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Transformative worship encounters: toward a relational philosophy of church music as community music

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TRANSFORMATIVE WORSHIP ENCOUNTERS:

TOWARD A RELATIONAL PHILOSOPHY OF CHURCH MUSIC

AS COMMUNITY MUSIC

by

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who alone is worthy of all worship, glory, honor, and praise in this life and for all eternity. May all my efforts stimulate the heartfelt praise and affection for God of churches and believers everywhere.

Psalm 40:1–3 (ESV)

I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry.

He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog,

and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.

He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.

Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord.

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ABSTRACT

This philosophical inquiry explores the nature and purpose of church music through a critical and interdisciplinary lens. Responding to the dominance of performance-driven models and pragmatic aestheticism in popular worship literature, this study argues for a new conceptual model of church music as a relational, participatory, and formational practice. Positioning church music as community music in practice while drawing from literature in relational ontology, theology, and spirituality in music, this study critiques commonly accepted traditions in evangelical churches, and instead proposes a vision of worship music as a lived, transformative encounter grounded in human and divine relationality.

The study proposes a conceptual model of church music as community music shaped by four phenomenological dimensions: relationality, corporeality, temporality, and spatiality. These categories frame worship not as a product to consume, but as transformative process carried out in community. Each dimension is examined in relation to community music, theological reflection, and spiritual formation, offering insight into

how church musicians might cultivate more embodied, inclusive, and transformative musical encounters.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, contemporary Christian artist Chris Tomlin hosted a large-scale worship event at the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles as part of his "Holy Roar" tour. Nearly twenty thousand attendees participated in what closely resembled a typical evangelical worship service. Tomlin led a series of well-known original songs, and the audience joined in readily, without instruction or prompting. Throughout the event, he interwove biblical references with personal reflections, describing his intent not merely as performing songs but as "an encounter with the presence of the living God" (Tomlin, 2018). During one particularly memorable moment, the crowd sang "How Great Is Our God" in unison, with hands raised and eyes closed. Despite the size of the venue, the atmosphere was both electric and reverent. The musical experience seemed to transcend entertainment, functioning instead as a communal act of worship and spiritual engagement.

For many in attendance, the event exemplified what worship music is intended to do: draw a diverse group of people together in shared participation and create space for spiritual transformation (Ingalls, 2018). Yet this kind of experience remains uncommon in many local church settings. While evangelical churches widely affirm the theological importance of congregational worship, musical participation in typical services often feels restrained, formulaic, or disconnected. The contrast between large-scale events and local worship services raises an important question: If music is meant to facilitate

meaningful spiritual encounters, why do so many worship environments struggle to achieve that sense of unity and transformation?

This kind of transcendent and transformative worship experience is far from typical in most evangelical churches. While many congregations affirm a theological commitment to corporate worship as a spiritually formative practice, the actual experience of music-making often lacks the kind of communal depth, spiritual intensity, and participatory engagement observed in large-scale events like Tomlin's concert. In many local settings, worship music can feel scripted or consumer-driven, with congregants positioned as passive observers and worship leaders as performers (Ingalls, 2018). Despite the centrality of music in evangelical identity, its function is frequently reduced to that of emotional preparation for preaching or a vehicle for theological messaging (Lim & Ruth, 2017). This dissonance between the ideal and the lived experience of worship music raises fundamental questions about how music functions in evangelical worship, and whether current frameworks adequately support its transformative potential.

As a church musician and former chair of a worship studies program, I grappled with these questions not only in practice but also in theory. Despite years of ministry leadership and theological training, I lacked a conceptual framework for articulating what I had experienced in rare but powerful moments of musical transformation. Much of the evangelical literature available to me focused on doctrinal purity, scriptural fidelity, or the role of music in supporting preaching, often treating music as a functional accessory rather than a formative and communal act (Ingalls, 2018; Lim & Ruth, 2017). Popular

texts emphasized theological alignment or musical excellence by Western art standards (Jones, 2006) but rarely addressed the pedagogical, psychological, or relational mechanisms that make musical worship spiritually meaningful. Meanwhile, broader fields—such as music education, philosophy, and sociology—offered robust theories on music's role in identity formation, social bonding, and spiritual transformation, but these were largely absent from evangelical worship discourse. The result is a fragmented understanding of worship music that risks missing its full relational and formational potential.

Ingalls (2018) examined five modes of congregating of evangelicals in the United States. She found that some of the modes, especially conference and concerts, shifted the expectations of congregants to a higher standard. If churches are to prevent members from leaving, they would need to raise their standard closer to that of near rock-concert quality. Such a tension exemplifies what Regelski (1975) referred to as a "see-saw" in music education—the continual negotiation between the ideal and the pragmatic. In the context of church music, the theological ideal is an encounter with the presence of God, yet many churches experience little more than a functional selection of songs shaped by the theology and aesthetic preferences of their leaders. Like the music educator, the worship leader must navigate the expectations of the congregation, the pastor, and sometimes denominational norms, all while striving to cultivate more than a redundant or performance-centered song service.

Music has long played a central role in Christian worship, serving as both an expression of faith and a means of spiritual formation (Myrick, 2021). The terms

"worship music" and "church music" are used interchangeably to refer to the musical expressions practiced within evangelical congregational settings, including congregational singing, instrumental accompaniment, choirs, bands, and liturgically oriented music forms. While traditionally viewed as theological or liturgical expressions, this study frames church music not only as a doctrinal tool but as a relational and participatory practice central to spiritual and communal formation (Wainwright & Tucker, 2006; Lim & Ruth, 2017).

In conservative evangelical churches, music is often primarily evaluated through doctrinal correctness, biblical fidelity, and its role in corporate worship. Conservative evangelical worship tends to focus on accurate and theologically rich lyrics, along with more reverent and static musical style. Conversely, charismatic worship emphasizes personal experiences with God, lending itself more to simple praise songs written in modern styles. Although the literature on worship theology and practice from across the spectrum is extensive, much of it fails to engage with broader academic perspectives that explore the philosophical, sociological, and educational dimensions of music in religious settings. As a result, many evangelical churches lack interdisciplinary scholarship for understanding how worship music functions beyond its theological messaging.

The limitations of evangelical worship literature are particularly evident when viewed alongside scholarship from adjacent disciplines. While theologians have contributed significantly to the understanding of worship's doctrinal foundations, they often overlook the formative, communal, and psychological dimensions of musical participation (Saliers & Saliers, 2017; Wainwright & Tucker, 2006). Conversely, scholars

in fields such as community music and music education have long explored how music facilitates identity development, social cohesion, and personal transformation (Higgins, 2012; Veblen, 2007). These disciplines offer frameworks for understanding music not only as a sonic or symbolic expression, but as a deeply relational and embodied practice—yet such insights are rarely integrated into evangelical discussions of worship music.

The field of community music provides a particularly valuable lens through which to reevaluate church music practices. Community music is defined as participatory, inclusive, and socially engaged music-making that emphasizes process over product and relationship over performance (Higgins, 2012; Veblen, 2007). It frequently occurs outside formal institutional settings and focuses on accessibility, local relevance, and personal transformation through shared music-making. Community music scholarship emphasizes participatory, inclusive, and socially embedded music-making as a vehicle for transformation and connection (Bartleet, 2023; Higgins, 2012). This study proposes that church music, when practiced in a participatory and transformational manner, fits squarely within the aims and values of community music. As Kelly (1984) noted, community music is not oriented toward musical product but toward the process of musicking as a communal and creative act.

Coined by Small (1998), *musicking* refers to any form of musical participation—performing, listening, rehearsing, composing, facilitating—which collectively shapes the relationships among participants. Rather than viewing music as a product, Small defines it as a social and relational act. In the context of worship, musicking invites worship

leaders to interpret musical worship not as consumption but as a participatory process that enacts spiritual and communal identity. Small (1998) reinforced this orientation by redefining music not as a noun but as a verb—musicking—emphasizing that every act of musical participation establishes and affirms social relationships. These insights resonate with what many worship leaders, acting as community music facilitators, intuitively understand but lack language to articulate: that worship music is more than performance or theological content; it is a space of communal formation and spiritual encounter.

Music education scholars have also contributed significantly to discussions of music's spiritual potential (van der Merwe & Habron, 2015). Boyce-Tillman (2009, 2013, 2016) demonstrated that musical experiences can generate liminal spaces where personal and communal transformation is possible. Her now sixteen volumes in the "music and spirituality" series published by Peter Lang demonstrate the centrality of her voice to the conversation. These, along many other scholars in music education, advocate for models of education that attend not only to technical skill and cognitive development but also to spirituality, embodiment, and relationality in music-making.

In this study, the term "spirituality" refers to the experiential dimension of transcendence, meaning-making, and connection with self, others, or the divine (Palmer, 2010; Yob, 2011). Transformative music encounters describe moments in worship where music facilitates a liminal experience—disrupting the ordinary and opening space for healing, insight, or reorientation (Boyce-Tillman, 2016; van der Merwe & Habron, 2015). These encounters are marked not only by emotional resonance but also by relational integration and spiritual depth. These ideas parallel the concerns of theologians like

Tillich (1957) and Yannaras (2011), who argued that spirituality cannot be abstracted from the lived, relational experiences of worship. Yet despite these overlapping insights, evangelical discourse on worship continues to treat music primarily as means to theological correctness rather than as a relational practice capable of shaping spiritual identity.

In addition to relational and educational models, sociological theories of religion and ritual offer further insight into how participation in worship music fosters communal identity and spiritual energy. Ritual theory provides a valuable lens for interpreting the role of music in worship, especially in terms of participation, identity, and meaning-making. Durkheim (1995) argued that rituals serve as the binding agents of social life, reinforcing collective identity through shared symbols and sacred boundaries. Rituals operate by distinguishing the sacred from the profane, constructing meaning through repetition, bodily action, and communal affirmation. They generate what Durkheim termed "collective effervescence"—a heightened emotional energy that emerges when individuals unite around a common sacred purpose. This emotional charge sustains the moral and social order of a community.

Building on Durkheim's foundation, Erving Goffman (1967) examined how individuals manage identity and social interaction through ritualized behaviors in everyday life. His concept of "face-work" emphasized the micro-level negotiations that occur within ritual contexts, where participants actively shape their roles and protect the integrity of communal performance. Randall Collins (2004) later synthesized Durkheim and Goffman into his theory of interaction ritual chains (IRCs), suggesting that rituals

succeed when they generate four ingredients: bodily co-presence, mutual focus of attention, shared mood, and symbolic resonance. When these align, rituals produce emotional energy, reinforce group solidarity, and motivate future participation. Ammerman (2011, 2021) further conceptualized religion in sociological terms as local, and participatory, but also identifies how people enact religious practices in their everyday lives. In the context of church music, these theories suggest that music is not merely aesthetic or expressive—it is ritual action that forms identity, cultivates belonging, and creates the conditions for spiritual encounter.

The importance of ritual theory to this philosophical inquiry is underscored by recent empirical findings. Williams (2021), in his qualitative study of Catholic school liturgies, found that students commonly equated participation with outward behaviors such as standing, singing, or appearing respectful, yet rarely articulated deeper theological or spiritual understanding. Music was often viewed as a tool to enhance engagement or emotional resonance, rather than as a vehicle for formative spiritual experience. These observations reinforce the need for a more robust framework, one that recognizes worship music not merely as a tool for behavior management or aesthetic experience but as a ritualized and relational practice capable of forming identity and cultivating spiritual encounter.

Music practitioners and educators in evangelical church music contexts need a new conceptual framework—one that draws together the theological roots of worship with the relational, communal, and transformative dimensions emphasized in music education and community music literature. This study proposes such a framework

through the lens of relational ontology as articulated by Martin Buber (1937) and Emmanuel Levinas (1969), supported by contemporary thinkers in music education. Relational ontology is the philosophical position that being is not individual or self-contained but fundamentally constituted through relationship (Buber, 1937; Levinas, 1969; Benjamin, 2015). In contrast to substance metaphysics, which views entities as isolated and self-sufficient, relational ontology understands identity and meaning as emerging through interaction, presence, and responsibility.

This study applies relational ontology as the foundation for reimagining worship music—not simply as theological expression, but as an ontological act that shapes who worshippers are becoming in relation. These scholars suggest that identity is not formed in isolation but in *encounter*—an idea that aligns with Small's vision of musicking and with participatory worship practices across many traditions. By integrating these perspectives, this study seeks to offer a more holistic understanding of worship music: not simply as a means of theological instruction, but as a dynamic space of relational formation, communal meaning-making, and spiritual transformation.

Drawing on Buber (1937), the term *encounter* is used in this study to distinguish from mere *experience*. An experience may be passive or self-referential; an encounter is relational, dialogical, and ethically charged. In worship music, an encounter involves not only emotional or cognitive engagement but a recognition of the other—whether human or divine—as subject, not object. This distinction is foundational to the study's philosophical framing of worship music as a site of relational formation and will be explored further in chapter two.

In this study, I seek to bridge the gap between evangelical worship literature and broader academic research by proposing a relational philosophy of church music as community music. Grounded in relational ontology, community music, and contemporary scholarship on spirituality in music education, this framework reimagines church music not simply as theological expression, but as a participatory, socially embedded, and spiritually formative practice. By reframing worship leaders as community music practitioners, this study affirms the relational and educational dimensions of church music often overlooked in popular and academic evangelical discourse.

At the heart of this proposed conceptual framework is the concept of transformative worship encounters—moments in which worship music facilitates not only spiritual awareness but also communal participation and personal renewal. Drawing on Buber's (1937) philosophy of *I–Thou* encounter and Levinas's (1969) ethics of responsibility, this study frames worship music as a relational act, where spiritual transformation arises through encounter with others and with the divine. These philosophical commitments are supported by insights from music education and community music research, which highlight the role of musical participation in fostering identity, belonging, and transcendent experience.

By synthesizing theological insight with research from other disciplines, this study contributes to both scholarly understanding and practical application. It provides church musicians and worship educators with a robust philosophical framework to guide their practice, one that accounts not only for doctrinal concerns but also for the relational and communal dynamics of music-making. In doing so, it responds to the growing call

within both music education and theological scholarship for models that integrate spiritual formation, communal identity, and musical participation (Benjamins, 2023; Ingalls, 2018).

Problem Statement

Historically, church music has played a central role in worship and spiritual formation within Christian communities. Evangelical church leaders, in particular, have developed extensive literature for their congregations and churches on the theology of worship, emphasizing biblical principles, doctrinal alignment, and corporate singing as an act of faith. Despite the progress of scholarship of other faith practices, much of this literature remains insular, focusing on theological interpretations while largely ignoring broader philosophical, sociological, and educational insights that could deepen understanding and enhance worship experiences.

This lack of integration with broader research represents a critical gap in both scholarship and practice. Music in evangelical worship is often treated as an tool for theological transmission or a rallying sound for like-minded believers, rather than as a relational and transformative experience informed by contemporary research in music education, community music, and relational ontology. Without a broader theoretical foundation, church musicians and worship leaders may unwittingly reinforce cultural and theological biases, failing to create truly inclusive and spiritually engaging worship environments and potentially reinforcing social injustices and hate instigated in the name of religion.

Moreover, conservative evangelical literature on worship continues to be shaped primarily by popular authors and preachers rather than by academic research. Popular evangelical literature refers to books, internal documents, brochures, or papers associated with special proceedings, such as music/worship conferences. This reliance on theological discourse alone limits critical reflection on worship music's educational, philosophical, and communal dimensions. Without a clear conceptual model, worship leaders have no other goal than selecting the appropriate songs based on the theological and aesthetic preferences of their respective congregations. As a result, many church music programs fail to create transformative musical encounters, leading to unexamined traditions, aesthetic preferences masquerading as theological convictions, and an underdeveloped philosophy of worship.

In this study, I address these concerns by developing a broader philosophy of church music—one that synthesizes theological, philosophical, sociological, and music educational perspectives. Through this interdisciplinary approach, I seek to bridge the divide between scholarly research and evangelical practice, equipping church musicians and educators with a framework for facilitating meaningful and transformative worship experiences.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to propose a relational philosophy of church music that integrates theology, philosophy, and music education to better understand and facilitate transformative worship encounters in evangelical church contexts. While existing evangelical literature on worship music predominantly focuses on theological

perspectives, this study seeks to bridge the gap between scholarly research and practical application, providing a more robust and interdisciplinary foundation for worship practices. By synthesizing insights from relational ontology, community music, and spirituality in music education, this study aims to:

1. Explore relational ontology as philosophical grounding for church music as encounter rather than an experience.
2. Critically evaluate how current evangelical literature frames worship music and assess its alignment with contemporary research on spiritual and communal music-making.
3. Situate church music within the broader framework of community music, demonstrating its social and educational impact beyond theological discourse.
4. Propose a relational philosophy for church music that equips worship leaders and church musicians with practical and theoretical tools to facilitate transformative worship encounters.

Through this study, I aspire to provide a framework that not only enhances theological understanding but also empowers church musicians to cultivate inclusive, participatory, and spiritually enriching worship environments.

Research Questions

To achieve the purpose of this study, the following research questions will guide the investigation:

1. How is worship music conceptualized in evangelical literature, and what limitations does this reveal?

2. How can relational ontology reframe worship music as a transformative, communal encounter?
3. What can community music principles contribute to a conceptual framework for church music?

Significance of the Study

This study holds significance for both academic scholarship and practical application in the fields of theology, music education, and worship leadership. By integrating relational ontology, community music, and spirituality in music education, it provides a robust interdisciplinary framework for understanding worship music not solely as a liturgical or aesthetic feature, but as a transformative, participatory, and spiritually formative practice.

From a theological and philosophical perspective, this research challenges the prevailing reduction of worship music to a vehicle for doctrinal messaging or aesthetic affect. It reframes worship music as a relational encounter between individuals, the gathered community, and the divine where identity and transformation are formed through participatory musical engagement (Boyce-Tillman, 2016; Buber, 1937; Levinas, 1969). In doing so, it contributes to a growing conversation in practical theology and worship studies about the ontological and pedagogical dimensions of worship (Benjamins, 2023; Saliers & Saliers, 2017).

For church musicians and worship leaders, this study offers a research-based model to guide the intentional design of spiritually enriching worship services. Many leaders operate without clear philosophical grounding, relying on inherited traditions or

stylistic preferences that may not support participatory transformation (Ingalls, 2018; Lim & Ruth, 2017). By positioning worship leaders as community music facilitators and reframing church music as a relational practice, this research equips practitioners with a framework to evaluate and enhance their worship programs in ways that foster inclusive, participatory, and spiritually resonant experiences.

In the field of music education, this study situates church music as a form of community music—worthy of scholarly attention for its pedagogical, social, and spiritual contributions. Despite the widespread educational impact of church music contexts and despite the long-understood similarities of religious and aesthetic experiences (Reimer, 1963), these settings have often been overlooked by music education research (Benjamins, 2023). This project addresses that oversight by demonstrating how church music functions as an accessible, community-based, spiritually oriented site of music education (Higgins, 2012). It invites music educators to consider the implications of spiritual formation and relationality within their own teaching practices, particularly in informal and non-institutional settings.

The accelerating trajectory of artificial intelligence, especially in the realms of creativity, communication, and emotional simulation, has triggered deep societal reflection on the essence of human interaction and presence. As AI became capable of composing music, generating art, simulating human conversation, and offering spiritual counsel, the church's role as a site of incarnational gathering became more vital than ever. Turkle (2011) warned that our increasing reliance on digital proxies for relationship led to "expecting more from technology and less from each other" (p. 1). The present

study responded to this cultural shift by elevating the embodied, relational aspects of worship as essential components of Christian formation. The communal act of singing, listening, and co-creating in worship served as a theological counter-practice to digital abstraction. Crouch (2017) argued that the way forward was not to reject technology outright but to intentionally re-center embodied practices that trained us to be fully present to God and one another. The church, therefore, was not merely preserving tradition but cultivating human flourishing in a world increasingly shaped by disembodied efficiency.

By bridging gaps between theology, education, and practice, this research contributes a flexible and transferable model that can be adapted across diverse evangelical and worship contexts. In doing so, it opens new pathways for interdisciplinary scholarship, fosters deeper spiritual formation in congregational settings, and expands the relevance of music practices rooted in faith communities to music education.

Contextual and Conceptual Foundations

Worship music has long played a central role in Christian spirituality and communal life. From the psalms of ancient Israel to the hymns of the early church and the revival songs of the Great Awakenings, music has been employed as both expression and formation—shaping theological identity, reinforcing doctrinal memory, and facilitating spiritual devotion (Wainwright & Tucker, 2006). In the Old Testament, music accompanied temple rites and national celebrations; in the New Testament, singing was a communal and didactic practice (Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19). These biblical

patterns laid the groundwork for diverse liturgical and musical expressions across Christian history.

During the Reformation, divergent theological perspectives catalyzed distinct philosophies of church music. Martin Luther emphasized vernacular hymnody and congregational participation as tools of theological education, while John Calvin favored metrical psalmody and restrained musical form to avoid distraction from Scripture (MacDiarmid, 2018; Music & Price, 2010; Wainwright & Tucker, 2006). The 18th- and 19th-century evangelical revivals, particularly in North America, marked a shift toward emotionally responsive music, foregrounding individual experience, simplicity, and accessibility (Justice, 2008; Lim & Ruth, 2017). These movements significantly shaped modern evangelical attitudes toward music, emphasizing its capacity to evoke spiritual emotion, facilitate altar calls, and reinforce communal identity.

Despite these rich musical traditions, contemporary evangelical literature on worship often reduces music to its theological or emotional function, giving limited attention to its formative, communal, or philosophical dimensions (Ingalls, 2018; Myrick, 2021). Popular worship texts—frequently authored by pastors, musicians, or ministry leaders—tend to approach music as a support tool for preaching or as a mechanism to "prepare hearts" rather than as a primary site of spiritual transformation. Meanwhile, conversations around style, genre, and aesthetics are frequently framed in terms of preference, orthodoxy, or nostalgia, rather than educational or relational philosophy (Crouch, 2022; Lim & Ruth, 2017). This narrow scope has left a critical gap in how church musicians understand and engage their role and function in worship service

settings.

In contrast, the field of community music offers an additional framework that foregrounds music as relational, participatory, and socially embedded (Higgins, 2012; Veblen, 2007). Defined by its emphasis on inclusion, local relevance, and collaborative creativity, community music values the process of musicking over the perfection of product (Kelly, 1984). As Higgins (2012) explained, community music is "an approach to active music making and music knowing outside of formal teaching and learning situations" (p. 4). It centers music-making as a form of social practice that nurtures belonging, identity, and mutual transformation. Though typically associated with secular or civic contexts, community music's emphasis on participation and transformation closely aligns with many of the implicit goals of worship music—especially within evangelical traditions that prioritize shared singing and spiritual encounter.

Christopher Small's (1998) concept of musicking further supports this reorientation. For Small, music is not a product but a verb: to musick is to engage in any form of musical participation—performing, listening, rehearsing, facilitating. Every act of musicking contributes to the shaping of relationships among participants. In worship, this means that music is not merely accompaniment to theological content but a central means through which spiritual and communal identity is formed. When church music is framed this way, worship leaders become facilitators of community rather than curators of spiritual content.

For much of church history, church musicians were primarily clergy and often offered worship on behalf of the congregation, acting as a mediator in worship. While not

stated explicitly, modern worship leaders follow the same pattern in believing that excellence of performance equals effective worship. In other words, if the stage performance is excellent, what the congregation does is of little importance. This study proposes that church musicians should be understood as community music facilitators—not in opposition to theology, but as partners in the work of relational and spiritual formation. This conceptualization shifts the focus from performance to participation, judging effective worship by the congregation's engagement. This reframing situates church music within a broader educational and social context and opens valuable intersections with scholarship in music education and philosophy. Church musicians, like community musicians, are responsible not only for producing musical sounds but for cultivating spaces of inclusion, expression, and transformation.

Scholarship in music education has moved in similar directions, particularly in exploring the spiritual dimensions of musical experience. Boyce-Tillman (2009, 2013, 2016) has written extensively about music's potential to create liminal spaces—experiential thresholds where participants may encounter personal, communal, or even cosmic transformation. Van der Merwe and Habron (2015) offered a conceptual model of musical spirituality grounded in embodiment, relationality, temporality, and spatiality. These approaches shift the conversation about music from cognition or performance to being, encounter, and wholeness. Yet, despite their resonance with evangelical aims of spiritual transformation, such perspectives remain largely absent from church music discourse.

Benjamins (2023) represents one of the few scholars to engage contemporary

church music from an interdisciplinary perspective. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of practice and Noddings's ethics of care (Bourdieu, 1977; Noddings, 2002), Benjamins explores how worship musicians navigate institutional dynamics, musical behaviors, and relational identity. Her work introduces important concepts like liminality, formation, and musicking into evangelical discourse. However, Benjamins remains largely sociological in her focus, attending to how musicians navigate fields of power rather than engaging what music is as a relational, ontological act. Her approach focuses on the strategic self in worship leadership, whereas the present study emphasizes the relational self-formed through communal encounter and dialogical participation.

Thus, while Benjamins provides a valuable foundation, this dissertation diverges from her work by grounding the study of worship music in relational ontology—a framework that views being itself as constituted through relationship (Benjamin, 2015; Buber, 1937; Levinas, 1969). In doing so, this project seeks to build a conceptual bridge between evangelical theology, philosophical anthropology, and community music practice. Rather than asking only how worship leaders perform or adapt, this study asks: *What kind of being is formed through music in worship?* And how might worship music be intentionally structured to cultivate transformation through relationship?

Theoretical Framework

This study constructs a conceptual framework for church music grounded in relational ontology and enriched through community music and spirituality in music education. Together, these lenses converge around a shared commitment to transformation, participation, and relational formation in worship music contexts. These

three strands collectively inform the philosophical structure through which worship music is interpreted not merely as a liturgical act or doctrinal expression, but as a transformative, participatory, and relational phenomenon. Each framework contributes a unique perspective that challenges prevailing assumptions in evangelical worship literature and offers a broader foundation for understanding music's role in spiritual formation.

Relational ontology serves as the study's primary philosophical foundation. Drawing from Buber's (1937) distinction between *I–Thou* and *I–It* relationships, this perspective emphasizes that human identity is not autonomous or static, but formed in and through relational encounter. Buber's work frames worship music as a dialogical space where participants encounter one another—and the divine—not as objects to be used but as subjects to be known. Levinas (1969) deepened this framework by proposing that ethical responsibility emerges in the face of the Other; worship, in this view, becomes a moral response to the presence of others rather than a privatized spiritual moment. Benjamin (2015) and other contemporary thinkers have expanded this line of thought into ontological ethics, suggesting that being itself is constituted through relationship, and that any practice of formation must therefore be relational in nature.

The field of community music offers a complementary lens by emphasizing the participatory, inclusive, and socially embedded nature of music-making. Scholars such as Higgins (2012), Veblen (2007), and Bartleet (2023) have defined community music not by genre or setting but by its process-oriented, relational, and transformational qualities. Community music practitioners focus on *facilitation* rather than performance, viewing

their role as one of empowerment and connection. Small's (1998) concept of musicking aligns with this view by asserting that music is not a product but a verb—an active process of shaping and being shaped through musical engagement. When applied to church music, these ideas reposition the worship leader as a community music facilitator, responsible not only for theological accuracy or musical excellence, but for cultivating space for spiritual participation and relational connection.

