

SENSING THE PRESENCE OF GOD
THROUGH ONLINE WORSHIP AT
HERITAGE FELLOWSHIP IN CANTON, GEORGIA

by

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DEDICATION

To Anna,
whose encouragement sustained me throughout this project,
and to Elijah and Benjamin,
whose sparks for life inspire me to see the divine everywhere.

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To begin a lengthy academic process is to be overwhelmed by the details, but to end a project is to gain a retrospective in which one is overwhelmed by the support one has received along the way. I am grateful to all who took time to aid me in this process and bore with me through my anxiety and perfectionism. Many thanks are owed to the following who made this work possible:

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ABSTRACT

JUSTIN DWIGHT BISHOP
SENSING THE PRESENCE OF GOD THROUGH ONLINE WORSHIP AT
HERITAGE FELLOWSHIP IN CANTON, GEORGIA
Under the direction of Karen G. Massey

Can sensory experiences enhance online worship? In an era when church attendance is in cultural decline and online or hybrid worship is becoming the new normal, one wonders how to make the most of this limited time in worship, especially for online worshippers. This thesis examines the biblical and historical use of sensory elements in worship, and it seeks to reimagine them for an online presentation in order to examine the effect of these sensory elements on the online worshippers' experiences. Ten participants volunteered to take part in four video worship experiences during the Lenten season of 2021, beginning with a survey and semi-structured interview prior to the actual worship experiences and ending with a similar survey and interview. The questions were designed to determine if the sensory elements "enhanced" the overall online worship experience without using the word "enhance." The themes that emerged from the surveys and interviews indicated that sensory elements were disruptive enough to call attention to the *act* of worship, enhancing it by making it less of an *event to attend* and more of an *act* in which to *participate*. Finally, in conclusion, this thesis offers ideas for how worship leadership might incorporate more sensory elements in both in-person and online worship that might enhance the divine encounter.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Since the Reformation, much of Protestant worship has been limited to the passive act of listening to some music and a sermon, and with the advent of online worship necessitated by the novel coronavirus pandemic of 2020, worship runs the risk of becoming even more passive, becoming just another video to consume. However, there are traditions which make the experience of worship more active, appealing to all five senses and requiring active participation. When I first stepped into the fifteenth-century Anglican chapel at Magdalen College, Oxford, not only did I have a sense of traveling back in time, but I also had the experience of entering an atmosphere of worship long before the worship service actually began. The smell of incense lingered in the air, giving the light a pathway to trace and creating a presence in the air that one could almost taste. The sight of the stained-glass windows and ornate carvings told visual stories of Biblical figures. I saw several people before me bow and cross themselves as they entered, and so I did the same, engaging the sense of touch. Echoes from footsteps lingered long after they had ceased. And then the service actually began. The organ music didn't just emanate from a corner of the room—it filled the entire sanctuary, deep bass notes that I could feel reverberating throughout my body. The procession was colorful, holy vestments glimmering in the light filtering through the icons. The priest didn't just speak; he called for a response, and the congregation followed suit. The smell of incense grew stronger. The sermon was short, decentralized but precise and to the point. We walked up front and made a cross with our hands, receiving the wafer, the strength of the taste of the wine hard to ignore. I had become an active, engaged

participant in worship. It was an immersive, sensory experience which “broke script”¹ and brought worship to life. I began to wonder if it would work in the context of a Baptist church in the American South, perhaps even online.²

The sacred encounter with God in worship remains a mystery. We sense when it happens, even if it is hard to put into words what we’ve just encountered. Often the experience of the ineffable surfaces in conversation only in the inadequate terms we have at our disposal, such as “That was a great!” or “Wonderful service!” or “Today was such a blessing,” uttered in benignly emphatic tones on the way out the door. We’re not sure exactly what to talk about, yet those are the services after which everyone *is* talking, the participants remarking on the experience even if they can’t articulate precisely what made the difference. Sometimes all the pieces fall into place, making the story come alive, creating liminal space for an authentic sacred encounter. But not every Sunday worship service succeeds in creating this experience. So what makes the difference, and is it possible to facilitate the creation of a sacred space through a video while the worshiper sits at home? I suspect that engagement and cohesiveness enhance the worship experience, online or in-person. When all the senses are drawn into the act of worship, when all the pieces of worship fit together to tell a unified story, that’s when the

¹ “Breaking the script means to violate expectations about an experience.” Chip Heath and Dan Heath, *The Power of Moments: Why Certain Experiences Have Extraordinary Impact* (Simon & Schuster, 2017 Kindle Edition), p. 61.

² A version of this paragraph appears in my published work *Sensing God Online*. The book contains a modified version of this project which was published before the completion of this project, so some of this project’s material may appear in an altered form in my publication as I was working on both the project and the book concurrently. Justin Bishop, *Sensing God Online: Navigating Worship in a Digital World*. (Smyth & Helwys, 2021 Kindle Edition).

experience of God becomes most palpable. And if participants adopt a more active view of their role in worship, perhaps they will also adopt a more active view of their role as Christians in the world.

Description of the Ministerial Context

Over the years, the world has seen a myriad of arrangements of worship elements to usher participants into the presence of God. Every church has a liturgy, even if not every church would be comfortable with the word “liturgical.” The order of service was particularly important to the founders of Heritage Fellowship in Canton, Georgia when they chose to break away from the Southern Baptist Convention in the late 1990s, citing, among other things, a “lack of integrity”³ in worship as one reason for the split. I have heard numerous members speak about the pitfalls of “emotional manipulation” which they see employed in some worship practices ranging from fear-based “fire-and-brimstone” sermons to loud rock music “putting on a show” for mere entertainment value. The church wanted to avoid those trending extremes and get back to the basics of a traditional Baptist worship service, going so far as to choose the word “heritage” as part of their name, presumably hearkening back to some idealized version of traditional worship from fifty years ago or longer.

This does not mean that they are opposed to innovation. Renovations were made early in 2019, adding some controversial televisions at the front of the sanctuary. This change to the worship space had the potential to divide the congregation, but since the implementation of the screens, there has been near unanimous support for the addition of

³ I’ve heard these phrases used repeatedly by more than one church member to describe worship at other churches or the worship practices from their former church.

visual elements to enhance worship. In fact, there seems to be a concerted effort to keep worship practices vibrant at every level, including the sermon. In my four years as worship pastor, I've watched as a change in senior pastoral leadership led to a transition from a sermon-series approach to a lectionary-based system of worship planning. As I've stood in the back of the church shaking hands with our average crowd of roughly sixty retirees and a handful of younger members, comments range from "Have a great week..." to "Nice music!" to "Wow, what a great service today!" This project seeks to create the latter type of service in an online format and determine if the orchestration of narratively cohesive sensory elements enhances the online worship experience at Heritage Fellowship.

Statement of the Problem

The 2020 pandemic created conditions where meeting in a sacred space was not possible, and video services were produced out of necessity. Even before the pandemic, not every worship service led to an authentic sacred encounter with God, and the problem becomes more complex with the added distractions of an online medium. A variety of distracting variables influence the outcome of congregants attending worship which is not engaging: loud or unexpected noises, faulty technical equipment, personal stylistic preferences, personal dilemmas or disputes, poor execution of public speaking, wrong notes in the music, disjointed elements of the service, etc. The list of distractions only grows when the worshiper is watching a video at home instead of sitting in the sanctuary. Some of these are outside the control of the worship leader. However, if the worship planner intentionally selects cohesive elements which engage the participant at a variety of sensory levels, then the experience takes on the aura of an immersive ritual journey,

minimizing the effects of the distractions listed above and ushering the participant into the mysterious presence of God. In order for this to happen, participants must encounter elements that focus their attention on the narrative unfolding in the worship event. In other words, there must be a unified theme around which every element is focused in order for the sensory elements to enhance worship rather than become yet another distraction.

One problem is that participants enter worship with various misunderstandings and pre-conceived expectations about their role in and the purpose of worship. Even the word “participant” is problematic as a description of the role according to some expectations which view the worship event as a pastime where they will “get something out of it.” For some, worship has become an arena for a passive audience rather than a stage⁴ for active participants.

If the worship planner wants to overcome the obstacle of these prohibitive expectations and misunderstandings, the worship encounter with God must be carefully crafted to immerse and fully, actively engage the worshiper in the experience. Based on my personal experiences as a study-abroad college student attending an Anglican sung Eucharist for the first time at Oxford and then as a pastor processing feedback on a variety of worship experiences, sensory experiences can enhance the experience of God in worship and provide more opportunities to take an active role in worship. Some of these practices have a long history in Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican traditions, but now the problem is how to reclaim all five senses for a Baptist

⁴ Soren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing* (Simon and Schuster, 2013), 147.

congregation whose tradition historically has engaged only the sense of sound with music and spoken word. If worshipers at Heritage Fellowship were encouraged to take a more active role in sensory worship online, what effect would this have on their experience and perception of worship? Could they articulate how and why the experience of worship was either enhanced or hindered by these sensory elements?

Research Question

Can online worship at Heritage Fellowship in Canton, GA be enhanced by the inclusion of sensory elements? Although “enhanced” is a difficult concept to measure, after having *watched* a year’s worth of online worship at Heritage because of the 2020 pandemic, I assume that participants have a baseline for comparison and can therefore make a pronouncement on the quality and authenticity of online worship when asked to evaluate it in a survey or interview. The first goal is to create worship experiences during Lent at Heritage Fellowship that engage the senses of sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. The second goal is to learn how congregants at Heritage Fellowship view worship and their role in it. Thirdly, this project seeks to understand how sensory experiences affect congregants’ views of worship and their role in it. Overall, the main goals of the project are to learn how congregants at Heritage Fellowship create a sacred space when viewing an online worship video and to understand how sensory elements affect the experience.

Procedure

In order to accomplish these goals, I designed worship experiences that engage more than one of the five senses using four special online worship videos during Lent 2021: Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday, and Easter Sunrise Service. Each of these experiences utilized sensory experiences to immerse the worshiper into the biblical story around which the service was built.

I measured how the participants view their role in worship by coding their interview responses and looking for themes to emerge, gauging what (if any) effect sensory elements had on their online worship experience. This was done with care to avoid leading participants to focus on particular language, leaving space for more authentic responses to open ended questions in the interviews. I therefore engaged in qualitative research measuring and codifying the response of members of Heritage Fellowship's congregation after their participation in the special services. This involved an initial and follow-up worship survey (see Appendix A and B), both a pre- and post-experience interview (see Appendix C and D). I looked for patterns in their responses regarding their role in and experience of worship.

To select participants, I asked for volunteers from Heritage Fellowship during the announcement time of Sunday worship and in our weekly newsletter. Participants must have been attending church for at least two years prior to the study. The time requirement for participants was six hours: two hour-long interviews—one each pre- & post-experience and four hour-long worship services. These interviews (and any expert interviews for reference) were conducted via phone or in-person following social distancing protocols including masks.

Heritage Fellowship was equipped with video equipment for producing online worship videos. For these special services, I employed the use of images and video footage obtained from the internet (obtaining permission when required) or created by me. I also created “worship kits” for participants which included supplies for each participant to use during worship in order to engage the senses: clay for Ash Wednesday, a full Seder meal for Maundy Thursday, candles for Good Friday, and rocks for Easter Sunrise Service. The participants were asked to pick up these items from church before viewing the videos.

Rationale for the Process

The purpose of incorporating sensory elements into worship was to determine if participants adopt a more active role in online worship when encouraged to participate. In order to measure the response of the worshiper, personal interviews were conducted to give an opportunity for open, honest feedback on the event. The qualitative analysis of worship experiences employed ethnographic interview techniques outlined in both *Ethnographic Research* by Moeschella and *Qualitative Research* by Sensing to provide a framework for asking open-ended questions.

Plan for Evaluation

This project used the qualitative research methods of interviews and coding proscribed by Sensing and Moeschella, highlighting themes/language/attitudes that interviewees used to describe their experience and role in the worship event/experience. Did the sensory elements aid in their immersion in the story? Did they feel more active? I identified patterns of how people described the experience of God in worship and

subsequently described the experience and how they respond to changes (i.e. the *enhanced* experience with the addition of sensory elements).

Plan for Assessment

After all experiences and interviews were conducted, I made a spreadsheet of my findings. This project will have the ongoing effect of providing me with vital feedback on how my congregation perceives and experiences worship in an online format, equipping me with new information that will guide how I plan future worship services (both in-person and online) based on the success or failure of the experimental experiences and the resulting congregational feedback. By sharing my findings at the end of the project through personal conversations with members, this creates an opportunity for the worshipers to be more self-aware and reflective about their experience of God in worship, opening the possibility for a deeper, more profound experience. By reporting my findings in the DMIN thesis, this project will offer insight on how the Protestant church at large might reclaim sensory experiences as part of liturgical worship practices, reimagined for the twenty-first century.

In order to answer the question and measure the success of the goals, I collected qualitative data utilizing ethnographic methods and analyses. These ethnographic methods included a combination of both pre-experience and post-experience surveys and semi-structured interviews of ten adult church member volunteer participants. I posted a notice in the weekly church email newsletter, and participants contacted me via phone or email that they would participate in the study. The first criteria for participation was that the person had to be a member of the church for at least two years, and the second requirement was that the participant had to be eighteen years of age or older. Those who

responded represented a cross-section of the demographic of Heritage Fellowship—middle-class White males and females between the ages of forty and eighty.

I began by having participants complete a survey about worship in general (Appendix A), establishing a baseline for the participants' expectations for worship. Then, before any of the special video services were broadcast, I interviewed each participant by phone or in-person, following safety guidelines due to pandemic conditions. The topic of this interview was, again, worship in general, and I took notes on my computer, paraphrasing their responses and occasionally using direct quotes. I then prepared four video services during Lent of 2021, including Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunrise Service. I prepared “worship kits” with materials necessary for the online sensory experiences which were made available at the church for participants to come pick up at the church. Once each participant had viewed all four services, I then had each one complete a post-experience survey with questions focusing specifically on the special online services prepared for the study. I then interviewed each participant to further elaborate on their experience, again taking notes.

In order to guide my processes in forming the survey and interview questions and their subsequent analysis, I utilized the works *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses*⁵ by Tim Sensing and *Ethnography as*

⁵ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

*Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*⁶ by Mark Clark Moschella. After collecting all data, I arranged the responses in a spreadsheet in order to code and interpret my findings. This resulted in the emergence of various themes, both confirming my hypothesis and taking me by surprise.

Limitations and Delimitations

The main limitation for my project was the effect of the observer on the authenticity of the moment. Simply by asking questions about worship beforehand, respondents now entered worship with an altered frame of mind and expectations. It may be difficult to feel natural and at ease when congregants know they are being studied, and therefore it will be more difficult to immerse the participants in the worship experience. Furthermore, I am limited by my inability to control distractions during worship, as well as those that occur because of internal preoccupations with personal issues. Another limitation is the attendance habits of constituents who are mostly retired couples and individuals who love to travel. Finally, participants may not be honest in their responses given they might be sensitive to my feelings as their associate pastor, especially if they did not resonate with the experiences.

While sensory elements could be employed in worship at any time, for my main delimitation, I will confine this study to special services during Lent, a short timeframe where congregants are already open and receptive to alternative worship elements. I will also limit the study to adult church members who have regularly attended worship at

⁶ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008).

Heritage over the past two years. I will be examining participants' perceptions of their role in worship and the effect of sensory elements on those perceptions; therefore, participants must be active members of our church.

Definition of Terms

Worship is the sacred encounter with God, including ritual, revelation, response to God, relationship building, and rehearsal⁷ of “love, justice, and peace in preparation for life in the world.”⁸ Traditions and practices have varied throughout church history, many of which the Protestant Reformation abandoned. A *sensory experience* is a worship element that engages one or more of the five senses (sight, sound, touch, taste, smell). In the worship context, this would include sight: visual images such as banners, videos or pictures displayed on a screen or on paper, or lighting; sound: spoken word, music, recorded sounds, etc.; touch: an object lesson (something to hold), kneeling, performing the sign of the cross, holding hands during a prayer or benediction, crossing hands to receive the bread during communion; taste: tasting the bread and juice or wine during communion, eating any other symbolic food; smell: the use of incense or scented candles, baking fresh bread in the building, or using real greenery. *Experiential worship* employs multiple sensory elements to enhance the experience, marking a sharper contrast between worship and daily life and deepening the connection to and experience of God in a corporate gathering.

