CONGREGATIONAL SINGING AS SOCIAL IDENTITY SHAPING IN TORONTO CANTONESE WORSHIP SERVICES

by

Carson Ka Shing Mok, H. BBA, M. Div

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AUTHOR:	Carson Ka Shing Mok
SUPERVISOR(S):	Dr. Wendy J. Porter Dr. Francis G. H. Pang
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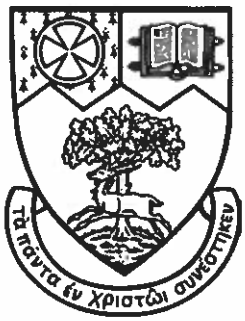

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Carson Ka Shing Mok

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Primary Supervisor: Wendy Porter — Digitally signed by Wendy Porter Date: 2023.06.06 16:49:14 -04'00'

Wendy J. Porter, PhD

Secondary Supervisor: Francis Pang — Digitally signed by Francis Pang Date: 2023.06.06 16:52:13 -04'00'

Francis G. H. Pang, PhD

External Examiner: Digitally signed by Roberta R. King Date: 2023.06.06 4:51 pm PST

Roberta R. King, PhD

Vice President Academic Designate: John Hilber — Digitally signed by John Hilber Date: 2023.06.06 15:42:36 -04'00'

John W. Hilber, PhD

Date: June 6, 2023

ABSTRACT

"Congregational Singing as Social Identity Shaping in Toronto Cantonese Worship Services"

Carson Ka Shing Mok
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, Ontario
Doctor of Practical Theology, 2023

Congregational singing is widely acknowledged as a doxology to God. Yet, opinions differ on how congregational singing influences the worshippers' lives. Some believe that the group singing prepares the heart for the sermon, while others believe it has formational implications. This project explores the formative qualities in congregational singing, specifically emphasizing how such group activity informs the worshipper's identity with God and how the worshipper relates to others through God. Biblical identities are utilized as the theological perspective to examine the identity messages expressed in congregational singing. The idea of identity hierarchy in social psychology, which includes social association and identity renegotiation, is used as the theoretical framework.

This research strives to conduct critical inquiry and reflection on the theological, theoretical, and practical orientation of congregational singing in Greater Toronto Area Cantonese worship services. As such, a literature review concerning the theology, theory, and practice of congregational singing is discussed, from which implications are drawn to

the research design process. Participant observation, online questionnaire, and qualitative interview methods are used to help extract and analyze how the social identity shaping process occurs in congregational singing within the research context.

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CHAPTER 1: UNDERSTANDING CONGREGATIONAL SINGING IN TORONTO CANTONESE WORSHIP SERVICES

Christians generally agree that congregational singing serves as praise and adoration to the Triune God, giving him all the glory and honour for his identity and deeds. In contrast, there is comparatively much less attention and consensus in the ecclesial domain regarding how congregational singing shapes an individual's self-concept, social self, and social commitment. Even church leaders who acknowledge its positive influence on the worshippers have difficulty articulating its formational implications clearly and concisely. I believe part of the challenge is that practitioners need to understand the complex multidisciplinary nature of congregational singing—weaving together Christian theology and tradition, sociology, psychology, musicology, and cultural study. Thus, this research explores how congregational singing in Sunday worship services (i.e., the practice) communicates biblical identities (i.e., theology) and advocates social identity formation within a worshipper's life. Identity hierarchy and renegotiation are theoretical lenses to describe how a worshipper identifies one's relationship and association with God and others. Related socio-cultural and musicological considerations will also be discussed in understanding how Christian identity correlates to a worshipper's singing experience.

This opening chapter aims to fulfill a few purposes. This research is fundamentally rooted in the essence of practical theology and practice-led research. With this in mind, I will begin by discussing how my faith journey and ministry practice

contribute to this critical theological and practical inquiry. This inquiry strives to fill a knowledge gap that ministry practitioners will find necessary, inspiring, and forward-looking. I will also elaborate on the research direction and objectives, describe the elements of congregational singing under examination with respect to my research context, and elaborate on why practice-led research in practical theology is a suitable approach for this study. In addition, I will elaborate on the theology-theory-practice paradigm, followed by an explanation of my research methodology and process. This chapter concludes with a discussion of how the theology-theory-practice paradigm integrates into this research and a roadmap of how each subsequent chapter contributes to the overall research inquiry.

A Personal Reflection of the Meaning-making Process in Congregational Singing

This research topic is driven by years of my personal worship experience and active involvement in pastoral ministry. To illustrate this, I will begin with two of my personal congregational singing experiences.

When my wife, Stephanie, and I dated many years ago, we encountered different arguments and conflicts. Often, these were minor issues, but they required time for healing and reconciliation. Later on, with the help of professional couple and family counseling, we can identify and improve our communication patterns and understand our thinking processes during times of argument. In one of the counseling sessions, I expressed that there is often a noticeable urge and motivation to apologize, seek forgiveness, and strive for reconciliation with her after a genuine and spiritual encounter with the Lord. Indeed, I recalled various incidences of how the Lord urged me to forgive, seek, and reconcile amid congregational singing experiences on Sundays. The message of

love and forgiveness was not the central focus of the sermon, but these themes were often embedded in the worship songs. Since then, I have wondered if and how a corporate spiritual encounter with the Lord enables Christians to imitate Christ's humility and outpour such love to those around us. In other words, I am intrigued to know if a divine-human encounter enables true worshippers to love God through loving others in self-giving manners (1 John 4:18–21).[1] Concurrently, I also realized that settling an interpersonal conflict, in general, removes a massive burden on my heart, allowing me to sing praises to the Lord more wholeheartedly (Matt 5:23–24).

A genuine spiritual encounter with God also prompts faithful responses and facilitates redemptive living from a worshipper. Two years after Stephanie and I entered into marriage, God gave me a vocation to quit my previous full-time profession and study at the seminary. Based on the conviction that this must be a family vocation and not merely a personal call, I brought this up to Stephanie for mutual discernment. With this in mind, we intentionally set aside time to discuss and pray about this matter, to weigh all the pros and cons, and to discuss how this vocation would impact our family and planning. In short, these conversations were inconclusive. One Sunday morning, we worshipped at our local church as usual. When we left the church building, my wife immediately told me that the Lord had touched her and affirmed that we should take the leap of faith and respond to God's call. As a congregant, she explained that the Lord's immense love touched her heart deeply through the choir group's singing. The song described that the Lord had given his one and only Son to save us, and there are no greater things he can give to express such oceanic love.

[1] This research uses the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible throughout the work unless otherwise indicated.

I was shocked by her explanation. To me, the song was a typical theocentric worship song talking about God's salvific motives and works. The music and the singing were delivered at an average local church choir level. Nothing specific about vocation or our immediate life struggles was directly and explicitly mentioned throughout the entire congregational singing and worship service. Looking back, I believe the Lord revealed his will to Stephanie profoundly through the group singing event in worship. Stephanie brought her struggles and issues before the Lord as the worshipper, the listener, the disciple, and the singing congregant. The Spirit of God used the choir's singing and reached out to her affectively, cognitively, and spiritually, inviting her to make a change in her behaviour.[2] Under the guidance of the Spirit, she contextualized and personalized what the choir delivered and appropriated to her situation. Her holistic knowledge of God as the Lord and Saviour prompted her to reflect on how she, as the servant, redeemed child, the blessed, and spouse, should respond in life.

These two spiritual stories are some of my memorable moments in congregational singing that trigger theological reflection and advocate spiritual formation. I believe that God's Spirit invites and leads Christians to the inseparable union with the Son and knits Christians to the Son's communion with the Father.[3] Simultaneously, the Father empowers Christians to live out Christ's love and truth in missional manners under the Spirit's guidance.[4]

This love of God is self-giving, unconditional, and whole. In the Gospels, Jesus summarizes that the two greatest commandments are to love God and love others (Matt

[2] King, "Mango Tree," 164–65.
[3] Torrance, *Worship*, 30–31.
[4] Torrance, *Worship*, 30–31.

22:37–39). This love that Jesus instructs his disciples to imitate is fully exemplified through his atoning sacrifice, attesting that love is a verb and not merely a psychological state or feeling (John 13:31–36). Therefore, I am interested in exploring if the weekly collective singing about God's greatness, power, loving-kindness, and sacrifice has any significance in mobilizing loving relationships as a response to loving God. Put differently, if an authentic spiritual encounter with the "worship-worthy" Lord in spirit and truth advocates spiritual and holistic formation (John 4:22–24), then I am also interested to hear how worshippers can be "guided and energized" by the love of God in congregational singing and respond in love to God and others.[5] With this in mind, one of the research objectives is to determine if congregational singing can bring any identity and relational significance to Christian worshippers.

Also, musicology suggests that vocal music often contains diffuse, complex, and hard-to-label emotions and thoughts.[6] This research allows me to practice "pastoral listening" and extract some hard-to-label feelings and thoughts.[7] I believe worship singing can stimulate reflections in worshippers' lives. Nevertheless, reflections and contextualization are not bounded by the stimulus (e.g., music and lyrics). For example, in my pastoring experience, I sometimes hear congregants saying the Lord enlightens them with an idea directly or indirectly related to the sermon message. Other times I hear worshippers saying the Lord comforts and assures them through the music and the lyrics in congregational singing. These feelings and thoughts range from acute to subtle, general to specific, and principle to contextual.[8] Similarly, my personal stories and ministry

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[5] Wolterstorff, *God We Worship*, chapter 2, para. 8–9, location 563–68.
[6] Countino, "Singing and Emotion," chapter 14, para. 22, location 7889.
[7] Moschella, *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice*, 4.
[8] Countino, "Singing and Emotion," chapter 14, para. 22, location 7889.

experiences suggest that the Spirit could speak and work during worship services beyond what is explicitly communicated in the music and lyrics, prompting meaning-making reflection and faithful response. As a result, a second research objective is to explore the formative aspects of congregational singing.

Moreover, it is part of my pastoral vocation to improve congregational singing for disciple-making continuously. My interest in this area continues to strengthen throughout my past seven years of pastorate at Scarborough Chinese Baptist Church. A substantial portfolio of my ministry portfolio includes leading, teaching, organizing, and evaluating weekly worship services and congregational singing. As a local church pastor, my core practice in congregational singing serves two significant purposes. On the one hand, I am responsible for advocating doxology through congregational singing—a bottom-up movement that worships who God is and what he has done and will complete in this world and the world to come. The Lord invites humanity to join in the ascending praises as part of God's creation (Ps 8; 104; 95:6; Rev 4:11).

My pastoral mandate also includes utilizing congregational singing as a medium for disciple-making. This top-down movement instructs and empowers Christians to live as God's people. The singing engagement urges the congregation to live victorious and God-glorifying lives, which includes expressing love and service to others in self-giving ways (Amos 5:23–24; Col 3:16).[9] When the formational and relational potentials and challenges of congregational singing can be better understood, a worship practitioner can seek for improvements in the practice. My third research objective is to obtain knowledge to seek advances in the weekly practice of congregational singing.

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[9] Cherry, *Worship Architect*, chapter 11, para. 34–35, location 4379.

The Practice of Congregational Singing

This research acknowledges the complex and interdisciplinary nature of congregational singing. On the one hand, the music composition (i.e., music and lyrics), performance (e.g., worship leader), and participant (e.g., local worship congregant) all contribute meanings to the congregational singing and worship experiences.[10] Each worshipper in a worship service is an active agent with unique identity markers (e.g., age, ethnicity, culture, background, character, and knowledge) in which one's involvement and presence bring new meanings to the singing event. In other words, the worshipper is not merely a recipient of the composer's work.

With this in mind, I will borrow Roberta R. King's Transaction Music Communication model to describe major components in the congregational singing of the Greater Toronto Area Cantonese-speaking worship services. King's four channels in the congregation singing highlight the major elements at play during congregational singing in her research context. Unlike King, I am keen to go beyond the communication dynamics, and inquire if the singing experience shapes a worshipper's identity and relationship with others in any way.

The Four Channels in Congregational Singing

King's Transaction Music Communication model suggests that congregational singing can be divided into four channels for discussion and research purposes: music, lyrics, performer (e.g., worship leader), and body movement.[11] I will concurrently describe these

[10] Heaney, *Music as Theology*, chapter 1, para. 57, location 1577.
[11] King, *Pathways*, 40.

channels below and connect them to my observation of the phenomena among the Greater Toronto Area Cantonese worship services.

Music

The first channel is music, which refers to the "musical sound patterns" expressed in worship.[12] Music provides a means by which individuals can express their thoughts, emotions, and intentions. Music in corporate worship can "accomplish its best service to the church because the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are intimately at work in creation and culture, in art and artistry, in worship and the worship arts."[13] Worship arts and music are cultural and theological artifacts.

At the same time, music is more than merely "musical sound patterns."[14] Social psychologists and musicologists see music as a product of social interaction and culture. They suggest that an individual's self-concept is closed-knitted with one's musical identity. Musical identities refer to "how we use music within our overall self-identities—to the extent to which music is important in our self-definitions as masculine-feminine, old-young, able-disabled, extravert-introvert, and so on."[15] Musical identities are performative and social, representing something individuals do while simultaneously associated with their self-concept.[16] This research provides the space to hear how worshippers describe and perceive others' musical identities.

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[12] Begbie and Guthrie, *Resonant Witness*, introduction, para. 11, location 83.
[13] Taylor, *Glimpses of the New Creation*, chapter 1, para. 19, location 530.
[14] Begbie and Guthrie, *Resonant Witness*, introduction, para. 11, location 83.
[15] Hargreaves, "Changing Identity of Music Identities," 5.
[16] Hargreaves, "Changing Identity of Music Identities," 5.

Scholars and practitioners have tried to address the issues caused by individual, cultural, and sub-cultural preferences in worship music and styles in the past decades.[17] Many ministry practitioners have been attempting to incorporate diverse styles of worship music with a "political compromise" mindset.[18] In fact, it is relatively common for Cantonese immigrant churches to use this "political compromise" approach to satisfy diverse musical tastes and preferences of different congregants, although Timothy J. Keller criticizes this handling as "quite jarring and unhelpful."[19] Cantonese worship music has a wide range of styles and expressions, ranging from traditional (e.g., hymnals) to contemporary music that shares aural commonalities with popular culture. At the same time, Cantonese worship music is also influenced by Southeast Asian music, such as those from Taiwan and mainland China. Some worship songs borrow ethnomusic elements (e.g., melody in Chinese music uses a pentatonic scale similar to the major scale in Western music, but uses five of the notes instead of seven). As mainstream culture and music style evolve, contemporary worshippers and Christian composers have developed different musical identities accordingly. This gradual change imposes the challenge concerning song selection, style, and arrangement. Suppose Keller is correct that each local faith community needs to discern the range of musical expression and diversity that aligns with one's theological and cultural orientation. In that case, Cantonese worship services cannot simply mimic what is done in Hong Kong, China, Taiwan, or other Southeast Asian countries.[20] A contextual and localized understanding is much needed.

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[17] Ashton and Davis, "Following in Cranmer's Footsteps," chapter 2, para. 87, location 1357.
[18] Keller, "Reformed Worship," chapter 4, para 11, footnote 8, location 4498.
[19] Keller, "Reformed Worship," chapter 4, para 11, footnote 8, location 4498.
[20] Ashton and Davis, "Following in Cranmer's Footsteps," chapter 2, para. 87, location 1357.

Lyrics

The second identity shaping component in congregational singing is the worship lyrics. As Jeremy S. Begbie puts it, "theology throws light on music, and music throws light on theology."[21] The sung texts communicate theological truths in an aesthetic manner that words or texts alone cannot achieve. The lyrical theology of doxology is "multifaceted, multidimensional, and filled with diverse themes."[22] The lyricists demonstrate one's way of "working through theological issues, thoughts, concepts, and of shaping the theological idea."[23] Lyrics are interpretations and aesthetic re-expressions of Christian traditions and values under the interpretive lens of, first, the lyricist and, second, the contemporary worshippers, listeners, and singers.

Like Western Christian songs, lyrics in Chinese Christian worship songs can range from theocentric claims of the biblical truth and Christian theology, to personal and communal anthropocentric reflection concerning the One being worshipped and adored. Expressions in lyrics can also draw from poetic, formal, and vernacular forms. Unlike Western Christian songs in English, the tonal constraint in Cantonese has been a widely-known challenge when it comes to lyrics because alternations in the tone of a word can mean something different, even if it makes sense in the written form. My observation is that the younger Christians are more easily irritated by the tonal issue and find less resonance in the poetic and formal writing of lyrics. In contrast, the older generation in the church does not consider the tonal problem in lyrics as problematic. They also appreciate the beauty in eloquent and poetic lyrics more than the daily informal or

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[21] Begbie, "Faithful Feelings," chapter 13, para. 3, location 3493.
[22] Kimbrough, *Lyrical Theology,* 53.
[23] Kimbrough, *Lyrical Theology,* 54.

vernacular language in lyrics. The younger generation prefers the daily language because it aligns more with their everyday expression and experience.

To better describe how the experience of singing (i.e., the "sung text") and the lyrics on paper (i.e., the "song text") differ, I find that King's Three Dimensions in the Song Pathway is a helpful model to work with. She sees that unlike reading the song text, singing the lyrics in a communal setting can more profoundly engage the affective dimension of the singers.[24] Worshippers are receptors of one another's singing and musical expression in congregational singing, in which the corporate activity "creates an event where, through active participation within a group, one may contemplate and reflect upon one's particular life situation."[25]

King also notes that music and lyrics have an inseparable relationship in group singing. The music "serves as a gateway" when the worshippers find the music "pleasing and appropriate."[26] Here, the worshippers will respond behaviourally, such as singing and dancing, and are more prone to focus on the cognitive content. I can relate to King's observation and agree that Cantonese Christian worshippers also believe the central function of a song is to communicate the song's message. At the same time, I also wish to emphasize that when talking about the music in congregational singing, the congregant's voice and group participation contribute to the overall music dynamics and render new meanings to the song. The "sung text" in a corporate worship setting has a more identity-shaping effect than singing alone or words on paper.

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[24] King, *Pathways*, 165.
[25] King, *Pathways*, 165.
[26] King, *Pathways*, 169–71.

In sum, Cantonese churches, in general, are concerned about how lyrics help worshippers to keep God as the subject and object in corporate singing more than the edifying impact on the worshippers' character.[27] My research acknowledges the importance of the doxological dimension, but it is more interested in how the sung text informs and adds value to a worshipper's understanding of one's identity in God and relationship with others.

Worship Leader (The "Performer")

The third component is the people leading in congregational singing. Broad categories include musicians and leaders who lead on stage and the technicians who support the execution. This research focuses on the worship leader's role because that person directly influences the social and worship norm in congregational singing. Worship leaders vary in leadership style, musicality, social functions, and perceived authority, all directly impacting the singing discourse and environment.[28] Such diversity is seen across different Cantonese worship services. The leading style ranges from traditional and instructional to relational and free-flowing. Some services are led by one person, and others by a team, with variations in music skills. The use of language and gesture also range from authoritative to friendly. This research explores how the behavioural variation of a worship leader impacts singing engagement (i.e., social behaviour) and social belongings. I am also eager to exercise pastoral listening and examine if different leading styles can trigger different forms of participation and response from the congregants.

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[27] Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*, chapter 11, para. 36, location 4774.

[28] A singing discourse refers to the scene of the group singing or congregational singing, which comprises the people, the place, the sung text, the music, and so on, that contributes to the singing experience.

Worship Peers (The "Body" Presence)

Last, King discusses the spatial dimension of worshipping God through body movements. I agree with King that congregational singing intertwines physiological, psychological, cultural, and spiritual dimensions under specific socio-cultural and liturgical contexts.[29] While I concur that body movement, such as dancing, could play an essential role in a Christian's embodied worship, I must also acknowledge that cultural factors precede and determine the significance of it. King's Senufo-African Christians have very different cultural perceptions and orientations in body movement than the Chinese Christians.[30] My participant observation further confirms such cultural differences. Standing up, clapping hands, and occasionally lifting hands when singing is as active as they can be in many Cantonese services. Indeed, responding to these behaviours alone in a Cantonese worship service might be perceived as an interruption. In a culture where worshipping with body movement amid congregational singing is generally not considered a norm, some of these actions and behaviours mentioned above could be perceived as disturbing and socially inappropriate in specific local church contexts. As a result, worshippers often wait for instructions and order when it comes to body expressions.

Despite this, what I believe is valuable when discussing social identity is the presence of those who worship together—body presence. Humans are relational beings, and the presence of other worship peers is significant to developing social association and a sense of belonging. In this research, I seek to gather descriptions of how seeing, hearing, and sensing other worshippers engage in congregational singing help to shape

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[29] King, *Pathways*, 31.

[30] My participant observation shows that dancing and big physical movements are not common in Greater Toronto Area Cantonese worship services. Standing and clapping during congregational singing are seldom and requires explicit instruction.

the Christians' corporate identity. The pre-supposition I hope to verify is that there are formational values for Christians to intentionally and physically gather at the same place and time for singing and worship. I am keen to understand how physically gathering people of different social characteristics (e.g., age, gender, and mother tongue) and sub-cultural nuances shape one's sense of attachment and belonging to the Christian community. With the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, talking about worshipping together without physical proximity is no longer a hypothetical assumption. Many worshippers can now compare the difference between worshipping online at home and worshipping together at church. This comparison can offer valuable insights pertaining to the social significance of congregational singing as an embodied practice.

Before concluding this section, I must also highlight that worship space is a factor in congregational singing. For instance, singing around a campfire is a different social experience than singing in an industrial warehouse or a historic cathedral. However, Cantonese churches in the Greater Toronto Area do not differ much in the worship space layout for Sunday worship services. They may vary in size, but their architectural design and layout are primarily functional and simple, with sufficient illumination for reading and seeing. Worshippers are arranged on long benches or rows of moveable chairs, and the worship leaders either lead on a stage or a raised platform. Some services occur in sanctuaries, whereas others in multi-purpose areas (e.g., a gym or a large room). From a functional perspective, they are set up similarly in corporate worship settings.

Also, I classify most worship service flows as conventional and semi-formal. They are not formal and liturgical as a high church but not highly sensational and spontaneous as a free-flowing service. The order of service follows what is generally

known as the fourfold of worship: gather (e.g., sing praises), word (e.g., Scripture reading and sermon), communion (e.g., holy communion and response hymn or prayer), and send forth (e.g., dismissal with missional connotation).[31]

In summary, the synergetic effects of the factors above suggest that worship music and singing should be studied "as part of a perpetual complex that includes a range of non-musical phenomena."[32] A greater understanding of the complex social and religious gatherings allows worship practitioners to better leverage the singing engagement in conveying biblical living as "life-changing alternatives" for worshippers in the contemporary world.[33]

Importance of this Research to Cantonese Worship Services in the Greater Toronto Area

Many Christians perceive worshipping God as a religious norm and a Christian mandate with minimum room to be questioned or challenged. This research seeks to contribute to the conversation about why Christians practice and worship the ways they do. This faith-seeking-understanding attitude is of critical importance to disciple-making. In today's rapidly changing world, the complex human experience challenges the sufficiency of the previous "rule-based" and "law-following" approach to worship singing.[34] Indeed, an interdisciplinary inquiry requires Christians to humbly accept their limitations, in which they seek to understand God's wondrous blessings and wisdom behind the worship mandate and why it matters to the complex world. Thus, studying the identity shaping

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[31] Cherry, *Worship Architect*, chapter 3, para. 34–40, location 1160–1210.
[32] Begbie, "Faithful Feelings," chapter 13, para. 31, location 3614.
[33] King, *Pathways*, 172.
[34] Cahalan and Mikoshi, *Opening the Field of Practical Theology*, introduction, para.10, location 135.

effects of congregational singing can create new knowledge helpful for constructing disciple-making congregational singing experiences.

That said, my investigation recognizes ongoing tensions and conversations between "the world of the text" and the world of the congregational singers.[35] Christian songs and singing proclaim and admonish the Christian truth, beliefs, and values to one another (Col 3:16). Congregational singing is also a public proclamation of the human identity as per God's creative, redemptive, and restorative intentions. This collective singing is a theological, ideological, and artistic proclamation to the world, projecting diverse and rich Christian views of God and humanity. Contrarily, the world suggests very different worldviews and values. Therefore, this study is critical because it examines how biblical truths expressed in collective singing address those currently living and influenced by contemporary culture and society.

Furthermore, the worship war between traditional and contemporary music remains in many Cantonese churches. Scholars who value the Christian worship heritage and tradition contribute their voices by emphasizing "historic continuity, tradition, high culture, and theological exposition" in worship.[36] Other scholars, who see the necessity of contemporary worship development, are critical of churches that only make alterations when something is considered "erroneous or inconsequential."[37] Introducing new things to the church, such as contemporary worship music, is often "likely to be seen as a charade."[38] The tension between preserving a good Christian heritage and seeking continuous relevance in Christian worship remains high in everyday church practice.

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[35] Veling, *Practical Theology*, 63.
[36] Keller, "Reformed Worship," chapter 1, para. 1, location 3151.
[37] Packiam, *Worship and the World to Come*, chapter 7, para. 6, location 1829.
[38] Packiam, *Worship and the World to Come*, chapter 7, para. 6, location 1829.

I acknowledge that tensions between traditional and contemporary expressions of worship remain today and cannot be resolved overnight. This work does not try to offer a quick fix to this issue. However, my research provides another entry point to address this issue by considering how God-glorifying singing moments advocate identity shaping. Instead of debating and searching for equilibrium in worship expressions such as format, music style, and song selection that pleases everyone, this research approaches such tension from an identity and relational dimension that allows practitioners to consider factors beyond individual music tastes and preferences. I believe that many Cantonese worshippers differentiate themselves from others with music because "their very identity was threatened in a way they sensed was somehow related to their overall personal and cultural identity as well."[39] Perhaps musical preference is a surface issue, not the root cause. Deep down in the lives of worshippers, identity ties, relational attachment, and cultural association could be other underlying reasons why many worshippers fail to embrace the old and the new in worship music.

Theological Framework

Christians' collective singing is a theological, ideological, and artistic proclamation to the world, projecting diverse and rich Christian views of God and humanity. The singing is a medium that conveys who God is, what he did, has done, is doing, and will complete. The songs capture biblical ideas and principles that inform worshippers who they are in relation to God, other Christians and non-Christians, and themselves.

The Bible contains many descriptions of the Lord's relationship with his people. Some biblical examples include master/slaves (Rom 6:18), vine/branches (John 15:5),

[39] Saliers and Saliers, *Song to Sing*, chapter 6, para. 2, location 1323.

Creator/creatures (Eph 2:10), shepherd/sheep (John 10:11), and so on. In the above, I use plurals in the human correlates, signifying a relationship established between slaves, branches, creatures, and sheep. Part of my research investigates some of the biblical identities embedded in congregational singing about God-human and human-to-human relationships, and how these identities in the singing inform the Christian's daily living. I acknowledge that there is no fixed way to lay out these categories and relational terms described in the Bible. That said, Brian S. Rosner's biblical identity model is a coherent way to organize various descriptions of God-human relationships and put them into perspective. He summarizes the biblical identities of Christians into four central ideas. The image of God, known by God, and redeemed in Christ, are three main ideas that all contribute to the fourth idea, which is the core identity as God's children.[40]

Rosner's theology of biblical identities can relate to the lyrical component described in King's work above. Worshippers sing about biblical identities and God-human relationships through a biblical perspective. The Lord is portrayed as the Transcendent and Immanent God through direct communication (e.g., God as the Creator and friend) and indirect communication (e.g., God is our shepherd and rock). Some lyrical works also describe how a worshipper can perceive one's relationship to others through God (e.g., the essence of being brothers and sisters or the need to care for the oppressed).

I agree with Rosner's perception that among all the descriptions of who Christians are, the identity as God's children is an idea that vividly captures both the loving and intimate relationship between God and humans. Rosner's model also proposes that the

[40] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 2, para. 34–37, location 731–46.

parent-child relationship is the overarching description to capture the top-down hierarchical order between God and humans relationally and intimately. From this relationship, Christians can relate to one another as siblings and extend this family love to those who have not yet received it. Indeed, The "Father" and "Son" language is a Divine-chosen description used to depict the intimate and harmonious relationship between the different persons of the Triune God (Matt 3:17; John 10:30; Luke 23:34; and Col 1:15). For this study, I will refer to this as the parent-child relationship to account for gender-inclusive language and simultaneously differentiate God the Parent from earthly parents.

The study of Rosner's model provides a coherent paradigm to see biblical identity from top-down and horizontal dimensions. I am interested to see if my research participants would define themselves using Rosner's language of identities. To reiterate, this research does not aim to limit the biblical identity model offered by Rosner as the only way to understand the human relationship with God. Participants' associations and references to other biblical identities are equally legitimate and valid, and I am interested in exploring what identities the worshippers recall in their Sunday worship services. This research aims to gather descriptions of how the biblical references concerning identities are expressed through the singing activity to the worshippers and how the singing behaviours instill contextual and personalized meanings to the biblical references.

Theoretical Perspective

This research builds upon the ideas of a few social identity concepts to study congregational singing. This research defines social identity as how individuals identify themselves in relation to others according to what they have in common with others. The word "social" refers to all forms of social interactions that an individual engages in their

lives. These social interactions and relationships (e.g., spouse, employee, believer, church member, and citizen) require different degrees of love and commitment.

Social identity theory suggests that an individual tends to classify oneself and others according to "social categories or schema, constructed by abstracting prototypical—or stereotypical—features of the group's membership."[41] When sociologists use the term "membership," they do not refer to a formal application and acceptance of belonging to a group (e.g., a church's official member) but instead refer to a person's self-determined relationship to a social circle (e.g., this is "my church"). An individual involves in different social identity groupings (e.g., ethnicity, religion, and profession) and relational categories (e.g., family member, friendship, and employee). Individuals must weigh their identities and determine which identity at a particular condition dominates.

In sociology or psychology, identity theories should not be viewed as independent ideas, but they should be seen as a web of identity theories and thinking. Among many social identity theories, this research is particularly interested in identity hierarchy, social association, and identity renegotiation. Many sociologists have contributed to this area, and Peter Burke and Jan Stets' Identity Control Theory offers a paradigm to describe how the identity hierarchy, association, and renegotiation operate. Identity Control Theory studies "the set of meanings that define who one is in terms of a group or classification (such as being an American or female), in terms of a role (e.g., a stockbroker or a truck driver), or in terms of personal attributes (as in being friendly or honest)."[42] A central idea in Identity Control Theory is the concept of a hierarchical control system, which

[41] Wang, "Social Identity and Professional Architects," 48.
[42] Burke and Stets, "New Directions," 45.

describes the "interlocking set of individual control systems at multiple levels" within a person.[43] The higher identities do not control social roles and behaviours directly, but they set the goals and standards to manage the lower identities and inform the lower identities of what meanings need to be verified.[44] The lower identities then draw comparisons with identities of the same level and match the meanings to the surrounding contexts.

This hierarchical concept intersects with Rosner's argument that "the Bible confirms the legitimacy of the standard personal identity markers [e.g., possession, occupation, race, and so on], but denies their ultimacy. Many of them are indispensable, but they are an insufficient foundation upon which to build your identity."[45] To Rosner, the identity of God's children offers a sufficient and necessary foundation (i.e., high hierarchical order) for Christians to shape their self-concept and relational dimension. To others, it could be the master/servant or king/citizen identity that sets the goals and standards for self-perception and behaviour at church, home, or other social settings, thus leading the person to respond accordingly. For example, the congregational singing could remind a worshipper how Jesus, as the King and Master, came to serve in the form of a slave, prompting the person to imitate Jesus with the same spirit of love and attitude in different settings. Alternatively, another worshipper may be reminded to devote more time to care for the oppressed rather than pursuing career advancement because such use of time is perceived as a way to serve the master. In either case, identity renegotiation occurs with reference to the hierarchical order of identities.

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[43] Tsushima and Burke, "Levels," 173–75.
[44] Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, chapter 7, para. 18, location 3020.
[45] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 3, para. 5, location 843.

As a result, this study investigates whether congregational singing as an event conveys Christian identities as high hierarchical identities and, if so, how it informs or shapes the worshipper's life. In the best-case scenario, congregational singing can serve as a meaning-making and identity-reconstruction process in the affective and cognitive realms. Suppose self-renegotiation occurs when the singing suggests a Christian identity as a higher hierarchical identity. In this case, the person needs to reconsider how the Christian identity sets goals and informs the lower identities. In that case, congregational singing offers an opportunity to assess how the higher and lower identities correlate in worshippers' lives.

In addition, congregational singing is a form of social interaction, and individuals make sense of one another's relationship in the midst. This research explores whether congregational singing brings meaning-significance to biblical concepts (e.g., brothers and sisters and the body of Christ).[46] It sheds light on whether Christians in congregational singing associate with one another based on commonalities and separate apart based on perceived differences.

Employing Practice-led Research and Practical Theology to Study Congregational Singing

This study leverages many respected scholars' hard work and inspiration in their respective disciplines, believing that the intertwining voices can trigger new inspiration and knowledge. The following describes why practice-led research in practical theology is a suitable knowledge-seeking approach.

[46] In this study, I use the term "meaning-significance" to emphasize the interpreter-centered or reader-centered view of meaning. Such type of meaning could be the same as or different from what a song explicitly tries to convey.

Practice-led research "is concerned with the nature of practice and leads to new knowledge that has operational significance for that practice."[47] It is an action-reflection approach to gaining knowledge which includes "reflection-in-action" (i.e., reflection during the practice) and "reflection-on-practice" (i.e., reflection after the practice) when responding to a situation or context the research-practitioner faces.[48]

Like many other practice-led investigators, my research begins with intense love and passion for a specific area and a desire to contribute new insights, understanding, and inspiration back to the practice.[49] The goal of practice-led research is to uncover new knowledge and meanings and attempts to "have accessibility (potentially at least) outside its borders."[50] In practice-led research, the practitioner actively explores, in which it is natural that unexpected discoveries, ideas, and challenges could arise.[51]

All these scholars suggest that practice-led research has a clear goal—to move beyond the theoretical stage, to make operational significance to the field of study, and to contribute new knowledge back to the theory pool. Practice-led research recognizes that expertise does not only arise from pure research or theoretical development, but that knowledge can also be acquired through practice. As a result, practice-led research is a suitable approach to studying congregational singing because the group activity is a practice-driven social event substantiated by layers of theological, aesthetic, social, psychological, physiological, cultural, and musical considerations. All these factors in congregational singing contain different "operational significance."[52] They are variables

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[47] Candy, "Practice Based Research: A Guide," 1.
[48] Schön, *Reflective Practitioner*, 128–36, 275–83.
[49] Gray, "Ground Up," 2.
[50] Ferguson, "Practice-led Theology," 165.
[51] Gray, "Ground Up," 5.
[52] Candy, "Practice Based Research: A Guide," 1.

that contribute to the dynamics of congregational singing. As a result, the voices of various worship practitioners are vital contributors to the action-reflection cycle in the knowledge-seeking process.

Practice-led research suits this research because every corporate singing event is a complex artistic and social activity.[53] Practice-led research is a methodology readily adaptable to theology, and one that suits the very nature of theological reflection, providing new opportunities for theological research in the academy."[54] The need for rigorous academic research with a practical orientation in congregational singing aligns with the interest in practice-led research.

Practical Theology and Congregational Singing

Practical theology is a "critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world."[55] Congregational singing is more than a biblical mandate and a religious habit as a church practice. Instead, conducting theological reflection and interdisciplinary conversation allows contemporary Christians to understand how group singing can be better utilized for redemptive, formational, and missional purposes. Worshippers are invited to engage as a faithful community to "tell a story in order to find a story or reformulate a more fulfilling life narrative."[56] On the one hand, the group singing connects God's overarching narrative

[53] Brown, et al., "Types of Research in the Creative Arts and Design," 2.
[54] Ferguson, "Practice-led Theology," 65.
[55] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, chapter 1, para. 8, location 252.
[56] Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories*, chapter 3, para. 32, location 1208.

with his children's narratives, from which new meaning-significance concerning faithful Christian living and practice is formed.

On the other hand, the group singing is also a doxological and missional proclamation to and for the world, declaring the good news that the world needs to receive, accept, and believe.[57] People are "drawn to churches that are involved in God's mission and in which, because their members are aware of God's work and able to talk [and sing] about it, there is a sense of hope and expectancy."[58] Studying congregational singing as an interest in practical theology does not only aim to satisfy an urge for better church services for Christians; holistic and authentic corporate worship and group singing could advocate vital missional purposes "in, for, and to the world."[59] Congregational singing involves both art (e.g., music and visual arts) and science (e.g., social psychology), and knowledge in these fields can help researchers and practitioners to describe and interpret the context of the study more profoundly.

Furthermore, humans are agents of action, driven by their roles and expectations of self and others. I realize that a person's agency or ability to act in the world is expressed in one's perceived social identity. Here, social identity refers to "a person's self-concept based upon their group memberships together with their emotional, evaluative, and other psychological correlates."[60] These groupings include an individual's attachment and identities within one's family, church, social network, nation, and so on, with whom the person identifies as having significant emotional ties. As a social event,

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[57] Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories*, chapter 3, para. 22, location 1135.
[58] Kreider and Kreider, *Worship and Mission*, chapter 5, para. 19, location 1410.
[59] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, chapter 1, para. 8, location 252.
[60] Turner and Oakes, "Significance of the Social Identity," 240.

congregational singing provides practical-theological interpretations of understanding the web of life and relationship in a Christian's life.

It is important to note that practical theology is not "social science 'lite.'"[61] Thus, it does not substitute or suppress the voices of social science or other disciplines. Instead, practical theology aims to bring in different theological, artistic, and social scientific disciplines for conversations which could lead to the formation and enactment of strategies and actions to improve existing Christian practices.[62]

Limitations of the Study

There are several fundamental limitations in this study. Due to the limited length of this research, other worship elements that help contribute to the identity shaping of worshippers, such as corporate prayer, sermon, Holy Communion, and so on, are excluded from this research. Also, this study acknowledges the cultural and contextual distinctions in Greater Toronto Area Cantonese churches. For this reason, other ethnic and multiethnic churches in the Greater Toronto Area will be excluded from the scope of this research. Furthermore, this research is a theological inquiry concerning identity formation and contributions to interpersonal relationships. It is different from a psycho-therapeutic analysis that tries to study the details of individuals' upbringing and examine their identity development processes.