Finally, this study draws on scholarship in spirituality and music education, particularly the work of Boyce-Tillman (2009, 2013, 2016, 2017, 2019), van der Merwe and Habron (2015), Palmer (2010), Yob (2010, 2011), Bogdan (2010, 2020), Jorgensen (2001, 2011), and others. These scholars, among many others, have argued that music is not merely aesthetic but deeply formative, offering liminal spaces where transcendence, embodiment, and community intersect. Their research emphasizes that spiritual experiences through music are not accidental byproducts but essential components of music's educational and ontological power. In reframing music education as a spiritually rich, relational act, these perspectives support the argument that worship music must be understood not only theologically, but pedagogically and spiritually.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide the scaffolding for a new philosophy of church music—one that moves beyond debates about style or tradition and toward a deeper inquiry into how worship music shapes being, belonging, and belief. Rather than treating theology and musical practice as separate spheres, this study integrates them, offering a framework that is both philosophically rigorous and practically applicable for worship leaders, church musicians, and educators.

Methodological Orientation

This study employs philosophical inquiry as its primary research methodology. Rather than conducting empirical investigation, this approach is concerned with conceptual analysis, critical reflection, and the construction of new meaning through interdisciplinary synthesis. Philosophical inquiry in music education often asks not what *is*, but what *should be*—examining the values, assumptions, and frameworks that shape musical practice and experience (Jorgensen, 2006; Phillips, 2008). As such, this study seeks to explore how worship music might be reconceptualized through relational ontology, community music, and spirituality in music education, forming a new philosophical framework for church music.

Philosophy, particularly when applied to lived experience, is inherently contextual. As Richerme (2020) and Slife (2004) argued, philosophical reflection does not emerge in abstraction but from within the personal, cultural, and institutional conditions of the researcher. This study is rooted in my over two decades of direct involvement with evangelical worship practices—as a church musician, worship leader, and academic program director. These experiences, while situated within conservative Baptist and evangelical contexts, provide both the motivation and perspective through which the research question emerges. Butler (2005) acknowledged the insider–outsider tension inherent in researching one's own tradition (p.48). Adopting the stance of an "observant participant" (Tedlock, 1991), I am not a passive observer but an active participant in the practices I study. While such insider knowledge can introduce bias, it also affords access to insights that may remain unfamiliar to an outsider.

The interdisciplinary nature of this inquiry reflects the multifaceted role music plays in worship: it is theological, relational, pedagogical, and cultural. To account for this complexity, the methodology synthesizes insights from philosophy, theology, sociology, and music education. Following models of philosophical research in music education (e.g., Jorgensen, 2006; Phelps *et al*, 2005), the study proceeds through four stages:

1. Interdisciplinary engagement with scholarship outside theology, especially in relational ontology, community music, and spiritual pedagogy;
2. Critical analysis of evangelical worship literature to identify prevailing theological and philosophical assumptions about worship music;
3. Conceptual construction of a new philosophical framework for church music that integrates relational and transformational dimensions;
4. Application of implications, offering guiding principles for church musicians, worship leaders, and music educators.

This approach does not seek to establish universal conclusions, but to construct a flexible, transferable model that can inform practice across diverse evangelical and worship contexts. It aims to clarify how worship music might be more intentionally structured to support spiritual transformation, communal participation, and identity formation through relational and musical encounter.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the field of philosophical research in music education by positioning church music as a worthy site of conceptual exploration—a context where music, spirituality, and formation converge in rich and complex ways. It

also responds to the practical needs of church leaders seeking thoughtful frameworks to shape worship environments that are not only doctrinally sound, but spiritually and communally transformative.

Summary

This chapter has established the foundation for a philosophical inquiry into the nature and purpose of church music within evangelical worship contexts. It began by identifying the dissonance between the transformative potential of worship music and the often formulaic or disconnected practices observed in local churches. The study responds to this tension by proposing a relational philosophy of church music, one that reframes worship music as a participatory, spiritually formative, and communally embedded act rather than a tool for theological messaging alone.

To support this aim, the chapter outlined the problem of disciplinary fragmentation, highlighted the absence of interdisciplinary engagement in evangelical worship literature, and introduced a conceptual framework grounded in relational ontology, community music, and spirituality in music education. The purpose and significance of the study were articulated through a series of research questions designed to explore how worship music might be reimagined to foster more inclusive, relational, and transformative encounters. Key terms were defined to ensure conceptual clarity, and the theoretical framework was introduced to provide a philosophical foundation for the study. Finally, the methodology was described, emphasizing the role of philosophical inquiry as a contextual, reflective, and value-driven mode of research that draws from theology, sociology, and music education.

The next chapter provides a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, beginning with the historical and theological development of worship music in Christian tradition. It then explores the philosophical and sociological dimensions of music-making, focusing on relational ontology, community music, and the role of spirituality in music education. This review will identify both the foundations on which this study builds and the gaps it seeks to address, situating the proposed framework within the broader academic conversation.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction: Situating the Inquiry

Worship music holds a central place in evangelical spirituality, shaping not only the soundscape of Sunday gatherings but also the theological imagination and spiritual formation of countless believers. Despite its prominence, worship music remains under-theorized in scholarly literature (Benjamins, 2023), particularly with respect to its formative, communal, and philosophical dimensions. Much of the evangelical discourse on worship music is driven by practical concerns or popular trends, lacking sustained engagement with the deeper ontological and pedagogical questions that underlie musical participation in congregational settings. Moreover, conceptualizing church music as community music reveals a wealth of potential for future scholarship to shape the practice of music educators in those contexts.

This chapter illuminates the rich potential of interdisciplinary dialogue to reframe church music as a relational and transformative practice. Drawing from theology, philosophy, community music, and music education, this chapter identifies and synthesizes relevant research that supports the study's central claim: that worship music, when viewed through the lens of relational ontology and community music, emerges not as mere aesthetic expression or doctrinal delivery, but as a spiritually formative act of encounter and participation.

The chapter begins by tracing the historical and theological foundations of

worship music, from biblical roots to contemporary evangelical practice. It then examines relational ontology across various disciplines as the study's primary philosophical framework to articulate a view of human being as inherently dialogical and relational. Next, the chapter explores the field of community music. This lens positions church music not only as artistic or liturgical performance but as social and spiritual practice. The chapter then reviews research on spirituality in music education, in which scholars have established that music is not merely cognitive or technical, but a profound space for spiritual growth, identity formation, and transformation.

Finally, the chapter considers the ontological and methodological foundations that support philosophical inquiry in church music and music education affirming the role of philosophical research as a contextual, interpretive, and praxis-oriented form of scholarship—well suited for exploring music's relational and spiritual potential within congregational life. Taken together, this chapter argues that worship music must be understood as a spiritually formative and ontologically significant act, shaped not only by theology and aesthetics but also by relationships, embodiment, and communal engagement. By critically reviewing and synthesizing literature across fields, this chapter establishes the foundation for the study's proposed philosophical framework and identifies the gaps this research intends to address.

Theological and Historical Foundations of Worship Music

What is worship from a theological standpoint? Different Christian authors have framed it in myriad ways. Peterson (2014) defined worship as "an engagement with God on the terms that he proposes and in the way that he alone makes possible" (p. 20). The

goal of transformation is at the heart of the evangelical worship services. For over two thousand years, the Christian church has gathered to participate in singing, communion, prayer, and instruction from the Bible. All these activities are carried out to lead people from where they are presently to a greater likeness to Jesus. The Apostle Paul contended that believers are to be "transformed by the renewing of their minds" or changing the way they think and view the world (Romans 12:1–2). This transformation, from a Christian perspective, begins with a personal relationship with Jesus as an act of surrender in faith to his purposes and plans in the world. Then begins a spiritual work of transformation in the life of believers, instilling in them the indicatives of a new nature, such as what the Bible calls the "fruit of the Holy Spirit" (Galatians 5:22–23).

Throughout history, music has been deeply intertwined with worship, not only as aesthetic expression but as spiritual and communal formation. From the psalms of ancient Israel to contemporary praise choruses, music has functioned as both proclamation and participation—mediating belief, reinforcing memory, and shaping spiritual identity. While ancient Greek philosophers supported the formative power of music, many Christian traditions viewed music as the "handmaid of theology," often functioning as the primary theological educator of the average congregant (Wainwright & Tucker, 2006). Despite its formative role, much of the literature in evangelical contexts treats worship music either as an afterthought to preaching or a battleground for stylistic preference (Crouch, 2022; Lim & Ruth, 2017). This section overviews the historical development of Christian worship practices to modern times to disclose the disconnect between the philosophical understanding of musical formation and the practice of music in church

settings.

Biblical and Early Church Music

Scriptural accounts present music as an integrated aspect of worship, justice, mourning, celebration, and divine encounter. From Miriam's song in Exodus 15 to David's psalms and temple music traditions, music was not supplemental but central to Israel's life with God. The New Testament continues this vision, as evidenced in Paul's exhortations to sing "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" as a form of mutual edification and theological instruction (Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19). Here, music is presented not only as vertical praise but horizontal formation—a framework largely retained in early Christian worship.

Early Christian thinkers like Augustine recognized music's formative and affective power, though with significant caution. Augustine's ambivalence is evident in his *Confessions*, where he acknowledges music's powerful allure while cautioning against aesthetic pleasure detached from theological truth. This tension has persisted through the centuries, particularly within Protestant contexts (Wainwright & Tucker, 2006).

Medieval Liturgical Developments

During the Gothic period (1100–1500 A.D.), liturgical music evolved significantly, influenced profoundly by papal and monastic reforms. The Cluniac reform movement, originating in the tenth century and continuing into the Gothic era, sought to renew monastic life through stricter adherence to the Rule of St. Benedict and the centrality of communal worship. This emphasis produced standardized liturgical customs

and elaborate musical practices that highlighted the role of prayer, chant, and communal participation in shaping spiritual formation. In parallel, the Investiture Controversy (1075–1122)—a conflict between the papacy and secular rulers over the appointment of church officials—reinforced a *sacramental* ecclesiology that distinguished sacred from secular authority. This clearer demarcation elevated liturgical music as a uniquely spiritual act, set apart from the political or utilitarian functions of secular culture (Thibodeau, 2005). Together, these developments laid the groundwork for the Gothic era's heightened musical sophistication—particularly the expansion of polyphony and the flourishing of cathedral-based choral traditions that reflected the theological and aesthetic ideals born from these reforms.

The Reformation and Diverging Musical Theologies

The Protestant Reformation produced divergent musical theologies that continue to influence church music today. Martin Luther embraced music as a divine gift, integral to congregational life and theological formation. He translated hymns into the vernacular, developed chorales for communal singing, and believing that next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world (Eskew & McElrath, 1995; Reynolds, et al, 2010). For Luther, music was not an accessory to preaching but a form of proclamation in its own right.

Conversely, John Calvin approached worship music with restraint, concerned about emotional excess and doctrinal purity. Calvin restricted congregational music to unaccompanied, textually controlled metrical psalmody (Mitchell, 2005). This cautious approach highlighted ongoing tensions between emotional expression, doctrinal fidelity,

artistic practice, and instructional intent—tensions that continue to shape Protestant worship music (MacDiarmid, 2018).

Evangelical Movements and Musical Innovation

Evangelical movements from the 18th through the 20th centuries, particularly within Anglo-American Protestantism, significantly reshaped worship music. Revivalists such as John Wesley and Charles Finney harnessed music's affective power to catalyze personal conversion and communal renewal. The 19th-century gospel song movement further popularized emotionally expressive and accessible worship music, laying foundations for what would become characteristic of much contemporary evangelical practice (Eskew & McElrath, 1995). The term "evangelical" in this study primarily refers to protestant evangelical churches whose traditions emerged from these revivalist practices (Baptist, for example). Parallel developments within other evangelical contexts carried their own rich musical theologies that merit further study.

The rise of contemporary worship music (CWM) in the late 20th century, influenced significantly by movements like Vineyard, Hillsong, and Passion Conferences, marked a cultural and theological shift. CWM became a liturgical innovation and a carrier of evangelical identity, unifying transdenominational communities through shared musical repertoire (Ingalls, 2018; Lim & Ruth, 2017). However, this shift also introduced consumerist and performance-driven ethos into worship, raising concerns about commercialization and authenticity (Myrick, 2021; Rosenholtz, 2000).

Pentecostalism and charismatic movements introduced distinctive emphases, notably stressing personal, experiential encounters through music. Rooted in Wesleyan

Holiness traditions, Pentecostal worship emphasized participatory, expressive musical practices, including congregational singing, musical spontaneity, and the integration of spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues (Work, 2005). These practices profoundly impacted global worship trends, promoting greater spontaneity and emotional engagement across evangelical contexts.

Recent decades have witnessed significant ecumenical convergence in worship practices, with liturgical renewal efforts fostering cross-denominational dialogue about worship music's role. This convergence has led to greater appreciation and integration of diverse musical traditions and styles within worship, highlighting music's universal role in community building and spiritual formation (Wainwright & Tucker, 2006).

Music is not the only part of worship that can be considered formative or one in which the leader functions as a facilitator of embodied practice. Tillis (2019) argued against a product-centric model of preaching and the entertainment-driven standards often associated with sermon preparation. Drawing on the practice of *lectio divina*, he reframed sermon preparation as a spiritual discipline that forms the preacher through slow, attentive, and embodied engagement with Scripture. In this model, the preacher is not merely a content producer but a participant in divine encounter, formed in the presence of God before ever proclaiming the message. This resonates with the vision of church music leadership developed in this study, where the music facilitator is not a performer but a co-participant in spiritual encounter, formed by relational and ritual practices within the community. Both models resist instrumentalization and highlight the formative power of preparation as a ritual practice rooted in spiritual and relational

integrity.

Sociologist Nancy Ammerman (2011) offered a compelling interdisciplinary perspective on how congregations function as local, social, and religious institutions. She observes that music is a nearly universal component of worship across traditions, describing how congregational singing not only enacts spiritual meaning but fosters social cohesion and identity. Ammerman's work affirms that even in highly individualized or decentralized religious movements like evangelical Protestantism, shared musical practices remain central to communal life. As she notes, "gathering in a religious congregation is widely expected to include music," and this expectation reflects a deeper reality: music operates as a relational and cultural anchor, shaping the way congregations experience the sacred and one another. Her insights support the central claim of this dissertation—that worship music functions not only theologically but also socially and ontologically, forming participants through communal patterns of musical engagement.

Tensions and Limitations in Evangelical Worship Literature

Evangelical worship literature often reflects these historical tensions, prioritizing theological alignment while neglecting the pedagogical, relational, or ontological dimensions of musical practice. While many texts focus on biblical models of worship or the proper motivations for praise, they rarely engage with questions of how music shapes being, identity, or community. This has resulted in literature that is theologically earnest but philosophically thin, dominated by pastoral voices or popular writers and under-engaged with academic discourse.

Moreover, while the field of worship theology has produced valuable work (Saliers & Saliers, 2017; Wainwright, 2006), much of it remains disconnected from contemporary musical experience in evangelical churches. Theologies of worship often focus on biblical interpretation, worship practices, or stylistic matters, without grappling with how music as *relational practice* functions in worship contexts. This leaves church musicians and worship leaders without a robust framework for understanding their role beyond sound production or theological fidelity.

Popular Literature in Fundamentalist Evangelical Churches

In addition to the more widely circulated popular literature in contemporary evangelical worship culture, there exists a parallel canon of worship texts that holds significant authority within conservative and fundamentalist church circles. These authors have exerted enormous influence over the theological and aesthetic framing of worship in evangelical Bible colleges, seminaries, and churches aligned with denominationally unaffiliated evangelical traditions. Their works are often presented as theological correctives to perceived compromises in contemporary worship and culture, emphasizing reverence, order, doctrinal purity, and musical conservatism, thereby framing worship aesthetics as moral and theological imperatives. While they speak with conviction and clarity to their intended audience, these texts tend to operate outside the domain of interdisciplinary scholarship, rarely engaging with contemporary research in philosophy, music education, sociology, or theology beyond their own tradition.

A central feature of this popular literature is the implicit elevation of Western classical music as the standard of excellence for worship. Garlock and Woetzel (1998),

Jones (2006), and Lucarini (2002) framed classical music as more reverent, orderly, and theologically sound than contemporary or culturally diverse styles. Their teachings and writings primarily sought to discourage evangelical churches from adopting modern musical practices, particularly those associated with rock and roll. They portrayed these styles as morally corrupting and spiritually dangerous, rendering them inappropriate for use in the church. In contrast, these authors proposed theoretical frameworks for identifying "biblical" Christian music, frameworks largely rooted in Western classical traditions.

While the arguments of these authors may appear compelling on the surface, they fail many tests of logic and critical inquiry. Their aesthetic preferences are seldom acknowledged as culturally conditioned; rather, they are presented as morally and spiritually superior to modern musical styles, especially those linked to popular culture. Scholarly research, when cited, is often secondary and selectively applied to reinforce pre-existing theological interpretations. As a result, these works—and the many others they inspired—reflect not interdisciplinary engagement but isolated interpretations of biblical and aesthetic preference. Furthermore, these authors frequently employ fear-based rhetoric to persuade their audiences. The recurring use of the "slippery-slope" argument serves as a primary example, warning readers that embracing certain musical expressions might inevitably lead to moral or spiritual decline.

Bakss (2015) critiqued this cultural phenomenon specifically within the Independent Baptist tradition. He asserted that Garlock maintained an unchallenged influence on the philosophy and practice of many churches in North America and around

the world. Garlock's entire line of thinking is skewed by his strong believe that rock music is the product of spiritual and societal decline (Garlock, 2018). Bakss' logical approach and use of contemporary research demonstrated that what evangelicals called "philosophy" was nothing more than the establishment of aesthetic and theological preferences intended to control the activities of church musicians across a group of otherwise autonomous churches.

Contemporary worship artists such as Kauflin (2015), Crider (2021), Anderson (2022), and Boswell (2013) displaced the focus from aesthetic and stylistic preferences and refocused evangelical audiences on the primary theological concerns surrounding worship. Their works, coupled with the widely influential work of Keith and Kristen Getty through the "Sing Conference," have reignited joy and passion in evangelical worship while retaining critical theological depth in their hymnody. Musical style became a matter of taste and preference situated at the individual church level, rather than being of biblical or moral importance.

Reformed theologians critique modern contemporary worship for its emotional fluff and lack of theological depth. Aniol (2009) is an outspoken critic of practices of Contemporary Worship Music (CWM). Lim and Ruth (2017) explored the history of CWM, albeit not from a critical position. Nonetheless, their findings became fuel for a recent conference lecture of Aniol's in which he asserted that contemporary worship should be replaced by "covenantal worship." Covenantal worship does not emphasize an encounter with the presence of God, as contemporary worship asserts, but rather is an obedient act of covenant renewal (Aniol, 2025).

Despite all this, the body of popular literature, modern blogs, and seminary lectures have become normative in worship training institutions, functioning as de facto curricula that shape ministerial practice more directly than scholarly and interdisciplinary literature. The pervasiveness of these writings, and their under-examined role in shaping both theology and pedagogy, makes them an essential component of this literature review. If including research from community music and music education will influence the practices of these churches, it will require specific understanding of the concerns and conceptualizations that formed it. Having grown up and worked in this context as a professor of worship studies, I bring adequate contextual understanding to this study. Moreover, the supporting literature of Benjamins (2023) and Ingalls (2018) were also written with the same understanding.

The idea that popular literature carries more weight in these contexts aligns with what Bourdieu (1984) described as the exercise of cultural capital—using particular artistic standards to reinforce institutional authority and social boundaries. As Ingalls (2018), Lim and Ruth (2017), and Benjamins (2023) observed, this ideological stance has significant implications for worship training: it marginalizes community-based or participatory models of music-making and reinforces a performance-oriented, Eurocentric vision of spiritual excellence. These assumptions remain largely unchallenged within the fundamentalist canon, shaping the worship experiences and theological imaginations of countless congregations.

Andy Crouch (2008) offered one of the most influential popular-level frameworks for understanding evangelical engagement with culture through his discussion of

"gestures and postures." Crouch identifies four dominant responses Christians have taken toward culture—condemning, critiquing, copying, and consuming—each of which began as an appropriate gesture toward a specific cultural good but hardened over time into fixed postures. A gesture, Crouch explains, is a temporary, intentional response suited to a particular situation; a posture, by contrast, is an unconscious and default mode of engagement. These postures have shaped how evangelicals have approached not only politics and media but also the arts and church music.

Crouch's historical tracing—from fundamentalist condemnation and neo-evangelical critique to the consumerism and mimicry of Contemporary Christian Music—reveals a pattern of reactive, often uncreative participation in culture. His most significant contribution, however, lies in calling the church beyond these stances toward a posture of cultural cultivation and creation. Drawing from the Genesis account, he contends that humanity is called to be both gardeners and artists—those who tend what is good in culture and those who create anew. This emphasis on creative responsibility and cultural stewardship resonates deeply with this study's goal: to reframe church music not merely as a vehicle for doctrinal messaging or as an aesthetic product, but as a site of relational and spiritual formation rooted in culture-making.

Ritual Theory and Contemporary Practices

Ritual theory provides a valuable lens for interpreting the role of music in worship, especially in terms of participation, identity, and meaning-making. Émile Durkheim (1995), often regarded as the father of modern ritual theory, argued that rituals serve as the binding agents of social life, reinforcing collective identity through shared

symbols and sacred boundaries. Rituals operate by distinguishing the sacred from the profane, constructing meaning through repetition, bodily action, and communal affirmation. They generate what Durkheim termed "collective effervescence"—a heightened emotional energy that emerges when individuals unite around a common sacred purpose. This emotional charge sustains the moral and social order of a community.

Building on Durkheim's foundation, Goffman (1967) examined how individuals manage identity and social interaction through ritualized behaviors in everyday life. His concept of "face-work" emphasized the micro-level negotiations that occur within ritual contexts, where participants actively shape their roles and protect the integrity of communal performance. Collins (2004) later synthesized Durkheim and Goffman into his theory of interaction ritual chains (IRCs), suggesting that rituals succeed when they generate four ingredients: bodily co-presence, mutual focus of attention, shared mood, and symbolic resonance. When these align, rituals produce emotional energy, reinforce group solidarity, and motivate future participation. In the context of church music, these theories suggest that music is not merely aesthetic or expressive—it is ritual action that forms identity, cultivates belonging, and creates the conditions for spiritual encounter.

Driver's (1998) contribution to ritual theory is rooted in the conviction that modern ritual boredom stems not only from stagnant forms but also from a deep misunderstanding of ritual's purpose and power. Defining ritual as "an efficacious performance that invokes the presence and action of powers which, without the ritual, would not be present or active at that time and place" (p. 97), Driver positioned ritual as a

performative and transformative act rather than mere symbolic repetition. Drawing from anthropologists such as Van Gennep and Turner, he emphasized the importance of liminality and communitas in rituals, suggesting that the suppression of these elements has led to diminished transformative potential in contemporary worship. Moreover, Driver proposed a provocative typology of priestly versus shamanic ritual, arguing that early Christian worship bore more shamanic qualities—dynamic, improvisational, and oriented toward liberation—than the institutionalized priestly forms dominant today. His call to recover the liberating power of ritual challenges ecclesial traditions to reimagine worship as a participatory, Spirit-led praxis that actualizes divine presence and social transformation in the present moment. This perspective expands ritual theory beyond liturgical formalism, advocating for rites that engage embodiment, creativity, and communal freedom.

Recent empirical research underscores the gap between theological ideals and lived experiences of musical participation in worship. Williams (2021), in a qualitative study of Catholic school liturgies shaped by Vatican II's call for "full and active participation," observed that students largely interpreted participation in behavioral terms—such as singing, standing, or being respectful—while lacking theological vocabulary or ritual literacy. Music was consistently seen as a facilitator of participation, especially when it was familiar or emotionally resonant, but its role was often reduced to enhancing engagement rather than fostering spiritual or liturgical depth. A recurring tension emerged between performance and prayer, particularly when student choirs unintentionally overshadowed congregational inclusion. These findings suggest that

worship participation must be understood not only as outward behavior but as a relational and ritual act involving both internal attentiveness and external expression.

Williams's work reinforced Durkheim's (1995) view of ritual as a collective activity that constructs identity through shared symbols and emotional resonance. Similarly, Collins's (2004) IRC framework clarified how rituals succeed through emotional energy and mutual focus, offering language for describing what makes musical participation feel spiritually meaningful. These sociological insights correspond with theological perspectives such as Page's (2010) claim that liturgical music fosters "authentic togetherness" by orienting participants toward a shared sacred encounter. The internal dimensions of participation—attention, contemplation, and symbolic awareness—remain as vital as external actions. Thus, Williams's findings support this study's core claim: that worship music, if it is to be formative and transformative, must be intentionally structured as a relational, ontological, and ritualized practice—not merely a vehicle for doctrinal content or audience engagement

Philosophical Grounding: Relational Ontology

At the heart of this study lies a philosophical conviction: that worship music is not merely expressive or instructional, but ontological. It participates in the formation of human being. This claim rests on the foundation of relational ontology, which asserts that identity and meaning are not derived from individual essence or isolated substance, but from relationship. In contrast to substance metaphysics—what Levinas (1969) described as "ontology as totality"—relational ontology emphasizes being-in-relation as the constitutive mode of existence (Benjamin, 2015). This foundational perspective reorients

how we think about worship music: not as a theological mechanism or emotional stimulant, but as a relational act of transformation and divine encounter.

The bridge between theological and philosophical discourse is further complicated by the disagreement regarding conceptual dualism and the notion of spirituality. This will be explored more thoroughly in the section dedicated to spirituality. In quantum mechanics, Schrödinger (1936) coined the term "entanglement" to refer to the phenomenon where particles become linked and the state of one cannot be fully described without reference to the other, even across vast distances. From the theological lens, Polkinghorne (2010) and several authors utilized this concept to discuss a trinitarian conceptualization of what they call an "entangled world," arguing for a relational theology. They argue that spiritual and religious life is one of multiple entanglements, such as the trinity, the incarnation, sacraments, and personhood. An ontology of relation is necessary to understand the spiritual realm and all its entanglements in life, theology, and trinitarian worship.

Buber and the I–Thou Encounter

Buber (1922) pioneered the development of a relational ontology in his monumental work *I and Thou.* He distinguished between two fundamental attitudes towards existence using what he called the basic words *I-It* and *I-Thou.* In the first attitude, the person views his relationship with the world as something experienced or consumed. Conversely, the second attitude recognizes existence as relationship, beginning and ending in human meeting. Whale (2009) summarized the idea succinctly.

> In accordance with the two attitudes of existence – I-It and I-Thou – Buber argues that a person is never merely a singular I. Her I, he observes, is always constituted in relationship to her Thou or reduced in relationship to her It. As I-Thou a person is self-conscious of herself as her relationship to herself and, in and as relation, she attends to and becomes herself. As I-It a person denies that she is her relationship to herself and identifies herself, rather, with the single I who "experiences" (p. 21) herself and life as *It* (Whale, 2009, p. 18)

A person may deny this relationship, supposing an existence only as *I*, leading to a solipsist view that the self is all that can be known to exist. Ironically, in doing so the person may become completely self-absorbed or otherwise completely lose any sense of individual identity because identity is just as much about who I am as it is about who I am in relation to other identities. Moreover, the individual no longer is accountable to any supreme ethic of love or responsibility for neighbor, for the neighbor exists only as something to be experienced if the neighbor exists at all. Applied to worship music, this suggests that musical participation can cultivate *I–Thou* encounters—not only horizontally among congregants, but vertically in communion with God. Rather than facilitating a performance for spiritual consumption, worship music, viewed through Buber's lens, becomes a space of mutual presence and sacred recognition.

