, church members could visit other churches “virtually.” As a result, some have left their home churches to attend elsewhere. Others continue to enjoy the freedom discovered online by following a variety of churches regularly. One worship leader candidly admitted, “I think we should make it a point to regularly visit other churches.”

Clergy and staff “burnout” is a challenge some churches face post covid. This responder indicated that interpersonal relationships between members of their staff are strained. “Lots of the trauma experienced in the last 2+ years is finding its way out now in surprising ways, meaning we’re constantly navigating conflict within the church. Staff health (mental, physical, and interpersonal) is strained.”

Many congregation members are still grieving the loss of friends and family members, and social isolation has affected the elderly members of many congregations, causing discernable cognitive loss among members of this age group. The following responder addressed this issue, “Most people have lost someone. So, grief is present. We are aging, so the challenges of a small church aging have been accentuated. One member’s health has been affected, and she is now in a nursing home. Isolation set some back cognitively.” Another responder wrote, “We still have low numbers. Some are still worried about contracting covid. A great number of our congregation are elderly with health conditions. We understand why they are afraid, but it does not help the feeling of preaching to yourself.” Another ministry leader said, “We are probably at 60% of pre covid worship attendance. Many are disengaged, and many continue to worship online from home rather than in person. Many older adults experienced significant health decline, likely from the isolation and lack of regular access to routine medical care.”

This survey also reported some churches' are dealing with a general lack of enthusiasm or malaise. For example, "Attendance is down. There seems to be less enthusiasm." Another leader asked, "Will we survive?" These are the practical challenges faced by this church: "Reduced attendance. Drastically reduced! Being more blatantly sucked into an ungodly worldview due to the postmodern and secularized world in which we live. It seems that covid has accelerated the blending of the holy with the profane (if I can put it that way)."

Another reported challenge is that the unhealthy political climate that existed before covid was exasperated during covid as social media posts created more polarization among church members, thus adding to the negative perception that many outside the church already held. These two responses illustrate the pervasive and unsettling realities of the political divides that continue to affect and infect our churches, "The extremism of Christian white nationalism has had an impact. There is definitely a division of opinions in our church, although overall, the congregation does get along. However, we feel some people have left our church for political/theological reasons that are not related to covid. There are viewpoints on social media that have had an impact." This survey response probably captures the spirit of some of those polarizing social media posts, "The theological challenges we see in our area have less to do with covid and more to do with the unhealthy social/political climate that has decided that maybe God didn't make humanity male and female and that maybe racism is ok as long as it's committed against Caucasians." However, this response offers hope and healing for all churches post covid "During (covid) was a firestorm of challenge with politics being the root cause – the polarized state of our culture found its way into the church and manifested on the topic of politics outright, racial justice, and response to Covid/masking/vaccines. Coming out of that, we have focused on citizenship in God's kingdom and unity in Christ as central themes to help us heal." Another

ministry leader responded, “The public view of God and church is vindictive and judgmental, especially when tied to radical Christian nationalism and white Christian supremacy. (We are) trying to let our community know that we believe in a God of grace and love.”

Churches also face the post covid challenge of balancing meeting their in-person attendee’s needs with the needs of those who choose to attend virtually. Churches report that even those who consider themselves regular attendees do not feel the need to participate in church services every week. This presents the genuine challenge of rebuilding the church as a community and maintaining continuity with smaller and inconsistent numbers. This survey response summarizes the problem well, “Many people have become more isolated and have lost the value of church as a community.”

Sprinkled in among the challenges were two anomalies to these reported trends. One ministry leader commented, “We are exploding with growth. New believers and newcomers to the area are stretching our space and capacity to serve, love and teach them all.” Another reported, “By now (November 2022), most things, practically speaking, for our church have gone back to roughly normal compared to pre-Covid.”