At the time of this research, various global issues and dynamics have been emerging that impact congregational singing in my research context. One rapidly developing trend is the popularity of online worship services since the beginning of the

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[61] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, chapter 3, para. 98, location 1950.
[62] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, chapter 4, para. 2, location 2071.

COVID-19 pandemic. This change has allowed Christians to reflect on the theological and practical meanings of gathering remotely versus gathering physically. Digital ministry is a massive topic, and I must reiterate that my research interest resides in the social identity shaping effects in in-person Sunday worship service. Thus, research into online and digital platform demands separate intensive research endeavours. Other global changes, such as the use of technology, such as YouTube or pre-recorded music tracks, to overcome the shortage of live musicians, are also worth exploring further in the future but will not be covered in this research.

Research Design and Methodology

Methods of Inquiry

Researching Christian music communication and its identity shaping impacts is a complex task.[63] A common qualitative research challenge that many researchers and scholars try to overcome is how to capture an objective reality behind subjective feelings and thoughts provided by human research subjects.[64] The research design and process of King's *Pathways in Christian Music Communications* is one of the excellent exemplars for congregational and worship study.

King employs multiple qualitative research methods to study Christian music as a communication medium in the Senufo culture. She goes through past Christian songs and music documents, examines related communication theories of interest, and conducts field observation—from which she consolidates the contextual description and constructs her research framework.[65] Two case studies are derived and crafted from the

[63] King, *Pathways*, 13.
[64] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, chapter 2, para. 47, location 947.
[65] King, *Pathways*, 23.

aforementioned information-gathering process. These case studies are then used in her focus group interviews with believers and non-believers, asking them questions regarding musical preferences, thoughts, and feelings toward Christian music and the underlying Christian messages.[66] After that, she compiles music and song text samples and presents them as stimuli for her participants to comment on and critique.[67] As King puts it, the integral use of these methods is "to create triangulation in the research where the object of study is approached from many angles to verify the validity of the investigation."[68] Triangulation is "the combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials, perspectives and observers in a single study" used to overcome the limitations of biases and methodological shortcomings.[69]

As a result, triangulation is also thoughtfully integrated into my research design process on two levels. On the first level, my practical expertise in ministry, interdisciplinary literature reviews, and ethnographic research are three core sources of knowledge that contribute different insights towards the research topic. My ministry knowledge and the inspirations offered by various scholars both contribute to the research design of my pastoral ethnography and point of reference to evaluate and interpret the research outcome. On the second level, this research utilizes participant observation as a "macro snapshot" of the research context, and uses an online questionnaire and one-on-one interview to gather micro-level details.

I intentionally invite diverse roles of individuals in a worship service to participate. Research invitations were sent via email to the network of Greater Toronto

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[66] King, *Pathways*, 18–19.
[67] King, *Pathways*, 13–15.
[68] King, *Pathways*, 15.
[69] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, chapter 2, para. 47, location 950.

Area pastors. They were also invited to extend the research invitation to Christians they knew would be interested in participating. These include other pastors, church leaders, worship ministry practitioners, and general congregants who attend different Greater Toronto Area Cantonese worship services. Their collective and diverse opinions are much needed to capture different perspectives and concerns towards the study subject. Like King, I am convinced that individuals with different roles, areas of interest, experience, and skills will likely approach the research issues from different angles and perspectives, thus allowing the compilation of a "thick description."[70] A thorough analysis and critique of these intertwining voices can increase the validity of this research. Unlike King, I have chosen a one-to-one online qualitative interview rather than a focus group interview as a critical data collection channel in my pastoral ethnography for three reasons: (1) To keep the interview period within a reasonable timeframe (i.e., 60 to 75 minutes); (2) The feasibility of finding a common time to meet via Zoom video conference, particularly the pastors, who always have packed and contingent schedules and; (3) To overcome health concerns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pastoral Ethnography

Ethnography is a form of social research to study human beings in their respective personal, social, and ecclesiastical contexts.[71] This research uses ethnography as the research method. It strives to discover knowledge revealed through embodied practices, relations, narratives, and tensions.[72] Within it, ethnographers attempt to understand the

[70] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures,* 1–30.
[71] Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 25.
[72] Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 5.

interweaving of various layers of cultural stories, theologies, social interactions, and power structures.[73]

Pastoral ethnography is a suitable research method for this practice-led research in practical theology because it strives to obtain a thorough description of what is seen, heard, and experienced in the ecclesial domain. The ethnographer realizes that insightful findings and new inspirations require partnerships between the researcher and the research participants.[74] A pastoral ethnographer desires to understand "the gaps and the connections between theology and lived faith practices."[75] As an effort of collaboration, ethnography perceives "the [faith] community as theologians," which contains practical wisdom that can offer theological insights.[76] Active listening in understanding others' narratives and lived experiences is therefore crucial in making ethnography an effective information-gathering method. The listening process includes understanding how a Christian interprets God's active participation in one's life; and how the interpretation of life experience shapes one's identity in Christ.[77] Here, I am specifically interested in utilizing pastoral listening to deepen my understanding concerning the identity formation effects in congregational singing.

Research Process

This research begins with my experience concerning biblical identities in congregational singing. To understand the song themes and content, I start by sorting through three years of worship songs archives at my church and identify some major underlying biblical-

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[73] Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 28.
[74] Scharen and Vigen, eds., *Ethnography*, 21.
[75] Moschella, "Ethnography," chapter 21, para. 2, location 7102.
[76] Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 16–21.
[77] Graham, Walton, and Ward, *Theological Reflections*, chapter 2, para. 1, location 1104.

relational descriptions about God and God's people. My argument is that mentioning one side of the relationship also entails the identification of the counterpart. Some examples include Lord/disciple, Redeemer/sinner, Father/child, Creator/creature, master/servant, and sender/missionary. Although the actual song lists will differ from church to church, I work under the pre-supposition that the worship songs of Cantonese worship services have similar worship themes, identity categories, and music genres. This pre-supposition is later verified in the qualitative interviews and participant observation.

Second, participant observation in thirteen Greater Toronto Area Cantonese services of different locations, sizes, and denomination allows me to describe the overarching worship narratives and identify similarities and differences concerning how the singing discourse takes place. It helps me depict the general norms and cultural expressions of how Cantonese-speaking congregants worship, including the types of music, lyrics, leading style, and worship environments. Some churches contain shared song traditions and liturgies in which the practices can be traced back to their denominational roots. It also provides a method to confirm how doxological and disciple-shaping moments take place in the singing discourse (e.g., service flow, worship space, and leading style).

Third, participants who have attended Greater Toronto Area Cantonese services for a minimum of three years are invited to participate in this research in the form of an online survey and interview.[78] They represent the voices of general congregants, lay

[78] Greater Toronto Area has over a hundred Chinese churches with Cantonese worship services. Among this network of churches, there are many different denominations. That said, the major ones with relatively higher worship attendance by denomination and the largest number of church sites are Baptist, Alliance, and non-Denomination churches. The ones that are smaller in number include Methodist, Presbyterian, and Gospel churches. As I extended my research invitations through the network of pastors within the Greater Toronto Area and through them to reach out to Christian worshippers, the response was

leaders, musicians, and other worship practitioners. The online survey includes demographic, background, and identity formation questions. Following this, the research participants attend a one-to-one qualitative interview via Zoom video conference. In this interview, I present various video and audio stimuli to gather the participant's thoughts, feelings, and experiences about different music, lyrics, and leading styles used in congregational singing. I also invite them to share their thoughts and experience pertaining to a sense of belonging, singing and contextualization, music memory, and identity formation in congregational singing.[79] Their collective research voices demonstrate how congregational singing is currently utilized as a doxological, spiritual, and formational practice.[80]

In this study, I use the term "contextualization" to refer to how a worshipper brings and connects the four elements of the congregation's singing experience into one's own context and life. When it comes to theological discussions, I admit that contextualization remains a vast topic, and the scope of meaning could vary substantially across different fields. Coming from a theological and pastoral background, I employ the concept of contextualization in my research from a hermeneutical perspective, believing that it is God-honouring to try and relate theology and Scripture to a Christian's daily life.

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in direct proportion to the number of churches in each denomination. Understanding this distribution can help explain why the denominations, such as Cantonese Anglicans, Pentecostals, and Mennonite churches, which are small in number, are not included as part of the sample research population. This is because there are relatively few of these churches and Christians, even though these churches are considered part of the Chinese church circles.

[79] Statistics Canada 2016 reports 260,355 Cantonese-speaking individuals living in Greater Toronto Area. Ministry practioners often estimate that 3 to 5 percent of them are Christians. Assume a portion of Cantonese speaking individuals attend non-Cantonese worship services, and that 3 percent of the population attend the Cantonese services. In this case, 40 participants represent 0.5 percent of research sample population. While this may seem a small sample size, the diverse demographic and religious orientations, along with the research methods of triangulation will help to ensure this research provides a representational description of the research context.

[80] Fiddes, "Ecclesiology and Ethnography," 17.

The purpose of such contextualization through congregational singing is to bring changes to lives per "the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ and the abundant life he provides."[81] As Grant R. Osborne says, "The Bible demands that we challenge all persons and societies with the supracultural norms of Scripture."[82] The principle holds true when applying to Christian worship singing filled with biblical truth. In other words, the congregational singing experience invites the worshipper to "exegete" one's life with the embedded biblical message in the songs and to connect these messages to the various contexts and roles in which the individual is situated.[83]

Fourth, pastoral participants also undergo the same interview process as the congregants. Their voices are used to compare and validate the congregant's qualitative inputs. The theoretical assumption is that ministry practitioners who are theologically trained may have different interpretations and observations, concerns, and insights than ordinary congregants or ministry volunteers. I compare and contrast the pastors' and congregants' qualitative descriptions to identify commonalities and differences in their sharing and reflection process. This comparison helps to determine theological, socio-cultural, and operational variables that could impact the formational capabilities in congregational singing. The integrative use of various micro and macro research approaches helps to enhance research validity.

Bringing the Practice-Theology-Theory Paradigm Together

As I have mentioned earlier, my research objectives are threefold: formal, relational, and operational. First, the mandate of this research is to understand how the four elements in

[81] Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 454.
[82] Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 454.
[83] Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 454.

congregational singing (i.e.., music, lyric, worship leader, and worship peer) inform a worshipper to perceive one's relationship with God and others and whether congregational singing has any formational effect on Christians who attend Cantonese worship services in the Greater Toronto Area. Unlike other forms of learning about biblical identities, such as listening to a sermon, reading the Bible or a book, or attending a Bible study or workshop, congregational singing allows everyone in the worship context to participate. Congregational singing weaves the voices and music together as worshippers dynamically interact through the songs and singing, declaring who God is and his relationship with humanity and the created world. When worshippers participate in musical worship, it creates a formative experience. This participative and communal nature of congregational singing makes this study focus on the experience of the sung text rather than examining the song text and music sheet. The ethnographic research aims to gather qualitative descriptions in the form of an interview, exploring how congregational singing shapes different practitioners and participants in worship. The online participant observation and questionnaire help depict macroscopic and microscopic views of the research context, allowing cross-referencing and verifying interview results.

Second, biblical identities about God-human and human-to-human relationship demand love, commitment, and priority. Social identity theory offers a social psychological approach to help describe what happens when different roles and identities demand our attention, love, and commitment. As Christians gather to sing, they are reminded of their relationships with God and relationships in this world. All these relationships prompt the worshippers to discern how the Christian identity fits into the

identity hierarchy. Research questions are framed to extract their singing experience and contextualization process.

Besides, I am also intrigued to research and determine if Christians follow the same sociological considerations regarding social identity. Through the ethnographic study, I wish to know to what extent Cantonese-speaking Christians in the Greater Toronto Area are drawn together by commonality and separated by their differences—whether that difference is physical, musical, sociological, cultural, or theological. In my ministry practice concerning congregational singing, I have heard far too many conversations expressed in terms of "us-versus-them." This "us-versus-them" categorization is similar to what sociologists label as "in-group" (group a person self-associates with) and "out-group" (group a person does not self-associate with).[84] I hope to discover if other biblical and relational considerations are at work and prompt Christians to associate, belong, and commit differently. Bringing theology and social psychology together is needed to provide further insights.

Third, my research aims to generate knowledge to improve the existing practice of congregational singing. Suppose congregational singing contains formative and relational dimensions. In that case, an assessment and evaluation of the current practice and what congregational singing ought to provide, requires our attention to probe and compare further. Biblical and social identities are communicated implicitly and explicitly as worshippers regularly engage in congregational singing. As such, the style and ways of worship leading need a closer look. The worship leader can facilitate contextualization in congregational singing, assisting the worshippers in connecting the songs and singing

[84] Hogg and Abram, "Social Identifications," 19–21.

experience to their contemporary situations. Ethnographic research participants are invited to comment on how their worship leaders at church influence the embodied worship experience and social interaction. Last, I intend to use the literature review to interpret and critique the research outcomes. This will be covered at the end of each literature review chapter.

The Roadmap of This Study and Subsequent Chapters

Let me conclude this opening chapter by providing a roadmap for this study. Chapter 2 includes a literature review concerning the biblical theology of identity. The question of who worshippers are before the Lord is examined. I discuss some core identities using Rosner's work and extend the discussion to identity groupings that I can find in the Sunday worship songs.

Chapter 3 takes an interdisciplinary approach and describes how various scholars believe identities are formed and strengthened through group singing. I leverage other social psychological research studies concerning music's identity-shaping capabilities to deepen the understanding of how music, worship leaders and worship peers could impact ones' self-concept and relational identity. Chapter 4 briefly describes the developmental trajectory of social identity theory and explains how social identity can be applied to help describe the identity formation and renegotiation process with respect to congregational singing.

Chapter 5 strives to explain my ethnographic research design, process, and ethical considerations. A summary of the online questionnaire and qualitative interview are presented. The method of analysis is also explained. Chapter 6 is the qualitative analysis research report. Here, I offer my interpretation of the research data and analysis. Certain

parts of the literature review are referenced for discussion, reflection, and evaluation purposes.

The final chapter summarizes this research by integrating the entire discussion with a practice-theology-theory paradigm. Here, I offer some recommendations for utilizing congregational singing as a formational medium to enrich Christians' identity and interpersonal relationships. This work concludes with a short section on how this study can shed light on future congregational singing research.

CHAPTER 2: CORE IDENTITIES AS DISCERNED IN THE BIBLE AND REVEALED IN CONGREGATIONAL SONG

The Bible contains tremendous descriptions and metaphors about Christian identities. These biblical accounts reveal to Christians how an individual's relationship with God and with other human beings can be interpreted and understood. I acknowledge that even a brief discussion in this regard can quickly exhaust the length of this chapter. As such, this chapter utilizes a biblical framework in Christian identities in pursuing an overarching understanding of who Christians are in relation to God and others. I believe that in the best-case scenario, congregational singing is an attempt to remember, restate, and redefine a worshipper's identity first in relation to God and from this Divine-self relationship to others and the world.

Chapter Overview Concerning Core Identities as Discerned in the Bible and Revealed in Congregational Singing

With this in mind, the first section of this chapter explores the questions of "who am I" and "who are we" through Scripture. I employ Rosner's biblical identity framework to discuss some of the biblical identities. At the centre of Rosner's diligent work is the theological foundation of the Parent-child relationship, in which a Christian's self-identity and social identity in relation to God as the Parent and others as siblings are restored and re-established. As God's children, a Christian's identity is anchored upon the biblical truth that humanity is made in the image of God and known by God. God's oceanic love and abundant grace flow to his children through the restored relationship in

Christ, advocating and enabling believers to extend such love and grace to others through different roles, identities, and relationships. As a result, typical key identity markers to define oneself, such as ethnicity, culture, occupation, physical capacity, and so on, are deemed valid and legitimate but never "ultimate" to the Christian life.[85]

To put it succinctly, Rosner sees that the identity of God's children is the most intimate and significant identity to Christians. The Parent-child identity is an expression that the Triune God uses to describe the intimacy between the persons within him.[86] It is also a form of intimate human relationship to which humans can relate. Rosner uses this Parent-child relationship to incorporate the Creator/creation, Redeemer/redeemed, Love/beloved, and Owner/belonged dimensions.[87] I have also inserted a section referencing how Christian anthropologists define a human person, offering a more comprehensive view and addressing the question of "who we are."

Following this, I further present a theological understanding of congregational singing and discuss how I attempt to use Rosner's work to relate to the identity categories in the song. Under the assumption that Cantonese churches across the Greater Toronto Area might have different song lists but similar song categories, I use my home church's three-year song records as the dataset to relate with Rosner's biblical identity framework. After that, I sketch the overarching expressions of biblical identities concerning God-human and human-to-human relationships using the song dataset and comment on them using Rosner's model. This exercise offers a test case for me regarding what identity categories I expect to collect or hear from the research participants. It contributes to my

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[85] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 3, para. 5, location 843.

[86] The usage of "Parent-child" to describe the relationship is to account for and replace gender inclusive language for "Father-child."

[87] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 3, para. 5, location 843.

qualitative research design because I can compare the songs in my song list and participant observation with biblical identity markers expressed by the research participants. This chapter concludes with an explanation of how studying biblical identities and song samples adds value to my ethnographic research.

Personal Identity and Social Identity in the Bible

For centuries, humans have been eager to determine the meaning of existence. Philosophies, cultures, and religions from the East and West have attempted to offer answers to this complex question. The Bible provides a paradoxical truth that human beings cannot know about themselves apart from knowing God and being known by God (Ps 139; Gal 2:20; Phil 1:21; Col 3:3–4).[88] Indeed, Christianity believes that as God's children, one's meaning of existence is defined, assured, and actualized in and through Christ (John 15:5; 2 Cor 5:17). Thus, a Christian's key identity markers are also redefined and re-oriented in Christ, with Christ, and for Christ. Such re-orientation impacts how Christians *relat*e to themselves, others, and God. For this research, the word "relating" refers to the holistic engagement of our thoughts, emotions, and actions to and for others (Matt 22:36–40; Phil 2:1–5).

From a socio-relational standpoint, humans are ontologically social beings, in which identity is deeply rooted in whom we love and who love us.[89] Scholars such as Kevin Vanhoozer suggest that humans are "inherently social" in God's design and not merely autonomous individuals (Gen 1:28; 2:18).[90] As such, the question of "who are we [humans]" in relation to God needs to be addressed before pursuing the question of "who

[88] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 10, para. 8–11, location 4728–48.
[89] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 6, para. 56, location 2671.
[90] Vanhoozer, "Human Being, Individual and Social," 174–75.

am I?"[91] David Benner, a psychologist who has devoted forty years of work integrating psychology and spirituality, affirms John Calvin's statement that "nearly the whole of sacred doctrine consists in two parts: knowledge of God and of ourselves."[92] Benner sees that knowing one's true self and God has inseparable and dynamic correlations. Neither type of knowledge can be better understood without the other. Likewise, Rosner's biblical identity model acknowledges the intertwining relationship between these two types of knowledge. In addition, Rosner accentuates that being known and redeemed by God precedes any human awareness of his works in individual lives. The Triune God is the first cause of love. His perfect love and glory overflow to all he has created (1 John 4:7–19).

Humans Are Holistic and Relational Beings

To discuss human identity and the meaning of existence from a biblical perspective, the creation account in the book of Genesis provides a vital theological basis from which to begin. Rosner's exegesis of Gen 1–3 suggests that a human is not merely a physical being but also is: "(1) special, (2) social, (3) sexual, (4) moral, and (5) spiritual."[93] The Bible says that a human as a "living being" is created with "dust from the ground" and addressed by God's "breath/spirit" (Gen 2:7).[94] The description of "dust from the ground" emphasizes the human's physical frailty, relationship, and constitution with the ground. As Kenneth A. Mathews puts it:

> God is depicted as the potter who forms Israel (Isa 64:8; Jer 18:6; cp. Sir 33:13; Rom 9:20). "Dust" as constitutive of human existence anticipates [Gen] 3:19,

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[91] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 2, para. 25, location 704.
[92] Benner, *Gift of Being Yourself*, 22.
[93] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 4, para. 11, location 1789.
[94] This research uses New Revised Standard Version for Bible quotations unless otherwise indicated.

> where the penalty for the man's sin is his return to "dust" (e.g., Job 34:15). While "dust" may also show that man is fragile physically (e.g., Job 10:8–9; Ps 103:14), the intent of the passage is the association of human life and the basic substance of our making. A play on the words "man" (*ʾādām*) and "ground" (*ʾădāmâ*) becomes apparent: man is related to the "ground" by his very constitution (3:19), making him perfectly suited for the task of working the "ground," which is required for cultivation (2:5, 15). [95]

Here, Matthews tries to illustrate that humanity, as part of creation, has ontologically inseparable relationships with the created order and the Creator. In addition, the word *népēš*, which is often translated to "soul" or "living being," refers to the whole person and not the immaterial and fractional part of a human being.[96] Matthews contends that a human person "does not possess a nepeš but rather is a *nepeš*."[97] In other words, Matthews is saying that a person's soul or actual self is not something contained within a body. The person as a whole is a living being. He further comments that the word "breath," not "soul," comes closest to the idea of a transcendent life force.[98] Vanhoozer argues that God's breath into a human being is a distinctive address to the human constitution, enabling humans the power to will, create, imagine, reason, and love.[99] When God exclusively says "let us make" and "in our likeness," he affirms that the human's holistic being, self-concept, and union with others cannot be self-determined but instead is Creator-determined.[100] Indeed, God intends to create humans as "psycho-social creatures, embodied souls, or ensouled bodies," who actively engage in one another's life under the Triune God's grace and provisions.[101]

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[95] Matthews, *Genesis 1–11:26, New American Commentary 1A*, 196. The gender language in this quotation is unavoidable because the author explains an idea in the original gender specific Hebrew language.

[96] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 4, para. 11, location 1611.

[97] Matthews, *Genesis 1–11:26,* 196.

[98] Matthews, *Genesis 1–11:26,* 196.

[99] Vanhoozer, "Human Being, Individual and Social," 163–64.

[100] Vanhoozer, "Human Being, Individual and Social," 167.

[101] Vanhoozer, "Human Being, Individual and Social," 164.

Note that the creation account also informs readers about ownership hierarchy through naming. Naming is often associated with attributes, origin, character, identity, and ownership in the Hebrew culture. John Muddiman states, "The Jewish idea of 'naming' implies more than just nomenclature; it involves the notions of determining the character and exercising authority over what is named (Gen 2:19; Ps 147:4; Eccl 6:10)."[102] For instance, God entrusts humans to name the creatures (Gen 2:19) and exercises good stewardship in managing God's world (Gen 1:26). In another scenario, the Lord uses Prophet Isaiah and says, "he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine" (Isa 43:1). This emphasizes the ownership hierarchy and intimacy embedded in naming.

Similarly, Jesus says he "calls his own sheep by name" (John 10:3). This expression assures an intimate way of knowing and ownership between the Son of God and his people. Naming entails God's dominion over all creations and human dominion over all other creatures. Both orders are constitutional in the order of creation, which the Creator sees as "very good" (Gen 1:26).[103] The significance of naming, ownership, and intimacy are themes that continue to develop in the Bible, shaping the self-concept and worldview of the Hebrews (Exod 13:9; Eccl 12:1;7) and their social identity at large (Exod 19:6; Ps 100). This understanding of naming and ownership prompts God's people to be accountable to the Lord as individuals, community, and society. The Lord's ownership of humanity entails humans being called to live and serve the divine-given purpose.

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[102] Muddiman, *Epistle to the Ephesians,* 166–67.
[103] Johnston, "Humanity," 565.

Furthermore, the holistic view of a human person continues to develop in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul uses different anthropological terms in describing human beings in his epistles. Examples include "body, flesh, soul, spirit, mind, heart, and inner being."[104] When the Apostle Paul uses these terms, he refers to an individual as a holistic creature instead of perceiving the heart, soul, and spirit as fractional parts within an entity. Scholars such as James D. G. Dunn argue that Paul's perspective is coherent with the Hebrew mindset and understanding of nép̄eš in the Old Testament (Gen 2:7; 1 Cor 15:45).[105] Paul's view of the human person contrasts with some of the dichotomized thinking concerning body and soul in the Greco-Roman times.[106] For example, Paul rebukes the Corinthian Christians for mistakenly thinking that their souls are secured in the spiritual realm, and that bodily indulgence does not hinder their new life and status in Christ (1 Cor 5–6).[107]

Scholars also suggest that the biblical view of resurrection includes the resurrection of the entire person (Luke 24:39–43; Rom 8:23; Phil 1:23). The human body is temporal but never insignificant. Paul exhorts the Roman Christians to "offer your bodies as a living sacrifice," which he refers to as the entirety of one's life (Rom 12:1). Likewise, Paul's usage of the Greek word *psychē* (i.e., soul) often refers to a holistic living being, "animated by the mystery of life as a gift."[108] The Pauline theology suggests that the human flesh will be perfected and transformed by the Lord Jesus Christ one day into a glorious and imperishable body (1 Cor 15:35–58; Phil 3:20–21).

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[104] Rosner, *Known by God,* chapter 4, para. 17, location 1639.
[105] Dunn, *Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 51–78.
[106] Johnston, "Humanity," 564.
[107] In the Pauline epistles, the word "body" differs from another commonly used word "flesh." The latter has a wider scope of meanings, ranging from the physical body to human weakness (Rom 7:18; 11:13–14; 2 Cor 4:11; Gal 1:15–16; 5:24).
[108] Dunn, *Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 76.

Three Central Ideas Pertaining to Biblical Identity as God's Children

Rosner's biblical identities revolve around three central ideas: the image of God, known by God, and in Christ—all contributing to the core identity as the children of God.[109] The following section discusses the theology that substantiates these identity claims and their significance to a Christian's social identities and relationships.

The Image of God

The discussion concerning the "image" and "likeness" of God in Gen 1:27–28 has a long and contested history. Scholars in systematic theology, missiology, and Christian education, contribute to the discussion from different perspectives. To Rosner, the image of God denotes a family relationship in which humans are made to resemble the family head's likeness.[110] He uses the illustration of how siblings share the same family physical attributes and likeness as their parent. According to Rosner, since humans bear God's image and likeness, Christians are called to imitate him as his beloved children and heirs. Sonship and daughtership are also "seen as a central category not only for redemption but also for creation and new creation."[111] As creatures, humans bear the image and likeness of God with the best sense of being known by God as his children (1 Pet 1:14).

Consequently, Adam and Eve's transgression was a crisis of identity. The image of God was defaced when humankind was deceived by the counterclaims of the serpent, tempting them to seek independence from God, which eventually led to disobedience. Humans forfeited the privilege and honour to cherish Divine-human intimacy, cutting themselves off from the Almighty God. This separation at the Fall disoriented the

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[109] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 2, para. 34–37, location 731–46.
[110] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 5, para. 6, location 2052.
[111] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 5, para. 20, location 2146.

human's relationship—our relationship—with God, others, themselves, and the created world. Howard A. Snyder and Joel Scandrett state that sin not only brings estrangement between humans and the Creator but also alienates the human family from one another.[112] For example, they say that the first "fruit" of alienation from God is "the man blaming the woman—and indirectly, God himself" (Gen 3:12), in which such estrangement from God multiplied the alienation in the entire web of human interrelationships.[113]

Also, before the Fall, God's glory and love substantiated and perfected human relationships and a person's inner life (Gen 2:23–25; 1 John 4:18). After the Fall, Adam's fear and anxiety are signs of internal dividedness and self-alienation driven by alienation from God and others (Gen 3:10).[114] From this, Snyder and Scandrett suggest that it is an inevitable result that the earth and all creations also suffered and faced alienation, "subjected to futility," and the "bondage to decay" (Gen 3:17–19; Rom 8:20–22).[115] Nevertheless, God's image in his children is not lost, for the atonement of Christ brings restoration to the brokenness in relationships and frees humans from the bondage of sin.

Known by God

As children of God, the Heavenly Parent has immense knowledge about his children's true selves and life purposes. The Hebrew word *yāḏaʿ* (to know) does not merely refer to intellectual knowledge but the most intimate way of knowing (Gen 4:1). In Genesis, Abraham is known and invited by God to bless all nations (Gen 18:18–19). In Exodus, God says to Moses, "I know you by name, and you have found favour with me" (Exod

[112] Snyder and Scandrett, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, 68–71.
[113] Snyder and Scandrett, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, 71.
[114] Snyder and Scandrett, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, 73–74.
[115] Snyder and Scandrett, *Salvation Means Creation Healed*, 77.

33:11–12). In 2 Sam 7, David expresses that the Lord knows his servant immensely and that no one is like him (2 Sam 7:20–22). In Psalms, the psalmist says, "you have searched me, Lord, and you *know* me," affirming that God's knowledge of a person is far greater than one's knowledge of self in all circumstances (Ps 139:1–16). Thus, in a Divine-human relationship, the two sides that "believers know God and are also known by him" coexist, and both are of vital importance.[116] Moreover, Jeremiah's vocation to serve as God's mouthpiece exemplifies that being known and chosen by God includes the importance of being "set apart" for the Lord's kingdom and glory (Jer 1:5–6). A Christian's self and social identity are deeply rooted in the Lord's will in knowing, loving, and choosing them.[117]

In other words, being known by God as his beloved children includes the theological conviction that Christians belong to him (i.e., ownership) and are chosen by him for a Divine purpose.[118] God adopts Israel as his son at the time of the Exodus (Exod 4:22–23). He also adopts and chooses David and Israel as his son in the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7:14). Prophet Amos also proclaims that the Lord has intentionally chosen the Israelites as his holy nation (Amos 3:2). John Calvin proposes that "to be known by God simply means to be counted among his sons."[119] F. F. Bruce suggests that "there is no difference between being known by God and being chosen by him."[120] Instead, Christians are chosen and known to glorify the Father's name (Isa 43:7).[121] This understanding of

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[116] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 6, para. 15, location 2408.
[117] Packer, *Knowing God*, 41–42.
[118] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 6, para. 30, location 2485.
[119] Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries: 1 Corinthians*, 173.
[120] Bruce, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 202.
[121] The word "chosen" by Rosner does not mean Christians are pre-destined to be saved. Rosner's usage simply refers to God's active participation in human history to make his salvation available to humanity.

sonship and daughtership is at the centre of helping humans define the extent of knowledge, ownership, and election concerning God and their meaning of existence. Prophet Hosea proclaims that "when Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt, I called my son" (Hos 11:1). This *ḥesed* love is the Parent's outpouring mercy and loving-kindness to his children. Thus, being known by God is not merely a question in the intellectual category. Instead, it is both a relational and identity issue because the acknowledgment of being known by God prompts the discernment of ownership, purpose, identity, affection, and action, both as an individual and as a community in God's kingdom. To live as sons and daughters in the Parent's family prompts faithful individuals to live out his family's "image" and "likeness" together on earth.

Thus, the notion of God as the Parent includes the belief that the individual's well-being relies on the Caregiver. The profound attachment to the Parent is an assurance of fullness and wellness in a child's life.[122] To illustrate this, McLean Loyola and Rosner make references to attachment theory in the field of psychology, discussing how the parent-child relationship forms a stable sense of others. Attachment theory proposes that a person's secure early attachment relationships advocate the development of a positive self-concept and one's ability to establish trustful relationships.[123] A parent is a child's source of love, joy, security, and identity reference that a child seeks. The same idea holds in a Divine-human relationship. Additionally, children in a household are subjected to the "house rules" and parental instructions for protection, mutual harmony, common good, and blessings. Thus, the acknowledgment of being owned, known, and loved by the

[122] Loyola and Rosner, "Theology and Human Flourishing," 65–83.
[123] Loyola and Rosner, "Theology and Human Flourishing," 65–83.

gracious Caregiver signifies a moral and virtuous direction toward holy living (1 Tim 6:11–12).

Being known and owned by God as his children denote the exercise of obedience. The Christian view stresses that the human identity can only be understood in light of obedience to the Triune God's "creating, redeeming, and sanctifying activity."[124] Pursuing the human's true identity requires submission and faithful obedience to the Parent's will and works. For instance, in the Gospels, Jesus remains to be God's faithful and obedient Son throughout his entire life (Matt 4:1–11; Luke 23:46). Jesus demonstrates that one's true identity can only be found in obedience and dependence on God. He also sets the exemplar for Christians that faithful obedience to the Lord is necessary for allowing one's true self to become a stream of blessings in different relationships and social contexts (Matt 22:36–40). Jesus demonstrates that as God's children, Christians are called to love others in self-denial and self-giving ways.

Jesus' teaching contradicts today's social norms and cultural narratives. When the world declares that following one's heart will lead to finding the true self, the Bible states that humans need to attach to the Lord and surrender to his Divine will. Only in such a way can the meaning of existence be found, and divinely-given vocations and potentials can be fully actualized.[125] God's children are called to live out the "family likeness" by intimately knowing and attaching to the Parent as the source of faith, hope, love, and strength (John 15:5; 1 Cor 13:13). Conversely, the Parent's immense knowledge and love for the children heightens the children's desire to get closer to him and know more about him in relational and intimate ways.

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[124] Vanhoozer, "Human Being, Individual and Social," 163.
[125] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 5, para. 40, location 2244.

In Christ

Rosner contends that the pursuit of finding one's identity *in* Christ is rooted in these theological truths that: "1. The identity of Jesus Christ as the Son of Man and the Son of God; 2. The fact that Jesus is known by God as his Son; 3. The link between Divine adoption and union with God's Son; and the way in which being in union with the Son of God gives us our identity."[126] Rosner draws on the Gospel of John to substantiate these claims. First, Jesus says, "I am the good Shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:14–15). The intimacy between Jesus and his sheep is "grounded upon the intimacy between the Father and the Son."[127] Through the Sonship of Jesus Christ, humans can restore the intimate relationship with the Parent. Christians are saved by grace through faith, from which Jesus' righteousness is shared (Eph 2:8–9). Christians are redeemed in Christ as the lost children (Luke 15:11–32).

In fact, in the Gospel of John, Jesus has extended conversations with seven individuals in which these dialogues contribute to the thematic development of being deeply known by God.[128] In these conversations, "Jesus deals with them differently, according to their individual circumstances."[129] For example, Jesus knows and addresses the Samaritan woman in an immanent manner, and this encounter prompts her to make Jesus known to others. Her reaction in approaching and telling others about Jesus encourages the elimination of alienation between humans (John 4:6, 28–30).

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[126] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 8, para. 40, location 2244.

[127] Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 387.

[128] The seven persons include Nathanael (John: 47–51); Nicodemus (John 3:1–21); Samaritan Woman (John 4:7–26); Martha (John 11:20–27); Pilate (John 18:33–19:12); Mary Magdalene (John 20:14–17); and Peter (John 21:15–22).

[129] Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory*, 15–16.

In contrast, the Gospels also show that Jesus makes a distinction between those he knows and those he does not know. In the Sermon on the Mount, he claims not to know the false prophets (Matt 7:23). In the parables of the ten virgins, there is a clear distinction between knowing the wise virgins versus not knowing the foolish virgins (Matt 25:12). Profound joy, hope, and blessed reassurance are given to those known by Jesus, who believe in him, and live with him (Matt 10:32–33; Luke 12:8–9).

In the book of Revelation, the letters to the seven churches begin with the two words: "I know." Jesus Christ recognizes the circumstances that his churches and people are facing. He knows their hearts, from their faithfulness for Christ to their inner struggles amid persecutions and sufferings (Rev 2:9–3:22). In Revelation 20, names that are written in the Book of Life signify that the individuals are forever known, redeemed, and loved in Christ.

The New Testament also teaches that being known in Christ renders the possibility to restore the relationship with the Father in Christ and through Christ. The Apostle Peter states that Christians represent a community of royal priesthood that strives for holy living (1 Pet 2:9). He urges Christians to witness to Christ's love and victory over sin and death within the early Christian's situated social structure (1 Pet 2:9–15), work structure (1 Pet 2:18–21), and family structure (1 Pet 3:1–7). As such, Christians relate to one another as siblings rather than strangers in Christ, fellowshipping, praying, loving, and serving one another for the glory of the Lord (1 Pet 4:7–11). At the same time, Christians re-orient their existing social relationships within their respective households, communities, workplaces, and countries through Christ's love and truth. In

these relationships, Christians are called by the Lord to demonstrate the "family likeness" and the "fruits" (Gal 5:22–23).

For instance, in the Epistle of Philemon, Paul appeals to Philemon to re-orient his master-slave relationship with Onesimus through the brotherhood in Christ. Paul is not saying Philemon should disregard the current social structure and relationship. Instead, he encourages those known by Christ to re-orient these relationships in accordance with the love and command of God (1 Phlm 16). Likewise, 1 Peter 3:1–8 also encourages the women believers to re-orient their marriage relationships from a christological perspective and surrender to their non-Christian husbands with love and respect. Christ's redemptive love enables Christians to restore and enrich existing relationships in this life with eschatological dimensions and spiritual significance.