Buber (1970) concluded the first part of his work with this exhortation, "…in all seriousness of truth, listen: without *It* a human being cannot live. But whoever lives only with *It* is not human" (Buber, 1970, p. 86). In that statement, this clearly articulated the belief that to be human is more than a biological or material reality. He supported this idea not only with examples of human interdependence, but also with primal human experiences. Why is a child scared of the dark? What causes human children to create

extraordinary explanations for their every-day experiences so imaginatively? Scientific method and materialism may have robbed our sense of wonder by the progressive increase of what Buber called the *It-world*. We now come full circle to find that our understanding of human reality must consider deeply human spirituality and our relationship to other spiritual beings.

As stated previously, Buber emphasized in his basic words two *attitudes* of existence. He thought that what matters is not the *fact* that we perceive the Other, but rather *how* we perceive the Other that matters. In the encounter, the Other may be perceived as an *It* or as a *You*; as an entity that can be assumed into or consumed by my transcendental ego (to borrow Heidegger's term) or as an entity separate from and equally transcendent as another *I*. This distinction, which also becomes the basis for the supreme ethic of love, is further developed by the work of the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.

Emmanuel Levinas: Totality and Infinity

Levinas was a young adult at the time Buber published his first iteration of *I and Thou*. Levinas would spend his intellectual career developing (and in many instances revising or refuting) the ideas of his teachers, the German philosophers Edmond Husserl and Martin Heidegger. His early writings can cause the reader to digress with his growing disenchantment with Husserl's phenomenology, an attempt to "give an absolutely secure philosophical foundation to the natural sciences" asking what "science does not normally question: the role of the perceiving consciousness in the constitution of the perceived world" (Davis, 1996, p. 10). His issue with phenomenology was less about how it dealt

with human meeting and more about its unquestioned ontological roots in scientific objectivity. Heidegger, more than Husserl, gave phenomenology an ontological turn (Davis, 1996, p. 14).

The issue at hand, however, is the relationship between what Levinas called the Same (self) and the Other. Levinas sought to establish a relationship that does not diminish the separateness of either. This was his obsession and the basis for the rest of his intellectual career: philosophy must allow that the Same and the Other remain essentially separate from each other, never to be assumed into or merely experienced by the Self. The failure of phenomenology and Western philosophy lies precisely in its failure to demonstrate an encounter with the Other that does not eventually transmogrify into the Self. It fails to treat the Other as Other.

> Western philosophy coincides with the unveiling of the other in which the Other, by manifesting itself as a being, loses its alterity. Philosophy is afflicted, from its childhood, with an insurmountable allergy: a horror of the Other which remains Other. It is for this reason that philosophy is essentially the philosophy of Being; the comprehension of Being is its final word and the fundamental structure of man (Davis, 1996, pp. 32–33).

Levinas' ideas would not be fully developed until his monumental work *Totality and Infinity*, published in 1961. His treatment of topics like freedom, responsibility, and the ethical consequences of the postmodern situation caused Levinas to be viewed by many as one of the greatest ethical philosophers of the twentieth century, even though he made no certain argument for a specific ethic or code of ethics. Nonetheless, Levinas' concept of the separateness and independence of multiple "others" existing and experiencing the world distinctly, but somehow in relation, laid the foundation for a

renewed interest in human spirituality in the twenty-first century.

Levinas added an additional layer, emphasizing that the Other is not merely a presence to be received, but a call to responsibility. Levinas insisted that we are summoned by the face of the Other—drawn into ethical relation by our vulnerability to their presence. When applied to worship music, this frames participation not as spiritual consumption, but as ethical engagement. Singing becomes a moral act: to see, hear, and respond to the needs of others within the musical moment. A Levinasian reading also resists worship environments where performance replaces participation. Worship, like ethics, cannot be observed—it must be entered into. Music becomes the space where response is demanded, and responsibility is formed.

These two big ideas—the separateness of self and other and the attitudes we take towards the other—form the foundation of a relational philosophy of church music to be developed in this study. Church musicians and music leaders as well as congregants and participants must be aware of the varied relationships at play during worship services and other musicking contexts, including the horizontal relationships with others and the vertical relationship with the supreme and transcendent Other whose presence is assumed in contexts of worship.

Benjamin: Unwilled Nature of Worship

Andrew Benjamin (2015) offered a philosophical articulation of relationality as ontologically prior to individual subjectivity—a concept he terms *anoriginal relationality*. While much of the music education literature emphasizes social interaction and collaboration as desirable outcomes, Benjamin's work pushed further, asserting that

relation is not the result of choice but the very condition of being. This deeper metaphysical grounding invites a theological and pedagogical reorientation: if worship, music-making, and community are not constructed from discrete actors but unfold from within already-present webs of relation, then our understanding of formation, leadership, and participation may need to shift accordingly.

Benjamin's concept of *anoriginal relationality* disrupted any lingering assumptions that community, worship, or even subjectivity itself begins with autonomous individuals who subsequently choose to connect. Rather, he suggested that relation precedes being: "particulars are only ever the after-effect of relations" (Benjamin, 2015, p. 219). This shift can reposition worship not as the product of individual will or rational belief, but as an emergent expression of ontological interconnection—a communal enactment grounded in what already exists between bodies, voices, traditions, and spaces. For worship leaders and music educators, this means that spiritual formation cannot be reduced to strategies of persuasion or instruction. Instead, it involves *attuning* to the relational fabric already present and facilitating environments where that fabric may be felt, deepened, and made audible.

This ontological account also reshapes our understanding of agency. Just as Benjamin argues that love is not the result of an act of will but rather "unwilled" and therefore integral to being human (Benjamin, 2015, p. 187), so too worship must be approached as something into which one is drawn, rather than something one orchestrates. The worshipper, like the lover, "finds themselves" in a state of responsive presence. Music becomes a mode of that finding—a site where the aesthetic, moral, and

spiritual are entangled. From this view, musical worship is not simply a tool for doctrinal formation but a modality through which the subject is continually re-formed in relation to others, to the sacred, and to the community of practice.

Cutrofello (2017) deepened the contemporary resonance of Benjamin's framework by situating *anoriginal relationality* within ongoing debates in metaphysics, aesthetics, and political theory. He emphasized that Benjamin's refusal to ground being in singular entities exposes the dialectical illusions that have long shaped both Platonic and empiricist traditions. By affirming relationality as not just antecedent but dynamically open-ended, Cutrofello positioned Benjamin's ontology as an ethical alternative to both determinism and abstract universalism. Particularly relevant to worship and music is Cutrofello's reading of Benjamin's treatment of affect: that the structure of subjectivity is aesthetic only *because* it is first affective and relational. This affirms the central claim of this study—that worship is not a constructed event imposed on individuals, but a responsive, ethical encounter unfolding from within relations that already exist. Benjamin's relational ontology, as interpreted by Cutrofello, thus offers a robust philosophical grounding for viewing worship leadership not as a technical act of design but as a dynamic participation in the fragile, formative reality of being-with-others.

Whale: Music as the Between

Whale (2009) offered one of the most direct philosophical integrations of Buber's relational ontology into music, developing the notion that music itself can inhabit the space of "the between"—the liminal, dialogical realm where genuine encounter takes place. Whale argued that music should not be understood as an aesthetic object or

expressive tool but as a relational presence—a Thou rather than an It. Drawing from Buber's distinction between *I–It* and *I–Thou* relations, Whale contended that musical meaning arises when both the participant and the music attend to one another with mutual presence. In this framework, music does not merely *express* meaning but participates in the *creation* of meaning through encounter.

This perspective challenges objectivist or formalist readings of music that treat it as a utilitarian product to be analyzed, performed, or consumed. Instead, music becomes a dialogical partner, capable of shaping identity and forming relational reality. For Whale, musical experience is fundamentally ontological: it is "in the between" that human subjectivity is reconstituted, not through analysis but through presence, openness, and shared becoming. This insight is especially potent in the context of worship, where music is not just a vessel for theological truth but a *relational event*—a site of becoming in which the identity of the worshiper is formed through their attunement to the presence of God, others, and the music itself.

By extending Buber's ontology into the realm of music, Whale offered a conceptual bridge between theology, aesthetics, and spiritual formation. Worship music, when viewed through Whale's lens, becomes more than a soundscape for devotion; it becomes a spiritual encounter that mediates presence and invites transformation. Moreover, it invites participants into a responsible creativity together. Music is not an object or container of meaning but a *meeting*, a "between" in which music and participant co-create significance. This conception situates musical knowing as inherently dialogical. This aligns deeply with the central argument of this study: that worship music is not

simply expressive or doctrinal but ontological—a formative meeting with the sacred "between" participants and musical sound.

Brown and Hopps: Music as Divine Extravagance

Brown and Hopps (2018) added theological richness to this conversation by describing music as an art form capable of mediating revelation itself. They argued that music creates the space and modes of listening that engender those signals of transcendence which may lead to divine encounter. These signals—of order, humor, hope, and even damnation—can evoke not only emotional or aesthetic response, but movement toward God. This transcendent experience with music will be explored more fully in the section on spirituality in music.

Brown and Hopps (2018) further contended that these musical experiences may "establish or confirm in the subject's mind specific qualities of the divine," leading to awe, reverence, peace, and even theological affirmation. In this sense, music functions not merely as human-to-human encounter but as divine self-disclosure—a mode by which God initiates encounter through musical beauty, order, and play. This view aligns with a theological anthropology that sees human beings not only as relational but as receptive—capable of knowing God through mediated musical presence. Taken together, Buber, Whale, and Brown and Hopps have suggested that worship music is both a relational and revelatory act—not only an *I–Thou* between humans and music, but a space in which the divine may encounter the worshiper through music.

Finally, Brown and Hopps (2018) provided a mode of listening that remains open to divine communication beyond the boundaries of sacred text. While such an approach

often provoked resistance from more fundamentalist groups who viewed it as a challenge to the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, it nonetheless affirmed the personhood of the divine and the relational foundation of religious experience. Their work supported the notion that music can serve as a medium through which individuals encounter transcendence, particularly for those attuned to its presence. As Brown and Hopps suggested, divine presence may be disclosed in sound, space, and sensory experience. This aligns with a relational ontology in which the transcendent Other initiates relationship not only through revelation but through encounter.

Bonhoeffer: Sanctorum Communio

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's early theological work presents a robust vision of personhood and ecclesial life grounded in relational ontology. Bonhoeffer (1998) defines personhood not as an autonomous essence but as "responsible freedom" oriented toward the other. He contends that a person exists only in relation and never in isolation, emphasizing that "freedom is not from others but for others" (p. 304). This inherently ethical framing positions personal identity as something constituted in encounter, underscoring the interdependence of human beings within community.

This relational anthropology was developed in *Sanctorum Communio* (1998), where Bonhoeffer described the church as the empirical manifestation of Christ existing in community. Drawing from both sociological and theological categories, he presents the church as a social organism formed through ethical, spiritual, and interpersonal relationships. Rather than viewing the church as a metaphysical or purely institutional reality, Bonhoeffer characterizes it as a relational structure in which Christ becomes

present in and through the fellowship of believers. The church is the form that Christ takes in the world, and this form is a communal one.

Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology rests on the conviction that divine revelation occurs within social encounter. Revelation is not an abstract idea or individual experience but an event that unfolds in relationship—particularly within the gathered body of Christ. Accordingly, the church becomes not only the recipient of revelation but its medium, embodying the presence of Christ in concrete, lived community. He integrates theological claims with sociological analysis, identifying love and responsibility as foundational dynamics of communal life. The relational structure of the church, in this view, is not a pragmatic arrangement but a theological reality. Bonhoeffer affirms a vision of human and ecclesial life that is irreducibly social. His thought resists dualisms that separate the spiritual from the social or the individual from the communal, offering instead a holistic account of personhood and the church as constituted by relationship and ethical responsibility.

Yannaras: Relational Freedom

Yannaras (2011) added theological specificity by grounding relational ontology in Trinitarian communion. Personhood, he argued, is not individuality but ecclesial relation—freedom found in sacrificial love for others. His emphasis on kenotic self-offering parallels the participatory humility required in community musicking. The word *kenosis* comes from Philippians 2 where Paul describes Jesus' self-emptying to serve humanity. Worship music, then, is not a vehicle of self-expression or doctrinal dissemination, but an invitation to kenotic relation with God and with others.

In theology and education, the work of Yannaras (1984, 2011) highlighted how Christian ethics emerge from the nature of God as relational. Similarly, Noddings's (1984) ethic of care—central to Benjamins' (2023) framework—further illustrated how educational praxis depends on authentic relation rather than instructional transaction. These insights bolster the present study's argument that worship music is not an event to consume or a ritual to memorize, but an ontological event of relational formation.

Broader Applications of Relational Ontology

Relational ontology, while central to this study's philosophical foundation, is not a concept confined to theology or abstract metaphysics. In fact, relational thinking has been considered across a range of academic disciplines, each highlighting the insufficiency of atomistic or abstractionist approaches to understanding human identity, action, and formation. Several recent studies have explored relational ontology in musicology (Born, 2010), theology (Fratheim, 2010), business communication (Cooren, 2018), and phenomenology (Bannon, 2011). These applications reinforce the flexibility and robustness of relational ontology as a framework through which worship music can be interpreted not merely theologically, but ontologically, socially, and pedagogically.

In music education and spirituality, scholars have drawn upon relational ontology to frame spiritual music as a site of connection—not just between individuals and God, but also among participants themselves, and even with broader transcendent realities. Quindag (2017) offered a compelling framework that views spiritual music as inherently relational, arguing that it enables three levels of connection: interpersonal, communal, and transcendent. This triadic structure parallels theological notions of encounter and

supports the notion of *musicking* as an act of formation, not performance. Boyce-Tillman (2009) and van der Merwe and Habron (2015) both offered different conceptualizations of spirituality in musical experience. The concept of spirituality and relevant sources are explored later in this chapter.

Richerme (2020) asserted at the outset of her dissertation that *philosophy is context*, arguing that our understandings and philosophies must never be abstracted from the practices that form them. In psychology, Slife (2004) similarly critiqued the dominance of abstractionism, in which practices are treated as applications of universal theories rather than as contextually situated, relational phenomena. He proposed that "practices do not truly 'exist' ontologically except in relation to their situations and cultural contexts," suggesting a strong form of relational ontology that privileges embeddedness and encounter over disembodied universals.

In sociology and phenomenology, thinkers such as Bannon (2011) and Cooren (2018) applied relational concepts to communication and organizational life, arguing that identity and meaning are continually negotiated through interaction. These views parallel community music frameworks, which emphasize participatory formation and relational belonging over musical excellence or hierarchical delivery. Taken together, these interdisciplinary perspectives affirm that relational ontology is not an abstract idealism but a practical, tested way of rethinking being, knowing, and doing. By drawing from these fields, this study does not merely import philosophy into worship music, but rather demonstrates that worship music belongs among these relational spaces—as a site of becoming, belonging, and shared encounter.

From Theory to Implication: Worship as Ontological Meeting

Together, these thinkers offer a rich and layered account of relational being. The relational ontology of Buber (1937) and Whale (2009) frame musical worship as a dialogical meeting. The divine extravagance of Brown and Hopps (2018) elevated worship further as a site of revelation. Levinas (1969) reminded us that to sing is to be ethically bound to those with whom we sing. Yannaras (2011) tied worship to divine freedom and ecclesial love. This study builds on these perspectives to propose that worship music is not a product to evaluate or a tool for doctrinal education. Rather, it is an ontological event of mutual becoming, shaped by the presence of others, the vulnerability of the moment, and the extravagance of God's self-disclosure through music.

Benjamins (2023) touched on some of these ideas, particularly through her use of *musicking* and *formation*. Her work remained sociologically grounded, focusing on how worship leaders manage roles and expectations in the "field." While valuable, her framework stopped short of ontological critique or philosophical construction. This dissertation builds on her insight while extending it into a deeper metaphysical conversation—one concerned not just with how worship leaders perform, but with how worship music shapes who we are becoming through encounter, participation, and shared responsibility.

Musicking and Community Music as Relational Praxis

If relational ontology offers a philosophical foundation for reimagining worship music as a transformative and dialogical act, the field of community music provides a

practical model through which that vision is enacted. In contrast to performance-oriented or institutionally structured music paradigms, community music emphasizes inclusion, participation, and transformation over product, perfection, or prestige (Higgins, 2012; Veblen, 2008). As such, it offers a powerful parallel to the vision of worship music proposed in this study: music as relational praxis, not passive consumption.

Small's (1998) concept of *musicking* provided the philosophical vocabulary that undergirds community music. For Small, music is not a thing but a doing—any act of participation in a musical event, whether singing, listening, organizing, rehearsing, or facilitating. *Musicking*, he argued, is a ritual enactment of relationships: between people, between individuals and their communities, between the known and the unknown, and—implicitly—between self and the transcendent. "The act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies" (Small, 1998, p. 13). This reconceptualization challenged traditional frameworks that view music as an object to be evaluated or consumed. Instead, musicking aligns closely with relational ontology: it understands the musical act as co-creative, forming identity, shaping belonging, and enacting presence.

Regelski (1975) offered a compelling philosophical perspective on music education that resonates strongly with the goals of community music and relational worship. He framed effective teaching as a dialectical process, wherein educators continually navigate the tension between lofty ideals and practical constraints. Rather than compromising, the teacher engages in a dynamic synthesis that honors both the values that animate the discipline and the contextual realities of students and schools.

This approach aligns with the community music ethos, which also resists rigid, top-down methods in favor of responsive, participant-centered engagement. Regelski's concept of "permissipline"—a blend of teacher guidance and student autonomy—further supports the notion that transformative music-making is forged in the tension between structure and freedom, a notion that undergirds the practices of community music facilitators and church music leaders alike.

Community Music: Definitions and Priorities

Community music is notoriously difficult to define because it resists fixed models or institutional boundaries. As Bartleet (2023) and Veblen (2008) noted, community music manifests in diverse contexts—from intergenerational choirs and youth workshops to street bands, refugee choirs, and therapeutic environments. Yet, Higgins (2012) suggested that scholars generally agree on several key characteristics of community music:

- **Open participation**: Community music values accessibility over selectivity. There are no auditions or barriers to entry. All are welcome to contribute regardless of musical training, technical ability, or background. This inclusive posture reflects a belief that musical participation is a human right and a communal good, not a privilege reserved for the trained or elite.
- **Collaborative music-making**: Rather than privileging a single composer, conductor, or performer, community music emphasizes collective creation. Musical ideas may be generated through group improvisation, shared songwriting, or dialogical arrangement processes. Collaboration is both musical and relational,

fostering a sense of co-ownership and belonging.

- **Local responsiveness**: Community music arises from and responds to the specific needs, cultures, and concerns of the communities it serves. It is context-sensitive, often incorporating local musical traditions, languages, and social issues. This makes each project unique and rooted in place, resisting imported or universalized standards of musical value.
- **Emphasis on process over product**: In contrast to conservatory or concert traditions that emphasize polished performance and aesthetic perfection, community music values the experience of making music together. Rehearsals, experimentation, and dialogical exchange are central. The relational and formative aspects of the process are often more important than the end result.
- **Transformative social goals**: Many community music projects aim at more than musical development—they seek to build social cohesion, foster cross-cultural understanding, promote mental health, or support social justice. Music is seen as a vehicle for personal growth, healing, and communal empowerment.

These characteristics collectively position community music as a relational and pedagogical praxis, rather than a performance model. It invites participants into a space where music becomes a means of connection, reflection, and transformation, rather than simply an artistic output. When applied to worship, this framework opens new ways of understanding church music as a site of formation and encounter rather than aesthetic product delivery or doctrinal instruction.

Community music refers to the active, inclusive practice of music-making that occurs outside formal educational structures. These spaces are intentionally non-hierarchical and prioritize accessibility, drawing together participants of diverse backgrounds and skill levels. Central to community music is the conviction that everyone—not only trained musicians—deserves the opportunity to participate meaningfully in music. As Higgins (2012) explained, "a cultural democracy—in which creative arts opportunities, enjoyment, and celebration would be available to all—was paramount to its cause" (pp. 30–33).

Braden (2025) contrasted this ethos with traditional "high art," emphasizing its working-class orientation and process-focused aesthetic. In this framework, artistic value is not determined by polish or prestige but by relational and participatory engagement. Baldry affirmed that the community artist is "chiefly concerned with a process rather than with a finished product" (Kelly, 1984, p. 16), while Higgins highlighted the mistaken belief that "community arts somehow advocated a reduction in artistic standards" (Higgins, 2012, p. 33). Instead, as Cole (2011) noted, community artists reject the notion of the professional as sole "inspired" creator and instead prioritize shared interaction and meaning-making.

This inquiry approaches worship leadership and church music through a similar lens. When the community arts tradition is applied to worship, music becomes more than a delivery mechanism for theology or a tool for eliciting emotional responses—it becomes a communal, transformative encounter. Webster (1997) argued that "the Arts have the power to transform communities and to change the lives of people," a view

echoed in his claim that "Community Arts is, if nothing else, about change" (p. 69). In this way, community music aligns with the goal of this dissertation: to envision church music as a site of ongoing spiritual, social, and communal formation.

Higgins ties the emergence of community music to broader cultural concerns: weakening social structures, growing individualism, and the alienation of ordinary people from elite artistic institutions. Community musicians, he argues, seek to empower participants to "take control of their own lives, to resist dominant ideology," and to reclaim artistic and cultural spaces as public goods (Higgins, 2012, pp. 35–36). Braden (1978) clarified that community arts is "not a specific form of art, but a specific attitude to art" (p. 107)—a notion that challenges music educators and worship leaders alike to reconsider what it means to lead music in a spiritually and socially conscious way. Higgins (2012) offered additional insight, unpacking the key terms of community music's ethos: *community* signals the participatory and collaborative nature of the work, *cultural* points to its broader social and activist implications, and *development* highlights its dynamic pursuit of transformation and empowerment (p. 37).

The Global Liberal Arts Alliance (Brooks, 1998) reinforced this by framing community arts as a method-oriented practice: "an Arts practice in which artists and communities work in creative partnership…with the final aim [being] the creation of a culture of equality" (p. 7). Everitt (1997) added that community-based arts serve additional purposes beyond performance or entertainment, including personal growth, cultural expression, and social cohesion. According to Webster (1997), community music is marked by three distinctives: it promotes participation regardless of skill, it gathers

people around shared identity, and it especially includes those marginalized by social or economic circumstances.

Theological Resonance and Practical Implications

This view of church music as community music aligns not only with music education research but with theological conceptions of the church as body and "koinonia" (κοινωνία, a biblical word for fellowship or community). Musicking in a congregational context is not a tool for doctrinal recitation or to signal alliance with a particular theology or group; it is an ontological act—a ritual of mutual belonging, presence, and transformation. Furthermore, understanding congregational singing as community musicking challenges the professionalization and platform culture that dominate much of contemporary evangelical worship. Rather than positioning the worship team as performers who deliver a spiritual product, this framework invites leaders to cultivate relational space, co-create meaning, and facilitate participation in the shared communion of worship.

Framing the worship leader as a community music practitioner repositions their work from product delivery (songs, experiences, outcomes) to relational formation. This reframe carries significant implications for how worship leadership is taught, practiced, and evaluated—particularly in traditions where theological orthodoxy or musical excellence have become the sole metrics of faithful worship. The parallels between community music facilitators and worship leaders are striking because both:

- Shape musical environments that prioritize *participation over performance*
- Negotiate local context, values, and needs

- Operate in relational space rather than instructional hierarchy
- Are responsible not only for musical sound but for communal and spiritual atmosphere

A growing body of literature began to interrogate the cultural and philosophical consequences of artificial intelligence on relationality, creativity, and spiritual practice. Turkle (2015) extended her earlier concerns, arguing that our capacity for real-time presence and conversation had atrophied due to digital mediation. Newport (2019) championed a digital minimalist philosophy, encouraging deliberate constraints in technology use to foster deeper creativity, solitude, and interpersonal richness. Within community music and liturgical studies, scholars insisted that authentic human creativity was not reducible to content production but was emergent, relational, and often embodied (Higgins & Bartleet, 2012). Church music, in particular, thrived on co-presence, participatory vulnerability, and the collective shaping of spiritual space through sound and silence.

Theologically, Smith (2009) reminded readers that worship was not simply a cerebral act of knowledge transmission but a liturgical formation of desire—formed through repeated embodied gestures. These insights offered a critique of AI-generated worship music or virtual church platforms that risked severing practice from presence. Elfar and Dawood (2023) outlined a five-stage method for human-AI collaboration in design, emphasizing pattern recognition and ideation. Their model echoes design thinking processes but offers limited application to spiritual, embodied creativity. The present study situated itself within this discourse, proposing that church music pedagogy must

champion embodied co-creativity as both a theological necessity and a humanizing countercultural witness.

In summary, the literature in community music supports the reframing of church music as community music and the worship leader as a community music facilitator. This reinforces the argument that music in worship is a relational and formational act, not a transactional or performative one. Moreover, this builds a practical bridge between relational ontology and congregational practice, setting the stage for the next section on spirituality in music education, which will further explore how transformation is cultivated through musical and pedagogical experience.

Spirituality in Music Education

At the beginning of the 21st century, the seeds of the secularization of Western culture sewn throughout the twentieth century had come to fruition. The 20th century was something of a social experiment of the theories and discourses of Darwin, Marx, Freud and Nietzsche. The proclamation that "God is dead" gave birth to a new kind of society, one that can be reduced to merely natural cause and effect devoid of any real relationship except those which are formed for the sake of the survival and the prosperity of a group or individual. The attempted secularization of society made a "disenchanted reality" most prominent in academic thought and made unbelief in the divine or spiritual the norm (Heuser, 2019).

Two world wars, impoverished economies, and global disunity had forced society to abandon pure materialism and to reconsider what it means to be human. What about human beings gives them the capacity to observe and deeply contemplate truth, beauty,

and goodness? How can transcendent experiences be transformative, leading people to abandon behaviors supposedly derived from "survival instincts" and environmental cues or the rise of the modern self (Trueman, 2020)? Over the past two decades, such questions stimulated a surge of research related to human spirituality (Boyce-Tillman, 2017). Many people today, despite being the products of postmodern secularization, are seeking meaning for their lives in the realm of the spiritual (Heuser, 2019, p. 164).

What is spirituality? The answer varies from one person to the next. Some scholars have identified multiple kinds of spirituality (Ingersoll, 2002) ranging from silence and solitude to shouts and community (Albanese, 2001, p. 2). All the various descriptions and definitions considered, spirituality fundamentally speaks of relationship and connection (Sternberg, 2003), a sense of otherness with the world and perhaps the divine. Carr (2006) understood the "realms of spiritual experience" as existing "beyond the sensual and empirical" (p. 114). It is the "something more" than mind and body from which art, love, choice, freedom, and morality flow.

