

THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON 21ST-CENTURY WORSHIP

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IN THE LATTER days of the 20th century and these first of the 21st century an interesting phenomenon known as the Church Growth Movement has begun to impact the worship and music of the church. Because of its impact on worship, worship styles, music, music styles, and what the church growth movement is saying and publishing on these matters, it is time for serious research and evaluation of this impact on current and future worship forms and styles. This paper can only start what hopefully will become a serious and unbiased look at the pros and cons of this movement and its far-reaching implications. There is considerable material to evaluate, weigh, and judge! It is time to address these serious issues and bring them under the light of informed, open-minded, enlightened research and criticism.

I

What is the Church Growth Movement and what is it saying about music and worship in the 21st century?

In the late 20th century many of the clergy and national leaders of the mainline denominations (i.e., Methodists, Presbyterians, and Lutherans) became alarmed at the significant drop in membership and loss of members to other, newer denominations (i.e., Assembly of God and Christian and Missionary Alliance). These leaders were also concerned with the lack of newer, younger members coming into the church and possibly the loss of a whole generation or two. Serious study, research, surveys, treatises, and even doctoral-level programs were developed to deal with these issues. One such doctoral program is offered by the Beeson Institute of Church Growth and Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky.

Bill Easum has also developed a tool for churches to use to evaluate themselves with a paid consultant's Ministry Audit Report. At the First United Methodist Church in Butler, Pennsylvania, where this author served as music director, we used Bill Easum's *The Complete Ministry Audit*, prepared specifically for the church by Jeffrey H. Patton, regional consultant for 21st Century Strategies, on September 8, 1999. Many of the quotations used in this paper about music and worship come from this report and from books written by the pastors of some of the newest, largest, and fastest-growing churches in America—the new mega churches. These churches are referred to as “Spiritual Redwoods” by Bill Easum. Some of their statements are eye-opening and need to be studied, evaluated, and, yes, even at times challenged.

Bill Easum describes this current age we live in as the “pre-Christian” world, a time when the age of Christendom is coming to a close and a pre-Christian world, much like the first century, is emerging. In his book, *Growing Spiritual Redwoods*, Bill describes some churches which he calls “Spiritual Redwoods.” These “Spiritual Redwoods” have grown head and shoulders above the other churches, and

if we see the world from their vantage point, we can see where God is leading the church in the 21st century. These churches are spiritual giants because they have discovered how to grow people into spiritual giants. Each of these churches has focused its entire ministry on making disciples of nonreligious people. In the 1996 General Conference, the United Methodist Church reclaimed its historic mission, “*To make disciples for Jesus Christ.*” These churches are causing a fresh wind to blow across the land showing the way through the modern wilderness.¹

The *Complete Ministry Audit*, prepared specifically for the First United Methodist Church in Butler, Pennsylvania, includes the following statements:

It is more important to use music that unchurched people understand and are interested in to spread the Gospel, than it is to teach people to appreciate “good” music. They [new churches] design worship so it is sensitive to the needs of the unchurched.²

Bill Easum in his book, *Growing Spiritual Redwoods*, states:

The needs in the world are many and great. People outside the church are spiritually hungry at the same time that they are alienated from, or simply ignorant of, traditional Christianity. The signs are clear . . . God is raising up a new kind of church to meet the challenges of “*this present age.*”³

In the *Complete Ministry Audit*, Mr. Patton concludes:

Strong, healthy churches that are described as *Spiritual Redwoods* exhibit the following characteristics:

- They are biblically grounded.
- They are culturally relevant.
- They exist to transform individuals, mainly adults.
- They are lay led.
- They are a trusting community.⁴

Most of what Mr. Patton states in his report is taken word for word from Bill Easum's book, *Growing Spiritual Redwoods*. Obviously, the book has been made into a workshop and is easily downloaded by trained regional consultants such as Mr. Patton.

The writer is alarmed by Mr. Patton's statements and wholeheartedly agrees that music is a vital and communicative bridge to the unchurched in worship; however, it is so much more than that. It is also a fundamental bridge in worship to our very creator.

This writer takes great personal comfort in that every family of musical instruments is mentioned in Psalm 150. Verse 4 even says “pipe.” One can base their whole philosophy of developing a church instrumental department on this psalm.