As siblings in Christ who live as a faithful community, Christians identify and relate to each other under the divine adoption and union in Christ. Paul Trebilco examines how Christians in the days of the New Testament perceive themselves in relation to other believers. Specifically, his study explores the "insider language" that the early Christians used to relate among themselves, such as referring to one another as brothers and sisters, believers, saints, assemblies, disciples, and Christians. Among these terms, Trebilco believes the term "brother" is the most common term used to self-identify oneself and address others. The usage indicates "the importance and closeness of the early Christian communities and the significance of the familial ethos for these communities."[130] It anchors upon the theological understanding that Christ is "the firstborn within a large family" (Rom 8:29) and Christians are siblings in Christ,

[130] Trebilco, *Self Designations,* 298.

surrendering to the same Father in heaven. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the words Christians use among the faith community help define mutual accountability, submission, cohesion, and intimacy.[131] Identifying each other as siblings in Christ (i.e., brothers and sisters) affirms the "social relations, to emotional ties, to harmony and concord, as well as to a common ancestry through the work of Christ."[132] This relationship in Christ has a rich range of links to "Christology, ecclesiology, ethics, and so on."[133] The familial metaphor also aligns with the practice of Christian gatherings taking place in each other's houses.[134]

Co-humanity in Christ

It is important to note that Christians of the early church gathered not only for religious reasons. They also practiced a form of co-humanity according to God's creation mandate. Christian anthropologists understand human beings as social creatures, "defined by social interdependence and responsibility."[135] Ray S. Anderson states that the creation account of Adam and Eve includes the social constitution in God's design that "humanity is co-humanity."[136] Anderson sees that a human is a relational and communal being in which "existence as a human being is fundamentally existence with regard to the other."[137] Likewise, psychologists such as Daphna Oyserman, et al., state that people are likely to define themselves in terms of what is relevant in their time, place, and network of relationships.[138] As a result, living in the form of co-humanity means that the singularity

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[131] Trebilco, *Self Designations*, 304.
[132] Trebilco, *Self Designations*, 308.
[133] Trebilco, *Self Designations*, 308.
[134] Trebilco, *Self Designations*, 308.
[135] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 4, para. 18, location 1654.
[136] Anderson, *Being Human*, 37.
[137] Anderson, *Being Human*, 37; 44.
[138] Oyserman, et al., "Self, Self Concept, and Identity," 76.

of being a human person is never separated from the significant encounters with other humans.[139] At the core of the structure of humanity is co-humanity, in which depths of knowledge concerning human natures and identities are expressed and experienced.[140] This view is also shared by David A. Jopling, who further elaborates on the paradoxical reality in which "persons come to know themselves in being known by persons other than themselves."[141] Likewise, Karl Barth's view of co-humanity can be summarized in a threefold statement: "humanity is a determination of the Word of God, a determination of being with others, and the determination of one person with the other."[142] This understanding does not mean a person dissolves one's individuality in co-humanity settings and loses uniqueness. Instead, a person who lives and interacts with others "results in a determination of humanity in its singularity as well as its plurality."[143] Barth's view is in line with Martin Buber's description of the "I-Thou" (I-and-God) and "I-thou" (I-and-human-other) relationship, in which a person encounters one's humanness and identity in others and God.[144] Michael Horton, a Christian theologian, suggests that God never intended to create humans as self-sufficient beings with individuated nature and that the perception of self as an autonomous individual does not exist.[145]

In other words, the reciprocity of one's relation first to God, then to others, has ontological significance to one's self-knowledge and engagement in this world.[146] Today,

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[139] Anderson, *Being Human*, 54.
[140] Anderson, *Being Human*, 45.
[141] Jopling, *Self Knowledge and the Self*, 166.
[142] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, volume 3, section 2, 243.
[143] Anderson, *Being Human*, 45.
[144] Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Walter Kaufman, 62.
[145] Horton, *Christian Faith*, 87.
[146] Anderson, *Being Human,* 48.

a narrow view of individuality in the constitution of humanity is caused by the conventional understanding of the psychological self, "the self viewed as a discrete entity, individuated within the species as an object of study or of self-reflection."[147] Humanity as co-humanity means a holistic encounter is necessary to determine the human identity through human-others. This encounter does not reduce the distinctive nature of one's humanness but instead sheds light on one's self-determination. Suppose the relationship of Adam and Eve symbolizes the most intimate form of human-to-human relationship and co-humanity. In this case, the Church body is the Divine-chosen entity to re-live the essence of co-humanity under the splendor of the King; a glorious way of living that was lost at the Fall.

Anderson sees that love and attachment through various relationships are fundamental needs of human personhood. He states that "self-existence is a struggle between the reality of individuality and community. Because humanity is originally and essentially co-humanity, the fundamental affirmation of human existence is surely one of relatedness" (Gen 2:18).[148] Moreover, the centrality in co-humanity, or the core of human relatedness, is a social relationship in which God's outpouring love manifests in the midst. God has created humans as relational beings in need of authentic love and attachment. Through different forms of loving sacrifice among humanity, these relational expressions summon goodness and blessings among creations, which manifest the Creator's glory.[149]

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[147] Anderson, *Being Human*, 49.
[148] Anderson, *Being Human*, 168.
[149] Anderson, *Being Human*, 169.

Extrapolating from this discussion, congregational singing can be recognized as a relational engagement, corporate witness, communal experience, and holistic engagement that exemplifies the essence of co-humanity and interdependence of worshippers under the Triune God. On the one hand, congregational worship is a divine invitation to his worship community, which comprises psycho-physical creatures, embodied souls, and ensouled bodies engaging in praise and adoration dynamically, interactively, holistically, and corporately.[150] The children's ascending praises and exaltations to God in a social setting re-orient the worshippers' knowledge and the relationship concerning God, others, self, and the created world. On the other hand, the uttered words and embodiment are powerful witnesses of the embodied truth to those unaware of their true selves in Christ.[151] Therefore, congregational singing is not an inward-serving activity exclusively for churchgoers. It is a formative, restorative, and missional group activity that deserves greater depth of study. The following section discusses congregational singing and its significance to the Christian identity.

Congregational Singing as a Source to Know about God, Self, and Others

I adopt Brian Wren's definition of congregational singing as "anything sung by a group of people assembled to worship God, not as a presentation to some other group, but as a vehicle for their worship. The content, musical style, and liturgical function of such songs can be quite varied, but if it is group singing, community singing, it is congregational singing."[152] In essence, the congregational song is by nature "corporate, corporeal, and

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[150] Vanhoozer, "Human Being, Individual and Social," 164.

[151] Kreider and Kreider, *Worship and Mission after Christendom*, chapter 10, para. 6, location 3096.

[152] Wren, *Praying Twice*, chapter 1, para. 4, location 148.

inclusive; at its best, it is creedal, ecclesial, inspirational, and evangelical."[153] In the Christian tradition, believers gather to sing praise and express their thanksgiving, adoration, confession, lamentation, and so on to the Lord.[154] Karen B. Westerfield Tucker sees that when Christians gather to sing, they are imitating the angelic choir's praise to God (Luke 2:13–14), are following the example of Jesus who sang at the last meal with his followers (Matt 26:30; Mark 14:26), and are equipping themselves "to perpetuate a pairing of worship and evangelism taken up by Paul—in jail" (Acts 16:25).[155] Westerfield Tucker believes the early church's singing discourse is a form of "faithful performance of the gospel," which, as Swinton writes, advocates the "complex dynamics of the human encounter with God" in an ecclesial setting.[156] The lyrical works describe who God is, what he has done, and who humanity is in relation to him and one another. Throughout different centuries, inspired composers "give life to a text and energy to the faith expressed, and may by their melodies and harmonies assist in the text appropriation or internalization."[157]

In this case, expressing the music through the intertwining voices of theologians and musicians in the ecclesial settings serve as a "resonant witness" of the gospel.[158] God's attributes and works are emphasized, remembered, celebrated, and reassured in the midst. I resonate with Constance M. Cherry that the overarching message in Sunday corporate worship singing is primarily:

> A proclamation of the whole story of who God is and what God has done through his mighty acts of salvation throughout history. God's story includes his acts of

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[153] Wren, *Praying Twice*, chapter 2, para. 98, location 1767.
[154] Westerfield Tucker, "Song as a Sign," chapter 1, para. 1, location 272.
[155] Westerfield Tucker, "Song as a Sign," chapter 1, para. 1, location 272.
[156] Swinton, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, chapter 1, para. 3, location 208.
[157] Westerfield Tucker, "Song as a Sign," chapter 1, para. 2, location 283.
[158] Begbie and Guthrie, *Resonant Witness*, introduction, para. 24, location 153.

> creation, perfect fellowship between the Creator and human beings, the tragic alienation of Creator and humanity, redemption in Jesus Christ, the re-creation of all things upon Christ's return, and the establishment of his eternal kingdom.[159]

Praise and exaltation in the form of singing uplift the lordship of the Triune God over his worshippers and all creation. Instructions for Christian living are reiterated and emphasized, prompting the children of God to live out the Father's will.

In other words, the congregational song is "creedal" because the lyrics reflect and shape the congregant's shared convictions and understanding of God, others, and themself.[160] Through recurring and repeating communal singing events, the tune and meaning of the words become familiarized, memorized, internalized, and contextualized.[161] The singing experience testifies to the Christian faith by offering distinctive biblical and theological claims, teachings, and convictions concerning identity and meaning of existence, thus prompting responses from both the singers and the listeners.[162]

Congregational Singing as Embodied Practice of Faith

Hymn singing is an embodied practice of faith that involves music-making and music-hearing. Begbie and Steven R. Guthrie define music-making as "the intentional *production* of temporally organized patterns of pitched sounds" and music-hearing as "the *perception* of temporally organized patterns of pitched sounds as music."[163] As such, Begbie and Guthrie suggest that singing is both socially and culturally contingent because "the way we make and hear music is shaped by our relations to and perception of

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[159] Cherry, *Worship Architect*, chapter 10, para. 5, location 3540.
[160] Wren, *Praying Twice*, chapter 2, para. 98, location 1767.
[161] Wren, *Praying Twice*, chapter 2, para. 118–20, location 1887–1906.
[162] King, *Pathways*, chapter 9, para. 3, location 2118.
[163] Begbie and Guthrie, *Resonant Witness*, introduction, para. 12, location 80.

others—our social settings, all the way from one-to-one relationships to very large groupings."[164] Undoubtedly, no worship song, song set, or worship service can capture the immense richness of the overarching Divine-human narrative. Yet, over time, the biblical truth unfolds through cycles and cycles of singing the lyrics together, thus shaping the worshippers' consciousness before the Almighty One and how worshippers relate to others. Marva Dawn believes that when congregational singing is prepared and implemented with proper knowledge and attitude, the corporate activity can offer "countless possibilities, endless resources, [and] innumerable ways to encounter" God's transcending and immanent presence, enabling the worshippers to love and sacrifice for others faithfully.[165]

As a result, a careful and thorough study of a church or faith community's Sunday song album can help understand the sung theology. Helen Cameron suggests that four categories of theology take place in a church setting: normative, formal, espoused, and operant theology.[166] A study of the lyrics, music, and context of singing can also provide insights pertaining to the formative effects of congregational singing. This exploration also helps understand how the worshippers' affections, thoughts, and behaviours react and respond amid congregational singing. For instance, Robert Jourdain suggests that when individuals describe how they can feel a rhythm, they refer to the emotional pleasure they gain by processing the rhythm in the sensory and motor system.[167] This experience that Jourdain talks about includes the entire singing engagement—from the person processing the lyrics through the eyes and music from the ears to their brains, to

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[164] Begbie and Guthrie, *Resonant Witness*, introduction, para. 13, location 90.
[165] Dawn, *Royal Waste of Time*, chapter 1, para. 27, location 127.
[166] Cameron et al., *Talking about God*, chapter 4, para 11–13. location 964–987.
[167] Jourdain, *Music, the Brain, and Ecstasy*, 148–49.

the inhaling and exhaling in singing with emotions, will, and spirit. The physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions are fully engaged and immersed in such social and collective expressions. In those moments, the body and spirit are inseparable—bodily commitment and expression invite a commitment and expression of the spirit.[168] This understanding of singing as a holistic activity resonates with the holistic view of humanity mentioned above.

Furthermore, worshippers intertwine their voices in congregational singing, dynamically connecting, listening, and responding to one another through aural and spatial forms. The congregational lyrics and tunes remind the participants that Christians are embraced in the love and grace of Christ, unified as a Christ-centred community (Col 3:16). Singers are joined in the collective whole while simultaneously retaining each person's individuality.

Put differently, the corporate musical expression through sung words is essentially a theology in action grounded upon Christian trinitarian orthodoxy, rooted in Scripture, and classically expressed in the church's ecumenical creeds.[169] Westerfield Tucker contends that Christian song is perceived as an "existential counterpart to church teaching, the vital flesh, and blood upon the skeletal structure of doctrine." While I concur with Tucker in the above, her suggestion that "'what is confessed with the lips is both to reflect and to shape what is 'believed in the heart' (Rom 10:9)" needs further research to validate.[170] Indeed, this could be an overstatement because, in my ministry practice, some congregants do not seem to process or interpret all the meanings and

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[168] Wren, *Praying Twice*, chapter 2, para. 110, location 1837.
[169] Begbie and Guthrie, *Resonant Witness,* introduction, para. 21, location 123.
[170] Westerfield Tucker, "Song as a Sign and Means of Christian Unity," chapter 1, para. 2, location 283.

implications behind every single word, phrase, or idea they sing. Therefore, the overarching conviction that the uttered lyrics represent a confession of a community's beliefs and theological claims remains worthy of being studied and validated in different research contexts.

On the one hand, I believe that lyrics contain the formative effect to "either enlarge and develop Christian faith, or distort and diminish it."[171] On the other hand, it is my conviction that a song's meaning is not bound by its lyrics. Scholars such as Ion Olteteanu suggest that a song's meaning is not fixed. Instead, the singers or listeners are active interpreters who develop "an essentially personal relationship with music."[172] The congregants, who are the music performers before the Lord, present the hearts with the music in their capacity of understanding, feelings, and interpretations. The worship leaders, musicians, and congregants also contribute to the music-making and meaning-making process themselves.

An example of this meaning-making process is the role of memory. Wren states that messages and images of a particular congregational song initially engage the worshipper in the world of music, theology, culture, and aesthetics.[173] However, as the worshipper gets more familiar with the lyrics, the words become "unimportant compared with the enjoyment of the tune. . . because music holds the words in memory, they can break into consciousness."[174] Thus, familiar hymns or songs register in the memory along with other life memories and experiences that "accompany the singers throughout their

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[171] Wren, *Praying Twice*, chapter 1, para. 2, location 140.
[172] Olteteanu, "Formative Function," 218.
[173] Wren, *Praying Twice*, chapter, para. 118–20, location 1887–1906.
[174] Wren, *Praying Twice*, chapter 2, para. 123, location 1916.

lives and surface in ordinary places, often without bidding, to reinterpret experience."[175] Memory that attaches to a song can contain meaning-significance beyond the lyrical meanings. This process of re-contextualization and internalization in each worshipper's life is necessary, natural, and needed in congregational singing.

The Role of Rosner's Work in the Study of Congregational Songs

Rosner's work provides a coherent approach to bringing together multifaceted identity descriptions in the Bible. Rosner uses this Parent-child relationship to incorporate the Creator/creation, Redeemer/redeemed, Lover/beloved, and Owner/belonged dimensions. These identity categories are often found in worship songs.[176] Rosner's biblical identity outlines the top-down and horizontal dimensions between God-human and human-to-human relationships.

That said, this research does not perceive Rosner's work as the optimal and final way to categorize all the biblical identities expressed in the Bible. There are three reasons for this. First, although it is possible to allocate and "plug in" biblical identities into Rosner's work, yet doing so eliminates the individual uniqueness and messages different identity accounts try to convey. For example, how does the biblical account of God as the "Judge" in Ecclesiastes 3 expressed in the worship song relate to Rosner's model? Should Christians perceive judge as a subset of "Parent/child" or a subset of "known by God"? There are many ways to connect and group identities in a way that makes theological sense. Therefore, I do not intend to forcefully "plug in" all the identities in the song list to Rosner's work to justify their legitimacy.

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[175] Clark, *Music in Churches*, 6.
[176] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 3, para. 5, location 843.

Second, a "plug-in" approach interferes with my research's mandate to exercise pastoral listening and overlooks how specific identities become meaningful to the research participants. Individuals may refer to particular song themes, ideas, or phrases that correlate to the Bible but not precisely what the Bible conveys. For example, I recall a contemporary Cantonese worship song called "The Lord Is My Restful Harbour." This song's name and theme share a similar idea to the Lord as my refuge (Ps 46:1). At the same time, due to geographical uniqueness and the daily living experience in Hong Kong, the idea of a calm and restful harbour is far more vivid and substantial to a Hong Konger than a Torontonian. Indeed, "harbour" contains a similar level of contextual relevance and cultural significance to a Hong Kong worshipper as "refuge" means to someone who lives in the Middle East area during the Old Testament times. They both represent a safe place and a source of protection.

Third, Cantonese worshippers are not trained to think and categorize songs using Rosner's prescribed models. As a result, it is more appropriate to use Rosner's language to summarize the identities in the songs, but not perceive it as an exclusive method to categorize biblical identities. I am mindful of individuals' stories and experiences in the qualitative interview because storytelling can express identities. Besides, I am also aware that research participants may be incapable of naming the exact identity terms from the Bible but can recall specific song names, lyrics, and overarching ideas.

Going through Some Biblical Identities Expressed in the Worship Songs

I am using my church's three-year Sunday worship song list as a sample dataset to explore biblical identities in the songs. The list of worship songs is included in Appendix 1 as a reference. This list contains the weekly worship leader's song selections for my

church's worship service over three years. To reiterate, I acknowledge that song albums between Greater Toronto Area Cantonese churches differ. Yet, song categories, themes, theologies, and ideologies contained in congregational songs should be similar due to similar denominational origins, shared cultures, and mutual music resources. Later, I apply the summary of findings to compare with what the interviewees from other churches believe to be their identity shaping songs and experiences.

I believe this localized approach is more suitable than asking the interviewees to choose from a list of songs that I or someone else believe to be important concerning identity shaping. For instance, Lester Ruth conducted a research study with the Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) top 25 songs. This approach would not work in my research context for two reasons. First, a list of hit songs could be driven by marketing reasons or digital algorithms rather than the songs' identity shaping capabilities.[177] Second, Cantonese Christian music has no centralized copyright organization like the CCLI; thus, any list of top songs would be unrepresentative.

In contrast, my qualitative research includes a "free recall" question by inviting the interviewees to share the songs, lyrics, and phrases they believe have identity shaping influences and formational impacts on themselves. A similar approach has been used by Glenn P. Packiam, who studies the theology of hope in congregational singing.[178] This "free recall" element encourages worshippers to express their identity shaping and contextualization process in congregational singing, thus addressing my study's primary focus and interest. Here I am also following a similar collection method in Packiam's study of the theology of hope. For example, Packiam is interested in nouns, pronouns,

[177] Ruth, "Some Similarities and Differences," 68–86.
[178] Packiam, "Worship and the World to Come," 163.

and verbs pertaining to Divine and human usage. As for my research, biblical identities can be expressed in nouns (e.g., Saviour) and verbs (e.g., to save or redeem entails a Redeemer and a beneficiary). Identities can also be expressed in direct communication (e.g., the Lord as Creator) or indirect communication (e.g., the metaphor of God as the vine and his people as branches). Also, identities can be implied in descriptive accounts of God's work (e.g., the idea of Almighty God is embedded in describing the creation's beauty). There are countless ways to express identities. Thus, I pay attention to these descriptions when the research participants recall them in the qualitative interview.

Nouns and Verbs

The exercise to go through the lyrics used at my church provides a basis for understanding how God's overarching narrative (i.e., Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration) is expressed in most Sunday congregational singing song sets. Surely, different Sundays may have a different proportion and emphasis in these themes. And yet, the overarching narrative is convincingly apparent when factoring in the rounds of weekly singing and reinforcement. God's narrative framework is necessary for worshippers because humans "think in stories in order to weave together into a coherent whole," to understand their meaning of existence and the world around them.[179] As such, the names worshippers use to identify God and themselves in the songs contribute to forming the God-human and human-to-human narratives.

First, many congregational songs used during Sunday services relate to praising God as the King, Creator, Holy One, Master, Father, and Almighty. In Rosner's terminology, these themes can be categorized under the "known by God" category

[179] Anderson and Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals*, chapter 1, para. 5, location 374.

because they emphasize the transcendence of the Almighty God, who knows and reigns over all creations. God's omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient natures are proclaimed and elaborated on in these song accounts.[180] Specific biblical names and relational claims can be found in many of the lyrical works, such as "Most High God," "Lord my Banner," "Lord of Peace," "The Lord of Hosts," and so on.

God's attributes do not only come up as nouns but can also be expressed as adjectives. Examples include "merciful," "compassionate," "majestic," "loving," "eternal," and "faithful." Referents that describe a worshipper's relationship with God include "servant," "citizen," "children," and "creation." Musically reciting these nouns resonate with the idea of naming and self-identification mentioned above. The naming entails ownership, intimacy, authority, and relationship. Likewise, verb choices that describe God's active participation are used, such as "manifest," "create," "save," "rescue," "come," "pour down," and so on. In most cases, verbs suggest appropriate attitudes and roles to the worshippers, helping the worshippers understand the top-down hierarchical identity between the transcendent God and the worshippers. Examples like "to kneel," "to bow," "to praise," "to confess," and "to adore" are verbs that contain such connotations.

Second, a central theme of Sunday worship relates to the salvific works and fulfillment in Jesus Christ. This theme is prominent in almost all Sunday services because Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, death, and resurrection are the reasons why Christians gather on Sundays to worship. This "in Christ" category recurs in every weekly service, highlighting that worshippers as redeemed sinners are the beneficiaries of Christ's

[180] Frame, "Omnipotence, Omniscience, and Omnipresence of God," [no page number].

atonement and humility (Phil 2:6–11; 1 John 4:7–21). Words such as “atonement,” “salvation,” “forgiveness,” and so on are used to depict Jesus’ redemptive love and actions. The ideas of being known and chosen by God are also intertwined in Christ-centred songs. Contrarily, fewer songs expound on the idea of humans being made in God’s image. Often, the concepts of being created, saved, known, and chosen by God are reiterated in the singing. This “in Christ” category also includes the theology of the immanent God. Jesus Christ is the Incarnated God to “heal,” “comfort,” “journey alongside,” and “offer hope” to individuals who call on his name. He is the Messiah who has come to “understand,” “reach out,” “enable,” and “empower” those who seek him wholeheartedly. This “in Christ” category is theologically rich and multifaceted. The theology of sin and salvation, grace and condemnation, hope and resurrection, ecclesiology and eschatology, and many more can be included in this category. That being said, one common understanding behind all these themes is that Christ’s attributes and works can only be fulfilled and found in him. As Luke says, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Third, congregational songs are not limited to depicting and describing God’s attributes and works. Many lyrics and themes urge the singers to respond to God in action, commit to virtuous living and seek a change in their hearts, mindset, and will. Examples of verbs include “believe,” “surrender,” “pray,” “submit,” “follow,” “dedicate,” and “offer” oneself to God. Moreover, verb choices such as “love,” “serve,” “sacrifice,” “make,” “tell,” “do,” and “offer” are terms used to express one’s willingness to love God by loving others. In my analysis, a vast number of Cantonese worship songs

used on Sunday mornings contain the invitation to live a missional life, including the ideas of virtuous living, sharing the gospel, and making disciples for Christ. Another common theme is to serve others within the fellowship of God, resonating with the idea that Christians are spiritual siblings called and chosen by God. Sometimes, ordinary identity markers such as possessions, abilities, and other earthly matters (tangibles and intangibles) are mentioned. The worshippers are often prompted to re-prioritize and re-align these things and their lives with the biblical identities and the Divine call.

Human response is a crucial perspective in congregational singing. Congregational singing provides a corporate medium for worshippers to express their willingness to pursue holiness. It offers the moment for the singers to reconsider core beliefs, values, and identity markers in accordance with their sonship and daughtership in Christ. Moreover, sanctification and the conviction to become more like Christ are often presented as necessary Christian responses in many response songs. These ideas represent a way of godly living that members of God's family and the Holy Nation strive to pursue.

The image of God may seem to be the category that is the least mentioned in congregational songs. Human beings are often referred to as part of God's creation or the beneficiary of Christ's redemption instead of directly referring to their image and likeness in the creation account. This phenomenon could be caused by some composers' inability to convey such mystical, diverse, and complex theological ideas in short lyrical phrases.

Aside from the top-down hierarchy, some songs contain a horizontal dimension. These songs describe human-to-human relationships and how believers relate to others. Nouns such as "church," "fellowship," "we," and "us" can be found in some songs. Ideas such as gathering, togetherness, a body of believers, and a body of Christ are also

commonly used to highlight worshippers' relationships in and through Christ. Believers are encouraged to serve and love one another, just as the Lord has done in relation to them. However, using first-person plural nouns or pronouns does not necessarily mean the normative theology contained in the lyrics translates into operant theology. Ideas and phrases regarding human-to-human relationships as creatures, siblings, and a body of Christ do not automatically convert into a sense of belonging and mutual submission to one another; though these songs offer the ideal scenario of co-humanity.

In comparison, the first-person singular pronoun "I" or the possessive pronoun "my" have a much higher occurrence. Yet it is inconclusive that higher occurrence signifies a favour towards individualism or vice versa. A descriptive approach is needed to understand how the identity of "I" is perceived in communal singing. The singing discourse can also instill meanings towards the meaning-significance of these pronouns worshippers sing weekly. Finally, horizontal relationships in songs also include the depiction of Jesus as a "friend " (John 15:15), a fully Divine yet fully human being (John 1:14), or someone who knows the worshippers intimately and immensely.

Metaphors

Janet Martin Soskice discusses how metaphors generally fall into three primary groups: decorative, affective, and distinctive.[181] Her term decorative refers to ways of saying something that could not have the same effect in direct communication (e.g., Jesus is the true vine). Affection refers to the emotional realm a metaphor exerts and the feeling it evokes (e.g., the Lord is my shepherd, refuge, and shield). Distinctive refers to the unique cognitive construct enabling a meaning that cannot be re-expressed in other ways (e.g.,

[181] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religion Language*, 24–53.

God's children).[182] These three groups of metaphors are not mutually exclusive. Simply put, Rosner defines metaphors as "a form of communication that uses a familiar image to (1) say something (2) memorably (3) with feeling."[183]

The Bible contains detailed and vivid descriptions of the Lord's attributes and his relationships with the believers. My song analysis shows that descriptions such as the "rock" (Ps 18:2), "shepherd" (Ps 23:1), "potter" (Isa 64:8), "road" (John 14:6), and so on, do frequently appear in the songs. Metaphors that relate to human identity in Christ are terms such as "salt and light" (Matt 5:13–16), "one body" (1 Cor 10:17; Eph 4:1–6), and "household" (Eph 2:19–22). Note that some concepts, such as "body," are used more frequently than "bride" (Rev 19:7–8).

Based on my observation, it is easier for worshippers to relate and apply the sung messages to their immediate faith community and religious networks than in other social settings. There is a stronger correlation between how the Bible describes the relationships among Christians and how Christians relate to one another in contemporary contexts. However, other forms of social association, such as employer and employee, candidate and voter, service provider and customers, may be more challenging to relate to and apply.

Furthermore, God is "the Subject, Object, and Infinite Center" in a church's Sunday congregational worship.[184] In this case, the focus of congregational singing must be God Himself. Under this condition, it is legitimate to understand why standard relational terms such as "spouse," "worker," "citizen," "friend," or "co-workers,

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[182] Soskice, *Metaphor and Religion Language*, 24–53.
[183] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 9, para. 6, location 4081.
[184] Dawn, *Royal Waste of Time*, chapter 1, para. 26, location 126.

"students," and "classmates" do not appear in the songs. Nevertheless, this does not mean that contextualizing the sung words and theologies is absent in the worshippers' hearts. Suppose a proper response to God's love is to offer a self-giving life to those around. In that case, encountering God through the singing experience should prompt one's re-evaluation of self-identity and relationship with others, prompting alterations in the worshippers' thinking, feelings, and behaviours, even in these other social associations.

How Do Biblical Identities Inform the Ethnographic Research in Congregational Singing

In this chapter, I have discussed biblical identities using Rosner's model and showing how the term "children of God" can serve as a paradigm to gather and organize different biblical identities. The Parent-child relationship integrates the top-down hierarchy between God and his children intimately and forms a basis for Christians to understand the relationship with other believers. As God's children, believers experience the Parent's unconditional love and are called to imitate Christ by loving others, including those not yet part of or returned to God's family.[185] The mission to live in loving and sacrificial manners substantiates that Christian identity is fundamentally relational. As a result, the connection between identity and relationship is inseparable. Rosner's model provides an organized paradigm for discussing identity with research participants.

Despite this, I remain open to the likelihood that worshippers do not necessarily think in terms of Rosner's work. I believe that while the biblical identities offer their meanings to the worshippers, the worshippers also interpret and personalize biblical identities according to their knowledge, background, experience, and emotions. I agree

[185] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 9, para. 59, location 4378.

with Rosner, Anderson, Vanhoozer, and Packer that humans are social and relational beings. Thus congregational singing as a corporate event provides a sacred and relational space for everyone to contribute and create individual meanings (e.g., God is my source of strength) and corporate implications (e.g., everyone who worships with me is my brother and sister). Congregational singing as a collective experience renders a unique opportunity for meaning-making. As a result, I take the position that identity terminologies and ideas await human interpretation and reinterpretation. The interweaving voices of praise and communal presence help define the Christian's view of God, self, and others.

With this in mind, my qualitative research probes the participants to recall some significant identity categories that they can identify in weekly congregational singing. The interview conversations help determine if specific identity ideas contain stronger resonation with the worshippers and how these ideas inform their relationships with God and others, if any. I also probe to determine if they think there are reasons why some identities are emphasized while other identities are rare or excluded during Sunday services. Finally, I ask the participants to describe how contextualization occurs in congregational singing and also inquire if they can recall a song critical to their memories and upbringing. Perhaps there are identifiable accounts that they can remember of how the lyrical and musical meaning becomes vivid and precious to their identity. This research is interested in the identity shaping process and not merely identity groupings. A deeper understanding of contextualization in the singing can lead to more effective operational strategies in utilizing congregational singing as a source for identity shaping.

CHAPTER 3: HOW GROUP SINGING CONTRIBUTES TO SHAPING SOCIAL IDENTITY

In chapter 2, I began the discussion by connecting the concept of the Divine-human relationship with the lyrics and language used on Sunday mornings. From this, I sketched some of the significant identity categories worshippers sing weekly. This chapter continues the conversation by exploring how the music, the congregation, and the worship leaders contribute to the singing discourse from a social-psychological perspective. To reiterate, this research is interested in the formation aspect of the sung text rather than merely the song text. Studying congregational singing differs from analyzing words and musical notes on paper because the leader and congregants are also involved in the meaning-making process. The aural quality in worship music contributes to the singer's memory and communal experience, prompting the singers to form ways of association with respect to time, space, people, and music. Congregational singing is also a platform to do theology in a pluralistic and interdisciplinary context, correlating the questions and answers offered by the world and human experience (e.g., sociology, musicology, and culture) with the questions and answers provided by the Christian text and tradition.[186]

This chapter discusses how music in congregational singing contributes to an individual's emotional and relational wellbeing. This study proposes that when it comes to subjective preferences in musical styles and expressions in congregational singing, the

[186] Tracy, *Blessed Rage*, 43–52.

challenge to embrace musical diversity resides in identity more than in music. Musical identities weave with the singers' personal growth, social belonging, and spiritual memory. To recap, musical identity refers to "how we use music within our overall self-identities—to the extent to which music is important in our self-definitions as masculine-feminine, old-young, able-disabled, extravert-introvert, and so on."[187]

The second part of this chapter examines how group singing shapes a person's social self. With references to scenarios of group singing outside of a church setting, I intend to draw implications from how singing with others can cultivate group identity and association. This chapter shows that group singing affirms the presence and significance of one another, from which social connections and bondings can be strengthened. Individuals can also locate and affirm one another's social and cultural importance amid the group singing experience.

The third section of this chapter explains why the worship leader plays a crucial role in identity shaping during congregational singing. The core objectives of a worship leader includes facilitating holistic engagement of the worshipper and shaping a worship environment that is both God-centred and socio-culturally significant that prompts the re-orientation of self-concept to God and human others through christological orientations.[188] The worship leader's ability to sincerely express one's thoughts and feelings, accompanied by adequate technical skills and sufficient preparation, also impacts the identity shaping potential of congregational singing. This chapter summarizes how studying these three things (i.e., music, worship peers, and worship leader) drive and shape my ethnographic research.

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[187] Hargreaves, "Changing Identity of Music Identities," 5.
[188] Pierson, *Art of Curation in Worship*, 8.

The Role of Music and How It Informs Who We Are

Christian music can be perceived as a niche music genre that serves different religious and social purposes. Frank Burch Brown resonates with Calvin that there is Christian music for church use, outside-of-church use, entertainment with a God focus, and world music that promotes "good-morals."[189] Conceptually speaking, each category serves a different purpose depending on the context. Yet, many songs can serve multiple functions in practice and address different religious and communal needs. Although my study focuses on the context of Sunday congregational singing, exploring research studies of group singing within and outside the church can provide insightful knowledge about music and group singing's formational effects.

Broadly speaking, many theologians, sociologists, psychologists, and musicians believe that music can contribute to the wellness of an individual's holistic self and social relationships. For instance, Olteteanu suggests how group singing is a physiological and psychological form of mutual self-exposure to one another and relational engagement.[190] The singers express their will, emotion, imagination, and desire through the listening and singing process, which "develops an essential personal relationship with the music."[191]

The human voice evokes strong emotional feelings in both the listeners and singers. Human vocal music is by nature hospitable in that it invites others to join and form part of the music and singing discourse. Group singing can be understood as a unique moment of human connection and communication. Individuals can express and resonate with one another's emotions and thoughts that are otherwise difficult to

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[189] Burch Brown, *Inclusive yet Discerning*, chapter 6, para. 15, location 1287.
[190] Olteteanu, "Formative Function," 217.
[191] Olteteanu, "Formative Function," 218.

articulate in social settings. Thus, the music in worship connects believers to cohesively remember, feel, and respond to the "Subject and Object, the Infinite Center" of worship.[192] The singing of worship music amplifies the God-human narrative embedded in the songs, in which singers with shared beliefs and values find consolation, encouragement, affirmation, and comfort by participating in this corporate event.

J. Gertrud Tönsing discusses the role of music through the lens of neuroscience. She proposes that group singing triggers a higher emotional effect than listening because "singing together triggers the communal release of serotonin and oxytocin, the bonding hormone, and can even synchronize our heartbeats."[193] Tönsing suggests that when people share the same musical preferences and join together to sing, it is easier to notice the heightened emotional effect and to facilitate a mutual sense of ownership and belonging.[194] In other words, the sounds of music enable worshippers to encounter one another through shared emotional, musical, and faith experiences. Through the Triune God's redemptive love, truth, and Spirit, God's children can relate to one another cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually (Phil 2:1–2). Swathi Swaminathan and E. Glenn Schellenberg, in their exploration of music and emotion, make references to various psychological research, stating that humans can recognize emotions conveyed in the music while also experiencing emotions in response to the music.[195] On the one hand, they acknowledge that many variables influence a person's appreciation of a song, including its poetic quality, author's background, musical elements, memories, etc. Their work reflects that the interpretation of emotions is not merely personal and subjective.

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[192] Dawn, *Royal Waste of Time*, chapter 1, para. 26, location 126.
[193] Tönsing, "That Song Moves Me to Tears," 3.
[194] Tönsing, "That Song Moves Me to Tears," 3–6.
[195] Swaminathan and Schellenberg, "Current Emotion Research in Music Psychology," 194.

Instead, emotional responses through music can be triggered and influenced by cultural-specific and universal cues that the singers absorb in their everyday lives. Emotional responses to and through music are modes of communication learnable through persistent exposure and training.[196]

Begbie discusses emotion and music beyond the expression and interpretation level. He discusses how worship music can re-orient the congregation's emotions toward God.[197] Begbie states that music provides "a more concentrated emotional engagement with the object or objects with which we are dealing."[198] Thus, when human emotional lives are often "confused and transient," and our deepest desires latched on to objects other than God Himself, worship music offers a time and space to re-orient and re-wire the innermost desires and emotions to and through the Transcendent, Immanent, and Infinite God.[199] Music in worship is a medium God uses to fulfill his restorative and transformative purposes, from which He uses it to re-establish a person's and a community's emotional ties and desires.

Furthermore, Begbie criticizes a major weakness in many cognitive theories that treat music as something that "merely resembles, reflects, mirrors, [and] copies" existing emotions.[200] He says cognitive approaches "invariably fail to address the emotionally transformative effect of music" in individuals and communities.[201] Music can help us "discover something that we could feel, that we have not felt before," allowing the possibility of bringing new inspirations into our lives.[202] I resonate with Begbie that

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[196] Swaminathan and Schellenberg, "Current Emotion Research in Music Psychology," 190.
[197] Begbie, *Peculiar Orthodoxy*, chapter 3, para. 15, location 1634.
[198] Begbie, "Faithful Feelings," chapter 13, para. 51, location 3719.
[199] Begbie, "Faithful Feelings," chapter 13, para. 16, location 3560.
[200] Begbie, "Faithful Feelings," chapter 13, footnote, location 6702.
[201] Begbie, "Faithful Feelings," chapter 13, footnote, location 6702.
[202] Begbie, "Faithful Feelings," chapter 13, para. 53, location 3729.

worship music does not only influence the singers' physiological and mental levels, nor does it only allow them to respond to past events. More importantly, worship music points the worshippers to change their beliefs, will, and actions for the future. God uses worship music to allow singers to encounter his Divine presence, participate in his glorious plan, and provide a glimpse of his hope and glory, which will fully manifest in the future (Rev 4:1–11, 20).

That being said, music's reflexive quality is undoubtedly crucial to identity shaping. For example, Tia DeNora, a sociologist specializing in socio-cultural music study, invites her ethnographic participants to comment on how music serves as a form of self-affirmation and how different musical materials contribute to self-identity.[203] DeNora's finding further confirms that although song lyrics' cognitive content shapes a person's sense of self, music's aesthetic and affective attributes can also influence the identity-formation process. For instance, one of the respondents says she locates part of her self-identity in specific musical structures with certain instruments in the low register (i.e., she refers to them as the "juicy chords").[204] Her story supports the idea that determining one's musical identity forms part of the self-discovery journey.

David J. Elliott and Marissa Silverman argue that music as social praxis "provides powerful intersubjective contexts in which people of all ages and abilities can positively co-construct each other's musical–social–personal identities and narratives and, more deeply, co-construct empathetically each other as persons."[205] This co-construction process can be seen when individuals attend a concert. The attendants will pre-suppose

[203] DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 131.
[204] DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 69.
[205] Elliott and Silverman, "Identities and Music," 30.

that others who attend the show share similar musical identities and interests. If the music contains ethnomusical components, then a person often presupposes that others share the cultural or social interest. Individuals communicate and interpret one another through music and singing engagement.

