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## Making a Way: Music in an African American Congregation

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MAKING A WAY: MUSIC IN AN AFRICAN AMERICAN CONGREGATION

A Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Designation  
University Honors with Distinction

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Signature Page

This Study by: Emily A. Miller-Todd

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### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the African American church that I attended for welcoming me into their family and for helping me and encouraging me. Worshiping with you in body, voice, and spirit has been unbelievable. I have loved attending church, being part of the gospel choir, and getting to know members of the congregation. I especially want to thank the gospel choir and those who volunteered to be interviewed. Without your help, my understanding of music in the church would not have been as deep. Thank you for sharing your music, your faith, and yourselves with me.

## Introduction

When I began brainstorming ideas for my research, I was initially drawn towards a general study of music's role in church settings. As a music major and religion minor, this topic appeared to be the most obvious way I could combine my interests and apply them to a research project. Broadly speaking, I was interested in describing the role of music in a worship setting and the meaning members of the congregation found in music. In addition, I wanted to develop a research project that allowed me a more thoroughly experiential understanding of music in a congregation through personal participation in some of the music making.

Since I have grown up in the church and have been exposed to various predominately white protestant churches, I did not feel motivated or energized about the idea of conducting research in settings that were almost too familiar to me. After contemplating how to make the topic truly of interest and value for me personally and for a research project, I redirected my attention to worship settings unfamiliar to me.

Building on this new idea, I focused my research on a comparison of the use of music in worship between two contrasting cultural settings. I thought the meaning and use of music in a Hispanic Catholic congregation and an African American congregation would be fascinating to research in light of each other. I received IRB approval for my thesis work initially for this idea. Not long after looking into two locations, I realized that the study would be much too broad to accomplish in a limited time period. I had the ability to attend only one service per week, and it became evident that it would be difficult to build relationships anywhere if I attended each individual location only every other week. Furthermore, I do not speak Spanish, which added another level of difficulty for studying the music in a Hispanic service.

Research on church music in the United States, and more specifically on African American church music, approaches the interpretation of music from a number of analytical perspectives, that include, but are not limited to theological, literary, historical, and sociological frameworks (e.g., Friedman, 2008; Ogasapian, 2007; Dargan, 2004; Routley, 1978). The majority of the research involves the use of library sources and broad based surveys (e.g., Peretti, 2009; Friedman, 2008; Ogasapian, 2007; Dixon, 1976). Little research has been done about how music functions within a particular contemporary African American congregation. In addition, researchers rarely utilize ethnographic methods in collecting data. A significant contribution to the existing literature would be a study that describes and interprets how music relates both to individuals within a particular congregation, and to the congregation as a whole.

It is important to acknowledge that every congregation is unique as well as every individual within a congregation. Therefore, studying the use of music within one specific congregation allows a detailed and personal focus that is not possible in broad studies that cover a large range of information collected from observations or surveys of various places. Ethnographic methods allow the researcher to recognize and identify personal ways music reaches a congregation as well as the individuals within the congregation. An ethnographic study on a more personalized and specific level provides a better understanding of a larger cultural community by going beyond generalizations and depicting personal realities.

I approached my research wanting to better understand the role of music in an African American congregation, but I did not have a set of research questions or a specific hypothesis for my research because grounded theory is used to inform my analysis (which is further explained in my methodology section). My goal through interviews, notes, and tape recordings was to

develop a body of data that included a broad range of information related to music in the church. From that body of data, themes that naturally emerged were identified and analyzed.

In sum, the objective of my research is to identify and explain the role music plays in an African American congregation in small-city Iowa. As a participant observer, I wanted to explore the experiential component of music and explore the broader socio-cultural dynamics of music in a specific congregation. My desire is that my analysis provides greater understanding and appreciation of cultural dynamics embraced through music in the church.

### **Review of Literature**

The history, dynamics, and practices of African American churches have been widely researched. Focusing on music, much research has also been done on spiritual and church music. Even more specifically, research has examined the histories and progressions of African American musical genres and particularly African American church music. However, little research has been done about the role of music within a contemporary African American church. Significant room exists for understanding the influence of music in the lives of individuals and an individual congregation with its own history and hardships.

### **The African American Church/Spiritual Experience**

First, it is important to acknowledge that studies have been done that look at the entirety of the African American church experience, not particularly focusing on the role of music. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) discussed various denominations, social teachings, and practices of the Black Church. Devoting a chapter specifically to music, however, I will further address their book when discussing literature on African American music. Another work of literature looked at the Black Church after the Civil Rights era. Emphasis was on the history, theological background, and social teachings/concerns of the Black Church (Pinn, 2002). An additional

source covered the progression of African American Protestantism from Africa to the American South and the British Caribbean to 1830 (Frey and Wood, 1998). A comment about individual and community dynamics embraced through voice, the role of the shout in slave worship meetings was addressed. It was described as an expression of individual conversion and spiritual experience at the same time that it created closer social relationships.

It is notable that ethnographic research in African American churches is a fairly recent development. Williams (1984), the first to conduct ethnographic research of its kind, studied the social and cultural dynamics in a black Pentecostal church in Pittsburg, finding at its core an example of human vitality. Another, Nelson (2005) conducted a qualitative, ethnographic study in an African American church in Charleston, South Carolina. However, his research did not focus on music and his location in the South contrasts my research in the Midwest, specifically Iowa, where cultural dynamics are different.

### **Broad Approach to Spiritual or Church Music**

The spiritual nature of music has been addressed in many works of literature (Friedman, 2008). In addition to poetic descriptions of sacred music, authors included in Friedman's anthology addressed the importance of sacred music as an accessory within worship and a means by which humans express their own nature. Less poetic in nature, Routley (1978) addressed the history, function, and approach of music in the church, stating that the ability church music has to create conflicts demonstrates the importance of music to the congregation. Routley controversially discussed his opinion that the Christian embrace of popular music in worship, when the subject matter diverts from the true message of the Christian Gospel in favor of what is emotionally satisfying, can have a negative effect. Examining church disputes over music in worship, he identified that the root of these disputes is in conflicting perspectives of doctrine,



faith, and Christian practice. He argued that music in the church should align with God's movement towards the world. His book was the result of library research and life experiences with church music. Furthermore, Ogasapian (2007) provided a compact synthesis and description of church music in America from 1620 through 2000 as a result of extensive library research. This synthesis provided general history and stylistic comments about actual church music, as opposed to sacred secular music, and its composers/compiler. None of the research addressed thus far involves ethnographic research.

### **African American Music**

The literature on African American music addressed music history, formation, function, and genre. Katz (1969) compiled previously unpublished writings on the history of early African American music. The book concluded that although slave music has travelled through generations and various musical periods, the core dialects and features of early African American music have withstood transformations through the development of rag-time, syncopation, jazz, and blues. The book used the example of modern stomp practices, which are made up in a manner similar to the way spirituals were created. In addition, the rhythms associated with stomp related to the drumming rhythms of Africa.

#### **History, Formation, and Function.**

Several studies have examined the broad influence and history of African American music—carrying African Americans through slavery, the emancipation, segregation, and struggles to break free of middle class limits (Peretti, 2009). These studies, like Peretti's, tended to be based upon library research. Peretti addressed the history of African American music and found that African American music constantly shows the interaction with various cultures while

also possessing continuity. This continuity traces back to roots in African, where voices first began rising, celebrating, supporting, and questioning along a path towards equality.

Other research devoted more attention to the history and function of the Black Church as a whole, acknowledging music's role on a smaller scale. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) addressed the entirety of the Black Church—discussing denominations, history, politics, social issues (including economics, women, and youth), music, and 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges associated with the Black Church. They asserted that it was important to study and acknowledge the influence and relevancy of African American religion in order to better understand the people. As a result, their study covered a broad range of information pertaining to African American religion. One chapter addressed a broad range of historically African American church music genres and information regarding dynamics around music in the church. They concluded that gospel music is a major recruiter of young people, music in the Black Church tends to cause tension through issues over tradition and new musical style, and there is a tendency to find appropriate ways to incorporate generally secular styles (jazz and blues) or modern dance in service. Their study utilized extensive library and ethnographic methodologies (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990).

### **Genre Studies.**

Other literature sources demonstrated genre specific studies that provided information about various African American sacred genres including spirituals, gospel music, folk song, and hymn-lining (Caldwell, 2003; Darden, 2004; Dargan, 2006; Dixon, 1976; Epstein, 1977). Darden conducted a study of gospel music, particularly interested in the stories of people associated with gospel music (Darden, 2004). He identified that from its beginning, gospel music has caused arguments about traditional, contemporary, church, and secular music in worship services. He concluded that some people, such as Shirley Caesar, argue that the lyrics of gospel music make it

gospel and bring deliverance. Others, such as Donnie McClurkin, emphasize that gospel music was never intended for the church alone. In speaking to the secular world, gospel music is able to encourage conversion. Furthermore, those such as Albertina Walker, stand by the timelessness of traditional music and its strong tie to the Word (Darden, 2004).