Theological Challenges Post Covid

Many theological challenges that churches face post covid relate to the practical challenges already mentioned. How to encourage people to come back to attending church services in person is associated with the challenge that church leaders report of communicating the importance of the church as a community and physically participating in the body of Christ. The other side of this challenge expressed by survey responders is how to include the new and growing remote church population in discipleship, evangelism, spiritual formation, and fellowship. Ministry leaders are being stretched to redefine what it means to be the church

gathered to include in-person and online attendees. Therefore, many are developing and expanding their online ministries to minister effectively to the online population segment. In answer to the question, “What are the theological challenges facing your church since Covid?” this leader said, “Meeting the needs of those who are in person and those who attend virtually.”

Another theological challenge that was addressed by some was dealing with the fallout of grief and loss. The suffering experienced by many members during covid has left church leaders with the challenging task of demonstrating God’s hope and healing to their congregations and communities. People are asking why a loving God would allow Covid in the first place and/or why did God allow my loved one to die. Therefore, the struggle for church leadership is “How to demonstrate a loving God’s response to Covid-19.”

Theology is itself a challenge in post-Christian America. One ministry leader said that the following topics present significant theological challenges. “Homosexuality, female ordination, and race and gender issues, etc.” Another ministry leader acknowledged, “Our main challenge comes in the form of our Presbyterian church combining with a Baptist church, and honoring both theological convictions. The PCA is in the midst of a lot of conversations about sexuality and women’s eldership/pastorship in the church, so that’s a big part of our internal church conversation as well.” Another theological struggle is representing the truth of God. This survey responder wrote, “People really want to know the truth from the Word of God. They want clear teaching and practical application. This is only a challenge in the sense that we want to honor the Word of God and always be true to Him.”

Decreased attendance has triggered other changes, and leaders are learning how to adapt to these changes. Many face smaller budgets and smaller congregations while still needing to improve social media interaction, live streaming, and maintaining other ministries and outreach

goals. Sadly, one church expressed genuine concern about dying out as a congregation due to all these post covid practical and theological challenges. One weary ministry leader exhorted, “We just need to keep putting one foot in front of the other and keep moving forward.”

The survey results reflect a need for Christians of all denominational backgrounds to continue demonstrating love for one another and their neighbors by partnering to move forward. What was unilaterally observed during the covid lockdowns was that worship was important. It meant responding to God’s love as individuals and communally, but it also meant showing others the love of God in both practical and spiritual ways. During covid, many churches worked together and were able to meet the needs of their congregations and their local communities. One church leader shared, “Every partnership across church and denominational lines is a good thing. We regularly try to share special nights of worship with friends at other churches, as well as special events to benefit our community. For example, we’re working on a Christmas caroling event to benefit the homeless and addicted in our area, and that is an initiative being shared by three different churches.”

Biblical Worship

The last question in the survey asked the survey responders to define biblical worship. Many of the surveyed pastors and worship leaders believe that biblical worship encompasses one’s whole life lived in service and devotion to God, (Romans 12:1) and lived out in service to others (Matthew 22: 36-40). Only a few responders limited their definitions to worship as music. For example, “Worship is a musical style that resonates with people” or “Worship is music that has rich theological lyrics.”

Other definitions of biblical worship include “bowing,” “praising,” “obeying,” “yielding,” “loving,” “serving,” “glorifying God,” “offering oneself to God,” “expressing thankfulness to God,” and “working to make one’s community a better place.”

Worship was described as transformational and transcendent. It was defined as an activity that was both individual and corporate. Responders also described worship as “any action that brings glory to God, “Participation in the community of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit,” “A covenanted fellowship together directing all actions to the glory of God,” “outward service and neighboring” and finally, “An all of life activity (Rom. 12:1).” Most responders defined worship as more than a musical style or as limited to one singular act of adoration. Overall, their definitions reflected an understanding of worship as an incarnational and missional lifestyle.

Covid was a wake-up call to the church in America. It was a call for individuals and churches to embrace an incarnational lifestyle of worship. Based on the survey results, the worship wars of the past few decades may be ending. Most who were surveyed acknowledged that worship was so much more than music. This survey reveals that this Clarion call is being heard by many in worship leadership positions in the American church. This creates a renewed hope that lifestyle worship’s meaning and essence can unite believers within churches and across denominational lines rather than dividing them.