Moreover, DeNora's study concludes that "music is a device or resource to which people turn to regulate themselves as aesthetic agents, as feeling, thinking and acting beings in their day-to-day lives."[206] This regulation underlies a process of reflexivity, which in turn provides the "building material of self-identity."[207] I am convinced that musical artifacts serve as aural mirrors, advocating self-determination and self-reflection through the process of listening, singing, and internalization. Music engagement is an aesthetic reflexive activity beyond musical tastes and preferences. It provides a pathway for an individual to search for one's self-meaning and existential purposes.[208]

Music Forms Individual Memory and Collective Memories

Don A. Saliers interviewed a group of mature adults, asking them which Christian songs meant most to them and why. One of the discussions relates to musical memory and body memory.[209] Saliers states that the music and singing are closely knitted with the memories of the five senses, along with the people and events involved. Saliers sees that music's formative and inspirational power is more prominent when the music is frequently repeated and reaches certain degrees of familiarity by the people. As such, multiple recurrences are crucial for music to form part of the human's incidental and

[206] DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 62.
[207] DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 62.
[208] DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, 113.
[209] Saliers, "Singing Our Lives," 185–86.

emotional memory.[210] When a song becomes familiar and beloved, it attaches to one's memory, and worshippers tend to "sing their hearts out."

Similarly, Tönsing sees that for a song to be internalized and become part of a person's memory and identity, the song must be well-known by the singers, sung many times, and used during important and emotional occasions.[211] Tönsing uses the example of singing the national anthem to illustrate this point. When a person sings the national anthem, it enriches social bondings and a sense of belonging to one's nation. It also creates new memories that attach to the tune and the scene of the group singing.

The work *Lovin' on Jesus* by See H. Lim and Ruth Lester examines how different demographic groups respond to musical identity differences by interviewing practitioners of worship music from various ministries.[212] The research outcome suggests that worshippers perceive music as a "marker of individual and social identity"—associating the style of music with one's cultural marks and value systems.[213] For example, Lim and Lester's research respondents share that they use broad music categories or choices to claim identity and identify others. I can relate Lim and Lester's comment to worshippers in my ministry who self-identify their generation to the traditional version and arrangement of "Amazing Grace," and other worshippers who associate themselves with the later revisions, such as "Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)." In addition to the difference in lyrics and melody lines, the specific style of music arrangement is registered with their memories of personal history. The musical style and expression become part of their history and identity through repetition. The response suggests that musical style can

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[210] Saliers, "Singing Our Lives," 185–86.
[211] Tönsing, "That Song Moves Me to Tears," 2, 6–7.
[212] Lim and Lester, *Lovin' on Jesus*, preface, para. 8, location 129.
[213] Lim and Lester, *Lovin' on Jesus*, chapter 1, para. 59, location 490.

be perceived as one of the determining factors in forming self-identity and social-belonging. Henceforth, the music in worship is not a neutral external stimulus but contains identity implications. In addition, Don Saliers and Emily Saliers see that music, including congregational singing, enables the singers to reflect on patterns in life, and "sometimes nostalgia lures us back to hear the familiar" songs in similar fashions.[214] The familiar songs and musical expressions provide a familiar musical realm for a worshipper to anchor one's current emotional and mental state to the past. Such familiarity could also serve as a source of strength and comfort for the individuals.

Saliers and Saliers' study also assures that the younger generation seeks music for inspiration and identity. The younger respondents say they tend to discover which communities and groups they associate with and belong to through different musical styles and genres.[215] Many of them also find the elders' music hard to associate with their identities. Likewise, Levitin's study also attests to this phenomenon, showing that youths intentionally set themselves apart from the older generation by the music they hear.[216] Tönsing contends that individuals tend to favour and become accustomed to music styles in their youth and these become a reference for personal, cultural, and musical identity.[217] All these studies highlight the reality that different age groups seem to label and distinguish from one another by comparing their counterpart's styles of music to their own. Individuals evaluate and categorize their own identity with others through their musical memories, experiences, and cultural stereotypes. [218]

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[214] Saliers and Saliers, *Song to Sing*, chapter 5, para. 11, location 1126.
[215] Saliers and Saliers, *Song to Sing*, chapter 3, para. 14, location 735.
[216] Levitin, *This is Your Brain on Music*, 226.
[217] Tönsing, "That Song Moves Me to Tears," 8.
[218] Olteteanu, "Formative Function," 219.

Put differently, music can latch to human memories in powerful ways. June Boyce-Tillman believes that musical memory is powerful for identity shaping because it has the characteristic to define and redefine time, space, and culture.[219] She illustrates this point by citing letters from a young soldier in the First World War. The person wrote home a letter stating how he sang short hymns in the battle trenches as a source of empowerment, comfort, and identity affirmation.[220] The worship singing brings back memories of previous faith experiences and bridges the Christian faith, communal experience, and personal memories with the soldier's situated context. The singing helps this soldier draw from past memories to experience God's consolations, reminding him of Christ's peace and hope from the eschatological realm and providing new meaning-significance amid his dangerous immediate context.

Likewise, Begbie uses Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life in prison to illustrate how music plays a role in identity, memory, and beliefs. When Bonhoeffer was in prison, he only had the music in his mind. In one of Bonhoeffer's letters, he recalled the association of Bach's *Mass in B Minor* with the evening he first heard about this piece at the age of eighteen.[221] The musical memory became his source of comfort and strength to endure his sufferings. The musical memory also provided Bonhoeffer with the "aesthetic categories and analogies" to conduct deep theological reflection and a source for him to experience God's comfort and presence in times of tribulations.[222]

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[219] Boyce-Tillman, "Turn Your Music to Your Heart," 55.
[220] Boyce-Tillman, "Turn Your Music to Your Heart," 55.
[221] Begbie, *Resounding Truth*, chapter 6, para. 58 , location 3113.
[222] De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation*, 145.

Jenefer Robinson highlights that emotional memories can be contingent and change based on personal circumstances and relational status with human others.[223] For instance, a couple chooses a song for their wedding because it has a previous unique and emotional association. When the song is used at their wedding ceremony, it further creates special memories and emotional associations for the married couple. To the couple, replaying the same song in different settings could trigger memories of the wedding and related positive emotions. Suppose the couple ended up in a divorce. In this case, singing or listening to the same song could trigger negative emotions and associations. In other words, music contains the capacity to store emotional memories, but the emotional responses are subject to one's experience and interpretation. The human context informs the interpretation and determines if the stimulus (i.e., the song) is associated with positive or negative memories and emotions.

In a church setting, many church leaders believe it is possible to find a balance between musical styles and genres that can make everyone happy and satisfied. However, scholarly voices such as Robinson, Begbie, and John W. de Gruchy suggest that the fundamental issue is not a musical issue in congregational singing but an identity issue. For seniors who have attended churches since an early age, singing traditional songs in styles closely associated with their history and identity can create a sense of familiarity. Hearing and singing songs with the same or similar musical identity allows them to "embrace that part of identity again " and grounds them in their religious upbringing.[224]

Thus, I am intrigued to verify how Cantonese worship service congregants respond to the application of new musical rearrangements of the traditional hymn (i.e.,

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[223] Robinson, *Deeper than Reason*, 384.
[224] Saliers and Saliers, *Song to Sing*, chapter 5, para. 11, location 1127.

what I have called the compromise approach). My intuition is that some individuals will find drastic rearrangement unacceptable, while others will find it refreshing. For individuals accustomed to a certain kind of musical identity, the rearrangement creates a dissonance in their memories of the song. It might thus take away a portion of their musical identity. Individuals can sometimes feel intimidated or threatened if they feel their musical identity is being pushed aside. In other words, the musical identity represents their overall personal, social, and cultural identity.[225] To the younger generation, the absence of memories of the old songs in their original expression may make it easier for them to adapt to the rearrangements and revisions in lyrics or music, though they may or may not associate their musical identities with these songs.

Although the differences in musical identities impose a practical challenge to the weekly worship, I remain hopeful that musical identities are not static and fixed. Creativity and imagination are vital "virtues" when introducing and arranging in ways that can draw people of different musical identities together.[226] The determination of who Christians are and who they can yet be, both as a private entity and part of communities, is influenced by the songs they hear, sing, and remember, and "the songs they have yet to sing and hear."[227] Therefore, music is not merely an expression of identity or affirmation of a community's identity, it is a medium for the person or community to "try on some imagined aspect."[228] Music's aesthetic, creative, and imaginative nature renders the possibility to develop new musical identities and memories and form new social identities and emotional ties.

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[225] Saliers and Saliers, *Song to Sing*, chapter 6, para. 20, location 1324.
[226] Lim and Lester, *Lovin' on Jesus*, chapter 1, para. 66, location 527.
[227] Saliers and Saliers, *Song to Sing*, chapter 5, para. 20, location 1172.
[228] Saliers and Saliers, *Song to Sing*, chapter 5, para. 24, location 1206.

With this in mind, Christians must develop worship songs of different styles and genres and become "friends" with them.[229] Indeed, I propose that Christians try to make as many "friends" with different and unfamiliar styles of music as possible, particularly in their early stages of life and Christianity. A church's ability to advocate the appreciation and usage of musical variations reflects the church body's theology of inclusivity and diversity. As Burch Brown puts it, "our goal as it concerns worship in human communities is to encourage greater diversity and inclusion . . . That is a task for individuals and specific communities of Christians whose discipline and practice need to include sensitivity to art, music, and worship."[230]

To sum up, I believe these scholars are not trying to legitimize that musical identity and established memory are static and cannot be changed over time. Succinctly, Christians should not only be capable of singing praises in their "musical bubble"—that is, with others who favour similar styles and genres of songs. Instead, local churches should educate the worshippers about weaving together ties between emotion, identity, memory, and music, seizing the opportunity to promote the appreciation of diversity and inclusivity concerning sub-cultural and musical identity. The Cantonese worship service is ethnically homogeneous. Yet, I am saddened that some church leaders are reluctant to embrace varying musical identities and sub-cultural differences within their congregations. Instead, these individuals perceive the segregation of worship services by musical identities and preferences as a good solution to preserve overall corporate harmony and minimize disputes. I believe that this segregation approach may be a viable short-term solution, but it does more harm than good to the long-term development of an

[229] Tönsing, "That Song Moves Me to Tears," 8.
[230] Burch Brown, *Inclusive yet Discerning*, chapter 3, para. 34, location 810.

inclusive worship culture. In Early Christianity, Christians with different ethnic and political stances who once were segregated are "brought near by the blood of Christ" (Eph 2:13–14). It is a beautiful and inclusive testimony of witnessing God's salvific act. The ideology of doing congregational singing differently to suit different musical identities counters this spirit.

Furthermore, another common situation I have experienced in ministry is that leaders believe that getting the theology of worship right is all that matters in congregational singing, thinking that musical styles and structures are neutral and therefore are of minimal importance. Researchers such as Lim, Lester, and Saliers, mentioned above, believe that music is closely knitted to forming identity and social belonging. Acknowledging rather than ignoring the existence of such correlation is needed for practitioners to better reflect and utilize the life-building potential in congregational singing. Indeed, music can promote group cohesion and strengthen relationships between people when sociological, psychological, and cultural considerations are factored into its use.[231]

In summary, this section highlights that music is closely related to the social construction of self and others in the public sphere. While individuals gather at different music events due to shared interests, Christians are called together by their shared religious convictions. As such, when it comes to congregational singing, Chinese churches face the challenge of drawing worshippers with diverse musical identities together. The challenge to embrace diversity is more of an identity than a musical issue. When worshippers acknowledge a spectrum of musical identities and appreciate the

[231] Robinson, *Deeper than Reason*, 390.

differences, practitioners can approach worship music arrangement creatively to advocate an enriching communal singing experience. This might be a challenging goal to achieve. Yet, I am convinced that pursuing such a goal can lead to long-term benefits for worshippers. The worshippers can learn and practice loving one another by appreciating and worshipping through other people's music, appropriating the biblical teaching of staying humble and valuing others above oneself and one's self-interest (Phil 2:4).

The Role of Worship and Singing Peers and How It Informs Who We Are

Worship is never merely a personal or private matter.[232] Bryan James Smith puts it, "from our roots in Judaism to the earliest expression in the ecclesia of Christ, worship has always been a corporate activity. We worship because we are peculiar people whose roots are in the future. We tell our stories, learn our language and find our life in the presence of other Christ-followers."[233] Each person contributes their own unique individuality, beliefs, values, culture, and so on to a singing discourse. The collective whole offers layers of social identities to those who attend.

Contrarily, online worship services could lead to a silo and detached worship experience because it is much more difficult for a worshipper to recognize other worshippers' presence, involvement, and uniqueness. With the weaker level of holistic participation, the sense of belonging and togetherness in online worship is also likely weaker than when individuals worship in-person as a community. As such, it is far more difficult to advocate identity shaping moments via the digital platform—something many

[232] Smith, *Good and Beautiful Community*, 171.
[233] Smith, *Good and Beautiful Community*, 172.

individuals experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic when online worship at home was the only feasible option.

The significance of the presence of human others is also prominent in many group singing studies. Studying group singing in non-religious settings can provide substantial sociological insights and inform us of what could also occur in congregational singing. Jane W. Davidson and Robert Faulkner use interviews and questionnaires to gather data and analyze how group singing relates to identity shaping in three different community settings. The first study is about a community choir in North East Iceland with a small population. The second is about a choir in Australia that comprises homeless, unemployed, and disabled choir members. The third one is about a senior choir group in Australia. These case studies employ Western social psychology's concept of self and explore how "the Material Self (the body and the physical world); the Social Self (expressed in relationships); and the Spiritual Self (found in religious or spiritual experience)" interact in group singing and form identities.[234]

The Icelandic choir study shows that group singing forms part of the social construct of families and communities. In Icelandic culture, group singing has always been a socially favourable way to bond and enrich interfamilial, intergenerational, and inter-communal relationships.[235] A person's identity is socio-culturally perceived as "primarily developed in relation to others," and group singing is a social appropriation of such cultural ideology.[236] Group singing in the Icelandic context is socially perceived as acknowledging one another's importance in a person's life.

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[234] Davidson and Faulkner, "Group Singing," chapter 42, para. 1, location 21750.
[235] Davidson and Faulkner, "Group Singing," chapter 42, para. 3, location 21811.
[236] Davidson and Faulkner, "Group Singing," chapter 42, para. 16–17, location 21825–32.

In the second case, choir members claim that their "persons" are positively shaped when an individual voice joins as part of the collective sound in the vocal group, through which bondings are strengthened. For example, a chorister claims that singing engagement advocates personal and collective achievement alignment, thus leading toward "the complex interaction between personal and social identity."[237] One participant states that the broader construction of self is enriched when the singing voices blend in emotional and aesthetic expressions.[238] In addition, the interviewees also realize that a communal vocal experience serves three spiritual and social purposes: to prepare for life changes (e.g., birth, death, marriage, and departure), to create collective experience concerning these life events, and to offer communal celebration, grief, and resolution in response to the seasons of life.[239] Singing with one another in life events, such as wedding ceremonies and funerals, reinforces the social bondings and social self. The human presence in these events reaffirms the relationships within a family hierarchy, friendship network, religious grouping, and community structure. The gathering of people renders new meanings to music usage.

The second and third studies suggest that group singing forms a social structure that facilitates positive self-worth and self-confidence, advocating better physical and psychological well-being.[240] When individuals may be negatively labeled or neglected in other social settings, the interpersonal interactions and collective singing moments positively affect the sense of self and reassurance of self-worth in social settings. Here, interviewees commented that group singing brings people closer physically, relationally,

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[237] Davidson and Faulkner, "Group Singing," chapter 42, para. 16–17, location 21825–32.
[238] Davidson and Faulkner, "Group Singing," chapter 42, para. 16, location 21835.
[239] Davidson and Faulkner, "Group Singing," chapter 42, para. 22, location 21866.
[240] Davidson and Faulkner, "Group Singing," chapter 42, para. 26, location 21902.

and emotionally.[241] From these studies, Davidson and Faulkner conclude that singing can enhance self-identity and social connection by changing one's feelings and sense of belonging in relation to others.[242] The "Material Self," "Social Self," and "Spiritual Self" constantly interact in a web of ever-changing intrapersonal and interpersonal influences, from which the "Created Self" is formed.[243]

Music can often bring people of different backgrounds together and create a unique group identity and association. However, the correlation between self-concept, musical identity, and ethnocentrism can differ across different ethnicities. For instance, Diana Boer, et al. conducts research regarding national identity and music ethnocentrism in six student samples, each with over a hundred respondents, from Brazil, Germany, Hong Kong, Mexico, New Zealand, and Philippines.[244] Their research examines how the concept of music ethnocentricism correlates with a preference for unique cultural-specific music styles and national identity. Among the six-country samples, Hong Kong is the only place with a weak correlation between music preferences, ethnocentrism, and identity. Boers and her team suggest that this phenomenon could be caused by the complex national identity in post-colonial social settings, in which the city has gone through various significant social and economic changes in the last few decades.[245] Many respondents self-identify a closer association with "Cantonese-pop" music or "Mandarin-pop" music than traditional Chinese music and genre (e.g., Chinese opera).[246] They believe these musical expressions better represent their culture and ethnocentricity. In

[241] Davidson and Faulkner, "Group Singing," chapter 42, para. 26–39, location 21902–997.
[242] Davidson and Faulkner, "Group Singing," chapter 42, para. 39, location 21999.
[243] Davidson and Faulkner, "Group Singing," chapter 42, para. 3, location 21751.
[244] Boer et al., "Music, Identity, and Musical Ethnocentrism," 1–3.
[245] Boer et al., "Music and National Identity," 13.
[246] Boer et al., "Music and National Identity," 13.

Hong Kongers' everyday collective social experience, Cantonese-pop and Mandarin-pop music fill their social gatherings and daily lives. Regular exposure and usage give birth to a cultural musical identity that detaches from the ethnic musical origin. In a colonial city, these musical expressions form the collective memories in the public sphere (e.g., school, media, and concerts). Begbie further explains, "in postwar Hong Kong, music played a substantial role in the former colony's search for cultural identity through a combination of Chinese, other East Asian, and international popular and art music styles."[247] Music expresses a distinctive cultural and religious identity that may not always directly correlate with racial roots. Everyday social interactions contribute to how an individual perceives the music and the people who undergo the same historical and cultural events.[248]

Similarly, as people gather to worship, the cultural and sociological nuances remain to play a significant role in the social identity process. The group singing engagement invites the singers to consider and define their ethnic, cultural, musical, and theological groupings. Boer further elaborates with the example of the New Zealand national anthem sung at an international rugby tournament, bringing tremendous national pride to the New Zealanders. The singing contains specific musical traits, cultural expressions, and language in which all these embedded elements are identity cues that prompt self-evaluation. The singers' humanness is expressed as part of the music-hearing, music-making, and music-interpreting process and forms a unique social mix.

Overall, in today's Greater Toronto Area Cantonese church settings, one common contemporary perception is to view Sunday worship as merely a vertical, "God-me"

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[247] Begbie, *Resounding Truth*, chapter 1, para. 47, location 781.
[248] Begbie, *Resounding Truth*, chapter 1, para. 47, location 781.

encounter, neglecting that a horizontal dimension is dynamically at play and shapes us. The exploration of the horizontal dimension of congregational singing can prompt Christians to reconsider what it means to live as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, [and] God's own people" in their situated social and relational contexts (1 Pet 2:9a). To a group of immigrants who came from a colonial city to settle in a multicultural city, the identity of ethnocentrism is further complexified. It is part of my research interest to explore how Cantonese worshippers perceive their ethnic and social selves in congregational singing.

To sum up, the holistic presence of human others matters in congregational singing. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an increase in the popularity of using recorded music as a music medium for congregational singing. Despite the fact that technology serves as a convenient alternative for music accompaniment, I concur with Wren that congregational singing is healthiest when done in person, with live musicians leading and live congregants participating in it.[249] When worship is a Divine encounter with the living God, the singers' humanity, sincerity, and spontaneity are vividly expressed through live engagement and accompaniment. This embodiment, on its own, is a meaning-making process that forms a worship community's theology and faith experience. Contrarily, singing with a YouTube video or backing tracks is "singing someone else's song, and someone else's theology, from someone else's situation."[250] Thomas Tarino states that "the etiquette and quality of sociality is granted priority over the quality of the sound per se."[251] The aural experience of hearing one's voice singing

[249] Wren, *Praying Twice*, chapter 3, para. 74, location 2628.
[250] Wren, *Praying Twice*, chapter 3, para. 74, location 2628.
[251] Tarino, *Music as Social Life,* 35.

along with other worshippers, though sometimes less skillfully, could indeed develop a profound sense of mutual ownership, togetherness, and connection. Thus, even though there are other worshippers whom a person does not and will not know personally in a group singing context, the communal singing experience can still draw lives together. To many individuals, singing together with others and "imagined others" come together as one cohesive voice whose effect can transcend time and spatial constraints.[252]

That being said, ministry practitioners in worship need to be sensitive towards individuals with hearing impairment or those self-identified as "poor-pitch singers."[253] Some researchers suggest that their inability to participate in a singing event could lead to a negative self-concept.[254] Karen Wise investigates the challenges for individuals with singing deficiency. Her finding suggests that these individuals have a lower assessment of their musical abilities and are fearful of social judgment, leading to "self-censoring or avoidance of singing activities."[255] In my opinion, ministry practitioners need to acknowledge that these disabilities, whether physical or psychological, do not reduce their precious identity as part of God's family and part of the local church group. Their presence and willingness to participate in the midst is still valuable and important for the church community. The holistic worship engagement with others and "imagined others" of different capacities translates into an inclusive, relational, and dynamic force that transcends beyond time and physical constraints.[256]

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[252] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation,* chapter 1, para. 44, location 1511.
[253] Wise, "Defining and Explaining Singing," chapter 14, para. 3, location 8713.
[254] Wise, "Defining and Explaining Singing," chapter 14, para. 2, location 8702.
[255] Wise, "Defining and Explaining Singing," chapter 14, para. 7, location 8748.
[256] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation,* chapter 1, para. 44, location 1511.

The Role of a Worship Leader and How It Informs Who We Are

Mark Pierson uses the term "worship curator" to describe a worship leader's core mandate as the person who designs, prepares, and shapes the corporate worship ambiance, experience, and culture.[257] His opening chapter criticizes the misconception that many individuals think of worship leaders as primarily song leaders. Like Pierson, I also oppose this narrow understanding and argue that the role of the worship leader is to substantiate the curation of God-glorifying, participative, and pedagogical congregational singing moments in corporate worship. The mandate of a worship leader is more than leading the singing. It includes the mandate to bridge songs and context together, advocate holistic engagement rather than merely singing, consider cultural receptivity and teaching theology, and relate authentically and musically to other worshippers. In a broader sense, the term "worship leader" can also refer to and include the song leader, the vocalists, the musicians, the audio-visual technicians, the worship planners, or the worship pastor, who contribute to shaping the singing culture and discourse. Nevertheless, for the discussion purpose, I will focus on the role of a song leader and refer to it as the worship leader when discussing the role's influential and formational capabilities.

In the following section, I describe song leading as a holistic engagement involving the mind, emotion, and soul expressed through voice and body expression. The leader constructs meanings from the songs, connects meaning between songs and sections of a worship service, and expresses ideas and thoughts in ways the immediate singing community can understand, contextualize, and relate. The leader forms part of the

[257] Pierson, *Art of Curating Worship*, 52.

message in congregational singing and directly influences the worship and singing culture. Henceforth, an expression of sincerity and preparedness is needed.

Shaping a Worship Community with One's Voice, Gesture, and Role as a Worship Leader

The voice of a human being is the best teacher for someone to learn and follow the singing. Unlike playing the melody through other instruments, the human voice is a more inviting and emotionally engaging medium for others to follow. Wren states that "people learn best not from hearing another voice but also from seeing the song leader . . . [and] a song leader humanizes the song and makes learning a memorable experience."[258] For this reason, the leader's skillset can augment or hinder their ability to communicate the music's underlying message to the congregants. In addition, a competent worship leader must be capable of confidently and humbly expressing one's true self in public and putting together music in ways that facilitate others' holistic engagement in congregational singing and spiritual encounter with the Lord. Having said that, this is not to say that a professional voice is always more favourable than an ordinary voice.[259] A natural, passionate, and confident voice with sufficient preparation can be equally effective and crucial. Put differently, a non-professional worship leader can advocate and model the spirit of inclusivity because the person is not "a performer to be admired" but someone that stimulates the holistic engagement and reflection of life and faith during congregational singing.[260]

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[258] Wren, *Praying Twice*, chapter 3, para. 50, location 2490.
[259] Wren, *Praying Twice*, chapter 3, para. 51, location 2495.
[260] Wren, *Praying Twice*, chapter 3, para. 61, location 2544.

Ingalls believes that leaders who wish to create God-centred worship must allow the participants the "freedom to demonstrate the depth of their sincerity and sense of love, awe, and devotion."[261] A worship leader is mandated to actively construct an environment where worshippers can feel safe, un-criticized, and free to express their inner selves. She interviewed two young worshippers who shared that, as worshippers, they went through the process of self-judgment and determined if their worship expressions were deemed "appropriate" within a finite range of worshipful gestures and expressions.[262] Like many worshippers, the two youths worry about how other worshippers think of them.[263] Worshippers tend to read the norm and range of acceptable expressions, and the worship leader is the one that sets the "upper limit." They try to understand the social construct and respond in ways they believe would comply with the singing context. I have also witnessed this kind of social compliance and self-assessment in my worship ministry. Frequently, worshippers censor themselves to ensure they can fit into the norm and avoid being interpreted as outliers. I believe these worries and self-judgment should be minimized because they are hindrances in offering praise and adoration to the Lord holistically. As a result, worship leaders play an influential social role because they need to understand the social spectrum of acceptable behaviour and build a culture that embraces diverse expressions. Henceforth, they need to constantly evaluate the involvement of visual and aural expressions to ensure these things align with the social and cultural expectations (e.g., raising hands, kneeling, and ways of singing, etc.).[264] Through outward worship expression, Christian worshippers dynamically interact

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[261] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation,* chapter 1, para. 27, location 1344.
[262] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation,* chapter 1, para. 30, location 1361.
[263] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation,* chapter 1, para. 29, location 1356.
[264] Cherry, *Worship Architect*, chapter 7, para. 31, location 2596.

with the Lord and other congregants through music and singing, interpreting and absorbing ideas about one's Christian identity, and reflecting on how their identity as children of God informs different personal identities and relationships.

In other words, leaders must be sensitive to the socio-cultural interpretation of performance and participation cues. This includes choosing suitable verbal and body expressions in leading and avoiding expressions that could be misinterpreted as self-performing. Often, this is a complex and ongoing discernment process because the leader stands between the tension of a rapidly-changing world and a slow-to-change or stagnant local church culture. For instance, Ingalls conducted research at an interdenominational conference that employed a "rock-concert" ideology and leading approach. In this event, the worship leader leads like a performer and stimulates the anticipated forms of worship response in a "rock-concert" way. The performative elements include well-rehearsed and timed singing, lighting effects, vibrant and loud music, etc. Individuals who attended and expected the concert-like worship describe it as inviting, engaging, and relevant rather than exaggerating or self-glorifying because it resonates with the cultural and generational expressions with which they are familiar. However, putting these elements and expressions into a different context, such as my ministry context, the musical style, song lyrics, leading styles, and extramusical discourse, would be considered overly expressive and disruptive. Mature conservative Baptists would critique that the rock music performances are ritualized, disguised, and artificially-reframed as acts of public worship.[265]

[265] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation,* chapter 1, para. 9, location 1111.

As we discuss performance and expression, I wish to highlight two worship-leading concepts that church leaders tend to dichotomize. The first issue relates to participation versus presentation. I agree with Ingalls's observation that congregational singing weighs heavily on "participatory performance," in which values and social roles of "presentational performance" are intertwined and often difficult to separate clearly.[266] By participatory performance, Ingalls refers to eliminating boundaries between the worship leaders on stage and the worshippers at their seats because both groups are theologically "equal participants in the activity of worship" before the Lord.[267] In contrast, presentational performance distinguishes the leaders as the message deliverer and audiences on the recipient end. Here, the leader must discern the degree and manner that the targeted worship community can accept and appreciate. Individual worshippers interpret whether they are passive followers or active participants in the singing event. Their perception of role and involvement shapes their understanding of their role as worshippers and a worship community.

Nevertheless, presentational and participation performance are not mutually exclusive categories. An expression that one congregational context considers presentation may, in turn, be a good motivator for participation in a different context. Ingalls also uses the word "performance," not with the connotation of self-boasting, but rather seeing it as a form of message delivery from the stage, which can be good or bad depending on the worship leader's intention and cultural interpretation.

In any case, sincerity is one underlying attribute that both presentational and participatory leadership require. Worship leaders lead with their characters, skills,

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[266] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation,* chapter 1, para. 39, location 1449.
[267] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation,* chapter 1, para. 34, location 1420.

knowledge, emotions, behaviours, and desires. Sincerity and authenticity are vital because leaders lead with their true personality, knowledge, emotion, and behaviour. Sarah Thornton and Ingalls both discuss the issue of sincerity and authenticity in their works. Thornton tries to locate authenticity as an attribute influenced by popular culture. Thornton suggests that "authenticity is arguably the most important value ascribed to popular music . . . music is perceived as authentic when it rings true or feels real when it has credibility and comes across as genuine . . . it is valued as a balm for media fatigue and as an antidote to commercial hupe."[268] Ingalls also sees that the perception of sincerity in worship singing also borrows the same cultural and musical elements from popular music and culture. From a behavioural perspective, the worship team uses certain musical aspects such as "unplugged" acoustic guitar strumming with other performative expressions to convey a sense of authenticity—techniques that popular music concerts will also use.[269]

However, true sincerity occurs when the leader can first locate one's true self in and through Christ and is empowered by the Lord to express one's authentic character in public. Sincerity and authentication do not mean spontaneous or unpreparedness in handling the leading role. Instead, a sincere and humble worship leader goes through rounds of preparations and scripted rehearsals to internalize and articulate their thoughts and singing to "sound natural, properly paced, and sincere."[270] Also, sincerity and humility are practiced through disciplined preparation and practice.

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[268] Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 26.
[269] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, chapter 1, para. 27, location 1338.
[270] Cherry, *Worship Architect*, chapter 9, para. 38 location 3154.

The second concept many church leaders struggle with is categorizing what worship expressions are "secular" and "sacred." I appreciate that Ingalls did not try to offer a fixed definition of what expressions are deemed "sacred," "secular," or "proper." Each aesthetic and expression has its intrinsic strengths and limitations, and the leaders who choose a particular form must understand its effects and constraints. In the example above, anyone who tries to mimic the concert arena has to face the risk of creating a performance-like worship service. Similarly, choosing a "leading-edge" form of worship expression in a local church setting may resonate with a small population but compromise and neglect others in the worship community. Conversely, anyone who desires to adopt the "historical" approach could preserve a local heritage but might risk introducing a distant and foreign worship experience to the younger generations.

Worship Leader as a Missional and Pedagogical Facilitator

It is also important to note that effectively integrating cultural elements in a group singing setting can expand the worshipper's missional identity. For example, Ingalls studies the Passion Conference and Urbana's concert worship services. Through the music, the messages, the visual aids, and so forth, worshippers are encouraged to imagine how their belonging to the earthly and heavenly Christian communities impact their everyday living and how God's missional call shapes the core of a Christian's self-identity.[271] Ingalls sees that Urbana intentionally emphasizes the gendered, ethnic, and racial diversity of Christianity, in which such diversity conveys a robust eschatological and missional significance to the attendees.[272] The worship leader also leverages the gathering of people

[271] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation,* chapter 1, para. 25, location 2024.
[272] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation,* chapter 1, para. 38, location 2122.

from different cultures, backgrounds, gifts, and traditions to augment God's transcending sovereignty and the Christian's eschatological and missional identities. In this singing discourse, the leader skillfully and purposefully selects or arranges ranges of genres and styles of music, video presentations, words of encouragement, and sharing, to instill missional significance into the lives of worshippers. Ingalls comments that "the social structure of music-making, style of music, and variety of languages used in the worship songs at Urbana was intended both to highlight unique contributions of cultural groups represented and to encourage participants to appreciate the practices of o/Other worshippers and incorporate them into their own expression."[273] In addition, the worship space, speech, song, musical style, and gesture are each performative means of establishing sincerity and transparency in congregational singing. These elements help redirect the worship focus to God and redefine the participants' social and spiritual roles.[274]

To summarize, Ingalls's case studies substantiate my earlier discussions that the music Christians sing and the people they sing with are crucial contributing factors to the identity shaping process in congregational singing. At the same time, influential worship leaders are emotional companions of the worshippers in the way they "preach" with their voices and lives as they advocate the participation of other worshippers. Joyce Irwin believes that worship leaders utilize the pedagogical value of music to communicate doctrinal truths, construct memories of collective faith experience, and substantiate worshippers to determine their true identity with God and others."[275] Worship leaders are

[273] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation,* chapter 1, para. 41, location 2175.
[274] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation,* chapter 1, para. 49, location 1581.
[275] Irwin, "So Faith Comes from What Is Heard," chapter 3, para. 14, location 851.

also theologians because they are in the position to bridge biblical ideas, teaching, and identities with the contemporary context, creating resonance in the hearts of the worshippers, and facilitating a God-centred response through singing and adoration. Finally, spiritual maturity and spiritual fruits are foundational to and inseparable from the worship leaders' effective leadership. Leaders must care for their own holistic wellness by grounding their own lives upon Scripture, spiritual disciplines, and spiritual community.

Conclusion

The role of musical identities and their influence on social and interpersonal relationships remains a topic to explore further.[276] Many theories and concepts concerning the effect of music on identity and relationship formation are still under development.[277] Thus, I am encouraged to believe that my research project with an ecclesiological emphasis can also contribute to the study of musical identities and interpersonal relationships.

This chapter revisits and reflects on some commonly accepted understandings of congregational singing across the Greater Toronto Area Chinese church circles. First, this chapter validates that worship music shapes and intertwines with the singer's identity, memories, and past experiences. A person's musical identity is not a neutral matter driven merely by personal taste and preference. Research shows that individuals evaluate their self-identity with different styles and genres of music through their own interpretive lens, backgrounds, experiences, and memories. Individuals also interpret other worshippers by their musical identities, referencing the respective sub-cultural,

[276] Greenberg and Rentfrow, "Social Psychological Underpinnings of Musical Identities," 319.
[277] DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life,* 20.

sociological characteristics in a church setting. The study of musical identity in congregational singing provides vast knowledge for understanding normative beliefs, stereotypes, social characteristics, and psychological processes.[278]

The discussion above drives my interest in determining how worshippers across different Cantonese worship services describe one's musical identities and how they perceive others' musical identities. The descriptive data can be collected by asking the research participants to comment on musical stimuli that vary in styles and languages found in Cantonese worship settings. As they describe each stimulus, I also pay attention to any "us-versus-them" language and how they believe the stimuli impact their engagement level. I argue that holistic engagement can be seen as a sign of a possible identity shaping moment because it requires processing what is conveyed and making sense of it. Individuals absorb concepts and ideas far better when cognitive, emotional, and behavioural processes are present.

Second, the people who sing along in congregational singing always contribute to each other's self-determination. The collective singing by the children of God brings assurance to the worship community in terms of their social identity and associations. The holistic human presence and the interweaving of voices affirm and signify the importance of being each other's spiritual companions in the Lord's household. Indeed, worshippers are embodied creatures in which worship stimulates our imagination, desires, and identity towards God's unfailing kingdom and the way Christians "fit together with others" and live in this materialistic world.[279] The sons and daughters of God are called to pursue a holy and missional living as one body in Christ, and this call is

[278] Greenberg and Rentfrow, "Social Psychological Underpinnings of Musical Identities," 309.
[279] Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 23.

appropriated in the unified voice of singing every Sunday. The essence of practicing Christian liturgies and habitual practices is to train human desires and imagination to live in God-glorifying ways. The group presence and settings also send strong messages to help individuals define their social roles and associations, whether denominational, demographical, cultural, geographical, or ethical.

This discussion also prompts me to examine if congregational singing draws people closer (i.e., a sense of togetherness and connectedness), and if so, in what manner. I am intrigued to hear if physical proximity and presence cultivate any identity affirmation, such as siblings, fellowship, and body of Christ, thus making some of the biblical identities vivid and relevant. Research questions in this regard are framed to probe further.

Finally, worship leaders play crucial roles in designing and executing congregational singing and shaping corporate worship's ambiance, tone, and culture. Their involvements are influential and pedagogical to the worshippers, helping them construct and connect identity meanings from the songs to the contemporary context. This chapter highlighted that worship leaders must be self-critical, culturally sensitive, sincere, and adequately skilled in technical aspects to advocate a singing culture where individuals can authentically engage, relate to, and respond. In my online survey, I try to obtain a general depiction of how the participants evaluate their respective worship leaders at church. In my qualitative interview, I also devote a section to presenting different exemplars of worship leading common to Cantonese worship services. I invite them to comment on how they believe the worship leaders in the samples can engage

them holistically, and what elements could lead to withdrawal and disengagement in congregational singing.

The collective voices of the research participants allow me to understand further how worshippers claim themselves to be influenced and shaped by the music, worship peers, and worship leader in congregational singing. In the next chapter, I employ social identity concepts and ideas to discuss how identity shaping and renegotiations could occur during congregational singing.

CHAPTER 4: A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON STUDYING CONGREGATIONAL SINGING

Introduction

The study of the self has always been one of the fundamental focuses of social psychology. Among numerous micro and macro theories concerning self-identity and self-concept, identity theory and social identity theory are sibling theories with different emphases yet they contain substantial overlap.[280] Identity theory and social identity theory's underlying thoughts and ideas have also incubated other social psychological thinking and theories in the past decades.