Dargan conducted a genre study on Dr. Watts hymn-lining (Dargan, 2006). Hymn-lining is a particular unaccompanied method of singing hymns that is done in a call and response manner that used to be common especially in country churches without hymnals. Each line of the hymn “lined out” before the congregation sang was frequently done in a chanted, rhythmic fashion. The study displayed how lining-out integrated speech and song, influencing future genres. In addition, Dargan stated that its continued presence in some African American communities despite its construction and sound does not make rational sense when it was created for a period when hymnals were not readily available and literacy was not as high. Thus, the book concluded that the tradition, more widespread among African Americans, demonstrated the continued relevance of oral tradition in the African American culture. In addition, Dargan found that African Americans altered speech and musical features of African cultures to fit oral traditions developed in North America. It was established that further studies needed to be done on African American regional styles, their relationship with linguistics, and possible connections between spoken soul and African language tonalities (Dargan, 2006).

Another genre study focused on Negro spirituals (Dixon, 1976). After analyzing individual spirituals, Dixon revealed their deep connection to the Bible and their ability to lighten burdens. Songs (spirituals) emerged out of Biblical texts that were fit to historical African American situations. In addition, Dixon identified that spirituals are as vibrant today as they were when first created. Furthermore, Caldwell (2003) identifies spirituals as “the fundamental

communal music of Black Americans” within his title. These two studies reveal the ability of spirituals to lighten burdens, working in individual lives, as well as their ability to facilitate community.

### **Summary**

I have identified research that addresses the Black Church experience, spiritual and church music in a broad sense, the history and role of African American spiritual music through time, and specific African American musical genres. While existing literature provides information about the history of African American music and the history and meaning behind specific genres, my research will provide insight into the role of music at a personal level. Based on the literature review, I expect to discover that individuals will embrace their voice and community support will be felt through music in the African American church. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) indicated the importance of the deep community and social bonding created through involvement in music. This involvement may be through voice and through body (dance). I anticipate that I will find personal examples of individual expression through music as well as specific congregational examples of community bonding through music. I also expect to hear music from various genres.

My objective is to analyze, through ethnographic observations and interviews, how music influences spirituality and community within a particular African American congregation in a small Iowa city. This research will be able to provide examples of the influence of music within a specific African American congregation, the membership of which experiences similar social environments, hardships, changes, and blessings of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Methodology**

My research is based on ethnographic methodology and used grounded theory techniques for recording, organizing, and analyzing observations. The systematic approach associated with grounded theory embraces the unique quality of all human experience while acknowledging that, while unique, human experiences do possess patterns that can be identified and analyzed (Bernard, 2011). In carrying out ethnographic research using grounded theory, observations and thoughts are continually recorded, themes are pulled that emerge within the notes and connections that have emerged within the themes are presented and validated. This method prevents an agenda from being placed on the research, allowing themes to naturally emerge and present themselves within the data. Therefore, my research included thorough and consistent notes from which I drew my themes (Bernard, 2011).

After receiving IRB approval to begin research, I asked the pastor of an African American church if I might attend his church during the academic year for my research. My primary method for data collection included semi-structured, open-ended interviews, participant observation (of church services and choir practices), and audio recordings. I interviewed six individuals, including some musicians in the church. Consent to interview and audio record interviews was confirmed verbally.

My recorded observations started on Sunday, September 25, 2011, and continued until Sunday, February 5, 2012. My recorded observations include sixteen church services, eleven choir rehearsals, and three choir engagements. After each church service, choir rehearsal or choir engagement during this time period I typed notes on the event. Examples of observations recorded in these notes included subject matter within the music, use of music within the rehearsal or service, musical techniques within the songs, choir or congregational engagement

during various songs, associated scripture readings, and additional commentary that related to worship music from congregation members or worship leaders. Participant observations yielded 25 pages of notes on service content including single spaced commentary paragraphs in addition to some typed lyrics. I also audio recorded music within seven church services in order to examine specific song lyrics. Transcriptions from these recordings yielded an additional 20 pages of primarily single spaced lyrics in column formatting.

In addition to participant observations, I conducted interviews with six women in the church. One woman was a senior citizen, three were middle aged, and two were young adults. The two young adults were members of the gospel choir, while one of the middle aged women was a member of another choir in the church that tended to sing more traditional songs. I began interviewing on October 16, 2011, and completed interviews on February 21, 2012. Interview participants were recruited through various methods. After introducing myself and my research project to the church, several members vocalized an interest in talking with me about their experiences with music or offered their contact information. A couple of my interviewees came from these church members who initially showed interest in participation. An additional interviewee was randomly chosen from a list of suggested contacts I received from the second woman I interviewed. The remainder of my interview participants contacted me as a result of a blurb I placed in the church bulletin as suggested to me by a couple of the women I interviewed. Individual interview times and locations were scheduled with those interested prior to the interview. Before each interview, the church woman was informed of my research project and asked if she would be willing to participate in a confidential interview. I received verbal consent to tape record and to confidentially use the information gained in my thesis. I asked five to nine semi-structured questions pertaining to personal preferences, perspectives, reactions, and

relationship to worship music (see Appendix A). It tended to take a half an hour for the interviewee to answer all of the questions. Following each interview, transcriptions of the audio recordings were completed. I have 22 pages of interview transcriptions with responses single spaced with double spacing before and after paragraphs.

When I met with the pastor before attending church, he suggested I introduce myself and my thesis topic to the congregation. Therefore, on my first Sunday attending the church, I introduced myself and my thesis topic during a time when visitors are invited to stand and introduce themselves to the congregation. As a result, I was invited by a gospel choir member to attend rehearsal. When I arrived at the church to observe my first rehearsal, I explained to the choir director that I was working on my thesis and asked for his permission to observe rehearsal. After observing three rehearsals, I was asked if I would like to join the choir and all other rehearsals were attended as a participant in the choir. Participation in the choir involved singing one Sunday a month during Sunday morning worship service and singing in outside choir engagements at other churches.

Beyond being a member of the gospel choir, I attended church regularly starting at the end of September and continuing through the end of the academic year. I attended several church meals, and one of the choir's engagements included rehearsals with a mass choir from multiple churches for a holiday choir engagement. In order to understand the role of music in the congregation, I found consistency important at church services and rehearsals in order to build relationships and observe common musical practices and themes. While continuing observations and interviews, a preliminary analysis of my field notes and interviews was completed mid January. Through this analysis, I identified themes that reoccur in my observations. I also identified a few tentative themes from interviews before completing the interview process—such

as music's ability to help individuals cope with difficulties and the strong sense of community encouraged through worship music. I completed my data collection and analysis of all written notes and transcriptions for themes on February 23, 2012.

Describing my research methods provides a solid framework for understanding how my themes developed and formed my analysis. In addition to understanding my methodology, however, it is important to understand some basic information about the church I attended. Explanations of the general service content, length of service, etiquette expectations, and age/sex demographics provide a stronger base of understanding on which to build in my analysis. Therefore, descriptions of the worship service and choir rehearsals I attended are provided to facilitate a deeper understanding of the context in which my themes emerged.

## **Results**

### **Service Description**

The church is located in Waterloo, Iowa, in a predominantly African American neighborhood that includes many other churches. This particular church has a fairly large sanctuary that could probably hold around 1600 people. There is a mural representing the creation on the front left wall. Just to its right, three ships are painted on water, behind which is the baptismal. The front of the church is painted blue with the theme of the church, Kingdom Building, painted in large letters across the wall. In front of this wall is the pulpit and on the left of the pulpit, the lectern. They both have blue cloth draped over them displaying crosses. A smaller gold cross is set in front of the pulpit. On the two side walls are large banners that display the three words by which the church identifies itself: worship, friendship, and fellowship. Although in its past Sunday worshippers filled the pews, currently people sit fairly spread out throughout the sanctuary and the pews are less than half full. Attendance is frequently mentioned



during services, but it is stressed that true discipleship is more important than numbers. While there are many men in leadership roles (reverends or deacons), the congregation is heavily female. Furthermore, the majority of the congregation is middle aged and up. There are some young adults, though, and there are many children. There are probably 30 or more children in the congregation on a given Sunday.

While all are welcome, there are certain social expectations within the church. It is expected that members dress nicely—jeans are generally frowned upon. The men, especially the deacons, wear suits. The mothers, older/prominent women in the church given this title of respect, tend to wear nice dress suits or dresses that may be accompanied by a formal Sunday hat. The other women in the church vary more in dress—from dress slacks to skirts to dresses. In addition, members of the church address each other formally—especially when addressing the older population of the church or those in positions of leadership. For instance, the mothers in the church are addressed with the title Mother accompanied by their last name. In addition, reverends are always addressed with their title and last name. Even young adults in the church are addressed frequently with the title Brother or Sister.