For years, the task of conceptualizing human spirituality was relegated to the realm of religion. The scientific method of Darwinism, along with the secularization of society seemed to disqualify metaphysics and spirituality from the realm of real academic discourse. But these did not hinder many from experiencing or believing in spirituality. While the resurging interest in spirituality may spark hope among people of faith, the concepts of spirituality are often intentionally disconnected from religion. For a secular culture, religion was long suspected to be yet another capitalistic and totalitarian organization leveraging human spirituality to manipulate the masses and accumulate

wealth and power to the elite. While some may consider themselves spiritual and religious, many of these individuals self-identify as spiritual and non-religious (Boyce-Tillman, 2017, p. 6).

Some would indicate that secularization's severance of the spiritual from the religious might be a positive effect. Yob (2010) argued that "religion is the manifestation of spirituality," not the other way around. The catastrophic terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, followed by years of religious and political violence led many to believe that fundamentalist religion may do more harm than good to society. This instigated new opportunities for research into what is called spiritual experience without the boundaries or biases of the traditional scope of religious activity (Boyce-Tillman, 2017, p. 1). Consequently, divorcing the spiritual from the religious helps to place spirituality in the realm of universal human experience. Yob (2010) described the experience of meeting a vocal ensemble director from the former USSR who, being a strictly non-religious member of the Communist Party, still described experiences he had with music as being intrinsically spiritual. Religion, Yob argued, is no longer needed to be spiritual.

That is not to deny that spirituality and religion have traditionally gone hand in hand and are necessarily related in modern thought. This is sometimes simply a relationship, but other times it is a relationship of superiority or inferiority. Selvam (2013) addressed this by providing a helpful, multidimensional model of religious spirituality. This model corresponds with the concepts of connectedness discussed later by offering the three dimensions of "upward-directed vertical spirituality, inward-directed interior spirituality, and outward-directed horizontal spirituality."

Separating religion and spirituality allows for more specific analysis of one or both. In this case, the separation from any specific theology or dogma is helpful in qualifying spirituality as common amongst humans, regardless of religious affiliations. At the same time, separating religion and spirituality runs the risk of abstractionist evaluation Slife (2004) warned about. While spirituality may be a human trait, it is mostly expressed and explored in religious contexts. A relational ontology would require a consideration of the relationship between religion and spirituality. What about religion allows for spiritual expression and exploration? Is it ritual? Is it shared culture among the congregants? These are valuable questions to understand spirituality that would be ignored if spirituality is completely divorced from religion in our analysis. Integration, rather than distinction, may better serve our research outcomes.

While a multitude of views exist on the differences between the religious and the spiritual (Heuser, 2019), Selvem (2013) suggested that such distinctions are not effective for understanding the matter from a global perspective. Spirituality may be defined on a spectrum between heightened moments of ecstasy and transcendence to the carrying out of mundane, daily practices for the betterment of self or society. In any case, scientific method can examine one part of human existence, but it fails to offer sufficient answers or explanations for non-physical experiences and human emotions. Of all possible human activities, spiritual experiences seem to be most palpable in creative activities like the arts. Yob (2010) further suggested that music is, in fact, the language of spirituality.

Music and Spirituality

In recent decades, a growing body of scholarship in music education has reclaimed the concept of spirituality as central to the experience of music. This body of literature resists both the privatization of spiritual experience and the secular reduction of music education to cognitive skill-building or aesthetic appreciation. Instead, it highlights the ways music fosters connectedness, meaning-making, and transformative awareness—all of which are essential to a relational and ontological understanding of worship music.

Music seems to connect with humans at a deeper level than mere physical experiences (Bogdan, 2010). This phenomenon has led scholars to reconsider the spiritual nature of human beings (Albanese, 2001) and its relationship to musicking (Boyce-Tillman, 2009). Various studies emphasized intrinsic benefits of relationality and spirituality in addressing social injustice (Quindag, 2019), promoting healing and well-being (Boyce-Tillman, 2014), and fostering authentic educational connections (Hendricks, 2021). However, this research primarily addressed educational contexts rather than church music contexts, complicating application for church musicians. Scholars also disagree on whether all music equally fosters spiritual experiences, yet a relational philosophy for church music must encompass diverse styles ranging from classical traditions to contemporary worship music (Lim & Ruth, 2017).

Brown and Hopps (2018) argued that popular music styles possess comparable potential for spiritual experiences as classical forms, albeit in unique ways. They contended music, even without words, can mediate divine encounters analogous to contemplative prayer, emphasizing music's ability to evoke imaginative and transcendent

engagement in daily life. Despite such explorations, explanations of how and why music profoundly affects humans remain elusive.

Historically, philosophers have examined musical experiences primarily from naturalistic and rational perspectives rooted in conceptual dualism—understanding human nature as fundamentally divided between mind and body, with experiences originating from one or both. Yet dualism frequently undervalues or misinterprets metaphysical, transcendent, or subjective experiences. For instance, Langer (1957) proposed that artistic expressions, potentially predating language itself, primarily symbolize rational human experiences, emphasizing cognitive empathy and interpretation. Similarly, David Elliot (1995) viewed musicking as an aesthetically engaging praxial activity arising from the intentional interaction between musician and listener. Conversely, Reimer (1963, 2022) highlights music's capacity to reveal emotional insights through aesthetic experiences, though still grounded in dualistic conceptions of emotional-rational interactions. Rather than considering these as spiritual, these scholars stressed the aesthetic which fits in a dualistic framework.

These dualistic interpretations, however, may fall short of fully explaining music's profound spiritual impact. Yob (2010) directly challenged the mind-body dualism, advocating instead a triadic nature—mind, body, and soul. She argues spirituality, neglected in dualistic frameworks, better accounts for experiences of transcendence and deep connection. Bogdan (2010) further complicated dualism by suggesting that distinguishing sharply between aesthetic and spiritual experiences is problematic, citing research indicating these experiences differ primarily in individual

interpretation rather than fundamental quality. Thus, aesthetic and spiritual experiences should be viewed as inseparable aspects of musical encounter rather than separate dualistic categories.

This study explicitly rejects dualistic conceptualizations of spiritual experience such as that defended by Elpidorou (2013), who argued for conceptual dualism by asserting an epistemic gap between phenomenal (subjective) and physical truths. Unlike Elpidorou, this study maintains that the epistemic gap does not indicate fundamental ontological division but instead highlights limitations in our conceptual and communicative strategies. Spiritual experiences, while uniquely phenomenal, can be fully integrated within a unified philosophical framework, given an appropriately holistic conceptualization of human experience and epistemology.

Ultimately, the research presented here suggests that musical spirituality is neither solely aesthetic nor merely spiritual, nor dualistically divided. Instead, spirituality and aesthetic experience represent complementary dimensions of the same profound musical encounter—fundamentally relational, embodied, and formative. As discussed previously, this position is also consistent with trinitarian theology commonly held in evangelical contexts, arguing that *imago dei* suggests not a dualistic nature, but a triadic conceptualization of human nature: mind, body, and spirit.

Spirituality in Music Education

Spirituality in music education is a notoriously contested term. Scholars such as Palmer (2010), Yob (2011), and Boyce-Tillman (2013) have argued that spirituality, while not reducible to religion, involves the pursuit of connectedness between the self,

others, the world, and, for many, the divine. Palmer (2010) framed spirituality as the "capacity to be fully present," not as escape but as rooted engagement. Yob (2011) asserted that if we better understood spirituality, we would teach for it with more intentionality. In other words, spirituality is not merely an outcome—it can be a pedagogical commitment.

Heuser (2019) contributed to this growing body of literature by framing music education itself as a sacred practice. Drawing on philosophical and sociological sources such as Taylor (2007) and Durkheim (2008), he argued that musical learning shares structural parallels with spiritual traditions—particularly in its capacity to foster reflection, presence, and transcendent awareness. Heuser acknowledged the tension between secularism and spirituality in modern educational systems, noting that public life in Western culture has largely excluded the theological and mystical from legitimate discourse. However, he contended that musical engagement still opens sacred spaces within secular contexts, allowing students to connect with themselves, others, and what may be perceived as transcendent. In this way, music education becomes a "locus of self-exploration," capable of fostering spiritual identity and meaning-making even in environments where religious language is avoided (Heuser, 2019; Taylor, 2007). This insight strengthens the case that worship music, especially within educational or formational spaces, must be understood not only in theological or aesthetic terms but as a spiritual and philosophical practice.

Boyce-Tillman (2013) presented congregational musicking as a relational, participatory act capable of fostering both theological formation and communal identity.

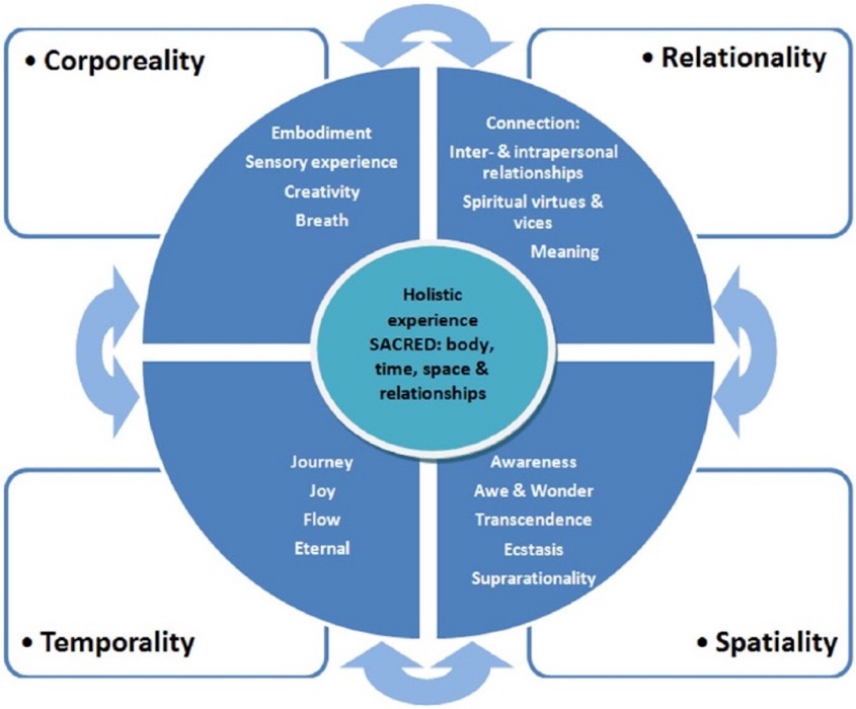
Drawing on Christopher Small's concept of *musicking*, she emphasized that the meaning of music lay in the relationships established through performance—between individuals, communities, and the transcendent (p. 2). She viewed singing as *performed theology*, where sung texts entered the being of participants in ways that shaped intrapersonal and communal belief (p. 3). Through her phenomenographic map of musical experience, Boyce-Tillman outlined four interrelated domains—expression, materials, construction, and values—that church leaders needed to consider in order to foster transformative worship (p. 4). She highlighted how expressive dimensions of singing allowed personal identity to emerge through shared emotional and spiritual engagement, often mediated by memory and embodied participation (pp. 5–6). Ultimately, she argued that relational worship must be evaluated not by aesthetic perfection but by its capacity to empower, include, and unify diverse participants in a spiritually formative encounter.

Models of Musical-Spiritual Transformation

Van der Merwe and Habron (2015) offer a related conceptual model of spirituality grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology and Van Manen's (1990) lifeworld existentials: corporeality, relationality, spatiality, and temporality. These four dimensions of human experience intersect through music to generate spiritual insight and transformation. Corporeality emphasizes embodiment, or how music is felt, moved with, and internalized. Relationality highlights connectedness to others, to oneself, and to the transcendent. Spatiality refers to how music shapes and opens spaces for reflection and encounter. Temporality points to how music suspends or reorients time, creating moments of meaning. Together, these frameworks insist that music is more than a skill or

subject—it is a spiritual act, capable of forming identity, healing wounds, and creating relational presence.

Figure 1: From van der Merwe & Habron (2015): Conceptual Model of Spirituality in Music Education



Quindag (2017) suggested that spiritual music is relation by exploring a relational ontology for spiritual music. She suggested that the aim of spirituality in human beings is oneness, whether that be the expression of connectedness with others, the universe, God, self, or all the above. She offered this framework for spirituality:

> Spirituality is a desirable human quest that requires our most profound thoughts, consciousness or mindfulness in order to inquire about mysterious and transcendent topics that include existence, purpose and ultimate fate in and beyond this physical world (Quindag, 2017, 90).

From this framework, Quindag observed three confluent streams demonstrating that spiritual music is relationship. The first stream is that "music has relational value"

because of its communicative nature. The second stream is that "music is relational" when participants meet for the purpose of musicking together, whether as cocreators or a dynamic relationship of performers and listeners. This collective relationship gives way to the third stream that is more personal and individual. This stream is that spiritual music is relationship when individuals are drawn away or "awe-struck" by a central truth or state of transcendence, an experience that seems to connect them to something beyond. Consequently, she concludes, "spiritual music is relationship when…it brings us into oneness," oneness with self, oneness with others with whom we are in relationship, and oneness with what is beyond.

Quindag (2019) argued that spiritual music becomes relationship through a complex web of musical and non-musical relational factors even in the presence of racism and hate. Rooted in the belief that God is relational and humans are made in His image, spiritual music reflects and embodies various relationships—between performer and listener, text and context, history and present moment. These relational layers include performance style, cultural history, personal belief, and even the contrast between injustice and grace. In this way, spiritual music draws meaning not merely from its musical content but from the interconnected relationships it evokes and inhabits.

Further, Quindag suggested that the degree to which spiritual music forms relationship depends on the strength of relationality in the belief system it expresses. Drawing on Buber's *I-Thou* vs. *I-It* paradigm, she contrasted weak relationality—marked by objectification and control—with strong relationality, which honors others and extends forgiveness. Authenticity and truthfulness in both belief and performance

amplify the power of spiritual music to form relationship, especially across cultural or aesthetic divides. She argued that music may not *cause* spirituality, but it can kindle it, awakening empathy, inviting reflection, and fueling spiritual transformation. In this way, spiritual music becomes a vehicle for relational understanding, communal healing, and even broader social action.

The concept of transformation permeates current literature on spirituality in music. Some researchers have written about transformation in terms of healing and wellness, others in terms of social justice, and others still in terms of oneness with the divine. It seems that the idea of transformative musical encounters, flowing from a relational ontology, might be helpful in explaining meaningful, transformative spiritual encounters in church music and music education settings.

Developments in the field of musical therapy would also suggest a growing interest in music's healing properties. June Boyce-Tillman is a leading voice on the topic of transformative musical experiences as a means to address human suffering and promote well-being (2014), peace (1999), and healing (2000). Boyce-Tillman (2009) explored the transformative qualities of liminal space as created by musicking. Relationships formed the foundation of her study as she called on philosophers like Buber to frame her study with the theory of musical experience as encounter. The variety of these relationships, or encounters, "make the possibility of transformation both likely and rich." The terms she uses to define the nature of liminal space are relational terms:

> A limen that is crossed from ordinary knowing especially in the space/time dimension; a sense of encounter; a paradoxical knowing so that diversity can exist within it easily; a sense of empowerment, bliss,

> realization; a sense of the beyond, infinity; a feeling of an opening-up in the experiencer as boundaries start to dissolve; a sense of transformation, change; an evanescent and fleeting quality that cannot be controlled and which may result in a sense of givenness; a feeling of unity with other beings, people, and the cosmos (Boyce-Tillman, 2009, p. 189).

Boyce-Tillman continued to list several distinct transformative qualities of liminal space: removal from the everyday experiences, removal of natural boundaries as one relates with the transcendent, space for intuition and reflection, an encounter with a variety of existential domains, loss of responsibility to the divine, empathy with others, trying on new discourses and personas, and agency (Boyce-Tillman, 2009, pp. 191–197). These qualities of liminal space inform musical contexts to create experiences in which transformation is not simply possible, but rather, as Boyce-Tillman suggested, likely. This supports the notion that worship leaders could craft worship experiences that are more likely to facilitate spiritual encounters.

Hendricks (2021) argued that vulnerability and integrity are essential components of authentic connections. Considering the environment of a global pandemic coupled with unprecedented levels of political and social disunity, Hendricks observed that fear, racism, and national prejudices threaten to divide us spiritually. Conversely, Hendricks argued that care, compassion, and connection go hand in hand. Hendricks' interpretation of Buber is insightful:

> Buber's interpretation of relationship might also be viewed differently. If the You were to completely fill the circle of relation, then it is not an I–You relationship, but rather a hollow, empty You. Rather than viewing the I–You relationship as one in which the needs and interests of the I might get lost or subverted, I perceive Buber's description of the I– You relationship as the *essence of spiritual communion* – as authentic connection (Hendricks, 2021, p. 245).

Implications for Worship Music

The parallels to worship music are profound. In many evangelical settings, music functions as a means of doctrinal communication or aesthetic stimulation. However, when framed through these spiritual and educational models, worship music becomes an act of communal formation—an embodied pedagogy where participants not only sing but become. This reframing addresses one of the core challenges raised earlier: the tendency of evangelical worship literature to reduce music to aesthetics or theological ends while neglecting formation. By integrating music education's insights into spirituality, this study affirms that worship music can and should be approached as a spiritual practice with pedagogical and ontological implications. Singing in worship is not just about what is sung or how, it is about who is being shaped through the act. These frameworks also resist the individualism that often marks both evangelical spirituality and academic music training. They point instead to relational, communal, and ethical dimensions of spiritual experience, echoing the themes of relational ontology and community music developed earlier in this chapter.

In summary, this section demonstrates how music education has adopted human spirituality as a valid and vital aspect of the musical experience, one that aligns deeply with worship music's highest aims. It supports the central thesis of this study: that worship music is not simply expressive or theological, but a relational and transformative practice that forms participants through spiritual, embodied encounter.

Philosophical Methodology and Ontology

The methodological commitments of this study are grounded in philosophical inquiry, but this is not a detached or abstract form of reasoning. It is a contextual, interpretive, and praxis-oriented epistemology that reflects the relational ontology at the heart of the study's argument. Philosophical research, particularly in the fields of music education and theology, has long wrestled with the tension between universal claims and local knowledge, between ideal forms and lived realities. This study embraces that tension and proposes that meaning in worship music is not discovered through objectivity or analysis alone, but through situated engagement, reflection, and relational presence.

This section affirms that philosophical inquiry, far from being abstract or detached, is a method of relational engagement. It reflects the values of relational ontology by emphasizing context, encounter, and transformation. It also challenges dominant models of knowing that prioritize objectivity or control, proposing instead that truth in worship and in research emerges through presence, relationship, and reflexive participation.

Philosophy as Contextual Inquiry

Richerme (2020) insisted that "philosophy is contextual," rejecting the image of philosophy as the pursuit of universal, timeless truths in favor of a view that situates philosophical reflection within personal, cultural, and institutional conditions. Richerme's work relies heavily on Bowman and Frega (2012), who argued that philosophy should not be viewed as merely speculative but as a form of critical engagement with lived experience. Richerme, along with Bowman and Frega, highlights the value of

philosophical inquiry not for its abstraction, but for its ability to clarify, interrogate, and reframe the structures that shape practice.

This approach is particularly well-suited to music education, where scholars such as Jorgensen (2006) and Wright (2014) have long emphasized the value of philosophical reflection as professional practice. In this tradition, philosophical research is not about solving problems with fixed answers but about asking better questions, fostering conceptual clarity, and creating new frameworks for understanding musical and educational experience.

Relational Knowing and Situated Meaning

This methodological orientation aligns naturally with relational ontology, which resists epistemologies grounded in control, detachment, or abstraction. As Slife (2004) argued, knowledge is not merely the application of general theories to specific cases; it is emergent from the particular, the local, and the relational. He critiqued the "abstractionist" tendency in psychological and educational research to assume that truth resides in decontextualized models rather than in the lived situations of real people. This study affirms that truth about worship music arises not from generalizations but from the embedded, dialogical, and transformative practices of communities who sing together.

In this way, the methodology of this dissertation reflects the epistemological commitments of its content. If worship music is fundamentally relational, then any inquiry into its meaning must be relational as well. I do not seek to establish universal rules for church music through this study, but rather to construct a flexible philosophical model that reflects the spiritual, pedagogical, and communal dimensions of musicking in

worship.

Relational Ontology in Education and Theology

Relational ontology has emerged in theology and education as a corrective to the overly cognitive or mechanistic approaches to learning and knowing. Palmer (1993, 2010) described teaching and learning as acts of relational presence, where knowledge is not transmitted but mediated through shared encounter. In his words, "we teach who we are"—a claim that resonates deeply with worship leaders, whose presence, posture, and relational intent shape the spiritual atmosphere of the room.

Similarly, Benjamins (2023) framed worship leadership as a relational practice influenced by habitus, care, and relational accountability. While her work remained largely sociological, it pointed toward a broader ontological turn—one in which worship is understood not only as an act of communication, but as a space of relational meaning-making. This aligns with the aims of this study, which views knowledge as formed in relationship, theology as embodied, and musical meaning as co-created.

Synthesis and Identified Gaps

The preceding sections have demonstrated that worship music, when viewed through the combined lenses of relational ontology, community music, and spirituality in music education, emerges not merely as artistic output or theological delivery, but as a relational, pedagogical, and ontological act. These fields provide robust language and interdisciplinary frameworks for understanding musical worship as a site of transformation and communal becoming. However, despite clear resonances across these literatures, several significant gaps remain—both within each field and especially at their

intersections.

Across disciplines, a shared emphasis on relationship, transformation, and formation emerges. First, relational ontology offers a philosophical foundation for understanding human identity as formed in and through encounter with others, the world, and the divine. Second, community music emphasizes inclusive, process-based, and locally responsive music-making that fosters belonging, participation, and empowerment. Third, spirituality in music education frames musical experience as a liminal and deeply formative act, where spiritual insight arises through embodiment, connection, and reflection. These shared themes affirm the core conviction of this study: that worship music, rightly understood, is not a tool for emotional effect or doctrinal transmission but a relational encounter that shapes identity and community.

Identified Gaps in the Literature

Despite these points of alignment, several critical gaps remain, especially in how worship music is conceptualized in evangelical contexts. First, there is a lack of interdisciplinary integration in evangelical worship literature. Much of the existing writing remains either theologically narrow or pragmatically driven, often failing to engage meaningfully with perspectives from philosophy, music education, or sociology. Even among more academically rigorous works (e.g., Lim & Ruth, 2017; Ingalls, 2018), the focus tends to center on history, theology, or cultural analysis rather than on ontology or spiritual formation. As a result, worship leaders are often trained in techniques and traditions, but not in frameworks that explore the formational power of musical participation.

Second, there is a noticeable neglect of relational ontology in worship philosophy. While theologians frequently affirm that worship involves divine-human encounter, few explore the ontological nature of that encounter using philosophical tools such as those developed by Buber, Levinas, or Yannaras. This leaves a significant gap in the metaphysical and anthropological underpinnings of worship practice—one that this present study seeks to address.

Third, community music remains underutilized in the study of congregational worship. Despite its emphasis on participation, transformation, and relationality, community music is rarely applied to the church music context, particularly in evangelical or fundamentalist settings. Worship leaders are seldom equipped to function as facilitators of communal meaning-making, even though this aligns closely with their actual roles in local church life.

Fourth, the dominance of popular literature in conservative evangelical institutions often overshadows scholarly discourse. Authors such as Aniol (2009), Garlock and Woetzel (1998), Lucarini (2002), Jones (2006), and the many pastors and authors who have echoed their perspective exert disproportionate influence on worship philosophy and pedagogy in many conservative ministry training contexts. Despite being widely circulated and taught, these perspectives frequently operate in isolation from the academic dialogue of other disciplines. This has led to a closed-loop system in which theological claims about music are treated as axiomatic, while interdisciplinary engagement is treated as suspect or unnecessary in light of firm theological beliefs.

Fifth, and finally, there is an absence of a comprehensive ontological framework

for worship leadership. While recent studies, such as those by Benjamins (2023), have made valuable contributions to understanding formation, care, and sociocultural negotiation in worship settings, they stop short of offering a fully developed account of worship as a relational act of being. This dissertation extends that conversation by arguing that worship is not only a social performance but an ontological event of encounter—one that shapes identity, community, and spiritual transformation through musical participation.

There is a clear need for a new framework—one that draws together theological, philosophical, and educational insights to offer a more holistic understanding of worship music. This study proposes such a model, one that views the worship leader as a community music practitioner, the act of singing as ontological encounter, and the gathered church as a formational community shaped by shared musical participation. In doing so, it addresses gaps in the current literature and contributes a conceptual structure for both academic scholarship and practical worship leadership.

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has critically reviewed the theological, philosophical, educational, and practical literatures that inform this study's core claim: that worship music is best understood not as doctrinal delivery or aesthetic performance, but as a relational, ontological, and formative event. By weaving together insights from relational ontology, community music, and spirituality in music education, this literature review has shown that worship music can be a space of transformation, encounter, and communal becoming.

The review began with a historical and theological exploration of worship music in the Christian tradition, identifying long-standing tensions between doctrinal content, emotional expression, and participatory formation. It then developed the philosophical grounding of relational ontology, particularly as articulated by Buber, Whale, Levinas, Benjamin, and Yannaras, with further theological support from Brown and Hopps. These thinkers frame music as both meeting and revelation—a site in which human identity is formed and divine presence may be disclosed.

Next, the literature on community music reframed worship leaders as facilitators of relational experience rather than curators of content. The chapter then turned to spirituality in music education, revealing how music-making can create liminal, transformative, and spiritually formative spaces. Finally, the section on philosophical methodology reinforced the study's approach as contextual, reflexive, and practice-oriented.

Throughout the chapter, significant gaps were identified: the absence of relational ontology in worship studies, the marginalization of community music in evangelical contexts, the dominance of unexamined popular literature in training institutions, and the need for a coherent philosophical model for worship leadership and formation. This dissertation responds to those gaps by proposing a framework in which worship music is interpreted as a relational, formational, and spiritually potent act of encounter.

The next chapter will articulate the methodological foundation of the study. It will describe how philosophical inquiry is employed as both a mode of critical reflection and a generative practice. It will also clarify how this study's epistemological commitments—

rooted in relational ontology—inform its process of conceptual synthesis and framework construction. The chapter will also discuss the author's positionality and interpretive orientation, ensuring transparency in the interpretive and integrative work that follows.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter situates the study within the tradition of philosophical inquiry. In contrast to empirical methodologies that aim to measure or quantify, philosophical inquiry seeks to clarify meaning, explore value-laden concepts, and construct interpretive frameworks. Creswell (2013) underscored that all qualitative inquiry is informed by philosophical assumptions regarding ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology. However, philosophical inquiry differs by explicitly foregrounding these assumptions rather than treating them as implicit. Bowman and Frega (2012) affirmed that philosophical inquiry is especially suited to complex educational domains that resist simplification and demand integrative thinking. Richerme (2020) explored philosophical methodology in detail, noting that "philosophical inquiry illuminates and investigates a discipline's unconscious beliefs, principles, values, and assumptions" (p. 16).