One final criticism: Why is it wrong, or where in Scripture does it say that it is

wrong, “to teach people to appreciate ‘good music’?”⁵

The author as a child was taught to behave properly in church. He was told not to talk during Mass. I personally never questioned what music was being used, Latin Masses or new hymns. I enjoyed and loved it all! I firmly believe in using any good sacred music from every and any era. Some of our current clergy and younger laity do need to be educated and culturally stretched. Their tastes seem to be far too parochial.

Marva Dawn's views on this topic need to be considered seriously by all church musicians and especially by the clergy. She says:

The major reason why tradition often grows stale is that we have failed to educate worshipers to know why we do what we do and who we are as a community carrying the faith together. Moreover, we have not taught the vibrancy of renewed worship rooted in the heritage of faith and expressed in new forms. We must constantly be teaching people what is happening and why, as well as who and whose we are.

Who does such teaching? We might think it is the job of a congregation's clergy and musicians and education leaders, but it is really the responsibility of the entire community to hand on the faith to the next generation. I once surveyed a confirmation class of seventh- and eighth-graders. Their responses matched exactly—every kid who loved the liturgy was the child of parents who sang it. One boy, whose father usually stood silently gazing elsewhere, exclaimed that he hated the worship service, but could give no specific answer when I asked why.

The problem for many who don't like worship is that they don't understand it. We have not taught the meaning of symbols, the reason for certain actions or responses, the value of doing things in certain ways. As a child I never liked the slow movements of piano concertos. I liked the flashy parts, the thrilling impossibility of moving one's hands so fast over the keys. Not until I was more mature did I learn to appreciate the greater difficulty of capturing the kind of expression that is only possible in slowness. To appreciate genuine worship, no matter what style or form, requires training, sensitivity, and patience with mysteries of God that are beyond our ken. Worship that is too easy cheats us. It deprives us of the grandeur of an infinite God.⁶

II

A phrase used by many of these “Spiritual Redwood” church staffers is Indigenous Worship. *Webster's New World Dictionary* defines indigenous as an adjective that means: 1. born, growing, or produced naturally in a region or country; native; 2. innate, inherent, inborn. From reading several of the books and articles by these church growth leaders, this author has come to believe that this means contemporary worship and music, band, worship team, multimedia, drama, video clips, PowerPoint presentations, and more. To some of the leaders this even means rock. One believes this to be a misapplication

of the word indigenous. This word, to me as a musician, seems to imply American Indian, spirituals, jazz, soul, blues, and maybe even blue grass and country and western. One is led to believe that these mega-church leaders are just confusing issues of culture, taste, and style that may be, in some instances, more regional than they appear to know or want to admit.

Two recommendations from the *Ministry Audit* that summarize much of the above material are: "Worship designed for unchurched and pre-Christian people is essential for ministry in the 21st century" and "Worship that reaches pre-Christian people born after 1946 must include indigenous music, high-tech tools, and be prepared to offer multimedia forms to enhance communications."⁷

The author has no problem or quarrel with this if these leaders are open-minded enough to accept traditional, liturgical, as well as blended, services to be offered along with totally contemporary or indigenous services; however, some of these leaders appear only to want worship their way. In fact, they even appear willing to remove staff and lay leadership who are perceived as not being in 100% agreement with them on every single topic or issue of discussion. This writer has even heard a new term used by a senior pastor to describe himself. He calls himself a "Benevolent Bastard." Benevolent is an overstatement. Why has the church growth movement sunk to such a low level with such language? Fifteen years ago, at Community Alliance Church, a growth consultant called a pastor of a growing, forward-moving church a "Change Agent." Five years later, the term "Benign Dictator" was used; today, "Benevolent Bastard." The language of the church growth movement has truly spiraled downward.

Here is a brief job description for a Worship Leader compiled from several of the books written by mega-church pastors, staffs, consultants, and worship and fine arts seminars.

The Worship Leader should:

1. Be a Gen-x person able to lead worship for that generation;
2. Have a knowledge of the "culture-avoid traditionalists";
3. Have a knowledge of music—recruit, rehearse, and lead the band and worship team;
4. Have a knowledge of multimedia and technology;
5. Be able to recruit a number of people to lead the various aspects of the worship service.