The Research Questions, Hypotheses, and Supporting Results

Two research questions were posed in Chapter One, along with two correlating hypotheses. The research questions were:

1. How can pastors and worship leaders continue in the spirit of unity to display lifestyle worship more effectively to congregants and the outside community?

2. What are the practical and theological challenges facing pastors and worship leaders that the Covid crisis illuminated within the church?

Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 read:

1. Pastors and worship leaders can continue in the spirit of unity to display lifestyle worship more effectively to congregants and the outside community by focusing on teaching and demonstrating biblical lifestyle worship to their congregations, engaging in worthwhile community projects with other denominations, and addressing relevant issues by dialoguing together regularly with other church and community leaders.

2. The practical and theological challenges facing pastors and worship leaders highlighted during the Covid crisis may include counteracting declining in-person attendance, ministering effectively to a growing online worshipping community, fostering intergenerational relationships, and teaching biblical lifestyle worship

The survey results already reported earlier in this chapter answer the research questions in depth and strongly support both correlating hypotheses. The ministry leaders who participated in the survey generally agree with the premise that a biblical lifestyle of worship can bring unity to the body of Christ. In defining biblical worship, the majority believe that worship is responding to God's attributes and presence with submission and humility, which should then overflow into a lifestyle of caring for the physical and spiritual well-being of others. Participant #3 wrote this definition, "It (*worship*) is serving, loving, yielding to, obeying, praising, and offering ourselves to God in participation with the community of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. This has implications for formal gathered worship, outward service and neighboring, and lives of service to God." Another ministry leader wrote,

In a broad sense, biblical worship is any action in life that brings glory to God... Like an artist's paintings, God created the world for that world to reflect back to God the beauty

of God the artist bringing God joy. And the part of creation most capable of doing that is the body of humanity: reflecting back to heaven God's word, God's character, God's will, God's love, hence the Great Commandment to love God with all of our beings, and love the neighbor, the stranger, and the alien as ourselves.

Another response read, "Biblical worship is giving God the due for giving us everything we have, most importantly, our salvation. We want to honor and praise God and thank Him for the things He has done. We want to be encouraged to live right lives and love others-so our lives uplift each other and attract those in the world who need God." This definition by participant #14 sums up lifestyle worship using the Bible's own words, "Responding to God with all our hearts, soul, mind, and strength and loving others."

As far as how to continue in this spirit of unity, church leaders expressed the importance of maintaining the ministry relationships which were cultivated during the covid crisis and developing or expanding ministry networks to meet their local communities' practical and spiritual needs. As to what continues to divide, several respondents believe that the political partisanship which is dividing American churches needs to end. They expressed the concern that this is a contributing factor to the already negative perception of Christianity in America and that it is making the church's message seem irrelevant, adding to the exodus of former church members as well as the scarcity of new ones.

Another challenge expressed by survey responders is "rebuilding a church that values community." Respondent # 15 wrote, "Many people have become more isolated and have lost the value of the church as a community." To rebuild that sense of community, respondent # 3 is confronting this challenge and focusing on teaching and modeling "citizenship in God's kingdom and unity in Christ and re-engaging in fellowship and community outreach/service ministries." Another ministry leader added that their approach in this time of rebuilding after covid is to go

smaller and be more personal and intentional. Their approach is “One person at a time, sharing God’s love through both word and deed.”

Conclusion

The results of this post covid survey reveal real-life issues facing all those in worship leadership today. Some of those issues are practical, such as diminished church attendance especially now that the height of the covid crisis has passed. Most churches participating in this survey report that they are at 50% and not more than 60% of their attendance numbers before the covid lockdowns. These statistics present related challenges involving decreased church finances, budget concerns, and a diminished volunteer base. Many churches have a growing base of members who prefer to interact digitally and worship online, adding the additional challenge of discipling a growing online community. As a result of covid, churches experienced the loss of members, some due to contracting and dying from the disease but other members simply moved to other churches. Additionally, many church leaders have found that former members have lost the habit or, in some cases, the desire to attend church services and have used covid as an opportunity to slip out and not return. The main theological challenge for church leaders is communicating the importance and joy of being a part of the community of Christ and how that is to be understood and lived out in this new climate of digital interaction, phygital community, and hit-or-miss attendance.