In the first section of this chapter, I briefly discuss the development of identity theory and social identity theory, as well as some key concepts relevant to understanding self and social identity. I discuss the related sociological concepts that connect to Burke and Stets' Identity Control Theory, followed by an elaboration on how Identity Control Theory as an interpretive lens can help describe identity shaping and renegotiation in congregational singing. I also try to bring the various fields of the literature review together and conclude the chapter by stating how the knowledge obtained in the study of social identity contributes to my ethnographic research.

The Development of Identity Theory

George Herbert Mead, a sociologist from the late 1800s, has made tremendous

[280] Stets and Burke, "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory," 224. Note that some of the co-published works by Stets and Burke begin with one name, while others begin with the other name.

contributions to the idea of self and identity. Mead is keen to understand how the concept of "I" and "me" develop in social settings.[281] To Mead, "I" and "me" are two sides of self. The concept of "me" refers to the social aspect of the self, influenced by learned behaviours, social values, social expectations, and knowledge of society. In contrast, "I" represents an individual's identity based on the response to the "me."[282] The "I" and "me" are separated in the identity-making process but belong together as an integrated whole.[283] From a behavioural perspective, sociologists often describe individuals as "agents" or "actors" who perform the actions and the patterns that constitute the social structure. At the same time, society is defined as an organized community of "actors" engaged and interacting with one another. In this structure, "society shapes the self, which drives behaviour."[284]

It is also crucial to note that Mead's view of self was in the singular—meaning there is only one self. Contrarily, philosopher-psychologists such as William James argue that an individual in modern society typically has multiple selves.[285] James sees the multiple selves as driven by the natural consequence of people's diverse roles in various institutions and interpersonal relationships and, thus, they have different role expectations.[286] This concept later develops into the perspective of multiple identities.

Mead's identity paradigm has two strands. The first strand refers to the relationship between identities and social structures of different sizes (e.g., economic structure, school, church, and friendship networks).[287] The second strand refers to the

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[281] Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 173–77.
[282] Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 173–77.
[283] Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 178.
[284] Davis, "Identity Theory in a Digital Age," 139.
[285] James, *Principles of Psychology*, 293–95.
[286] James, *Principles of Psychology*, 293–95.
[287] Burke and Stryker, "Identity Theory," 659.

internal subjective processes within the minds of human beings. Mead sees these two strands as co-dependent and dynamic in nature. Burke, Stets, and Sheldon Stryker are some later scholars who continue to further study the second strand, particularly in the identity verification processes in which my research of social identity shaping in congregational singing is particularly interested.[288] Despite this, Burke, Stryker, and other sociologists acknowledge that bringing the two strands together and understanding the dynamics and complexity in between are vital in studying identity formation, even though their contributions to the field gear towards the internal subjective processes. These scholars perceive identity and other social psychological theories as part of the larger puzzle in understanding human social behaviour and interaction.[289] Identity theories should not be viewed as independent ideas, but they should be seen as ongoing developments. Research outcomes are refined through conversations and critiques among a web of identity theories and thinking, from which new research pathways continue to arise.

Symbolic Interactionism

Sociology has had tremendous development since the early 1900s, and one of the widely known concepts is Symbolic Interactionism. Symbolic Interactionism is "a theoretical perspective in sociology that addresses how society is created and maintained through face-to-face, repeated, meaningful interactions among individuals."[290] As this project specifically examines congregational singing in corporate worship, Symbolic Interactionism offers a sociological perspective to study a small-scale view of society

[288] Burke and Stryker, "Identity Theory," 659.
[289] Burke and Stryker, "Identity Theory," 677.
[290] Carter and Fuller, "Symbols, Meaning, and Action," 931.

(e.g., a congregation). It also focuses on a small-scale perspective of the interaction between individuals. Instead of looking at macro levels, such as law and education, Symbolic Interactionism focuses on interpersonal interactions and aims to explain social order and advocate change.[291]

The two views of Symbolic Interactionism can be broadly summarized as traditional and structural. In traditional Symbolic Interactionism, Herbert Blumer continues Mead's development and sees that as different forms of interaction and communication take place via signs and symbols, different people can assign different meanings to objects, roles, and individuals. Nevertheless, such assigned meanings are contingent and can change over time.[292] Here, Blumer is particularly interested in action-dependent meaning, how meanings are assigned, and how their thought processes alter the person's behaviour.

In contrast, Sheldon Stryker labels the second view as Structural Symbolic Interactionism. One of the significant differences between Stryker and Blumer is their views on the stability of the social structure. Stryker criticizes the traditional Symbolic Interactionism because it "tends to dissolve structure in a solvent of subjective definitions, to view definitions as unanchored, open to any possibility, failing to recognize that some possibilities are more probable than others. On the premise that self reflects society, this view leads to seeing self as undifferentiated, unorganized, unstable, and ephemeral."[293]

Stryker believes that social structure is somewhat stable, ongoing, and durable, in

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[291] Da Silva, "Re-examining Mead," 292.
[292] Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism*, 1–20.
[293] Stryker, "Identity Competition," 27.

which this structure pre-exists the social engagement of actors or agents. Individuals form their understandings of identities and roles in structured and organized social systems and derive their interpreted meanings from within.[294] For example, Stryker is concerned with the normative and conventional aspects of role identities within a person's relational networks, such as teacher-student and parent-child. Individuals can assign meanings to their lives based on what the social expectations and symbolic interactionism convey to them in these stable and ongoing roles.

Following this logic, worshippers do not subjectively define the meanings of corporate singing. Instead, social expectations pre-exist, and worshippers interpret all sorts of identity cues in such context. For example, it is possible that worshippers construct meanings amid a worship service, correlating their pre-existing beliefs, affections, and behaviours with the Christian identity. Worshippers also attend a service with an expectation of how to behave in a corporate worship setting. They interpret pre-existing social cues (e.g., following the instruction of a worship leader) and respond in ways based on the meanings they assign (e.g., giving ascending praises to God as a local congregation is a form of mutual social duty and commitment). Note that Stryker is less concerned with how identities are negotiated amid human interactions—something Burke and Stets pick up and further work on in their study.[295]

Salient Identity

In addition to Structural Symbolic Interactionism, early works from Stryker and Richard Serpe also explore the internal structure of the self. Like William James, they suggest that

[294] Stryker, "Beginning there Is Society," 315–27.
[295] Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, chapter 3, para. 23, location 1054.

the self comprises multiple identities organized into hierarchies of salience.[296] Their works define salient identities as those an individual most likely invokes across situations. Sociologists often refer to identity salience as "a product of commitment, that is, the affective and interactional ties connected to a particular identity."[297] Those identities to which a person is most committed maintain the highest salience, and persons will seek to retain and play out these identities across different situations.[298]

In other words, once an identity becomes salient, an individual responds in ways consistent with the meanings attached to that identity across different circumstances and contexts. Burke and Stets build their sociological thinking upon Stryker's identity theory, arguing that one crucial factor influencing the salience of identity is the degree of commitment and cost attached to a specific identity. Henceforth, commitment is associated with the price a person has to pay for living in accordance with a particular identity. If the cost of giving up the identity is high, then commitment to the identity is high.[299] For instance, Stryker and Serpe conducted a study on religious identity. They assess the extensiveness and intensiveness of relationships with others based on their religious roles by prompting the respondents to identify how their commitment to religious activity influences their connectedness with other believers. Their study also examines whether relational closeness impacts commitment to religious activity. Results suggest that "those persons with many relationships based on religion (high commitment) have more salient religious identities that are associated with more time spent in religious

[296] Serpe et al., "Structural Symbolic Interactionism," 2–3.
[297] Davis, "Identity Theory in a Digital Age," 140.
[298] Davis, "Identity Theory in a Digital Age," 140.
[299] Serpe et al., "Structural Symbolic Interactionism," 16.

activities."[300] Here, relational connectedness and religious due diligence seem to be positively correlated. In another study, Larry Nuttbrock and Patricia Freudiger examined the salient identity of first-time mothers. Likewise, their study found that mothers with a more salient mother identity are more willing to make concrete sacrifices (i.e., time and energy) for their children.[301]

The studies mentioned above seem to augment the idea that roles and identities with higher salience and priorities often lead to greater commitment and self-giving behaviour. In other words, if the essence of living as God's child, a redeemed Christian, a disciple of Jesus Christ, and so on, is "salient" to a Christian's life, then the individual's willingness to strive for godly living and offer sacrificial love to others will be more vital. If this is true, the Christian songs and the singing context can be understood as positive reinforcements to advocate greater conviction and commitment to a person's identity in God. In other words, the weekly songs that Christians sing portray a hierarchy of identities to the worshippers in different degrees, with the Triune God as the focal point and highest priority. My human research thus aims to explore if God-centred congregational singing edifies worshippers to interpret how God's people should engage in this world and what actions are deemed in alignment with biblical identities and espoused theology. My research interest also includes whether Christians redefine their group identity, sense of belonging, and degree of intimacy within and outside their religious group through congregational singing.

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[300] Burke and Stets, "Identity Theory," chapter 3, para. 31, location 1116.
[301] Nuttbrock and Freudiger, "Identity Salience and Motherhood," 153.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory derives from identity theory with a specific interest concerning in-group identity. Many contemporary sociologists and psychologists recognize Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner as critical contributors who introduced the social identity theory in 1978. They contend that a person's social identity emerges from the natural process of social categorization in which individuals categorize or classify themselves and others by many criteria.[302] For instance, age, gender, occupation, religious affiliation, ethnicity, and economic class are some common social categories a person consciously and subconsciously classifies and categorizes, identifying oneself with some categories and rejecting others. Later scholars such as Michael A. Hogg and Dominic Abrams adopt Tajfel's definition of social identity, which refers to "the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of the group membership.[303] A social group contains individuals who view themselves as members of a shared social category. Through social comparison between different groups, the individuals determine and evaluate others and themselves based on specific traits, values, beliefs, commonalities, and emotional attachments, classifying themselves and others as "in-group" or "out-group."[304]

The purpose of social comparison is to determine the positive distinctiveness of a social group. Social identity theory suggests that an individual tends to classify oneself and others according to "social categories or schema, constructed by abstracting prototypical—or stereotypical—features of the group's membership."[305] If the

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[302] Tajfel and Turner, "Integrative Theory," 281–82.
[303] Hogg and Abram, "Social Identifications," 7.
[304] Hogg and Abram, "Social Identifications," 19–21.
[305] Wang, "Social Identity and Professional Architects," 48.

comparison perceives that a particular group membership contains positive and valuable distinctiveness, then the association with the group is enhanced and forms part of the self-identity. In contrast, if the group shows negative attributes and inferiority, then one's self-identity will be impacted negatively, prompting a re-evaluation of belonging. Here, the goal is to achieve a good self-concept by undergoing social identity renegotiations. Hogg and Abram believe that the outcome of self-categorization is an accentuation effect, judging in-groups positively and judging out-groups negatively. Social identity theory suggests that individuals are situated in an already pre-existent structured society, and the self-categorization process is natural, necessary, and unavoidable.

For instance, in the pre-COVID period, I led a young adult and youth Cantonese worship service that happened simultaneously but in different places from the mature adult worship. I often come across both mature and young adults describing their respective worship services by music styles and age. They will describe the service they attend as "my service" (i.e., in-group) and the other one as "their service" (i.e., out-group). Also, when they invite newcomers or Christian friends from other churches to join on Sundays, they will match the service with the individuals by demographic group and their presumed musical identities based on age.[306] Likewise, a worshipper will also categorize the songs (e.g., old or new) and the individuals around (i.e., peer, non-peer, or elder), which aligns with the in-group and out-group phenomenon described above.

As such, social identity theory offers an interpretation concerning the social-psychological process for categorizing in-groups from out-groups. Social identity theory

[306] I am using the term "musical identity" by David J. Hargreaves which refers to "how we use music within our overall self-identities—to the extent to which music is important in our self-definitions as masculine-feminine, old–young, able–disabled, extravert–introvert, and so on."

also aims to explain intergroup conflict as a function of group-based self-definitions. It includes identifying and explaining biases and exaggerated perceptions. Gazi Islam says positive in-group bias can be explained by one's desire to take on a self-relevant role in an in-group, in which "the person defines him/herself through the group."[307] Thus, when sociologists use the term "bias," they are trying to highlight that comparisons between groups are "emotionally laden" and not as rationalistic as they might seem. Turner argues that among these groupings lies a competition for positive identity, in which the motivation to attribute positive identity to the in-group is to enhance or preserve the positive self.[308] Based on my observation, demographic, language, denomination, musical preference, socioeconomic class, and hobby are some common categories in which positive-identity bias can be seen in local church contexts. I am intrigued to explore how both positive and negative perceptions and biases are formed and reinforced in weekly worship services.

Before concluding the discussion of social identity theory, a few remarks are worth mentioning about the theoretical emphasis on identity theory and social identity theory. First, social identity theory emphasizes the ideas of categories or groups, whereas identity theory has a specific interest in roles. Second, in both theories, the self is reflexive because it can be classified, categorized, studied, and named in relation to social categories and classifications.[309] Social identity theory is specifically interested in the process of self-categorization, in which identity is formed when an individual perceives and self-identifies toward social groupings and underlying expectations. In contrast,

[307] Islam, "Social Identity Theory," 1.
[308] Tajfel and Turner, "Integrative Theory of Inter-group Conflict," 33–47.
[309] Stets and Burke, "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory," 224.

identity theory focuses on the process of identification, which involves understanding one's interpretation of social roles and expectations and how the knowledge of "I" is formed through the "me."

Furthermore, later social identity theory extends the scope of study to include personal identities and how they relate to and impact social identities and groupings.[310] Personal identities refer to those characteristics through which a person defines the self as a unique individual: kind, stubborn, moral, optimistic, and so on. Stets and Burke contend that personal identities function as master identities, "operating within and across a situation."[311] The idea of master-subordinate identity relationships contributes to the development of Identity Control Theory.

Identity Control Theory

Sociologists believe that each identity contains a set of meanings.[312] The person's self-defined meanings of the identity serve as a point of reference when comparing with what the environment expects from that identity. Burke and Stets state that the individual wishes to "control" the environment by altering one's behaviour so that the identity expression aligns with self-defined identity meanings.[313] Therefore, the goal is to behave according to the self-determined identity standard. The verification cycle continues as the individual exposes themselves to the same and different environments over time. The process becomes more complex when a person has many different identities in play.

There are two scopes to consider when discussing a person's multiple identities.

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[310] Stets and Burke, "Development of Identity Theory," 57–97.
[311] Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, chapter 10, para. 35, location 4594.
[312] Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, chapter 4, para. 5, location 1414.
[313] Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, chapter 4, para. 10, location 1457.

The internal focus explores "how an individual's multiple identities function together within the self and the overall identity-verification process."[314] In contrast, the external focus "addresses how the multiple identities that an individual has are tied into the complexities of the social structure in which the individual is embedded."[315] In other words, the complexity of studying multiple identities includes how these identities operate and are influenced by the social structure and how various identities relate to one another within a person's life when a person operates and makes decisions on a routine basis.[316]

For instance, Stryker suggests that when society becomes more differentiated by groups, roles, and organizations, the individuals who live in this complex structure will take on more identities, leading to a more complex identity verification process. Hypothetically speaking, suppose one of the identities the person faces contains specific attributes and values that are not shared in other identities. In this case, other roles and identities will be unaffected. However, if the attributes and values in one identity are shared across various identities, then a "spill-over" influence will often occur. Put differently, identities with more common attributes tend to be activated together whenever those meanings are present. For example, imagine a Canadian Christian father feeling angry after reading the newspaper about the Russian invasion and feeling compassion for the suffering children in Ukraine. His personal identities of being compassion and caring are shared across the identities as a child of God, father, Christian, Canadian citizen, and so on. The shared values across all these identities may prompt him

[314] Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, chapter 7, para. 3–4, location 2914–2924.
[315] Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, chapter 7, para. 3–4, location 2914–2924.
[316] Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, chapter 7, para. 3–4, location 2914–2924.

to act and influence his behaviour, perhaps leading him to volunteer for Ukrainian refugees and donate to rescue projects. On Sundays, the congregational singing might advocate and strengthen his sense of mission to live out as a compassionate disciple when he praises the compassionate and righteous God.

Nevertheless, not all identities function harmoniously, as in the above example. Bernice A. Pescosolido and Beth A. Rubin state that since modernity, individuals have the choice to decide "the unique configuration of membership in social circles."[317] This discretion to make social circle choices expands even more in postmodernity. Thus, they claim that the competition between various identity choices in many situations causes religion to "lose social power gained originally from its integration with the entire complex of social ties in geographically circumscribed areas."[318] That is, they suggest individuals nowadays are subject to far more identity tensions than ever before, and there is less correlation between one's social identity and physical proximity.

To explain tensions and interrelationships between identities, Burke and Stets attempt to explain the identity verification and negotiation dynamics through Identity Control Theory. Succinctly, this theory suggests that a hierarchical structure exists within a person's multiple identities (e.g., son of God, husband, father, pastor, citizen, and neighbor). The higher identities, measured by the level of importance and commitment, influence the lower identities of a person as dominating references.[319] Alternatively, suppose the individual requires more time to process for verification because they are incapable of sorting out the identity hierarchy and response. In that case, the less essential

[317] Pescosolido and Rubin, "Web of Group Affiliation Revisited," 56.
[318] Pescosolido and Rubin, "Web of Group Affiliation Revisited," 56.
[319] Stets and Burke, "New Directions," 44.

and weaker commitment identities must wait.[320]

Though this may sound complicated, Burke and Stets emphasize that despite "possibly many identities, there is only one behavioural output stream because there is only one person to act."[321] In other words, an individual's behaviour must satisfy several identities simultaneously by "altering the situation in ways that change all of the self-relevant meanings perceived by all of the different identities."[322] Identity Control Theory proposes that the self-defined higher identity has some control over the lower identity, and thus eventually, they cannot be in conflict. The lower identity serves as the subordinate of the higher identity. The higher identity does not tell the lower identity exactly how to verify itself. However, it tells the lower identity what meanings need to be verified.[323]

Furthermore, Identity Control Theory also leads to the discussion of how individuals classify a specific identity as high or low. Burke and Stets state that the determination resides in the level of perception that "perceptions that are higher in the control hierarchy are more complex in that they consist of patterns of perception at the lower level."[324] Burke and Stets substantiate this argument using an earlier study of parent identity conducted by Teresa Tsushima and Burke in 1999. In this study, Tsushima and Burke interviewed fifteen married and fifteen single mothers with children in elementary school. These participants were asked to answer qualitative questions concerning standards for parental identity, views on education, and methods of discipline.

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[320] Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, chapter 7, para. 12, location 2970.
[321] Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, chapter 7, para. 14, location 2991.
[322] Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, chapter 7, para. 14, location 2989.
[323] Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, chapter 7, para. 12–18, location 2970–3020.
[324] Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, chapter 7, para. 22, location 3040.

The study reflects that some parents operate by "principle-level standards," such as values and beliefs. Other parents operate by "program-level standards" with concrete action items.[325] Thus, for parents who have perceived and developed their parental identity with high commitment and importance, their parental identity becomes a dominant identity, with general valued-based principles that guide all of their program-level activities.

In comparison, parents who have perceived and described parenting as program-level standards have their parental identity governed by other higher standards in the identity hierarchy.[326] Their parental responses often reflect "immediate, short-term ways of dealing with immediate problems."[327] To sum up, this illustration shows that parental identity in the hierarchy of identities varies across individuals. The parents' backgrounds, values, beliefs, and family histories could all contribute to the level of importance and degree of salience as parents.

Following a similar logic, my qualitative research wants to determine if singing about the Divine-human relationship in a corporate setting informs worshippers to see their relationships with God as a higher standard in their identity hierarchy, and whether such understanding brings any impact to their other relationships. For Christians to believe that the Bible contains the supreme authority in teaching about godly living and virtues, the Christian belief offers a transcending belief system with formational influences on how Christians perceive their roles in the web of interpersonal relationships. Therefore, virtuous living as a child or believer of God is a high identity

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[325] Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, chapter 7, para. 23, location 3049.
[326] Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, chapter 7, para. 25, location 3065.
[327] Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, chapter 7, para. 23, location 3061.

that offers biblical teachings and identities to other roles and relationships in life (spouse, parent, employee, friend, citizen, and so on). In the ideal scenario, the restored Divine-human relationship becomes the cornerstone of all interpersonal relationships, and these relationships are realigned and reinterpreted accordingly. In practice, I admit that this is often not the case. Everyone weighs the significance of their Christian identity differently. Instead, Christian values and identities often cause tensions and compete with other ideologies, values, and desires in a person's life. For this reason, it is intriguing to explore what effects congregational singing can offer to Christian identity shaping, including the reinterpretation and renegotiation of the worshippers' hierarchies of identities.

Bringing the Voices Together

In chapter 1, I described congregational singing as a unique communication pathway using music, lyrics, worship leader, and worship peer.[328] Through these channels of identity shaping, the worshipper is invited to engage affectively, cognitively, behaviourally, and spiritually in a corporate event.[329] Weekly congregational singing provides a communication pathway that "functions cyclically, continuously, and contextually."[330] Congregational singing is a unique form of learning about Christian identities because, unlike a sermon or Sunday school class, it is a social interaction in that worshippers contribute their presence and voices as self-exposure to God and one another. Congregational singing differs from a Bible study group or other identity learning methods because holistic engagement is at work through music and singing.

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[328] King, *Pathways*, chapter 10, para. 5, location 2401.
[329] King, "Mango Tree," 165.
[330] King, "Mango Tree," 165.

In the singing discourse, the worshipper processes one's life in light of the overarching worship event, bridging the comprehensive worship experience to a conversation with one's life. In such a state, "spiritual negotiation within worship-song events, whether transformational in terms of major changes or small increments, is taking place."[331] In sociological language, this negotiation can also refer to one's comparison between an identity standard (e.g., one's self-defined expression as a Jesus follower) and how the environment describes the standard (e.g., what the songs say about living as Jesus' followers). The person must decide if behavioural alterations or identity modifications are needed. Here, worshippers are not merely passive recipients of the message but also form part of the message in congregational singing. As worshippers gather and their voices weave together, the collective voice becomes a social affirmation and corporate proclamation of faith concerning their relationship with God and others.

My research in congregational singing shares similar interests to what social psychologists are interested in exploring concerning identity formation. Chapter 2 showed that the lyrics are interpretive works that allow the worshippers to contextualize the biblical principles in the contemporary context. Congregational singing weaves theological, musicological, and sociological interests together. The sung text carries embedded messages and ideologies and speaks to human minds, emotions, and motivation. A worship and singing community creates penetrating and community-building effects that the silo worship experience cannot replicate.

For instance, when Christians sing aloud about their theological conviction, commitment, and dedication to the Lord, they encourage others around them to respond

[331] King, "Mango Tree," 165.

and believe similarly. Over time, the corporate singing moments knit with one's lived experience, create communal values and memories, and thereby form embodied theology at a corporate level.[332] In addition, singing as a ritual advocates the re-orientations of what humans love. The human person's identity as lovers "shift the centre of gravity of human identity away from a fixation on thinking, idea, and doctrines and locates it lower, as it were, in the region of our affective, nonconscious operations."[333] In other words, congregational singing is not only a cognitive activity but a holistic engagement.

As a powerful medium, congregational singing differs from a book or a journal because its intrinsic nature appeals first to the human senses, followed by our cognitive thinking and emotional engagement. When lyrics are utilized effectively, they can become a source to advocate self-evaluation and identity renegotiation (e.g., what does the singing about offering one's life to Jesus mean?). Note that the sung text in congregational singing is not solely personal engagement. In Mead's terms, singing is one's self-exposure of "me" to others and a mirror image of the "I."[334]

This chapter about social identity connects to the discussion in chapter 3 because I want to know if the variation in music styles and forms prompts self-categorization (e.g., does this music style align with my identity and culture? How should I associate with other worshippers who do not share the same musical identity, demographic background, and theological orientation as me?).[335] The ethnographic research provides a platform to understand how worshippers self-categorize by musical, cultural, and sub-cultural identities. Besides, as discussed in chapter 3, the emotional effects in music offer a source

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[332] Saliers, "Singing Our Lives," chapter 13, para. 18, location 2215.
[333] Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, chapter 1, para. 41, location 991.
[334] Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 173–77.
[335] Refer to chapter 1, page 7, for the definition of musical identity.

of emotional ties to the Divine, the worship community, oneself, and other interpersonal relationships (e.g., do the songs and singing experience trigger emotional biases and bind social belonging?).

Further, the worship leader and the worship peers form the basis of a faith-based social group. The formation of such a community suggests worshippers are drawn together by some common beliefs, values, and traits (e.g., ethnicity, denominational distinctiveness, use of language, and so on). In the midst, each person needs to decide on the degree of attachment and define their in-group/out-group association (e.g., what is my due diligence, role, and commitment to the religious group and the local church?). Social identity theory allows us to understand how individuals associate and dissociate with specific groupings and why people are willing to act according to the social expectations of their preferred groupings.[336] My qualitative research is an attempt to explore these questions that an average Christian may or may not consider as they sing along on Sundays.

In this case, understanding fundamental sociological concepts and borrowing the concept from Burke and Stets' Identity Control Theory can help me to explore and describe the identity shaping process in congregational singing. It gives me a thinking paradigm to probe if a Christian perceives one's relationship with God as a high-hierarchal identity that penetrates and informs all facets of life in congregational singing. It also helps me explain what musical, leadership, or sociological elements individuals believe can develop their identity in God, including but not limited to the identity as God's people and children.

[336] Brewer, "Ingroup Identification and Intergroup Conflict," 17.

I anticipate that my research in congregational singing can shed light on strengthening the creation and re-creation of meanings in the singing event.[337] When individuals instill their innermost feelings and experience through singing, contextualization and alternate ways of living as Christians on earth will emerge.[338] At the same time, I do acknowledge that subjectivity plays a role as participants respond. The diverse group of participants (from general congregants to pastors) across different Cantonese worship services in the Greater Toronto Area is critical to depict an identity shaping trajectory in congregational singing, if any. Similarities and differences in the congregational singing experience across different people and roles can also be identified. In the next chapter, I share my findings in congregational singing across Greater Toronto Area Cantonese worship services.

[337] Boyce-Tillman, "Turn Your Music to Your Heart," 54–55.
[338] Boyce-Tillman, "Turn Your Music to Your Heart," 54–55.

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

Introduction

Pastoral ethnography is both an art and a science. Good ethnographic research demands a "high degree of sensitivity and self-awareness for the accurate 'reading' of situations and the effective interpretation of people."[339] As a pastoral ethnographer, one of my mandates is to remain humble, curious, self-critical, and open-hearted in listening, observing, and being surprised by what the research participants express.[340] Another crucial mandate is to facilitate a secure, ethical, and sincere research environment so that research participants can freely articulate their thoughts and feelings, from which the underlying theological and pragmatic implications can be extracted.[341]

This chapter begins with a quick recap of how triangulation in research is factored into the research. I then provide a macro perspective of the research context by summarizing my participant observation results in thirteen Greater Toronto Area Cantonese worship services. Following this, I move forward to the micro level of research by outlining the comprehensive results of forty online questionnaires, which are vital for readers to understand the research participants' backgrounds and contexts. The remaining section aims to explain how online questionnaires and participant observation inform the design of interview questions.[342]

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[339] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, chapter 2, para. 64, location 1102.
[340] Scharen and Vigen, eds., *Ethnography*, 19–21.
[341] Scharen and Vigen, eds., *Ethnography*, xxii.
[342] Fiddes, "Ecclesiology and Ethnography," 16–17.

A Recap of Research Design

As I discussed in chapter 1, the idea of triangulation is factored into this study to increase the research's reliability and validity. I begin by going through my local church's worship song archive in the past three years, and identify some major underlying biblical-relational descriptions of God and God's people. Simultaneously, participant observation offers a macro description of the research context, and allows me to compare if the biblical-relational categories are similar across different Greater Toronto Area Cantonese worship services. Participant observation provides the contextual description for me to craft the interview questions and choose music and song leading samples with strong correlation and significance to the research contexts. I anticipate that the research participants will find that some of the music and worship video samples resonate with their congregational singing experience, which further encourages them to share their feelings and thoughts.

Various voices are gathered to enrich this research's comprehensiveness: The voices of the general congregants, pastors, ministry practitioners, scholars, Christian tradition, and the researcher. The qualitative interview collects the voices of general congregants, pastors, and ministry practitioners. Their voices provide micro perspectives concerning congregational singing and its identity shaping effects. In chapter 6, I also leverage the voices of scholars and others from Christian tradition in my literature review to interpret and critique the research results. The integral use of these research methods allows the contribution of micro and macro, practical and academic, as well as subjective and diverse perspectives toward the study subject.

Participant Observation

Many churches launched public worship services online since the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., YouTube live streaming service). This arrangement allows me to conduct online participant observation amid an unprecedented time in church history. It also prompts Christian worshippers to reflect on the meaning-significance of in-person congregational worship and religious gatherings. Though online participant observation is constrained by the amount of information exposed in front of the camera, yet I think it is sufficient to provide descriptions of the worship and singing discourse as well as cultural and liturgical traits across Cantonese worship services.[343] I have used thirteen Greater Toronto Area Cantonese online worship services for participant observation in this research. As per my discussion in chapter 1, I describe my findings in four segments: music, lyrics, leaders, as well as worship environment and flow. I have included a sample of the worksheet for gathering my observations and making field notes in Appendix 2.

Music

The majority of the Greater Toronto Area Cantonese worship services currently use a mixture of traditional hymnals and contemporary worship songs in their weekly services. In a congregational singing setting, it is reasonable not to perceive traditional and contemporary music as two discrete genres. For instance, it is common to see hymnals with contemporary accompaniment (e.g., band music with dynamic rhythms and chords). Likewise, contemporary worship songs can be sung with simple accompaniment, sometimes with simple and structured vocal harmonies. Cantonese contemporary worship songs are often in ballad style or slow rock, with a moderate tempo (e.g., mostly ranging

[343] McCurdy, *Cultural Experience*, 8.

between 60 to 96 beats per minute), and the time signature would mostly be 4/4, 3/4, or 6/8. Many contemporary Christian songs' music structure and tone colour are somewhat similar to mainstream Cantonese pop songs from the 80s to 90s. Based on my understanding, only two of the thirteen churches have full-time worship pastors actively involved in implementing weekly congregational singing.

Many small to medium size churches face human resource limitations and cannot afford a full band or choir each week. This limitation has been particularly noticeable since the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, most singers and musicians are volunteers with musical skills ranging from amateur to semi-professional. There is no choir-led congregational singing in the sample churches I observed. Generally speaking, some Cantonese churches have a choir anthem in their regular service. The role of a choir is often perceived as a vocal group giving ascending praises to the Lord on the worshippers' behalf. Congregants are usually invited to worship by listening and reflecting on the choir anthem.

Lyrics

The worship songs that I came across in the participant observation share some common themes: God's attributes (e.g., the Lord as the triune, holy, all-powerful, and almighty Creator), God's loving and salvific acts through Jesus Christ (e.g., messages that centre around Jesus' incarnated works, atonement, death, and resurrection), God's grace and provision (e.g., the comfort, assurance, and intimate knowing of God), and the human response to God (e.g., prompting a change and commitment in the mind, heart, or action). Lyrics in contemporary songs use vocabularies and phrases that are understandable by the general public. Some lyrics are reflections and paraphrases of one or multiple references

from the Bible, while others contain sentimental realms like a popular sentimental song. Lyrics in hymnals generally have more religious terms and expressions closer to formal writing. They are structured in stanzas, which offers a neat way to organize and express ideas in repeating melody lines.

Either way, the songs in congregational singing convey theocentric ideas and draw worshippers' focus towards God, even though the theological depth and artistic richness vary between songs. Based on the sample songs in participant observation, the number of praise songs outnumbers songs for personal reflection. A personal reflection song could be a confession of sin or a reassessment of one's current spiritual state and relationship with God.

A response song usually follows after the sermon, and many leaders attempt to connect song ideas to it. In denominational churches such as Baptists, Alliance, and some Non-Denominational churches, the congregants will stand and sing the Doxology and Fourfold Amen at the end of a service. This practice shows that liturgical and denominational nuances still play a role in the singing culture of local churches today. In terms of languages, some churches use a mixture of Mandarin and Cantonese songs, while others primarily use Cantonese. Only one out of thirteen church samples use only English songs in the worship service.

The Worship Leaders and Worship Team

As for demographics, worship musicians and leaders are primarily mid-adults and older. The aging demographic in Cantonese churches has been a widely acknowledged challenge in the past ten years. Recently, new and returned immigrants, primarily young families and young adults, might have started to bring down the average age. The mixture

of first-generation immigrants, the 1.5 generations from Hong Kong to Canada in their school years, and the recent waves of immigrants, weave these sub-cultural groups together under the same church roof. I am intrigued to examine if each group contributes their preferred expressions of worship and singing to the corporate event. Moreover, I am intrigued to hear if sub-cultural diversity causes tensions and hinders the sense of belonging and group associations amid worship.

Most teams lead the singing in a standing position, with natural body movement as opposed to formal conducting, followed by congregants who stand or sit as per the instructions. Some leaders lead behind a pulpit, while others use a music stand. The leaders with a traditional leading or church choir background also lead the congregants with a conducting hand. Many leaders prepare transitional sharing and bridge the songs with the contemporary context, using prayer, Scripture, or paraphrasing biblical ideas. There are only a few rare incidences in which the leaders reference personal thoughts and feelings as transitions. Overall, the leading style aligns with what Ingalls describes as participatory performances. At different degrees of effectiveness, their expressions and behaviours mobilize communal participation without extensively drawing the congregant's attention.[344]

For attire, worship personnel on stage wear business casual to formal wear, reflecting a culture of respect towards the act of leading worship. Some sections are led by a team of singers and multiple musicians. In contrast, it is common to see one worship leader and an accompanist handle the entire congregational singing section. One worship

[344] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation,* chapter 1, para. 34, location 1420.

leader uses YouTube videos as a tool for others to follow and sing along, which I believe is an increasingly common method due to resource limitations.

Worship Environment and Flow

Most worship services begin with a word of greeting, followed by reading a Bible passage and opening prayer. Following this, the congregational singing section often contains three to four songs, ranging from eight to seventeen minutes. That said, I am surprised to find out that four out of thirteen churches use only two songs before the sermon. Part of the reason could be saving time for Holy Communion or special arrangements. In some cases, corporate prayer, Scripture reading, or the sermon go after the congregational singing section. In other cases, corporate prayers can also take place after the sermon, or the Scripture reading takes place within the sermon time. As mentioned in the opening chapter, many Cantonese churches express their worship "semi-formally." They are not liturgical like a high church, but also not elevating sensation and spontaneity as a free-flowing church. This observation is verified through participant observation.

The worship settings vary from modern architectural halls or gyms to practically designed sanctuaries, with congregants facing one direction. The places of worship are usually bright in illumination, and more contemporary settings use stage lighting and dim the house lights. All services use PowerPoint presentation software to project the lyrics on the wall, and there is no usage of hymn books in any of the observed samples. Since this is an online participant observation, the video and audio records primarily focus on what happened on stage, not off-stage (i.e., the congregants). Despite this, I can see from various shots that most Cantonese worship services are predominantly Chinese adults and

mature adults, with some but not proportionately significant numbers of young adults in the midst.

Online Questionnaire

Ethical Consideration

Upon the research ethics clearance provided by the McMaster Research Ethics Board, the direct human research began with research email invitations sent via Greater Toronto Area pastoral networks. The invitation was twofold: inviting the pastors to participate in the online questionnaire and interview while simultaneously asking them to extend the invitations to their respective congregants, worship leaders, musicians, and general congregants.[345] In the letter, I explained my research topic, purpose, method of inquiry, and potential research benefits to the local churches.

Following this, interested participants visited a McLime Survey link which begins with information concerning the research's code of ethics, such as privacy and confidentiality, data security, and time of data deletion. As Sissela Bok states, confidentiality refers to "the boundaries surrounding shared secrets and the process of guarding these boundaries."[346] Henceforth, I am responsible for explaining what parameters are used in guarding such boundaries to ensure a high standard of privacy and confidentiality.

For instance, I affirmed that their real names would remain anonymous in my writing, though there could still be a slim chance that someone could conceive their true

[345] With reference to McMaster Research Ethics Board application section 10.6.6, 10.6.8, 10.6.10, and 10.6.12 for the invitation letter and scripts.

[346] Bok, *Secrets*, 119.

identity.[347] I would apply pseudonyms to any names of individuals, groups, and organizations mentioned in my research.[348] I also explained that interview recording in Zoom is needed for notetaking purposes. I affirmed that the clips would be stored offline, and I am the only authorized person to have access to these video files and interview notes throughout the writing and defense process. Afterward, all interview notes and videos will be permanently deleted. Participants were also reminded of their right to withdraw during the information-gathering process. Psychological and data leakage risks were also covered, with psychotherapeutic contacts for individual counseling available upon request.[349] All participants agreed to the confidentiality, data security, and potential risks involved by signing the online consent. In addition, participants had the right to choose between video and audio recording, audio-only recording, or no recording. Those who permitted recordings understood they had the right to stop or pause a recording at any time.[350]

Online Questionnaire

As previously indicated, the online questionnaire served as a tool to help outline the contours of the research context and provide an overview of the research participants' backgrounds. For the research in this study, I interviewed forty Christian adults (i.e., eleven pastors and twenty-nine lay leaders or general congregants) who had attended Cantonese services in the Greater Toronto Area area for a minimum of three years. The questionnaire shows they are young to mature adults, with thirty-eight persons ranging

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[347] Malony, *Clergy Malpractice*, 111.

[348] McCurdy et al., *Cultural Experience*, 85.

[349] A sample of the inform to consent can be found via https://surveys.mcmaster.ca/limesurvey/index.php/654922?lang=enb.

[350] Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 87.

from twenty-five to sixty-five years old (see Appendix 3.1). Their years of Christianity range from ten to forty years. Thirty-nine individuals speak Cantonese at home, with one saying he speaks Cantonese and English to his family. Thirty-seven say they can best express themselves in Cantonese (see Appendix 3.2). They are incredibly comfortable using a mix of Cantonese and English to sing during a worship service (average of 9.5 out of 10), and many are comfortable singing in Mandarin as well (average of 8.4).[351] All forty individuals can read and share in Cantonese and English—one of the prerequisites for participating in this research.