Churches like Willow Creek of Barrington, Illinois, and the Willow Creek Association offer weeklong conferences dealing with a multitude of subjects and worship; the fine arts conferences annually are sold out. They even schedule mini-conferences over the weekend (Friday afternoon and evening and all day Saturday) across the nation. Attending a week conference at Willow Creek and a weekend Willow Creek Association held at Orchard Hill Church in Wexford, Pennsylvania, has been a time of significant stretch and challenge in my ministry. They present a strong scriptural basis for worship and music in worship; however, they completely and intentionally avoid any and all discussion of worship styles and especially music styles and tastes.

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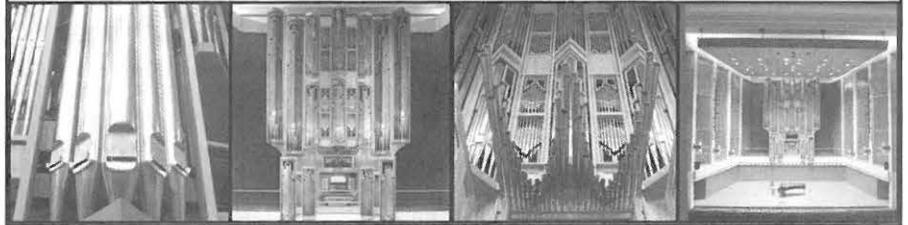
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Willow Creek does use drama and multimedia to excellent effect—quality is expected at all times and in all things. They have a full-time arts director with several full-time musicians under her instruction. They employ a full-time conductor, a full-time arranger/composer, and a full-time media person, as well as a full-time drama resource person. They are also surrounded by a large part-time staff in this area alone. They have at least six bands and worship teams, which they rotate. They only use the choir once a month and mostly as a backup for the worship teams or soloists. They also use a church orchestra on some Sunday mornings and at special holiday concerts. Bill Hybel, their senior pastor, has been the catalyst in growing this church, which started out years ago as a youth group movement. They now average 30,000 to 32,000 in attendance on the weekends. They also have services and concerts (bands) on Friday and Saturday evenings for Generations X and Y.

Any church can, for an annual membership fee, join the Willow Creek Association. They have the largest church-oriented Web site I have ever surfed. Most of their dramas, music arrangements, youth ministry material, small group material, and children's ministry material can either be purchased on a credit card and mailed to you—and many times (again with a credit card payment) downloaded. They have even joined with Zondervan Publishing House to have all their small group books and most of their other written resources published. They definitely—besides having an "alternative" worship style that has attracted thousands—

are in both the publishing and conference center businesses.

In fact, one quote from Marva J. Dawn's excellent book, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, is totally apropos here: "The emphasis on measurements and experts is revealed by the huge push for worship practices to be changed in order to attract large numbers and by the turning of congregations into mega-businesses instead of Christian communities."⁸

One must ask the question: Are we worshipping at the idolatrous altar of numbers and business? Douglas Webster in his controversial book, *Selling Jesus: What's Wrong with Marketing the Church*, would have us believe that the answer is yes!

III

An interesting partnership has occurred between the Beeson Institute of Church Growth, Asbury Theological Seminary, and several of these mega-churches. A doctoral candidate from Asbury can receive degree credits by attending the leadership conferences at the various churches. Seminary staff go to these conferences and give the degree students from Asbury extra lectures during these conferences not available to the regular attendees. A paper is then required a few weeks later to be mailed, faxed, or e-mailed to the seminary. The paper is then graded by the seminary staff. One fears that this doctoral program from the Beeson Institute and Asbury Seminary, by focusing on these mega-churches, can cause frustration to the local church staff members whose pastors are involved in this program. Do they show

Here is another quote from Jeff Patton:

Unchurched young adults consistently cite boring, irrelevant worship as the number one reason they do not attend worship. They grew up with music and television and are not reached through traditional worship that focuses on an organ, hymns, and quiet time. To reach them you must start where they are.

This service has at least 15–20 minutes of music. Almost everything is done visually instead of in print, including words to music, biblical text, sermon, announcements, etc. Usually it contains some of the following elements—drama, interviews, a band, a Q & A session.

This service needs at least the following teams: Sound, Choreography, Lights, Drama, Singers, Prayer, Follow-up, Floor Team (people who make the new people feel at home).