During the Covid crisis, many church leaders discovered that networking with other local churches was essential. Sharing ideas and resources and working together to meet the needs of their local community went a long way in bringing glory to God and showing the world that God is love. This survey reveals that many participating churches understand the importance of continuing and expanding these partnering relationships moving forward.

In sharing their biblical definitions of worship, worship leaders expressed overall a unifying understanding of worship as an all-of-life activity meant to bring glory to God. They seemed to genuinely grasp the two-sided nature of worship as piety and charity. They understood that worship is a response to the revelation of God's love, that worship is loving God with all the passion in one's soul and loving one's neighbor with all the compassion of God's heart. Responders supported working with other denominations and faiths to demonstrate the love of God in visible and measurable ways to family, friends, and their communities. As one ministry leader wrote, biblical worship is "Responding to God with all our hearts, soul, mind, and strength and loving others."

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Introduction

This section will recapitulate the main points of this thesis. The research questions and results will be re-stated and summarized. This final chapter of the thesis will focus on the significance of the data gathered from research results. It will explore the benefits of this study, especially for the post covid church in America. It will interpret the research findings as they compare to the existing literature discussed in Chapter 2. In addition, this concluding chapter will discuss the limitations of this study and provide recommendations of topics for researchers to explore in future related research studies.

Summary of Findings

The Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020 was a wake-up call, especially to the church in North America. The church had its own critical pre-morbidity issues, which were severely tested by both the practical and theological challenges of the pandemic. The survey participants candidly discussed these challenges as they answered the following two research questions.

1. How can pastors and worship leaders continue in the spirit of unity to display lifestyle worship more effectively to congregants and the outside community?
2. What are the practical and theological challenges facing pastors and worship leaders that the Covid crisis illuminated within the church?

The survey results strongly support these two original hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Pastors and worship leaders can continue in the spirit of unity to display lifestyle worship more effectively to congregants and the outside community by focusing on teaching and demonstrating biblical lifestyle worship to their congregations, engaging in

worthwhile community projects with other denominations, and addressing relevant issues by dialoguing together regularly with other church and community leaders.

The survey results confirm that a spirit of ecumenism formed during the Covid crisis as church leaders worked together to support each other and to minister to the needs of their communities. Church leaders indicated in the survey that they wished to continue in this spirit of cooperation and unity. Survey responders offered several suggestions for how churches could continue in the spirit of unity to display lifestyle worship more effectively to congregants and the outside community. These included local churches sponsoring community events like worship nights, working together on community-oriented projects, ramping up social media outreach, and offering the use of church space to the community. All agree that Covid has changed things for the church in America.

Hypothesis 2: The practical and theological challenges facing pastors and worship leaders highlighted during the Covid crisis may include counteracting declining in-person attendance, ministering effectively to a growing online worshiping community, fostering intergenerational relationships, and teaching biblical lifestyle worship.

The results of the survey show that the practical and theological challenges facing pastors and worship leaders post covid are indeed counteracting declining in-person church attendance, ministering effectively to a growing online worshiping community, fostering intergenerational relationships, and teaching biblical lifestyle worship. The survey results reveal that the number one challenge faced by church leaders post covid is the loss of former church attendees and continuing declining attendance. However, many churches have discovered an online community as a result of their streaming church services during covid. This is a community who wish to be part of the physical church community while remaining online. Church leaders are welcoming

families back to physical church services but many of these families no longer want to be separated into age groups, but prefer to worship together as they did online during the church lockdowns. The survey also reveals that lifestyle worship was normative during the church lockdowns as churches ministered to those around them. Therefore, these results also support Hypothesis 2.

The church lockdowns early in the Pandemic forced church leadership to reevaluate their understanding of worship and distill essential congregational worship elements to provide meaningful online worship experiences for their congregations. This was a significant challenge for churches without experience in broadcasting their church services. As a result, church leaders offered each other help, guidance, and support even across denominational lines. New digital ministries were created, and an entire community of online worshipers is enjoying meaningful connections through newly emerging Phygital churches (a combination of physical and digital).