⁷ Ruth C. Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God: Vital Worship for the 21st Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 7-14.

⁸ John E. Burkhart, *Worship: A Searching Examination of the Liturgical Experience* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 31-33, quoted in Ruth C. Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God: Vital Worship for the 21st Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 7-14.

Assumptions

My main assumption is that people will be open to new practices in worship and willing to engage in honest discussion about the experience. My second assumption is that people are interested in their worship experience being enhanced. My basic assumption about worship is that the ritual of these gatherings facilitates a connection to God and an awareness of the presence of God. I assume that, while worship is meaningful, many people have a limited understanding about worship which can be influenced by a few powerful moments during Holy Week.

Purpose and Significance

Worship that does not engage the senses can become empty and hollow repetition, and without revitalization, Heritage's membership and spiritual vitality could dwindle. Worship can easily become entertainment that is passively received rather than an experience in which to actively participate. Worshipers who have a strong sense of their role as an active participant are more likely to view their role as more active in daily Christian life as well.

The experience of God is highly personal, and we are all made differently, responding to different experiences in a variety of ways. To offer more sensory variety in worship experiences (more than just sound) is to differentiate, to meet more people in ways that connect with their unique dispositions. To enhance the worship experience by engaging the five senses is to effectively make God more tangible and real for the worshipers gathered, enhancing the experience of God in worship and making the participant's role more active.

If worship is crafted with a narrative approach, sensory elements serve to immerse the worshiper into the shared experience of the story. To locate yourself in God's story is to embark on the ritual journey and walk away transformed with a stronger sense of identity and purpose for building the Kingdom of God.

This project could potentially unlock my creativity and engagement as a worship planner, and it also could revitalize the liturgical practices of Heritage Fellowship and Baptists at large, enhancing the worship experience with a more holistic engagement of the senses by reclaiming from Roman Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity some of that which the Reformation ultimately rejected in worship practices. If I can create experiences where the presence of God is more easily sensed, the path toward spiritual formation becomes more visible. If worshipers see their role as more active, the next step would be to translate this premise to their daily lives in the world—to become more active in living out a Kingdom lifestyle outside the walls of the church.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL, HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Worship has a long history of adapting to new contexts—from worshiping God on a mountain, to worshiping God in a tent, a temple, a synagogue, a church, etc. Now the question is how best to create a worshipful space with only a viewer in front of a screen no matter where they happen to be. In a culture with a predisposed consumer-mindset, it can be difficult to transition from worship being “something we watch to something we engage,”⁹ something that was already difficult when meeting in person but is now more difficult because online worship could become just another piece of media to view on a screen. Although the viewer could be anywhere, one would assume this would involve creating a sacred space at home. Ironically, house churches have been a part of the Christian movement from its inception. Tracing the adaptation of worship through a variety of historic contexts may shed light on how we are to navigate our current context in which online (or hybrid/live streaming) worship is becoming the more and more common norm. We must begin with an understanding of what worship is from a theological perspective, and then we will examine its praxis in biblical times through our current day. Part of the task of worship in any context is to create a sacred space in which a divine encounter may occur, and the goal is to facilitate a reorientation of the worshipper toward God and a lifestyle transformed and influenced by liturgy.

At the heart of Christian worship is a trinitarian theology which permeates through all of Christian life and practice, from large corporate gatherings to private

⁹ Shaun King, Pastor of Johns Creek Baptist Church, interview by author, 22 October 2020, Zoom teleconference video recording, Johns Creek Baptist Church, Alpharetta, GA.

prayer. In his series of essays now known as the book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis describes this trinitarian paradigm:

An ordinary simple Christian kneels down to say his prayers. He is trying to get into touch with God. But if a Christian, he knows that what is prompting him to pray is also God: God, so to speak, inside him. But he also knows that all his real knowledge of God comes through Christ, the Man who was God—that Christ is standing beside him, helping him to pray, praying for him. You see what is happening. God is the thing to which he is praying—the goal he is trying to reach. God is also the thing inside him which is pushing him on—the motive power. God is also the road or bridge along which he is being pushed to that goal. So that the whole three-fold life of the three-personal being is actually going on in that ordinary little bedroom where an ordinary Christian is saying his prayers.¹⁰

The same paradigm here applied to prayer also works for worship. This trinitarian paradigm applied to worship means that “God is not only the One before us, ‘up there’ to receive our praise. God is also ‘alongside us’ in the person of Jesus, perfecting our otherwise imperfect songs and prayers. God is also at work ‘within us,’ prodding us, prompting us, encouraging us, and even – when we are unable to pray – praying through us (Rom. 8:26).”¹¹ Therefore, God is thus present in every aspect of worship. We only lack the awareness of God’s presence. This is where the role of the worship leader becomes crucial to unlock the worshiper’s awareness of both the work God is already doing and the work to which God is calling the worshiper. This chapter will unlock the significance of the theological, biblical, and historical foundations for both understanding

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. (New York: Touchstone, 1943), 143, quoted in John D. Witvliet, “The Opening of Worship: Trinity,” *A More Profound Alleluia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 2.

¹¹ John D. Witvliet, “The Opening of Worship: Trinity,” *A More Profound Alleluia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 2.

what worship has been and speculating as to what it might become in light of our current context and the advent of online worship.

Theological Foundations

Homo Liturgicus: James K. A. Smith and A Hermeneutic of Worship as Theater

“We worship in order to know.” ~James K.A. Smith¹²

We are liturgical beings. Out of necessity, we develop habits in order to significantly reduce the number of conscious decisions we must inevitably make every single day. Thus, we follow a daily (weekly, monthly, yearly, etc.) liturgy with the way we live our lives. Because we now inhabit what Charles Taylor has dubbed the “immanent frame”¹³ of the here and now, the transcendental language of the church becomes more and more frequently out of touch with the concerns of daily life, especially if someone has gotten out of the “habit” of going to church. This makes the task of the worship leader more challenging as he or she must bridge the gap between traditional methods (and expectations) and modern cultural preferences. In short, what used to work no longer works in the same way, but few people holding on to the old ways seem particularly enthusiastic about changing or adapting, and those who do adapt struggle to break free and form new paradigms.

Even though ministers craft worship every week, there is a gap in understanding the process, for both ministers and participants alike. Kierkegaard offers a definition which defines worship as a theater with God as the audience.¹⁴ This marks a major shift

¹² Smith, *Desiring*, 33.

¹³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 2.

¹⁴ Soren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing* (Simon and Schuster, 2013), 147.

from what most people think—that they are there to consume worship as an audience to be entertained or that they are there to “get something” out of worship.

Scripture

The roots of Christian worship go all the way back to Exodus and the practices outlined for worshipping God in the Tabernacle. These practices included sensory elements: the sight of candles, the ark, and the special garments worn by priests, the smell of incense, the taste of bread, the touch of ritual washing of hands, the sounds of prayers, etc. Furthermore, worship is mentioned explicitly in the Psalms, and later redefined by Paul in Romans. Sacrifice was a common worship practice in the ancient world, but Paul shifts the paradigm, saying we should “present [our] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is [our] spiritual worship” (Romans 12:1, *NRSV*). To live this out today is to take an active role in worship, both inside and outside the church, shifting the emphasis from “getting something” out of worship to actually *practicing* worship.

The way to overcome these challenges is to recognize the structures at play in the core identity of our worshipers. The church often operates as if church attendance is a one-dimensional transaction wherein the “message” is transferred to the attendees after they give an offering. Then all go about their lives as if nothing has changed. Perhaps the church has overemphasized information over formation. Psychologists and theologians alike would agree that there is more going on during a worship service than just the transfer of information through a sermon. In order to understand more of what is at play in these complex rituals, we must first recognize who we are and what primarily moves us to action:

We are what we love, and our love is shaped, primed, and aimed by liturgical practices that take hold of our gut and aim our heart to certain

ends. So we are not primarily *homo rationale* or *homo faber* or *homo economicus*; we are not even generically *homo religiosus*. We are more concretely *homo liturgicus*; humans are those animals that are religious animals not because we are primarily believing animals but because we are liturgical animals—embodied, practicing creatures whose love/desire is aimed at something ultimate.¹⁵

Each of us aims all of our life (our comings and goings, consciously or otherwise) toward the ultimate reality for our lives—our best selves flourishing in the best possible way, or *living the good life*. The job of the worship leader is to align that personal version of the good life with the Kingdom of God to the point that even our unconscious habits embody a lifestyle fit for the Kingdom. We must recognize that human beings are primarily *desiring* beings as opposed to *thinking* beings, and

This love or desire—which is unconscious or noncognitive—is always aimed at some vision of the good life, some particular articulation of the kingdom. What primes us to be so oriented—and act accordingly—is a set of habits or dispositions that are formed in us through affective, bodily means, especially bodily practices, routines, or rituals that grab hold of our hearts through our imagination, which is closely linked to our bodily senses.¹⁶

Preaching good sermons is not enough to realign the worshipers' lives to the Kingdom of God. It can only be through immersive worship which engages the entire *desiring* being that habits begin to form which effect change.

Developmentally, small children learn first by imitating before they understand exactly what it is they're doing. Similarly, worship practices must model the behavior that worship pastors seek to have worshipers imitate. Creating the practice first leaves time for elaborating the understanding of the actions later, perhaps in smaller conversations. In other words, before the *Kingdom desire* might develop, the worshiper

¹⁵ Smith, *Desiring*, 40.

¹⁶ Smith, *Desiring*, 62-63.

must be surrounded with the language and form of an attitude of worship not as a passive reception of a message about God but as an active *performance*¹⁷ of devotion and praise. This is to be distinguished from a view of the worshiper's role in the service as merely a spectator *of* a performance. Instead, the worshiper becomes an *active* participant in the "worship as theater"¹⁸ (Kierkegaard) model with God as the audience rather than the congregation.

So is God passively observing worship and greedily soaking up the accolades? The infinite nature of God's being cannot be limited to such a narrow view of God's character, and this particular vision has more in common with the pagan, anthropomorphic deities than it does with the Christian Trinity. Instead, God is present alongside the worshiper, prompting praise for the purpose of moving the worshiper to become an active agent of God's Kingdom work in the world. In other words, "The real presence of God comes with the expectation of God's willingness to be mobilized according to the needs of God's people."¹⁹

Thomas Aquinas

Although he predates the Protestant Reformation by some three hundred years, Thomas Aquinas provides a bridge between both the past and the future through his Christian application of Aristotelian philosophy. His observations in the *Summa Theologiae* both catalog and categorize much of Christian life and practice of his day but with the added insights of the Golden Age of Greek philosophy which also speak to our

¹⁷ Clayton J. Schmit, *Too Deep for Words: A Theology of Liturgical Expression* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 31. Here, Schmit reverts to the old French root of the word which means "to carry through to completion."

¹⁸ Schmit, *Too Deep*, 31.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

modern sensibilities. For example, Aquinas makes a clear distinction between things above and things below, pointing out that what we can know of what's above can only be perceived by what we have here below: "The worship of God has two parts: the first—external bodily worship—is at the service of the second—an interior worship uniting our minds and hearts to God...God's truth can only express itself to us in symbols we can sense."²⁰ This is reminiscent of Aristotle's oft mentioned maxim: "All knowledge begins with the senses," except in this case, it's knowledge of God. The symbols used in worship (bread, wine, etc.) function to connect the worshiper to God's truth, and therefore the primary means of access to God are the senses. This empirical theology, when applied to worship (namely, the sacraments), suggests that the sensory elements of worship are vital for creating an authentic sacred encounter by which God is represented in tangible symbols which are accessible to humanity's perceptive capabilities. Thus the Aristotelian empiricism is newly Christened:

Man's natural path to knowing things only his mind can grasp is through what he perceives with his senses. Since the sacred realities signified by the sacraments are spiritual things that only mind can grasp, the sacraments must signify them with things our senses can perceive, just as the scriptures express them with analogies drawn from the perceptible world.²¹

This premise underscores the notion that sensory elements are vital to both the worship of God and the resulting empirical knowledge of God which, Aquinas argues, serves to influence our daily lives as well.

Classic texts by Aristotle and Aquinas speak to a theological understanding of matter and ritual, i.e. the bread can contain a divine thing, being both real and ideal at the

²⁰ Aquinas, *Summa*, 300-301.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 547.

same time (as opposed to the more Platonic understanding of matter as entirely symbolic of something higher, that is, Forms). The Reformation, in seeking to rid Christian worship of anything *magical* which would give priests too much power, rejects the Aristotelian view of the Real and Ideal being mixed, and we are left with only auditory experience in worship. Perhaps this was an overcorrection, and the restoration of sensory experiences might make God more tangible and therefore more real since our perception of reality is based on our sensory experience of it.

Senses and Reality – Aquinas

Our sense of reality is determined almost exclusively by perception (through the senses). And as sensing beings, we have what Aquinas calls a “sense appetite.”²² Plato seems to have won the day with all his talk of higher forms (ideals, logos, i.e.—*up there*), but Aristotle’s understanding of the universe is rooted in things *down here* that can be tangibly sensed. Aquinas adopts this Aristotelean view with regards to the liturgical practices of the Roman Catholic Church: you see God in the icons, you hear God in the

²² **Sense-appetite (role in worship: passive audience vs. active participant) -** “Sense appetite takes two different forms: one pleasure-seeking or *affective* and the other *aggressive*. ...Aristotle says *our soul rules our physical body like a tyrant ruling slaves*: its commands are irresistible, and every member of the body subject to will reacts immediately in the way the soul desires it to. But *our mind rules our appetites like a president ruling free men*: our sense-appetites have domain of their own in which they can oppose reason’s decisions. ...We experience conflict between our feelings of pleasure or aggression and our reason when we sense or imagine pleasurable things that reason forbids or painful things it commands. Such conflict is still compatible with obedience. Our external sense require stimulus from external objects the presence of which reason cannot totally control. But our interior powers of knowledge and desire don’t need external objects, and are subject to reason, which can excite or temper feeling and conjure up images.” St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation*, ed. Timothy McDermott (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1989), 125-126.

reading of the word, you touch God in the water and sign of the cross, you smell God in the incense and breathe God in, you taste God when you eat the bread and wine.

Ritual and Rite – Alternative Reality

Worship transcends the cognitive. Something happens when the worshiper leaves the ordinary life and crosses the threshold of adventure (in the context of the ritual journey of worship) to be transformed and re-enter that world recreated, a new being. We aren't always aware of the how or why we're caught up in these transcendental moments because they operate outside of the cognitive mind. Therefore, the engagement of the senses aids in the creation of worshipful spaces where the presence of God can be more freely experienced without the need for putting everything into explainable ideas. You know if "God showed up" even if you can't exactly articulate why—because you felt it, you sensed it, you experienced it.

The Eucharist

A microcosm of everything discussed above can be seen in the Eucharist. The event itself is a paradigm for what happens to the individual in the ritual of worship. It's as if worship involves the transubstantiation of the self, wherein we become the body of Christ. In worship, we touch ultimate reality, and thus our ultimate version of ourselves. One might claim that a successful ritual journey is one from which a participant leaves having their very substance and reality transformed.

Worship as Theological Event – The Dialogue of Revelation and Response

Regardless of whether or not worship leaders are aware, what they construct on a regular basis are narrative theological events. Much like Joseph Campbell's "Hero's Journey," we create a space where the worshiper leaves the familiar, crossing the

threshold into the sacred where he or she is confronted with a struggle (usually regarding the truth), getting help and mentorship along the way, in order to find some new boon with which to return to the outside world with an upgrade, ready to face the next challenge. The medium through which the worshiper undertakes this journey is the divine narrative or a Christian liturgy which “is fundamentally an act of memory or *anamnesis*, an act of rehearsing God’s actions in history: past and future, realized and promised.”²³ Although one may be surprised by a divine encounter in unexpected places, maintaining an expectant attitude and cultivating anticipation among worshipers is essential in order for worshipers to recognize the divine encounter when it occurs.

Our modern consumer culture creates an expectation that worship is just another thing to attend, or, in the case of the social distancing of the 2020 pandemic, just another thing to watch on a screen. With this mindset, the worshiper’s role is minimized, relegated to being only a spectator. Kierkegaard’s “worship as drama” analogy reverses the direction of the flow so that God becomes the audience and the worshipers become active participants. But this begs the question as to God’s role. Perhaps the best analogy is to describe worship as a dialogue of both revelation and response in which the spirit moves and speaks and prompts the actors in a divine interaction where no one is merely a spectator. This dialogical pattern is outlined in the prophet Isaiah.