People born before 1950 or people of any age who never left the church come to church to meditate, reflect, and confess. People born after 1950 come to church to find hope and meaning to life. For them, it is impossible to separate entertainment and inspiration. To them, inspiration is more important than meditation. To them, clapping is not a response to entertainment, but a show of agreement with what has been said or sung.

Do not expect, or require, the unchurched to participate in the service by singing or reading creeds. At first, they are spectators trying to decide if they want to participate. Do not make them meet your criteria for worship. Meet them halfway.¹⁰

This final quote from Jeff Patton is all too typical of these church-growth consultants and mega-church pastors: “A **totally indigenous service does not need a choir.**”¹¹ [bold added]. This author’s personal experience and observations of these churches and their services and styles affirm that they truly do believe and do this. The worship team and band are king! The choirs, orchestras, organs, and organists are often seen as passé . . . dinosaurs!

IV

Another pastor, Dr. Rick Warren, his church, and writings need to be discussed and evaluated. In his book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, Warren devotes two chapters to worship and music that every student of sacred music must read. They are: Chapter 14: “Designing a Seeker-Sensitive Service,” and Chapter 15: “Selecting Your Music.” Dr. Warren also writes frequently for *ZondervanChurchSource.com*.

Dr. Warren’s Saddleback Valley Community Church in Orange County, California, is another “Spiritual Redwood” according to Bill Easum. For the first ten years of this church’s phenomenal growth, they owned no buildings of their own but rented and moved frequently. They currently own a flexible worship site with about 60 acres. Their average weekend worship attendance is in the 20,000+ range. Dr. Warren’s books include *Dynamic Bible Study Methods*, *Answers to Life’s Difficult Questions*, and *The Power to Change Your Life*. His tape ministry, “The Encouraging Word,” serves thousands of pastors and church leaders worldwide. It is his book, *The Purpose Driven Church*, that has won the attention of pastors across the nation. His word and opinions carry a lot of weight with young, progressive pastors who would like to model his California Valley image of casual dress and worship style.

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these pastors “the promised land” and say go and do likewise? One believes and fears so. Or do they turn a young, immature child loose in a candy store? Again, one believes so. Every time my senior pastor returned from one of these conferences and classes held at another growing mega-church, we, the staff at First Church, were pushed to the limit to see what we could duplicate. Many hours were involved in this process and always we were chastised that we must do something *big* for God. We were told we must push the envelope (the congregation and ourselves) harder and farther. One fears that too many of these young pastors believe that just because these mega-churches are a reality, they, too, can reproduce the same results practically overnight. In the Bible, in the book of Nehemiah we see the man of God surveying the ruined walls of the city of Jerusalem, counting the cost, and then producing a plan; essentially a five-year plan. He puts on paper the cost, resources, man-hours, goals and objectives, a time-flow chart, and a system of evaluation. Many of our clergy do not have the organizational skills or discipline necessary to do all of this and appear to be too insecure and/or vain to let others accomplish this task for them. The word we United Methodists like to use for this is “empower.”

Again, from *The Complete Ministry Audit*:

FIVE ESSENTIALS OF INDIGENOUS WORSHIP

Visual—I must have my sight-sense affected—Symbols are metaphors for the message.

Sound—There must be sound all of the time.

Technologically advanced—requires a well-supported team.

Participatory—people want to join in and be welcomed.

Indigenous Music—These people want the music of their lives.

Never underestimate the importance of music. Undergird everything you do with music in this service. This service is a mission to the “yet-to-be-committed” people in the community. It is not intended to be for people in the congregation. This service must be visual, informally structured, and mostly music. It is important to remember that this service does not in any way replace your present worship services. It simply adds to them and provides an alternative. Here is a chart that shows the different styles of worship. Keep in mind that the further we go into the 21st century, the less effective traditional worship will be. In time the two indigenous forms of worship, praise and sensory, will virtually replace traditional worship. For the next 20 years, praise worship will be the most effective. Twenty years from now all effective worship will be sensory worship.