Additionally, the pandemic allowed pastors and those in worship leadership to model biblical lifestyle worship as they moved beyond and outside the walls of their church buildings, creatively bringing God's comfort to others in spiritual, emotional, and practical ways. Biblical lifestyle worship, explained in the Great Commandment, expounded in the Great Commission, and clearly expressed in Romans 12:1, was the foundation for churches working together during the crisis. It remains the church's greatest hope for unity moving forward.

During the Covid crisis, those outside the church were recipients of God's love in action as the church rose to meet the varied needs of their communities. This demonstration of lifestyle worship is not unique to this recent 2020 pandemic. History reveals that the believers have consistently and courageously ministered to their neighbors during times of crisis, often at their own peril. Beginning with the Antonine plague of the second century, which may have been the

first significant health crisis to affect the church, believers in Christ have cared for those around them. Martin Luther urged his church members not to flee the plague but to stay and minister to their sick and dying friends and neighbors. For Luther, this decision to stay came at a high personal cost because his daughter succumbed to the plague. Throughout history, Christians have been responsible for building hospitals and caring for the sick in various ways during times of crisis. This was true in this most recent health crisis of Covid-19. The survey results revealed that churches found creative and practical ways to minister to those in need around them. Church buildings were used as classrooms, free food and other supplies were distributed, chores were done, rent assistance was offered, telephone chains were set up to keep in touch with members (especially the elderly population), pastors and their teams visited congregation members and neighbors on their front porches, church services went online, and then outdoors, and more social media options were created or expanded to help people keep in touch with one another, all of which were especially helpful during the church lockdowns and shelter-in-place mandates. In a sense, the church became more about the people than the building during the pandemic. The people of God, Christ's body, were pushed out of their comfort zones by the pandemic, but to the benefit of their neighbors. One survey responder shared, "It's about loving your neighbor, and that works best when we go to where our neighbor is."

This thesis's research data and survey responses reveal that the church in America faced serious issues before the Pandemic. As David Kinnaman of the Barna Research Group stated in chapter one, "The U.S. population is undergoing major religious, social, demographic, and digital change. The rise of digital life, including social media, the economic crisis, changing attitudes about social issues, and the emergence of younger generations on the scene are some of

the factors that are likely to form undercurrents recalibrating Americans' connection to faith and to Christianity."²¹⁷

According to the survey results, the most agreed-upon challenge facing church leaders post covid is reduced church attendance. The people have come back now, but church attendance is only 50% or, at the most, 60% of what it was before the pandemic. This decline in attendance has affected churches in various ways. The money just isn't there, and budgets have had to be adjusted to compensate; the volunteer base is down, staff members face ministry burnout, and a general feeling of malaise still affects many congregations. But the statistical reality is that church attendance had steadily declined before the pandemic. The survey responses, along with Barna surveys, support that political partisanship, sectarianism, controversial issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, church leadership debates, i.e., complementarianism versus egalitarianism, and other hot-topic issues are promoting division and disunity among God's people and rendering the place of the church in the lives of non-believers as simply irrelevant.

It is the position of this thesis that the Pandemic of 2020 was a clarion call to the church and a God-given opportunity to come together as one worshipping body in Christ to fulfill the redemptive mission of the church. The pandemic's challenging circumstances precipitated the need for churches to support one another and to band together to minister to the needs of their congregations and those in their local communities. In the aftermath of the pandemic, the church in America needs to assess and reassess how to move forward in unity by loving God passionately and all others compassionately. As Brett McCracken stated in the first chapter, "In

²¹⁷ David Kinnaman, "Signs of Decline and Hope Among Key Metrics of Faith," Faith and Christianity: State of the Church 2020, March 4, 2020, www.barna.com/research/changing-state-of-the-church/

such a precarious and polarizing environment, how can churches move forward in beautiful unity (Psalm 133) rather than ugly division? It won't be easy. But by God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit working to unify us in ways our flesh resists, the opportunity is there for us to be a countercultural model for the rest of the world."²¹⁸

One responder wrote,

You can't pour new wine into old wineskins! This time is an opportunity. God is calling us to something new. The old order is passing away. We need to be open to the Spirit! This is a time ripe for evangelization, but in ways "beyond the walls"- intentionally building relationships and caring for people at the most basic level before inviting them to church-learning how to communicate the Gospel in ways compatible with new technology.