Biblical Foundations

In spite of the centrality of worship for Christian life in a modern world, biblical prescriptions are surprisingly scarce when it comes to outlining specifically Christian practices. The Books of Moses abound with explicit instructions for animal sacrifices,

²³ Witvliet, “Opening of Worship,” 15.

Tabernacle procedures, and law codes for ethical behavior. From the amount of time spent on laws, one might reach the conclusion, as did the Apostle Paul in Romans 12:1, that we are to worship with the very way we live our lives—that we are “to present [our] bodies as a living sacrifice.”

Revelation and Response in Isaiah 6-8

Although Isaiah recounts an individual experience, a vision of God in the Temple, the passage illustrates the revelation/response pattern of worship which can inform worship practices for a corporate gathering.²⁴ The back-and-forth rhythm imitates the flow of a dialogical worship gathering. First, Isaiah “saw the Lord...high and lofty,” and there was a declaration of God’s holiness and glory (Isa. 6:1-4). In verse five, Isaiah responds with contrition, recognizing his own sin, and he is moved to confession. Pardon is issued with the image of a live coal from the altar touching his lips (v. 5), and in response to the question, “Whom shall I send?”, Isaiah commits himself with the response, “Here am I, send me!” What follows then is questioning and clarification that is “often overlooked in pious talk about worship and discipleship.”²⁵ This passage informs the shape and structure of Christian liturgy, but its influence is only tangential in that many concrete worship practices developed independently with a variety of influences. In other words, this passage prescribes the dialogical pattern of worship which will be enacted in numerous practices throughout Judeo-Christian tradition.

²⁴ Gary A. Furr and Milburn Price, *The Dialogue of Worship: Creating Space for Revelation and Response*, (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1998), 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

The Sabbath

Perhaps the best demonstration of the intended purpose of the Sabbath is a ship (and there is some irony in that *ship* is part of the word *worship*). In the earliest known versions of the practice, there was little to no association between the sabbath and worship, but its central location in the decalogue and the Torah gradually evolved into a more elaborate practice of ritual. The linguistic etymology of the words can illuminate the distinctions:

The Hebrew noun “sabbath” is related to the verb *shabat*, meaning “to cease, stop, interrupt.” The sabbath involves breaking into the routine, interrupting what is presumed normal, periodically stopping us in our tracks in order to return us to a healthy rhythm of worship and work, a balance between focusing on God and focusing on others, an equilibrium between caring for our own basic needs and caring for God's whole creation.²⁶

This contrasts with the Hebrew for worship, *abodah*, which is from *abad*, meaning “to labor or to serve,” lending to the more accurate rendering “the service of God.”²⁷ The concepts seem to be at odds with sabbath focusing on stopping and worship on serving, but one can imagine a balance where self-service is paused for God-service. But the two should influence one another in that “Obedience to God’s will should follow the feeling of awe and reverence for God.”²⁸ Hence we are ascribing worth to God by doing something worthwhile for humanity (the “Love God; Love people” paradigm from the Law and later quoted by Jesus). The English word “worship” comes from the Old English for “worth

²⁶ Dennis T. Olson, “Sacred Time: The Sabbath and Christian Worship,” *Touching the Altar: The Old Testament for Christian Worship* (Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Liturgical Studies) Kindle Edition. Carol M. Bechtel. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008. Kindle edition.

²⁷ T.C. Smith, *Beyond the Shadows: Embracing Authentic Worship*, (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

ship,” meaning that you are conveying “worth,” or value, to something—in this case, to God. In Spanish, there’s a connection to “adoration.” We get our word “liturgy” from the Greek for “work” and “people,” an act performed to benefit the community. The German word for worship puts together “God” and “service”²⁹—again defined as something done for others, not just a meeting with songs and a sermon. Other words for worship in Spanish, French, and Italian are connected to the cultivation of the earth, and by extension, the *nurturing* of faith, community, and relationship with God. When viewed this way, there seems to be a connection between service for God and service for people. We are ships carrying worth to God by serving other people.

The ship imagery not only denotes passage to another place, but also a sanctuary from the storms outside:

The community of Jesus' disciples gathered in a boat was for the early church a common symbol of Christians gathered in community for worship. Even today the inside architecture of many church buildings represents an inverted boat or ship. The image also recalls the story of Noah and the ark, with Noah's family being saved from the raging floods of Genesis 6-9. The Noah narrative is the story of another new creation. This same divine power to create, tame chaos, and bring sabbath rest is evident here in Jesus, who both rests and acts in power to save. Rest, peace, calm-creation's seventh day offers to worshipers a sabbath refuge from the winds, storms, and waves that buffet our workdays and threaten to throw us off balance or even drown us in the waters of chaos. The sabbath and sabbath worship are first of all about God's coming down into our lives and communities to act, to create, to calm, and to give rest. Sabbath worship is an interruption in human time whereby God becomes revealed and present in power among a gathered community of faith.³⁰

²⁹ See Ruth C. Duck’s *Worship for the Whole People of God: Vital Worship for the 21st Century*, Westminster John Knox 2013, pages 3-5.

³⁰ *Touching the Altar: The Old Testament for Christian Worship* by Carol M. Bechtel (kindle 312)

This disruption of our daily liturgy for sacred liturgy and rest serves to realign our priorities and our vision for our purpose and mission in the world. In other words, for an hour each week, we turn away from ourselves and reorient our lives to God. The combination of both resting and acting, as mentioned above, reveals the concomitant goals of the Sabbath: to express our love to God and be recharged ourselves that we might learn and seek new ways to love our neighbor.

The Tabernacle and Temple

Not much is known about worship practices during the captivity in Egypt, but as the Moses narrative develops, so does the enumeration of stringent rules regarding the worship of God. It's beginnings in the desert wilderness are polemical: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3, *KJV*). Even though there were similarities to their surrounding cultures, many of these practices sought to distinguish the Israelites from their neighbors. These practices grew in complexity from simple sacrifices at open altars on mountains or elsewhere outdoors to a mobile Tabernacle with an entire tribe of attendants to a fixed Temple with an elaborate system of rituals marking a place of pilgrimage and worship to an ever expanding group of followers.

Animal sacrifice was the predominant mode of worship, creating a dramatic sensory experience: the sounds of the priest's words and the cries of the animal in distress, the sight and smell of the blood, and in some circles the actual eating of parts of the cooked animal. The fanfare regarding the Ark of the Covenant was a physical symbol of God's presence, including a jar of manna and its implications for both sabbath and worship:

The jar of manna is a visible sign in worship "before the LORD" of God's gracious gift of food, the equality of all before God, the character of the

sabbath as a special day to lean back in trust into the comforting arms of God, and the trustworthiness of God to “give us this day our daily bread.”³¹

The visual reminders of both God’s intended order for our lives (the tablets of the decalogue) and God’s provision for our sustenance (the manna) serve to keep God’s people focused on God in worship.

The Exile

“How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” Psalm 137:4

What remains of worship when all senses of *normal* are removed is a question in our current pandemic context and one which connects us most directly with the period of the Babylonian Exile. Jerusalem had been firmly established as a center for worship by Isaiah (Isa. 31:5). Crisis seems to have a purging/purifying effect on practices across all walks of life, forcing people to focus on what is most significant in order to take the next step and survive. Therefore, crisis provides an opportunity for growth. With the center of worship now lost with Judah in exile in Babylon, worship needed a new center. The temple was replaced by the synagogue out of necessity, and animal sacrifice was replaced by more in-depth focus on Torah and other written “word of God from the prophets.”³² Even the return from exile and the rebuilding of the temple could not erase the new changes formed in exile.

³¹ Dennis T. Olson, “Sacred Time: The Sabbath and Christian Worship,” *Touching the Altar: The Old Testament for Christian Worship*, ed. Carol M. Bechtel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), Kindle edition, Locations 296-298.

³² Smith, *Beyond*, 5.

Jesus, Paul, & The Early Christians

Jesus steps into a world replete with systemic problems in both religious and political (which were often overlapping) spheres. His ministry represents a prophetic challenge to these systems by means of speaking truth to the power structures of the day and seeking to call God's people back into their mission of blessing the world.³³ As a reformist, it is doubtful (or at least unclear) if Jesus actually sought to create a new religion with himself at the center. One might argue that Jesus sought to create more followers of "The Way" rather than "believers" in him. People often mistakenly look for *Christian* worship practices in the life and sayings of Jesus, but it is an important distinction to make that he was operating as a reformist of the Jewish faith and practices. Therefore, while we find some scriptural examples to follow, Christian worship is largely a product of the Roman church rather than New Testament followers of Jesus. However, when it comes to some worship practices, we can in fact look to Jesus for examples, namely the Lord's Prayer, the Sermon on the Mount, and the Last Supper. These passages from the Gospels serve as signposts on the path to Christian worship which would evolve gradually out of the tiny house churches mentioned in the book of Acts.

The expansion of the diaspora marked not only a transition in worship practice for the dispersed Jews throughout the world, but also the development of a Christian faith which struggled to find its identity. Was it going to be a new way to practice Jewish faith? Or would it split to become something entirely new? And, perhaps more

³³ Robert N. Nash, Jr. *Moving the Equator: The Families of the Earth and the Mission of the Church*, (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2020), Kindle edition, 30.

important and more controversial, who could join? Must a person be a Jew first before pronouncing himself or herself a follower of Jesus?

In the letters of Paul, we find more concrete worship instruction such as the words of institution for communion and general recommendations about who may speak (which inevitably and inadvertently led to the perpetuation of patriarchy throughout history), how to maintain community, the role of music, etc. Furthermore, Paul actually used all the technological tools available in his day in order to reach a wider audience. He is the model of an adaptive leader, from his conversion to another way of seeking God to his adept use of the written word. Because he was willing to adapt, we have a record of numerous churches adapting to the paradigm-shifting message of Jesus. This was all possible by the open embrace of technology, i.e. “The epistles carried the same authority as his physical presence.”³⁴ Thus we are able to observe his abiding influence over the worship practices of the church then and now. But a centralized and definitively Christian liturgy was centuries in the making, even beyond Paul’s immediate influence.

Historical Foundations

The Senses in Worship

An examination of historical Christian practices will yield a variety of sensory experiences which have been abandoned by many modern Protestant denominations. *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* and Dix’s *The Shape of the Liturgy* enumerate the how and why each practice has been implemented in the past. For this project, the most relevant parts of the liturgy include the active practices involving the senses, practices

³⁴ Bryce Ashlin-Mayo, *Digital Mission: A Practical Guide for Ministry Online*, (Toronto: Tyndale Academic Press, 2020), Kindle edition, 54.

which Heritage Fellowship’s liturgy frequently omits. Establishing the historical veracity of the practices legitimizes and justifies their reclamation for this project while at the same time leaving room for their reimagination based on historical shifts and contextual trends. According to Bevins, there is even a revival of these practices in some post-denominational movements.³⁵

The emphasis on listening to music and a message as the dominant form of worship is a modern development. Throughout history, worship practices have employed a wide range of sensory elements. From burnt offerings to incense, from freshly baked bread to floral arrangements, there is a long tradition of smells that accompany ritual gatherings—wine, palm fronds, etc. The mind may wonder to another place, but there’s nothing like a smell to remind a person of where they are currently. The sense of hearing has dominated the worship scene as practices shifted from offering a sacrifice to receiving the Eucharist with an accompanying hymn and homily. The earliest known hymn with accompanying music dates to the third century C.E., and monastic communities have long utilized chants of Psalms (the hymnbook of the Hebrew Bible), which then expanded in form and content far beyond the Psalms beginning in the Reformation.³⁶ This rich tradition of music is perhaps the primary participatory element of worship because “Song engages the whole person—voice, body, mind, and emotion—in worship and draws the singers together in community.”³⁷ Other means of active (engaging the sense of touch, kinesthetics, etc.) participation include giving an offering,

³⁵ Winfield Bevins, *Ever Ancient, Ever New: The Allure of Liturgy for a New Generation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019).

³⁶ Duck, *Worship*, 79.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

shaking hands and passing the peace, communion, kneeling for prayer, raising hands in praise, or holding an object for prayer or reflection. The visual arts, ironically, have met with much controversy over the centuries, inciting debates including but not limited to the following: the placement of the altar table, lighting, the iconoclasm of Puritanism, the color scheme to renovate the sanctuary, the high cost of architectural artistry (stained glass, masonry, carved saints, high steeples, etc.), and the installation of video screens. The intensity of the debates indicates the significance of the visual elements of both worship practices and the worship space in order to “convey doctrine, tell stories, and create an inviting context for worship.”³⁸

James K. A. Smith describes humans as liturgical beings, coining the term “*homo liturgicus*,” stating that we are not primarily thinking beings but ordered, liturgical beings who follow routines, habits and rituals based on our desires.³⁹ This relates to Pierre Bourdieu’s term “habitus” which describes the sense-worlds in which we operate.⁴⁰ To break into the habits and habitus, one must identify the framework already in place in

³⁸ Ibid., 90.

³⁹ Smith builds a “philosophical anthropology that recognizes that we are, ultimately, liturgical animals because we are fundamentally desiring creatures. We are what we love, and our love is shaped, primed, and aimed by liturgical practices that take hold of our gut and aim our heart to certain ends. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2009), 40.

⁴⁰ Bourdieu coined the term “habitus,” but I encountered it as described by Moschella: “A *habitus* incorporates the aspects of cultural life that we have learned so well that we have forgotten that we learned them at all. ...A *habitus* is expressed through the sense-worlds of the people in the group: the sight of art, architecture, or artifacts; the smell of incense or special foods; the bodily feeling of kneeling in prayer or moving to music; the tones of the organ or the sound of the cantor singing; the taste of wine or grape juice or matzo. Styles, habits, customs, ethnic expressions, and people’s ways of interrelating to each and the outsiders--these all express the *habitus*.” Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 52-53.

both the individual and the sense-world in which it operates by identifying the “habit loop” and modifying either the cue, behavior, or reward, but not all three at once.⁴¹ For these modified worship experiences to work, they must fit within the established framework of Heritage Fellowship worship but display a reward (i.e., a more palpable experience of the presence of God) which is clearly superior to status quo. Otherwise, the practices will not become part of the congregation’s habitus.

Worship and the Kingdom

How you view your role in worship influences how you view your role in the world as a Christian.⁴² This significance of the potential for worship to influence daily life cannot be understated, even if it frequently falls short. James K. A. Smith has a three-part series on worship, worldview, and cultural formation⁴³ which investigates how worship works⁴⁴ and reimagines public theology.⁴⁵ Part of worship is the public articulation of who God is and one’s place and role in God’s Kingdom, which ultimately establishes a view of reality—which leads us to back to Aquinas.

The Shape of the Liturgy

Just as Jewish worship developed over millennia, so did the complexity of Christian worship grow as the Roman Empire adopted it and even sanctioned it for over a thousand years until the Roman influence became less centralized with the advent of the

⁴¹ Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit* (Random House Publishing Group, Kindle Edition), 19.

⁴² James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2009), 10.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ James K.A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2013.

⁴⁵ James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 201

Reformation. Here the central event of worship was the Eucharist where the dominant purpose of worship was *anamnesis*, a liturgical event which

is in this active sense, therefore, of “re-calling” or “re-presenting before God the sacrifice of Christ, and thus making it here and now operative by its effects in the communicants, that the eucharist is regarded both by the New Testament and by second century writers as the *anamnesis* of the passion, or of the passion and resurrection combined. It is for this reason that Justin and Hippolytus and later writers after them speak so directly and vividly of the eucharist *in the present* bestowing on the communicants those effects of redemption—immortality, eternal life, forgiveness of sins, deliverance from the power of the devil and so on—which we usually attribute more directly to the sacrifice of Christ viewed as a single historical event *in the past*...not by way of a repetition, by as a “re-presentation” (*anamnesis*) of *the same offering* by the church “which is His Body.” As S. Cyprian puts it tersely but decisively in the third century. “The passion is the Lord’s sacrifice, which we offer.”⁴⁶

The *anamnesis* or “re-presentation” of Christ’s sacrifice speaks of both the narrative nature of worship and the sensory experience, recalling Old Testament practices of animal sacrifice but also re-enacting the covenant narrative by which Christ calls us to follow him. Thus with each Eucharist ““we are *there*...Golgotha...Easter...the upper room...Sacramental communion is not a purely mystical experience...it is bound up with a corporate memory of real events.”⁴⁷ The liturgy was thus as educational as it was ritual and redemptive.