Each church service begins with a couple of songs led by the Praise Team usually consisting of one to four people. Some Sundays the Praise Team is made up of men, or deacons, in the church. Other Sundays, young women in the church—mostly from the gospel choir—are part of the Praise Team. The songs sung during this time vary. They may include traditional gospel songs, contemporary gospel songs, spirituals, or general contemporary Christian songs. Sometimes they are led in a call and response style, and frequently the leader of the Praise Team speaks or sings words of praise within the songs. The songs chosen during this time are simple and tend to focus attention on pure worship and praise. Between or after these opening songs,

scripture is read—many times coming from Psalms—a book of the Bible that is meant to be spoken song. After singing and reading scripture, the congregation is led in prayer and then is led in a responsive reading from scripture.

Next, a hymn of the month is sung by the congregation, led by the director of the choir singing that particular Sunday. Five choirs alternate Sundays during the month—the general adult choir, Gospel Choir, Men’s Choir, Children’s Choir, Mass Choir (a combination of the adult choirs for fifth Sundays). During the hymn, frequently the last refrain is repeated, and sometimes the organist is signaled to stop playing for the beginning of the repeated section and then signaled to play again for the ending. If using a hymnal, most congregation members return their hymnal to the back of the pew for the final chorus and repeat of the chorus. This frees hands and body for clapping and dancing.

After the hymn of the month, visitors are asked to stand and introduce themselves and are welcomed to the church. In welcoming the visitors, the reverend, who stands at the pulpit, states how the church identifies itself in terms of discipleship and the church’s central focus. Then, the congregation is given time to greet each other. During greeting time, a lively song is frequently sung by members of the Praise Team—usually the young women. Many times, the song chosen during this time is a song that specifically references how the church introduces itself to visitors.

After greeting time, the choir of the week sings a hymn of adoration that leads into prayer time where people are welcomed to pray from different stations in the church. Frequently music continues softly in the background after the choir’s piece, aiding a smooth transition into the prayer. The musical aspect of the prayer may take multiple forms. The reverend who is praying may sing to open the prayer, the organ usually continues to play soft chords or a soft hymn, or the choir may softly sing.

After the prayer, the offering takes place. Again, this time is frequently accompanied by the choir of the week. The offering plates are held at the front of the church and people are dismissed by pew to walk up the middle aisle to give their offering and back down the side aisles to return to their seat. The choir and congregation continue to sing until everyone is back in their pew, and then an offertory is sung with the congregation. One or two more choir pieces are frequently sung before the sermon. However, it needs to be noted that audience participation is not frowned upon when the choir is singing. Clapping, standing, dancing, singing, and verbal encouragement are commonplace. Music is a communal activity.

The beginning of the sermon often involves a transition from the choir pieces sung. The pastor will frequently re-emphasize the content of the song through spoken word. The praising that the congregation was doing through song is acknowledged verbally and further praise is given, naturally and gradually transitioning into a prayer before the sermon. The sermon goes into great depth and I would estimate that it lasts 45 minutes to an hour. Many in the congregation take notes; a page of the bulletin provides a general outline on which to take notes. It is not uncommon for the pastor to sing during part of the sermon, whether to open the sermon, within the message or to close the sermon. There have also been times when the pastor has encouraged the choir to sing again in the middle of the sermon. Furthermore, the organ or keyboard will sometimes begin playing softly in the background when appropriate or play more fully behind the pastor when he raises his voice or shouts to emphasize a point.

At the end of the service, there is an optional time for people to come to the front of the church and share testimonies. Another song is frequently sung as the option to come forward is opened and is continued if no one comes forward or is sometimes continued after testimonies are

shared. The pastor frequently has final remarks and then a benediction is sung. Services last anywhere between two and three hours.

During services, time is not a focus. If the congregation becomes actively engaged in a song during service, it does not simply end at a predetermined place in the song. The length is dictated by the engagement of the congregation. Therefore, it is not unusual for various sections of a song to be repeated or looped until the congregation feels ready to end the song. Even after it seems as though a song has ended, if the congregation continues to audibly respond to the song in praise, a section of the song may be started again. In addition, the sermons preached are not scripted. Therefore, the pastor may continue a point for any length of time until he feels as though it has been given appropriate attention.

Services also involve interaction from the congregation throughout. During worship songs, it is common to have clapping, stomping, swaying or verbal affirmations of the lyrics with something such as, “Yes! Thank you, God!” When the choir sings, members of the congregation also participate in singing, dancing, clapping, etc. if desired. Encouragement from the congregation may be given to the choir with a “Sing it, choir!” However, community engagement continues during the service into the prayers and sermon as well. Common phrases shouted are phrases similar to “Amen!” “Preach it!” or “Alright.” If the pastor is not getting much feedback from the congregation, he will even comment on it saying something like “Can I get an Amen” or commenting on how he is getting himself into trouble with the congregation.

### **Choir Rehearsal Description**

The Gospel Choir is a choir made up of young adults (roughly 18 to 45) in the church who focus on learning more modern gospel music. The choir sings the second Sunday of every month. In addition, the choir sings with the Mass Choir quarterly for the fifth Sunday of the

month and sings in scheduled choir engagements for additional programs in the church or other churches in the community. The choir is largely made up of women, but there is one male in the tenor section and the director is male. There are roughly 19 members of the choir, participation usually varying somewhere between 8 and 15, that make up a soprano, alto, and tenor section.

Gospel Choir rehearsal is opened with a time of business where announcements pertaining to the group take place. These announcements, depending on the week, may involve addressing concerns, providing details regarding upcoming choir engagements, acknowledging what is going well, reflecting on recent services, or discussing church business or activities beyond the choir itself. One of my first times visiting the choir, there was a lot of tension around issues regarding the bus ministry. Feeling the tension in the group, the choir director went to the organ and began playing quietly. While continuing to play, he opened the time up for choir members to share and release any concerns that they had around the issue. While no one verbally shared, the tension within the choir did seem to ease a little as the director played the organ for awhile.

During the opening business section of rehearsal, the attitude of the choir and rehearsal/service etiquette is also addressed at times. The director occasionally stressed that attitudes need to be positive and in a spirit of worship. Those chosen to direct or sing solos would be people with their spirit in a humble place of worship, not those interested in show. In addition, the importance of being engaged in all of the music of the service when part of the choir in front of the congregation was emphasized. When in front of the congregation for the choir's Sunday of the month, it was important to understand that leading worship extends beyond the choir's specific songs. The choir's presence is to help lead praise during the entire service, from the songs the Praise Team leads to the hymn of the month to the choir selections.

Furthermore, the business aspect of the rehearsal frequently included reflecting joyfully on previous services or engagements where the choir sang. The greatest joys were shared within the choir when they discussed dynamic examples of ministering that happened through the music they sang. The choir shared joyfully about the connection they felt with the music and the Spirit through each other as well as the involvement of the congregation in the songs. The choir director sometimes mentioned during times of reflection things that went really well musically and things that did not go as well. Once, after making many mistakes in a song during service, the choir director acknowledged that the congregation was still ministered to and enjoyed praise through the music. However, he mentioned that those who already know God will praise alongside the choir and feel the Spirit through the group even when there are mistakes, but that people who do not already know God may be distracted by the mistakes. Therefore, he stressed the importance of practice and focus in order to reach even those who do not know God. Conversely, when services and engagements went extremely well, the choir director pointed out that it is not ultimately about how good the choir sounded but about how effectively the choir ministered to people through music.

Whatever is addressed during the business time—from concerns, to joys, to dress expectations for the next engagement—the business time is ended with the choir director encouraging the choir to let go of the stress of the day and prepare to spend the rehearsal focused on praising God. A scripture reading is frequently done during this time, and then the choir is led in prayer. The prayer is typically for the rehearsal to be a time of praise and preparation for ministry and for the members of the choir.

Rehearsal itself involves learning or reviewing songs that will be sung at upcoming engagements or services. Unless running the hymn of the month before the choir's Sunday to

sing, rehearsals do not involve reading music. The director teaches the soprano, alto, and tenor parts by singing each section's parts for them and with them as necessary. Memorization does not need to take place because the process of learning the songs and memorization are simultaneous without the use of written music. Outside preparation includes listening to the choir's CDs of repertoire. Sometimes additional songs are sung during rehearsal purely to praise God, not to prepare for anything in particular.

During rehearsals, practice is focused on preparing to be able to minister to the congregation. For instance, diction is stressed because the words of the songs are a large part of what reaches people in a spiritual way. It is the words within the music that move people. In addition, watching the director is practiced in various parts of songs. Watching the director is important to ministering to the church, because the director pays attention to the involvement of the congregation in the song and directs the choir to loop (repeat), invert, modulate or speed up musical figures that are transferred between sections depending on the congregation's engagement. For instance, if the choir reaches the end of a song but worshippers are still clapping, shouting, crying, etc. in praise, the song does not merely end. The choir director continues the song by looping the end or returning to a previous section. Therefore, the choir needs to be prepared to watch the director and needs to have an idea of what he will ask them to do.