Significance

The significance of this study is that it offers a path for churchwide unity rooted in incarnational biblical lifestyle worship. This spiritual theology of worship (based on scriptures such as Psalm 133:1, Micah 6:8, Deuteronomy 6:5, John 4:23, Mark 12:30-31, Luke 10:27, Matthew 28: 19-20, John 17:21-24, 1 Corinthians 12:3, Matthew 7:12, Matthew 5:14-16, John 15:13, and Romans 12:1) can help to promote unity and a spirit of continued cooperation and dialogue among American churches of all denominations. As such, this study provides church leaders with a kind of roadmap to pandemic recovery and restoration. It explores the church's response to past public health crises, the pandemic's ongoing effects on the present, and the implications that these effects will have on the church's future in America.

Covid-19 brought many changes to the landscape of the church in America. With these changes came new challenges and opportunities. The most significant is that Covid-19 launched

²¹⁸ Brett McCracken, "Church, Don't Let Coronavirus Divide You," The Gospel Coalition, May 15, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/church-dont-let-coronavirus-divide/>

the American church into the Digital Age. This study shows that churches with little to no digital presence before covid are now live streaming and expanding their social media ministries. For many more innovative churches, this includes increasing interactive platforms for online worshippers and embracing the new technology trend known as Phygital Church to reach a new and growing digital church community. Another positive effect of the lockdowns is that many churches are reexamining the importance of multiple generations worshiping together rather than in age-segregated groups as well as reevaluating their expression of corporate worship and including more frequent if not weekly celebrations of communion.

The study also links worship as a lifestyle and the church fulfilling its redemptive and restorative mission. Churches are realizing that in post-Christian America, the mission field outside their doors is not coming to them, and therefore, they must go to where the people are. This was obvious during the church lockdown period, but it was a precious lesson learned.

The qualitative methodology used to collect and analyze the data provided by the online survey answers allowed the relevant theological and practical issues faced by pastors and worship leaders to be explored. The church pastors and worship leaders who participated in this study represent various denominational backgrounds. During covid, these church leaders experienced what JD Pluss calls “a spiritual ecumenism.”²¹⁹ In their survey responses, they relate the benefits they experienced by working with other leaders and tell of instances when churches came together during the covid crisis to meet the community's needs. This study's significant contribution is to offer hope for future cooperation and collaboration among churches based on a

²¹⁹ Pluss, “Covid -19, the Church, and the Challenge to Ecumenism,” *Transformation* 37, no. 4 (2020) 286-296.

common understanding of worship that is missional and incarnational, in other words, biblical lifestyle worship.

Finally, this study is significant because the gathered data establishes a common perspective of worship and unity which can inform related practical and ideological applications to pedagogical practice.

Limitations

The most obvious limitation of this study is that Covid-19 and its effects on the church in America are still unfolding. The American church, along with the global church is currently in recovery mode. The church is processing, healing, and reflecting. New studies and reports on the effects of Covid-19 will be emerging for quite some time to come. This further information will continue to inform the church with the wisdom only hindsight can offer.

Other limitations of this study are inherent to the method of qualitative research, as opposed to quantitative research. Qualitative research does not use statistical methods to interpret data. As such, the data analysis is subject to the researchers' biases and interpretations. Also, the data gathered from the survey respondents is based on their personal opinions and experiences and the structure of the survey.

The final limitation of this study is that this relatively small sampling of worship leaders and pastors, compared with the total number who exist in America, may not be entirely representative of all pastors and worship leaders.