Traditional	Praise	Sensory
Rational	Emotional	Real
Information	Celebration	Personal
Transformation		
Knowledge	Discernment	Spiritual Growth
Adult Orientation	Children’s Sermon	Adult Orientation
Quiet	Semi-Loud	Extra Loud
Stately	Casual	More Casual
Print	Screen	Computer
Liturgy	Less Liturgy	Food Liturgy
Creeds	Interviews	Testimonies
Organs	Synthesizers	Guitars/Variety
Hymns	Choruses	Secular Songs
Choirs	Ensembles	Bands
Explanation of	Motivation of	All About
Missions	Missions	Mission
Faith Telling	Faith Sharing	Faith Experience
Bible Reading	Biblical Drama	This Is My Story
Oratory	Sermon Outlines	Strong Content
Directors of Music	Worship Teams	Worship Teams
Liturgists	Drama	Drama
Educational	Experiential	Experiential
Contented Souls	Yearning Person	Aching Hearts
Offering in Worship	Personal Decision	Life Covenant ⁹

Dr. Warren has a five-point strategy in his book that he believes will enable your church to grow:

1. WARMER through fellowship;
2. DEEPER through discipleship;
3. STRONGER through worship;
4. BROADER through ministry; and
5. LARGER through evangelism.¹²

The author has no arguments with the above statements; however, let us see what Dr. Warren says about music and worship:

Create a service that is intentionally designed for your members to bring their friends to. Make the service so attractive, appealing, and *relevant* to the unchurched that your members are eager to share it with the lost people they care about.¹³

Dr. Warren will get no arguments from me on this statement.

In America, the most common fear people have is going to a party where they will be surrounded by strangers. The second most common fear is having to speak before a crowd, and the third most common fear is being asked a personal question in public. The way many churches welcome visitors causes them to experience these three fears all at once!¹⁴

Dr. Warren in his excellent chapter on "Designing a Seeker-Sensitive Service" has many more insightful comments and ideas on how to make a visitor comfortable when visiting any new church and its worship services. He truly has studied in depth what makes a visitor ill at ease and how to address these issues. Even restrooms and the nursery are addressed from a visitor's eyes.

However, is not the church, the body of Christ, assembled first and foremost to worship God? Let us once again see what Marva Dawn says about this:

It is absolutely essential that the Church keep God as the subject of worship since to be Christian means to believe that the God revealed in Jesus Christ is everything to us—Creator, Provider, and Sustainer; Deliverer, Redeemer, and Lord; Sanctifier, Inspirer, and Empowerer. Friendship, instruction, and other aspects of the gathered community are important, but we lose our reason for being if we do not constantly remember that God has called us to be his people and that our ability to respond to that call in worship and life is totally the gift of God's grace.¹⁵

Dr. Warren's next chapter, "Selecting Your Music," has a lot to say and some of it needs to be challenged. Here are many of his opinions quoted from Chapter 15—some are excellent and some are not:

From the first day of the new church I'd put more energy and money into a first-class music ministry that matched our target.¹⁶

A song can often touch people in a way that a sermon can't. Music can bypass intellectual barriers and take the message straight to the heart.¹⁷

Music is the primary communicator of values to the younger generation. If we

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don't use contemporary music to spread godly values, Satan will have unchallenged access to an entire generation. Music is a force that cannot be ignored.¹⁸

Churches also need to admit that no particular style of music is sacred. What makes a song sacred is its message. Music is nothing more than an arrangement of notes and rhythms; it's the words that make a song spiritual. There is no such thing as "Christian music," only Christian lyrics.¹⁹

The debate over what style of music should be used in worship is going to be one of the major points of conflict in local churches in the years ahead. Every church will eventually have to address this issue.²⁰

Why do people take disagreement over worship styles so personally? Because the way you worship is intimately connected with the way God made you. Worship is your personal expression of love for God. When someone criticizes the way you worship, you naturally take it as a personal offense.²¹

After surveying who we were reaching, we made the strategic decision to stop singing hymns in our seeker services. Within a year of deciding what would be "our sound," Saddleback exploded with growth. I will admit that we have lost hundreds of potential members because of the style of music Saddleback uses. On the other hand, we have attracted thousands more because of our music.²²

In other statements Dr. Warren tells us to speed up the tempo, update the lyrics, write new songs, use worship choruses, replace the organ with a MIDI-band. As stated earlier in this paper, Warren has some excellent ideas and makes some biased and opinionated statements. Not everything that works at Saddleback in California is going to work elsewhere.

Here is a biased, uninformed, and highly opinionated quote from Dr. Warren that I downloaded from his Web site on March 14, 2001.