Philosophical inquiry is particularly appropriate in interdisciplinary and under-theorized settings, as is the case with evangelical worship music. While often overshadowed by empirical approaches in music education research, philosophical inquiry plays a crucial role in interrogating values, constructing frameworks, and broadening conceptual understanding. As Jorgensen (2006) observed, philosophical inquiry illuminates and investigates underlying assumptions and clarifies the meanings of key concepts, often drawing upon concepts from multiple fields to reshape practice. In

the context of this study, such inquiry provides the structure through which worship music is not simply observed or categorized but reimagined as a site of relational and ontological formation.

Jorgensen (2006) argued that philosophy in music education must serve not merely as historical commentary or abstract theorizing, but as a practice of meaning-making in context. She highlights the need for transformative vision and reflective action in the face of educational and cultural complexity. Phelps et al. (2005) argued that, through philosophical inquiry, equips researchers to study the underlying principles of any discipline and to critique the value and purpose of educational practice. Bowman and Frega (2012) asserted that philosophy is vital for surfacing the assumptions beneath our practices and for creating frameworks that remain imaginative and contextually responsive. Elliott (1995) suggested that philosophers focus on broad, overarching questions—ones that cannot be fully answered through observation, description, or experimentation alone. Their work explored entire domains of ideas and the practices connected to them, probing why these fields have developed as they have. Often, philosophical inquiry means examining how current views relate to enduring philosophical concepts. Despite its enduring value, philosophical inquiry remains relatively rare in music education research, often relegated to the margins of formal methodology discourse (Richerme, 2020). Taken together, these perspectives establish philosophical inquiry as the most appropriate methodology for researchers to employ, not only to describe but also to interrogate, reimagine, and construct conceptual foundations.

This chapter will begin by describing the theoretical foundations of philosophical

inquiry, particularly its use in music education and theology. The rationale section demonstrates how this method is uniquely suited to the research questions at hand. The third section will address the study's epistemological commitments, specifically its grounding in relational ways of knowing. The fourth section will describe the researcher's positionality and interpretive stance, recognizing the significance of practitioner experience in shaping philosophical reflection. The fifth section will lay out the methodological process, including literature review, conceptual synthesis, and framework construction. A sixth section will explore the interdisciplinary integration of theology, music education, and philosophy as a methodological mode. Finally, the chapter will include a discussion of ethical considerations and a conclusion summarizing the methodological structure that underpins the study. In summary, this chapter explores the integration of theology, music education, and philosophy as an interdisciplinary methodological orientation.

Theoretical Foundations of Philosophical Inquiry

Philosophical inquiry in education and theology has long served as a means of examining foundational questions related to knowledge, ethics, aesthetics, and meaning-making. In contrast to empirical methods that seek to generate generalizable data, Creswell (2013) distinguished philosophical research as an approach grounded in interpretive frameworks that foreground ontological and axiological assumptions rather than empirical measurement. Such inquiry is inherently reflexive, requiring the researcher to engage with questions of purpose, value, and context (Phelps et al., 2005). This approach is especially relevant in disciplines where the subject matter is value-laden,

interpretive, and resistant to quantification.

Philosophical inquiry also functions as a bridge between disciplines, enabling scholars to draw insights from multiple fields into a coherent conceptual framework. Music education philosophy requires drawing on diverse intellectual traditions and interdisciplinary perspectives to address the complexity of musical experience (Bowman & Frega, 2006). As Phelps et al. (2005) affirmed, philosophy helps clarify what is valued in education and why. In theological studies, philosophical reflection helps interrogate metaphysical claims, ethical frameworks, and anthropological assumptions. This study synthesizes research from music education, theology, philosophy, and community music. By synthesizing concepts where these disciplines converge, philosophical inquiry offers a more holistic understanding of participatory worship.

Within music education, philosophical inquiry has historically served to critique reductionist or technicist approaches to teaching music. Jorgensen (2006) described philosophy in music education as a means of examining fundamental beliefs and values that influence practice, arguing that it is essential for surfacing underlying assumptions and generating meaningful change. She views philosophical inquiry not as abstract speculation but as a reflective practice grounded in real-world teaching and learning. Similarly, Reimer (2022) emphasized the philosophical dimension of music education as a way of understanding music's role in human life, beyond skill acquisition or aesthetic preference. More recently, Richerme (2020) also emphasized that philosophical inquiry can serve as a "rhizomatic process," enabling educators to complicate and connect diverse perspectives.

Philosophy is not at odds with Christian theology. In theological discourse, thinkers such as Tillich (1957), Yannaras (2011), and Brown and Hopps (2018) have demonstrated how philosophical reflection can uncover deeper meanings in worship and spirituality. These scholars show that philosophical work is not opposed to faith but integral to its articulation, helping faith communities navigate the complexities of meaning, presence, and transformation. This integration resonates with Jorgensen's (2006) argument that philosophy should engage the fullness of human experience, including spiritual and ethical dimensions.

This study draws on these traditions, not to offer abstract propositions about worship music, but to construct a conceptual model that repositions worship music as a relationally and spiritually potent practice. Phelps et al. (2005) argue that such inquiry not only critiques but also builds conceptual foundations that can inform practice and guide future research. By grounding this inquiry in relational ontology and interdisciplinary dialogue, the study aims to contribute a flexible and generative framework that honors both academic rigor and lived experience. Moreover, it demonstrates that church music is a valuable site for music educators both to inform and conceptualize meaningful practice.

Rationale for Philosophical Methodology in This Study

Philosophical inquiry is not merely a methodological preference but a reflection of the research questions and subject matter at hand. The central concern of this study is not the evaluation of musical effectiveness or the measurement of worship outcomes, but the ontological implications of church music and the value of conceptualizing church music as community music. Bowman and Frega (2012) noted that philosophical inquiry

is uniquely positioned to explore “big questions” about music’s nature, purposes, and social functions, especially where empirical inquiry falls short (p. 4). Musicking and music education occur weekly in evangelical churches, and these contexts are valuable sites for research in music education, especially when understood through a lens of community music. In short, this study asks what church music *is* and what it *accomplishes* in terms of music education and practice. As Phelps et al. (2005) explained, philosophical research is concerned not only with description but with appraisal and the construction of normative arguments about educational value.

Philosophical methodology is particularly suited to this inquiry because it allows for conceptual synthesis, the interrogation of values, and the construction of normative frameworks. Jorgensen (2006) described philosophy as clarifying terms, exposing and evaluating assumptions, and constructing systematized theories that relate to practice. She further argues that philosophical inquiry is essential when a field suffers from conceptual underdevelopment or when prevailing practices have become disconnected from reflective theory. Richerme (2020) similarly contended that philosophical inquiry in music education is particularly vital where practices are under-theorized or framed by unexamined norms. This is precisely the case in many evangelical contexts, where church music is governed by inherited traditions, stylistic preferences, or institutional dogma rather than a coherent, philosophically informed understanding of its purpose and power.

Moreover, philosophical inquiry is necessary due to the interdisciplinary nature of this present study. Worship music is the intersection of multiple domains. It is theologically motivated, musically enacted, socially embedded, and pedagogically potent.

No single empirical method can adequately address the complexity of these overlapping dimensions. The interdisciplinary nature of the study lends itself to conceptual integration rather than isolated or abstracted analysis (Slife, 2004). Philosophical inquiry allows for the synthesis of literature from fields that rarely interact. By drawing on relational ontology, community music, and spirituality in music education, this study proposes a framework that is intellectually coherent and contextually grounded.

Philosophical inquiry is also appropriate because of the formational and participatory character of worship music. Worship is not simply about beliefs or behaviors, it is also about being. To worship is to engage one's identity in relation to the divine and community. Philosophical tools help clarify how such relational acts function ontologically and epistemologically. As Palmer (1993, 2010) and Slife (2004) reiterated, educational and spiritual practices are not neutral or mechanical; they are saturated with meaning, shaped by context, and oriented toward transformation. Worship music itself is a meaning-making act. It invokes values, affections, beliefs, and memories. To study it requires an approach that respects its complexity, embodiment, and ambiguity. Philosophical inquiry provides the tools for such a study, particularly when framed by relational ontology. Jorgensen (2006) further argued that philosophical inquiry's strength lies in its capacity to address both the conceptual and experiential dimensions of music education.

Finally, this study employs philosophical inquiry as a form of constructive theology, allowing for a critique of dominant narratives within evangelical worship literature. Philosophical reflection not only critiques, but also proposes better ways of

seeing and living. Jorgensen (2006) and Bowman and Frega (2012) both emphasized that philosophy is both critical and constructive—offering positive visions for music education's aims and values. Many influential voices in fundamentalist traditions present worship music as either doctrinally safe or morally dangerous, often relying on aesthetic prescriptivism rather than interdisciplinary engagement. A philosophical approach offers a means to interrogate these assumptions and construct a more nuanced and integrative framework, aligning with the purpose of this study which seeks not only to shed light on the deficiencies of current worship paradigms but also to articulate a hopeful, holistic, and theologically grounded alternative.

Ontological Commitments

The framework for this study is grounded in relational ontology, a way of knowing that privileges connection, context, and co-construction over abstraction, isolation, or detached objectivity. Relational ontology emerges as a response to dominant models of knowledge in Western thought, particularly positivism and rationalism, which emphasize linearity, neutrality, and universal applicability. By contrast, relational ontology recognizes that all knowledge is situated within specific contexts, relationships, communities, and embodied experiences. Benjamin (2015) argued that relationality is not simply a feature of experience but the ontological ground from which singularities emerge. He described this as *anoriginal relationality*, meaning that relationships precede and constitute what appear to be independent entities. This view challenges the assumption that discrete individuals pre-exist their connections and instead affirms that being itself is always already in relation.

Slife (2004) critiqued the tendency of educational and psychological research to reduce meaning to abstraction, warning that when knowledge is stripped of its relational and contextual grounding, it becomes disconnected from the actual lives of practitioners. He distinguishes between "weak relationality," which treats relationships as secondary or additive, and "strong relationality," which asserts that entities only exist as nexuses of relation (Slife, 2004, p. 159). From this perspective, knowledge divorced from relational context becomes not only incomplete but distorted. He further advocates for an epistemology that begins with relationship and returns to it in every act of interpretation. Similarly, Richerme (2020) asserted that philosophical research in music education must remain grounded in the lived experiences of learners and communities, particularly when dealing with culturally embedded practices like music and spirituality.

In worship contexts, the implications of relational ontology are profound. Worship is not merely a performance of belief or a repetition of doctrine; it is an encounter—with God, with others, and with oneself. To understand worship music, therefore, is to understand it from within the relationships it creates and expresses. It is not a product to be consumed but a lived experience that shapes spiritual identity. Whale (2009) extended this idea to music itself, arguing that music is not an object or container of meaning but a *meeting*, a "between" in which music and participant co-create significance. This conception situates musical knowing as inherently dialogical.

Palmer (2010) argued that we teach who we are, implying that teaching and learning are not simply transactional processes but acts of presence and mutual vulnerability. In worship music, this means that what is known through song is not

merely lyrical content but embodied truth. The spiritual realities communicated through music are received not through cognitive decoding alone but through affective, communal, and performative engagement. Boyce-Tillman (2016) and van der Merwe and Habron (2015) demonstrated this claim by showing how music can be a space of spiritual knowing. Their models of spiritual-musical experience suggest that transformation occurs not only in what is understood but in what is experienced and shared. Knowledge in this framework is holistic, integrating the mind, body, spirit, and social world. Thus, the ontological commitments of this study affirm that:

- Knowledge is always relational, emerging through encounter.
- Worship is a formational act that produces and reflects spiritual understanding.
- Music is a meaning-making practice, not a neutral medium.
- Spiritual truths may be known through presence, participation, and transformation.

This understanding of worship music supports the broader methodology of the dissertation by affirming that relationality is not only the subject of study but also the mode through which truth is encountered and understood. The work of Palmer (2010), Benjamins (2023), and Boyce-Tillman (2016) affirmed that knowing is not a solely cognitive activity, but one that involves the heart, the body, and the community. As Buber (1970) also affirmed, relational knowing carries ethical weight because every act of understanding is also an act of meeting—one that requires presence, openness, and responsibility toward the other.

Researcher Positionality and Interpretive Lens

This study is shaped not only by the research problem and scholarly literature but also by the researcher's positionality—the personal, theological, and professional experiences that inform the inquiry. In qualitative and philosophical research, the researcher is not a neutral observer but a participant in the meaning-making process. As Butler (2005) and Palmer (2010) argued, philosophical reflection is never disembodied; we inquire as situated selves, shaped by our contexts, histories, and communities. Jorgensen (2006) emphasized that reflexivity is central to philosophical method, describing it as a self-critical posture that interrogates the values and assumptions shaping inquiry. Phelps et al. (2005) similarly highlighted that philosophical research requires researchers to locate themselves within the inquiry rather than feign neutrality.

I have spent over two decades serving in traditional, Anglo-American evangelical worship contexts, including roles as music director, worship leader, department chair, and church consultant. This experience provides firsthand insight into the implicit philosophies, aesthetic norms, and theological convictions that shape worship music in those settings. It also reveals the gaps, the absence of interdisciplinary dialogue, the lack of critical reflection on musical formation, and the dominance of stylistic preferences masquerading as theological absolutes. This background positions me as both an insider and a critical friend. As an insider, I understand the language, culture, and values of the communities under study. As a critical friend, I bring a lens informed by theological reflection, music education, and philosophical critique to bear on practices that are often taken for granted.

This positioning also requires attentiveness to bias, voice, and interpretive responsibility. I approach worship music not merely as a function of church life but as a cultural and theological practice that demands ethical reflection. Inspired by a hermeneutic posture, I recognize that all understanding is mediated through tradition and context. This mediation is not a limitation; it is an invitation to more deeply understand how practice is shaped in real human contexts. Importantly, this inquiry is not a memoir or personal testimony. While lived experience informs the questions and passion behind the study, the work itself is a product of interdisciplinary scholarship. The goal is not to validate personal experience but to construct a conceptual model that is transferable, grounded, and generative. By naming my positionality, this chapter acknowledges the interpretive lens through which the study is conducted. I am not detached from the subject but deeply entangled in it—and it is precisely this entanglement that allows the inquiry to be both honest and hopeful.

Methodological Process

This study proceeds through a multi-stage methodological process that reflects the layered and integrative nature of philosophical inquiry. Each stage contributes to the development of a conceptual framework that reimagines worship music as a relational, ontological, and spiritually formative practice. These stages are not linear in a traditional sense but iterative and reflective, shaped by continuous dialogue between literature, practice, and philosophical reflection. Jorgensen (2006) described philosophical inquiry as clarifying concepts, exposing assumptions, evaluating frameworks, and synthesizing ideas into cohesive theories that inform practice.

The first stage involved a systematic and thematic review of relevant literature in theology, music education, philosophy, and worship studies. This included not only peer-reviewed academic sources but also widely influential popular texts used in conservative evangelical worship contexts. The review identified key conceptual limitations, such as the reduction of worship music to either doctrinal content or stylistic preference, and the widespread absence of interdisciplinary engagement. Particular attention was given to the lack of ontological reflection within worship literature, despite its centrality in both philosophical theology and music education. Phelps et al. (2005) also noted that philosophical inquiry often draws on multiple disciplines, integrating insights to generate normative claims about what should be valued in education.

Drawing upon the literature, the next stage focused on synthesizing concepts from relational ontology across disciplines, community music, and spirituality in music education. The synthesis process involved identifying resonances, interrogating assumptions, and constructing connections across connected fields of research that may not always interact. This synthesis was not only thematic but conceptual, aiming to articulate a philosophical framework that can account for music's role in spiritual formation.

Informed by synthesis, the next stage developed a new conceptual framework for understanding worship music as a relational and ontological act. The framework positions the worship leader as a community music facilitator, congregational singing as a formational and dialogical practice, and musical encounter as a space of transformation. The framework also incorporates spiritual pedagogical models and relational ontology,

offering worship practitioners tools to evaluate and shape worship environments that are not merely expressive but spiritually formative.

The final stage involved theoretical application, applying this conceptual framework to existing worship paradigms, including those found in popular evangelical literature, seminary curricula, and lived worship practices. This application is not intended as prescriptive but illustrative, demonstrating how the proposed model can reframe practice, shift pedagogical focus, and challenge theological assumptions. The goal is to offer a vision of worship music that is both theologically grounded and practically generative.

Throughout each stage, the methodological process has remained reflexive and integrative. I have moved between literature and lived experience, between critique and construction, and between theological conviction and philosophical analysis. This methodological movement reflects the central conviction of the study itself:
that transformation happens through relationship, and that knowledge about worship must emerge from dialogical, interdisciplinary, and reflective engagement.

Integration of Theology, Music Education, and Philosophy

A distinguishing feature of this inquiry is its deliberate methodological integration of theology, music education, and philosophy. Each discipline brings a unique lens to the study of worship music, and their convergence is necessary for a robust understanding of music as a spiritually formative, relational act. This integration is not incidental but essential, grounded in the ontological claims outlined in previous chapters.

From theology, the study draws a foundational belief that worship is a site of divine-human encounter. Theological discourse, particularly in the works of Boyce-Tillman et al (2019), Brown and Hopps (2018), Saliers and Saliers (2017), and Yannaras (1984, 2011) offered language for understanding worship as revelation, sacrament, and ethical response. Theologies of relationality, communion, and presence provide the metaphysical backdrop for interpreting worship music as more than expression—as participation in the divine life.

From music education, the study adopts a pedagogical lens that prioritizes formation, embodiment, and participation. Researchers such as Boyce-Tillman (2016), van der Merwe and Habron (2015), and Quindag (2017) offered models for how musical experience can generate transformation, spiritual insight, and relational connection. The emphasis on musicking (Small, 1998) and community music (Higgins, 2012; Veblen, 2008) reframed music-making as a social and educational practice, not merely an artistic or theological one. This pedagogical vision affirms that worship leaders are not performers or technicians, but facilitators of spiritual and communal engagement.

From philosophy, the study draws tools for conceptual synthesis and critique. Philosophical inquiry allows for the integration of these diverse insights into a coherent framework that resists reductionism. Thinkers such as Buber (1937), Levinas (1969), Benjamin (2015), and Whale (2009) contributed to a relational ontology that situates being and knowing in encounter. Philosophy also supports the study's methodological posture: reflective, situated, and open to meaning-making that transcends disciplinary boundaries. This integration is not simply a thematic triangulation but a methodological

commitment. The study does not treat theology, music education, and philosophy as separate silos but as mutually informing domains. This reflects Jorgensen's (2003) call for music education to engage the fullness of human experience—including the spiritual and philosophical—and supported Slife's (2004) argument that understanding must emerge from within relational contexts.

It is within this interdisciplinary integration that the principle that results matter finds its place. While this study is philosophical and non-empirical in nature, it does not claim that spiritual formation or worship leadership should remain theoretically grounded but practically inert. As Bartleet (2023) noted in her evaluation of community music initiatives, meaningful frameworks must demonstrate impact—whether in increased participation, community connection, identity development, or transformation. Her work charts both short-term and long-term outcomes of community music practice, from shifts in emotional well-being and social engagement to more sustained changes in leadership, inclusion, and cultural imagination.

Figure 2: Bartleet (2023): Dimensions of Social Outcomes in Community Music

Though this study does not propose a quantitative metric, it affirms that if worship music is truly transformative, such transformation should be observable. This includes the fostering of congregational participation, the cultivation of spiritual attentiveness, and the shaping of ethical and communal sensitivity. Philosophy does not dismiss results; rather, it expands what counts as meaningful outcome. The interdisciplinary lens used in this study underscores that worship, like community music, must be accountable to its claims of transformation.

By uniting these three disciplines, this inquiry offers a methodological model for other interdisciplinary studies: one that is theologically grounded, pedagogically attentive, philosophically deep, and open to evidence of real-world formation and impact. It also models for worship leaders, educators, and theologians a way of thinking that honors complexity, resists simplification, and pursues depth in both understanding and practice.

Ethical Considerations

Although this study does not involve human participants, ethical reflection remains central to its philosophical and theological commitments. This research considers communities, traditions, and practices that carry deep spiritual significance for many believers, and the process of critique must therefore be handled with integrity, humility, and pastoral sensitivity. The ethical orientation of this study reflects its central claim: that worship music is a relational and ontological practice. As such, the way we think, write, and critique must mirror the relational attentiveness and dialogical openness that the framework itself proposes.

One ethical commitment of this study is to represent perspectives with fairness. Many of the thinkers and institutions discussed—particularly those from fundamentalist or conservative evangelical backgrounds—have made enduring contributions to worship practice. While the study critiques certain assumptions or limitations within these perspectives, it does not do so from a posture of dismissal or superiority. The goal is not to deconstruct but to reframe: to show how deeper philosophical and pedagogical reflection might enrich what is already meaningful in worship traditions.

Another ethical principle guiding this work is the responsibility of interpretation. Philosophical inquiry involves interpretation of texts, traditions, and practices, and such interpretation is always selective and situated. The researcher acknowledges that this project does not speak for all traditions or theological perspectives. Rather, it seeks to offer one coherent and constructive voice within a broader conversation. Moreover, this study resists the temptation to present a universal solution or normative model that disregards local context. What is proposed is a philosophical framework, not a prescriptive program. Its usefulness will depend on how it is contextualized, interpreted, and applied by communities of practice.

Finally, the study is committed to transformative generosity. Critique in this study is motivated not by opposition but by care. It reflects a desire to see worship music flourish as a site of spiritual growth, ethical responsiveness, and relational vitality. This ethic of engagement is inspired by scholars like Palmer (2010), who advocated for education as an act of hospitality, and Boyce-Tillman (2016), who saw music as a space of healing and wholeness.

Conclusion

This chapter has established the philosophical and methodological foundations of the study. Beginning with a theoretical account of philosophical inquiry, it clarified how this method functions not only to analyze but to construct new frameworks for meaning-making. Through an interdisciplinary rationale grounded in theology, music education, and philosophy, the chapter justified the use of philosophical inquiry to explore the formational and relational dimensions of worship music.

The chapter also articulated the ontological commitments that undergird the study, particularly relational ontology, which frames knowledge as emerging from context, relationship, and participation. The author's positionality was explored as both a resource and a lens, highlighting the significance of embedded practice and critical engagement. The methodological process was outlined in detail, describing a sequence of literature review, synthesis, framework construction, and application. Furthermore, the integration of theology, music education, and philosophy was shown to offer a fertile space for developing a holistic model of worship music as relational formation. The importance of practical impact and measurable transformation was also acknowledged, using insights from Bartleet (2023) to affirm that results matter—even in philosophical inquiry. Finally, ethical considerations were addressed, ensuring that critique is framed with respect, that interpretation is situated and transparent, and that the study contributes constructively to ongoing conversations in worship, theology, and education.

Together, these methodological commitments position the study to offer a rich and generative contribution to music education, particularly where it takes place in

church music and worship studies. The next chapter will present the conceptual framework developed through this inquiry—a relational, interdisciplinary, and transformative philosophy of worship music that synthesizes the insights and convictions of the preceding chapters and charts new directions for worship leadership, education, and spiritual formation.

CHAPTER 4

TOWARDS A RELATIONAL PHILOSOPHY OF CHURCH MUSIC

Introduction

Through this study, I propose a relational philosophy of church music, integrating relational ontology, community music, and insights on spirituality from music education to form a holistic conceptualization of worship music. Central to this argument is the recognition that church music, particularly in evangelical contexts, is often narrowly understood as merely theological expression or stylistic preference, neglecting its deeper potential as an ontological and spiritually formative practice. This misunderstanding leads to shallow practices that fail to recognize the opportunity each service represents, much less the opportunity for musicians and music educators to engage in meaningful community music making in church contexts.

Chapter one identified the problem that evangelical worship literature largely neglects interdisciplinary insights, resulting in a fragmented understanding of worship music. Moreover, the existing frameworks often reduce music's role to doctrinal messaging or aesthetic preference rather than recognizing its relational, communal, and pedagogical potential. The purpose of this study is to develop a holistic philosophical framework that positions worship music as a transformative, participatory, and spiritually formative practice, bridging gaps between theological discourse and broader academic scholarship from philosophy, music education, and community music. The research questions guiding this study were selected to support this purpose.

Chapter two explored the existing literature on relational ontology, spirituality in music and music education, historical worship theology, and community music. The historical and theological literature explored historical shifts in church music, from biblical and early church practices through the Reformation, evangelical revivalism, and contemporary worship movements. This historical survey established church music as an enduring site of musicking and educational practice yet significantly undertheorized within contemporary community music and music education scholarship. Additionally, it highlighted the limitations of evangelical literature, especially its dependence on popular authors rather than rigorous scholarly interdisciplinary perspectives.

Relational ontology, drawing particularly from Martin Buber (*I–Thou* encounters), Emmanuel Levinas (ethical responsibility to the Other), Andrew Benjamin (ontological relationality), Mark Whale (music as relational space), and Christos Yannaras (relational freedom), provides the philosophical foundation for understanding worship music as spiritually formative and personally transformative. This research also established music's role as an ontological act that forms identity and community through relational encounter. Community music, defined as inclusive, participatory, and process-oriented music-making, established the praxial relationship of music making in church contexts. This clearly connects to Small's (1998) concept of "musicking" as relational practice to the role of worship leaders, repositioning them as community music facilitators rather than performers. Finally, I synthesized research from spirituality in music education to argue that musical participation can create transformative spiritual encounters. This research established that spirituality in music education aligns closely

with the relational and formative goals of worship music.

Chapter three established the rationale of philosophical inquiry for this study. As the primary research method, philosophical inquiry emphasizes conceptual clarity, critical reflection, and interdisciplinary synthesis. Moreover, philosophical inquiry is particularly suited to exploring the ontological and pedagogical dimensions of worship music. I established the ontological commitments, advocating for a strongly relational ontology which emphasizes that knowledge is contextually embedded, embodied, and relationally situated. Finally, I clarified my insider-outsider positionality as both a practitioner and a critical researcher, balancing lived experience with scholarly critique. I demonstrated my commitment to ethical engagement through respectful critique and generous interpretation, avoiding reductionist or dismissive treatments of evangelical traditions.

Building on this foundation, this chapter articulates a relational philosophy of church music by clearly defining the conceptual framework derived from relational ontology and community music. This philosophy describes how worship leaders as community music facilitators can intentionally structure transformative worship experiences. Moreover, this chapter explores how an intentional approach based on this philosophy could change practical aspects of church music ministry, training, and practice. This chapter structures the relational philosophy of church music according to the four dimensions outlined in van der Merwe and Habron's (2015) conceptual model of spirituality in music education.

A Relational Theology of Worship

A foundational component of a transformative philosophy of church music is a relational theology of worship. This theology encompasses the biblical convictions and theological understandings that shape evangelical worship practices. Yet worship is more than ritual observance or stylistic tradition. As Peterson (2014) observed, "worship theology expresses the dimensions of a life orientation or total relationship with the true and living God" (p. 18). It is this holistic, relational life-orientation—expressed communally—that defines the scope of this section. While personal devotion is vital, the focus here is on corporate worship as a covenantal act carried out in community.

From an evangelical Christian perspective, worship is not primarily an aesthetic, emotional, or cultural activity. It is a theological act rooted in God's self-revelation and initiated by divine grace. Human worship is always a response—never the origin. At its core, worship reflects the imago Dei, the image of God imprinted on humanity, which includes the capacity and calling for relationship. Relationality is not incidental to worship; it is its essence, because it flows from the eternal relationality of the triune God. The Father, Son, and Spirit exist in perfect communion, and from this divine fellowship, humanity is invited into loving relationship. Thus, worship is not merely expressive; it is participatory. It is an invitation into the very life of the divine.