Rehearsal always closes in prayer. Frequently, the choir joins hands in a circle and members are welcomed to share prayer concerns with the group. Then, usually the director or the choir member elected chaplain for the group leads the choir in prayer and includes the prayer concerns shared. However, prayer has taken different forms at different times. One choir rehearsal, after the choir was encouraged to share spiritual hopes and goals for the year, the

director played the keyboard quietly while asking each person to pray silently. The director said a short prayer aloud during the time, but a large portion of the time was spent with each individual in silent prayer while the keyboard was played in the background. Even though there was an individual aspect of prayer at this rehearsal, the music played throughout and the short prayer aloud still made the prayer feel communal. Some rehearsals, each choir section has individually circled and held hands to close in prayer. Many times, I have noticed that when the group holds hands to pray that the group begins to sway together—even when there is not music playing there seems to be a rhythm/movement felt subtly within the group.

Having provided a basic background of knowledge of the church's services, dynamics, and general practices, themes can be presented and developed. In examining my notes and transcriptions, four themes emerged. 1) Music is thoroughly integrated in worship services. 2) Understanding of God and relationship with God are observed through song themes. This understanding/relationship is expressed in four prominent ways that I divided into sub-themes: God will make a way, trusting in God, giving to God (in praise, body, and spirit), and God's everlasting presence/care. 3) In addition, music revealed itself as a way that embraced and united community. 4) Finally, music has a meaningful role in personal lives—teaching about God, growing with individuals through life experiences, and providing a coping mechanism.

## **Themes**

### **I. Thorough Integration of Music in Worship.**

Worship in the African American church I attended for my research integrates music seamlessly throughout the service. While music helps set the tone of the service, present from the time the service begins, music is also present within the service as a response to the emotional dynamic of the congregation and the preacher. As one of the women I interviewed commented,



the message is more important than the music during worship, but the music helps prepare individuals for worship and prepare them for the message. Music helps the congregation engage in the service and allows the mind to let go of distractions. Music's integrated presence throughout can be observed through the Praise Team, Psalm readings, hymns, prayers, sermons, and additional components of the service (such as greeting time, offering, testimonies, and baptism).

Sunday morning worship is always opened with a couple of selections from the Praise Team. The songs chosen by the Praise Team are simple and tend to have themes that encourage focus on God and on praise and worship. It is common for the leader of the Praise Team each particular Sunday to speak messages to the congregation between songs or within songs. The verbal encouragement to join in worship frequently weaves itself into the flow of the music or the message of the songs. One Sunday, the Praise Team leader of the service said between opening songs, "Our next song is about coming into the presence of God. We come here only to be in His presence and worship Him in a spirit and truth. So I just ask you to help us." The organ was still playing in the background as this was said and the transition into the song was seamless. The song's lyrics were extraordinarily simple, the main verse repeating, "I feel the presence of the Lord, I feel the presence of the Lord, in the room, in the room" (see Appendix B for more information on referenced songs). This song is an example of an opening song that helped prepare the congregation for a time of worship that was focused on God.

Scripture is also read at the beginning of each service, many times coming from the book of Psalms. This is notable because the book of Psalms is a book of spoken song—the verses in Psalms are written with a musical purpose. Psalms actually translates "songs," and the Psalms tend to focus attention on joyfully and musically praising God. At one service, after singing

“How Great is Our God” and “We Worship You for Who You Are,” a section of Psalm 95 was read. It begins (in the King James Version), “O come, let us sing unto the Lord: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto Him with psalms. For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods. For He is our God; and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand.” The message in the songs and the Psalm flowed together, while the Psalm further encouraged joyful noise and “song” (psalm).

Every month, the church chooses one hymn to sing each Sunday of that month. During significant months of the church year, hymns are chosen to fit the season. For instance, for the Christmas season in December, “Angels We Have Heard on High” was the hymn of the month. Then, during Black History Month, February, “Lift Every Voice and Sing” was the hymn of the month. This hymn is sometimes called “The Negro National Anthem,” and it became a popular hymn in the African American community during the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Jim Crow laws and lynchings were rampant. The song rose to popularity again during the Civil Rights Movement, its lyrics providing a sense hope and perseverance. The hymn opens, “Lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring, ring with the harmonies of liberty.”

Not isolated to specific moments reserved for musical worship, music also integrates itself into times of prayer. While music is not a mandatory aspect of prayer, it has freedom to move within prayer time—setting the tone of the prayer at the beginning or responding to the emotional direction the prayer takes. Frequently, prayers are transitioned into after a worship song. The longer prayer, when the congregation is asked to stand or move to various prayer stations in the church, occurs after the choir sings the Hymn of Adoration. It is common for the reverend leading the prayer to open with words related to the song that the choir sang. For

example, after the Gospel Choir sang “We Worship You,” the opening of the prayer recognized that the congregation worships God and that the focus of worship is on Him, not on oneself or the congregation. Music helps shape the prayer, its instinctive presence, never mandatory or forced, is a way of communicating a feeling of reverence and emotional connection with God that accompanies the spoken appeal to God.

Sometimes the reverend leading the prayer will open with a hymn. Part of the hymn “Sweet Hour of Prayer” is one that is frequently used. The words may be sung or stated with the organ softly playing in the background, but regardless the congregation is reminded of the quiet, reverent nature of the hymn. Once, the pastor began by speaking part of “Sweet Hour of Prayer” as well as “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” The organ quietly played “Sweet Hour of Prayer” throughout the remainder of the prayer, continuing to be a hushed reminder. The choir has functioned similarly as well—opening the time of prayer with a quiet worship song and then continuing to sing as the spoken prayer unfolded above the voices of the choir. When the choir sings during prayer, the song is frequently simple. The simplicity prevents the song from being too distracting, allows for the song to easily rise or fall in volume to fit with the spoken prayer, and provides many possible stopping points. One song that the choir sang during the prayer repeated the word “alleluia” throughout.

Sermons may also have music incorporated in various ways. While it is natural for music to be present in the sermon, it is not necessarily a consistent component as it is during the prayer or other parts of the service. In multiple services, the pastor opened the sermon by singing part of a hymn and then saying a short prayer. The hymn usage here is similar to how it may be used with the main prayer. The hymn helps set the tone and focus. “I Need Thee Every Hour” and “Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross” were both used to open sermons. These hymns are about

relying on God, and their nature invites the congregation to remember times when they have needed God and He was there or remind them of their current need. As a result, the congregation is more open to hearing a message that will go into depth about what it means to be a Christian.

Music may also arise within a sermon as part of an illustration. When the pastor returned from a mission trip to Africa, he described in his sermon a situation when he was able to sing hymns to a paraplegic woman to comfort her and remind her of God's grace and remind her that she could trust God. She was anxious because she needed to catch a flight home in order to care for her sick dog, which generally cares for her—picking things up for her, rolling her over at night to prevent her from getting sores, etc. The pastor explained that he sang hymns such as “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” and “Amazing Grace” to her while they were rushing to the airport. She later expressed her appreciation for the comfort that came from the songs. She also acknowledged that missing her flight was a blessing because it allowed her to answer her phone and make important decisions for the dog's care that she would not have been able to on the flight. In describing this story, the pastor sang small sections from the songs that he mentioned singing to the woman. Hearing the music that the woman would have heard from his voice gave the story more life.

The pastor also brought music into his sermon in a manner that emphasizes a key point. One Sunday, he talked about finding fullness of joy in Christ. He said that finding fullness of joy was different than finding happiness—finding fullness of joy in Christ is learning to be content or satisfied in life through relationship with Christ. Within this point, the pastor said that with fullness of joy he could “get his praise on.” He said he could go down the street saying, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound. What a friend we have in Jesus.” He spoke these words that are from hymns, but added that he could sing his way out of difficult times with fullness of

joy. Another Sunday, the pastor was preaching about the importance of Christians showing their proof of God's grace in the way they live out their lives. Towards the end of the sermon, to emphasize one way to show God's grace, he began to sing the song "I Smile" by Kirk Franklin that the gospel choir sung earlier in the service. With his encouragement, the choir even stood from their seats in the pews to sing part of the song again. Some of the lyrics are as follows:

I smile, even though I hurt see I smile,  
I know God is working so I smile,  
Even though I've been here for a while  
I smile, smile..  
It's so hard to look up when you've been down.  
Sure would hate to see you give up now.  
You look so much better when you smile, so smile.

Music may also be incorporated to close a sermon. While the organ or keyboard may be played in the background at any point of the sermon, the organist will often begin playing when the sermon is reaching a conclusion. The music prepares for the transition from the sermon to the time that the "doors of the church are opened" for individuals to come forward and share testimonies. A prayer frequently ends the sermon, and music in the background helps set a tone of reflection on the sermon lessons. In addition, the pastor led the congregation in singing a hymn at the close of a sermon at times. He led the congregation in singing "I Surrender All" at the end of a sermon about going the distance for Christ through submission, sacrifice, and salvation. The hymn musically and emotionally fit with the points the pastor had verbally been making throughout the sermon.