Why are you using the organ? [bold added]

Let me give you one simple—yet controversial—example of what I'm talking about related to worship styles. Many traditional churches use organs and hymns, but I'm just telling you that you're not going to attract many lost people with that kind of music. Do you listen to organ music on the radio? Do you think lost people listen to CDs of the organ's Greatest Hits? Do you listen to choir music in your leisure? What makes you think lost people will find choir music suddenly interesting on a Sunday morning?

At Saddleback Church, we use ensembles, and microphones, and we sing choruses. We do this because choruses are easier to quickly learn and sing along with—even on a lost person's very first visit. Keep in mind; our target on Sunday is not the person who's been a Christian for 50 years.

Now let me ask you, who is your target? It's a little like fishing—if you use "organ bait," what kind of fish do you think you're going to catch? Probably people who like organ music, or like more traditional worship, people who have been Christians for many years! There's nothing wrong with that, but there are plenty of good churches that were already designed for those people. How are we going to attract the lost—the people who aren't coming to church now?²³

It is clear that those comments contain both positive and negative opinions. One finds Dr. Warren to be very biased, and he definitely does not like or use an organ, choir, or hymns.

One wholeheartedly agrees with much of what he says in Chapter 14, "Designing a Seeker-Sensitive Service," but one must ask: "How culturally literate is he when he talks about music, organs, choirs, and hymns?"

Just visiting?

What the visiting organist can expect when playing for one of the following eight religions:

- African American Protestant
- Baptist
- Episcopal
- Reform Jewish
- Lutheran
- Presbyterian
- Roman Catholic
- United Methodist



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What education does he have in music? Has he even had a *basic* music appreciation course in college or seminary? What depth of knowledge and education does he possess about Western civilization, let alone music? What exposure does he allow himself to the arts?" Also, once again these questions, "Will it also work for a pre-existing church or a pre-existing inner city church?" It seems easier to start a new contemporary church in a California valley than to transform an already existing, healthy, vibrant, growing church, or even declining church. Dr. Warren does away with all traditional, liturgical, and even blended services at Saddleback Church and makes the rest of us almost believe we are not a vibrant part of the Body of Christ if we do not follow his methodology.

V

Some Pros and Cons About the Church Growth Movement

First, the Pros:

1. **Every Member in Ministry**, shortened to EMIM, is a great program that is used to help a church find ways to use, employ, and strategically empower the laity to find their gifts and passions for ministry. It is a well-developed and thought-out program with excellent tools and resources. The workbook and surveys are actually enjoyable to use. The material generated is an excellent way for a church staff to find gifted, passionate volunteers to head up various ministries within the church.

2. **Networking Spiritual Gifts** is another such tool that should be used in conjunction with EMIM. They both are biblically sound and grounded.

3. **Disciple** is a multi-level, exhaustive, and demanding study of Scripture. Homework and heavy reading assignments are require-

ments to participate in this United Methodist program of in-depth Bible study.

4. **Small Groups**. In many of the new mega-churches one cannot become a member until he joins and becomes an active participant in a small group. Both Willow Creek and Saddleback churches strictly enforce this requirement. It's a throwback to John Wesley and the early Methodist movement that used small groups to hold members accountable to one another. You can worship at these churches, but you can't be a member without being a member of a small group and a faithful, regular attendee and participant.

This church musician has found new music, old music, drama, video clips, theme-oriented sermons and services, multimedia technology, and even PowerPoint sermon presentations to be a great addition to worship but, first it must truly seek to be "Worship in Truth and in Spirit!"

In the second half of the 1990s, some new trends came to light that are having significant impact on the Church Growth Movement and the mega-churches. Robert Weber, author of an excellent new book, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), has challenged the leaders of the Church Growth Movement with new statistics, trends, and facts about the newest generation to emerge—the Millennials (those born between 1981 and 2000). He teaches an excellent seminar, *Renew Your Worship! Workshop II—Authentic Worship in a Changing World: What's Next?* He is also the director of the Institute for Worship Studies and professor of ministry at Northern Baptist Seminary, Lombard, Illinois.

In articles, books, and workshops he is challenging us to re-evaluate where each one of us is in matters concerning all areas of

worship. He is also not afraid to use new books and research from the secular sociologists who are studying how different generations relate and react to each other. He is challenging the 20th-century church growth experts who have been saying "go contemporary or die." A survey that he has taken shows new trends in the newest generation—the Millennials.