The long period in which the church maintained its most centralized structure was not without inequitable worship practices and perceptions. A large urban cathedral could boast far more extravagant vestments, architecture, and golden embellishments than a small rural parish church. Depending on the context, there might also be a range of

⁴⁶ Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 161-162.

⁴⁷ Dodd quoted in Dix 263.

education in the room. Indeed, by Luther's time there had already developed a marked separation between the intentions of the more learned clergy and their largely uneducated worshipers (not to mention the preeminence of Latin mass even though there were few linguistic remnants in the vernacular):

Intellectuals endeavored to control the meaning of sensuous worship, deploying a largely Aristotelian framework analogous to what prevailed across Europe, but their ability to establish this understanding among more ordinary sorts of people is subject to question. In the vernacular, people played with the language of the senses, and shaped their own understandings of the sensate in religion. When turning to the Reformation, it is clear enough that many, indeed most, leading theologians, pastors, and preachers retained the traditional understanding of the senses from learned culture: immersed in an educational system that retained Aristotelian learning, it was cultivated as a basic assumption from an early age. It forced Lutherans and, perhaps more surprisingly, Calvinists into meaningful engagement with the positive role of the senses in religion until the very eve of the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648).⁴⁸

If Aristotle's notion holds true that we can only know what we can perceive through the senses, it follows that all of us sense differently. Perhaps this is why "taste" can refer to things like music and novels. What is sheer beauty and art to one person is noise and nonsense to another. This paradigm applies to worship in the medieval era even before the Reformation. In fact, the shift toward individualism as opposed to "communitarian or corporate unity"⁴⁹ began long before our modern consumer culture could champion individualism. Do we consume the body of Christ for ourselves, or by consuming it, do we become the body of Christ as a group of believers? The answer would seem to depend on who you ask in the medieval church: the laity or the clergy. However, the

⁴⁸ Jacob M. Baum, *Reformation of the Senses*, Studies in Sensory History, (Springfield, University of Illinois Press, 2018), Kindle edition, location 254.

⁴⁹ Nathan D. Mitchell, "Reforms, Protestant and Catholic," *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 319.

mass has remained the central part of Christian liturgy then and now, and in spite of the wide array of perceptions and understandings of the worship event, the sensory elements of the mass also remained the central, unifying element of the church for over a thousand years until the Reformation.

The Great Reformation

Perhaps the greatest shift in worship practices to arise from the Reformation is not necessarily a change in form but a change in frequency. Some records indicate that communion for most laypeople only occurred at Easter (or perhaps other high holidays), and, therefore, “Luther’s plan to have laypeople communicate frequently ‘was a radical step for people who had done so only at the very greatest festivals.’”⁵⁰ It is unclear what weekly devotion looked like in these medieval societies, though one may safely assume that a Christian worldview was predominant in most European communities. But just because people *believed* in the reality of God does not indicate how devout they might have been in their lifestyles and habits, presumably opening the door to a large gap between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. The church, at various times and in various places, therefore, sought to stamp out heresy. It is therefore possible that Luther’s greatest contribution to the faith is placing the sacrament of communion at the center of worship practice.⁵¹ Participants could now more frequently see, hear, smell, taste, and touch “God” symbolically through this Christian practice.

With his interpretations of the Eucharist and emphasis on scripture alone, Martin Luther paved the way for worship practices to develop around more personal preferences

⁵⁰ Ibid., 318.

⁵¹ Ibid., 320.

than institutional mandates. The printing press made scripture more accessible to the masses, and as literacy rates increased, so did the diversity of interpretations of scripture. After all, it is only natural that if more people have access to the printed word, then more ideas will start to emerge. The aftermath of the Protestant Reformation opened the door for an even larger myriad of debates and divergent worship practices which makes the diversity of the previous era seem more like uniformity.

One constant is the economic constraints of both eras, meaning that much of the diversity continued to be influenced by the resources available to the locale.

Nevertheless, even a poor, rural pre-Reformation church offered a sensory escape with every Eucharist, “transporting people from the often disgusting sensory surroundings of their daily lives, focusing their gaze on the Eucharist, and bringing them closer to heavenly things.”⁵² The theatrics and ritual displays were as immersive as they were therapeutic and educational. In a world marked by suffering, plague, and malnutrition, the heavenly meal offered at mass offered nourishment and reprieve. This begs the question if the same elements hold the same power today in an entirely different context where film and special effects are commonplace and where the population is largely healthy and well fed. However, one thing has become abundantly clear—the church has frequently used the same language but with varied results as to how the worshipers perceive it. What one set of ears hears as inviolable sacrament, another set hears as idolatrous. Therefore, the debates raged during the period of the Reformation, resulting in a wholesale abandonment of sensory worship by many Protestant sects.

⁵² Baum, *Reformation*, 354.

While Luther made the Eucharist central, his protégés made it simple, removing the fanfare and thereby anaesthetizing its effect. Subsequent reformers would take Luther's suspicions of the clergy's "magic" and power to the next level, reinterpreting the purpose of iconography. Thus, iconoclasm was born, leading to the actual destruction of many ornate church structures citing their "idolatrous" nature, most notably during the English civil war and brief reign of Oliver Cromwell. The effects of these suspicions were far more long-lasting and widespread than England in the 1640s. Luther's desire to "purify" the Roman Catholic Church resulted, years later, in the creation of the Puritans. They viewed the sensory elements of Roman Catholic worship and architecture as vain idolatry, ignoring the educational value of visual media (stained glass, statues, etc.) to an illiterate population. The Puritan influence would then jump continents where it would develop its own ethos. Let us now move ahead two centuries after Luther and shift our focus from Europe to North America where the Puritan influence can still be seen in worship practices and church architecture.

The Great Awakenings

The initial aftermath of the Reformation paved the way for new emphases to develop in the divergent denominations and their ever more diverse worship practices. From its first wave in the 1730's until the dying ripples of the fourth wave which currently resurface from time to time, the last three hundred years or so of faith in America have been marked by (what many have now labeled) the Great Awakening's over-emphasis on personalization and individualism. For worship, this means an added emphasis on emotional manipulation, using shame and guilt as a means of coercing worshipers toward salvation and repentance. Although these techniques were successful

in terms of the sheer numbers of new converts to the faith, the diminished role of both community and the in-depth process of discipleship resulted in a faith that was as easy to leave as it was to join. As the adage goes, Baptists in particular excelled at “bringing them in,” but not at “leading them on.” The consequences for worship practices are still currently shifting, but this era is marked by an expectation for the dramatic, for a highly emotional experience catered to the individual.

Coming out of the seventeenth century, Pietism and Rationalism both influenced the First Great Awakening and its worship emphases on the “religion of the heart” and the “stress on the individual” (respectively).⁵³ These two movements would not seem to have much in common, one stressing emotion, and the other the intellect, but both influenced worship practices to elevate public speaking to a more central role within worship service, albeit with different intentions. As a result of this new emphasis, a modern trend emerged in many denominations where *hearing a moving* sermon was the focal point of the Sunday ritual, with the length of the homily now eclipsing other parts of the service. What had once been a sensory experience with the eucharist at its heart had now become an arena for public speakers. In other words, worship had now become a place where “Preaching was the main task of worship, inviting hearers to a moral life, and to meet that purpose, worship spaces were designed first and foremost to accommodate public speaking.”⁵⁴ Thus the meetinghouses which had been stripped of their “idolatrous” ornaments by the Puritans a century before were now stripped of many worship practices in order to make more room for preaching. By the nineteenth century,

⁵³ Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, “North America,” *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 596-597.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 597.

all that remained of the liturgy for many Protestant congregations was hymns and sermons. This reduction of liturgical variety also brought with it further emphasis on the individual with the profound influence of hymn writers like Fanny Mae Crosby who accentuated first-person pronouns in many of her popular lyrics: “This is *my* story. This is *my* song.”⁵⁵ Within a few generations, some denominations had normalized this watered-down liturgy so that it had become the *only* liturgy with which multiple generations were familiar, having never attended something like a Catholic mass or perhaps even publicly excoriating Catholic theology and practice as a different religion altogether, in some minds *not* Christian in the slightest. The irony is those “empty rituals” held far more variety and depth than the more emotional camp-meeting style revivals and preaching which were singular in aim and focus and “empty” of ornament and sensory variety.

The Billy Graham Era

There was a time when in order to participate in an event, a person, by necessity, had to travel to a particular geographic location where the leaders and other participants were in your immediate vicinity. Thanks to modern technology, that era has passed, and as a result, the methods that worked then no longer hold the same appeal as they once did. However, for the sake of comparison, let us examine the high point (measured by sheer numbers of physically present attendants) of in-person worship: the Billy Graham era.

From May 30 to June 3, 1973, an estimated 3.2 million people attended Billy Graham’s largest ever Crusade in Seoul, South Korea, with 1.1 million traveling—mostly by foot—to the final service on the airstrip at

⁵⁵ Fanny Crosby, “Blessed Assurance,” *Palmer's Guide to Holiness and Revival Miscellany*, July 1873, 36.

Yoi-do Plaza. Some 75,000 people submitted cards showing they made a decision for Christ because of that Crusade.⁵⁶

The subjective experience of sensing the presence of God can occur in a small space in one's own home, but by contrast, standing in a crowd of this size with the attention of millions focused on a singular event must have been inspiring by sheer volume alone.

It is worth noting that attendance to Billy Graham's crusades does not seem to have been hindered by the radio broadcasts which began in 1950, "providing sermons and an opportunity of worship for persons unable to leave their homes for the community church."⁵⁷ One might argue that broadcasts of such worship elements via radio actually encourage in-person attendance, at least for those capable of leaving their homes. This remote option has perhaps been under-utilized by smaller churches until the 2020 pandemic when even the smallest of churches began using platforms such as Facebook Live to stream their worship services on the internet.

A hallmark of the Billy Graham era was an emphasis on "accepting Christ" (Billy Graham's broadcast was actually called "Hour of Decision"), an emphasis designated for these crusades or camp (revival) meetings which was intended to begin the journey of discipleship but which for many churches became the singular focus of worship. The entire service, in this context, was reduced to a persuasive emotional manipulation designed to frighten "the lost" into a transactional adoption of certain propositions about Jesus' identity. These types of services, as evidenced by Graham's legacy, were

⁵⁶ Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, "A Look Back at Billy Graham's Largest Ever Crusade," *Billy Graham*, June 3, 2019, <https://billygraham.org/story/seoul-south-korea-a-look-back-at-billy-grahams-largest-ever-crusade/>, (accessed 30 October 2020).

⁵⁷ Tucker, "North America," 627.

incredibly effective at drawing large numbers to the faith.⁵⁸ But at what cost? The fallout seemed to vary greatly across denominations throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with conservative and liberal factions forming even within each group.

Beyond the Building - The Rise of Social Media & Online Worship

Much ink has been spilled over the architecture and design of worship spaces over the centuries with waves of innovation sporadically dotting the historical landscape. From the beginnings with the basilica which was adapted from law courts in the fourth century⁵⁹ to the American experiment in Puritan style to our modern warehouse-like efficiency, the building has been the dominant focus of worship space. But recent advancements in technology make it possible for worshipers to sit in their living room while watching mass in Rome. One might say, “The church has left the building,” though many still prefer to attend in person when possible. But the question remains: what makes a space sacred? Although the arrangement continues to evolve in the physical space (from gothic cathedrals to high-tech screens and sound systems and everything in between), one thing remains central: the “common function of bringing together the people and the message of scripture.”⁶⁰

The televangelist has been around almost as long as the television, but recent advancements in modern video technology and the internet have now enabled churches of every size to broadcast their worship services online. As a result of these recent

⁵⁸ Ibid., 607.

⁵⁹ James F. White, “The Spatial Setting,” *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 803.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 806.

developments, however, many churches new to the online medium are inexperienced with best practices and techniques, and they are often overshadowed by the front-runners who have both the experience and the equipment to do the job at a higher quality. This begs the question of which is more important for the remote worshiper: form or content? Does the message or the method of delivery matter more in terms of engaging the worshiper and creating a sacred space at home?

The church has a long history of employing the visual arts for conveying spiritual content, from paintings to stained glass windows to modern projections of film media. In an era where illiteracy was prevalent and books were expensive, pictures told biblical stories in a universal way, accessible to learned and uneducated alike, even speaking in places where language barriers might inhibit the communication of the Gospel. In this way, online worship has much in common with bygone eras of visual presentation of worship content. The primary advantage of online media is that the worship leadership can more concretely control the focus of the visual material (as opposed to an in-person service which might offer many competing foci for a worshiper's attention). The downside is that it's much easier to turn off the tv, computer or smartphone if things are not going to a worshiper's liking. A worshiper might sit through a sermon on a "boring" text if the service is in a building, but that same worshiper might simply turn off the sermon if it is online.

The Pandemic of 2020

In March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic struck America with widespread school, business, and church closures and state-wide lockdowns. Worship gatherings at churches were deemed especially dangerous due to the prolonged proximity of groups

indoors. Even with masks, the virus managed to spread in churches which continued to meet. As a result, many churches, Heritage Fellowship included, transitioned to online worship in order to maintain the safety of their members. Various sources indicate that the initial switch to online worship occurred quickly for most churches, many of whom had never before attempted such a feat. Recent technologies such as Facebook Live enabled ministers to continue to reach their congregations with only a smartphone as their broadcasting equipment. During the early months of the pandemic, many churches reported a much greater attendance online than they had experienced in person, and I can confirm that Heritage Fellowship went from reaching an average of one hundred people in person each month to reaching an average of over one thousand for several months throughout the pandemic. This does not mean that all those people watched every worship service all the way through, but the analytics on Facebook indicate that over a thousand people saw a post that we created. These are the positive sides of switching to online worship.

On the other hand, online worship comes with a host of potential problems. The biggest problem is the possibility for distractions. For Heritage, our attempts at livestreaming were hindered by internet connectivity. If worshipers tuned in live, the video would pause to buffer every few minutes, making it difficult to concentrate or focus on the message. And even if this problem is overcome by pre-recording the service and publishing it later, there remain the potential distractions of a worshiper at home. Our modern culture is filled with media of all types, and it is extremely easy for the mind to wander, to pause the worship service and tend to a chore or answer the phone or tune in to another internet post or television channel. Hence this project seeks to determine

the best practices to lead a congregation to stay focused and sense the presence of God through online worship.

Perhaps the greatest pitfall of worship leaders treading into the uncharted digital arena is the temptation to practice “ministry transliteration by simply changing to digital platforms and presuming that the methodology that was somewhat effective in face-to-face context would be equally or even more effective digitally.”⁶¹ The assumption here is that worship leadership can continue to do what it has always done with the only difference being that there is now a camera pointed at the pulpit. This *transliteration* of worship leaves a lot to be desired, much as a Greek or Hebrew word transliterated into English is hardly capable of conveying the same meaning that a *translation* might provide. The “effectiveness” of worship is difficult to discern on any given Sunday, but the metrics of the traditional counts of “nickels and noses” is at least a starting point. The second greatest pitfall (at least on par with the first) is that adapting to a Worship OnDemand model “can breed a kind of worship consumerism” even as it offers the convenience of tuning in whenever *you* like, creating at best “fragmented engagement within the community of faith.”⁶² It inadvertently puts the individual worshiper (and his or her wants, needs, desires, etc.) above the community.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the shift to online worship happened quickly, and, desperate for something “normal” on which to rely, online “attendance” held strong. However, for those churches who failed to adapt to this new reality and who failed to “consider new forms and methodologies of teaching, preaching, and pastoral care,” both

⁶¹ Ashlin-Mayo, *Digital*, 8.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 54.

“attendance and engagement declined leading to disappointment and discouragement.”⁶³

It is perhaps safe to say that many churches will never be the same after the pandemic.

What remains to be seen is how online worship will take new shape as it now has an exponential increase of both creators and explorers.

On the Presence of God – Teaching Them How to See

We cannot *attain* the presence of God because we’re *already in* the presence of God.

What’s absent is awareness. Little do we realize that God’s love is maintaining us in existence with every breath we take. As we take another, it means that God is choosing us now and now and now. We have nothing to attain or even learn. We do, however, need to unlearn some things.

