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Editorial

Bearing Witness from Pentecost to the Eschaton: Introduction to "Multilingualism in Religious Musical Practice"

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Through the Holy Spirit's orchestration at Pentecost, the Church's first public voice was multilingual praise. As the Spirit-filled disciples descended from the Upper Room into the streets of Jerusalem, they praised God in a multitude of languages from around the world (Acts 2:4–11). The work of the Spirit was linguistically manifested in these Galilean disciples, enabling them to "declare the mighty deeds of God" in languages and dialects of those gathered "from every nation under heaven" (v. 5).[1] Shocked and surprised by this cacophony of voices, many asked, "And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born?" (v. 8). Biblical scholar F. F. Bruce characterizes this event as "nothing less than the reversal of the curse of Babel," (Bruce 1988, p. 59) yet instead of this multilingual community being reunited by one distinct language, their multilingual and multicultural particulates were preserved. Ecclesiologically, unity is not found in one language, but in one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, and one Baptism.[2] Theologian Amos Yong defines this ecclesiology emerging from Acts as "unity in diversity," (Yong 2005, pp. 137–45, 172–73). highlighting, "The many find their wholeness in the one, and the one's effectiveness and beauty are to be found in the diversities of its members, including the sons and daughters, men and women, young and old (Acts 2:17–28) from around the world"(Yong 2005, pp. 173–74).

Over the past two thousand years, Christian movements have, in part, followed pathways of missionization and migration, in which churches and their worship adapted linguistically. Often, the liturgical languages of local Christian communities were influenced by political, ecclesiastical, cultural, and economic powers; yet missions historian Andrew Walls characterizes historic cultural shifts under his "indigenizing principle," which he describes as an "unvarying feature in Christian history" where Christians "desire to 'indigenize,' to live as a Christian and yet as a member of one's own society" (Walls 1996, p. 7). Broadly, Christianity's openness to adopting, adapting, contextualizing, and localizing has fueled a diversity of cultural forms and expressions of faith that include a multitude of languages. In particular, missiologist Lamin Sanneh sees the Christian adoption of local indigenous forms for God as an intentional approach in linguistic translation that "opened the way for indigenous innovation and motivation in the religious life" (Sanneh 2003, p. 10). In his view, "Translatability is the source of the success of Christianity across cultures. The religion is the willing adoption of any culture that would receive it, equally at home in all languages and cultures, and among all races and conditions of people."[3] Though intentional, unintentional, and at times nefarious forces have shaped Christians' postures toward culture and language, Walls and Sanneh observe a degree of continuity in Christianity's adaptability and openness toward translations and indigenization. These linguistic dynamics are salient in Christian worship, notably in congregational singing.

Though fueled by the work of the Spirit at Pentecost, multilingual worship requires resilience and intentional liturgical decisions of local congregations. Choosing to participate

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in singing in a new language without fully understanding its syntax and semantics can require a hospitable posture toward corporate worship that welcomes those with different linguistic needs, desires, and expectations. A similar posture of humility may be needed for first-language speakers, as participants from other linguistic groups who attempt to sing in a new or unfamiliar language may be prone to phonetic and phonological errors and to accent variation. A key aim of language translation is to establish dialogue and connection between distinct linguistic groups, which can be anchored in Christian hospitality and enable human flourishing. Yet beyond the horizontal dialogue between Christian worshippers from different cultural backgrounds, Christian worship is a vertical dialogue between God and worshipers. Within a dialogical view of worship, God speaks and reveals, and the people of God respond. Multilingualism in religious musical practices points to a belief in a God who self-reveals in a plurality of languages and who receives praise in all languages.

In contradiction to this view, ecclesiastical powers have often been closely tied to nationalist movements, whereby specific political agendas elevate certain languages and cultural expressions in worship while marginalizing others.[4] These assimilationist approaches to worship can be observed in contemporary evangelical church-planting literature. Missiologist Donald McGavran's homogeneous-unit principle of Church Growth undergirds much church planting among evangelical Christians globally. McGavran writes, "(People) like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers."[5] Unintentionally, when applied to corporate worship, this homogeneous-unit principle promotes accessible mono-cultural equivalents and worship practices within ethnically similar groups. Against these hierarchical cultural orders, Sandra Van Opstal, theologian of multicultural worship, describes worship as "an inclusive and diverse table that embodies reconciliation and points to the future celebration of God's people from every tribe, tongue, people, and language." (Van Opstal 2016, p. 16). In her view of worship, there is an invitation to recognize that within the practice of multicultural and multilingual worship, local churches enact an anticipatory liturgical response. These communities bear witness to the future coming of Christ, enthroned and surrounded by multicultural worshippers singing praise in a multitude of languages (Rev 7:9–12). As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr prophetically critiqued, "We must face the sad fact that at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning when we stand to sing 'In Christ there is no East or West,' we stand in the most segregated hour of America" (King 1968). Attempting to reverse these divisive liturgical inclinations, which, for evangelicals, are buttressed by McGavran's homogeneous unit principle, churches can engage in the work of reconciliation through local liturgies. Congregations enacting multilingual worship resonate with the unity of the Spirit at Pentecost and manifest a foretaste of the multilingual choir at the eschaton.