Geographically speaking, the participants are Christians and pastors from nineteen churches located in Markham, Richmond Hill, North York, Scarborough, Downtown Toronto, and Mississauga (see Appendix 3.3). All the participants have attended their churches for a minimum of three years, with twenty-eight of them attending their current churches from eight to fifteen years, reflecting that the participants have substantial familiarity with their church's congregational service and worship culture. In addition, fifteen of the eighteen churches are Alliance, Baptist, or Non-Denominational churches. Interestingly, although the participants came from more diverse denominational backgrounds, Alliance, Baptist, and Non-Denominational churches are still the three major categories (see Appendix 3.4).

In terms of church involvement, these individuals have served in one or multiple roles in worship ministry over the past three years (see Appendix 3.5). Some of these

[351] The scaling averages represent the overall responses to the provided statement. A high average score (e.g., 8 or above) means the partcipants strongly agree with a given statement. A low average score (e.g. 3 or lower) means the particpants mostly disagree or strongly disagree with the statement. Likewise, an average score in between 6 to 7 or 3 to 4 repectively means overall the partcipants agree or disagree with the statement. An average score close to 5 means the participants generally are neutral or indifferent in response to the statement. This scaling average applies to Appendix 3.2, 3.8, 3.12, 3.14, 3.15 and 3.16.

roles are directly related to congregational singing, such as musicians, worship vocalists, AV personnel, and other positions, such as usher and administration. Many musicians, vocalists, and worship leaders serve more than one role at different services.

In contrast, five out of forty congregants say they are not involved in worship ministry, and eleven say they do not play instruments. The diversity of voices, ranging from rich musical backgrounds to no musical training, is vital for research validity. If social identity formation in congregational singing occurs, then it should not be exclusive to music players and music lovers. Nevertheless, later research shows that those with a more substantial music background could articulate and describe the event more vividly from a musical perspective. Likewise, theologically trained pastors tended to offer an opinion with greater theological emphasis.

Questions about Music and Singing Experience

The questionnaire respondents were given four short answer textboxes to enter the names of two non-Christian and two Christian songs that touched them. The respondents will then select the reasons that make these songs unique and "dear to their hearts." The responses show that a "pleasing melody" is vital for lyrical music, both non-Christian and Christian songs (Appendix 3.6). As for song content, it is more crucial for Christian songs to contain lyrics representing the respondents' present state, beliefs, values, and memories associated with their faith experience. The responses reflect the pragmatic role of Christian songs as a corporate affirmation to declare biblical truths and Christian values, reflecting the doctrinal significance to a faith community.

Conversely, the result might suggest that individuals look for stronger sentimental qualities in non-Christian music. This sentimental quality may latch or resonate with

one's memory or childhood experience, which I further examine in the interview process. These individuals also say that when they learn a new song, they tend to focus more on the melody lines and lyrics than the arrangement, although these musical elements are arguably dynamically interdependent and interrelated in practice (see Appendix 3.7).

Furthermore, participants tend to interpret the lyrics and apply song meanings to their relationship with God (average of 8.1, as reflected in Appendix 3.8). I assume the participants refer to various scenarios or a general sense of intuition rather than directing all questions to one particular event as they answer them. The ranking also suggests that the respondents interpret the lyrics and apply the meaning to their present life stage and circumstances (average of 7.7). The qualitative interview extracts further details on this and verifies accordingly. It is interesting to notice the equal emphasis on singing well versus enjoying the singing without emphasizing technicalities (average of 7.3 and 7.4, respectively). Perhaps they suggest that worshippers tend to be less critical-minded when singing. Individuals are somewhat likely to apply and relate the songs' meanings to others, recall a personal memory, and seek new meaning-significance in congregational singing. Overall, individuals tend to follow the singing rather than remain silent during congregational singing (average of 4.3).

When it comes to peer participation, the participants describe they feel "connected," "united," and "encouraged" when they hear others sing out loud in worship (see Appendix 3.9). These top three descriptive words are also commonly used in the interview when describing in-person congregational singing. Intergenerational worship engagement is generally welcomed and can connect the worship community (see Appendix 3.10). However, when the participants are invited to follow a song not

congruent with their musical tastes, twenty-three say it can be disengaging (see Appendix 3.11). These two responses intrigued me in knowing how worshippers respond behaviourally and relate socially in joint worship services (i.e., intergenerational, interlingual, and intercultural services across Cantonese, Mandarin, and English congregants). Chances are that not every niche's musical tastes and aesthetic preferences can be factored into a single worship event.

Regarding worship leading, the participants say that their worship leaders at church are doing decent jobs of facilitating worship engagement (average of 7.5, see Appendix 3.12). However, the averages are lower when further broken into the leaders' ability to guide and bridge the songs with the contemporary context and daily lives (ranging from an average of 6.1 to 7). Besides that, this question attests to my observation that silence and solitude during congregational singing are not common in Cantonese churches (average of 5.8). I infer that the culture of keeping content flowing is a socially accepted spiritual expression that many Cantonese Christians feel comfortable with and consider suitable. Overall, the participants believe that singing with a worship team or band is "engaging," "connecting," and "relating" (see Appendix 3.13). The participants were invited to expand on this concerning social associations in the interview process.[352]

I included Rosner's core identities and other identity descriptions in a scaling question. In evaluating the general perceptions of how the worship songs function on Sunday mornings, most individuals say the songs affirm that they are redeemed in Christ (average of 8.0), forgiven by Christ (average of 7.9), and known by God (average of 7.8), and thus prompting them to respond in love and commitment to God (average of 7.8, see

[352] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, introduction, para. 37, location 651.

Appendix 3.14). I think these themes rank higher than others on the list because they are reiterated implicitly and explicitly weekly. Correspondingly, the participant observation substantiates that these themes or categories are common in congregational singing. Overall, participants perceive congregational singing as a relevant and essential practice for developing their Christian faith.

The questionnaire's result suggests that differences in personal identity markers do not hinder the participant's sense of belonging and association with a worshipping community (Appendix 3.15).[353] Research participants are somewhat comfortable worshipping with people who are different from them ethnically, culturally, demographically, and so on.

Overall, the scores in this question seem high, and I believe there could be four underlying factors. First, in principle, it is difficult for the participant to admit that they cannot establish a sense of belonging with others who have the prescribed differences (e.g., ethnicity, social economic class, and mother tongue). To give a low rating may sound rude and discriminating. Second, the high scores may be driven by the perception that congregational singing is a personal event with God. As such, worship peers with different identity markers have minimal relevance. Third, the participants may not think through the ripple effects caused by the differences. For instance, the result suggests that they can worship with others of different ages (average of 8.2). However, the participants may not consider that the difference in ages can entail a very different musical expression that is hard to relate to and engage with. Fourth, perhaps someone gives a high score

[353] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 3, para. 1, location 822.

because of solid Bible teaching about inclusivity in worship. More probing is needed from the qualitative interviews to understand further.

Despite this, the response suggests that differences in religious values and spiritual beliefs create greater hindrances to group association (average of 6.2). This result may be caused by the expectation of congregational singing as a public witness and declaration of religious values and spiritual beliefs (average of 7.4). Individuals are drawn together by the shared belief systems for religious gatherings.

Finally, the result demonstrates that current congregational singing contents do not contribute much to developing a christological self-view pertaining to the personal identity markers (see Appendix 3.16). I am not surprised by the medium score here. Most congregational singing contents and discourse do not address these topics (e.g., a biblical understanding of gender, ethnicity, and friendship). Thus, it is fair that the participants give them neutral ratings (circling near the average of 6), except for religious values and spiritual beliefs (an average of 7.4).

The Design of Qualitative Interview

The above online questionnaire helps to ensure the sample population has high representational significance for the research context. It also provides an overview of the research participants' comments about congregational singing at their local churches. The qualitative interview is purposefully designed to probe how congregational singing contributes to the worshippers' identity, social self, and interpersonal relationships. Thus, it is crucial to explain the rationale behind the design of this qualitative interview. A sample of the interview guide can be found in Appendix 4.

The interview divides music, lyrics, leaders, and singing space and experience into three major sections. In section A, I aim to understand the participants' responses to musical stimuli commonly found in Greater Toronto Area Cantonese churches. Specifically, I put together six versions of a familiar classic worship song, "How Great Thou Art." The six song samples cover a spectrum of music genres commonly experienced in Greater Toronto Area Cantonese worship services: traditional choral singing, Cantonese Christian modern style, contemporary music with revised lyrics, rock music with modified lyrics and themes, typical Western expression in English, and traditional Chinese singing in Mandarin.[354] I invite the research participants to imagine these versions used in their church's congregational singing time. They are asked to describe their feelings, thoughts, behaviours, and engagement levels according to the variations of musical styles, forms, languages, lyrics, etc.

The two revised Cantonese lyrics are built into the research design because tonal issue is a widely known challenge for Cantonese when it comes to lyrics. Unlike English, a dialect that does not rely on pitch variation to communicate a word's meaning, other languages, such as Mandarin and Cantonese, rely on pitch variation. For instance, Mandarin has only four tones, and Cantonese contains nine tones. Changes in Cantonese tones "affect the semantics of the lexicon," making it very difficult to match words with the music notes.[355] Any phonetic alterations can change the aural meanings and realms of the written words.[356] The tonal issue imposes an even greater challenge to Cantonese

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[354] The video sample used as section A stimulus can be found here: https://youtu.be/EM2SmqI-HQg

[355] So, "Tonal Changes in Hong Kong Cantonese," 186.

[356] As an example, the term "steadfast love" will sound and mean the same in English although it is sung on different notes and pitches. In Cantonese, phonetic alternation could turn the aural meaning of "steadfast love" to sound like the word, "dementia." Likewise, the word "I' or "me" could sound like the word "goose."

Christian lyrics than popular lyrics because the textual meaning must also be theologically sound and meaningful. Therefore, many Christian songs, particularly traditional ones written in Mandarin but sung in Cantonese for years, have the tonal issue because they are not initially written for Cantonese singing. Here, the participants articulate their attachment to the original lyrics and their perceptions and concerns about the ongoing trend in lyrics revisions.

In Section B of the interview process, I displayed five worship-leading samples and asked the participants to imagine worshipping in the midst.[357] The first one is a sample of a traditional approach to leading worship. This sample took place in Hong Kong, but the leading method is widely used by many Greater Toronto Area Cantonese churches today. The leader stands and leads between the church choir and the pulpit, giving detailed singing instructions with minimal emotional engagement.

The second one is a contemporary approach delivered in a band setting. The use of words, voice tones, and music are more inviting and energetic than the first. There are a lot of emotional arousals expressed through the talking and music playing. Participants are invited to respond if they think this worship-leading style suits and engages them and their worship peers at church.

Sample B3, B4, and B5 are transitions between songs that I extract from the same sample worship service. This arrangement gives a sense of flow and continuity for the participants to feel and respond to. Sample B3 is a general greeting and short prayer to begin the worship. Sample B4 is a quick transition with a gentle and polite invitation to stand up and sing. Sample B5 is a sharing that attempts to prepare the worshippers for the

[357] The video sample used as section B stimulus can be found here: https://youtu.be/pzX_j-bODaA.

next song, followed by a long waiting time that may or may not be intentional. This one-leader approach is a common form of leading in many Cantonese churches. Research participants conclude this section by summarizing what factors worship leaders can generally use to enrich their corporate engagement in congregational singing.

Section C of the qualitative interview strives to collect responses concerning the communal experience of congregational singing. The first question asks the participants to compare their physical and online congregational singing experience—a vivid and recent experience that individuals can use to describe how physical togetherness impacts one's worship experience and social belonging. This question leads to the following inquiry asking whether singing with a crowd strengthens their Christian identity.

Following this, participants are asked to recall the prominent and recurring themes when they sing about the "I-and-God" and "We-and-God" relationships on Sundays. Furthermore, the understanding of Christian communication suggests that the contextualization process in congregational singing takes place when a person engages behaviourally, cognitively, and emotionally.[358] I prompt them to describe how they relate and contextualize the lyrics they sing to their personal lives. Similarly, I ask the participants to recall if they sing songs on Sundays that describe how humans-to-humans relate to and love one another from a christological perspective. Respondents are then invited to conclude whether congregational singing shapes their identity and relationships with God and others.

The interview concludes by asking them to share any critical life events in which the Lord has encouraged them through a song. This question explores how music and

[358] King, "Mango Tree," 164–65.

memory help contribute to one's spiritual pathway. Alternatively, individuals can also refer to the songs they mentioned in the online questionnaire and elaborate on why these songs are meaningful to them. This last question helps to describe how the meaning-making process could take place beyond the textual meanings in the prescribed lyrics and how memory plays a vital role in one's attachment to a song.

Data Analysis Method

The interview is purposefully structured into concise questions because it helps to keep the answer focused and structured. It also helps to make data sorting and response comparison easier for data analysis. In addition, since all interviews are in Cantonese, this list of questions provides an organized flow of information for me to take notes and transcribe manually into English.

To analyze the interviews, I arrange the data through inductive and deductive reasoning (also known as "slices and bags").[359] Inductive reasoning means the data itself will suggest the categories and groupings. An example includes grouping common words and phrases that the interviewers use to describe the distinctive social effects physical worship contains. In contrast, deductive reasoning refers to the tagging and coding of the collected data by my research logic, interest, and flow. An example includes how individuals recall the meaning-making effect of music in critical life events.[360] Both reasoning methods are used to acquire practice-led knowledge to improve the current practice.

Although the slices and bags approach helps to depict the significant and primary

[359] Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 171.
[360] Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 170–71.

trajectories expressed in qualitative research, yet this method might neglect or overlook secondary data sets and comments. As such, I also search for significant and value-added outliers or even contradicting voices in the data set, and highlight ideas that are not in alignment with the dominant views and opinions. With this in mind, I begin to share my interview results in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6: RESEARCH ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Introduction

A qualitative interview is a widely used research tool in ethnographic fieldwork to understand a phenomenon. Research participants provide multifaceted and multidirectional details of the context and issue of the study. Thus, I must reiterate that my primary research interest remains in how congregational singing provides identity shaping capabilities among the Cantonese worship services in the Greater Toronto Area. From this premise, I am keen to understand how the participants self-identify by musical expressions, leadership style, and singing discourse, as well as how worshippers pre-suppose each other's responses about these variables. I am also intrigued by how individuals are willing to accommodate and tolerate elements that are not in line with their musical, cultural, and linguistic preferences. The question of whether and how worshippers contextualize the song's message is also fundamental and explored.

The first section of this chapter covers a range of results from my qualitative interview regarding social identity shaping, including: musical identity, worship leader and style, physical togetherness, lyrics and contextualization, and song memory. I reference the results with the literature review discussed earlier. The second section is my interpretation of the results, focusing on how identity formation and renegotiation occur amid singing about God and others. I interpret how the research suggests biblical identity

expressions, the singing contextualization process, and socio-cultural factors influencing the identity shaping capability in congregational singing.

Musical Identity

During the interview, descriptive words such as "engage," "sing," "reflect," "follow," and "comfortable" appear pretty often when commenting on and criticizing the music stimuli.[361] In section A of the qualitative interview, many participants who grew up in the church refer to traditional choral music as a musical expression they are familiar with in congregational singing. They are critical of the harmony in sample A1 for being too loud; thus difficult for the worshippers to follow the melody.[362] Those with better-trained ears comment that the off-pitch and inaccurate pronunciations are relevant samples and depictions of their routine worship experience that interfere with their participation. Different individuals express various comfort levels with and preferences toward the sample choral music. The participants associate choral music with the worship team leading with harmony parts or choir anthem presentation. Christians with years of Chinese church experience would accept that choral music is a church's norm and cultural expression of faith. Some individuals who do not support choral music still try to worship and sing along, possibly due to social compliance. Others try to stay engaged by listening to others' singing. At the same time, a fraction of the congregant and pastoral participants pre-suppose that the younger generations and contemporary faith seekers, who are not raised in this choral music culture, would find this genre distant and foreign.

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[361] These terms are not provided as prescribed vocabulary options to the participants, but they naturally appear during the interview conversations. Sometimes, they suggested these words on their own. Other times, I used these terms when I responded to them or initiated a conversation, and they picked up and used them to elaborate on their worship experience.

[362] Share, "How Great Thou Art 祢真偉大" (see 0:45–1:14).

Some participants use in-group and out-group language (i.e., "us-versus-them") to describe people with different musical identities.[363] For example, there seems to be a sense of social expectation that individuals are somewhat influenced by mainstream culture. Some participants critique that a musical form outside the mainstream culture, such as sample A1, could hinder musical-theological communication, engagement level, and cultural relevance. As a result, when I introduce sample A2, one of the contemporary expressions, many see it as an improved attempt to make the traditional song more culturally and demographically relevant, even though this may not be their preferred arrangement.[364]

Simultaneously, some participants say the genre, arrangement, and tone colour of sample A2 are in line with the mainstream Cantonese music in the eighties and nineties. Perhaps these voices illustrate a practical outcome in which leaders often naturally express, articulate, arrange, and sing a song that reflects the music distinctiveness of their respective contemporary era. Likely, this sample does not sound very "contemporary" to individuals in their twenties or thirties, while someone in their sixties or above would think it is a leading-edge expression. The musical ingredients serve as a timestamp and highlight that contemporary worship music is diverse and fluid. Here, musical identities are described in relative terms because the idea of contemporary music differs across individuals. Overall, the participants find this version easy to follow.

In my research, it becomes clear that most congregants prefer to have more than one vocalist in congregational singing because multiple voices can better project a more significant connotation of community and togetherness. This research response resonates

[363] Hogg and Abram, "Social Identifications," 19–21.
[364] Lord, "How Great Thou Art 祢真偉大" (see 0:39–1:15).

with Davidson and Faulkner's comment that group singing is a social construct. The multiple leading voices entail a sense and ideology of a church community and mutual self-exposure.[365] As such, research participants generally appreciate the corporate effect created by sample A3 because it contains a male and female voice.[366] Here, the group dynamics are more substantial than the female soloist in the previous sample, therefore more hospitable and inviting for singalong. In congregational singing, worshippers in general consciously and subconsciously try to feel and sense whether a song welcomes group participation. Thus, some individuals tend to listen more than sing when they perceive the singing as merely presentational. In my research, many participants think samples A1 and A2 belong to the presentational category. Multiple singing voices in unison and simple harmonies help deliver a sense of community and togetherness and thus could prompt singing together.

In terms of changes in lyrics from a traditional version to a new version, many of the interviewed pastors and congregants see it as a necessary evolution and development in Cantonese worship. The intonation issue in traditional hymns is a widely known cultural and aesthetic issue. Again, those who have been Christians for many years accept the original lyrics as part of the faith's heritage and can worship without much concern. Conversely, the young to mature adult participants welcome lyrical revisions because they believe this change can engage themselves, seekers, and the younger generations. All participants who welcome lyrical revision also emphasize that the quality of the revision matters the most. They understand that the original lyrics are often theologically rich, and newer versions should not sacrifice the depth in content merely for better tonal

[365] Davidson and Faulkner, "Group Singing," chapter 42, para. 3, location 21811.
[366] Hymn, "How Great Thou Art 祢真偉大" (see 0:46–1:17).

expression. This point is augmented by the sharing of two participants whose churches have their own local revised lyrics for traditional hymns. One of them, who serves as a pastor, says that revised lyrics are less likely to be challenged for songs with multiple versions because the congregants would assume the leader picks the best version among all the options. However, for songs with only one original and one local revised version, people wonder why the local version is thought to be better and why the original version is dropped. I believe this particular church uses the local revised version to help strengthen the distinctive identity and sense of belonging for the church members. When a specific set of lyrics becomes localized and familiarized, it forms the incidental human memory across the congregants.[367]

Two individuals also comment that they have yet to come across an acceptable Cantonese version of Christmas Carols. To them, the tonal issue in Cantonese Christmas Carols is too distracting and unbearable. They question why familiar songs like Christmas Carols cannot be sung in English during Cantonese service when many Christians can understand English, and Cantonese translations can be projected for those who need them. This comment resonates with King's observation that language is not only for communication but also contributes to developing a song's melodic and rhythmic structure.[368]

A few other individuals share that should newer versions substitute the original lyrics in their local worship service, they would feel a fraction of their heritage is lost because their childhood and church memory have knitted closely with the songs and lyrics. The original lyrics and musical expression have become part of their musical

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[367] Saliers, "Singing Our Lives," 185–86.
[368] King, *Pathways in Christian Music Communication*, 91.

memory, corporate experience, and spiritual identity. It resonates with Tönsing's comment that song memory is internalized with emotions.[369] That said, those who express such feelings and emotional ties to the original version understand the necessity for ongoing lyrical development for the benefit of the younger generations and faith seekers. Here, there are shared preconceived beliefs that the younger generations and faith seekers long for something new and different from the traditional songs and expressions.

Nevertheless, the research participants who honour the movement of lyrical revision also acknowledge that this change takes time. This is because, unlike singing a familiar version that many Christians can follow easily, like a "natural muscle reflex," a rewritten version requires individuals to interpret consciously and comprehend what they sing. Participants also believe that putting effort into interpreting what the new lyrics try to convey is a healthy and necessary habit, a process often bypassed when singing something overly familiar.

In comparison, alternations in the rhythm of a well-known melody receive more pushback than lyrical revision. Many participants acknowledge that sample A4 was a fair attempt to rearrange a classic song with a rock-style and aroused expression, which they think could be a good arrangement for the younger generations.[370] The majority of the research participants say that it is by far the most contemporary among the samples. At the same time, participants who make age-related comments share the consensus that older Cantonese-speaking Christians would not accept this rock-style with syncopated rhythms in congregational singing. Some criticize that the revised melody lines are too

[369] Tönsing, "That Song Moves Me to Tears," 2, 6–7.
[370] Express, "How Great Thou Art 祢真偉大" (see 0:49–1:20).

intentionally-changed from the original phrases, making it very difficult to sing along. A person mentioned that the lyrics seem to have shifted from a God-centred theme to a disciple-making theme, deviating from the original lyrics' focus, thus making it harder to appreciate, follow, and reflect. Therefore, it is fair to say that creativity and innovation could be "self-evident virtues."[371] Yet, such virtue does not guarantee the successful integration of bringing people with different musical identities together or translation into effective use of worship music.

In contrast, sample A5 uses a soft atmospheric sound with blended voices of the leaders and the congregants.[372] Many say this is their most engaging version among all six samples because the music playing does not distract the attention from the lyrics but provides sufficient accompaniment to encourage singing and reflection on their relationships with God. A few comment that this version, with lots of space in the music playing, is uncommon in their respective Cantonese services. Instead, the usual artistic practice is to fill in all the spaces and make the music sound busy and aroused, similar to the previous samples.

Hearing other worshippers singing together also facilitates participation and helps develop a sense of community. The worshippers' voices aurally join together and interact socially, from which spiritual experience is developed.[373] Although some individuals express that it is often more challenging to sing English songs, yet, all the participants say they are familiar with this particular English version, so they do not have any problems following. Indeed, the sound of the English lyrics matches with the melody notes (i.e.,

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[371] Lim and Lester, *Lovin' on Jesus*, chapter 1, para. 86, location 527.
[372] Church, "How Great Thou Art" (see 1:38–2:37).
[373] Davidson and Faulkner, "Group Singing," chapter 42, para. 1, location 21750.

unlike the original Cantonese version, which contains tonal issues), thus making the singing comfortable and blending well with the music. Nevertheless, many participants also believe that English lyrics are generally not preferable in Cantonese services because not everyone is fluent. Those who are more comfortable with the English culture and language can or have already chosen to attend the English service instead.

When considering participation, a pastor also shares that communal diversity and inclusiveness can be expressed through numerous vocalists and their perceived identity markers. He references his experience at a multiethnic church, where the worship pastor intentionally chooses vocalists of different genders, ages, and ethnicities to sing weekly. As time passes, congregants will understand that the church strives to be inclusive and embrace diversity by participating in this communal singing. This example demonstrates that a worship leader can shape a worship community in ways other than singing. Here, the leader includes people with different identity markers (i.e., gender, age, and ethnicity), vividly contextualizing the identity as spiritual siblings and appropriating what it means to be a diversified and harmonious family in Christ.[374]

The last video sample is a Mandarin version.[375] The singing style is opera-like or Chinese opera-like, and many say this is not something they can resonate with due to cultural differences. To my surprise, some individuals share that the singing evokes memories of their living experiences in mainland China. The person with a positive experience during one's stay in China thinks that the singing context matches the cultural nuances, which is somewhat similar to the Mandarin worship service in Toronto. He

[374] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 5, para. 20, location 2146.
[375] Vastli, "How Great Thou Art (祢真偉大)" (see 1:19–2:10).

states that this sample is indeed a culturally relevant expression, and they can participate and sing without reservation.

Conversely, another participant who had hurtful memories in China said that the singing and music reminded him of unpleasant experiences and thus felt discouraged from singing along. Their responses suggest three interesting components to consider in congregational singing. First, individuals will assess whether a specific musical expression fits the perceived social setting and cultural norm. Here, the opera-like singing style is perceived as a distant and foreign expression of Cantonese culture but a relevant expression of Mandarin culture. A person who can fit into different cultures will be able to adjust and assimilate oneself to fit the social expressions. Second, memory and experience play a subtle yet critical role in one's singing behaviour. This feedback is similar to what Boyce-Tillman illustrates with the example of a young soldier in the First World War. Personal memory directly influences musical memory and meaning.[376] A song is not solely an external stimulus that detaches from the singer.

Third, many Cantonese services allow Mandarin songs but not English to be used because it is still a form of Chinese. This practice is incongruent with some research responses, showing that more people are less proficient in Mandarin than in English. With this in mind, I probed further and asked how Mandarin songs are used in their Cantonese services. Some individuals say that their worship leaders sing Mandarin lyrics in Cantonese, some say that the leaders will use a Cantonese version of the same song whenever available, and some leaders use the original Mandarin version. In summary, leaders tend to find locally accepted ways to account for and overcome language barriers.

[376] Boyce-Tillman, "Turn Your Music to Your Heart," 55.

To many, language as a cultural artifact is one crucial identity marker and is often used to determine social categorization and social belonging, particularly in a local church setting. In Cantonese congregational singing, music, and language are ways of claiming identity, informing and affirming the worshippers of who they are and which musical and cultural groupings they belong to.[377]

Worship Leader and Worship Styles

The influence of religious upbringing can be found in the participants' responses toward different leadership styles. Most participants criticize that the leader in sample B1 is merely getting the "assigned job done," that is, not engaging, not utilizing creativity and emotions, and not intending to integrate the songs with the contemporary context.[378] However, the leader gives clear and concise instructions for the worshippers to follow, such as standing up and singing the song twice before the music begins. Congregants who grew up in a traditional worship setting or have years of exposure to this kind of worship style and culture say they accept this as the church's religious culture. Therefore, what they often do is lower their expectation of the worship leader and try to find their own ways to engage, such as singing or listening, in the congregational singing. In this situation, the identity standard as a singing worshipper is compared to the external expectation of a worshipper in the respective worship environment.[379] Even though the participants do not find the leading style engaging, they are still trying to align the worshipper role with the social and religious expectations, putting individual preferences and feelings as secondary considerations.

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[377] Lim and Lester, *Lovin' on Jesus*, chapter 1, para. 59, location 491.
[378] Church,"Praise Ye the Name of the Lord 同來讚美萬軍之王" (see 0:00–0:45).
[379] Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, chapter 4, para. 10, location 1457.

Some pastoral participants criticize this leading style as a hindrance to life-building ministry and indicate that it should be phased out in the church. These pastors pre-suppose that the leader probably adopts a formal, instructional, and rigid leadership style from previous leaders and the church norm, duplicating the delivery method without critical self-reflection. Participants generally think this form of leading is irrelevant to the younger generation, but whoever can worship in the midst will comply and follow the norm. A few participants also comment that the physical layout, particularly leading behind the large pulpit, creates an unnecessary physical barrier between the leader and the worshippers.

In sample B2, most participants commented that they could feel the emotional engagement from the leader's talking, singing, and gestures.[380] Despite this, the music overpowers the vocals in this sample. The worship leader's verbal sharing, which the participants believe could add value to the worship experience, is covered by the loud music. Participants say that theologically sound and genuine sharing can often help worshippers to engage their minds and hearts with what the leader wants to emphasize. A few pastors believe that as the emotional realm of congregational singing can reach a heightened and aroused level, most congregants would accept the emotional expression and would not find it exaggerated or awkward.

For this reason, experienced worship leaders and musicians also note that it often takes a lot of thinking and preparation in the worship flow and music arrangement to bring the congregational singing to a highly emotionally-engaged state. The perception is that in a Cantonese culture where individuals are generally introverted and conservative,

[380] Worship, "May the Lord Grant Vision to this Generation 求主給這世代看見異象." (see 0:00–0:28; 4:21–5:19).

it often takes more time and effort to warm up and become emotionally and behaviourally engaged. Otherwise, the highly emotional expression would often be perceived as awkward and thus lead to the congregation's disengagement. Awkwardness can be understood as the dissonance between the emotional realm leaders on stage try to convey and the congregants' overall emotional state. The vibe and emotive realm in worship service are elements that even individuals without a musical background can sense and feel. Thus, worship leading is a form of social organization in which the worship leader has to carefully consider what expressions can effectively engage worshippers within a specific local context.[381]

Some congregant participants say the expression in sample 2B is in line with Hong Kong popular culture. The playing and singing are closer to the current pop music, thus making it easier for the younger worshippers to relate to. Another pastor also comments that the music, sharing, and expression are all aligned with and tailored to contemporary Hong Kong culture. Thus, they believe that when cultural relevance is high, it can better advocate emotional resonance, cognitive engagement, and active behavioural response. Their comments illustrate that music is more than musical sound patterns; its aural quality also contains elements of cultural identity.[382] Overall, participants expect worship leaders to communicate and influence the congregants with their minds, souls, and hearts, guiding and directing the worshippers through the pathway of worship songs.

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[381] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, chapter 2, para. 25, location 2016.
[382] King, *Pathways*, 40.

In sample B3, many participants believe that beginning worship with a word of welcome and greeting, followed by a prayer, is inviting, standard, and appropriate.[383] This opening allows worshippers to quiet down and prepare themselves to participate in the worship service. Research participants use this sample to augment the fact that a leader's confidence and emotion directly impact the engagement level of the worshippers. They observe the leader's uncomfortable body movements and mellow voice as behavioural cues that reflect the leader's nervousness and lack of confidence. Some congregants and pastors presume this person might be an amateur leader undergoing stage fright. However, these participants also note that if this happens at their local church, where they know the person has tried their best to lead, they are usually gracious and forgiving. They will see past the inexperienced behaviour and technical hurdles, and sing praises aloud to God to encourage the amateur leader. In other words, knowing the leader who takes one's service to the Lord seriously and having pre-existing associations and relationships with the serving person or team can directly increase tolerance for imperfections and indirectly advocate participation. The identity of friends, siblings, and companions in Christ is at play.

In sample B4, the leader gives a gentle invitation to stand and sing.[384] Like sample 2B, the leader "invites" the worshippers to stand. Yet, this invitation sounded like an optional preference that worshippers could decide to follow or not to follow. Some research participants say these word choices are welcoming, unforceful, genuine, and socially sensitive to those with various physical challenges (e.g., seniors and physically disabled individuals). Other participants criticize that such optional expressions and word

[383] Church, "Worthy" (see 45:52–46:22).
[384] Church, "Passover (逾越)" (see 51:43–52:15).

choices are unnecessary because congregational worship is a corporate and intentional act. They think a Christian gathering is a God-commanded social event in which unified beliefs and values are manifested through the same cohesive human response. Thus, these participants suggest that leaders should not give too many choices in order to avoid Christians taking the act of worship too casually, believing they can worship in whatever ways they feel comfortable. Moreover, there are diverse opinions regarding the duration of transitions. Some believe the leader in sample A4 can expand the sharing a bit longer in helping worshippers connect to the next song, while others think that a quick transition is sufficient most of the time. Despite the difference in opinion, research participants generally perceive that the worship leader serves a social duty to fulfill—engaging the congregants cognitively, emotionally, behaviourally, and spiritually.

In terms of a worship leader's reflection and sharing between songs, one person explicitly mentions that content matters, but reflections do not have to be inspirational or insightful because the role of worship leading differs from pulpit preaching. Thus, "cookie cutter" sharing or simply reciting biblical truths is sufficient. Another person explicitly claims that most people do not pay much attention to transitional speech as long as it makes biblical sense. Regardless, most respondents believe leaders do not need to share much personal experience or give too many casual greetings in congregational worship. The worship event is perceived as a communal moment for individuals to focus on the Divine. Therefore, there is a demand for leaders to discern what specific contents and methods of delivery will direct towards or distract worshippers from praising God. Simply put, whatever is considered suitable duration and relevant transitional sharing can vary according to contexts and individuals. However, these diverse voices affirm that

leaders nowadays are expected to help bridge the song messages to contemporary contexts, to engage the worshippers emotionally, and to assist people in determining the areas of focus in congregational singing.

In sample B5, musicians state that using a soft atmospheric pad as background music helps set the worship's tone and mood.[385] This expression signifies being culturally sensitive because many are uncomfortable with prolonged public silence. That said, over half of the participants found that the music space lacked direction and focus before the singing. Some individuals guess the leaders may have missed the entry, while others believe it may be a planned arrangement for meditation. Once again, their inputs reflect a need that most worshippers long for precise directions from the leader in singing, praying, and meditating. The leader plays a vital role in drawing people together, unifying their communal spirits, and encouraging contributions to the singing event.

To sum up, participants generally believe that an unprepared worship team or leader diminishes their worship experience and engagement level. It could sometimes be difficult to distinguish between a genuine mistake and a lack of preparation. Yet, over time, the difference is usually more prevalent. Looking at it positively, improvements and hard work are also prevalent and observable, and thus can encourage the worshippers to contribute their voices and hearts to join the singing. The research participants also believe that voice tone, posture, and eye contact are critical interpersonal elements that can draw a crowd's attention and engagement. These elements help convey the leader's sincere intentions and help engage participants to focus on God-centered content.[386] The leader must allow others to sense one's conviction in the shared messages and singing.

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[385] Church, "May I Use My Life 願盡我一生" (see 57:10–57:49).

[386] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, 49.

As one participant puts it, “I am not concerned by the leadership style as long as it is executed well. Despite my preference, I can engage in any style under good implementation.” The collective inputs from these participants emphasize that the quality of music, seriousness in preparation, genuineness and confidence in delivery, sensitivity to cultural nuances, and contextually relevant emotions and behaviours all influence a person’s holistic engagement. When these elements are present, they facilitate mutual self-exposure and communal inclusivity in subtle yet powerful ways.

The Significance of Physical Togetherness for Group Singing

The ability to see, hear, and feel others’ presence is critical to an individual’s worship experience. The interweaving voices of praise and adoration in live settings are not replicable at home. All participants say that the engagement level and focus of attention for online worship are substantially lower than when they attend worship in person. Indeed, with the option to participate in online worship service, now people appreciate more the possibility and intentionality of gathering together for worship at church. On the one hand, the dedication to gather and worship physically signifies the importance of God and God’s community in a person’s heart. It symbolizes and facilitates unity, togetherness, mutual accountability, and a sense of belonging to one another in Christ. On the other hand, this phenomenon resonates with Ray S. Anderson’s notion that humans are relational and community beings long to live in the form of co-humanity.[387] Thus, the physical gathering for religious reasons satisfies a person’s social psychological and spiritual needs.

[387] Anderson, *Being Human*, 37.

That said, opinions differ in describing the spectrum of sense of belonging during congregational singing at church. Some individuals feel they belong and bond with the local community, irrespective of how well they know each other. The familiar faces and worship space advocate a sense of belonging to the worship community over time. Other participants express that they gain a sense of spiritual proximity with the ones they worship, including both familiar and unfamiliar individuals. These responses echo Ingalls's saying that even though an individual worshipper does not know some other worshippers personally, a sense of proximity can be established in congregational singing.[388] A few participants say congregational singing also creates a sense of attachment and belonging to the institutional church because the community represents shared identity, beliefs, values, and ownership. The singing reminds them that the Lord has purposefully brought the people together to worship, to be good stewards of the church, to shepherd one another mutually, and to participate in God's redemptive plan in the surrounding context. In addition, there are also comments saying that the group singing provides a sense of the connection between a local community and the global church and Christians.

I note that some individuals require additional help to think through this question. Henceforth, I asked them to compare their experience between worshipping at their local church and visiting a new church during vacation. Those who feel a strong sense of belonging to their local church report that their sense of belonging at the home church is much stronger than when worshipping elsewhere. In fact, since pre-existing relationships exist in the home church, some individuals think the unique congregational singing

[388] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, 60.

experience and impact are distinctive and relational. Thus, as I probe whether technical excellence is equally essential, these respondents comment that relational proximity does make the technical aspects of congregational singing and music secondary concerns. The significance of interpersonal relationships and bondings across the church family transcends beyond the expectation of technical excellence and advocates appreciation, acceptance, and association. To both the leader and the congregants, the responses suggest that the family ethos, as siblings in God, has a higher level of importance than the expectation of technical excellence in music delivery.[389] As Dawn describes, God seems to have used the worship community for his people to practice love and cherish the uniqueness and differences offered by familiar and unfamiliar faces.[390]

The above discussion highlights many benefits of physical worship. However, some individuals also state that social pressure is a drawback in physical worship. One participant says that he often observes how others behave and then tries to act in alignment with the scope of social expectations. This aligns with Cherry's observation that continuous behavioural re-evaluation occurs in congregational singing.[391] Another participant states that people are often concerned with how others perceive them in public. Thus, worshippers read the social cues in a church setting and adjust their behaviour according to the worship norm, complying and fitting in socially to avoid awkwardness. These social pressures and concerns often distract the worshippers from devoting their full attention to worship.