This covenantal nature of worship is clearly seen in the great Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4–6), a central confession of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Shema declares the oneness of God and commands God's people to love Him with undivided loyalty and holistic devotion. The love spoken of here is not sentimental affection but covenant

fidelity—akin to marriage vows. God, having delivered His people from bondage, calls for a response of loyal love. In this pattern, covenant precedes command, and deliverance precedes devotion. The same structure holds in Christian worship: through the mighty acts of Christ—His death and resurrection—God has delivered His people from sin and death, inviting them into covenantal worship rooted in relational fidelity.

Worship in Christocentric Theology

Christian worship is, at its core, Christ-centered, shaped by the person, presence, and redemptive work of Jesus. The incarnation marks the definitive moment of divine self-revelation and the foundation of Christian worship. As John 1:14 declares, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us," inaugurating a new way of relating to God through the embodied presence of Christ. Through Christ's atoning work, believers now have direct access to the divine presence (Hebrews 10:19–22), rendering worship not only possible but profoundly personal. Worship, therefore, is not oriented around cultural preferences, ritual forms, or stylistic debates, but is a response to the saving work of Christ and a celebration of His continuing presence.

Central to this orientation is the cross and resurrection, which stand as the defining events of Christian worship. Revelation 5:9–14 vividly portrays a heavenly vision of worship centered on the Lamb who was slain, whose worthiness stems not from ritual precision but redemptive sacrifice. This eschatological vision reframes worship on earth as a participatory echo of heaven's Christocentric song. Moreover, worship is not a call to precision in practice or ritual, as if our sacrifice enables the relationship with God. Rather, worship recognizes that God's acceptance of our worship is based exclusively on

the satisfactory payment (propitiation) of Christ's sacrifice.

However, this focus is often obscured in contemporary worship discourse, particularly in what has been termed the "worship wars"—debates over style, instrumentation, or liturgical form. Ingalls (2018) and Anderson (2022) critiqued the tendency to elevate aesthetic preferences above theological substance, warning that when worship becomes more about musical form than Christ's transformative presence, it loses its redemptive depth. A Christocentric theology reorients the church away from self-referential preferences and toward a posture of adoration, humility, and communal participation in the life of Christ.

Worship Regulations as Christological Foreshadowing

In some branches of popular church music literature, particularly within conservative evangelical traditions, Old Testament worship regulations are frequently cited to argue that God possesses fixed and enduring preferences for how He is to be worshiped—including specific musical styles or liturgical forms. These arguments often assume that the ritual details of the Mosaic covenant retain normative authority under the new covenant. However, a theological reading of Scripture suggests that the Old Testament's highly detailed worship system was not intended to prescribe eternal stylistic norms, but to foreshadow the redemptive work and mediatory role of Jesus Christ.

The book of Hebrews articulates this transition clearly, stating that the tabernacle and priesthood "serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven" (Hebrews 8:5, ESV), and that "the law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves" (Hebrews 10:1, ESV). The Old Testament worship

structures—temple, priesthood, sacrifices—were types that anticipated Christ as the great high priest (Hebrews 4:14), the once-for-all sacrifice (Hebrews 10:10), the true temple (John 2:21), and the only mediator between God and humanity (1 Timothy 2:5). These practices were preparatory, pedagogical, and prophetic—not prescriptive templates for Christian liturgy.

Jesus Himself reinforces this Christocentric reorientation in John 4. In response to the Samaritan woman's question about the proper location of worship, He declares, "A time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem" and that "true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth" (John 4:21–24, NIV). In this statement, Jesus collapses the categories of sacred space and ceremonial law, shifting the focus to spiritual authenticity and Christ-mediated truth.

Theological voices across traditions have expanded on this understanding. Bonhoeffer (1998) emphasized that both worship and community are mediated only through Jesus Christ, without whom there is discord between God and humanity and among human beings themselves. Tillich (1951), writing from an existential theological framework, warned against the idolatrous temptation to treat symbols, rituals, or styles as ends in themselves. For Tillich, religious forms are meaningful only insofar as they remain transparent to the divine reality they signify. When musical or liturgical forms are treated as ultimate, they obscure rather than reveal the truth of Christ.

Similarly, Yannaras (1984, 2011), writing from an Orthodox theological anthropology grounded in relational personhood, rejected both moralism and formalism. He claimed that true worship is not adherence to codified religious behavior but personal

participation in divine truth made possible through the incarnation. Christ transforms worship from ritual obligation into relational communion. Taken together, these insights affirm a theology of worship rooted in participation in Christ rather than the preservation of inherited forms. The detailed structures of Old Testament worship were pedagogical and prophetic, not stylistic blueprints. A Christocentric approach invites believers into a dynamic, Spirit-empowered encounter with God that transcends culture and style while remaining grounded in theological fidelity.

While many evangelical churches affirm this Christocentric theology in doctrine, they often revert to legalistic applications in practice, especially concerning moral and social norms. Where the New Testament envisions Christian liberty shaped by the Spirit and conformed to Christ, many churches seek to codify behavioral standards—dress, music, political ideology, or worship style—as marks of holiness. This produces a moralism wherein grace is the means of salvation but not the means of sanctification. Much of the popular literature reviewed in Chapter Two emerges from this framework. As the conceptual model in this chapter unfolds, these moralistic undercurrents will be critically examined considering a relational, grace-based theology of worship.

The Work of the Holy Spirit

A relational theology of worship must also attend to the role of the Holy Spirit, who enables and sustains true worship. According to Romans 8:15–16, the Spirit awakens the heart, grants access to the Father, and empowers the believer's response in worship. The Spirit not only moves individuals toward God, but unites the gathered body into communion with one another and with the divine (cf. Acts 2; 1 Cor. 12).

Through the Spirit, worship becomes participation in the divine life—a perichoretic movement into Trinitarian communion. The Spirit does not merely enhance the affective dimensions of worship; He is the source and sustainer of the encounter. Yet this spiritual reality is often misunderstood. When worship is reduced to emotionalism, the work of the Spirit is confused with mere affective highs. Crouch (2008) critiques the consumer orientation of much modern worship, warning against mistaking personal emotional experience for Spirit-led transformation. True spiritual worship is not consumption, but communion.

Worship as Relational Encounter

Worship, then, is best understood as a relational encounter. God reveals Himself—through Scripture, through Christ, and through the Spirit—and people respond in love, trust, and obedience (cf. John 4:23–24). This exchange is both vertical, in its encounter with God, and horizontal, in its mutual edification within the body of Christ. Ritual theory underscores this dynamic with concepts such as "active togetherness," collective effervescence, and shared meaning—frameworks that align with a relational understanding of corporate worship.

Community music provides further parallels. Like worship, community music emphasizes co-creation, participation, and shared meaning over performance and spectacle. Both are shaped by the values of openness, belonging, and mutual contribution. When church music functions in this way, it affirms relational theology not only in concept but in practice.

Worship as Transformative Formation

Worship is not only expressive; it is formational. In worship, believers are shaped by repeated encounters with God, self, and community. Worship shapes identity—offering a space where individuals encounter themselves in the presence of God and are formed in light of divine love (relational ontology). Worship builds community—gathering diverse individuals into one body, forming a people whose identity is not self-selected but God-given. And worship orients mission—propelling the church outward in response to God's holiness and love, as seen in Isaiah's prophetic calling (Isaiah 6) and the Great Commission (Matt. 28). However, when worship becomes transactional—focused on what one "gets out of it"—its formative power is diminished. Formation occurs through participation, not consumption. Worship is not a product but a process of being drawn into God's redemptive story.

Summary

Christian worship is Christ-centered, Spirit-enabled, relationally grounded, and formational in purpose. It invites believers into covenantal communion with God and one another, transcending stylistic and cultural boundaries while remaining anchored in theological truth. This relational theology sets the foundation for a philosophy of church music that is congruent with the values of community music.

The relational philosophy of church music developed in this study affirms that worship is always conducted in the tension between theological ideals and practical realities. Regelski (1975) described this dynamic as a "dialectical seesaw," where educators (and, by extension, worship leaders) navigate between the pull of aspiration

and the gravity of lived context. In Christian worship, the ideal is nothing less than the full realization of God's presence—a transcendent encounter that is both anticipated and partial in the present age. As Lewis (1940/2001) observed, "our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home" (p. 72). This eschatological perspective tempers our expectations: worship points toward communion with God but remains a shadow of the glory to come.

The task of the worship leader, then, is not to manufacture ideal outcomes but to facilitate meaningful, Spirit-empowered encounters within the limitations of people, time, and place. This creative synthesis—echoing Regelski's dialectic—requires theological imagination and spiritual discernment. It is not a compromise but a faithful act of leadership that honors the ideal by embodying it imperfectly, yet authentically, in community.

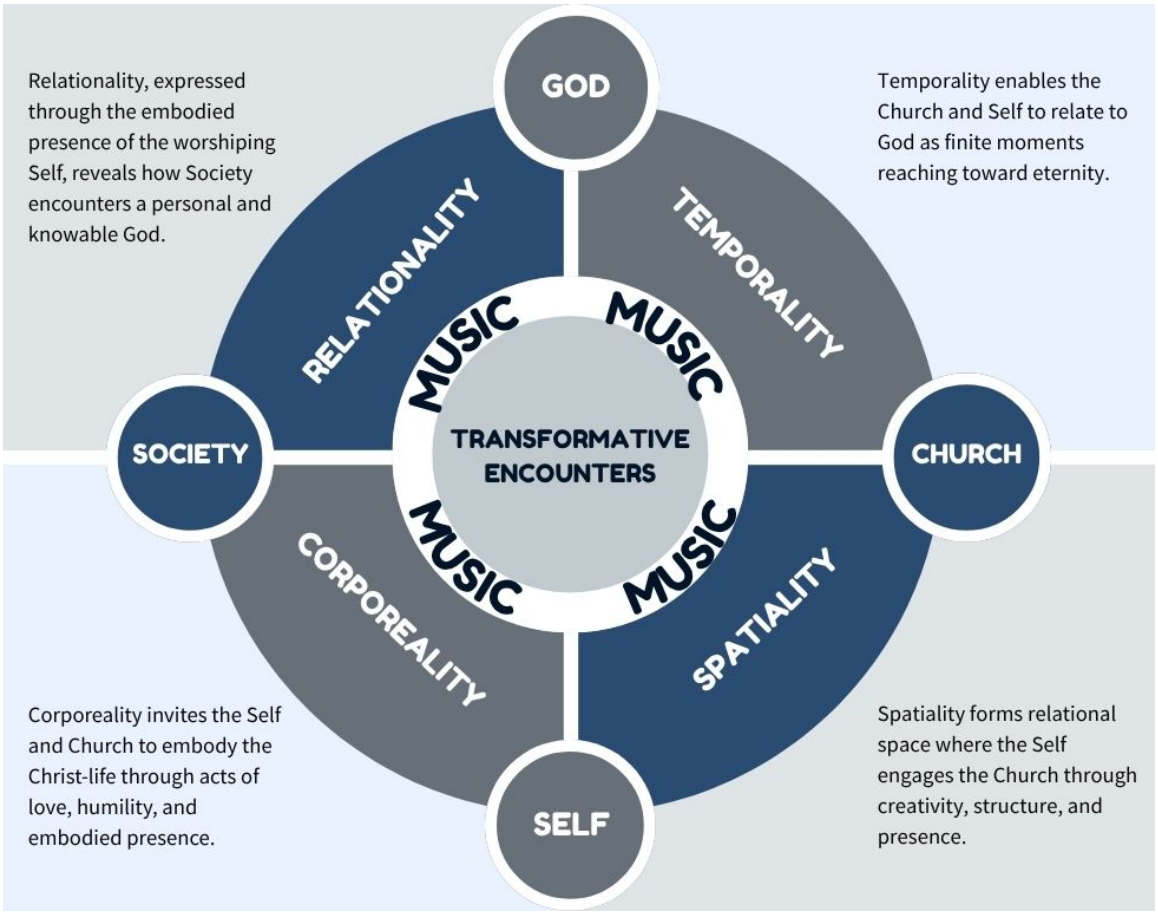
Relational Philosophy of Church Music

To visually articulate the conceptual framework emerging from this study, the following diagram synthesizes the philosophical foundations of relational worship as developed throughout the chapter. Drawing on van der Merwe's (2015) conceptual model for spirituality utilizing the four lifeworld existentials—relationality, temporality, corporeality, and spatiality—the model maps these dimensions onto corresponding relational domains of worship: God, Church, Self, and Society. These pairings reflect the dynamic ways in which human beings experience worship not as abstract theological content but as lived, multidimensional encounter. At each intersection, music mediates these existential relationships, serving as the integrative act that allows participants to

inhabit these dimensions simultaneously. Worship music, then, becomes more than a vehicle for theological ideas; it is a formative practice through which individuals and communities embody, express, and transform their relationship with the divine and one another.

At the center of the diagram is the phrase “Transformative Encounters,” representing the intended outcome of these musical interactions. Each existential dimension reveals a particular emphasis: relationality highlights the Self’s embodied witness of God to Society; temporality positions the Church and Self as agents relating to God in time; corporeality reflects the embodied Christ-life lived through love and humility; and spatiality underscores the importance of gathered, creative space where the Self meets the Church in communal formation. Music animates and sustains each of these connections. As such, this framework reframes the role of worship leaders not as performers or technicians, but as facilitators of transformative musical encounters—those who curate spaces, practices, and moments that attend to the fullness of human experience in worship.

Figure 3: Conceptual Model of a Relational Philosophy of Church Music (original graph)



Relationality

Relationality serves as the foundational dimension of a transformative philosophy of church music, grounding worship in the conviction that human beings are inherently interconnected—with one another, with themselves, with society, and with God. Informed by both relational ontology and community music scholarship, this perspective reframes music not as performance or product but as a participatory act of presence. Music becomes a lived event in which relational ties are not only expressed but also formed and deepened. In this view, church music cultivates conditions for personal

growth, communal solidarity, and spiritual transformation. The fundamental truth of worship is that God has revealed himself to humankind, and it is through the witness of both Self and Church to embody his characteristics in society.

Van Manen (1990) describes relationality as "the lived relation we maintain with others in the interpersonal space that we share with them" (p. 104), a dynamic echoed in Van der Merwe and Habron's (2015) framing of music as a practice grounded in connection. Even before music begins, we are already in relation—with the sacred Other, with our own embodied selves, and with the surrounding community. Musicking, then, becomes a way of acknowledging and making tangible these relationships. Theological reflections support this idea: in the embodiment of Christ, the Self becomes a vessel through which Society can encounter a personal and knowable God. In this way, relationality through music offers not only social cohesion but also spiritual witness.

In worship contexts, this relational energy manifests in both horizontal and vertical directions. Kraus (2009) defines spirituality as "a personal search to connect with the sacred" (p. 51). Church music meets this longing by drawing worshippers into a shared experience of the divine and of one another. Boyce-Tillman (2000) describes such moments as "musical spirituality"—transcendent awareness forged through collective aesthetic encounter. Similarly, community music practice values presence over perfection, recognizing that the meaning of music lies not in mastery but in mutuality. Within the gathered church, relationality through music allows the Self to embody God in ways that speak prophetically and pastorally to Society, thus making relational worship both a formative act and a theological witness.

Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Relationships

These connections are not only external. Music in worship fosters both interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships—each reinforcing the other. As Grise-Owens (2011) contends, spirituality is "both individual and communal" (p. 153). Church music must therefore be designed with attention to both personal reflection and relational interaction. This mirrors community music's emphasis on fostering relational confidence and safe musical spaces, where identity is formed through co-presence and interaction (Higgins, 2012).

A core component of this is gathering. The act of assembling, whether weekly or spontaneously, embodies the theology of togetherness. Whale (2009) describes music as the "in-between," the space where connection to others, the divine, and the self is negotiated and deepened. Scriptural imperatives like Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 highlight the mutuality of worship, while community music scholarship emphasizes the importance of *participatory access*—everyone having a role in co-creating the experience.

Considering increased digitization and the rise of artificial creativity, the church must be reimagined as a sanctuary for human presence, co-creation, and spiritual encounter. The model developed in this study assumed that transformation occurred not through passive content consumption but through active, embodied participation—what Van Manen (1990) called "lived experience." Worship, especially musical worship, formed a relational ecology that could not be replicated by AI or remote simulation. Unlike machine-generated soundscapes or digital avatars, corporate singing—filled with

breath, tension, imperfection, and resonance—embodied the theological reality of the Body of Christ.

Driver (1998) contended that ritual acts were transformative because they invited full-person participation within a shared symbolic world. In the same vein, Bonhoeffer (1954) asserted that life together in Christian community was grounded in mutual presence and confession—something digital platforms could approximate but not fulfill. This framework held that worship was not optimized through artificial intelligence but realized through relational fidelity. Singing together, lamenting together, improvising in musical prayer—these were not nostalgic rituals but spiritual resistance movements that asserted our creatureliness and connectedness. In the age of intelligent machines, the church became a place not of performance but of participation, where we were rehumanized through creative encounter.

Gathering must also be physical and local. Although digital tools provide some level of connection, Van der Merwe and Habron's emphasis on embodiment challenges worship leaders to resist purely virtual forms of musical engagement. Community music practices, from drum circles to choral groups, thrive on spatial proximity and embodied presence, emphasizing that music is made *with* people, not just *for* them. As Turkle (2011) has noted, digital connection often trades intimacy for immediacy, leaving individuals more connected but less known.

Meaning and Transcendence

Worship music also offers space for meaning-making and transcendence. These are not secondary outcomes—they are core to the church's musical life. As Van Manen

(1990) reflects, aesthetic experience "allows us to transcend ourselves and find a sense of purpose and reason for living" (p. 105). In church music, this transcendence is not escapist. Rather, it grounds the worshipper more fully in reality by orienting them toward God and community. The meaning created through worship is often co-constructed, formed in the spaces between the worship leader and the congregation, the known and the unknown, the expected and the surprising.

This meaning-making dynamic is central to community music, which approaches musical experience as emergent, context-driven, and relational. Community musicians often affirm the power of aesthetic moments like spontaneous harmonization or shared silence to carry deep spiritual weight. These experiences transcend style and point to what Van der Merwe and Habron describe as a lived spirituality embedded in the musical moment.

Debates in evangelical circles about musical morality (Aniol, 2009; Garlock & Woetzel, 1998; Jones, 2006) often miss this communal dimension of meaning. Their taxonomic frameworks suggest meaning can be isolated and fixed. By contrast, both community music and spiritual music education traditions recognize musical meaning as socially and relationally constructed, formed not only by musical elements, but by the lived experiences and interpretive communities surrounding them (Reimer, 2022).

My own experience affirms this. While living in Romania in the early 2000s, I was struck by how minor-key worship songs expressed hope amid suffering. At first, I found this contradictory—how could a song about heaven sound so sad? But then I learned that these songs emerged from stories of persecution, scarcity, and survival. Their

relational meaning arose not from congruence with Western tonal expectations but from honest resonance with the community's lived experience. This is a central insight of both community music and relational ontology: music means something because of the people who gather around it.

Spiritual Virtues and Vices

Relational transformation is also ethical and spiritual. According to Carr (2010), spiritual vices like pride, fear, and egotism inhibit connection, while virtues such as compassion, forgiveness, and humility enable us to transcend ourselves. Music, then, becomes a mirror: revealing what we bring into the room—our openness or resistance—and shaping what we become through communal participation.

Community music pedagogy frequently emphasizes this ethical dimension. It invites not only musical growth but moral and relational maturity. Musicians are taught to listen, to yield, to share space—all of which are deeply theological as well. Boyce-Tillman (2000) referred to what might be called a "unitive experience," where music draws people beyond ego into communion—with others, the cosmos, and the divine. Relational worship is not merely about good feelings or communal bonding; it is about cultivating the virtues necessary to dwell well with others and with God. This moral and spiritual dimension challenges worship leaders to model and nurture a relational ethos marked by hospitality, love, and self-giving.

Implications for Church Music as Community Music

A transformative philosophy of church music rooted in relationality aligns closely with the ethos of community music. Both traditions affirm the formative power of music

when it is practiced relationally, inclusively, and communally. The worship leader, then, is not merely a performer or curator but a facilitator of shared musical and spiritual encounters. This perspective requires a fundamental shift from platform-based presentation to community-based participation.

Connection invites worship leaders to design musical spaces where people are drawn toward one another and toward God. This may involve prioritizing songs that emphasize mutual dependence, fostering musical familiarity across generations, or incorporating testimonies and story-sharing that deepen relational bonds. The value lies not in musical precision but in mutual presence.

Interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships remind us that worship must make room for both personal reflection and communal interaction. Drawing from community music practices, churches can integrate relational rituals—greetings, responsive singing, group prayer, improvisation—that reinforce the shared nature of worship. Seating arrangements, eye contact, and even silence can become tools of relational pedagogy.

Meaning and transcendence shift the goal of music ministry from emotional atmosphere to *co-constructed significance*. Music is not merely the backdrop for spiritual events—it is the means through which those events are often realized. By approaching each song as a dialogical act, worship leaders can honor the contextual and communal dimensions of meaning. This mirrors the community music value of meeting participants "where they are" and building from shared stories and symbols.

Spiritual virtues and vices push beyond technique or mood to ask: *Who are we becoming through our worship?* Just as community music encourages ethical

relationality—listening, yielding, co-creating—so too must worship music cultivate humility, compassion, and hospitality. Worship leaders model these virtues through posture and practice, shaping a community where music forms character, not just sound.

Ultimately, a relational philosophy of church music calls for a participatory, embodied, and morally formative approach to worship, where everyone belongs, everyone contributes, and everyone is changed. In this way, church music becomes not just *community music*—but kingdom music, rooted in love, shaped by grace, and oriented toward the transformation of both self and society.

Spatiality

Spatiality refers not merely to physical location but to the lived experience of space as it is felt, shaped, and inhabited. Van der Merwe and Habron (2015) describe this as "lived space"—the affective and relational dimensions of an environment that influence perception, connection, and meaning. Spatiality is not abstract; it is experienced through the body, in relation to others, and through one's orientation toward the world. As Merleau-Ponty (1962) observed, "there would be no space at all for me if I had no body" (p. 117). Thus, space in worship is not neutral—it is formative. Every sonic, visual, and architectural element communicates a theology of presence, relationship, and belonging.

In church music contexts, spatiality speaks to the intentional arrangement of physical and social environments where worship unfolds. Music activates and transforms space—whether through gathered silence, communal singing, architectural resonance, or the symbolic geography of the worship setting. Community music literature affirms that

space is pedagogical: circular seating, accessible instruments, or flattened hierarchies invite participation and dissolve distance. Likewise, in worship, spatiality becomes a bridge between Self and Church. It is within this gathered space—curated through creativity and presence—that the worshiper not only engages others but also locates themselves within the body of Christ. Spatiality, then, enables worship music to serve as an embodied invitation into shared presence and sacred encounter.

Spatiality and Theological Presence

Theologically, spatiality prompts reflection on how God meets people in particular places—whether physical or symbolic—and how those spaces are made sacred through divine presence. In Scripture, encounters with God often unfold within specific spatial frames: the burning bush, the tabernacle, the temple, the upper room. Yet these places are not inherently sacred; they become holy through relational encounter. As Jesus taught in John 4:21–24, worship is no longer tied to a mountain or temple but takes place "in spirit and in truth" wherever God is rightly known and adored. This decentralization affirms that sacredness resides not in architecture or objects, but in presence—divine, communal, and personal. The church, then, is not the space but the people (ekklesia), gathered in Christ's name (Matthew 18:20). Evangelical tradition, with its rejection of icons and ritualized sacraments, reinforces this idea: space becomes sacred through relational presence, not religious artifacts.

This perspective challenges the sacred–secular divide often upheld in evangelical literature. While evangelicals reject icons and ritualized sacraments, they have often substituted their own ritualized norms—musical styles deemed sacred, standards of dress,

the use of pews versus chairs, or screens versus hymnals. Each of these debates reflects an appeal to sacredness rooted in form rather than presence. Yet, if, as Brown and Hopps (2018) argue, popular musical styles can evoke transcendent and spiritual experiences comparable to those associated with classical or liturgical traditions, then sacredness cannot be defined by musical form alone. Such a view reveals a utilitarian understanding of music—where music is valued primarily as a tool to achieve spiritual outcomes—rather than as a relational and formative act. As Whale (2009) suggests, music is the "between" of relational meeting (see figure 3 above). When people gather with shared values, relational awareness, and genuine love for one another, their musicking becomes sacred—not because of stylistic conformity, but because of the presence it fosters.

Categories of Spatiality

Awareness functions as the first movement into sacred spatiality. It is a reorientation of the senses and the spirit toward attentiveness—toward seeing, hearing, and feeling what might otherwise be missed. Williamson (2010) suggested that any moment marked by "extraordinary temporal or spatial delineation" may be considered sacred (p. 42). In this way, space is not merely filled by sound but opened by attention. This echoes Buber's (1937) idea of encounter as a readiness to be addressed and Levinas's (1969) framing of ethical responsibility in the face of the Other. In worship, this awareness might be cultivated through silence, stillness, architecture, or intentional use of movement and posture. It draws participants into presence—both God's and one another's—making the space feel "thick" with meaning.

Such epistemological ruptures, moments when inherited ways of knowing and

meaning-making are disrupted, can themselves become sacred. When the familiar categories through which we understand worship, community, or even God are destabilized, we are invited into an encounter that transcends cognition. These ruptures expose the limits of human understanding and create space for divine revelation, for the Other to be experienced as truly Other. In this sense, transformation does not occur in spite of rupture but through it; the breaking of epistemological certainty can become a threshold for sacred encounter and renewed relational awareness.

Awe and wonder follow naturally from awareness, as the heart begins to perceive the connectedness and intimacy of the moment. Wonder, as Debenham and Debenham (2008) suggested, "opens the door to sacred transformative experiences" (p. 50). It is the soul's exhale in the presence of mystery. These feelings are often evoked through music's capacity to transcend the limitations of speech, bringing worshipers into contact with beauty, complexity, and meaning beyond explanation. In the church context, awe may be stirred by harmonies that evoke longing, or by lyrics that confront the grandeur of God. Wonder disrupts familiarity and fosters humility, positioning the congregation not as performers or consumers, but as recipients of grace in a world infused with divine glory.

Transcendence arises when the experience of worship suspends normal boundaries of time, place, and self. Carr (2010) described this state as being lifted above ordinary concerns. For some, it feels like floating; for others, like being deeply grounded in a presence that envelops them. This dynamic supports the theological view of worship as a foretaste of the coming kingdom—an eschatological inbreaking that reorients perception and longing. Transcendence in music, then, is not escapism but alignment. It

positions the worshiper within the bigger narrative of redemption and communion. The literature supports this experience as central to transformation, enabling participants to see themselves, their community, and their God differently, even if just for a moment (Debenham & Debenham, 2008).

Ecstasis takes the worshiper "outside" of the ordinary self, beyond guarded rationality and into a space of embodied encounter. Bogdan (2010) defined ecstasis as being "seized and transported…by pleasure so intense it seems almost painful to endure" (p. 119). In community music settings, this is often where laughter, tears, or spontaneous song erupt. In church music, it might be when voices swell in harmony, or when stillness deepens during a soft reprise. Ecstasis is not disorder but openness—an undivided heart momentarily freed from the managing self. These moments are powerful not only because they mark affective peaks, but because they often coincide with shared vulnerability and embodied unity, key elements in both worship and community music practice.