In a previous Special Issue, my co-editor, John MacInnis, along with several contributors, explored the dynamics of language translation and localization in religious music.[6] Throughout the process, we continued to notice multilingualism as a significant socio-liturgical dynamic in many Christian communities. Alongside a growth in theologically oriented books on leading multicultural churches, numerous studies of Christian communities in places such as the global metropolis of London, the cosmopolitan city of Edinburgh, and the strategically located migratory hub of Athens exhibit multilingualism and multiculturalism.[7] However, the challenges and possibilities of multilingualism are not particular to mega churches or cosmopolitan cities. The multilingual praise of Pentecost reverberates in churches across the globe, particularly in those that demonstrate Sanneh and Wall's principles of translatability and indigenization. This congregational engagement with multilingualism in Christian worship music represents a deliberate ethical decision of hospitality that bears witness from Pentecost to the Eschaton.

In rural Northwest Iowa, where MacInnis and I both live, several churches exhibit approaches to multilingualism in corporate worship. In Sioux Center, María Magdelana Reformed Church focuses on "making a multi-generational, multi-ethnic, bilingual worship service." Their Sunday worship always features songs, prayers, and sermons in English and Spanish. With international students and faculty in attendance from neighboring universities, expressions of worship are also often vocalized in Korean, Kiswahili, Ukrainian, and Bajan Creole, among other languages. About a mile down the road, Christ Community Church self-defines as "One Church. Two Languages. Multiple Cultures."[8] This church offers two weekly linguistically diverse services, one in Spanish and one in English. Though worship is conducted in a particular language, they see themselves as one church led by a shared, multicultural staff. Another ten miles down the road in Orange City, the American Reformed Church was founded over a hundred years earlier than these two churches by Dutch Reformed immigrants, who desired to offer "English-language worship."[9] This novel approach contrasted with other Reformed churches in the area, which continued to worship in Dutch for decades.[10] Though these communities are not specifically featured in this study, their unique models of ministry and diverse engagement with multilingualism undergird this project for us as editors. Even in rural communities, the engagement with multilingualism in Christian worship is diverse and complex. Multilingualism in Christian worship is layered and influenced by countless factors, including culture, missional postures, ecclesiastical powers, liturgical expectations, personal and corporate stories of migration, and worship preferences.

This Special Issue explores the dynamics of multilingualism in Christian worship, a phenomenon with a historic and global reach, with particular connections to missionization and migration. Within such a complex and expansive phenomenon, the contributors focused on multilingualism in religious music, drawing from theological ethicist and ethnomusicologist Nathan Myrick's concept of "musical caring", in which congregational music demonstrates care ethics "when it enables human flourishing", "provides space for people to voice their needs. . .honestly", and "preserves people in and restores people to just relationships with each other" (Myrick 2021). In summation, this Special Issue explores the motivations for and approaches to multilingualism in sung congregational worship.

This project has been blessed by the many established and emerging scholars from a diversity of academic disciplines and Christian traditions. Their combined multi-voiced localities and scholarship give a taste reminiscent of the sounds of Pentecost and a foretaste of the future multilingual worship seen in John's vision of the throne of God.

In "I Thought It Was Beautiful; I Just Wish I Could Understand It": The Awkward Dance Of Multilingual Worship," Marcell Silva Steuernagel, in addition to exploring strategies for leading multilingual worship emerging from liturgical data from the United Methodist Course of Study School at Perkins School of Theology, offers a vital overview of the growing body of scholarship at the intersection of multilingualism and Christian worship.

Kathryn Minyoung Cooke, in "The Music of the Silent Exodus: Nunchi Bwa-ing and Christian Musicking in a Second-Generation Asian American Church," argues that at Glory Church, a second-generation Asian American church and multilingual setting, Asian American identity is not perceived sonically but rather through collective experience and physical performance.

In "Understanding 'Love' in the English Lyrics of the Original Songs by the Multilingual New Creation Church Singapore," H. Leng Toh and Daniel Thornton study New Creation Church Singapore, a multilingual congregation in which members speak numerous languages, such as Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil, at home. Yet the church's original congregational music is in English. Analyzing this unique context, these two scholars collab-

orate to discern the differences in the use of "love" in the lyrical theologies of contemporary Christian songs in Australian English and Singaporean English.