Recommendations

This author suggests that further research is conducted on the effects of Covid-19 on the American church. Additional surveys, like those operated by the Barna Research Group in 2020, could be performed to assess the damages and innovations resulting from the pandemic. Many

local communities were served by churches networking together during the pandemic. Before Covid-19, research studies showed that an increasing number of Americans held either a negative or an ambivalent opinion of the church and felt it was irrelevant to their lives. Future studies could explore if the American public's attitude changed because of this ecumenical movement of churches working together to serve their communities during the pandemic and how or if this affected church growth.

Second, this researcher suggests that further studies be conducted on the growth and effectiveness of digital technology in churches. It will be interesting to see what ministries evolve to meet the needs of the growing online community of worshipers that began to be noticed and listened to during covid. Churches will need to find ways to reach out in evangelism and discipleship and engage this new digital community in the worship life of the church. They will need to take some creative risks and leaps of faith. Churches may again benefit as they did during the covid lockdowns in sharing expertise and strategies across denominational lines. All churches must create and expand digital interactive platforms to engage their entire church community and further explore what Phygital ministry could mean for their congregation and beyond. Additional studies need to be done and surveys conducted to understand the digital needs and preferences of younger generations to reach them with the gospel message effectively and engage them in the worship life of the church. Further studies will help churches navigate this new digital age and move into the future. It will also help churches to be more prepared in the event of a future crisis.

This researcher suggests that churches continue to network and dialogue together. Churches need to proceed in the spirit of cooperation that was so evident during the covid health crisis to go on meeting the needs of their local communities.

The church's future in America depends upon a genuine display of unity that can only be found in biblical lifestyle worship. This author's final recommendation is that for the sake of the future of the church in America, all pastors, worship leaders, teachers, writers, bloggers, and influencers model and teach their congregations and audiences that true worship is a lifestyle.

Summary

Covid-19 was a clarion call to the church in America to find unity as the body of Christ. That unity was evidenced by the ecumenical spirit of cooperation and collaboration that existed among American churches of all denominations as pastors and worship leaders worked together with other church leaders giving technical advice, offering spiritual, emotional, and sometimes financial support, and coming together as one to meet these exact needs in their local communities. The pandemic ushered most American churches into the digital age in some form. Church leaders had to develop or further expand their social media presence to connect with their sheltering-in-place congregations and allow them to still worship together from their separate homes. The pandemic opened a path for new and innovative ministries, and it caused a reexamination of existing ones. As a result, many churches are expanding their digital ministries, developing intergenerational worship, and focusing on missional worship renewal. The covid lockdowns allowed church leaders to take a fresh look at worship, including incorporating ancient patterns of worship and reexamining what worship elements are essential in future church gatherings. Covid illuminated the need for all believers to express their worship of God as the church gathered and as the church scattered. Covid moved worship out of the church walls and into homes, digital devices, church parking lots, neighborhoods, and even drive-in movie theatres. It has even helped to create new Phygital churches and ministries.

The American landscape and the American church landscape have changed because of the pandemic. In this post-pandemic recovery world, there is no getting back to *normal*. Instead, there is a “new normal” and a “next normal” to be embraced and discovered. The pandemic brought the body of Christ together in a renewed atmosphere of spiritual cooperation. This study offers a spiritual theology of worship for all American churches and denominations to continue moving forward in this same spirit, diverse in expression but united in God’s redemptive plan and purpose. This worship theology is based on worship as an incarnational and missional lifestyle (Matthew 22:36-40 & Romans 12:1). Embracing incarnational worship can help the whole body of Christ to continue in that spirit of cooperation to dialogue journeying towards the oneness Jesus prayed for the night before his crucifixion.

The ramifications of COVID-19 on the American church are still unfolding. History records that in the past, followers of Christ acted selflessly by caring for those around them during times of crisis, and their acts of charity contributed to the church’s growth and favor with the people. Based on the encouraging first-hand accounts of the pastors and worship leaders who participated in this study, may the actions of the body of Christ during and hopefully continuing on after the Covid crisis of 2020 bring the same kind of perceived favor to the American church.

“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

(Psalm 133:1, NRSV).”

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