WILL THE NEXT GENERATION TAKE THE CHURCH BEYOND CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP?

The question posed by the title of this article is a volatile one, so let's begin with a definition of contemporary worship. I am using the phrase contemporary worship to refer to a pattern of worship developed since the late 1960s that can be loosely defined as "Let's put a band together, sing choruses for 30 minutes, and hear a sermon." This *music driven* approach to worship spans the range from excellent musicians and worship leaders to extremely poor musicians and worship leaders. At its best it can be a moving experience of the spirit. At its worst, it's a show, a performance done for the people or to the people and seldom by the people. One form or another of this worship is found in the mega-churches of Evangelicalism, in the churches that want to reach the younger generation, and in churches associated with Pentecostal or Charismatic movements. Many of these churches are characterized by an energetic dynamism and are among the fastest growing churches in America and even around the world. But, we must ask, does this style have a future? Will it evolve into another form?

Rumors of a New Shift

During the last two decades of the 20th century the church growth experts have been saying "go contemporary or die." Recently, I have been hearing an opposite voice.

Consider this: First, some pastors have confided in me that contemporary worship, which is all that they have ever known or done, now feels thin, even lifeless and rote; second, in Christian colleges all over this country, students are turning toward a much more quiet worship, such as candlelight prayer vespers, Taizé music, and Celtic worship; third, Kirk Dearman the composer of the acclaimed chorus, "We Bring the Sacrifice of Praise," has recently released a new CD, *Come to the Quiet*, a call to quiet meditative prayer characterized by a Celtic sound. These examples and more have been ringing in my ear for a year, so, I decided to do a research survey through the Institute for Worship Studies to find out what's going on.

Survey Shows New Trends

The Institute for Worship Studies created a survey and administered it to 176 "twenty somethings" from 38 states, 41 denominations, and 14 countries. The survey listed a number of words associated with worship and asked that they be categorized under five headings: very important; important; neutral; unimportant; very unimportant.

There seems to be a general reaction against the contemporary worship style. The highest negative response was given to entertainment (87%), to contemporary worship

(48%), and to the music associated with this form of worship, such as the band (63%), drums (59%), keyboard (56%), and guitar (38%).

There also seems to be a general dislike of the style of worship we associate with the 1950s traditional worship of the boosters. This shows up in the negative response to the choir (40%), the organ (38%), the neutral attitude toward hymns (28%), and ancient prayers (26%), which were probably associated with traditional worship.

Conclusion

Now the question remains: What are we to make of this survey? Let me conclude with several observations.

1. First, I called my friend, Chuck Fromm, the publisher of *Worship Leader*, to share the results of this survey with him, and I want to share his insight, which I found helpful. "Worship," he said, "should always be contemporary." He then went on to say, "By contemporary, I don't mean 1960s contemporary, but contemporary in the sense that it is always being incarnated into the current cultural situation. Our culture is changing, so it is no surprise that our worship tastes and style are changing as well."

2. The current change in worship taste and style is indeed a reflection of our shift into a postmodern world. The cultural world of 2000 is very different than that of the '60s and '70s. It is a culture tired of noise, turned off by phoniness, sick of glitz, and wary of the superficial. It is a culture searching for an authentic encounter with God, longing for depth and substance, craving quiet and spiritual contemplation, and moved by visual, visible, tactile forms of communication.

3. I don't interpret the negative responses to the music of contemporary worship as a rejection of the use of a band, keyboard, guitar, piano, and worship team, nor do I interpret the negative attitude toward the organ and choir as a rejection of the more traditional elements of worship. Rather, I think what is being said is this: *We are tired of superficiality. What we want is an authentic experience of worship, an encounter with God that has life-changing results. What we don't want is phony, loud entertainment worship or dead ritualistic worship.*

4. All these styles of music and instruments will still have a place in worship as long as they serve the goal of achieving a genuine encounter with God characterized by depth and substance.

We are now in a new cultural situation. The demand for depth and substance speaks to us of the need to find those biblical and transcultural principles of worship that have endured through 2,000 years of history and to incarnate these principles into a new style demanded by the new cultural patterns of a post-modern world. If we can do that, then the new generation will have taken us beyond the contemporary worship of yesterday into the contemporary worship of tomorrow.