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[389] Trebilco, *Self Designations*, 298.
[390] Dawn, *Royal Waste of Time*, chapter 14, para. 5, location 2238.
[391] Cherry, *Worship Architect*, chapter 7, para. 31, location 2596.

Affirmation of Christian Identity

Participants have diverse opinions when considering whether the discourse of congregational singing at church can affirm and shape their Christian identity. To those who believe congregational singing positively correlates to Christian identity, they think that corporate singing is a powerful proclamation of shared Christian beliefs and values expressed in uniquely religious and communal environments. One person notes that the singing reinforces the commitment to God and one another. Another person also comments that singing and worshipping with other Christians allows her to actualize and live similarly to God's followers in the Bible. These voices suggest that the definition of Christian identity and religious association can be stretched beyond time and space. Some participants say it is part of the human desire to belong and draw closer to one another through shared values and commonalities. Christian worship renders a communal space and human-to-human encounter to fulfill this fundamental social and spiritual need.

One respondent supplements that corporate Scripture reading and prayer can create the same affirmation effect as congregational singing. All these actions are driven by the underlying shared Christian convictions and biblical references. The person reiterates that a good worship leader and worship team will utilize and integrate Scriptures, prayers, and songs to draw a community closer to God (i.e., the head of the church) and towards one another (i.e., the body of the church). Using worship songs with Scriptural reading, prayer, and other worship expressions forms a contemporary setting to reenact the gospel in ways contemporary worshippers can relate to and respond.[392]

[392] Packiam, "Worship and the World to Come," chapter 2, para. 18, location 560.

To those who do not sense a correlation between corporate singing and affirmation of Christian identity, their perception is that group singing brings them closer to God but not necessarily to others. They reiterate that the theological focus of corporate worship is to affirm that God as the focus of worship is central to the worshippers. Thus, the impact of mutual influence among the singing community and social identity affirmation is secondary or insignificant. Their responses entail that they interpret Christian identity as a personal relationship with God and not necessarily a network of relationships through God. It seems to echo the earlier discussion about why individuals rank high for feeling comfortable worshipping with others who are different (see Appendix 3.15). If worshippers treat congregational singing as a personal moment with God, the significance of worship peers, irrespective of who they are, becomes low.

Again, I have encountered individuals who expressed difficulty in answering this question. I am not surprised by this because social identity and affirmation of identity are topics that most Christians will not consider during congregational singing. Thus, I asked them if they had ever felt a strong sense of Christian identity and felt closely knitted to a Christian community by singing a fellowship or a retreat theme song. They think that such an effect requires high intentionality to gather with other Christians for a shared purpose and clear goal. It also requires the songs or set of songs to be sung repetitively. That said, none of the respondents refer to the repetitive usage of the weekly liturgical singing (e.g., “Doxology” and “Threefold Amen”) as an intentional expression to help affirm their Christian identity. Perhaps this is due to the worshippers’ lack of understanding of these songs’ traditional and theological implications.

Lyrics and Themes about Relationships with God and Others

The research participants do not have difficulty coming up with the general ideas or themes in the songs they sing on Sundays. Some of the major themes they state include God's attributes (e.g., loving, holy, merciful, and almighty), God's deeds (creation, salvation, and restoration), and God's transcending and immanent presence (control, protection, refuge, and comfort). In terms of relational descriptions, they recall some major biblical themes such as Parent/child, King/citizen, Creator/creation, Divine/humankind, Master/servant, Healer-healed, Head/body, and so on. They usually come up with one side of the relationship (e.g., "Father" or "master"), and I seek their agreement if they also refer to the other corresponding role (e.g., "child "or "servant").

In addition, the participants affirm my pre-understanding that not many songs on Sundays describe or teach about how Christians relate to others through Christ. Many individuals respond quickly, saying there are not many songs in this category on Sundays. A few individuals think hard and then comment that mission songs can be perceived as human-to-human songs. Yet, they also express that the mission message is sometimes presented as a Christian duty rather than a relational act of self-giving love empowered by the gracious Lord.

They also observe that songs about how Christians engage in the lives of others often take place in the form of a response song. The logic smoothly flows from receiving the Word of God and then being prompted to respond in godly living or a change of mind and heart for the blessings of others. That said, these songs are few and often very general. The human other is often referred to in general nouns, such as "brothers and sisters," "believers," and the "non-believers," or general pronouns, such as "you" or

"them." With reference to the sermon that precedes the response song, worshippers construct their own meanings amid the response songs and imagine how they can live out the Christian teachings, ranging from a commitment to one's will, mind, heart, or action.

Some say songs about human-to-human relationships through God are more common in fellowship or special services, such as worship service on Mother's Day. They believe these social settings or festive occasions are more appropriate for bringing up the horizontal dimension of interpersonal relationships. In contrast, they generally agree that vertical relationships (i.e., God and his people) should be the primary focus in an ordinary corporate Sunday worship service. These comments about vertical relationships as the primary focus for Sunday worship songs reflect that worshippers understand that the Sunday service serves a different function and purpose than other Christian gatherings. Even though the group singing may look similar across various Christian gatherings, the social and religious purposes differ. Individuals tend to read the pre-existing social cues and religious expectations and respond accordingly. Their responses tie to Stryker's view that social structure is somewhat stable and exists before social engagement occurs.[393]

Contextualizing the Song Lyrics

Responses concerning the contextualization during or after congregational singing vary. Some say they rarely contextualize the embedded messages in a worship song, while others say they realize this sometimes takes place amid singing. These participants identify a few factors that affect the exercise of contextualization: 1. the singing time is too short for advocating contextualization (around fifteen minutes per service, which is

[393] Stryker, "In the Beginning there Is Society," 315–27.

considered too short); 2. messages and proposed human responses in the songs are mainly general (e.g., the pronouns such as "you," "we," and verbs such as "follow" or "serve" are loosely defined) and; 3. the worship leader may not offer sufficient guidance in bridging the song meaning to advocate contextualization. They comment that worship leaders do not need to preach on a song's idea or offer personal sharing within a short singing timeframe. Yet, the leader can consider offering Scriptural and contemporary perspectives to advocate reflection or highlight significant themes that allow individuals to reflect during the singing.

Another person comments from a practical standpoint and states that repetition and familiarity are crucial to facilitate contextualization. This comment aligns with Saliers' observation that music's formative and inspirational power is more prominent when the music is frequently repeated.[394] Otherwise, a worshipper will likely be occupied by the singing and does not have the mental capacity to perform contextualization. One pastor admits that contextualization is not an idea his congregants are accustomed to or familiar with. Instead, this pastor observes that his congregants seem to perceive the act of singing and praising as a communal ritual and duty. As such, the worshippers are willing to follow the motion of singing to give glory to God, but they are rarely taught to relate the singing and the messages back to their lives. This pastor thinks these Christians perceive congregational singing as a religious response and a believer's duty to the Lord, and that such singing sufficiently fulfills the requirement to worship. Boldy speaking, these Christians are perceived to be unconcerned with how the songs shape them. In other words, this pastor observes that further reflection during and after the singing is generally

[394] Saliers, "Singing Our Lives," 185–86.

not required or expected in his church norm. Perhaps this also has to do with how the Cantonese church elevates the sermon as the central component of Christian formation, thus neglecting that congregational singing is also a form of learning and a channel of formation.

Another pastor comments that expecting the congregants to construct the meaning-significance and personalized spiritual implications from a song puts unrealistic expectations on the worshippers. The pastor argues that while contextualization is theoretically possible, many Christians do not have sufficient Bible knowledge to interpret and appropriate a song. For instance, he says that it takes a lot of understanding to unpack theological terms and descriptions (e.g., holy, unconditional love, justice, and election) before they can be effectively related and contextualized. With this in mind, the worship leader must provide sufficient guidance and supplement some of these details accordingly. However, I would add to this pastor's comment that many worship leaders today may not have the theological training and knowledge to unpack theological terms and descriptions and bridge these concepts to the contemporary context.

Nevertheless, some participants say that contextualization is possible given that their feelings are intense as they sing or that there are some pre-existing conditions and burdens that they carry to the service—similar to my personal experience that I shared in chapter 1. These participants suggest that when a person brings forth one's concerns, emotional burdens, life challenges, and hardships before the Lord and engages in singing, contextualization becomes a more natural process. The process is described as feelings or ideas generated by the dynamic effects of music and lyrics, which speaks to and addresses one's situated needs. For example, if a person has been laid off from work or

has a close family member suffering from critical illness, singing about God's love may assure them that God will look after his child. My interpretation of these comments is that the interweaving voices of singing become a powerful message of assurance that God's mercy is present. The engagement and contextualization in congregational singing help re-orient negative emotions to restful and peaceful reassurance in God.[395] The corporate singing discourse is an effective medium and social space for worshippers to remember their inseparable relationship with God and his community.

It is important to note that contextualization of congregational singing could take place beyond a worship service. A substantial number of participants recall that some song phrases or ideas appear and resonate in their minds as they live their daily routines. For instance, a daily life event, such as jogging outdoors, could stimulate the recall of specific phrases and lines of a song about God's wondrous creation. The person can reflect and internalize the song's message and respond with thanksgiving and awe. Indeed, this experience is not limited to worship songs and corporate singing. It is a common phenomenon triggered by the "immersive and proximal" effect of music and lyrics that register in the human brain.[396]

One pastor suggests that the Cantonese Christian community needs more songs to edify Christians and how their Christian identities can penetrate and inform all their interpersonal relationships and social engagements. Congregational singing can effectively equip Christians to relate their relationships and social selves to others in Christ and through Christ. Some experienced worship leaders resonate with this comment and say that contemporary song publishers do not have many selections talking about

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[395] Begbie, "Faithful Feelings," chapter 13, para. 51, location 3719.
[396] Olteteanu, "Formative Function," 216.

how humans relate to one another through the Christian faith. Individuals with longer histories in the church realize that some hymnals contain this dimension, even though it may only be one stanza rather than the main focus of a song. Regardless, I concur that the Christian world needs songs that help Christians comprehend what it means to live as God's disciples in numerous roles and identities. These may or may not be songs suitable for Sunday worship service, but lacking these songs in the Christian song archive limits the worshippers' imagination and self-reflection.

Converting Song Memory to New Meaning-Significance

About half of the research participants agree that some songs are associated closely with their critical life incidents and that singing them would trigger memory, personal experience, and past feelings. Some examples generated by these participants include songs that touched them at weddings or funerals, convocations at school, tough times during the first year of immigration to Canada, dedication moments to God, the breakup of a relationship, memorable mission trips, and so on. Some incidences, such as funerals and convocations, are shared by various individuals, whereas immigration experience and the breakup of a dating relationship are specific examples offered by one person. Many responses resonate with Olteteanu's view that "the interpreter develops an essentially personal relationship with the music."[397] One respondent shared that he recalled a song written by the organization when his parachurch organization faced a huge hurdle. This song touched and reminded him of the beautiful faith community within the organization, giving him the strength to face the challenge and look upon the grace and mercy of God.

[397] Olteteanu, "Formative Function," 218.

Singing this song also stimulates the group's bonding and sense of belonging, knitting the hearts together to face the challenge with shared ownership.[398]

A few respondents recall the Christian worship songs they sang at an early age. These songs help to imprint their childhood church experience with the songs. They believe singing these songs early in their lives helps connect Christian values and faith-related memories, thereby shaping their Christian identity. Today, the songs may be outdated, and yet the attachment and meaning significance still holds every time they are used during Sunday service.

Likewise, another respondent shared an experience with the song "Good, Good Father," which she does not like. However, she recalls explicitly that in one of the worship services, the Lord told her to keep singing this song until she "sincerely believed in the song's message." She states that this memorable incident has been a powerful reminder because reflection and remembrance can occur amid a song that is not in line with a person's musical tastes and preferences. In this example, the spiritual implication transcends the musical importance, rendering the possibility for this person to break through the in-group (i.e., those who initially did not like the song) and out-group (i.e., those who initially liked the song) mentality.[399]

Some participants cannot recall any critical life moments that are knitted with a song at the time of the interview. However, they believe that, in general, songs may latch to significant life events, and singing them again will recall specific feelings and scenes of past life experiences. Still, two of the forty participants say they rarely look back to their past as they listen to or sing a song. Thus, these two individuals think memory and

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[398] Davidson and Faulkner, "Group Singing," chapter 42, para. 16–17, location 21825–32.
[399] Hogg and Abram, "Social Identifications," 19–21.

music have a weak correlation in their personal lives but admit that music-memory dynamics could occur in others.

To individuals who can clearly recall a song that links with a life incident, I also follow up with a question asking if singing this song again today would mean something different. About half of them say that it reminds them of how God led them through tough times in the past and assured them that He would continue to journey alongside them in the current and future state. Some say that as they sing the same song today, they can see how God has further developed their characters and transformed their lives into a more mature state. As a result, even if the memory and song relate to a painful experience, they can sing it with a grateful and thanksgiving heart. These comments affirm that when music links to memory, it is possible to create new meaning-significance in a person's life. I am convinced that the explicit meaning in a song does not constrain a song's meaning. When a person's life weaves with a song, implicit, distinctive, and powerful personal implications can be formed.

Interpreting Biblical Identities Expressed in Congregational Singing

The participant observation, online questionnaire, and qualitative research show that many worship songs describe humans as part of God's wondrous creation. The identity that humans are made in the image of God is not directly mentioned. Many songs encourage worshippers to give glory to the Lord and pursue holiness because God has the ultimate claim and ownership in their lives.[400] The singing also uplifts the Lord's attributes and works, articulating that he is the only Lord, Redeemer, Creator, Parent, King, Master, and so on, to the worshippers. Family likeness, imitation of Jesus, and

[400] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 5, para. 6, location 2052.

discipline by the Father are some concepts directly and indirectly expressed in the congregational songs I studied in this research.[401]

Additionally, congregational singing often contains the connotation that the spiritual community is comprised of redeemed lives in Christ (i.e., the "In Christ" dimension, as outlined by Rosner).[402] The proclamation of Jesus' atoning sacrifice and resurrection often leads to an assurance of being saved and embraced under the salvific grace, love, and act of the Lord. I believe the "In Christ" message in a song assures the relationship between the Redeemer and the redeemed individuals, accentuating that Christians' union with the Son allows them to participate in his death, resurrection, suffering, and glory (Rom 6:4; 8:17).[403]

The research participants recall some songs that relate to the union with the Son and prompt the worshippers to live per their new identity in Christ. For example, the songs will prompt the worshippers to live out biblical attributes such as "faith, hope, and love" under God's abundant grace. Other songs might encourage action-oriented responses, such as going into the world to extend Christ's love to others in a self-giving manner. In either case, the lyrics provide the general principles and emotional realms for engagement and reflection but require the singers to seek their personal meanings in the midst. This phenomenon explains why many participants believe the worship leader can supplement by providing suitable contextual guidance and direction to make a song more relevant to contemporary contexts.

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[401] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 9, para. 15, location 4119.
[402] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 8, para. 28, location 3960.
[403] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 8, para. 29, location 3961.

Songs about God knowing his people immensely (i.e., the "Known by God" dimension) are identified in the observed worship services and worship sets. These songs tend to be personal, sometimes sentimental, and expand on the ideas of God's comfort, peace, and presence. Some songs may convey the knowledge of God in theological terms, anchoring the worshippers to the unfailing promises and protections of the Divine. A segment of the songs also contains eschatological perspectives, pointing individuals to persevere and remain faithful because the Lord who gives hope also knows his people immensely. He will one day free his people amid earthly suffering and tribulations (1 Cor 5; 1 Pet 1:18–21).[404] Humanity's destiny can be assured in the restored relationship with the Lord.

I contend that these songs are essential to the congregants' spiritual identity in Christ because someone among the congregation is likely experiencing personal or family hardships. Being intimately "known by God" is a powerful message of assurance amid the turmoil. That said, I also believe that a song's content does not restrict the idea of being known by God. Individuals can also feel the assurance of being included in Christ and known by him when they sing praises about God's attributes together. The sense of belonging to God is enriched and embraced in the collective singing. The embodied act of corporate worship is an edifying faith practice in which individuals appropriate the identity as children of God and siblings in God. The admonishment, teaching, and encouragement among Christians manifested in the interweaving voices of praise and adoration bond Christians together in disciple-making and God-glorifying ways (Col 3:16).

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[404] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 10, para. 29, location 4874.

Research participants generally believe that congregational singing could create formational impacts, particularly in unifying individuals together. According to Graham F. Welch and Constanza Preti, congregational singing is an exceptional, dynamic, and corporate communication that connects individuals and knits people to God and, through God, to others.[405] A few participants say that congregational singing prompts the worshippers to acknowledge God in their midst and that through him, people with diverse backgrounds bond as a spiritual family, mutually watching over and loving each other as siblings in Christ. Carter and Fuller contend that the Christian self is best expressed and most vivid through face-to-face, repeated, and meaningful interactions in a worship community.[406]

Congregational singing can also be a foretaste of restored co-humanity in a harmonious yet diversified manner because individuals with very different personal identity markers can be unified in Christian worship. The responses resonate with Steven R. Guthrie's comment that "singing is an enactment of the differentiated unity of the body of Christ. It is the voice of the New Humanity—One voice composed of many voices; the 'one new humanity out of the two' (Eph. 2:15)."[407] Each instance of congregational singing is a collective music-making and meaning-making process, substantiated by their collecting living and ascending praises as God's children. The conversations with research participants also resonate with Ingalls's view about congregational singing. She states:

> The experience of being part of a vast gathering of Christians singing together, so indelibly imprinted within participants' memories, is used to interpret biblical accounts of the ideal community at the end of time. One such commonly invoked

[405] Welch and Preti, "Singing as Inter- and Intra- Communication," 40–41.
[406] Carter and Fuller, "Symbols, Meaning, and Action," 931.
[407] Guthrie, "Wisdom of Song," chapter 15, para. 44, location 4232.

> passage from the book of Revelation describes a large multitude comprising "people from every tongue, tribe, and nation" gathered in worship around the throne of God (Revelation 7:9–10). In performing these songs corporately, the gathered conference assemblies are, in effect enacting the beliefs, ethics, and aesthetics of the Christian eschaton.[408]

These scholarly voices and my research confirm that spiritual and social identities are affirmed, experienced, and developed as Christians with vast diversity join together and sing praises. The singing with familiar faces, strangers, and even "imagined others" form one powerful voice and witness of the living God.[409] Congregational singing is a collective self-exposure, acknowledging one another's significance and acts of God in their lives, from which a sense of belonging to a local faith community is established. The singing event positively influences and mobilizes the worship community first to know and love God more profoundly and then extend such love and commitment to the church family.

I believe that weekly congregational singing about biblical identities helps to provide a general understanding of one's identity in God. And yet, the singing engagement alone does not advocate better interpersonal relationships nor deepen the conviction of one's self-association with these biblical relationships. This view is substantiated by a few participants who believe that Christians should not expect congregational singing alone can turn feelings into habitual acts of sacrificial love. Boldly speaking, worship practitioners should be mindful that singing the correct identity categories with great music and stage effects alone is still insufficient to accomplish greater commitment and devotion to the Lord and one another. The uttered relational concepts and words such as "we," "church," "fellowship," "body of Christ," "children of

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[408] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, 82.
[409] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, 82.

God," and so on, need to be filled with real-life communal experience and understanding of the biblical truths so that these terms can be translated into meaningful expressions and actions.

Succinctly, singing as a collective spiritual experience must be substantiated by authentic Christian living beyond the singing and worship moments (Acts 2:46–47). Genuine social relationships within the ecclesial domain continuously instill new, relevant, and contemporary meanings and experiences in the congregational singing experience and sung text. This contention resonates with Alan Kreider and Eleanor Kreider's comment concerning the worship community. They state that Christian worshippers "were baptized into one body, and the Holy Spirit enabled them to live as one body. In this one body they all had gifts to share. They all were incomplete, so they needed each other; and they were bound together by a common empathy. All members experienced the suffering, the joy, or the honour of the other members (1 Cor 12:7, 13, 26)."[410] Congregational singing reminds the worshippers about mutual dependence and accountability within a faith community. It is also a channel to equip worshippers to be a missional community and extend mutual love and peace in Christ to others.[411]

This research provides an insightful perspective on the worship war in general. Today, many Cantonese churches continue to struggle between traditional and contemporary forms of musical worship, believing different mixtures of the two forms would satisfy the worshippers with diverse preferences. In my study, research participants generally agree that individuals tend to put aside their musical identities and preferences when authentic communal and interpersonal relationships are present. When

[410] Kreider and Kreider, *Worship and Mission*, chapter 11, para. 9, location 3296.
[411] Dawn, *Royal Waste of Time*, chapter 14, para. 16, location 2280.

a relational community is nurtured and shaped, theologically rich, well-prepared, and contextually relevant song sets can be used more effectively, irrespective of genres and leading styles. Worshippers are more willing to understand and see past musical and sub-cultural differences when genuine relationships exist. They tend to realize that technical excellence is not the most critical criterion to look for in congregational singing.

In light of my research, this research suggests that a worshipper's holistic engagement is not solely determined by a person's self-identified styles or forms of musical expressions—countering a conventional belief that styles and music genres are significant differentiators. Thus, if I were to supplement King's pathway of a song model, I would include that social dimensions play a role in Christian music communication during congregational singing.[412] When authentic, secure, and genuine social relationships are present within a local worship community, individuals are more prone to receive the song message, follow the song pathway, and express their inner feelings through singing and worship behaviours. In this community, cognitive reflections, emotional re-orientations, and authentic behavioural responses towards God and God's kingdom could more easily take place in the midst.[413]

From a musical perspective, I must challenge the conventional pre-supposition of perceiving specific music styles fitting particular demographic groups. It is a superficial assumption that does not hold true. Not only can individuals have different and diverse musical preferences, but more importantly, music cannot be simplistically polarized into contemporary and traditional camps. In my opinion, Christians often observe what musical expressions are in the mainstream culture, presuming that younger generations

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[412] King, "Mango Tree," 164–65.
[413] Begbie, *Peculiar Orthodoxy*, chapter 3, para. 15, location 1634.

will likely love contemporary music and vice versa, and apply these cultural umbrella concepts to the church setting. I believe the music arrangement of a song is like putting on different clothes on the same body. Musicians can exercise their gifts and creativity to make a familiar song sound fresh or culturally appropriate. In addition, the example of "The Good Good Father" also accentuates that worshippers can engage and reflect on the songs even if they may dislike them on a personal level.

After all, I am convinced that the attachment and commitment to God and God's church are attainable even when the musical identity is not ideally congruent with individuals' subjective preferences. This statement does not diminish the importance of being culturally and emotionally sensitive when worship practitioners assemble a worship set. However, worship practitioners should notice that pursuing a "perfect fit" in music style and songs is not as critical as they might think when advocating holistic worship engagement and shaping the disciple's identity. Instead, in line with my research, I suggest they devote more time and effort to two things. First, worship practitioners and musicians need a systematic plan to continuously excel in their understanding of theology, music, and culture. This helps increase their musical and theological capacity to create music in different genres and styles suitable to the local church culture. Second, they must immerse themselves in collective Christian living with the local worship community. Far too often, I have seen musicians who do not participate in other facets of church and fellowship life, leaving minimal quality time for a real-life encounter with the diverse congregants they serve. Some even attend the worship practice only when they have to serve. Conversely, when they devote time, effort, and energy to the local church community, they become more capable of determining culturally and demographically

suitable expressions that can nurture lives, deepen relationships, and strengthen the commitment to Christian identity.[414]

Interpreting the Contextualization Process in Congregational Singing

This research provides invaluable insights to address three areas of interest concerning contextualizing different biblical identities expressed in congregational singing: 1. the way individuals contextualize through the pathway of singing, if any; 2. the exploration in determining whether Christian identities mentioned in the singing suggest a salient identity, and 3. whether the act of congregational singing informs a worshipper to deepen the relationship with others. To recap, the sociological understanding of salient identity refers to "a product of commitment, that is, the affective and interactional ties connected to a particular identity."[415] If the relationship with God is the most central identity to a person, then such identity will influence how a person relates to others, both within and outside of the ecclesial domain.

The analysis of forty interview responses suggests that there is no systematic or set process for individuals to contextualize the message of a worship song. Often, individuals relate the explicit meaning of messages embedded in the songs and try to make sense of them. The music and the singing discourse provide the emotional and social realms to advocate reflection, contextualization, and engagement. In some scenarios, individuals re-orient their focus from immediate life issues to a God-focused life view in the singing, which re-orients their unsettled emotions and minds towards peace. In other scenarios, worshippers are reminded of the fundamental and familiar

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[414] Dawn, *Royal Waste of Time*, chapter 26, para. 5, location 3774.
[415] Davis, "Identity Theory in a Digital Age," 140.

biblical truths through singing and will ask what these truths and messages mean. Indeed, it is challenging to attribute the understanding of a particular identity to one experience or learning channel (e.g., Bible study, sermon, or congregational singing). Knowledge obtained from different sources weave together each time the Christian approaches and reflects with a faith-seeking heart. Despite this, the interview responses suggest that individuals remain open and favourable to having congregational songs as a reminder about biblical truths, even though the lyrics state biblical truths they already know. They also welcome theologically-rich worship songs to be used repeatedly across different worship services. This differs from what they expect from a sermon or lecture because individuals expect to obtain new knowledge and insights from a sermon, and people generally do not expect to hear the same thing twice.

In other words, unlike listening to a sermon where individuals seek contextualization more earnestly, worshippers who engage in music tend not to force themselves to be analytical, striving to extract concrete implications from the songs. For example, some participants say that when a song talks about human transgression, they will reflect on their sinful behaviours and the detrimental impacts on their relationships with God and others. However, it is also possible that they cannot think of any sins at the time of singing. In that case, the song will, at best, become a general reminder that God has forgiven the believer's sin and a cautionary reminder to avoid sinful temptations. These participants think that the presence of a direct, personalized, and relevant message from a song is a "nice-to-have" but remains optional. Life reprioritization and identity renegotiation are experiences worshippers do not expect to occur regularly. The absence of it is not an alarming concern to many of them.

The responses also reiterate that individuals with pre-existing life and relational issues are more likely to exercise song contextualization during a worship service. Some of the common areas include relational, financial, and health issues that happen at home or the workplace. Only two individuals directly mention that they seek meaning in the songs because political and social matters bother them. In either case, I believe these responses show that when something deeply bothers a person, the person will be more proactive in seeking the Lord's will and biblical wisdom in a worship service and singing. Worship music as a dynamic, emotive, and cognitive medium can often reach and touch these actively seeking hearts and minds offering spiritual directions, affirmations, and comfort to the worshippers. In cases like this, identity shaping and renegotiation are more likely to occur.

Nevertheless, this research also shows that contextualization during congregational singing is unnatural for many people and must be a learned practice. I appreciate one of the pastor's honesty in pointing out that self-reflection and bridging a song's meaning to one's life has never been a widely exercised spiritual practice. His response and many others illustrate that in order to advocate disciple-making moments in congregational singing, worship practitioners and pastors need to provide guidance and teaching in seeking reflexive knowledge. This point ties back to my advice for training and education to worship practitioners mentioned above. Constructing ideas with different musical elements, Scriptures, and contemporary contexts is a necessary skill set to acquire and master in effective worship design and practice.

Christian Identity as Transcending and Penetrating Identifiers

Based on my study of song contents, I argue that Christian worship songs encourage worshippers to believe that one's relationship with the Lord is a salient identity that transcends all human relationships.[416] In the Christian worldview, the greatest commandment is to love the Lord and love others (Matt 22:36–40). In other words, a Christian's relationship with the Lord is the highest relational priority and hierarchy. Theologically, this loving, intimate, and immense relationship with God forms the new basis of one's life. The act of singing also creates a mutual affirmation and influence among a congregation that this union with God is a committed, uncompromisable, and salient relationship.

That said, the conviction of seeing one's relationship with God as the most crucial relationship does not degrade or eliminate the significance of other earthly relationships. Instead, I would argue that it is impossible to love God deeply without loving others in self-giving and sacrificial manners. The two greatest commandments Jesus gave must be honoured and lived out together. However, as the research responses indicate, not many songs help us appropriate the second greatest commandment through various human-to-human relationships. As such, I concur with one fellow pastor who states that the Cantonese Christian community needs more songs that didactically teach Christians to relate with others through different roles and identities at home and in society. Christian virtue is never an abstract concept but a God-given vocation fundamentally rooted in the Christian identity that can penetrate all social and intimate relationships.

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[416] Davis, "Identity Theory in a Digital Age," 140.

Even though Christian identity is projected to be a salient relationship, I admit that different individuals weigh their relationships with God very differently. The relationship's significance is determined by one's knowledge, commitment, experience, and authentic encounter with the Lord. To many people, Christian identities could remain more as head knowledge than a fully committed and internalized identity. Sometimes, when making decisions, the individual does not always consider the Christian values embedded in different Christian identities as the highest and dominating considerations. In other cases, the singing may serve as a spiritual reminder to the worshippers. For instance, when someone is concerned with defining oneself with career success, social status, and material possessions, the worship songs and singing discourse draw the attention back to the Lord's will and heart, reminding the worshippers of what things in life they deem the most important. Thus, despite the fact that the songs themselves may or may not be able to lead worshippers to discernment, they can serve as a counterforce to the ideologies and values of the world, offering alternate perceptions of prosperous Christian living. An engaging congregational singing experience allows the Spirit to guide the worshippers in re-prioritizing Christians' commitment and attachment towards different people and things.

Moreover, those who claim that Christian identity is salient could still experience tensions between one's Christian identity and other identities.[417] For example, a local church deacon can perceive his Christian identity expressed in the local church as salient. Thus, his commitment to the church family is reinforced every time he sings about serving God as the body of Christ or his servant. The singing may facilitate him to

[417] Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, chapter 7, para. 12, location 2970.

continue faithfully and sacrifice his time to serve the church members as to serve the Lord (Matt 25:40). Yet, he might also face an identity struggle because both the local church and his family need his presence and involvement. Here, the identity hierarchy as a deacon and family member is in tension. He may need to weigh which identity will dominate this situation (i.e., the higher and lower identity relationship in relative terms). Alternatively, he may also see that one's commitment to his own family includes the Christian identity and vocation (i.e., the same dominant identity expressed differently).

Interpreting Socio-Cultural Considerations in Leaders and Worship Peers

Various social roles and identities are presumed in congregational singing. For instance, the distinctions between the worship leader and congregant are broad categories of social categorization and social grouping in a worship service. During congregational singing, worshippers interpret the worship leader's explicit instructions, assess the worship environment (e.g., solemn or casual), and make assumptions of appropriate social behaviour as a congregant and react accordingly. The surrounding physical, emotional, and social stimuli can influence their behaviours and engagement. Conversely, many leaders know they are expected to provide instructions and directions to the congregants with their best effort during congregational singing. Symbolic interactionism is evident because there is a clearly defined role and expectation for both leaders and congregants in a worship service.[418] Even someone who attends a church for the first time will quickly assign roles to individuals (e.g., leaders, pastors, and congregants) and determine how people interact in a worship service. Likewise, leaders and musicians interpret the church's norms and culture when leading and singing. Individuals utilize their senses and

[418] Carter and Fuller, "Symbols, Meaning, and Action," 931.

intuition to determine appropriate social behaviours. Social pressures and compliance are also considerations worshippers factor into their behavioural responses to congregational singing.

Second, as Hogg and Abrams note, musical identity and personal identity markers such as age are not necessarily the dominant factor in defining one's association (i.e., "in-group") when it comes to corporate singing.[419] My research suggests that the importance of quality, preparedness, and relationships expressed in congregational singing could influence the development of positive identities and associations, which corresponds with what Tajfel and Turner describe as positive social identity.[420] Furthermore, the shared religious values, beliefs, and responsibilities in a spiritual community are believed to have greater significance in this regard.

My research result suggests that ethnicity as a personal identity marker does not significantly impact the engagement level of congregational singing and that worshippers can sing praises together with different ethnic groups without issues. Yet, the use of language remains something individuals define and associate in a church setting. Language has practical implications in communication, but it also provides a sense of cultural identity. I believe lifestyle and upbringing are some of the underlying factors that influence the openness for revised lyrics in traditional hymns and acceptance level in praising with English or Mandarin. These participants could be exposing themselves to other languages and cultural artifacts daily (e.g., listening to music and watching TV shows in English and Mandarin). Many of them use English at their workplace or school in Canada. In contrast, I expected to hear many nostalgic comments and stronger

[419] Hogg and Abram, "Social Identifications," 19–21.
[420] Tajfel and Turner, "Integrative Theory of Inter-group Conflict," 33–47.

language preferences when the same question is asked among seniors and those who primarily expose themselves to Cantonese culture. I believe that numerous socio-cultural and popular trends, technological advancements, and everyday lifestyles contribute to and shape the younger generations to become more open and capable of adapting to diverse cultures and language expressions than their predecessors.

To the baby boomers and seniors, the Cantonese worship service is a community moment with a strong tie and affirmation to their cultural identity, notably preferring Cantonese as the language of worship. Contrarily, the 1.5 generation does not necessarily share the same cultural expectation and is generally open to using English, Cantonese, and even Mandarin to worship God. However, recent Hong Kong immigrants may initially find the cultural relevance weak if a worship service enculturates and adapts the 1.5 generation's culture (e.g., involving multilingual songs and using Hillsong-like music). I observed that many new immigrants might be accustomed to worshipping in Cantonese and Mandarin but not English. I expect these three sub-cultural differences to remain in the subsequent years. Still, I believe that multilingual songs will have an increasing level of cultural relevance and acceptance when more 1.5 generation and younger generations of Hong Kong immigrants settle and engage in the mainstream Canadian culture.

Final Remarks

In summary, congregational singing is vital to a worshipper's identity of self amid a faith community. The sense of togetherness, unity, and affection in physical worship are invaluable identity shaping effects that are not replicable through digital means. The singing activity is one of the distinctive faith expressions that anyone who participates in

the midst is invited to experience the Divine-community encounter holistically. The Lord's revelation and intimate encounter in congregational singing is an identity shaping time that transcends all other sociological, cultural, and aesthetic influences but never apart from all these variables and considerations. The Christian gospel is incarnational (Mark 1:1; John 1:4), and thus there are countless ways for a faith community to re-express this good news in different times, spaces, and contexts.

I believe that congregational singing is underutilized in many Cantonese worship services as an identity shaping force. Factors that local churches need to work on include: building authentic Christian living experiences (such as advocating relational building gatherings that can lead to informal and self-initiated interactions among the worshippers), increasing teachings in reflection and contextualization, minimizing cultural and linguistic tensions, replacing songs that have superficial theology with theologically-rich songs, replacing poorly prepared music with well-prepared music, introducing an inclusive worship environment, and acknowledging cultural diversity and limitations. On a positive note, many of these factors can be improved by intentional collaborations over time. I am deeply encouraged by the forty participants who devoted much time to this research. Some contemporary Christians believe there are still many more blessings and potentials to extract from congregational singing—a gift the Lord has given to his churches and children.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS

Congregational singing is one of the distinctive corporate events in Christian worship that can shape the worshippers' cognitive, emotional, and spiritual selves in relating to others. The Spirit enables the voices of corporate singing, the worship music and lyrics, and the singing environment to form God's people to become more like Christ and live out the attributes of his Kingdom community on earth.[421] Such theological conviction does not eliminate the necessary duty for practical theologians to explore Christian worship through interdisciplinary inquiries. Instead, it affirms that all knowledge is God's knowledge and that his eternal power and deity has been profoundly manifested through the creation and everything that he has made. (Rom 1:20b).

With this in mind, I begin this closing chapter with a recap of what I have contributed to the knowledge pool of studying congregational singing as a practice among the Greater Toronto Area Cantonese worship services. I then discuss how the aggregate voice expressed in this research informs churches in their ministry philosophy of congregational singing. I end with some thoughts about a possible direction for future work, discussing how this work sheds light on areas of study that practical theologians can continue to explore.

[421] Taylor, *Glimpses of the New Creation*, conclusion, para. 1, location 4954.

A Recap of the Practice-Theology-Theory Paradigm

In chapter 1, I started with the inspiration and reflection on my own practice that led to this research topic. While congregational singing forms part of the church's weekly routine activity, there are still many more questions that worship practitioners can ask to understand and improve its operational significance on Sundays.[422] The practical need prompted me to employ practical theology as a discipline to describe and explore the dynamics and contextual phenomenon across Greater Toronto Area Cantonese worship services. The interdisciplinary nature of congregational singing requires theologians to conduct critical inquiry from multiple aspects: theology, social psychology, musicology, and culture. Contextual observation and reflection allow me to appreciate how previous worship practitioners have tried to integrate Christian tradition and heritage, experience, reason, imagination, and re-express these in different and local church cultures. In addition, I have explained how various research methods in my ethnographic study are used to practice triangulation and enhance research validity.

In chapter 2, I discussed theology by exploring the theology of biblical identities using the voices of biblical scholars and Christian anthropologists. Humans are social beings defined by relationships, and the Bible states that humans can only find their ultimate meanings of existence through their relationships with the Divine and through the Divine with others.[423] With this in mind, I have leveraged some of the core biblical identities proposed by Rosner as a point of entry to discuss different Christian identities and theological-relational concepts expressed in congregational singing. The explicit song contents and singing discourse (i.e., music, lyrics, leading style, and worship

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[422] Candy, "Practice Based Research," 1.
[423] Rosner, *Known by God*, chapter 4, para. 45, location 1784.

environment) form pathways that communicate relational and biblical identities to the worshipping community. In return, communal worship responds to the musical invitation to participate in the music-making process and engage holistically.[424] Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, personal reflection, new meaning-significance, and vivid communal experience occur while singing these biblical identities together, rendering substantial formational capability for individuals and the worship community.[425]

Chapter 3 discussed theories and research studies pertaining to how music, worship leaders, musicians, and peers shape Christian social identities and roles. Research studies outside of the ecclesial domain were used as multidisciplinary voices that help to understand how music functions and influences a group in different socio-cultural settings. The sociology of music highlights a contemporary reality that "music is by no means individuated" in our society.[426] Individuals nowadays are accustomed to limiting themselves to the music genres and styles they like. Anyone can put music libraries on their smartphones and electronic devices and access them anywhere and anytime.