Not merely using music to open/close a sermon or emphasize a point, the pastor once gave an entire message on the sacrifice of praise at an afternoon service that took place at another church. Therefore, music was a key point discussed within the message. The pastor spoke about the nature of praise—that it has nothing to do with talent and everything to do with the Spirit. Therefore, it does not matter how well someone sings—one can hear talent and good notes and feel nothing—it matters if the singing is truly coming out of praise to God. Furthermore, the pastor talked about praise sometimes being sacrificial in a sense when we offer praise even when we are hurting. Praise should also be present in difficult times, because praise comes through connection with the Spirit. Continuing, the pastor emphasized that praise should not be compartmentalized and hidden in one's life. Although it should be done respectfully, one should enjoy praise not only at church but also at work, in the car, at home, etc. The pastor sang portions of various songs while explaining how he praises throughout his week, including the lyrics "Amazing Grace shall always be my song of praise." He acknowledged that praise comes naturally to the church—is in the people's bones—but that praise not focused above is empty.

In addition to prayers, sermons, and time specifically reserved for musical worship, music may be incorporated into the various components of the service, smoothing transitions, providing deeper meaning, and adding another way individuals may engage in each aspect of the service. During greeting time, it is common for several young women to sing a song in the background that includes the church's motto, stating, "We are the church of three ships—worship, friendship, and fellowship." During offering, any song may be sung, but sometimes the song has been about thanking Jesus for the blessings He has given. Before the offering, the church is frequently reminded to bless Jesus for the blessings they have individually been given. However, almost any worship song may be sung during the offering. At the end, an offertory is

sung and its lyrics are as follows: “All things come of thee, oh Lord. And of thine own have we given thee. Amen.”

Although communion and baptism do not occur every Sunday, they also may be accompanied by song with a related subject matter. The pastor started singing, with the church following, “Take Me to the Water” for a child’s baptism one Sunday. Furthermore, each Sunday, when the doors of the church are opened for people to come forward and share testimonies, the time is usually opened and closed in song. “I Will Trust in the Lord,” “The Sun is Gonna Shine” or “Lord, I am Available to You” are examples of songs that have been used during this time, but many various worship songs have been used. If nobody comes forward, the church frequently uses the time to continue singing. Other times, a song is begun by someone giving a testimony or by the pastor between testimonies. It is a time to praise God. The service is closed with a benediction that repeats the word “Amen.”

To summarize, music is thoroughly integrated throughout worship services. Each worship service opens with music led by the Praise Team. During this opening time with the Praise Team, a Psalm (spoken song from scripture) is frequently read. Prayers, while not always accompanied by music, tend to naturally flow out of preceding musical selections and many times incorporate music in the prayer itself. Furthermore, each Sunday one of the five choirs leads the church in the Hymn of the Month and presents the Hymn of Adoration as well as additional choir selections. Then, the sermon, similar to the prayer, may incorporate music through the pastor singing or encouraging the choir to sing. Finally, additional components of the service—such as greeting time, offering, baptisms, testimonies, and the benediction—naturally incorporate music. Relating to my first theme, Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) begin their chapter on music in the Black Church by emphasizing its importance even within sermons. The role of the pastor is

discussed, explaining that in many churches it is as important for the pastor to sing as it is for him to speak. This individual example supports music's thorough integration in worship. The degree to which music is integrated throughout worship services demonstrates how deeply music is ingrained in the congregation as an expression of worship.

## **II. Understanding of God and Relationship with God Observed through Song Themes.**

Much can be learned about a congregation's general perspective of God and relationship with God by observing common themes in worship songs chosen for the services. One way children and those new to Christianity learn about God is through the music at church. Therefore, when focusing on the lyrics of the songs, one is able to get an idea of what general message about God is being received. While the words spoken in the service are important as well, songs more frequently cycle through individual's minds throughout the week, reinforcing their messages. Therefore, they may reveal how people feel about God. In addition, common themes in worship songs reveal what aspects of God the congregation needs or wants to be reminded of most—whether it is God's mercy, grace, guidance, etc. In the church I attended for my observations, I noticed four recurring themes in worship songs. The songs reinforced that God will make a way for people in life, emphasized trusting in God, focused on giving to God in body and spirit, and reminded of God's everlasting love poured out through His presence, mercy and blessings. The four themes group into two ways of looking at reciprocal relationship with God. For instance, God making a way for His people mirrors His people trusting Him to make a way. The other grouping involves people giving to God—through praise, service, submission—while God provides everlasting love through His blessings, mercy, and presence.



### *A. God Will Make a Way.*

The theme that God will make a way was particularly powerful for the church, frequently receiving strong emotional responses throughout the congregation. The gospel choir sang multiple songs that asserted God makes a way for people. “Lord of the Breakthrough” was one simple song that the choir sang—largely repeating the lyrics “Lord of the breakthrough, You are the Lord of the breakthrough, We worship You.” “The Sun is Gonna Shine” was a song the gospel choir sang on multiple occasions, eliciting strong emotions each time. The first time I heard the song was from the congregation, and the choir continued to repeat the phrase at the climax of the song “the sun is gonna shine” continuously for awhile to allow the congregation to continue to cry out, stomp, clap, and embrace the lyrics of the song. The song addresses holding out through difficult times, but the overarching idea is that the sun will shine because of God—because God will make a way. Before a Christmas choir program, several members of the gospel choir indicated that they hoped “The Sun is Gonna Shine” would not be requested because they were tired of singing it. Clearly, the message was a powerful message for people. The song did appear on the New Year’s Eve program.

The idea of God making a way through difficult times appeared in songs that the general adult choir sang as well as the children’s choir. During my observations, the general adult choir sang “God Will”—stating that God will make a way—as well as the hymn “The Lord Will Make a Way Somehow.” The hymn “The Lord Will Make a Way Somehow” was another choir piece that particularly engaged the church emotionally. After the song, the reverend continued to encourage the clapping and praise that resulted saying, “Has the Lord ever made a way for you!? Just say Amen! Amen! Hallelujah, bless the Lord. I just was so blessed by [Mother] saying, ‘Yes He did! Yes He did!’ Yes He did. He did make a way for me! I’m gonna try not to cry, but God

is just so good...just so good.” The theme surfaced more subtly through a song the children’s choir sang, “I’m Looking for a Miracle.” It included the lyrics, “Just believe and receive it, God will perform it today” with the vamp at the end “I expect a miracle every day, God will make a way out of no way.” The belief that God will make a way surfaced verbally in services as well, supporting the message that appeared frequently in songs. God helping one through depression was frequently associated with the message.

### ***B. Trusting in God.***

Another theme that appeared in worship songs, naturally fitting with the belief that God will make a way, was emphasis on trusting God. Songs encouraging and stating trust in God remind individuals to trust God to make a way and continue trusting and standing strong through difficult times. “I Trust You” is a strong example of a song the gospel choir sang about trusting God through difficult and lonely times. When the gospel choir rehearsed this song the week before singing for service, they discussed the need for the song to minister to the church. It was acknowledged that everyone was going through a difficult time and needed to feel trust in God through the music. The choir discussed desire to minister to themselves and specific individuals in the church who needed to know they could trust God because of various home situations. During the Sunday service, it was clear that the choir’s goal was met. People in the choir as well as the congregation were crying out during and after the song as the pastor led the church in a prayer that expanded on the idea of trusting God. The choir sang the song as follows:

#### **“I Trust You” by James Fortune**

Even though I can’t see  
and I can’t feel your touch  
I will trust you Lord

how I love you so much  
though my nights may seem long  
and I feel so alone  
Lord my trust is in you  
I surrender to you

(bridge)

so many painful thoughts  
travel through my mind  
and I wonder how  
I will make it through this time (Sing choir!..comment from congregation)  
but I'll trust You (Yeah!) Lord it's not easy (Yeah!)  
sometimes the pain in my life makes you seem far away, but I'll trust you I need  
to know you're here  
through the tears and the pain through the heartache and rain I'll trust you  
(Amen! Hm!)

(verse 2)

everything that I see  
tells me not to believe  
but I'll trust you Lord  
you have never failed me  
my past still controls me

will this hurt ever leave?

I can only trust you

no one loves like you do

(bridge)

Through the tears and the pain, through the heartache and rain

Through the tears and the pain, through the heartache and rain

I'll trust you

I can, I will, I must trust you

I will make a way

I will trust you

God will make a way

(Sections of ending repeated multiple times)

I'll trust you

(Fortune, 2006)

Notice the end of the song included the phrase “God will make a way.” This represents the reciprocal nature of the two themes. While God’s role is to make a way, followers of God have the responsibility of trusting in God during times of pain and difficulty. However, applicable worship songs tend to focus more on one side of the relationship than the other for the body of the song. Emphasizing trust encourages perseverance and strength, a perspective that involves placing one’s fears and concerns in God’s hands. The church sang “I Will Trust in the

Lord” as the doors of the church were opened for individuals to come forward with testimonies. The lyrics simply stated, “I will trust in the Lord, I will trust in the Lord, I will trust in the Lord until I die (repeat). I’m gonna stay on the battle field...” with the basic pattern and idea continuing. The conviction to persevere in trusting God throughout life is conveyed through repetitively declaring the decision.