To become aware of God’s loving presence in our lives, we have to accept that human culture is in a mass hypnotic trance. We’re sleep-walkers. All great religious teachers have recognized that we human beings do not naturally see; we have to be taught how to see.⁶⁴

Regardless of the atmosphere in which one is attending worship, the primary task of the worship leader is to “enflesh and serve the *logos*, and true liturgy celebrates nothing but the active presence of the Three in One.”⁶⁵ Whether a worshiper is sitting in an enormous gothic cathedral in a large city, a tiny parish church in a rural village, or in his or her easy chair at home, the primary task of the worship leader is to usher the worshiper into an awareness of the presence of God where divine connection and personal transformation become possible. In a bygone era, stained-glass windows, incense and elaborate rituals were enough to accomplish this task. In our modern era, many have flocked to dark concert venues with professional rock and roll musicians to achieve this. But in an age of a pandemic, many are left to re-create a sacred space in

⁶³ Ibid., 8.

⁶⁴ Richard Rhor, “Loving the Presence in the Present,” *Center for Action and Contemplation*, 29 December 2015, <https://cac.org/loving-the-presence-in-the-present-2015-12-29/> (accessed 30 October 2020).

⁶⁵ Aidan Kavanagh quoted in Schmit, 39.

their homes by watching a screen. Christ may be revealed in all of these, but what do they have in common? It has everything to do with experience: “Christ is revealed when worshipers are drawn into the Word by preachers who know how to create a realm of virtual experience.”⁶⁶ Experiences of the presence of God are as varied as the people who seek such an encounter, but one mark of a worship service that successfully creates this atmosphere is the comments by worshipers on the way out the door about how the service “spoke to me.” The worship leadership must therefore maintain uniformity in theme and message in order to guard the service from all distractions.

While it might be impossible to eliminate all distractions, it is possible to control what language worship leadership uses, the songs that are sung—in short, everything the people are seeing and hearing (and if communion is involved, touching, smelling, and tasting), and one might even direct the worshiper to touch something (place a hand over his or her heart, etc.). This unity creates a space where every part plays a role in a larger undertaking—the creation of the “virtual experience.” A good story can take you to the banks of the Jordan. A good song can leave you feeling what Mary felt. A dramatic reading can take you to the foot of the cross. It is thus possible to create a space where the presence of God is more easily sensed because the worshiper has stepped out of selfishness for a moment and stepped into a community re-presenting God’s story. The first step is moving from “me” to “we.”

One thing must remain central for online worship to remain connected with worship in ages past: community. From the lamenting exiles forming new practices and inventing the synagogue in Babylon to Paul’s letters to secret groups under threat of

⁶⁶ Schmit, *Too Deep*, 39.

persecution, the sense of being connected to a corporate group of believers and followers has always been integral to the identity of worship. In order to maintain this community online, there must be both a concerted effort for interpersonal engagement and also a spoken emphasis on the group identity in order to avoid the privatization of the faith. N.T. Wright calls this self-centered worship “P-worship – the Platonic vision of ‘the flight of the alone to the alone,’” citing that in a virtual world we can easily become “just a group of like-minded individuals pursuing our rather arcane private hobby.”⁶⁷ In other words, worship leaders should not completely surrender to the consumer mindset that places “me” at the center of everything, but should instead emphasize the worshipers’ role as an active agent in establishing the Kingdom of God.

This paradigm of engagement harkens back to the “revelation and response” paradigm of worship, and worshipers must be led to respond in some way. This could be accomplished through a number of practices, both traditional and modern, tech-savvy techniques. Litanies have long been a place where the worship prompter can elicit a response from the congregation, and this is easily translated into online form with words printed on the screen for people to say. In order for people to not feel isolated during these practices, the online worship leader could record several voices speaking the response. The same principles apply to congregational singing or responsive prayer. Other means of engagement call for the worshiper to gather materials and participate when prompted: lighting candles, consuming communion elements, etc. The important thing is for the prompter to clearly communicate the expectations of the worshiper and

⁶⁷ N.T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), Kindle edition, 68.

the instructions for how to actively participate in worship. History has proven that sensory elements have long played an integral role in worship, and therefore online worship must utilize them in order to maximize the potential for online worship to reach its goals and overcome modern cultural obstacles which frequently leave the worshiper unengaged in the act of worship.

CHAPTER 3

MINISTRY CONTEXT

“Where Metro Meets the Mountains...”

Heritage Fellowship sits between worlds. In fact, Canton’s motto is “Where Metro Meets the Mountains,” and that divide has even more contrast for Heritage fellowship with two large suburban neighborhoods one mile to the south and farmland one mile to the north. Located halfway between the county seat of Canton, GA and the rural college town of Waleska, GA, Heritage Fellowship is indeed on the edge of civilization. A short drive North or West from the church will bring you to tractors, farmland, and rebel flags prominently displayed. A short drive South or East will bring you to BMWs, equestrian complexes, and bedroom communities of Atlanta’s commuters. What this means for the congregation is that the demographic of the church comprises a diverse collection of individuals from across the political and economic spectrum. Generally speaking, an *average* Heritage Fellowship member is of retirement age, college-educated, and White, upper-middle class. There are some outliers, of course, but this is the predominant makeup of the average of the sixty-five people who would attend our church each Sunday.⁶⁸

The demographics of the church’s zip code, 30114, are as follows: the total population – is 54,709 (compared to Waleska 6,365), with 83% White (compared to Waleska’s 90%), 17% Hispanic (compared to Waleska’s 4%), 8% Black (compared to

⁶⁸ This is the average before the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of this writing, our average attendance is about half of what it was before the pandemic, though giving has remained mostly the same.

Waleska 5%), and age 62 and over is 17.5% (compared to Waleska's 18.7%).⁶⁹ The congregation of Heritage Fellowship is 100% White and 80% age 62 and over. The median household income in zip code 30114 is \$75,417. In a personal interview with Kendall Jones of MUST Ministries who works with finding affordable housing in the area, he indicated that most new housing developments in the area are designed with commuters in mind, those who commute to Atlanta to work where they earn higher salaries, meaning that there are few options for "blue collar workers" to find affordable housing in the area.⁷⁰ While working adults of all classes make up over 50% of the population in 30114, they account for roughly 10-15% of the church population, most of whom are retired.

A variety of demarcations can be made to categorize the different groups within the church of about 100 active members, but many people do not fit neatly within any given category. For example, one way to group members is to differentiate between the "founders" and the "new-comers." The core group split from the First Baptist Church of Canton in 1994, building our current structure and funding the venture out of their own pockets, and they make up roughly half of the congregation. However, the group of "founders" were also diverse, and if other categories are assigned, some "new-comers" share more of the core moderate Baptist values of the church (i.e. women in ministry and leadership roles) than some of the "founders" who would currently identify as more conservative. Another way to group the church would be the Waleska folks and the

⁶⁹ *United States Census Bureau*, accessed August 20, 2021, <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=30114&tid=ACSDP5Y2019.DP05>. All demographic information that follows was found through this government website.

⁷⁰ Kendall Jones, personal interview, July 23, 2019.

“Townners” from Canton or Woodstock. Interestingly, some of the “newcomers” are from both groups, with some life-long Waleska residents recently joining our church along with transplants to the community from out of state. In other words, there are few characteristics which apply broadly across our demographic—except for the shared value that women should be able to hold leadership roles within the church.

My own connection to the community reflects some of the complexity of living in this demographic for a long time. I grew up in Canton, GA six miles from the church, though I did not know of its existence until recently. Having moved away for college and the first ten years of my career as a teacher, I recently returned to Canton shortly after I started at Heritage Fellowship as a part-time worship pastor four years ago. After two years of bi-vocational work as both teacher and minister, the opportunity presented itself for me to become full-time associate pastor while Dr. Rob Nash serves as part-time senior pastor. The unique model proves that the folks at Heritage are willing to innovate, even if “the way we’ve always done it” sometimes dominates our discussions. Having moved away only to come back to Canton, I am aware of some of the undercurrents which affect our members subconsciously or otherwise, undercurrents in which I used to get swept away without realizing it. Looking at a political map, this is “red” country, meaning most voters consistently vote Republican, and ideas like “systemic racial injustice” or even “critical race theory” are met with vocal opposition in town hall and school board meetings. Of course, not everyone fits this profile, but this remains the “water we swim in,” making it difficult for a “purple church” (one with both Republicans and Democrats) like Heritage Fellowship to thrive.

Every year on Anniversary Sunday in September, the church retells the narrative of its founding. The short history, which is recited by a senior member every year, goes as follows:

On August 9, 1994, a group of 26 adults, youth and children met at Reinhardt College to discuss the possibility of forming a new church fellowship. Energized by the hope for a church that valued reverence and devotion in worship and sustaining the ideals of priesthood of the believer and shared leadership for men and women, the group continued to meet and plan for a new church. The result was the birth of Heritage Baptist Fellowship.

On September 11, 1994 fifty-one people gathered in the auditorium of Reinhardt College in Waleska, GA for the first worship time together. Since that time, the church family has grown spiritually and in number. God has blessed the fellowship with a variety of families, single adults and children, adding to the vitality of the church. The individual giftedness and leadership of the people who make up HERITAGE have built a strong community of love and support.

On May 7, 1997, HERITAGE broke ground on the building that would become home for this church body. Heritage Baptist Fellowship later celebrated their permanent dwelling with a dedication service. Since that time, the church has been a community of hope and healing, a kinship of shared joys and struggles; a family of faith committed to knowing God and making God known throughout Cherokee County, the United States and the world.

In 2012, HERITAGE initiated a visioning and planning process that culminated in a clarified identity and a renewed commitment to be God's servants in this part of Cherokee County. What began as a dream at Reinhardt College more than twenty years ago is now a vital congregation committed to being a forward-thinking, open-minded fellowship of people who work every day to become more like Jesus Christ, so that our church and our world might look more like God's kingdom.⁷¹

Notice the word “open-minded” in the last paragraph and the phrase “shared leadership for men and women.” These terms indicate the moderate values at work in the congregation, revealing their identity in contrast with the conservatism from which they came. The phrase suggesting the mission of the church is that “our world might look

⁷¹ “Our Story,” *Heritage Canton*, accessed 1 November 2021, <https://heritagecanton.com/our-story>.

more like God's kingdom" indicates a theology leaning more toward service in the here and now as opposed to those church websites which emphasize only the "eternal" goals of the faith.

One of the things that sets us apart from other Baptist churches in the area is that we have deacons who are women and who are divorcees. There are few children regularly in the church, though they do materialize occasionally. We do have graduates every year, and we manage to send a handful to summer camp. I haven't quite heard the full story, but there was some controversy a dozen or so years ago where a youth minister was fired, and a schism occurred. But now we seem to be in a holding pattern of "the youth don't come because we don't do anything for them, and we don't do anything for the youth because they don't come!" Many of the members are now grandparents, but Canton isn't exactly known for being a place where work is easy to find, so many of the members' children moved away, or their grandkids migrated to much larger churches like Andy Stanley's Woodstock City Church or the similarly modeled Revolution Church on the other side of town. These churches employ a contemporary style of worship in arena-like concert halls, and in the case of Woodstock City Church, the pastor broadcasts his message to multiple sites simultaneously on Sunday mornings, meaning that he is rarely actually present on campus. Most other large churches in the area also offer contemporary worship, making Heritage Fellowship an outlier in both its size and traditional worship style.

Heritage Fellowship holds true to the moderate nature of CBF churches in that it has a wide range on the political spectrum. Many of the most active members lean heavily to the left, but a recent controversy among our deacons showed the political

disparity we have. In the ordination council of a new deacon candidate, she asked if her daughter being a lesbian would matter to her eligibility as a deacon. This led to a discussion of where we “stand” on the issue. We had several discussions and read a book by David Gushee called *Changing Our Mind*. The end result was that of the seven deacons, one recused himself from the conversation, two drew the line at same sex weddings in the sanctuary, and though the majority of four was for the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons (some of whom are already members), we have no official policy. Ultimately, we decided not to decide.

When it comes to theology and the idea of engaging otherness, much like in politics, we also have persons spanning the spectrum. Several Bible studies and sermon series have emphasized diversity, and they were met with little to no pushback, indicating at least a passing acceptance of these values. Everyone might not agree with everything being said at our gatherings, but they have thus far neglected to speak their minds. Overall, however, Christian education seems to be a weakness of the congregation, at least in terms of attendance. For example, during a recent world religions emphasis, I was surprised by who was curious enough to attend field trips to Hindu temples and catholic monasteries, but I was also surprised by the faithful members who did not. When we have tried Wednesday Bible studies, the attendance averaged three to four individuals. However, our community service projects are met with a much larger turnout, indicating the shared values of the congregation lean more toward serving people than toward Biblical education.

If you look at our budget, aside from salaries, our largest expenditure is Missions. The focus is on helping local children in poverty through our local non-profit partner,

MUST Ministries based in Marietta with an office in Canton. Every summer we hand deliver 14-17,000 lunches to around 400 students in need. This undertaking is supported by local churches, but we carry a large part of the financial load and human resources to make the logistics work. During the school year, we supply a food closet at one of the local elementary schools where volunteers send a backpack of food home with 50 or so children each weekend. Many of these children might find their only meal at school, so our program keeps them fed through the weekend when school lunch is not an option. On Mother's day we collect enough supplies to send MUST 20-40 layettes packed with much needed items for new mothers. Every Fall we collect funds for school supplies which are purchased and handed out at local title one schools. Every Christmas we collect toys for the MUST toy shop and volunteer to stock the shelves. We also contribute to our denomination, CBF, and every August we have a focus on Global missions where we raise money and awareness for the work CBF is doing internationally.

Our building is also used for a senior exercise class called Body Recall which is led by our moderator, drawing 60 plus senior adults three days per week. We also have an Al-Anon meeting weekly, along with music lessons taught by a local musician who joins us in worship occasionally. One prominent family supports 3-4 musical concerts per year, accompanied by a meal or reception. These events are open to the community. Although some traditions are held inviolate, the congregation is open to change. For example, in 2018, the sanctuary was renovated to include two television screens on each side of the stage, making it possible to view videos and other images or slides during the sermon or other events. I came to the church after a rather lengthy strategic planning process, and everything was lined up for change. They had had all the discussions and

made all the plans, all that was left was to actually do the work, to do the construction. There remained some anxiety over the addition of these two tv screens and wing walls to support them. Questions abounded, like “What are we gonna use these screens for, anyway?” “Are we going to throw away the hymnals and sing from the screen?” “How are we going to see the pianist?” “What color are they going to paint the walls?” These questions remained even after a process that lasted from 2012-2018. However, after a few weeks with the changes, people saw what it was going to be used for, and they have been pleased with the results and the enhancements the changes made to worship.

In my short tenure at the church, we have gained a new look on the inside, and a new model of leadership that I mentioned previously with me full-time associate and Rob part-time senior pastor. These changes indicate that the congregation has a comfort level with some types of change, although some hurdles remain. For example, perhaps the largest hurdle of the past ten years has been the decline of young families with children. When the church was in its golden era, it averaged 125 in worship, and there were multiple Sunday school classes for all ages of children. Now there are none. If it weren't for my children and the pianists' children, there would be no children of any age on most Sundays. Those who are new to the church don't seem to mind, but those who watched the children grow up and move away, never to return—they are more concerned. Scapegoats and theories arise from time to time, but I suspect that it's much in line with a large part of Christianity across the world which has seen a similar decline. Families seem to prefer the large-scale productions of Northpoint Community Church to the intimate, do-it-yourself approach that is the local church.

When you drive up to Heritage, the first thing you'll notice is that it's hard to find, even if you know what you're looking for! It sits on a hill, behind some trees, overlooking a very busy two-lane road between two towns. Most people from Canton or Waleska who drive by it every day have no idea that it's there. A few years ago, the previous pastor managed to enact a strategic plan to increase awareness, and many of the trees were cut down, opening the view to the property. But it still sits uphill from the road, and the expensive efforts only achieved marginal results. If you do happen to notice the church, it looks like all of the other small brick Baptist churches with a steeple in the area, and one would assume that it's theology is the same, complete with King James Only mantra and "suck-back," hell-fire-and-brimstone preaching. There's nothing to identify us as different on the outside, save the subtitle to our name: Heritage Fellowship: A Cooperative Baptist Church.