That said, voices from different schools of thought and studies show that music has the intrinsic power to advocate social identities and associations with one another. Scholars such as Davidson and Faulkner state that "group singing and social identity become synonyms" in their study, affirming how group singing can shape the identity of self in a community with similar values, cultures, and interests.[427] Likewise, leaders and

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[424] King, *Pathways*, 39–42.
[425] Taylor, *Glimpses of the New Creation*, conclusion, para. 3, location 4966.
[426] DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life,* 156.
[427] Davidson and Faulkner, "Group Singing and Social Identity," chapter 42, para. 45, location 22047.

peers also contribute to the singing discourse in a church with their own musical and cultural uniqueness. I discussed practical-theological considerations concerning how individuals self-identify themselves and others in corporate worship with different music, leadership styles, and worship settings.

In chapter 4, I examined social psychological theories and discussed how the identity of self and association with a social grouping is formed. The theoretical orientation behind this research is that Christians undergo identity re-prioritization and renegotiations and determine what identities and relationships in life are prominent when engaging in congregational singing.[428] In other words, identity re-prioritization and renegotiation are social-psychological descriptions similar to what Christians sometimes perceive as formational effects in discipleship. A worshipper's engagement in congregational singing helps shape one's "truth-centred worldview."[429] Congregational singing offers the time and space suitable for internalization, contextualization, and reflection, prompting individuals to become the type of person they sing about. A Christian's relationship and commitment to God and through God to others is also reinforced and encouraged as the most salient and highest order in the hierarchy of identities. Chapters 1 to 4 form the practice-theology-theory paradigm of this study and the basis for my ethnographic research.

In chapter 5, the online questionnaire provided a micro level and contextual understanding of congregational singing, and the participant observation in various churches offered a macro description of the research field. The qualitative interview provides ethnographic details describing the motives, thoughts, and emotions happening

[428] Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, chapter 3, para. 22, location 933.
[429] Best, *Unceasing Worship*, chapter 4, para. 25, location 1005.

amid the social dynamics in congregational singing. Some primary ethical considerations were also addressed here.

In chapter 6, I brought the results of the participant observation, survey, and interview together and offered my interpretive voice in understanding how congregational singing is utilized as a social identity shaping platform in different churches and what could be improved in practice. I commented on various musical, cultural, linguistic, and social considerations that churches can revisit in their ministries to advocate better identity shaping effects during congregational singing. The research participants confirmed that congregational singing remains an invaluable and irreplaceable faith practice to many Christians. It is an embodied practice that the family of God joins together to acknowledge the local and global relationships in Christ and through Christ, creating and mediating a sense of unity and togetherness among the gathered and imagined participants.[430]

On the one hand, my research attests to Ingalls's conclusion that "music-making can unify and divide."[431] Many Christians in the Cantonese church continue to perceive music as the determining factor in describing and defining a worship service. Individuals will still self-identify their commitment and belonging to a worship service through external influences such as music, language, demographic, and sub-cultural nuances. However, my research result also suggests that individuals with very different musical preferences, cultures, backgrounds, and personal identity markers still find it possible and valuable to worship in unity amid numerous pragmatic concerns and musical tastes. Inasmuch as individual differences exist in multiple ways and dimensions, the identities

[430] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, conclusion, para. 20, location 4856.
[431] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, conclusion, para. 4, location 4654.

as siblings in Christ knit the church body together as a spiritual family and community. When authentic relationships and commitment to one another are present and exercised, a community's diversity manifests the beauty and glory of God's kingdom. Regarding identity renegotiation, congregational singing offers the time and space for the worshippers to be reminded of their true selves before the Lord. This corporate worship moment allows them to earnestly seek the Lord's will and identify aspects and relationships that need to change per the Divine-human relationship.

Towards a Practical-Theological Reconsideration for the Church

In the previous chapter, I emphasized the importance of engaging in a spiritual community and advocating authentic relationships within a local worship context. I have noted the need to equip worship leaders musically and theologically. I do not offer detailed action plans and timelines in this section. Doing so would counter the fundamental conviction of practical theology that every contextual situation contains practical knowledge, unique nuances, comparative strengths, and specific limitations. Instead, what I aim to do here is to highlight the directions and philosophy of ministry pertaining to worship ministry that churches need to rethink. My research result prompts reconsidering three significant areas of ministry philosophies: ministry by segregation, ministry empowerment, and hybrid ministry (i.e., physical and digital ministry).

Ministry by Segregation

Many Cantonese churches in Toronto have flourished in size and resources in recent decades. When immigrants came to Canadian soil, and new Christians came to faith at different stages of their lives, many churches believed it was more effective to group

individuals of similar ages, cultures, and language preferences together for ministry. A typical example can be seen in the fellowship or body life systems, where individuals are segregated by age and language in small groups. Likewise, churches with more resources pursue a similar segregation philosophy in worship ministry. This thinking is often based on the sub-cultural needs and nuances that church members self-identify as critical to their worship engagement.

Though there are benefits to this segregation approach, my research suggests that this philosophy does not necessarily need to be perceived as the dominating and optimal approach for worship ministry. Grouping people by their different demographic groups, key identity markers, musical identities, and so on, may advocate instant engagement and achieve immediate ministry results. However, ministry by segregation often communicates the message of fulfilling individuals' self-perceived needs as a primary mandate. This thinking reinforces a consumeristic mentality that harms a church's spiritual health and growth. In addition, this research shows that cultural and musical identities are not static but somewhat fluid and can be re-shaped and re-imagined.

I agree with Ingalls that there is a tendency in today's church to "normalize one style of congregational music-making and a particular understanding of worship. Privileging one musical style and one theology (or ideology) of worship often serves to bolster the authority of certain modes of congregating."[432] In my research context, this tendency is expressed through dichotomizing traditional-contemporary worship services. People who believe their preferred music style or theology are more suitable for worship will group together and enjoy their worship within their respective "worship bubbles."

[432] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, conclusion, para. 6, location 4677.

Ironically, this is the easiest way to run a ministry because individuals will choose the mode and expression they feel most comfortable with, eliminating the need to compromise, understand, and sacrifice. The ideology of defining one's "in-group" through shared interests and traits is reinforced in this dichotomy. Yet, I am convinced that one of our goals in worship is to embrace diversity and be inclusive because Christians believe that the gospel can reach and unite very different people under the grace and love of God. Diversity in the arts and worship expressions symbolizes a community's commitment to bringing this conviction alive.

However, I must add that strategic and continuous exposure to embrace inclusivity and advocate trustful relationships outside of worship is vital before bringing a diversity of worship expressions into a worship service. Often, Cantonese churches attempt to pull different language groups together in a worship service and assume cohesiveness and unity will form in the midst. The most relevant and painful real-life example is joint worship services across the three language groups in a Chinese church. Many churches have this arrangement for special occasions (e.g., Christmas, Easter, and church anniversaries). To many worshippers, these services seldom lead to a pleasant result because they feel that their cultural, theological, and musical expectations are unmet. In this setting, believers continue to follow the sociological tendency to associate themselves with individuals who share similar external traits as in-group and others as out-group, and correspondingly reinforce "a sense of 'us versus them.'"[433]

Contrarily, the Apostle Paul states that the message of the Cross can draw and reconcile two very different groups of people together and experience the oneness in

[433] Burke and Stets, *Identity Theory*, chapter 6, para. 23, location 2644.

Christ (Eph 2:11–17). He does not necessarily mean that intercultural worship is the ultimate goal. Yet, his teaching aligns with the principle of inclusiveness and connectedness in congregational singing. An inclusive worship culture is a powerful testimony of the spiritual efficacy of the Cross. In other words, I suggest that a church should strategically and intentionally bring the various groups together and facilitate authentic relationships and interactions outside worship services. Relationship building must precede any attempts to pull diverse worshippers into one worship service. For example, the church can organize luncheons after worship service for relationship building so that self-initiated fellowship moments can follow. Alternatively, the church can mobilize diverse congregants to serve the community, group cross-congregation individuals as praying partners, launch worship conferences and workshops, and organize intercultural praise nights. Only when genuine relationships and collective lived experience are present can a faith community transform the spirit of inclusivity and mutual interdependence into the real-life worship experience, drawing humans closer to one another in Christ.

Empowerment

A familiar approach to planning a weekly worship service often follows what I call a "fill-in-the-blanks" approach. Usually, a pastor or a small group of leaders decide on worship ministry directions, and others comply with their conclusions. From this, worship leaders, chairpersons, pastors, and other serving parties follow the exact worship rundown or template and prepare their parts without much collaboration. Pragmatically, this is the most time-effective way to put together a worship service. However, as multidisciplinary efforts, creativity, and authentic relationships have been highly

endorsed in this research, collaboration and empowerment are needed to improve congregational singing.

Practically, the pastor or preacher must work closely with the worship leader to extract and bridge preaching ideas with the songs. For instance, the preacher can provide applicational ideas for the worship leaders to find a suitable song and frame the sharing that helps to augment specific teachings and advocate contextualization. Similarly, the worship leader can let the preacher know the song list and worship ideas in advance, so the preacher can offer different perspectives and opinions in contextualizing song messages. Behind these suggestions lies the concept of collaboration and empowerment. The role of teaching and decision-making is no longer centralized to the ministry pastor or leader but decentralized through empowerment and collaboration. These conversations should not be treated as operational tasks but as part of a church's life-building shepherd ministry.

Likewise, creativity and imagination are needed in worship design; thus, no church should assume one or two persons can continuously bear this responsibility. Therefore, a worship ministry should intentionally empower congregants of different ages and backgrounds to serve and lead, providing them with the necessary tools to shape an inclusive culture and giving them the freedom a worship ministry needs for creativity and imagination. I must acknowledge that empowerment is risky. Unsuccessful attempts and pushbacks can often be expected before positive results arise. Yet, an empowering culture is crucial for the future of a church and God's people. It offers an open-minded ideology for individuals to ask the "what-if" question and exercise imagination and theological reflection to sustain a relevant ministry practice. In addition, exercising

empowerment relieves some of the heavy burdens on the worship leaders to be the sole person responsible for delivering a formational worship experience. Formational worship becomes more feasible when a collective commitment and shared vision are present.

Hybrid Ministry

I am convinced that digital and online worship can never replace the in-person worship experience. My qualitative interview results have suggested that while online worship allows those incapable of attending in person to join a service remotely, it does not have the same penetrating influence on an individual's worship experience as an in-person worship service. In a digital age where sermons and music of the Christian faith can be easily accessed through digital devices, a live setting remains an irreplaceable and crucial experience for Christians to understand what it means to live as part of a Christ-centred faith community. As Ingalls puts it, "musical worship allows participants to efface boundaries between earthly and heavenly community and between members of the evangelical 'imagined community' who are separated by geographical distance but brought together through shared media and worship practices."[434] Such worship experiences without boundaries are best expressed in the embodied practices of physically worshipping together. The holistic presence and engagement of worshippers and the collective contribution to the singing event affirm one another's importance and significance to the community—advocating greater commitment to God, his church, and his people. Also, the sense of togetherness, unity, and affection are invaluable social effects that form personal and communal memories, affirming one another's social and spiritual importance. Mutual love and submission are best felt and expressed when

[434] Ingalls, *Singing the Congregation*, conclusion, para. 3, location 4642.

individuals intentionally gather for the same reason and underlying values. I must clarify that I am not discrediting the potential of digital ministry. However, each form of gathering contains distinctive effects, strengths, and weaknesses. Individual churches need to formulate their ministry philosophy concerning online and in-person gatherings.

It is important to note that ministry by segregation, ministry empowerment, and hybrid ministry require communal discernment, ongoing critical reflection, and persistence in actions substantiated by unified prayers. Making alterations in the philosophy and ideology of ministry that underpins a ministry operation requires tremendous time, effort, and patience. As such, I urge worship practitioners to identify and collaborate with other practitioners who share the same passion and vision. Practitioners need mutual support from one another to sustain them through ministry changes. They also need a community with shared passion and vocation to help each other overcome ministry obstacles and pushbacks. In my research study, I am enthusiastic and deeply encouraged that many Christians, musicians, and church leaders perceive congregational singing as more than an operational matter, a religious routine, and a personal enjoyment. These individuals have passionate hearts to improve congregational singing with their gifts. They are eager to draw others closer to the Lord and make the practice of congregational singing a disciple-making opportunity. They believe the Lord will reveal his will and manifest his glory during the corporate Divine-human encounter, leading his children to re-prioritize and reflect on their lives amid the worship moments. Their comments give hope to the continuous development of congregational singing because many are committed to improving the practice by considering others' needs, interests, and limitations.

Further, although tonal issues in Cantonese worship music are real and there are no quick solutions, lyrical revisions are generally perceived as a welcome and necessary evolution in Cantonese Christian worship songs. The Cantonese Christian worshippers' willingness and openness to lyric revisions in traditional songs also reflect the determination to stay culturally relevant while honouring the Christian heritage. In sum, the idea of a Christ-like worship community is manifested in selfless thinking, affection, and action for the benefit of others (Phil 2:1–5).

A Glimpse of Prospective Research Pathways Concerning Congregational Singing

This current work is far from the final words I wish to contribute to studying social identity in congregational singing. I am incredibly excited that this research sheds light on future possible research pathways concerning congregational singing, which practical theologians can pursue and explore down the road. I will highlight six prospective studies from which I believe Cantonese churches can benefit.

First, my research only describes the overarching identity descriptions expressed in congregational singing. It differs from the work of Packiam, which specializes in the theology of hope in contemporary Christian songs. Future song studies with a thematic interest like Packiam's work can bring tremendous reflexive knowledge to the Chinese church and songwriters. Thematic studies also help identify if specific theologies are neglected as Christian music evolves.

Second, this research aims to hear the voices of Christians familiar with Cantonese worship services in the Greater Toronto Area. All participants have at least been Christians for a couple of years. Thus, it would be interesting to examine how faith seekers and non-Christians describe their experience when joining the Cantonese

congregational singing. King's work for the Senufo culture is enlightening because she compares the responses of Senufo Christians and non-Christians regarding the Christian songs that they find pleasing and appropriate.[435] I believe King is right that Christian song has a greater chance to "at least win a hearing" in non-Christians' ears, particularly when a positive and welcoming singing environment and social norm can be shaped. For this reason, a similar study concerning non-Christians' responses to Christian songs for my ministry context is worth exploring in the future.

Also, in the meantime, pastoral theologians within the Cantonese church circles have conducted various ministry studies from a demographic or cultural standpoint. Perhaps collaborative research efforts are possible in studying how the continuous influx of Hong Kongers re-orients the landscape and needs of corporate worship and singing in a multicultural society.

Third, scholars such as Jesse Rice and Heidi A. Campbell contribute to the exploration of digital ministry before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, my research accentuates that physical and online worship serve different premises and objectives. The theological and practical considerations in utilizing both forms in a hybrid approach (i.e., in-person and online) are still ongoing. Hybrid worship ministry is particularly important and relevant to an ethnic group that undergoes diasporic experience. When Hong Kongers locate and settle in different parts of the world, the digital platform provides a possibility to unite and retain connections, fellowships, and cultural identities.

Fourth, the practice in my research study is congregational singing during Sunday worship service. Yet, sociological studies in music, such as what Davidson, Faulkner, and

[435] King, *Pathways*, 165–75.

DeNora have done, suggest that music in different social settings can create and re-create social-psychological effects and associations. Thus, practical theologians with a shared interest in congregational singing can conduct a similar study for Christian group singing outside Sunday worship services. It can deepen the understanding of how a change in the singing environment and context can influence worshippers' engagement and identity shaping process.

Fifth, in my ministry and research context, a song is more than a cognitive exercise. It is a holistic engagement and a form of spiritual exercise. Practitioners and theologians with strong spiritual formation backgrounds can expand on how silence, solitude, and meditation can be better utilized amid congregational singing and used as mediums to reflect and internalize good biblical reminders through group singing.

Last, the memory and meaning-making process through worship music is something I have touched on when considering the issue of contextualization and musical identity. Musicologists and psychologists continue to offer new inspirations about music and memory in their respective fields of study. I believe any new findings would help inform our understanding of the interrelationships between Christian singing, memory, and identity.

Final Remarks

It is the vocation of practical theologians to translate normative theology and espoused theology, such as the congregational singing contained in this research, into operant theology for Christians. I trust that the Lord will continue to use the gift of congregational singing to shape faithful worshippers who wish to honour him through group singing and all facets and relationships in their lives. I also believe that through the ways Christians

love and embrace one another within the family of God, the world will notice that they are the disciples of Jesus Christ (John 13:35). Congregational singing is a vivid and embodied proclamation that Christians are bonded in Christ's love and righteousness, from which the Lord empowers and enables them to make Christ known to the world. The unified voice of the worshippers invites the chaotic world to come before the Living God and dwell in his glorious kingdom (Col 1:17–20).

APPENDIX 1: MY HOME CHURCH'S THREE YEAR SONG LIST

1	Emmanuel	31	使我作祢和平之子	61	天地讚美
2	Hosanna	32	來敬拜榮耀王	62	天天歌唱
3	一生不枉過	33	信靠耶穌真是甜美	63	奇妙的愛
4	一粒麥子	34	傾出愛	64	奇妙雙手
5	一首讚美的詩歌	35	像美妙詩歌	65	奇異恩典
6	上主被專崇	36	先求祂的國	66	奇異的愛
7	上帝必建立教會	37	全因基督	67	如此認識我
8	不可能的愛	38	全地至高是我主	68	如鹿切慕溪水
9	不要憂慮	39	全然向祢	69	容我寧靜
10	主，我願像祢	40	再次站起來	70	寶貴十架
11	主，我願忠心於祢	41	創造奇功	71	尊貴主
12	主信實無變	42	動力信望愛	72	小伯利恆
13	主復活	43	十架光輝	73	希望
14	主愛在心燃起	44	十架犧牲的愛	74	平安
15	主愛大能	45	古舊十架	75	平安(One Circle)
16	主是安息港	46	只因愛	76	幸福
17	主是我力量	47	同心協力	77	從榮耀降臨
18	主是我萬有	48	同路人	78	復活得勝主
19	主治萬方	49	向至高者讚美	79	復興主工
20	主活著	50	和平之君	80	心中的眼睛
21	主的使命	51	和撒那	81	心曲
22	主耶和華是我牧者	52	啊！聖善夜	82	快樂崇拜
23	主耶穌，我愛祢	53	喜傳福音	83	恩典太美麗
24	主藏我靈在祂愛中	54	因主的名	84	惟有基督
25	主請你憐憫	55	因祂活著	85	惟獨耶穌
26	今要主自己	56	因著信	86	感恩歌
27	以愛還愛	57	在祢跟前	87	感謝神
28	以感恩的心進入祂的門	58	基督再臨	88	慈繩愛索
29	何等恩友	59	基督精兵前進	89	成了僕人
30	你是我藏身處	60	堅固保障	90	我不知道神奇妙恩

APPENDIX 1: MY HOME CHURCH'S THREE YEAR SONG LIST (CONTINUED)

91	我們呼求	121	有一位神	151	為何揀選我
92	我們成為一家人	122	有福的確據	152	為城市祈禱
93	我們有一故事傳給萬邦	123	榮光普照	153	為我主活這一世
94	我們渴望的耶穌	124	榮耀三一神	154	為耶穌而活
95	我們蒙召為神子民	125	榮耀上帝	155	無言的頌讚
96	我向祢禱告	126	榮耀大君王	156	獻上今天
97	我已經決定	127	榮耀歸於真神	157	獻上活祭
98	我心尊主為大	128	榮耀歸於耶和華	158	獻上頌讚
99	我心靈得安寧	129	榮耀的一天	159	獻己於主
100	我愛我主國度	130	榮耀祢聖名	160	獻給我天上的主
101	我抱愧未獻主更多	131	橋	161	當你走到無力
102	我的心， 你要稱頌耶和華	132	歌頌父神偉大權能	162	當讚美耶和華
103	我的託付	133	歡欣	163	當讚美聖父
104	我的負擔	134	每個清晨	164	當轉眼仰望耶穌
105	我知所信的是誰	135	永生神就是靈	165	相愛見證
106	我知誰掌管明天	136	永約的神	166	真光普照
107	我要向高山舉目	137	永頌上主	167	真相
108	我要唱耶和華的大慈愛	138	求主用凡	168	真神之愛
109	我願祢來	139	求主興起禱告的心	169	祂已被尊崇
110	掌握今天	140	求大君王來臨	170	神伴你每天
111	擁戴我主為王	141	求復興眾人	171	神啊, 頌讚歸祢
112	教會根基	142	求神領我	172	神大愛
113	教會獨一的根基	143	求聖靈充滿	173	神按計劃行事
114	敬拜上帝	144	沒有祢 那有我	174	神是愛
115	敬拜主	145	活出愛	175	神是我這生供應者
116	數算主恩	146	活著為耶穌	176	神是永活全能
117	是因為愛	147	渴慕主	177	神的形像
118	普世歡騰	148	渴慕祢	178	神的恩言
119	更像我恩主	149	渴慕祢的話（詩19)	179	神祢信實奇妙
120	最好的福氣	150	潔淨我	180	神祢在掌管

APPENDIX 1: MY HOME CHURCH'S THREE YEAR SONG LIST (CONTINUED)

181	祢成就救恩	211	興起教會	241	進入祢的同在
182	祢是彌賽亞	212	興起為耶穌	242	開我眼睛使我看見
183	祢是我的一切	213	舉手讚頌	243	阿爸天父
184	祢是我藏身之處	214	苦難之路	244	除祢以外
185	祢是為了我	215	萬世戰爭	245	陪我走過春夏秋冬
186	祢是王	216	萬代之神	246	陶造我一生
187	祢的信實廣大	217	薪火相傳	247	陶造我生命
188	祢的話	218	藉我賜恩福	248	雲上太陽
189	祢真偉大	219	虛心的人有福	249	靠著耶穌得勝
190	祢若不壓橄欖成渣	220	表彰我主大能	250	順服
191	祢讓我生命改變	221	要忠心	251	頌讚主聖名
192	祢顯能力的日子	222	親愛主	252	頌讚全能上帝
193	立志擺上	223	觀看宇宙	253	頌讚父權能
194	細細聽	224	誠心敬拜	254	頌讚父神偉大權力
195	美哉主耶穌	225	誰曾應許	255	頌讚祢 Hallelujah
196	耶和華是愛	226	請差遣我	256	願主榮美彰顯
197	耶和華求祢臨近	227	謝謝我主	257	願您平安
198	耶和華神已掌權	228	讓你心破碎	258	願祢用愛吸引我
199	耶穌, 至高的聖名	229	讓我愛	259	願那靈火復興我
200	耶穌，超乎萬名之名	230	讓我高舉稱讚祢	260	齊來頌讚
201	耶穌基督是我一切	231	讚美主		
202	耶穌奇妙的救恩	232	讚美天上君王		
203	耶穌愛你	233	讚美救主		
204	聖哉, 聖哉	234	讚頌祢的愛		
205	聖哉三一	235	賀祂為王		
206	聖法蘭西斯禱文	236	賜下奮興		
207	聖靈之歌	237	趕快傳道		
208	自耶穌來住在我心	238	轉眼仰望		
209	至愛的迴響	239	這是天父世界		
210	與神同行	240	速發光		

APPENDIX 2: SAMPLE WORKSHEET USED FOR PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Items to Observe[436]	Fieldnotes
1. Service Flow	
2. Attendance (demographic information)	
3. Behaviour	
4. Worship space and ambiance	
5. Music genre/style	
6. Use of the instrument	
7. Leading style	
8. Theology / Bible passages explicitly expressed	
9. Duration	
10. Use of language/type of language	
11. Attire	
12. Body movement	
13. Visual aids (Hymnals, PowerPoints)	

[436] This section corresponds to McMaster Research Ethics Board application section 11.14.2

APPENDIX 3: SUMMARY OF ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS[437]

Appendix 3.1 - Gender, Marital Status, and Age Distribution

Gender (total number of responses=40)	
Category	Number
Male	28
Female	12
Marital Status (total number of responses=40)	
Single	3
Married with children	14
Married with dependent (<18 years old)	18
Married with independent (children >18 years old)	3
Widower/widow	2
Age group (total number of responses=40)	
19–24	0
25–30	1
31–40	9
41–55	24
55–65	5
65+	1
Years of Being a Christian (total number of responses = 40)	
0–10 years	0
10–20 years	8
21–30 years	18
31–40 years	14

[437] This section corresponds to McMaster Research Ethics Board application section 11.14.7 and 16.6.3

Appendix 3.2 - Language Preferences

Use of Language at home (total number of responses = 40)	
Cantonese	39
English[438]	1

Language Best Express Oneself in Daily Life (total number of responses = 40)	
Cantonese	37
English	3

Able to Read the Following Text in a Worship Service (participants can choose more than one item)	
Traditional Chinese	40
Simplified Chinese	20
English	32

Comfortable in Using the Following Language to Sing during a Worship Service[439] **(10 = Strongly agree; 1 = Strongly disagree)**	Average
Cantonese	9.5
English	9.5
Mandarin	8.4

[438] The respondent elaborates during the interview that both English and Cantonese are used at home.

[439] The scaling averages represent the overall responses to the provided statement. A high average score (e.g., 8 or above) means the partcipants strongly agree with a given statement. A low average score (e.g. 3 or lower) means the particpants mostly disagree or strongly disagree with the statement. Likewise, an average score in between 6 to 7 or 3 to 4 repectively means overall the partcipants agree or disagree with the statement. An average score close to 5 means the participants generally are neutral or indifferent in response to the statement. This scaling average applies to Appendix 3.2, 3.8, 3.12, 3.14, 3.15 and 3.16.

Appendix 3.3 - Geographic Distribution by Cities and Duration of Attending the Current Church

Research Participants' Home Church Locations by Cities (total number of different churches by cities = 19)	Number of Churches
Downtown Toronto	1
Markham	7
Mississauga	1
North York	4
Online	1
Richmond Hill	3
Scarborough	2

Number of Years the Participants Have Attended the Current Church (total number of responses = 40)	
3–7 years	12
8–15 years	9
16–30 years	15
30+ years	4

Appendix 3.4 - Denomination Information

The Church that Participants Attended in the Past Three Years by Denomination (total number of different churches by denomination = 18)	
Alliance	5
Baptist	6
Gospel	2
Non-Denominational	4
Presbyterian	1

Denomination Background of the Participants (participants can choose more than one item)	
Adventist	0
Alliance	14
Anglican	3
Baptist	28
Evangelicals	6
Gospel	3
Lutheran	3
Mennonites	1
Methodist	3
Non-Denominational	12
Peace Gospel	1
Pentecostal	2
Reformed	1
Other	5

Appendix 3.5 - Ministry Involvement and Musical Background

The Roles that Participants are Currently Serving or Have Served in the Past Three Years (participants can select more than one item)	
Instrumentalist	16
Vocalist (worship team or choir)	28
Worship leader	24
Usher	5
Audio/video technician	7
Chairperson	15
Preacher	10
Song arranger	10
Others	2
No involvements	5
A pastor who oversees worship ministry	7
Deacon or church leader who oversees worship service	6
General Music Background of the Participants (participants can select more than one item)	
Vocal	24
Piano	17
Keyboard	8
Drums and percussion	6
Guitar (acoustic, classical, electric)	9
Bass guitar	5
String instrument (e.g., violin, viola, cello, double bass)	4
Wind instrument (e.g., flute, clarinet, recorder, saxophone)	6
Others	2
I do not play any instruments	11

Appendix 3.6 - Reasons Why Participants Find a Song Touches Them (or "Dear to Their Hearts") (participants can select more than one item)

	Non-Christian Song 1	Non-Christian Song 2	Christian Song 1	Christian Song 2
Pleasing melody	22	24	23	20
Pleasing music style	15	18	8	13
Engaging rhythm/groove	8	12	5	6
Meaningful lyrics that speak to my past state or beliefs	15	17	18	15
Meaningful lyrics that speak to my present state or beliefs	15	12	27	28
Sentimental qualities expressed in the music touch me	25	19	17	17
It contains cultural nuances that resonate with my life	6	5	1	1
Remind me of a childhood period, past memory, and/or experience	14	18	11	5
Associate with my social life/current life stage	10	6	6	6
Associate with my faith experience	6	5	31	32
A fan/supporter of the performer/singer	7	7	1	1

Appendix 3.7: Ranking - When Participants Learn a New Song, They Tend to Focus on: (total number of responses in each ranking = 40)

	First	Second	Third	Fourth
Lyrics	16	19	2	3
Melody	20	14	4	2
Music arrangement (i.e., rhythm, harmony, tone colour, etc.)	3	3	25	9
Singing, playing, and/or song mixing techniques and nuances	1	4	9	26

Appendix 3.8: When I Sing a Familiar Song in Congregational Worship, I tend to (1 – 10; 1 being the least likely, 10 being the most likely):

	Average[440]
Focus on singing the songs well (i.e., right notes, right words, or pronunciation)	7.3
Enjoy the singing experience without focusing on technicalities	7.4
Interpret the lyrics and apply the meaning to my present life status	7.7
Interpret the lyrics and apply the meaning to my relationship with God	8.1
Interpret the lyrics and apply the meaning to my relationship with others (e.g., family, colleagues, other Christians, neighbors	6.9
Recall a memory or past experience	6.2
Seek new meaning-significance to me	6.3
Not sing aloud and let the song and worship experience speak to my heart	4.3

[440] Same logic applies to the understanding of averages as in Appendix 3.2. Please refer to Appendix 3.2 footnotes.

Appendix 3.9: When I hear others sing out loud with me or around me on Sunday mornings, I feel: (participants can select more than one item)	Number of Responses by 40 Participants
Comforted	13
Affirmed	20
Connected	32
Embarrassed	0
Shy	0
Encouraged	27
Belonged	18
Distant or disengaged	0
Awkward	0
Peaceful	9
United	30
Excited	15
Loved	5
Accepted	6

Appendix 3.10: When I sing with people of different ages and generations, I find it (please select all that apply): (participants can select more than one item)	Number of Responses by 40 Participants
Disturbing	1
Confusing	1
Disengaging	2
Uninteresting	0
Welcoming	22
Connecting	32
Relating	16
Engaging	22
Transcending	5

Appendix 3.11: When I sing the songs that are "not my cup of tea" (i.e., not in alignment with my musical tastes and music library), I find it: (participants can select more than one item)	Number of Responses by 40 Participants
Disturbing	4
Confusing	4
Disengaging	23
Uninteresting	17
Welcoming	9
Connecting	4
Relating	2
Engaging	3
Transcending	0

Appendix 3.12: About worship leading - Please rate the following statements (10 = Strongly agree; 1 = Strongly disagree)[441]

	Average
Worship leaders provide sufficient guidance to help me bridge the songs I sing to my daily life and needs	6.1
Worship leaders provide sufficient guidance to help me bridge the songs I sing to my spiritual life and needs	6.5
Worship leaders provide sufficient guidance to help me focus on the works and attributes of God	6.6
Worship leaders provide sufficient guidance to help me focus on worshipping God wholeheartedly	6.7
I interpret and make up my own meanings of the congregational singing and songs	6.8
Worship leaders generally provide sufficient guidance to lead me and others in following the group singing	7.0
In general, the worship leaders at my Sunday service allow silence to give space for reflection and personal prayer	5.8
In general, I believe the worship leaders at my Sunday service function more like facilitators than performers	7.5

[441] Same logic applies to the understanding of averages as in Appendix 3.2. Please refer to Appendix 3.2 footnotes.

Appendix 3.13: Overall, when I sing with a worship team/band at my church, I find it: (participants can select more than one item)	Number of Responses by 40 Participants
Disturbing	2
Confusing	1
Disengaging	6
Uninteresting	3
Welcoming	13
Connecting	27
Relating	22
Engaging	30
Transcending	5

Appendix 3.14: The songs that I sing during Sunday services (10 = Strongly agree; 1 = Strongly disagree)[442]

	Average
Teach me cognitively to become a better Christian	6.8
Touch me and motivate me to become a better Christian	7.2
Encourage me to alter my behaviour and action as a Christian	6.9
Affirm that I am a child of God	7.6
Affirm that I have sibling relationships with other Christians in God	6.4
Affirm that I am redeemed in Christ	8.0
Affirm that I am a worthy person in God	7.6
Affirm that I am one of the citizens in God's kingdom	7.4
Affirm that I, as a Christian, have my duty as a citizen on earth	6.9
Affirm that I should strive to be a better student/worker	6.2
Affirm that I should strive to be a better son/daughter	5.9
Affirm that I should strive to be a better spouse (if applicable)	5.4
Affirm that I should strive to be a better parent (if applicable)	5.4
Affirm that my sins and transgressions are forgiven by Christ's redemption	7.9
Remind me of my weaknesses and wrongdoings	7.3
Remind me that I am created in the image of God	7.1
Remind me that God knows me, and I am known by God	7.8
Help me to know more about God's character	7.5
Help me to understand God and his truth more	7.2
Prompt me to love and commit to God more	7.8
Prompt me to love and commit to my neighbors more	6.5
Prompt me to love and commit to myself more	5.9
Advocate me to pursue biblical Christian living	6.8
Often create phrases and tunes that resonate in my head for days	6.1
Contains very different music styles/genres in comparison to my personal song preferences	5.6

[442] Same logic applies to the understanding of averages as in Appendix 3.2. Please refer to Appendix 3.2 footnotes.

Appendix 3.15: I feel comfortable and have a sense of belonging worshipping with others that are different in the following categories: (10 = Extremely comfortable and belonged; 5 Neutral; 1 = Extremely uncomfortable and detached)[443]

	Average
Race, ethnicity, and nationality	7.4
Cultural background	7.3
Age	8.2
Mother tongue	7.7
Physical capacity/ability/talent	7.9
Mental capacity/ability/talent (e.g., knowledge, emotional stability, and creativity)	7.3
Social economic class	7.7
Life stage (e.g., student, young adults, family, and mature individuals)	8.3
Religious values and spiritual beliefs	6.2
Personality and character	7.7
Musical tastes and preferences	7.3

[443] Same logic applies to the understanding of averages as in Appendix 3.2. Please refer to Appendix 3.2 footnotes.

Appendix 3.16: Overall, I believe my congregational singing experience is effective in shaping, supplementing, and/or augmenting my biblical understanding of the following: (10 = Strongly agree; 1 = Strongly disagree)[444]

	Average
Race, ethnicity, and nationality	5.9
Cultural background	6.2
Gender and sexuality	5.3
Physical capacity/ability/talent	5.4
Mental capacity/ability/talent (e.g., knowledge, emotional stability, and creativity)	5.7
Family relationship	6.2
Age differences	6.3
Friendship	6.3
Possessions (e.g., money, reputation, and unique experience)	6.0
Religious values and spiritual beliefs	7.4
Personality and character	6.9
Musical tastes and preferences	5.7

[444] Same logic applies to the understanding of averages as in Appendix 3.2. Please refer to Appendix 3.2 footnotes.

APPENDIX 4: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS[445]

Section A – Exploring Musical Identity in Congregational Singing (15 minutes)

The participants are invited to imagine singing the following versions of a familiar song, "How Great Thou Art," in their respective church worship services. Each clip is approximately 45 seconds in length. The participants will describe if variations in music, lyrics, and languages make any differences to their holistic engagement (i.e., behaviour, emotion, cognition) and how these samples relate to the existing weekly worship experience. Respondents are welcome to use a pen and paper to jot down their thoughts while watching.

A1 - Choral Singing, Cantonese, familiar lyrics
A2 - Contemporary singing 1, familiar lyrics, same melody lines
A3 - Contemporary singing 1, different lyrics, same melody lines
A4 - Contemporary singing 2, different lyrics, altered melody lines
A5 - English, familiar lyrics, and melody lines
A6 - Mandarin, familiar lyrics, and melody lines

Section B – Exploring Worship Leading Style (15 minutes)

Like section A, the participants will be given five worship-leading samples typical in a regular worship service. The participants will describe if different worship leading styles, including visual, aural, and spatial format variations, impact their holistic engagement (i.e., behaviour, emotion, cognition) and how these samples relate to the existing weekly worship experience. Respondents are welcome to use a pen and paper to jot down their thoughts and feelings while watching.

B1 - Traditional leading style, explicit singing instruction, uptight body gestures, formal voice tone, and an invitation to stand up and sing authoritatively.
B2 - Contemporary, performance-like leading style, band sound, emotional arousal, and informal voice tone.
B3 - Contemporary leading style, greetings, and prayer, semi-formal tone.
B4 - Contemporary leading style, short transition, semi-formal tone. Invitation to stand up and sing optionally.
B5 - Contemporary leading style, short transition, semi-formal tone. Include a music space that may or may not be intentional.

[445] This section corresponds to McMaster Research Ethics Board application section 11.14.5. Interview questions are translated in English but provided to the interviewees in Cantonese.

Section C – About Biblical Identities in the Congregational Singing Experience (30 min)

1. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have experienced congregational singing on Sundays in digital form. Would you please describe what makes physical communal worship and congregational singing different from the online experience? Does physical togetherness make any difference to your sense of belonging to the Christian faith, church, and people group? Do you think that others singing aloud as opposed to "watching and listening" shapes your life differently?

2. Do you think the ones who gather to sing and worship with you physically affirm and shape your Christian identity in any way? If so, please describe further.

3. In Sunday congregational singing, we sing many songs about God and our relationships with him. Can you recall what themes or ideas about who God is to me and who I am in God?

4. Do you contextualize the meanings to your individual life when singing these songs or after the singing event?

5. In Sunday congregational singing, we may have songs about our relationships with human others in God or through God. What themes or ideas about our relationship and identity with others relate to this relational dimension?

6. In sum, do you think congregational singing influences our identity formation and relationships with God and others?

7. Try to recall a critical moment or several moments in your life. The moments can refer to life and death, celebration events, difficult times, etc. How do Christian songs shape you in those events (e.g., affirmation, assurance, acceptance, hope, and being forgiven)? Do the critical moments re-appear in your mind when you sing these songs during Sunday service? Please kindly describe.

Remarks: For pastoral participants, they are being asked the same set of questions, except that I have explicitly prompted them to respond in dual roles (i.e., an ordinary worshipper and a pastor/minister).

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