In "Cultural Expression and Liturgical Theology in the Worship Songs Sung by British-Born Chinese," James Yat-Man Tang and I analyze the musical repertoire of Birmingham Chinese Evangelical Church, revealing that although English songs from the West dominate the worship services, through a British-born Chinese reading, several lyrical themes notably resonate with aspects of Chinese culture.

Adán Alejándro Fernández, in "The Precedent for Vernacular and Multilingual Liturgies in the Catholic Church in Latin America", examines the emergence of folk music in Nicaraguan Masses that, despite some ecclesiastical disproval, continued to enrich devotional practice and theological discourse.

Drawing together biblical studies, poetics, and language analysis, Jordan Covarelli explores the Benedictus (Song of Zechariah) as a potential case of multicultural worship in his article, "Multicultural Worship in the Song of Zechariah and Contemporary Christian Worship."

In "Multilingual Complexities in the Origins and Development of the Harrist Movement and Its Worship Patterns in Ivory Coast," James R. Krabill constructs a historical narrative of the ministry of William Wade Harris, revealing a case of linguistic complexity fueled by Harris' encouragement of converts to compose hymns in their own local languages.

Adekunle Oyeniyi's article, "Multilingual Singing in Nigeria: Examining Roles, Meaning, and Function in Wazobia Gospel Music" analyzes Wazobia gospel music as a multilingual musical practice through which layered identities are negotiated within Nigerian Christian contexts.

Alberto Annarilli examines the impact of migrations from South America and Africa to Italy on Protestant hymnals of Baptist, Methodist, and Waldensian churches in "Multilingualism and Interculture in the Repertoire Proposed in Hymnals from 2000 to Today: A Study on Italian Protestant Churches." He examines these denominational models of migrant churches and analyzes the process of editing and translating hymns.

Gathering these scholars and helping see their work published has been an absolute joy and honor. Many of these articles and relational connections originated at academic conferences such as the Christian Congregational Music Conference and the Society for Christian Scholarship in Music annual meetings, for which we are grateful. Finally, the team of editors and staff at *Religions* deserves special thanks for their expertise and support during the creation of this project. We hope that this Special Issue will be a helpful resource for scholars and practitioners, expanding awareness and understanding of how multilingual worship music continues to reverberate in communities around the world and bears witness to the unity of the Spirit.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 All Scripture quotations are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*, © 1995, by The Lockman Foundation.

2 See Ephesians 4:4–6. In my view, the larger context of Act 2 also reveals these unifying factors.

3 (Sanneh 1990, p. 51). In particular, Sanneh saw the role of missionary as key in translation. He stated, "The translation role of missionaries cast them as unwitting allies of mother-tongue speakers and as reluctant opponents of colonial domination." (Sanneh 2009, pp. 94–95).

4 Winner traces the impact of "sin" on Christian worship practices, highlighting how Eucharistic, baptism, and prayer have been used to divide in damaging ways. See Winner (2018). Marti critiques much of the essentializing practices that depict multiracial worship music as "stereotyped" and "idealized," and discourages "attempting to create categories from a handful of different races/ethnicities", stating that, instead, one should pay "attention to interactional and organizational dynamics."" (Marti 2012, pp. 41, 50).

[5] (McGavran 1970, p. 198). To increase the number of unchurched, evangelical mega church pastor Rick Warren proposes a type of liturgical pragmatism focused on attractive forms of worship that resonate with a particular type of person, which he calls Saddleback Sam. Addressing the issue, he states, "Create a service that is intentionally designed for your members to bring their friends to. And make the service so attractive, appealing, and relevant to the unchurched that your members are eager to share it with the lost people they care about." This culturally oriented liturgical pragmatism prioritizes accessibility of a particular form of culture and a particular group of people, resulting in cultural divisions and cultural hegemony expressed in worship. (Warren 1995, p. 253).

[6] See https://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special_issues/Language_Practice (accessed on 17 December 2025).

[7] For recent ecclesiologically oriented texts, see Gray (2021); Anderson and Cabellon (2010); and Rah (2010). For studies focused on the dynamics of Global Christians in particular contexts, see Goodhew and Cooper (2019); Chow et al. (2024); Carlson (2021).

[8] Maria Magdalena RCA, *About Us*, Maria Magdalena RCA, https://mariamagdalenarca.org/about/ (accessed on 17 December 2025); Beacon, *A Multicultural Church in Sioux County*, Northwestern College, https://beacon.nwciowa.edu/a-multicultural-church-in-sioux-county/ (accessed on 17 December 2025); Christ Community Evangelical Free Church, *Home*, https://www.christccevfree.org/ (accessed on 17 December 2025).

[9] American Reformed Church of Orange City, "*About*," https://www.americanchurchoc.com/about (accessed 17 December 2025).

[10] For more on the linguistic shifts of Dutch Reformed congregations, see (Vos 2022, chap. 2).

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