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To the Millennials even Willow Creek Church and Saddleback Community are viewed as traditional churches because they have been in existence 25 years. For this young generation, "contemporary worship" as we know it is old hat.

Sociologist Francis Fukuyama calls the period of history between 1960 and 1990 "The great disruption." The baby boomers (those born between 1945 and 1961) and Generation X (those born between 1961 and 1981) have had to deal with a shift of culture from modernity to post-modernity. The late '60s and '70s were characterized by a deep reaction against all forms of traditions—including religious traditions. Change was their rallying call!

The Millennials are the first generation coming out of the crisis of the cultural shift from modernity to post-modernity.

What is happening in the religion of teenagers is astounding. They have rejected the boomer's approach. Instead, they want to return to a more stable time, an era of calm and tradition. They want to go back to the tradition of a much earlier age and the traditions of very old times.

Current studies by leading sociologists are now suggesting that the road to the future runs through the past.

Robert Webber in a fascinating article in *Reformed Worship* (March 2, 2001), titled "How Will the Millennials Worship?" makes these bold conclusions:

So what can we expect from the Millennials as they lead the church and its worship into the future? Here are a few things to watch for:

The primary issue of the future is not the style of worship so much as its *authentic character*. It must be real, genuine, sincere. Millennials can smell "phony" a mile away. Therefore traditionalists must avoid "dead ritualism," and proponents of contemporary must avoid "entertainment" and "manipulation" worship.

- The future style of worship will draw from the catholic (early church), Reformation, evangelical, and contemporary traditions. Local churches must be eclectic.
- Future worship will move toward these style characteristics:
- More use of ritual and symbol
- More spaces for quiet and contemplation
- More frequent celebration of Communion
- High participation
- Convergence of musical styles
- More use of string and wind instruments
- Recovery of the Christian year as a spiritual discipline

The future of worship can be caught in the phrase "ancient worship with a contemporary flair." Millennials don't want 1950s worship. They want, as one said to me, "the old stuff." They want substance, depth, challenge, and encounter.

Let's not be afraid to listen to the Millennials and give them a chance to show us into the future.²⁵

A few questions need to be asked: Is the pendulum swing to the far right of Contemporary

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- (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), front fly leaf.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 253.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 260.
15. Dawn, p. 69.
16. Warren, p. 279.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 279.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 280.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 281.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 284.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 285.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 285.
23. www.ZondervanChurchSource.com, 2001.
24. Robert Webber, "Authentic Worship in a Changing World: What's Next?," *Worship Leader* (Lombard, Ill.: The Institute for Worship Studies), pp. 17-19.
25. Robert Webber, "How Will the Millennials Worship?," *Reformed Worship* (March 2001), p. 3.
26. Dawn, p. 97.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

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Worship correcting itself and re-centering? Is the reaction of the generations to each other supported by past history? In conclusion, is the ebb and flow of worship styles cyclical?

Are we entertaining ourselves and our congregations instead of worshipping God in truth and in spirit? Marva Dawn addresses this and other questions with these words:

This sense of God's greatness, fullness, and mystery is often missing in modern worship. Certainly the course of time gives place for all kinds of worship moods and attitudes, for God is an infinitely diverse God. But I am disturbed that the awesomeness of God is repeatedly swallowed up by coziness. Not only the Church but God himself is dumbed down, made too small, trivialized.²⁶

Worship and music used in worship is so important that we need to give God our best, not our leftovers; the very first fruits, not our spare time. We the creatures need to worship our Creator. Marva Dawn summarizes it in these words:

We need worship in which we can encounter God and learn that God is trustworthy, that God is large enough to care

for us in everything. We need worship that teaches us God's concern and welcome for all of our neighbors and invites us to participate in God's purposes on their behalf. We need worship deep enough to change us, strong enough to kill our self-absorption, awe-full enough to shatter the little boxes into which we try to fit God, and thorough enough to address the world's needs because God is already at work to meet them.²⁷

NOTES

1. Jeffrey H. Patton, *Bill Easum's The Complete Ministry Audit* (1999). Prepared specifically for the First United Methodist Church, Butler, Pa., Regional Consultant 21st-Century Strategies, p. 6.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.
3. William M. Easum and Thomas G. Brandy, *Growing Spiritual Redwoods* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1997), p. 27.
4. Patton, p. 8.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
6. Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), p. 149.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
8. Patton, p. 22.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
12. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*