### ***C. Giving to God.***

The third theme I observed in worship songs involved giving completely to God—giving full praise, honor, and glory to God as well as giving fully in body and spirit. Many worship songs—especially those that opened the service—acknowledged the awesome nature of God or addressed worshipping God and focusing on Him in daily life. These songs generally do not have complex verses to remember because many of them continuously repeat similar ideas throughout. “I Got Jesus on my Mind” and “I Woke up this Morning” are examples of traditional African American worship songs that address giving God full attention. The format allows flexibility in choice of lyrics and number of repetitions/alterations, but below are the lyrics for the songs that were used at the church I attended.

#### **“I Woke up this Morning”**

I woke up this morning with my mind

(Hallelujah)

stayed on Jesus

Woke up this morning with my mind

stayed on Jesus

Woke up this morning with my mind

(Hallelujah)

stayed on Jesus

Hallelu

(Halle)

hallelu

(halle)

Hallelujah.

(Following verses)

It ain't no harm to keep your mind stayed on Jesus...

Walkin' and talkin' with my mind stayed on Jesus...

I woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Jesus....

It ain't no harm to keep your mind stayed on Jesus...

**“Jesus on my Mind”**

Oh when you see me prayin', I got Jesus on my mind

Oh when you see me prayin', I got Jesus on my mind

Oh when you see me prayin', I got Jesus on my mind

I've got Jesus, Jesus on my mind

(Following verses)

Oh when you see me talkin', I got Jesus on my mind...

Oh when you see me shoutin', I got Jesus on my mind...

Oh when you see me drivin', I got Jesus on my mind...

I've got Jesus, I got Jesus, I got Jesus, I got Jesus, I got Jesus, I got Jesus, I got  
Jesus, I got Jesus, Jesus on my mind

Besides focusing the mind on Jesus, many of the songs give completely to God by thanking Him, acknowledging His greatness or submitting to Him in service. "How Great is our God" is a popular contemporary Christian song that has been used to open the service, its lyrics inviting the congregation to "sing with me, how great is our God" and telling "He's the name above all names." Other songs repeat the name of Jesus, descriptive words, or praise words such as "Hallelujah" over and over, focusing on the majesty of God through the words and the music. One Sunday the opening song, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus," repeated "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus" four times and then repeated the same melody five times with "savior," "healing," "thank you," "love you," and then "Jesus" again. Another song that I sang with the gospel choir, "Holy is the Name of Jesus," repeats "holy, holy, holy is the name of Jesus, holy, holy, holy is His name" replacing "holy" in upward modulating repetitions of the verse with "righteous," "healing," and "power."

Furthermore, multiple songs were sung that focused on thanking Jesus throughout the song. The children's choir and basic adult choir both sang songs devoted to giving thanks during my observations. The children's choir sang "Thank You Lord" and the adult choir sang "I Thank You Jesus." Other songs emphasized giving to God in body and spirit. For instance, the Praise Team led the church in singing "I Give Myself Away," the doors of the church were opened with "I Surrender All" and "Lord, I Am Available to You," and the gospel choir sang "I Will Bless Thee, Oh Lord." All of these songs focus on giving to God in body and spirit, whether inwardly or outwardly in service.

*D. God's Everlasting Presence/Care.*

The complementary idea, God's everlasting love for us and presence with us, is the final theme I observed. This theme is evident in a couple of the old hymns that are pulled into services. "Blessed Assurance" was the hymn of the month in October, and it embraces the assurance that "Jesus is mine." One verse ends with "echoes of mercy, whispers of love" and another with "filled with His goodness, washed in His blood," acknowledging the gifts that God bestows. While the focus is more prominently on God's presence and love, the hymn does display the reciprocal side of the relationship when it speaks of "praising my savior all the day long" and "perfect submission, perfect delight," including in the last verse "I and my savior am happy and blessed." The last quote shows both sides of the relationship are blessed. "I Will Bless Thee, Oh Lord" was an example used for the third theme, while the hymn of the month in November "He's Blessing Me" represents the opposite side of the relationship for this final theme.

There were many other hymns and worship songs used in services that drew attention to God's love and presence. "What A Friend We Have in Jesus," used in conjunction with several sermons, reminds that when feeling lonely and abandoned, Jesus is always there. The hymn of the month in January, "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," emphasized God's unfailing presence and care yet again. With the gospel choir, I sang "His Mercy Endures Forever" and "The Blood Still Works," which send strong messages through the words "forever" and "still." Other songs that opened service, such as "I Feel the Presence of the Lord," focused directly on the presence of God. The hymn "Amazing Grace" was referenced frequently, acknowledging God's love in telling of the amazing power of God's grace. For instance, the pastor incorporated "He Looked Beyond My Faults" in many sermons, which references "Amazing Grace."



**“He Looked Beyond My Faults”**

Amazing grace will always be my song of praise

For it was grace that brought me liberty.

I cannot know just why He came to love me so;

He looked beyond my faults and saw my needs.

I shall forever lift mine eyes to Calvary

To view the cross where Jesus died for me.

How marvelous that grace that caught my falling soul;

He looked beyond my faults and saw my needs.

I shall forever lift mine eyes to Calvary

To view the cross where Jesus died for me.

How marvelous that grace that caught my falling soul;

He looked beyond my faults and saw my needs.

He looked beyond my faults and saw my needs.

To summarize my second theme, understanding of God and relationship with God can be observed through common song themes. In services, I observed four key sub-themes emerge within the lyrics of worship songs: God will make a way, trusting in God, giving to God, and God’s everlasting presence/care. Understanding of God evidenced through music is also demonstrated through Dixon’s (1976) book on Negro spirituals. Attention is devoted to

explaining the meaning, patterns, and scriptural references found in the lyrics of the old spirituals. Observing and understanding recurring ideas in worship songs provides an understanding of a congregation's relationship with God and conception of God.

### **III. Community Embraced and United through Music.**

In the church, music is a community experience. The congregation does not merely hear the same music, the congregation participates in the music and communicates through the music throughout worship. There are set expectations during musical worship—some individuals may join in visible or audible praise while others may sit and soak in the surrounding community in worship. The music is not framed with requirements, either. The song may continue past its “ending,” the accompaniment might stop for a verse or the only part of a song may be used depending on the circumstance in worship. The music communicates with the congregation and the congregation communicates through the music, embracing community with each other. The community that is found in music is evident through verbal encouragements, the participatory nature, the flexibility, and the spontaneity associated with music in worship at the church.

During musical worship, verbal encouragement given to soloists, featured choir sections, a choir in general, the pianist or the preacher create a dynamic of closer community connections within the music. When singing with the gospel choir, I commonly hear individuals from the congregation shout, “Sing it choir!” Similarly, if a soloist is singing, people in the choir and congregation will frequently shout out in encouragement. This encouragement not only boosts the spirit and confidence of the choir or person singing, but reminds everyone of the personal connections and relationships of the members of the church body. In a joint choir rehearsal that involved members from multiple churches before a New Year's Eve program, one of the choir directors pushed each choir section to shout in encouragement for the other sections when

featured and to joyfully shout praise at the beginning of some of the choir selections or at the end of some of the songs that would be drawn out due to congregation engagement in worship. While in rehearsal it seemed forced, during the program the communication of joy, praise, and encouragement felt natural in bonding the community and sharing joy with each other.

The participatory nature of music during worship beyond verbal encouragement also strengthens community bonds. Individuals may choose to participate however they personally prefer during musical worship. Whether it be songs the Praise Team leads, the hymn of the month, a song an individual (pastor, member giving a testimony, etc) begins or the choir, the congregation may sing, stand, clap, stomp, shout, cry out, raise their hands, or join in worship however they would like. Active participation is so natural for the congregation that a middle aged woman who had been in the church many years shared in an interview, “I was floored maybe 15-20 years ago talking about church service with some people at work and found out that the audience does not join in the music at the churches they were attending.” After asking the same woman why she believed music was an important part of worship, she responded:

Because at my church, it allows you to interact. And I believe worship and a relationship with God is interacting. And I sing along with the songs, you have your own personal feeling, your own personal relationship, your personal thought as to what that song and what God means to you. So it becomes not only a one-on-one but it also involves everyone in that together. It's a sharing time.