Suprarationality completes the spatial arc, marking a shift into the ineffable. As Hyde (2005) explains, this is the "space of mystery," beyond enlightened thinking and discursive language (p. 38). While theology explains, music often reveals. This resonates with my critique of over-verbalized worship: not all truth can be stated, and not all encounters can be planned. Suprarationality reminds the worship leader that not every moment needs commentary; sometimes the best response is silence, repetition, or simple musical space. Matsunobu (2011) pointed to spirituality as the universal language of

music—an insight that aligns with the theological tradition where God is known best by acknowledging what cannot be said.

Insights and Implications for Church Music as Community Music

Community music reinforces the idea that space is never neutral—it shapes participation, relationships, and meaning. Whether in cafés, parks, or clinics, community musicians curate environments that lower barriers, decentralize authority, and invite shared ownership. These spatial dynamics often foster *active togetherness* and *collective effervescence* (Van der Merwe & Habron, 2015)—communal moments where emotional energy, embodied presence, and shared focus converge. The church, too, must reimagine its worship environments as formative spaces, not merely stages for spiritual content delivery. The layout of a sanctuary, the embrace of silence, or the positioning of musicians and congregants all influence whether the space invites encounter or enforces distance.

In this light, spatial design becomes an act of pastoral imagination. Every spatial choice communicates theological meaning—before a word is sung or a chord is struck. Lighting that softens rather than spotlights, seating that invites rather than divides, or room flow that encourages movement and mutual visibility can all cultivate a sense of sacred belonging. These are not peripheral design decisions; they are *liturgical acts* that shape how people relate to God and each other. In a transformative philosophy of church music, worship space becomes a kind of *ritual architecture*—not only facilitating spiritual experiences but forming a people capable of love, wonder, and communal presence. The goal is not to manipulate atmosphere for emotional effect, but to craft

spaces that honor the relational, eschatological nature of worship. When leaders curate space with this intention, the room itself participates in the sacred becoming not just a container for worship, but an active agent in transformation.

Temporality

Temporality, described by Van Manen (1990) as "lived time" (p. 104), is inseparable from our embodied and relational experience in the world. In worship, time is not merely chronological or sequential but deeply experiential—shaped by anticipation, memory, improvisation, and presence. Music in worship participates in this lived temporality by stretching and contracting time: lingering in silence, suspending the moment through melodic repetition, or accelerating energy through rhythmic flow. These temporal shifts can open participants to profound awareness, sometimes described as spiritual flow, timeless presence, or deep joy. Such moments are not interruptions of time but intensifications of it—markers of sacred encounter mediated through music.

Within a Christian theological framework, temporality must be considered alongside its counterpoint: eternality. Eternity, in biblical theology, is not merely a measure of infinite duration but the domain of God's unchanging presence (cf. Ps. 90:2; Rev. 1:8). As Wittgenstein famously observed, "eternal life belongs to those who live in the present" (1961, p. 72). When worship music cultivates attentiveness to the present—what Van Der Merwe and Habron describe as "each moment is a now"—it evokes a kind of temporality that gestures toward the eternal. Moments of musical stillness, unstructured improvisation, or congregational flow open space for worshippers to encounter the God who is beyond time yet meets us within it.

Within the gathered church, temporality becomes shared. As the Self joins with the Church in musical worship, time is no longer personal alone—it becomes communal and eschatological. Worship music positions the Church as a people between times: remembering God's faithfulness, encountering Him in the present, and anticipating future redemption. Through this shared temporality, music shapes the Church's collective memory and identity, helping worshipers rehearse the story of God in time.

This attention to temporality also reframes church music as a journey, not merely a delivery mechanism for content. Spirituality, according to Kraus (2009), is an "ongoing process," and so is the formation of a worshiping community. Music becomes a formative path, one that may include struggle, silence, joy, and discovery over time (Carr, 2010; Debenham & Debenham, 2008). Within this understanding, temporality invites iterative, culture-making practices rather than fixed liturgical templates. Crouch (2008) argues that culture is not merely received but made—and worship music can become one of the most potent ways the church forms, sustains, and reshapes its culture through time.

The implications of Crouch's (2008) framework become particularly generative when applied to a relational philosophy of church music. In many congregational contexts, musicians unconsciously operate from one of the postures Crouch critiques: condemning secular styles as unholy, critiquing culture through doctrinal grids, mimicking popular sounds with sanitized lyrics, or consuming trends with little theological reflection. While each of these responses may arise as valid gestures in specific moments, they often calcify into default postures that limit creative and pastoral responsiveness.

In contrast, Crouch's call for cultivation and creation invites a shift from reactive posturing to proactive stewardship. Worship leaders, in this view, are not just song selectors but curators of a musical and spiritual ecology—artists and gardeners shaping spaces where beauty, lament, hope, and encounter are made possible. This posture is inherently temporal and relational: it requires discernment of the present moment, openness to change, and faithfulness to both theological tradition and communal context. Church music, then, becomes an embodied practice of faithful presence, where culture is not feared or copied but engaged with hope-filled creativity. In this light, Crouch's vision affirms the role of the church musician as a culture-maker—rooted in tradition, responsive to time, and attuned to the relational rhythms of community worship.

By allowing musical practices to unfold over weeks, seasons, and liturgical years, worship leaders serve not just as curators of setlists but as guides through temporal formation. Rather than chasing the novel or nostalgic, they cultivate practices that draw people into shared memory, creative anticipation, and collective growth. Joy, as Levitz (2001) reminds us, is not just an outcome but a process—an unfolding sense of meaning and spiritual fulfillment born through repeated engagement. Randles (2015) echoes this with his emphasis on music as a means of "imagining the good life."

Even in popular music, a shift toward co-creative, participatory artistry can be observed in the work of contemporary musicians like Jacob Collier. While deeply immersed in digital tools and sophisticated production, Collier has consistently emphasized relationality in his performances—inviting audiences to sing in spontaneous harmony, layering voices across global collaborations, and treating musical expression as

a shared, unfolding conversation rather than a solitary product. His success challenges the binary between individual virtuosity and communal creativity, demonstrating that even in technologically advanced contexts, the hunger for embodied, collective participation persists. Such artistic movements parallel the theological claim of this study: that worship music, at its best, is not merely delivered but discovered together through presence, mutuality, and trust.

A relational philosophy of church music must therefore resist default postures and cultivate responsive, discerning gestures. It embraces the world as something to be engaged, shaped, and offered back to God—not with suspicion or mimicry, but with hopeful co-creativity and deep love. Church musicians, as culture-makers, are invited to reimagine worship not as a subset of aesthetic or doctrinal categories but as a practice of faithful presence—embodying truth, inviting encounter, and forming community.

In this way, temporality affirms that church music is both a present encounter and a long obedience. It recognizes flow states and spiritual breakthroughs as gifts, but not the only goal. Instead, the goal is faithful iteration: a musical way of life that trains hearts to live more fully in the present while anticipating the eternal.

Journey: Spirituality as Becoming

Temporality, as Van Manen (1990) described, is *lived time*—not objective clock-time, but the subjective experience of time as it unfolds in our consciousness and relationships. One of the clearest temporal motifs in spiritual musicking is that of journey. As Kraus (2009) noted, spirituality is a "dynamic, ongoing process" that often unfolds across varied contexts—religious and non-religious alike—and involves

negotiating one's relationship with the sacred. This perspective frames musicking as a site of continual spiritual becoming rather than fixed belief expression. Debenham and Debenham (2008) called this an "experiential journey inward," while Palmer (2010) described it as a "growth journey" (p. 165). These descriptions highlight the unfolding, durational character of spiritual formation through music. Boyce-Tillman (2009) reinforced this by pointing to music's unique capacity to house both public meaning and private transformation—creating space for the gradual maturation of the individual.

Joy and Immanence

Joy, as a temporal phenomenon, surfaces in musical experiences that heighten our awareness of the present. Levitz (2001) linked joy to Dalcroze's philosophy of movement-based music education, describing how technical mastery ultimately aims at releasing joy, spiritual fulfillment, and personality development (p. 97). In this frame, joy is not instantaneous pleasure but an unfolding quality—a processual state cultivated through musical immersion and embodied expression.

This focus on joy as both outcome and orientation echoes Hyde's (2005) phenomenological insight that time accelerates in joy and slows in boredom or anxiety. The experience of joy reveals time not as uniform but textured—dense, vibrant, and spiritually significant. Joy, therefore, becomes a temporal register of immanence, a way of inhabiting the *now* with full presence and shared affective resonance.

Flow and Altered Time

Another key expression of temporality is flow, a concept developed by Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (1992) to describe peak experiences of

engagement, creativity, and absorption. In these states, time perception is altered or lost altogether. As Palmer (2010) observes, spiritual understanding often arises only when one is fully present in the moment, unconcerned with past or future—a condition created by intense listening and performing (p. 166).

Flow is also marked by the dissolution of dualities, as Bogdan (2003) notes, citing Csikszentmihalyi's description of a state in which there is little distinction "between self and environment, between stimulus and response, or between past, present, and future" (p. 86). These are not escapist states, but deeply relational experiences where individuals become porous to one another and the musical moment. Elliott (1995) extends this to music education, asserting that dynamic musical practices create the conditions for optimal experience and enjoyment through the loss of self-consciousness (pp. 116–117).

Struggle and Growth

Temporality also entails disruption, ambiguity, and the durational nature of growth. Carr (2010) highlighted that the spiritual journey may include struggle, while Debenham and Debenham (2008) described a path toward "wholeness and engagement" (p. 46)—a process that often necessitates lingering in discomfort. Such growth is not immediate; it requires the slow movement through unresolved or even painful musical and spiritual terrain.

Boyce-Tillman (2000) observed that music can help integrate private pain into shared experience, offering an aesthetic and communal path toward maturity. These insights point to a temporality that is not euphoric or flow-like, but instead marked by patient endurance. Musical moments of hesitation, silence, or unresolved dissonance

become spiritual thresholds rather than mistakes. Temporality here signifies the courage to remain—to continue forming in and through time, even when the way forward is not clear.

Eternality and the Present Moment

Finally, Van Der Merwe and Habron (2015) explore eternality as a dimension of musical experience that transcends ordinary time. Yob (2011) offers a vivid example of this in her reflection on encountering the eternal while sensing her own finitude, writing, "I glimpsed the eternal and… knew that infinity was hospitable and safe" (p. 43). This form of temporality evokes timelessness, not as endless duration, but as an intense inhabitation of the present that feels unbounded by sequence.

Stump and Kretzmann (2000) define eternality as a state proper to minds or persons that exist "beginninglessly, endlessly and timelessly" (p. 255), while Wittgenstein (1961) offers a more experiential framing: "Eternal life belongs to those who live in the present" (p. 72). These conceptualizations reinforce the experiential reports in the musical vignette shared by Van Der Merwe and Habron, where participants, sitting in a circle, enter a space beyond verbal language and linear progression. In this "now," sounds carry the group rather than being carried, and time seems to stand still.

Such musical moments suspend normal markers of before and after. They defy linguistic encoding and instead communicate through tone, gesture, and resonance. Far from being ineffable anomalies, these experiences are part of the temporal range of spiritual musicking—and may be among the most deeply remembered and formative.

Implications for Church Music as Community Music

Recognizing the role of temporality in spiritual musicking invites a fundamental shift in how church music is conceived. Worship is not merely presentation or persuasion, but a process. Community music principles provide a practical and pedagogical framework for translating these temporal insights into church music practice. The following implications offer ways church musicians might embrace temporality as both a formative and transformative dimension of congregational life.

Church musicians must learn to craft musical experiences as ongoing journeys, not standalone events. Drawing from community music's emphasis on sustained engagement over time, this means resisting the pressure to deliver instant emotional impact or polished performance. Instead, leaders can design worship that honors long-term formation: rotating familiar songs across seasons, anchoring music to the church calendar (one of the strengths of a liturgical approach), and inviting people into spiritual progressions that unfold slowly and relationally.

Rather than focusing on novelty or production value, the temporality of journey reminds leaders that faith is formed through repetition and relational continuity. Music becomes the companion of the congregation's journey—not only expressing belief but shaping it over time. This speaks to the value of singing songs that reflect the generations of the church. Singing the hymns that were essential to the journey of the elderly congregants connects younger generations to a historical faith. Excluding the new songs of a younger generation equally disrupts the iterative journey of their faith. This invites creativity on the part of church musicians to be both iterative and timeless at the same

time, or at least in balance.

Community music encourages low-barrier, high-agency participation where joy emerges through shared musical making, not passive observation. Within church settings, this suggests cultivating worship environments where excellence does not eclipse accessibility. Joy is not a performance outcome but a shared relational state that arises when people are given permission to be present and expressive. Church musicians can intentionally curate spaces where joy is released through simplicity, collective rhythm, body movement, or improvisation. Drawing from Dalcroze-based approaches (Levitz, 2001), joy becomes a liturgical tool that not only enlivens the moment but deepens relational bonds.

Overly restrictive standards of expression can diminish the joy of worship. Conservative evangelicals often criticize such expression in a pendulum swing away from charismatic theology, but in doing so they deplete worship of its natural joyous expression. The scriptures demonstrate these gestures like dancing, clapping, shouting, raising hands, and falling on knees as appropriate and joyous responses in worship. Worship leaders should not only allow such expressive responses but also demonstrate them.

The experience of flow depends on clear structure, mutual focus, and the freedom to contribute meaningfully. Community music ensembles often nurture flow by balancing familiar patterns with improvised elements, creating conditions where participants lose track of time and enter immersive states. In church music, this requires rethinking liturgical design: allowing moments to linger, avoiding overly rigid timing, and training

worship teams to respond to the room, not just the set list. When church music prioritizes engineered spontaneity over rigid performance precision, flow becomes more likely, not as an emotional high, but as a mutual state of sacred attentiveness.

This approach in worship planning and performance may be referred to as engineered spontaneity. As a church grows in formational awareness and a sense of journey, worship leaders are better equipped to anticipate the congregation's response to specific stimuli in the music. Practice also allows them to respond more readily to unpredicted response. Examples of such sensitivity can be seen in both the "Asbury Outpouring" in 2024, where one night of worship and prayer turned into weeks of ongoing, spontaneous worship that attracted thousands from across the country.

One of the great insights from community music is that growth often emerges from tension—from mistakes, silences, and unresolved moments. In contrast, church music often gravitates toward polished experiences that avoid awkwardness. Yet, as Abramo (2017) observed, the quest for perfection can conceal the very labor and learning that make music human, creating what he called a "phantasmagoria*"* in which performance masks the process that produced it. The temporality of struggle, by contrast, invites a theology of patience, lament, and staying power. Church musicians can reframe these tensions as necessary thresholds or moments when worshipers are invited to wait, to listen, or to dwell in unresolved emotion. Rather than masking discomfort, music can serve as a vessel for carrying it together, echoing Boyce-Tillman's (2000) understanding of music as a bridge between private pain and public meaning.

This perspective invites the church to reimagine how it responds to suffering. In

my own church experience, there was an inordinate emphasis on happy, victorious music, emphasizing what seemed like a white-knuckle approach to simply push through pain and pretend that you are happy. The Psalms reflect the entire range of human emotion—sadness, joy, elation, sorrow, regret, confusion, and anger. When a church suffers together, acknowledging the tension between the future redemption and the "not yet," it gives congregants the words and expressions to grieve, and through grief to heal.

Finally, church musicians should recognize and protect moments of musical timelessness. These may occur in silence, in lingering repetition, or in spontaneous communal sound-making. Such experiences defy easy scripting but are more likely to arise when leaders create ritual spaces for deep presence. In community music, this might look like open circles or vocal improvisation; in church settings, it might involve call-and-response, sustained harmony, or wordless vocalization. These practices make room for participants to dwell in the sacred present—what Van Der Merwe and Habron (2015) describe as "shared suspensions of time."

Cultivating eternality requires that church musicians resist the urge to fill every second, allowing instead for the Spirit to move in time's stillness. These are not sentimental pauses, but spiritual events where God is encountered in a way that transcends language and measure. For example, at the Passion Conference of 2025, an entire stadium, with no prompt from the worship leaders, repeated the chorus of "Agnus Dei" for nearly 20 minutes. The worship leaders did not attempt to regain control but were equally captured in a moment where time seemed to stand still.

Corporeality

Corporeality, or the lived body, referred to the essential reality that human beings were always bodily in the world (Van Manen, 1990). As one of the four lifeworld existentials, corporeality emphasized that all human experience—musical, relational, and spiritual—was embodied. Van der Merwe and Habron (2015) identified four central dimensions of corporeality that shaped spirituality in music education: embodiment, sensory experience, creativity, and breath. These aspects positioned the body not as incidental to spirituality, but as the very medium through which spiritual and musical meaning was perceived, expressed, and shared. In a relational philosophy of church music, the body became a site of encounter, participation, and spiritual formation.

Embodiment affirmed that all sensation and perception arose through bodily experience. As Hyde (2005) noted, "phenomenologically, human beings are always bodily in the world. It is our way of being-in-the-world" (p. 38). Van der Merwe and Habron (2015) argued that cognition and sensation were inseparable in the embodied mind, rejecting dualisms that privileged the intellect over the body. Theological and phenomenological perspectives reinforced this connection; for example, Hannah (1994) described the human spirit as "transparently embodied," and the human body as "transparently inspired" (as cited in Williamson, 2010, p. 45). Such views affirmed that the body was the locus of both human and divine encounter.

Sensory experience, the second category, extended embodiment into the domains of hearing, touch, movement, and proprioception. Palmer (2010), drawing from Lakoff and Johnson, asserted that "spiritual experience is embodied," and thus must be "a

consequence of what is happening in our bodies and brains" (p. 162). These physical dimensions of awareness—such as the feel of air during breath, the vibration of sound in the chest, or the resonance of voices in communal song—contributed to the felt quality of spiritual presence in music-making.

Creativity, as the third dimension, was also rooted in corporeality. Boyce-Tillman (2000) observed that creativity involved both bodily action and spiritual transcendence, often functioning as a vehicle for ecstasy or peak experience. Van der Merwe and Habron (2015) affirmed that human creativity was a function of embodiment and could afford spiritual expression. Yob (2010) described this creative capacity as both expressive and generative—capable of manifesting spiritual insight across religious and nonreligious contexts. While AI can assist in generating and refining artistic ideas (Elfar & Dawood, 2023), the concept of collective effervescence in worship—where meaning is co-created through shared bodily presence—remains outside the scope of algorithmic generation and requires human creativity. In musical worship, this creative impulse was not only about composition or improvisation, but about the relationally responsive, physically grounded act of offering sound, gesture, or presence as worship.

Breath, the final aspect of corporeality, carried deep spiritual and symbolic meaning. Van der Merwe and Habron (2015) emphasized that breath was not only physiological but ontological—central to many traditions' understanding of life and spirit. Etymologically linked to the Latin *spiritus*, breath had long symbolized divine presence. Matsunobu (2011), for instance, cited the role of breath in Japanese shakuhachi tradition, where one respondent described the breath as a creative and spiritual tool

capable of surpassing the limits of formal musical systems. In Christian worship, breath bore similar significance, linked both to the Spirit of God (ruach/pneuma) and to the embodied practice of singing, praying, or simply being present with others.

These insights found strong resonance in the ethos of community music. Community music practices affirmed that all musical engagement was fundamentally embodied and that sensory, creative, and breath-based experiences were vital to participatory learning. Higgins (2012) and Veblen (2018) emphasized that improvisation, movement, and gesture were pedagogical tools, not distractions. Van der Merwe and Habron (2015) reinforced that spiritual connection in music education arose from embodied presence, not abstract principles. Community music, then, provided a fertile model for worship leaders who desired to foster incarnational and participatory experiences within congregational contexts.

Implications for Church Music as Community Music

Integrating corporeality into church music practice invites a reorientation of worship leadership toward embodied presence, inclusive participation, and theological integrity. First, church musicians and worship leaders should affirm the body as central to spiritual experience by creating space for embodied worship. Movement, gesture, posture, and breath are not merely expressive additions but essential modes of spiritual encounter. Practices such as lifting hands, bowing, swaying, or singing in full voice become physical manifestations of relational openness and divine responsiveness.

Educators and leaders must also teach through the body, emphasizing breath control, sensory awareness, and physical grounding as core dimensions of both spiritual

formation and musical development. This pedagogy affirms the unity of body, mind, and spirit, encouraging worshipers to become more fully present in each moment of liturgy or song. Creativity, long misunderstood as a cognitive or artistic function alone, should be reframed as a spiritual practice. Improvisation, visual expression, dance, or spontaneous vocalizations can become sacred offerings—relationally responsive acts that emerge from within the community and return as worship.

In modeling such practices, worship leaders should embody incarnational leadership, reflecting Christ's humility, presence, and compassion through their physical posture and relational attentiveness. Rather than performing from a platform, leaders engage as participants, cultivating shared authorship and trust. This embodied model of leadership further necessitates attention to cultural embodiment. Musical choices should reflect the lived, physical, and aesthetic experiences of the worshiping community, affirming their identities and inviting participation across lines of age, ethnicity, and ability. Finally, the design of worship environments must support bodily engagement. Thoughtful attention to seating, flow, lighting, and physical accessibility signals that the whole self—body included—is welcome and vital in the worshiping life of the church.

Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has articulated a relational philosophy of church music by integrating insights from relational ontology, community music, and spirituality in music education into a cohesive conceptual framework. Guided by van der Merwe and Habron's (2015) model of the lifeworld existentials—relationality, spatiality, temporality, and corporeality—this chapter positioned church music not simply as a carrier of theological

content or aesthetic form, but as a lived, relational practice. In doing so, it built directly on the critique established in Chapter 2: that much of the evangelical worship literature relies on popular or moralistic treatments of music that fail to engage the broader philosophical and educational insights available in interdisciplinary scholarship. By contrast, this chapter responded to that gap with a holistic model that acknowledges the complexity and spiritual significance of musicking within worship contexts.

Each existential explored here revealed a distinct yet overlapping dimension of spiritual transformation. Relationality emphasized that worship is always a shared act—already situated within interpersonal and divine relations—where the task of the worship leader is less about performance and more about facilitating mutual presence. Spatiality reframed the physical and symbolic environment of worship as a pedagogical and theological medium, highlighting how embodied presence, arrangement, and atmosphere contribute to sacred experience. Temporality offered a counter to performance-driven efficiency by foregrounding worship as a processual and durational journey. It affirmed that moments of flow, repetition, struggle, and stillness are not interruptions to worship but central to its formation. Corporeality completed the framework by returning attention to the lived body as the site of spiritual perception and expression, reminding us that all worship is mediated through breath, voice, movement, and sensory participation.

Together, these categories demonstrated that church music, when approached relationally, can function as a form of community music—one that is inclusive, participatory, embodied, and spiritually formative. I have argued that worship leaders, much like community music facilitators, bear the responsibility of crafting musical

experiences that are not only theologically sound but relationally situated, culturally responsive, and open to transformation. This reframing aligns with the earlier exploration of Buber's *I–Thou* encounters, Levinas's ethical responsibility to the Other, and Whale's notion of music as the "between"—all of which suggest that music in worship is less about transmission and more about communion.

In doing so, this chapter directly advanced the research purpose stated in Chapter 1: to develop a philosophical framework for church music that bridges the gap between theological discourse and broader academic scholarship. It also addressed key research questions related to how relational ontology and community music perspectives might reshape the understanding and practice of worship music in evangelical contexts. The result is a conceptual model that is both academically rigorous and practically generative—a model that invites church musicians, educators, and theologians to reconceive music not as a tool for persuasion or a style to be defended, but as a spiritually charged act of relational presence and shared transformation.

Chapter 5 will synthesize the findings and contributions of the entire dissertation, offering a summative reflection on how this relational philosophy of church music addresses the limitations of existing literature while proposing a constructive path forward for worship studies, music education, and congregational leadership. It will also identify implications for ministry practice, explore interdisciplinary resonance, and recommend avenues for future research—particularly those that seek to expand this philosophy in diverse cultural, pedagogical, and theological contexts.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

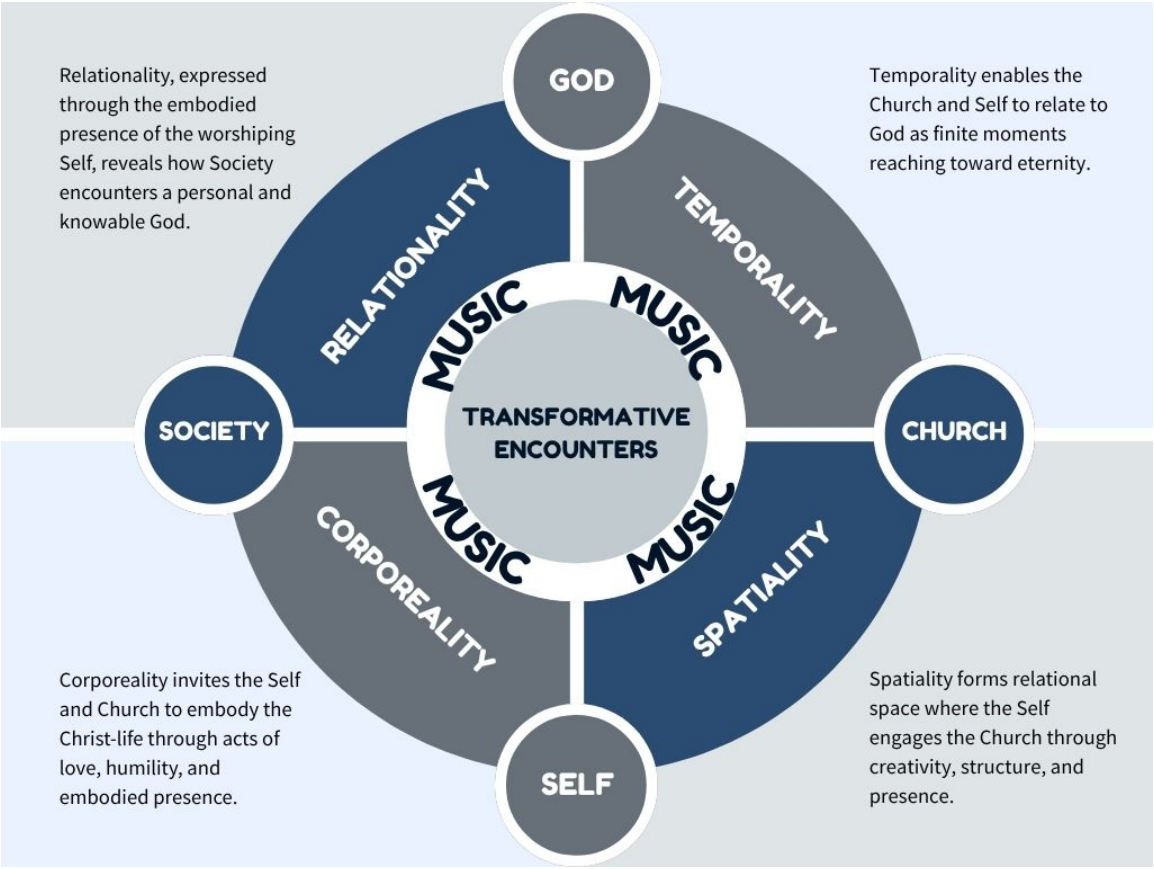
This study began with a conviction: that music in the church is not merely a tool for doctrinal delivery or affirmation—it is relational formation. Over the preceding chapters, I explored the philosophical and practical contours of church music as a lived, relational, and communal event. Rooted in relational ontology, framed by the understanding of church music as a community music practice, and enriched by research on spirituality in music and music education, I have argued that musicking in the church is not merely expressive but formational. It shapes not only what worshipers do, but who they become in relation to God, one another, and the world.