If you walk in the building before service, you'll notice one of two Sunday School classes, one upstairs and one downstairs with no discernable age grouping other than the one upstairs is on the same level as the sanctuary so that they don't have to negotiate the stairs. If you walked into one of these Sunday school classes, you would be greeted and warmly welcomed, but you would notice that there's only four or five other people there. If you attend Sunday morning worship, again, you'll be greeted warmly by ushers of the week, and you'll be handed a bulletin with announcements and a very stringent order of worship with everything outlined and largely in the same place from week to week. It's a semi-liturgical service with recitation of the Lord's Prayer and responsive readings. You'll notice everyone in formal clothes proudly holding their hymnals as we sing. You'll notice a variety of congregants leading in the service through reading scripture,

praying, or speaking about a local mission effort. Two things will probably stand out: the lack of children present in the room, and the tv screens at the front. Many churches of our size in the area have lots of kids and no screens. If there happens to be an event downstairs, you will notice the lack of an elevator and the steep stairs to the fellowship hall, along with lots of conversations about the topic, including opinions on our recently purchased 6-person golf cart to shuttle people from the upstairs front door to the downstairs back door. The fellowship hall itself is spacious and inviting with windows lining one side and Sunday school rooms lining the other which are now mostly storage rooms for things we can't bring ourselves to throw away. Our largest community outreach program is the senior exercise class called Body Recall which meets in the fellowship hall three days a week, serving over 100 folks in the course of the week.

When it comes to fellowship, I've found that while the "folks" (some members use this term frequently) in this congregation like to eat together, they've grown tired of cooking, so we've scaled back our gatherings with meals to mostly 1 per month (this was pre-pandemic, and we currently meet for Brunch with a devotion on Sundays rather than Sunday school), and that seems to be the optimum method to get the most attendance. The community of Canton has a quaint downtown district and a few parks which host musical events and farmer's markets where people gather. Our biggest presence in the community is through our partnership with MUST Ministries and their efforts to address an affordable housing crisis in the area. We are a host site for their summer lunch program and have been for ten years. I'm proud of the work we do in the community, and this church has believed in me and supported me in my transition to full-time

ministry. Even though we have some work to do, this is a church who believes in doing work for the Kingdom of God here and now, and I'm proud to be a part of it.

The Role of the Worship Pastor

My role has evolved since I began as bi-vocational “Minister of Music” in 2016, beginning with my request to change my title to “Worship Pastor.” The paradigm shift is significant to me in that the former title implies a role involving little more than “picking out songs” while the latter suggest a leadership role in which the person guides the congregation through a divine encounter. When I transitioned to the full-time role of Associate Pastor, I was able to devote more time to the intentional crafting of every element of worship built around the theme of the scripture (and sermon). My role now goes beyond “picking out songs,” and I am able to infuse multiple points of connection with thematic liturgical language intended to guide the congregation through a transformative worship experience. For example, I frequently use language which implies that worship does not end at the door when they leave the sanctuary but something that, if we are intentional, can overflow into every aspect of our lives. My goal is to create an understanding that helping out with mission projects is an act of worship, that being kind to the cashier is an act of worship, that being patient and gracious with struggling family members is an act of worship—that indeed, anything we do can be directed toward God as an offering if we learn to see our lives in this way. I mention this concept periodically in blog posts, emails, Facebook posts, video lessons, devotions, business meetings, mission projects, and, yes, also in worship.

Surviving the Pandemic

Heritage Fellowship met for the last time in-person on March 8, 2020 and remained online until Easter of 2021. The COVID-19 pandemic proved especially fearsome to our congregation, many of whom are elderly and/or have compromised immune systems due to a variety of conditions including cancer treatments. Our deacons wanted, rather than to try to *please* everyone, to keep everyone as safe as possible. During this time, my skills as a former video production teacher became very useful, along with a generous donation to the church of \$25,000 from a donor who agreed that the money could be used to fund “online church.” I was able to buy anything I could think of to help make a better online worship experience, including a new computer, multiple iPads and iPod Touches, greenscreens, ringlights, props, a specialized guitar, professional microphones specialized for guitar and piano, and subscriptions to *Zoom* (for meetings and weekly devotions) and a live-streaming service called *Switcher Studio*. This DMin project was already underway, but I was able to shift the topic from sensory experiences in worship to sensory experiences in *online* worship, therefore making my studies coincide with my ministry challenges. At first, there was an overwhelming surge of participation in the online video worship services and every live-streamed event, but the initial surge soon gave way to “pandemic fatigue.”

The Most Significant Challenges Needing Attention

After a wave of enthusiasm had passed once it became clear that COVID was not going to go away in a few weeks, the problem began to become more clear: is it possible to have a meaningful, engaging worship experience online? In keeping with my original intent for this project, I began to wonder if the inclusion of sensory elements could

enhance the online worship experience. The challenges of a small church attempting weekly online worship seemed to arise at every turn. Some were technical: the church's bandwidth speed not supporting a steady live stream causing the video to frequently pause to load (buffering), problems with audio levels and people not being able to hear, and the ability of members of the congregation to utilize the technology we had employed. These challenges proved easier to solve—we could upgrade our internet service and broadcast in a lower resolution, we could buy new microphones, and we could coach our members on the use of technology (we taught our 102-year-old member how to join *Zoom!*). The more difficult challenges arose months into the effort once enthusiasm had waned. It became clear that in our modern, consumer culture, watching an amateur video production of worship cannot easily compete with other professional media, not to mention the variety of distractions that might befall a worshiper. In other words, it's very easy to be tempted to click away from a "slow-paced" worship service for something more "engaging"—scrolling to a new video or post on Facebook, changing the channel on the tv to watch the news or a show on Netflix, or the phone ringing, dog barking, etc. The feedback I received and the drop in participation (going from 1,000 views of a video service at the beginning of the pandemic to 10 views months into the pandemic) overwhelmingly suggested that, in order for worship to happen online, it must be as engaging as possible in order to be effective. This is not to say that this is the way it *should* be, but this is to say that we (worship leaders) must acknowledge the context in which our worshipers live—the water in which they swim. How can a worship leader create the most engaging worship experience possible online, and do sensory elements enhance this experience?

The Project

Framing the Challenge.

As I began to notice declining trends in our weekly online attendance, I began looking for resources on the topic of online worship. To my great fortune, several books had made it through the press while our church was still “online only,” including *Digital Mission: A Practical Guide for Ministry Online* and *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges and Opportunities That Will Determine the Future of Your Congregation*. These books confirmed my suspicions about the trends I had noticed, they and empowered me with language with which to discuss the phenomena. The tendency for the modern pastor is to *transliterate* worship—that is, to do the same things online that they’ve been doing for in-person worship, but it just doesn’t *translate* to an online medium.

Processes and Procedures

Using the techniques for online worship which I had honed during the previous year, I prepared four “special” online experiences during Lent of 2021. They were “special” in that I spent more time in their production and planning than a normal service, and I took special care to include sensory elements for each service. Participants volunteered to take part in the study, but the services were broadcast as regular seasonal programming for the church at large. For the Ash Wednesday service, clay was provided at the church for members to come pick up, and during the video service, they were instructed to mold it as part of the worship experience. For Maundy Thursday, volunteers helped me prepare a Seder meal kit, also made available for pickup at the church. Participants ate the symbolic foods as instructed in the video service. For the Good

Friday service, participants were given seven candles and instructed to extinguish one at each “Station of the Cross” during the video service, ending in total darkness. And for Easter Sunrise Service, participants were given a rock (symbolic of the large stone at the tomb in the story) to hold throughout the service as they watched the narrative at the tomb unfold.

Data Collection & Coding and Interpreting the Data

I surveyed and interviewed participants before and after Lent. During the interviews, I took notes paraphrasing or directly quoting their responses to each question. The semi-structured interview questions led to more of a natural conversation on the topic of worship (pre-experience interviews) and the specific video worship experiences (post-experience interviews). Some participants needed more prompting in order to understand the question or elaborate on their initial response. After compiling the responses to the survey and interviews, I looked for trends to emerge in the responses. This process was guided by the work *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Projects* by Timothy Sensing and by *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*, by Mary Clark Moschella.

Several themes emerged throughout this process, including the significance of personal connection with the worship leaders and how the physical objects indeed aided the worshiper in focusing his or her attention on the act of worship. Many of my expectations were confirmed, though some surprises did emerge.

CHAPTER 4

THE PROJECT

This project has explored the biblical, theological, and historical groundwork for sensory elements enhancing worship experiences, adapting to new contexts as the world continues to evolve. The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed the use of online worship by churches of every size, and my own experience facilitating worship at Heritage Fellowship in Canton, GA has proven the need for practices which fully engage the worshiper in the experience in order to minimize the myriad distractions plaguing life in the digital era. My project enlisted ten volunteers to participate in four special online worship experiences during Lent of 2021: Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunrise Service. Each service included a sensory element, and participants were asked several questions in both written survey form and semi-structured interview form in order to determine the effect (and effectiveness) of the sensory elements. Did sensory elements enhance the online worship experience for worshipers at Heritage Fellowship? The surveys and interviews provide insight toward answering this question, particularly in regard to each of the senses.

Participants

After posting a notice in the church's weekly email newsletter, volunteers contacted me to indicate their willingness to participate. Due to the limited number of active church members, the demographic profile was kept broad in order to obtain enough participants for the study. Ages ranged from forty to eighty, with a variety of comfort levels when it comes to using technology. Seven of the participants are retired, and four were actively involved in the founding of the church. Four participants joined

the church within the last five years, while six have been members for over twenty years. Two participants had no childhood church tradition while eight experienced a traditional service similar to Heritage Fellowship's current liturgical traditions. The group of ten participants represents an accurate cross-section of our congregation, with a mix of "new-comers" vs "founders" and "natives" vs "transplants." Some have been with the church from the beginning while others are seeing it with a fresh perspective. All participants have served in a variety of leadership roles at the church over the years, as deacons, committee members and chairs, worship leaders, choir members, staff members, and organizers of events. This mix of participants provides a diverse range of perspectives on worship which reflects Heritage Fellowship's collective identity.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Retrieval and Coding the Data

Due to the safety concerns during the height of the pandemic, surveys and interviews were conducted either remotely over phone or email, or while practicing social distancing and wearing masks. Surveys were completed on paper, and I made notes during each interview on my laptop with each participant numbered to preserve anonymity. The pre-experience surveys and interviews focused on worship in general, establishing the biographical background of each participant and endeavoring to establish a baseline for each participant's views on worship and its intended goals. The post-experience surveys and interviews focused on the specific worship experiences designed for the project, asking questions about the effectiveness of the sensory elements. I tried to avoid leading questions, and I avoided the use of the word "sensory," opting instead to see how each participant would describe the sensory elements in their own terms.

I compiled the survey responses and interview notes into a spreadsheet with names removed and labels of “Participant 1,” etc. used instead. This allowed me to observe possible trends in their responses and visually assess their responses and any commonalities which they might share. I began to notice some themes emerge in the language used to describe worship (both in general and in reference to the specific sensory experiences). I wanted to know what they thought about worship in general and how going through these special experiences impacted their views on worship. What worked for them? What was a distraction? How could they describe points where they felt most “connected” during a worship experience?

Weaknesses in Methodology

The pandemic created some barriers to communication and safety concerns which inadvertently affected the data collection process. While I am confident that the results present an accurate assessment of the effectiveness of sensory elements on the worship experience, the unexpected communication hurdles involved in collecting data during a pandemic created conditions which, I suspect, heightened discomfort during the interview process and limited the range and scope of responses. In other words, I suspect that people would have felt more comfortable and therefore elaborated more if they had been interviewed under “normal” (i.e. pre-pandemic) conditions. Nonetheless, participants openly shared their opinions and experiences with me, feeling comfortable enough to share when they did not connect personally with a particular element. I sensed my limitations as a video producer while attempting to make these four experiences “special,” and I became aware of the challenges to inter-personal communication after prolonged isolation when I did the semi-structured interviews.

The conversations, though informative, did not flow as well as I had expected before the pandemic. However, this could also be the result of nervousness on the part of the participants who are unaccustomed to participation in academic interviews. Another weakness or limitation is my personal connection to the participants, meaning that they were more open to conversing over worship in general in the pre-experience interviews than they were to conversing specifically about the experiences which I had created for the project. They did not have as much to say during the post-experience interviews, keeping their answers short, vague, and largely positive. I suspect, however, given my past experience with this group, that they nonetheless told the truth about their experience, and that their reticence was a guarded measure to avoid “hurting my feelings” inadvertently, though they might have been more forthcoming if I had enlisted a research partner to conduct the post-experience interviews. An easy way to improve the surveys would have been to leave more space for written answers. I opted to keep everything on one page, which was a mistake. I suspect participants might have written more if they had been given lines on which to write their answers for the more open-ended questions. Overall, participants responded positively to the four worship experiences, and the research still achieved its intended goal of discerning if the sensory elements effectively engaged the participants in worship.

Interpreting the Results

Themes that Emerged from Pre-Experience Surveys and Interviews

Although the demographic of the congregation of Heritage Fellowship is rather homogeneous, the pre-experience surveys and interviews revealed some of the diversity within the congregation with regards to worship expectations. While many of the survey

questions elicited similar answers (chiefly, nine out of ten listed music as the number one way in which they connect with God), the interviews revealed the differences within the group and how each person approached worship uniquely.

Expectations for Worship

Perhaps the most succinct, accurate statement that stood out to me during the entire process was a written response to the survey question, “What are your expectations for worship?” The participant wrote, “to transcend my current issues with inspiration.”⁷² In all of my studies and readings on worship thus far, this captures the worship moment more profoundly than many longer definitions. After all, to enter into worship is an attempt to step *beyond* normal, or in other words, to “transcend” *normal* and encounter the sacred. There are many things which impede our spiritual progress or hinder our “inspiration,” and therefore we must learn to move beyond those issues in order to worship—in order to be inspired. Other participants approached this definition, albeit on a subconscious level. They answered with keywords like “actively” doing something—participating, listening, singing, reflecting, praying, thinking. One participant suggested that the purpose of worship should be something that affects life outside of the worship space by indicating on the survey that the chief expectation for worship is to walk away with something to “think about after the service.” I had expected more of this language, but only one out of ten mentioned it anywhere throughout the survey and interview process.

⁷² Quotations in this chapter come directly from participant responses. In accordance with IRB anonymity protocols, no citations will be made regarding their names.

When asked to rank the “purposes of worship,” seven out of ten participants chose “Experience God” as their number one reason while three chose “Praise God.” “Get right with God” ranked lowest on most lists along with “Feel Rejuvenated.” This suggests that, while some participants might *enjoy* parts of the service like the music, for them, the *entire* service fits together to form an overall experience of the divine. Keywords that emerged from the survey question “What are the expectations for you in worship?” include the following: active, participate, sing (this is perhaps a correlation to the fact that seven out of ten participants are members of the choir).

Understanding of the Act of Worship

During the pre-experience interviews, it quickly became clear that the question “How would you describe Heritage at worship?” elicited only trite answers like “traditional Baptist,” etc. Utilizing the freedom afforded by the semi-structured interview method, I prompted participants to think more deeply about the question by asking them to imagine how they would describe a worship service at Heritage Fellowship to someone who had never been to church in their life. This at first gave them pause, as if they had never thought about something like this before. At least for the short term, the necessity of online worship during the COVID-19 pandemic has inadvertently caused most worshipers to think more carefully and critically about worship than they have in their entire lives. Before the pandemic, worship was a given, something to be taken for granted as an event to attend. The conditions of the pandemic meant that people were forced to worship at home, making “worship” more of a verb than a noun. Having completed this project, my sense is that the participants were asked questions that they had never thought of before this project. Perhaps this makes an argument that all worship

leaders and pastors should intentionally educate the laity about the art and act of worship, or at least the worship leaders who actively create the experience.

Minimizing Distractions

I began this project with the expectation that participants would have enough self-awareness to identify distractions while attempting to worship in front of a video screen at home (during the pandemic or otherwise). However, if participants were distracted, they either did not admit it, or they were unaware of the distractions they experienced. They did not mention distractions throughout the entire survey and interview process, aside from one response which indicated that “a few of the videos seemed poor quality.” Instead, I had to pay attention when they used words like “focus”—a concept which indirectly refers to distraction, the idea being that if something helps a person focus, it does so by minimizing distractions. Language about focus tended to correlate with physical objects like the rocks used during the Easter sunrise service. Participants mentioned the “tangible” or “hands-on” benefits provided by being asked to hold a rock throughout a worship experience.