Expanding on the idea of interacting, the congregation notices when certain individuals find great meaning in particular songs. The community is in tune with each other. For instance, one Sunday a woman started shouting out with deep emotion from the opposite side of the church. She was a senior and had introduced herself when they asked visitors to stand,

explaining that she was visiting and felt as though she was out of prison. When the woman was crying out during the song, a woman sitting near me leaned over and explained that the elderly woman had been in a nursing home and was able to see her son as a deacon for the first time that morning. After the song, one of the reverends of the church commented that it was a blessing to hear the woman's cries during the song. It was clear how much it meant to the elderly woman to feel connected with the community during the choir piece and how attentive the community was to her situation and needs. Attentive to the community, I have also noticed that it does not necessarily matter how good a soloist sounds for the congregation to engage in the music and the song. While a man from the adult choir was singing a solo once, the woman sitting beside me told me that he had a health problem awhile back that left him with speech difficulties. The congregation was fully engaged in worship during his solo, encouraging him and shouting praise. In addition, a young woman I interviewed in the gospel choir revealed the community bonds that can be formed through testimonies associated with specific worship pieces.

[Pastor] loves "Never Woulda Made It"—He LOVES that song, but when I begin to listen to him and when he talks about his situation and how he's...going through what he's going through—trying to raise five kids and all that—I understand. I really know. And he really believes, he never coulda make it. I know I couldn't—without God. So that song is his personal testimony. He never coulda made it without God through those difficult times, times when he and our carnal mind could not figure out how to make it through. God comes and He just works through things and makes a way. And that to me—that is a powerful testimony...It allows us to worship, it allows us to share our testimony, our faith,

and our trust in God and then it allows people to be able to engage and participate and stand in agreement...with that song as well.

Music's flexible nature also allows for the community of the church to connect with each other as well as the music. For example, when the end of a choir piece is reached, the music does not necessarily stop. If the congregation is noticeably engaged with loud clapping, shouting, stomping, etc. the person directing the choir will frequently stretch the piece out. This may be by encouraging the choir to continue shouting praise while continuing to play the piano or organ or it may be done by repeating part of the song. If the director is trying to allow and encourage the church to take more time to release their emotions—their joy, pain, love, and appreciation for God—he will frequently loop the choir back through the climax of the song. Then, clapping and shouting usually follows to further taper out of the song. However, if a more soothing section is repeated, the congregation is given time to gradually release emotions that built through engagement in the song, but instead of increasing emotions again, a calming and soothing effect is communicated across the church. This may set the tone for a quiet beginning to a prayer.

Finally, when the pastor sings during sermons or when he re-engages the choir during a sermon, he emotionally draws the community together. Several of the women I interviewed, ranging from young adult to middle aged adult, spoke about the history of African Americans coming alongside each other and communicating with each other through music—two of them talking about it specifically when asked why they thought the pastor sings during his sermons sometimes. The ability for songs to unite those suffering on slave ships, the ability for music to communicate secret messages during slavery in the cotton fields, and the community strength and conviction declared through songs during the Civil Rights Movement were all points that arose in the interviews. Therefore, these women stressed that music is a culturally ingrained

method of communicating with one another through the Holy Spirit. A young adult, when asked why she thought the pastor sometimes begins to sing during sermons or re-engages the choir, responded:

I think he has the Spirit ministering to him, and through song we all are collectively...that's something we know. As Negro spirituals... singing of the slave ships and you know picking cotton, getting through time... and that's when we're all on one accord and we're able to sing this song by verse and feel the energy of 'Yeah, I get this. I understand this. Yeah, Pastor, I... yeah, do it.' That's when the Holy Ghost is involved and he wants us to join in it. That's one way to do it. If you collectively sing songs that we grew up with, that's a harmony.

In sum, my third theme is that community is embraced and united through music in worship. This is displayed through verbal encouragement given to choirs and soloists, the participatory aspect of music in worship, music's flexibility—never stagnant but responding to congregational responses, and incorporation of music in sermons. The idea of embracing community through music is evidenced in a broad manner through Frey and Wood's (1998) statement that African Americans, expressing independence and pride out of an environment of slavery, looked to ritual music and dance as a way of asserting their cultural independence as a black group. On a specific level, identification of congregational dynamics within music provides a deeper understanding of community bonds, communication, and awareness.

#### **IV. Individual Meaning in Music.**

While observations of music in worship obviously involves the way music is incorporated in the service, the content of the music, and the meaning music has for the dynamics of the congregation, it is also important to examine the role music plays in the lives of

individuals in the church. The variances and similarities found within individual preferences, opinions, and experiences with music can be applied to a broader understanding of the way music is able to work within a congregation. My interviews reveal music's role in teaching who God is, the ability individuals have to grow with worship songs, and the way music functions as a coping mechanism.

Although children may be taught about God through stories, Sunday School classes, and teachings from their parents, songs are also a prominent way that young people learn about God in the church. Two of the upper middle aged women I interviewed both indicated that hymns were their favorite, because they learned hymns while growing up. One of the women reminisced about memorizing hymns as part of Vacation Bible School, because her church did not have enough hymnals for everyone to read out of them. This memory with the hymns as a child gave them strong meaning for her. The other woman also explained that hymns were her favorite because of growing up with them. She explained that "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" has particular meaning for her now because of meaning the song was given when she was young. "[I] was 20ish when a choir director...took the time to explain what that song means. And it just gave me a totally new love and appreciation for the song." From a different generation, a young woman from the church explained during an interview that traditional gospel songs were her favorite because they were what she grew up on.

And those songs—traditional gospel—taught me who God was. You know I went to Sunday school and I would listen to the pastor and everything, but when you're young, you're just kinda halfway listening, you know. I would listen to the music or I would sing it...there would be this feeling that came over me that I could not describe...It was just so amazing and I knew it was nobody but God.

Initially having the ability to provide a foundation and point of reference for individuals, worship songs also have the ability to grow with individuals, possessing greater meaning and providing deeper understanding of God through life experiences. One woman that I interviewed talked about having times of grief and pain when she cried out during worship music, but she also spoke of times when she cried from a place of joy. She explained that as she had more experiences with God, she became more emotional during songs out of feeling the truth of the songs in her own past with God. For instance, the hymn “Standing on the Promises” had great meaning for her because she saw in her own life that when she trusts God and stands on His promises, a blessing does come out of even the darkest situations. In another interview, a young woman had lost her friend to cancer and a song they would sing, “Your Mercy,” gained meaning for her because of the association. She explained how in hearing the song, she would close her eyes and experiences with her friend would flash through her memory—memories up until the time of her friend’s death. The memory of the song also helped her cope with the loss.

The ability the song had to help the young woman brings me to music’s ability to help individuals cope in difficult times. Music has a history in the African American culture helping people cope. Slaves coped with harsh conditions and embraced their voice through music and songs were sung to help cope with brutal treatment during the marches and protests of the Civil Rights Movement. Music continues to be a prominent coping mechanism today, helping individuals cope with depression, grief, and difficult job situations.

The combined choir sang “Encourage Yourself” one Sunday and received a strong reaction from the congregation—two of the women I interviewed pulled the song into their answers. For one of the women, she started crying during the song because it reminded her of a difficult time when she had to encourage herself in Christ to get through. Her husband had left



her to care for two children alone, the youngest was special needs. In reference to the song, the other woman stated, “Depression is all around, sicknesses, and songs that speak of today and real life situations. But after all, overall, you have a friend in Jesus, you can encourage yourself, you can go to Him.” The same woman also talked about how “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” helps her come back to God when she is going through a period where she feels friendless, unhappy being single, and upset about what she does not have. Another woman talked about getting through sickness and job loss with the help of the contemporary gospel singer, Kirk Franklin. Finally, another woman stated as part of her interview:

I just want to say like you know I was thinking about your questions, and it got me to thinking that for African Americans, music is so crucial to our ability to cope with the difficulties that we face in society, deal with all the hardships and what not, and I started to think about during the Civil Rights Movement how they sang. I didn't really realize how much of an integral part music has been in helping us as a people and helping others too, but particularly...African Americans—how to help us with coping, stay strong and encouragement...and to be able to articulate the things that we struggle with through music.

To summarize my fourth and final theme, individuals in a congregation find deep meaning in music. Songs teach individuals who God is at a young age, grow with individuals, and are a tool for coping during difficult times. Music also functions as a reminder of God's help through previous times, which solidifies belief in God's presence and care. The meaning individuals find in music can be observed through Darden's (2004) study of gospel music. He explained that individuals placed the pain, humiliation, and hard work of slavery into new songs that became the first spirituals, out of which developed gospel music. Furthermore, since he

discussed recorded gospel singers that are popular among the religious while also reaching the secular world, he acknowledged how important spiritual music is in daily life. Many of the gospel singers he acknowledged sing of real, daily life in relation to faith—helping individuals carry through times of difficulty (Darden, 2004). Identifying congregational dynamics within music provides deeper understanding of community bonds, communication, and awareness.

### **Summary**

The four themes presented in my research show that greater understanding of a congregation is found in the presence of music in worship services, content prevalent in worship songs, communication dynamics associated with worship music, and individual meaning found in worship music. In the African American church I attended for my research, the presence of music throughout the service, flowing in and out of various components of the service, revealed music's deep level of involvement in the body of the church. The prevalent sub-themes in music chosen for worship depicted a perspective of God and provided an understanding of the messages about God needed within the community. Furthermore, congregational response to particular themes and songs communicated much about the needs and perspectives of the congregation.

Observations and experiences of communication that occurred within and around worship music demonstrated the strong community bonds formed through music and the importance of the bonds to the congregation. Individuals communicated testimonies through music, choirs sought to emotionally minister to the church through song, the pastor engaged the congregation through musical praise, support was verbally given to choirs or soloists during worship pieces, and individuals visibly and audibly expressed connection with music to the congregation through clapping, shouting, stomping, etc. Finally, individual examples of relationship with worship

music reveal the way music develops meaning in individual lives while teaching about God, grows with individuals through life experiences, and helps individuals cope with difficult circumstances. While congregational responses to songs during services demonstrate music's ability to work in personal lives, specific examples reveal how music affirms who God is and provides strength during times of grief, job loss, and personal difficulty.

### **Conclusion**

Studies have been conducted that cover a breadth of information associated with church music, the African American church, African American music, and African American church music. One can find books addressing the history and progression of music in various cultural worship settings in America. Furthermore, descriptions of the various musical genres present in African American churches and their histories are also easily found. However, little research has been conducted on the dynamics and relationships present through music in an individual congregation—especially a congregation in a small Iowa city surrounded by rural farming towns. The importance of music in the African American culture through times of slavery and through the Civil Rights Movement is still evidenced in the importance of music today. Music is a way that African Americans form community bonds. While expressing personal testimonies and emotions through music, individuals are also aware of the testimonies/emotions that others in the community express through music. However, the social dynamics and struggles of today differ from those during slavery and the Civil Rights Movement.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century, Midwestern, African American church I attended for my research revealed that today music can be used to help those going through depression, grief, and unstable job situations. Expressions of joy at the blessings and opportunities God has provided in the 21<sup>st</sup> century also come through in relation to songs of praise. Not only does music remind Christians

that they have company with Christ, surrounding voices serve as a reminder of fellowship with Christians experiencing similar life joys and struggles. Furthermore, drawing on a rich tradition of African American music, the church I observed incorporated a variety of genres into services. Spirituals, hymns, traditional gospel music, contemporary gospel music, and general contemporary Christian music were all incorporated. Therefore, each generation in the church was able to enjoy music they had history with from childhood, was exposed to music from various genres and time periods in African American history, and was introduced to new worship music of today. In small-city Iowa, music continues to serve as a strong method of communication and community bonding in the African American church, though life circumstances continue to change and develop from African American cultural beginnings.

**Appendix A:****Interview Questions:**

1. In worship services, have your most moving spiritual experiences with music been when listening to the choir sing, when listening to the pastor sing or when singing in the congregation? Would you be willing or able to explain or describe an experience?
2. Do you have a favorite choir or a favorite type of music during the service—why is it your favorite?
3. How does music during church on Sunday affect the rest of your day—your week?
4. If you do not connect strongly with the music at a particular service, how does it affect how you feel about the service as a whole?
5. Why do you think the pastor sometimes starts singing during his sermon or re-engages the choir?
6. What themes in worship songs are most meaningful to you and/or what specific songs are most meaningful to you?
7. Can you think of a time when you reacted particularly emotionally to music? Would you be willing to share?
8. Why do you personally think music is an important part of the worship service?
9. (This question was asked of the three individuals who participate in a choir.) How has participation in choir rehearsals and engagements affected you?

## Appendix B:

Further information is provided for all songs that were referenced. Within each genre category, songs are listed alphabetically and page locations are provided. I have done an approximate sorting; some songs may fit multiple categories.

### Contemporary Christian

“How Great is Our God” (pg. 22, 35)

- Chris Tomlin (released 2004); Album: Arriving

(<http://www.christomlin.com>)

### Gospel

“Encourage Yourself” (pg. 44)

-By Donald Lawrence

(<http://www.music-lyrics-gospel.com>)

“God Will” (pg. 29)

-Unknown

“He Looked Beyond My Faults” (“Amazing Grace shall always be my song of praise”) (pg. 26, 36- 37)

- Dottie Rambo; Album: Stand by the River (2003); Label: Word Distribution

(<http://www.allmusic.com>)

“His Mercy Endures Forever” (pg. 36)

-Richard Smallwood

(<http://www.elyrics.net>)

“Holy is the Name of Jesus” (“Holy is His Name”) (pg. 35)

-Kirbyjon Caldwell; Album: Welcome to the Village (Sept. 2002)

(<http://www.kovideo.net/windsor-village-choir-albums-57195.html>)

“I Feel the Presence of the Lord” (pg. 21, 36)

- Youthful Praise

(<http://www.gospellyricspraise.com>)

“I Give Myself Away” (pg. 35)

-William McDowell

(<http://www.allgospellyrics.com>)

“I’m Looking for a Miracle” (pg. 30)

-The Clark Sisters

(<http://www.lyricstime.com>)

“I Smile” (pg. 25)

- Kirk Franklin; Album: Hello Fear (2011)

(<http://www.cduniverse.com>)

“I Thank You Jesus” (pg. 35)

-Kenneth Morris

(<http://www.gospellyricspraise.com>)

“I Trust You” (pg. 30)

-James Fortune

(<http://www.metrolyrics.com>)

“I Will Bless Thee, Oh Lord” (pg. 35-36)

- Joe Pace

(<http://www.lyriczz.com>)

“I Will Trust in the Lord” (pg. 27, 32-33)

-By Rev. James Moore

(<http://www.allgospellyrics.com>)

“Jesus, Jesus, Jesus” (pg. 35)

- Rev. Timothy Wright

(<http://www.music-lyrics-gospel.com>)

“Lord, I am Available to You” (pg. 27, 35)

-Rev. Milton Brunson

(<http://www.lyricstime.com>)

“Lord of the Breakthrough” (pg. 29)

-Israel and New Breed

(<http://www.music-lyrics-gospel.com>)

“Thank You Lord” (pg. 35)

-Mississippi Mass Choir

(<http://www.seeklyrics.com>)

“The Blood Still Works” (pg. 36)

-By Malcolm Williams

(<http://www.allgospellyrics.com>)



“The Sun is Gonna Shine” (pg. 27, 29)

-By New Direction

(<http://www.allgospellyrics.com>)

“We Worship You” (pg. 23)

- Living Faith Cathedral

(<http://www.gospellyricspraise.com>)

“We Worship You for who You Are” (pg. 22)

- Israel and New Breed

(<http://www.gospellyricspraise.com>)

“Your Mercy” (pg. 44)

-Blessed

(<http://www.metrolyrics.com>)

## **Hymns**

“Alleluia” (pg. 23)

-Unknown

(<http://www.hymnlyrics.org>)

“Amazing Grace” (pg. 24, 26, 36, 37)

- John Newton (1779)

(<http://www.hymnary.org>)

“Angels We Have Heard on High” (pg. 22)

-Traditional French Carol

(<http://www.hymnary.org>)

“Blessed Assurance” (pg. 36)

- Fanny J. Crosby

(<http://www.hymnary.org>)

“He’s Blessing Me” (pg. 36)

-Unknown

“I Need Thee Every Hour” (pg. 23)

- Annie S. Hawks (1872); Author of Refrain: Robert Lowry (1872)

(<http://www.hymnary.org>)

“I Surrender All” (pg. 25, 35)

- Judson W. Van De Venter (1896)

(<http://www.hymnary.org>)

“Jesus Keep me Near the Cross” (pg. 24)

- Fanny Crosby (1869)

(<http://www.hymnary.org>)

“Leaning on the Everlasting Arms” (pg. 36)

- E. A. Hoffman (1887)

(<http://www.hymnary.org>)

“Lift Every Voice and Sing” (pg. 22)

-James Weldon Johnson (1921); also called “The Negro National Anthem”

(<http://www.hymnary.org>)

“Standing on the Promises” (pg. 44)

- Russell Kelso Carter (1886)

(<http://www.hymnary.org>)

“Sweet Hour of Prayer” (pg. 23)

-W. W. Walford (1845)

(<http://www.hymnary.org>)

“The Lord Will Make a Way Somehow” (pg. 29)

- Thomas Dorsey

(<http://www.lyricsday.com>)

“What a Friend We Have in Jesus” (pg. 23, 24, 36, 43, 45)

-Joseph Medlicott Scriven (1855)

(<http://www.hymnary.org>)

### **Offertory**

“All Things Come of Thee” (pg. 26-27)

-Unknown

(<http://www.hymnsite.com>)

### **Other**

“We are the Church of Three Ships” (pg. 26)

-Unknown, Greeting song

### **Soul**

“Take Me to the Water” (pg. 27)

-Nina Simone

(<http://www.lyricsdepot.com>)

**Spiritual**

“Amen” (pg. 27)

-African American Spiritual

(<http://www.hymnsite.com>)

**Traditional African American Worship Song**

“I Got Jesus on my Mind” (pg. 33-34)

-Unknown

“I Woke up this Morning” (pg. 33-34)

-Unknown

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