My limitations as a video producer were most evident to me while trying to film the Maundy Thursday Seder meal. Without a teleprompter, I was unable to read my script without looking away from the camera. I had suspected this would have proved too great a distraction to make the service effective. However, more participants chose the Maundy Thursday service as the one that affected them the most over any other. One might conclude from this that, because it was the most active and instructive (with participants frequently being instructed to do something, eat something, drink something, say something), participants felt most engaged during that service. This is an area I

would have liked to explore further during the interview process, but I had not assembled the data at the time in order to know this service was trending as the most affective.

The Senses

In an effort to avoid leading questions, the senses were not mentioned directly in the surveys or interviews, yet most participants discussed the effect of sensory elements on their experience. While it is difficult to incorporate every sense into every worship experience (outside of traditions which do not practice communion every Sunday), providing at least one focal point connected with the overall theme of worship proved to have a memorable effect for participants in this study who described the overall effect with phrases like “I really enjoyed this” or “it made the story more real (or come alive) for me.” These keywords indicated an enhanced worship experience, and they appeared in some form in the responses of every participant, along with more detailed descriptions of the effects of the sensory elements, as outlined below.

Sight – The Effect of Images

In an era of ubiquitous screens (televisions, computers, tablets, smartphones, etc.), worshipers are frequent consumers of visual media, yet worship has been relegated often to a category devoid of visual elements, particularly when it comes to the biblical narrative. Churches with screens display words to songs and maybe the scriptural text, but what about the biblical story itself? Half the participants ranked “images” in the first or second slot when asked to rank worship elements. In an attempt to bring the narrative to life visually, I obtained permission from *The Jesus Film Project* on YouTube to incorporate scenes from their films in my online services, as well as purchasing video clips from *Worship House Media* and *Igniter Media* along with a license for use in online

services. These clips featured prominently in both the Good Friday “Stations of the Cross” service (along with the visual element of candles and darkness) and the Easter sunrise service. As scripture was read, participants saw images of the story acted out in visual media (Jesus praying in the garden, etc.).

Participants were able to articulate the effect of the visual elements more frequently than the other senses. In regards to these video images in the Good Friday stations of the cross video service, one participant said, “It reflects the impact that a movie can have on you. Seeing the Exodus has more impact than reading it—it becomes more ‘real.’ You don’t have to create the imagery on your own mind.” Three participants identified the darkness (accompanied by the candles) of the Good Friday stations of the cross video service as the most worshipful moment of the entire experience. One participant mentioned that the darkness and candles helped reign in her attention from distractions:

with the candles, I was getting all these interruptions from grandkids. I kept thinking, I’m enjoying this worship time, but my grandkids facetedimed me and others called, yet the darkness was worshipful. Even though I don’t like it when I’m in church, the darkness made me focus and reminded me of the story and what Jesus did.

In addition to focusing the senses, darkness also seems to create a more memorable experience, as one participant shared, “Good Friday was my favorite. When I was in school, we did weekend revivals and had a thing with kids where we blew out candles. I don’t remember the lesson, but I remember blowing out the last one and being in the dark.”

Even though more participants identified on the post-survey that the Maundy Thursday service was the service that affected them the most, a majority of participants

mentioned the visual elements of the Good Friday service (images of Christ in the garden and being crucified, and the growing darkness as the candles were extinguished at each station) during the post-experience interview. One participant said, “My favorite was the Friday Night Darkness celebration – that really hit home that Jesus was a man and he died and was in total darkness. It was extremely moving, everything about it worked.” The word “moving” indicates the experience of something spiritual beyond words—an encounter with the divine in some way. If I were able to do the interviews again, I would look for keywords like “impact” or “moving” and ask participants to elaborate. Perhaps the most elaborate explanation came from a participant who said this about the Good Friday service:

I appreciated the clips that you had. I’ve formed pictures in my mind and have my own picture related to the death and resurrection, but seeing a person portraying him was very effective and made it seem like it really happened to a person. It was more impactful to see it. I make pictures in my mind and see Jesus, but seeing clips made me realize this was a real person. I thought, now here’s a picture of someone suffering when I saw the blood. It touches an inner feeling that just reading or hearing a sermon about it doesn’t do.

This “feeling” that goes beyond the experience of a normal sermon needs more exploration, but the above response indicates that the visual elements enhanced the experience, at least regarding the narrative being portrayed. The participant indicated that seeing the story rather than reading or hearing it made it more powerful.

Another participant said a video made the story more relatable and contextualized it for our modern day, saying, “My favorite was the Twitter video on Sunrise. It was bringing history to today by bringing what they said to today. I like the use of technology to enhance the story.” Here the participant explicitly used the word “enhance” without being prompted, and furthermore, this participant acknowledged the significance of the

narrative element by saying that “technology” (i.e. the visual elements in the video) actually *enhanced* the *story*. This statement is the most succinct proof that my hypothesis was confirmed that sensory elements do indeed enhance the experience of online worship. In this particular case, those sensory elements included visual images of Jesus in the Garden which were displayed while scripture was being read. On the Sunrise video service, I purchased a clip from Igniter media which portrayed the events leading up to the crucifixion and resurrection as a series of posts on Twitter. Although not every participant used the word “enhance” as this one did, the overwhelming majority of responses indicated that the inclusion of visual elements enhanced the online worship experience.

Sound – The Importance of Music

There has been much controversy regarding appropriate music for a church service for many generations. What is timeless and classic for one generation becomes old and stale for the next. The level of controversy indicates the significance that music plays in a service. People will leave a church over the music even if they love everything else about it. Paradoxically, if the music suits the worshipers taste, they might take it for granted and frequently find it unremarkable. As long as people are not complaining about the music, one might assume that the music is going well. In my project, I used a variety of recorded hymns and spirituals, several recorded by my own choir members (I am the choir director at Heritage Fellowship). Several participants were actually singing in those recordings, so their experience of listening to themselves would prove a different experience than someone not involved in the music’s production.

One participant illustrates the power that music can have to help or hinder the service. This participant indicated that “the background music was beautiful and enhanced the experience” of the Maundy Thursday service, but the same participant cited the animated version of “Go Down, Moses” at the end of the service as something that “didn't resonate—while I know it is from a children’s movie, it seemed a bit disrespectful for the seriousness of the topic.” Just as people have different “tastes” when it comes to their preferences for food, the same concept applies to music—some people just experience the music differently because their ears are functioning differently from person to person just like the taste buds. The same cartoon that one person found disrespectful, another participant identified it as a powerful point of focus, saying that “having the visual with the music on Maundy Thursday with the ‘Let my People Go’ cartoon really helped me pay more attention and see things in a different way.” The implication here is that differentiation and contextualization is significant when it comes to music in worship. After all, there is a common saying in the Baptist world that “the only thing worse than something new is doing the same old thing!”

Touch – Tangible Focal Points

The traditional tactile elements of worship (sign of the cross, kneeling, touching holy water, etc.) are not a part of many Baptist liturgies, including Heritage Fellowship’s traditional liturgy. Therefore, in order to incorporate the sense of touch, worshipers were given clay to mold during the Ash Wednesday service and then asked to consider the dirt on their hands at the end, along with the traditional words “From dust you came, and to dust you will return.” On the Easter Sunrise service, participants were given a rock to hold, signifying the stone that closed Jesus’ tomb, and they were asked to consider what

stones in their lives might need to be rolled away. What was the effect of these elements on the experience?

When I began this project, I avoided use of the word “impact” because it seemed to be a nebulous concept which would be hard to define or measure. However, in spite of my avoidance of the word in the surveys and interviews, participants frequently spoke of the “impact” that something from the services had on them. These responses typically came during the post-experience interview when asked “When did you feel most worshipful during the services?” The answers seemed to indicate what was most memorable or “impactful,” like this response from one participant:

The rocks were a good touch. We’ve seen the traditional place where the rock was rolled away, but actually touching a rock while we’re seeing it made it more impressive to feel. We had family with us for Easter, but to have the ability to have these special services with them made the entire weekend more meaningful. We’ve been to every Maundy Thursday service, but having it right here in the living room made it much more personal than we would have had at church. I say this as an introvert. Having it at home makes that day a day to celebrate our faith—we read it, but to sit at the table and tell the story is meaningful and makes it come alive.

The above response includes an additional physical attribute of an online service: the location. Having “church” at home via online media means the participant is “touching” more familiar surroundings—the easy chair, the couch, slippers, and even pajamas. The participant mentioned above also spoke of the more intimate effect of having “church” at home because it was like bringing God into the living room.⁷³ The part about the story “coming alive” indicates success in my goal to make the biblical narrative a bigger part

⁷³ Another participant said, “the downside is that you can’t sit at the kitchen table in pjs and yet be at church!”

of the experience, though it is unclear if this enhances worship or just makes the experience more entertaining or memorable. After all, a squirrel entering the sanctuary during a prayer would be “memorable” but not exactly “worshipful.”

One participant described the effect of touch with the following remarks:

One of the things that had an impact on me was the preparation you did...putting together bundles of stuff made it special...that’s hard to articulate...not just typing a sermon...you had to tangibly put yourself into preparation...something that couldn’t be replicated in-person...the clay...the tactile experience of shaping the cross was meaningful for me...I don’t know exactly...there was no special meaning in the sense of new information...but I think...not sure if you anticipated it or it’s my weirdness...it made me feel accountable for the cross because I’m making it...I mean it was some clay and 2,000 years plus after, but somehow just physically making the cross with my hands...it was meaningful for me.

This response indicates that, for some people, a meaningful, memorable experience is enhanced by the incorporation of physical, concrete objects. The above description indicates that “making” the cross immersed the participant in the narrative as a physical part of the experience, leading the participant to a sense of responsibility for the events of the day.⁷⁴ Another participant indicated the impact of tactile elements in this way:

When I used to do the flowers at church...we bought a crown of thorns...I touched it, and it hurts! Since I’m a tactile person, when I saw the crown, I know it hurt. I liked being able to see...I liked experiencing some other senses. Anything that I can touch and “feel” resonates with me...that’s why I so enjoy the special traditions. Like the flower cross – making something beautiful out of something so very ugly.

⁷⁴ Please note, the theological implications of this participant’s answer were not so much the result of my intentions as the result of the participant’s imbedded theology. I did not ask nor prompt the participant to consider the significance of forming the cross (actually, participants were free to create any object they chose, and this participant chose a cross); rather, the participant was simply asked to form an object with the clay throughout the service.

The above response, along with other similar responses, implies that physical objects provide a focal point, directing the participants away from distractions and signifying meaning that passive participation alone cannot easily replicate.

Taste and Smell – The Significance of a Meal

The Maundy Thursday experience was the only service to incorporate taste and smell, especially since these senses are difficult to utilize without a full meal (communion and incense being the exceptions used in some traditions regularly). The irony for me is that while I feel this was the weakest video service where I faced more challenges to create a quality experience (lacking a teleprompter and the challenge of getting a fresh meal to participants), more participants identified this as the service that affected them the most. Could it be the most affective service because it was the only one to involve all five of the senses? The matter would need more experiments and evidence to prove, but preliminary analysis of the data would suggest that this is indeed the case, so much so that even something that tasted bad would not ruin the experience. Several participants actually helped pack and deliver the “worship kits” that I devised to accompany these services, and they helped me make the charoset as part of the seder meal. We partook of some of the leftover charoset on the day it was made, and it was a wonderful, decadent, tasty dish! However, after one day of sitting in the refrigerator, I’m told that it became almost inedible. The fact that my performance was worst in the Maundy Thursday video and the fact that all participants ate the charoset after it had become undesirable yet most still identified the seder as the most “affective”—all of this indicates that the more senses involved in worship, the more the worship experience will be enhanced.

Overall Observations from Post-Experience Surveys and Interviews

Although I did not directly ask if these experiences were “effective” (or “affective”), one might infer their answers to this question by how they answered the question about their response to the services knowing that they were “special” and “not likely to happen every week.” Five participants indicated “I would like to see more elements from these services on a regular basis during Sunday worship, and four indicated “Experiences like this are nice once in awhile.” The first question of the post-experience interview was designed to leave space for open discussion without leading anyone in a particular direction. I simply asked them to “Tell me about these services that you experienced.” The most common response was that they “enjoyed these services.” This response perplexes me given the other responses about the purposes of worship in which they indicated “experiencing God” was the primary role of worship. However, I interpreted the “I enjoyed them” response as indicative that the experiences were overall effective in accomplishing the creation of an authentic worship experience.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

My philosophy of worship is that it's what we do—our very purpose. We lead lives of worship, though *what we worship* might need some redirection from time to time. Therefore, my calling as a worship pastor and my life-long love of music and worship led me to seek this Doctor of Ministry degree in order to see what I might add to the conversation on how to enhance the experience of worship, and my own experience with sensory elements led me to examine the role of the senses. Furthermore, the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the move to online worship for my congregation, something which society had long entertained even while many churches ignored this potential avenue of connecting with worshipers. I can now conclude that the inclusion of sensory elements enhances the experience of online worship, as evidenced by the responses of participants in the study at Heritage Fellowship in Canton, Georgia.

During the thirteen months in which Heritage Fellowship met entirely online, I noticed some trends in participation and responses as the season continued. Early enthusiasm faded a few months into the pandemic, and I began to look for ways to make worship more authentic and immersive. The reality struck me that as an amateur video producer, I was unable to “compete” with mainstream media which was equipped with more budget, expertise, equipment, human resources, and time to produce and edit high quality videos. Although worship is a fundamentally different experience than watching a television drama, news program, or sporting event, this high-quality media is indeed the *water in which worshipers swim*. Therefore, the online worship leader must take special care to craft experiences with the highest quality possible in order to simply maintain the

attention and focus of the worshipers who can much more easily become distracted on the other side of the screen. The feedback I received from the participants in the project was that the sensory elements I included in these special video services during Lent held their attention and made the experience more “meaningful” and “memorable.” The implication is that the sensory elements provided a means to focus attention and enhance the experience by immersing the worshiper in the biblical narrative being presented.

It is important to note the positive and negative aspects of including a variety of sensory experiences. Differentiation is possible because, within the same service, the worship leader may include elements designed for auditory, tactile, or visual learners whose predilection leans toward one sense over another. However, the worship leader must take care to avoid exclusivity, acknowledging that what resonates with one group of worshipers might prove to be distracting to another group. As mentioned in Chapter 4, when I ended a Maundy Thursday Seder meal online worship experience with a cartoon depiction of the story of Moses, some participants identified it as the most impactful experience out of the four total experiences while other participants proclaimed definitely that the video “did not work” for them. This Doctor of Ministry project helped me see the diversity which lies even in a seemingly homogenous demographic when it comes to personal preferences and learning styles, and this diversity begs the worship leader to not fall into the trap of complacency when planning worship. Even a small group of people like Heritage Fellowship needs a diverse selection of worship elements to fit the needs of the spiritual and educational predilections of its constituents. In other words, a variety of worship preferences necessitates a variety of worship experiences in order to maximize the formative impact of worship on participants, especially in an online environment—

though the conclusions of this project also have similar implications for in-person worship as well.

I was most surprised by the responses of participants when asked during the pre-experience interviews about the experience of worship itself. Even though most participants were life-long church attenders and long-time members of Heritage Fellowship, when asked to describe what goes on during worship to someone who never before had attended church, most participants struggled to articulate the practices which they have perpetuated for decades. It is as if they have taken the act and practices of worship for granted, never stopping to consider the purposes behind worship or even why they worship. My suspicion is that worship for them had been simply an event to attend rather than a practice in which to be engaged. Perhaps the very act of asking the questions enhanced the experience of online worship because they were now more aware of the complexity of the practice of worship. By asking the questions, I had helped them “see the water in which they swam,” so to speak.

Possibilities for Further Development

This project was disruptive of the “normal” rhythms of online worship which had been established during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in anticipation of this potential problem, I chose Lent as the season in which to experiment with sensory elements because the season of Lent has already been disruptive, at least in the institutional memory of worship at the Heritage Fellowship. Lent was already a time when special services would happen with *out-of-the-ordinary* elements, so it was a natural choice to incorporate more sensory elements into worship. However, outside the scope of this project is the inclusion of sensory elements into *routine* practices on a weekly basis, and

this is an area of possibility for further development. How might the common liturgy of worship at Heritage Fellowship incorporate more sensory elements in order to enhance the worship experience? Furthermore, how might these sensory elements be incorporated during in-person worship? The safety of congregants during a time when no vaccinations were widely available made the online experience a necessity, but how would these special services have been different if they were conducted in-person in the church building?

As the role of worship pastor is part of my job description as Associate Pastor, I have an opportunity to incorporate sensory elements on a regular basis during in-person worship, and this Doctor of Ministry project has given me insight into how one might do so more effectively. For example, the worship leader must take care to avoid sensory experiences simply for the sake of sensory experiences. In other words, it can be “overdone” to the point that it becomes “cheesy” and does not enhance the experience of worship. When the passage describing Joshua stacking stones on the banks of the Jordan River to commemorate its crossing comes up in the lectionary texts, I am fond of passing out stones and having worshipers write something to commemorate on the stones. However, this is not a sensory experience that could be easily employed when it does not fit the narrative center of the worship theme, and the experience could become arbitrary and trite if worshipers find themselves frequently writing on rocks. The evidence to support this premise from my project comes from the responses on the survey which indicate that “experiences like this are nice once-in-awhile.”

Experience and Worship

The connection between worship and identity is one which I would like to give further exploration in order to answer the question as to why worship might need enhancing in the first place. In *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, James K.A. Smith speaks to this connection between worship and daily life, saying, “Much of our action is not the fruit of conscious deliberation; instead, much of what we do grows out of our passional orientation to the world...we live into the stories we’ve absorbed; we become characters in the drama that has captivated us.”⁷⁵ The implication is that if biblical narratives can be better “absorbed,” as Smith states, then worshipers will begin to live into “passional orientation” which is influenced by worship and the biblical narratives it employs. Perhaps it all comes down to love—in order to absorb worship as a part of our identity, then it must become something that we love. In other words, we must love the practice of worship, the act of worship, and the object of worship, i.e. God. It is probable that it is of this love which participants spoke when they described the online worship services as “meaningful.” The concept of “passional orientation,” as described by Smith, is difficult to articulate, but when it occurs during worship (online or in-person), worshipers walk away with a sentiment of “Now *that* was a great service!”—even if they can’t articulate exactly what made the difference.

The easiest point of entry for incorporating sensory experiences regularly in worship is communion, but not exactly in the traditional Baptist context. Passing plates

⁷⁵ James K.A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 31-32.

with wafers and juice is a passive experience, but the participatory act of walking forward and actually breaking the bread off of a loaf, dipping it into juice, and then hearing the words spoken, “The Body of Christ, broken for you” creates a sensory experience which requires active participation and engages all five senses: worshipers smell and taste the bread and juice, they touch the loaf and cup, they hear the words spoken and music in the background, and they see it all unfold. The experience can be further enhanced with images either on a screen or on banners or the altar table. The frequency of the experience will vary by context, and the worship leader always walks a fine line between doing the experience too much or not enough. In light of the health concerns created by the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become even more difficult to do communion in this active, participatory way, yet it is still possible to be creative while maintaining safety. For those experiencing communion remotely, they need to know to prepare the elements ahead of time lest they disengage from the worship moment and become distracted just walking to the kitchen. Packets can also be prepared and distributed prior to the Sunday experience as I did in my project.

The main point for worship leaders to emphasize is that worship should mean *doing* something rather than just *being* somewhere, and this point needs constant reiteration. When introducing a hymn, the worship leader might simply say, “Let us now stand and lift our voices together in praise and worship as we sing hymn number...”. If there is an offertory prayer, one might communicate the sentiment that giving is an act of worship. Due to COVID-19 concerns, Heritage Fellowship currently does not pass an offering plate, but a sign might be placed next to the offering box declaring the act of giving as an act of worship. It does not necessarily require an object lesson in order for

people to actively engage in worship, but it does require intention and reiteration from those leading in worship. After all, they are “worship *leaders*.”

Technological Hurdles

During the COVID-19 pandemic when the church was entirely online and now that Heritage Fellowship currently livestreams the entire service (rather than just the sermon as we did pre-pandemic), I discovered that, while technology affords greater opportunities for visual and audio stimulation during the worship experience, it also creates many unpredictable hurdles. These hurdles must be addressed in order for the technology to enhance the experience rather than detract from it. For example, a choir might sound beautiful in the room where the natural acoustics and reverb of the space blend their voices well, but on a livestream, the same voices might sound harsh and brittle. The worship leader must utilize all resources available in order to create a better experience for the online worshiper. This might require the technical expertise of an audio engineer who can add digital reverb through the soundboard in order to make the choir sound more natural as if one were sitting in the room. Hiring an engineer and purchasing the sound equipment necessary for this upgrade also creates a financial hurdle. Other hurdles apply to the worshipers and their comfort level using technology. I have had to field numerous calls and emails on how to find the live stream, especially with members not familiar with YouTube or Facebook where live streaming is free. Once they are able to tune in, how might their attention be directed while watching online? For my project, I looked directly at the camera and instructed participants on what they should be *doing*. However, in a livestream scenario, a worship leader must be cognizant of the needs of two different audiences—those in the room and those tuning in

remotely. Simultaneously meeting the very different needs of both audiences can prove to be a very difficult task, but it is possible to address both sets of needs. For example, without having a hymnal, the online worshiper must be encouraged to sing along via words on the screen. Such accommodations create an additional hurdle and burden on the preparation time of the worship leader who now has to prepare both a printed bulletin and a multimedia presentation on a computer or tablet.

Future Writing Projects

During this project, I approached Smyth and Helwys publishing with a proposal including the draft of the first three chapters of this project, and the result was the publication of my book *Sensing God Online: Navigating Worship in a Digital World*. The work is a collection of my researched knowledge on the history and practice of worship, as well as my own personal experience in best practices for how to craft online worship experiences for small churches on a budget. In the future, I hope to expand this work and offer supplementary writings that could possibly create a workshop for worship leaders. I would create written material that could be shared at conferences in order to train worship leaders in how to effectively employ the use of sensory elements both online and in-person during worship experiences.

Impact on Ministry

Researcher

When I began this project, I assumed that most aspects of worship would be obvious to everyone involved, including myself. However, once I delved into research and interviews, I realized how little I knew about the history and variety of Christian worship practices and how little thought most people give to what goes on during a

worship service, myself included. It is as if the entire process is based mostly on the lived experience of participants doing *what they've always done*. In this way, worship seems to function more on the rote level of institutional memory than on the intentions of leaders carefully crafting divine experiences. I wondered how the experience of worship might be *enhanced* by the inclusion of sensory elements, and I learned that, while such enhancement is certainly a possibility, sensory elements also have the possibility to create as much disruption and distraction if not executed properly or in the right context. One missed cue on the video screens can cause minds to wander rather than enhancing the song, biblical narrative, or sermon. There is also the element of time which creates a problem for the worship leader because sensory elements require much greater preparation time. One must therefore tread carefully when venturing into the world of sensory elements in worship because of the time commitment and potential for pitfalls. However, the overwhelming response to the special online worship experiences I created for this project was positive, indicating that, occasionally, sensory experiences do indeed enhance the worship moment when executed properly in the correct context, leading to this conclusive maxim: the more engagement of the senses and the more active participation required of the worshiper, the more immersed worshipers will be in the act of worship.⁷⁶

This project has challenged my creative process for worship preparation, causing me to more carefully and intentionally craft each piece of a worship service. I seek to make every spoken word (or at least those which I can control!) instructive on some

⁷⁶ The caveat here is that these elements must be cohesively fashioned around a clear theme in order to enhance rather than detract from the experience.

level. My prayers of invocation offer guidance for how worshipers might act and respond during worship, my hymn introductions offer instruction on how and why we sing, and my responsive calls to worship include active language which encourages the congregation to live into the reality being proclaimed during worship. My goal has become not to just create worship in which congregants *feel* something, but to create worship from which worshipers walk away with both a sense of having *done* something and a sense of what to *do* in how they live their lives as lives of worship which actively build the Kingdom of God.

Constructive moments came when, during the survey and interview process, I learned of mistakes I had made in crafting the experiences and the effect on the overall experience. I was delighted to discover that, even in spite of the mistakes, worshipers found the online worship experiences meaningful. One reality that I did not expect was the diversity even within the ten participants of the study who appear at first glance to be demographically homogenous. The reality is that there exists within my congregation a large variety of learning styles, past experiences, and expectations for worship. I am a more well-rounded minister for having gone through this research process and having discovered how different people might experience the same worship elements differently. Silence and darkness worked well for some participants while bright images and loud music worked well for others. Creating a variety of experiences throughout the Christian year is essential to meeting the spiritual needs of a diverse collection of personalities. In future planning, I must take care to both be aware and to be inclusive of this diversity in order to meet the needs of a variety of worshipers.

Heritage Fellowship

The congregants of Heritage Fellowship frequently inquire about my doctoral work, and they have already discovered a shift in my worship planning and practice as I have employed ideas which I learned during this Doctor of Ministry project. I have incorporated what I have learned from my readings into blog posts, video reflections, Sunday school lessons, and sermons. In the future, I hope to craft a “Worship Workshop” for the congregation in which I succinctly restate what I have learned from this process. My most frequent point of contact is with the choir, and I have already made a point of instructing them on their role as “worship leaders,” attempting to instill in them their active role during worship. I plan to continue to craft language during choir practice which might be instructive in the art of worship leadership, and I hope that their understanding of worship might grow and transfer to the church at large so that active participation might become normalized to the point that sensory worship experiences are more “normal” and less disruptive to the expected flow of worship. I realize that doing so would be to disrupt the status quo of worship expectations, but my research to this point indicates that doing so would maximize the impact of worship on the spiritual formation and discipleship of those present. In other words, the assumption is that the more that is actively required of worshipers during worship, the more they will lead lives of worship as they leave the church building.

The Wider Community

If my small selection of participants from my church is representative of the wider population, then there are gaps which exist in the general public’s knowledge of both the history and philosophy of worship and how it informs current worship practices. In other

words, most people have little idea why we do what we do in worship, and the material in this project and my published work, *Sensing God Online*, could be presented at various conferences and gatherings which would then instruct church leaders on how to better educate their congregations on worship practices and instruct worship leaders on how to craft sensory experiences for their in-person and online worship services.

The ultimate goal of this project was to determine if online worship at Heritage Fellowship could be enhanced with sensory experiences, and, though caveats have been outlined previously, the result has proven that, if nothing else, sensory experiences disrupt the status quo of worship expectations enough that worshipers are forced to be more active and reflective about the experience in which they are participating. Sensory experiences will not allow worshipers to simply *attend* a service but instead require *participation* in the act of worship. This premise is worth sharing with worship leaders and worshipers all over the world, and I hope that both my book and this project will serve as a resource for those seeking to make the most out of worship, either as a leader crafting worship or a participant seeking to get the most out of worship.

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APPENDICES

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Pre-Experience Interview *Semi-Structured*

1. Welcome and Explanation of Project
 2. “We’re going to be discussing worship today, and I’m aware that I’m the one who plans worship at our church. I want you to know that you can be honest in our discussion today. Let’s begin with a general picture of what we do each Sunday.”
 3. How would you describe Heritage at worship? [describe Heritage at worship]
 - a. For follow-up (if needed):
 - i. What’s worship like here?
 - ii. If you were describing our service to someone who had never been here, what would you say?
 4. Other than the sermon, where do you connect in worship? What is most meaningful for you?
 - a. For follow-up (if needed):
 - i. What’s your favorite part of worship?
 - ii. When do you feel the most “worshipful” in the service?
 - iii. What makes you feel closer to God in worship?
 - iv. When do you feel closest to God in worship?
 - v. How do you feel God’s presence in worship?
 5. “Let’s imagine for a minute that you have walked into the *perfect worship service*. What would that be like? Take a minute and describe it to me.”
 6. Tell me about a profound, meaningful worship experience for you. (It’s ok if it’s family).
 - a. For follow-up (if needed):
 - i. Tell me more about it.
 - ii. What do you remember?
 - iii. What made it stand out?
- “There are people who play certain roles in the service which are easy to see, such as the minister, song leader, musicians, choir, etc. What is the role of the congregation?”

APPENDIX B

Post-Experience Interview *Semi-Structured*

1. Welcome and “thank you” for participating
2. “We’ve just taken part in a variety of special worship experiences based around Holy Week. Take a minute and tell me about those experiences for you. How would you describe them?”
 - a. For follow-up (if needed):
 - i. How were these experiences for you?
 - ii. What impact did these services have on you?
3. What resonated with you? What didn’t?
4. What parts of worship stood out to you?
5. When did you feel most worshipful?
 - a. For follow-up (if needed):
 - i. Most connected to God?
 - ii. Where did you connect in worship?
 - iii. What moved you in worship?
 - iv. What was the most real or authentic experience in worship?
6. “We’ve identified that there were several elements that were out of the ordinary during these services. Think about which ones resonated with you and which ones did not. Reflect for a moment on what this brought to or took away from the experience. How did this affect your experience?”
7. “We’re discussed worship now for some time. As a result of going through this experience, what new insight into worship have you discovered, if any?”

APPENDIX C
Participant Pre-Survey

1. How long have you been worshipping at Heritage Fellowship?
2. What worship tradition did you predominantly experience as a child?
 - a. None
 - b. Liturgical (Catholic, Episcopal, etc.)
 - c. Traditional (printed bulletin, hymnals, etc.)
 - d. Contemporary
 - e. Pentecostal (more freedom of expression)
3. How does worship at Heritage compare to your childhood worship?
 - a. Very similar
 - b. Similar
 - c. Different
 - d. Completely different
4. Rank these worship elements according to how they connect you to God, “1” being the most connected, and “6” being the least connected
 - Prayer
 - Scripture Reading
 - Music
 - Sermon
 - Response
 - Communion
5. Rank the purposes of worship, “1” being the most important, and “5” being the least important
 - Experience God
 - Learn about God
 - Praise God
 - Feel rejuvenated
 - Get right with God
6. What are your expectations for worship?
7. What are the expectations for you in worship? In other words, what is your role in the service?
8. Please provide some basic demographic information for this study by placing a checkmark in the appropriate boxes:
 - Male Female Married Single
 - Age: 18-24 25-34 35-49 50-64 65+
9. I would be willing for the researcher to contact me about this survey: Yes No
10. Would you be willing for the researcher to interview you for this research study?
 Yes No
11. If you answered “Yes” to either question 8 or 9, please provide your name and contact information below:
12. Name: _____
13. Phone: _____
14. e-mail: _____

APPENDIX D

Participant Post-Survey

1. Which services did you attend during Holy Week?
 Palm Sunday Maundy Thursday Good Friday Easter
2. Which service affected you the most?
 Palm Sunday Maundy Thursday Good Friday Easter
3. How would you describe the effect it had on you?
4. Knowing that these were “special” services not likely to happen every week, which one of these statements best describes your response:
 - a. I would like to see more elements from these services on a regular basis during Sunday worship.
 - b. Experiences like this are nice once in awhile.
 - c. I’m glad I experienced this, but I prefer our “normal” worship services at Heritage.
 - d. These experiences did not resonate with me.
5. Rank these special worship elements according to how they connect you to God, “1” being the most connected, and “6” being the least connected
 - Images on the tv screens corresponding to the Biblical story
 - Dramatic Scripture Reading
 - Silence
 - Waving Palm Fronds
 - Putting Flowers on a Cross
 - Stones
6. Rank the following statements in regards how much they apply to the special services during Holy Week, “1” being the most applicable, and “5” being the least applicable
 - I experienced God
 - I learned about God
 - I felt entertained
 - I felt actively engaged
 - I was distracted
7. Was the biblical story evident throughout the service?
 - a. If yes, what effect did this have on your experience?
8. Was anything different about your role in the service as compared to a “normal” worship service?
 - a. If yes, what was different? b. If no, what is your role during worship?
9. Please provide some basic demographic information for this study by placing a checkmark in the appropriate boxes:
 Male Female Married Single
Age: 18-24 25-34 35-49 50-64 65+
10. I would be willing for the researcher to contact me about this survey: Yes No
11. If you answered “Yes” to either question 10, please provide your name and contact information below:
12. Name: _____
13. Phone: _____
14. e-mail: _____