Through this inquiry, I engaged literature in theology, relational ontology, community music, and spirituality to construct a philosophical foundation for church music that reflects lived experience and spiritual formation. I critiqued the popular literature and beliefs of the conservative evangelicals of my background, demonstrating their lack of engagement with relevant research from these other fields. Then, in chapter 4, I proposed a conceptual framework built on van der Merwe and Habron's (2015) adaptation of Van Manen's four lifeworld existentials—relationality, spatiality, temporality, and corporeality—to describe the spiritual, relational, and pedagogical implications of musicking in the evangelical worship context.

The purpose of this chapter is to synthesize the findings of the inquiry, articulate their implications for the field of music education, and offer recommendations for future research. While the preceding chapters developed a philosophical framework through dialogue with literature and lived experience, this final chapter turns toward interpretation and projection. I begin with a summary of the central findings before exploring their relevance to music education, the contributions this study offers to current scholarship, and recommendations for future inquiry. I then conclude with a personal reflection on the journey and its broader implications for faith, formation, and music education.

Summary of Findings

This inquiry produced a conceptual framework for understanding church music as a spiritually formative, relational practice. Drawing on van der Merwe and Habron's (2015) adaptation of Van Manen's four lifeworld existentials, I examined the experience of musicking in church through four interrelated categories: relationality, spatiality, temporality, and corporeality. Each dimension reveals formative possibilities that shift the role of music in worship from expressive output to a catalyst for communal identity, spiritual depth, and relational awareness.



Relationality emerged as the foundational principle. Framed by relational ontology and informed by community music scholarship, this category emphasized that musical activity in worship is not isolated performance but participatory encounter. Even before music begins, participants are already in relation—to one another and to God. The implications here are significant: worship leaders must learn to prioritize "being-with" over "performing-for." Music becomes a means of active togetherness and sacred encounter, not merely a tool for expressing belief. Through ritual theory language such as "interaction ritual chains" and "collective effervescence" (Collins, 2004) the relational act of musicking is seen as the embodiment of communal and spiritual presence.

The subcategories of relationality—gathering, mutuality, and active presence—highlight the necessary preconditions for relational transformation in worship. Music catalyzes belonging by drawing people into intentional proximity, where shared attention and vulnerability foster spiritual depth. Gathering is not incidental; it is itself a formative act. Within this framework, spiritual music becomes an avenue of hospitality and mutual regard—each participant shaping and being shaped by the presence of the other. These ideas challenge prevailing models that center platform-driven performance and instead affirm the inherently reciprocal nature of worship music.

Spatiality explored how worship environments are pedagogical spaces. Drawing from community music practices that reimagine space to foster openness and participation, I argued that physical arrangement, atmosphere, and even silence function as theological statements. The aesthetic of space—whether it invites contribution or reinforces hierarchy—shapes not just the musical experience, but the spiritual posture of those present. Thus, spatial design in worship should reflect a commitment to inclusion, humility, and relational equity. This challenges traditional, performance-centric church layouts and invites fresh architectural and liturgical imagination.

The subcategories of spatiality—structure, flow, and atmosphere—reinforce the idea that space is not neutral but spiritually formative. Worship spaces communicate values through their acoustics, seating, staging, lighting, and even the transitions between elements. As community music scholars have shown, intentionally shaped space can lower barriers to entry, elevate lay participation, and foster trust. These insights call for music educators and worship leaders to become spatially literate—not merely arranging

sound, but cultivating environments that invite participation and spiritual engagement through intentional design.

Temporality illuminated the formational potential of time in musical worship. Rather than viewing songs as discrete moments or placeholders between liturgical elements, I argued that musicking unfolds as a recursive journey. Participation over time—repeating, remembering, improvising, and evolving—fosters both trust and transformation. In this framework, spiritual formation is not instantaneous but lived over time. Theological education and worship leader training must therefore emphasize presence, attentiveness, and the long arc of communal growth over event-based results. Rituals of return and continuity become critical mechanisms of spiritual memory and hope.

Within this existential, the subcategories of journey, improvisation, formation, and memory reveal that worship is best understood as an unfolding relationship rather than a sequence of moments. Music becomes a container for memory and a canvas for risk. Improvisation—musical or social—creates space for individuals to show up authentically and respond in real time. Church music, then, is not about delivering perfect experiences but about cultivating durable habits of engagement. When time is honored as sacred and nonlinear, congregations are invited into processes of spiritual transformation that are both deeply human and profoundly communal.

Corporeality emphasized that worship is irreducibly embodied. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Bowman, and others, I argued that spirituality is not something that happens despite the body, but through it. Every breath, gesture, vibration, and moment of

stillness is part of the theological and pedagogical experience of worship. This demands a shift away from disembodied vocal performance or musical precision as primary values. Instead, attention must be given to sensory experience, physical inclusion, and the affective, bodily presence of worshipers. The implications here extend beyond accessibility to include the full range of human physicality as sacred.

The subcategories of corporeality—embodiment, sensory experience, creativity, and breath—point to the reality that musical worship engages the whole person. Inhalation becomes invocation. Movement becomes meaning-making. Creativity, when understood as an embodied response to the divine, shifts church music from mere replication to participation. These embodied practices resist the false divide between spiritual and physical experience, insisting instead that transformation occurs not in the mind alone but through the very matter of our being.

Taken together, these findings point toward a new philosophical orientation for church music: one that is less concerned with stylistic debates or doctrinal precision and more attuned to the formational, relational, and spiritual possibilities of musicking. The framework I have constructed provides a language and lens for evaluating and designing worship practices that shape not only what is believed, but how people relate—to one another, to their bodies, and to God. Church music, in this vision, becomes a communal act of becoming rather than merely a product to consume or a performance to evaluate.

Applications for Church Music

The relational philosophy of church music developed in Chapter 4 carries significant implications for how evangelical congregations might approach worship.

Applying this framework would result in practices that differ meaningfully from many current models shaped by performance, preference, or consumerist logic. The following subsections highlight the primary areas in which evangelical churches would look and function differently if they embraced this philosophy.

This philosophy situates church music as formational and pedagogical rather than atmospheric. Worship music would be approached as a moral and spiritual practice that cultivates virtues such as humility, hospitality, and compassion. Churches would resist consumerist logics that evaluate music by the intensity of emotional experience, as well as moralistic approaches that police style. Instead, music would be understood as a primary context in which the Spirit forms people into the likeness of Christ.

From Performance to Participation

First, a relational framework reorients worship from performance to participation. Worship leaders are no longer viewed primarily as performers or curators of atmosphere, but as facilitators of shared encounter. Musical success is measured not by excellence of delivery alone but by the degree to which the community engages in the worship together. Congregational song selection would therefore emphasize accessibility, call-and-response patterns, improvisational opportunities, and intergenerational familiarity.

Central to this shift is the practice of gathering. In an age of increasing digitization and the rise of artificial creativity, the church must be reimagined as a sanctuary for human presence, co-creation, and spiritual encounter. Production-driven models tend to encourage passive consumption, whereas a relational philosophy seeks to shape worship as a lived encounter where those who attend are invited to know and be

known by those with whom they gather. Music thus functions not as a product to be delivered but as a mirror, revealing openness or resistance and shaping who the community becomes through participation.

This orientation also addresses the tension between individualism and collectivism. Western cultures often elevate the individual, while some Eastern traditions emphasize collectivism to the point of diminishing personal identity. A relational model resists both extremes. It affirms that individuals and communities mutually inform, confront, and complete one another. When self-centeredness emerges, music in worship can call individuals toward selfless service for the sake of the community. Likewise, when individuals stumble, the community offers both confrontation and embrace, reflecting the restorative vision described in Galatians 6. This dynamic of accountability and grace underscores why worship must be participatory: it is in the act of gathering and musicking together that identity is formed, relationships are renewed, and transformation occurs.

Reimagined Worship Space

This framework highlights spatiality as formative rather than neutral. Worship is never detached from its environment; every architectural, symbolic, and technological choice communicates theological meaning. Churches embracing a relational philosophy would resist spatial designs that separate leaders from participants and instead cultivate environments that flatten hierarchies, encourage visibility, and promote shared presence. In this view, the sanctuary is not a stage for religious content delivery but a space for sacred togetherness where music mediates encounter with God and one another.

One practical consideration is lighting. Contemporary evangelical practice often employs darkened auditoriums with brightly lit stages; a pattern borrowed from concerts and secular production. While darkness can foster introspection by allowing the individual to disappear into the crowd, relational worship prioritizes visibility and mutual recognition. A well-lit room enables the gathered body to see one another, reinforcing that worship is corporate rather than private. Musicians, whether a worship team or choir, model this shared participation for the congregation to mirror.

Technology and arrangement also shape the relational dynamic. The longstanding debate between hymnals and projection illustrates this tension. Hymnals provide musical notation that enables harmony and unity of expression, while screens allow congregants to lift their eyes and sing more freely but rely on auditory memory. Neither tool is inherently superior; the question is how each form supports relational participation. More broadly, evangelical sanctuaries often mimic amphitheater-style venues that reinforce passive consumption, with the stage symbolizing the authoritative source of approved content. A relational philosophy invites alternative spatial models that emphasize participation. For megachurches, defined here as a congregation with more than 2,000 in weekly attendance, often marked by large-scale organization and contemporary media culture (Thumma & Travis, 2007), this may mean multiplication into smaller gatherings across a community. While such a shift presents challenges—such as the need for trained pastoral leadership—it also creates opportunities for localized expressions that reflect the ethnic, linguistic, and musical diversity of the broader body.

Finally, silence in worship must be reconsidered as a spatial act. Silence is not absence but presence; it opens space for awareness, awe, and encounter (Van der Merwe & Habron, 2015). Within a relational framework, silence resists the production-driven impulse to fill every moment with sound or speech. It reorients attention toward God and one another, allowing the space itself to become "thick" with meaning. Practiced well, silence communicates that worship is not entertainment but encounter, a reminder that the gathered body does not manufacture the Spirit's presence but waits for its manifestation.

A New Relationship with Time

Temporality reframes worship as an unfolding process rather than a product. Services shaped by this philosophy would make room for repetition, improvisation, silence, and lingering moments, rather than prioritizing efficiency or polished sequencing. Worship would form congregations across seasons and generations, holding older hymns and new songs together in dialogue. In this way, music becomes part of the long journey of communal formation rather than an isolated moment of inspiration.

Churches that embrace a relational philosophy of music will invite congregants to linger in the moment. In contrast to the tightly scheduled pace of modern life, worship becomes an act of Sabbath rest—a space where time is held differently. Activities such as prayer, confession, and encouragement may occur spontaneously or follow the prompting of a song. For example, songs of holiness may evoke confession as congregants become aware of their shortcomings, while songs of lament may extend into intercessory prayer for those seeking justice or healing. These temporal disruptions affirm worship as responsive encounter rather than rigid program.

A relational philosophy also challenges prevailing evangelical patterns that prioritize preaching as the pinnacle of worship. In many congregations, preaching is given flexibility of length, while other elements—singing, prayer, testimony—are carefully restricted so as not to encroach on the sermon. Such practice reinforces a content-delivery model in which worship resembles theater. Relational worship does not diminish the centrality of truth, but views proclamation as one dimension of a larger dialogical act, inviting response and participation rather than eclipsing them. In this model, all elements of worship—singing, silence, preaching, prayer—become integrated prompts for relational engagement.

Musical repetition, extended harmony, or improvisation can create conditions for flow, in which time perception shifts and participants experience deep absorption. While flow is often discussed as an individual psychological state, within corporate worship it can also manifest communally. In these moments, shared musical focus and embodied participation draw individuals into a collective awareness that transcends self-consciousness. Congregational singing, rhythmic entrainment, and the subtle synchronization of breath and gesture can create a communal flow state, a sense of being carried together within a larger current of sound and Spirit. This shared absorption reflects what Durkheim (1995) described as collective effervescence, where individual consciousness gives way to a heightened experience of unity. In a theological sense, such moments may function sacramentally: time feels suspended, and the congregation becomes attuned not only to one another but to the divine presence encountered in and through their mutual musical participation.

Similarly, music enables worshipers to inhabit temporality as "becoming," where identity is formed through an ongoing journey of encounter and growth. Struggle, silence, or unresolved dissonance can themselves be formative, offering thresholds for patience, lament, and communal solidarity. Musical "mistakes" do not distract from the moment; rather, they enhance the struggle and invite the congregation into reflection of our finiteness.

Finally, relational worship gestures toward eternality. Moments of stillness or unstructured song may suspend ordinary categories of before and after, drawing participants into the "now" that hints at God's timeless presence. Rather than treating time as something to be managed, worship becomes a rehearsal for eternity—an invitation to dwell in presence, anticipate the kingdom, and carry the marks of that encounter into daily life.

Embodied Worship

Corporeality underscores that all worship happens bodily. Churches shaped by this framework would normalize movement, posture, and gesture as essential expressions of worship rather than peripheral additions, especially when ethnic and cultural diversity is present as some cultures rely more heavily on bodily expression than others. Breathing, singing, clapping, or kneeling would be understood as theological acts that express relational openness and invite encounter with God. Leaders would model and teach embodied practices, fostering worship that is incarnational, diverse, and holistic.

Conservative evangelical churches often discourage physical engagement with the worship, claiming these distract from the truth or draw attention to oneself. In doing so,

they have relegated worship to an internal process and bolstered the individuality of the experience. If someone is overcome with joy or grief, they are often too embarrassed to express it openly in the congregation. But as psychology and sociology would affirm, vulnerability builds trust and invites the community into the joy or grief of the individual. The safety to express openly the emotions of one's heart is a critical component of a relational philosophy of church music.

Practical Outcomes and Integrative Significance

In practical terms, congregations applying this framework would likely display several distinct characteristics:

- Worship leaders trained as *facilitators of participation* rather than as performers.
- Congregational singing that prioritizes accessibility and intercultural inclusion.
- Relaxed service orders that integrate testimony, lament, silence, and reflection alongside celebration.
- Physical spaces arranged to reduce distance between leaders and participants.
- Embodied practices normalized as faithful expressions of worship.
- Intergenerational song repertoires that reflect the faith journeys of the entire congregation.
- A worship culture oriented toward character formation and communal mission.

These implications directly address the research questions and literature gaps identified earlier in this study. Chapter 1 noted that evangelical worship literature often reduces music to doctrinal messaging or stylistic preference, while Chapter 2 highlighted the lack of interdisciplinary engagement with philosophy, music education, and

community music scholarship. By reimagining church music through a relational lens, this study demonstrates how worship can be understood as an ontological and spiritually formative practice that bridges those gaps.

In application, churches that adopt this framework will look and act differently. They will cultivate participatory practices rather than passive consumption, design worship spaces that foster encounter rather than separation, embrace temporality as formative rather than instantaneous, and affirm corporeality as central rather than peripheral. In doing so, they embody a more holistic vision of worship, one that integrates theological conviction with relational practice and situates music as a transformative act at the heart of congregational life.

Implications for Music Education

These findings carry significant implications for music education, particularly for those institutions that train worship leaders and church musicians. As I argued previously, churches have been—and will continue to be—meaningful sites of musicking regardless of music education's status within public school curricula. Music educators have much to offer the church, and likewise, church music practice provides fertile ground for rethinking the aims and assumptions of music education. By framing church music as a form of community music grounded in relational ontology, this study invites a fundamental reimagining of the pedagogical aims, curricular structures, and institutional priorities that shape worship music programs in Christian higher education.

First, the framework developed in this study demonstrates that worship leadership is not only a musical and theological task, but also a relational one. While musical skill

and doctrinal literacy remain essential, this inquiry emphasizes the formational nature of musicking—how it cultivates relationships, identities, and spiritual postures within community. Music educators must therefore prepare students not merely to lead songs, plan concerts, or manage services, but to steward spaces of relational and spiritual formation. This requires cultivating awareness of interpersonal dynamics, community-building strategies, and spiritual sensitivity alongside traditional musicianship.

Second, this framework calls for a paradigm shift in how music education understands context and participation. Rather than training worship leaders for platform-driven performance, curricula should emphasize mutuality, presence, and participatory leadership. Drawing from community music models, educators can introduce practices such as improvisation, dialogic facilitation, co-creation of repertoire, and spatial reconfiguration to help students lead music that invites engagement rather than observation. In this way, worship becomes a lived ritual, not a curated experience.

Third, relational ontology compels church music educators to revisit the formation of leaders, not just the delivery of content. If church music is relational at its core, then the inner life of the worship leader—their capacity to be present, to listen, and to foster belonging—becomes central to their vocational readiness. This suggests a need for spiritual direction, theological reflection, and mentoring to become core components of worship leadership programs. A relationally-formed leader is more likely to cultivate a relationally-shaped musical culture.

Fourth, the lifeworld framework outlined in Chapter 4 presents a pedagogical tool for curriculum design. Music education programs can use the four existentials—

relationality, spatiality, temporality, and corporeality—as thematic units or lenses for reflection across coursework. For example, a course on "Worship and the Body" might explore breath, gesture, and sensory perception, while a practicum on "The Worship Environment" could examine the spiritual implications of lighting, seating, or silence. This approach integrates theology, philosophy, and practice, offering students a multidimensional understanding of what worship music can be.

Finally, this framework opens the door to broader interfaith and intercultural applications. While this study is rooted in Christian theology, the emphasis on relationship, space, time, and embodiment resonates with other spiritual traditions. Music education programs situated in diverse or pluralistic settings may find value in incorporating relational ontology as a bridge for dialogue across communities. Practices such as shared musicking, dialogical facilitation, and ritual studies can help prepare leaders to foster spiritually significant musical encounters in a wide range of theological and cultural contexts.

In short, the implications of this study extend beyond local churches and into institutional structures that shape its future leaders. By reframing church music as community music and spiritual formation, music education is invited to reconsider what it means to teach worship—not as the transmission of doctrine through song, but as the cultivation of communal and spiritual transformation.

Contributions to the Literature

This study contributes to several intersecting bodies of literature by reframing church music as a formational, relational practice grounded in philosophical and

pedagogical inquiry. While most evangelical literature on worship music remains focused on theological content, stylistic concerns, or pragmatic leadership models, this study brings theological aesthetics, relational ontology, and community music theory into direct conversation with church music practice. In doing so, it offers a novel philosophical framework that speaks to both academic and ecclesial audiences.

It contributes to church music literature by offering a more expansive vision of music in worship—one that emphasizes spiritual formation, relational presence, and embodiment over performance or doctrinal transmission. While much of the evangelical discourse on worship music remains rooted in stylistic debates or proof-texted theology, this study foregrounds philosophical and pedagogical questions about how music might function in the life of a worshiping community.

It also builds on and extends the field of community music, particularly as articulated by Higgins (2012), Bartleet (2023), and Veblen et al. (2013), by applying its principles to ecclesial settings. Church music is not always included in community music research, often due to assumptions about institutional religion or the dominance of performance-based liturgies. By framing worship music as community music, this study opens the door for greater dialogue between these fields and affirms the church as a legitimate and fruitful site for participatory, socially embedded musicking.

This work further contributes to music education literature, particularly in relation to spirituality, embodiment, and relational pedagogy. Scholars such as Palmer (1998), Bowman (2004), Boyce-Tillman (2016), Jorgensen (2007), van der Merwe and Habron (2015), and Yob (2010, 2011) have called for more holistic, human-centered approaches

to teaching and learning music. This dissertation builds on their work by offering a framework that bridges theory and practice in both worship and educational settings, and by proposing curriculum-level applications that reflect relational and spiritual aims.

It also brings a relational philosophical framework—drawing on Buber (1937), Levinas (1969), Brown and Hopps (2018), Yannaras (2011), Polkinghorne (2010), and Whale (2009)—into theological reflection on worship. While some theologians have emphasized the communal and transformative aspects of worship, this study situates those claims within a broader ontological and phenomenological context. It synthesizes ritual theory, relational theology, and musical practice in ways that open new questions for theological aesthetics and ecclesiology.

Finally, this study responds to the lack of interdisciplinary scholarship on worship music and church music practice. As noted in Chapter 2, much evangelical literature operates within its own epistemological silo, often unaware of the wider philosophical, pedagogical, or sociological insights available in adjacent fields. By bridging music education, community music, theology, and philosophy, this study offers a relational framework that invites further interdisciplinary research, collaboration, and pedagogical innovation.

Limitations

As with any philosophical inquiry, this study is shaped by its particular lens, positional assumptions, and scope of engagement. Rather than aiming to generalize across broad populations or test hypotheses through empirical methods, this research pursued conceptual clarity, reflective synthesis, and constructive insight into the nature of

church music as a relational and formational practice. Its contributions are thus oriented toward theory-building and pedagogical vision rather than measurable outcomes.

One limitation of this study is its focus on a specific ecclesial context. While the inquiry draws on literature from various disciplines, its central concern has been the evangelical church—especially conservative evangelicalism in the United States. As such, the conceptual framework may not fully account for the theological, cultural, or musical dynamics of other Christian traditions or global worship settings. Further contextualization would be necessary to explore the framework's relevance in liturgical, charismatic, high church, or non-Western communities.

Another limitation arises from the positionality of the author. My background in conservative evangelicalism, my experience as a worship leader and music educator, and my theological commitments inevitably shaped both the inquiry's direction and its interpretive lens. While this perspective brings depth and experiential insight, it may also carry blind spots or unexamined assumptions. Including additional voices from a wider range of theological and cultural perspectives would offer a more comprehensive understanding of how relational ontology intersects with diverse worship practices.

This study also operates within a philosophical rather than empirical framework. Its primary method involved conceptual synthesis, theoretical exploration, and interpretation of existing literature. While this allows for deep reflection and interdisciplinary integration, it does not assess how these ideas are enacted in practice or how they are experienced by real congregations. As a result, questions remain about how the proposed framework would function in lived ecclesial or educational settings.

Finally, although the study draws meaningfully and necessarily from fields such as music education, theology, ritual theory, and community music, it could be further enriched by additional dialogue with fields like liturgical studies, ethnomusicology, practical theology, and educational psychology. These perspectives could deepen the analysis and offer new insights into how relational musicking shapes identity, memory, and spiritual life in community.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study opens several pathways for continued inquiry, both philosophical and empirical. Its findings raise important questions about how church music functions across diverse theological, cultural, and educational contexts, and how musicking might be more intentionally shaped by relational, spatial, temporal, and embodied awareness. Future research may deepen, challenge, or expand upon the framework presented here through a variety of approaches.

First, further philosophical inquiry could explore the concept of relational ontology in dialogue with other theological traditions. While this study is situated within a Christian framework, particularly shaped by Protestant thought and practice, many of its core themes resonate with other faiths. For example, Buddhist notions of interbeing, Jewish understandings of covenantal presence, or Indigenous spiritual practices that emphasize communal embodiment could offer rich perspectives on the role of music in sacred life. Comparative theological research could clarify how different ontologies might inform or reshape the function of music in worship and ritual settings.

Second, empirical studies are needed to examine how the conceptual framework

developed in this dissertation plays out in lived practice. Qualitative research involving worship leaders, congregants, or music educators could explore how relational, spatial, temporal, and embodied dynamics are experienced and perceived in actual worship contexts. Ethnographic methods or case studies could provide insight into how changes in spatial arrangement, song selection, facilitation style, or bodily engagement influence spiritual and communal formation.

Third, further work is needed to assess the pedagogical implications of this framework within music education programs. Action research or curriculum-based studies could investigate how incorporating the four lifeworld categories into worship leadership training affects student outcomes, leadership readiness, or vocational clarity. Such studies might also explore the integration of spiritual formation practices, improvisational techniques, or dialogic learning into music education courses traditionally focused on technical proficiency.

Fourth, interdisciplinary collaborations could enrich and expand this line of inquiry. Scholars from practical theology, educational psychology, liturgical studies, or sociology could bring new methodologies and frameworks to bear on the relational dimensions of musicking. Likewise, collaborations with practitioners—pastors, artists, educators, and spiritual directors—could ground these theoretical insights in embodied vocational practice.

Fifthly, future research might investigate how relational musicking contributes to healing, reconciliation, or community building in fractured or pluralistic contexts. Whether in ecumenical gatherings, multicultural congregations, or post-traumatic

communities, music holds the potential to serve as a space of shared presence and spiritual encounter. Studying these contexts through the lens of relational ontology could yield valuable insights for the church, the academy, and the broader social fabric.

Finally, the popular literature referenced in this study has profoundly influenced global worship practices, particularly in regions where missionaries from these denominational traditions established churches. In many cases, Western musical norms and aesthetic judgments were exported as implicit standards of "biblical" or "spiritual" worship, often displacing or marginalizing indigenous musical expressions. This process functioned as a subtle form of religious and cultural colonization, shaping global Christianity in ways that privileged Western cultural forms over local embodiment. Such influence warrants further examination, especially in light of how a relational philosophy of church music might invite a reorientation—one that values contextual formation, reciprocity, and mutual transformation within worshiping communities.

In sum, this study does not seek to offer a final word on the philosophy of church music, but rather to open the door to further reflection, dialogue, and transformation. Future researchers are invited to carry the conversation forward—to test, challenge, apply, and extend these ideas in ways that honor the relational, formational, and sacred nature of musicking in community.

Final Reflections

This study began with an encounter. A moment in worship that defied analysis, disrupted routine, and left me strangely changed. It was not the excellence of the music or the eloquence of the lyrics that marked me—it was the sense of being drawn into

something deeper, something shared, something sacred. I did not have language for it then. I only knew that something had happened, and I had been transformed.

In the years since, I have come to believe that these moments—what I now call transformative worship encounters—are not incidental to the Christian life. They are its lifeblood. They remind us that worship is not simply an act of expression or a delivery mechanism for doctrine. It is a space of becoming, of formation, of encounter. In music, we meet the divine not only in content but in presence. We are shaped by the relational, spatial, temporal, and embodied dimensions of musicking, even when we are not fully aware of it.

This study has been an attempt to name what I have long sensed: that music in the church is not just what we do—it is how we are formed. Rooted in relational ontology and informed by the lifeworld categories of Van Manen, I have proposed a framework not only for analyzing the role of church music but also for reimagining it. Not as performance. Not as persuasion. But as a shared practice of transformation.

Throughout this journey, I have wrestled with the limitations of my theological tradition and the assumptions of my musical training. I have searched for a language that honors both the mystery of worship and the materiality of sound and space. What I have found is not a system, but a posture. A way of seeing worship as an open, relational, and deeply human encounter with God and with one another.

There is more to say. Much more. But what I hope this study has offered is not a final word, but a doorway. An invitation for scholars, pastors, musicians, and worshipers to listen again—to their bodies, their communities, and the presence of the divine that

moves among them. I hope it sparks questions that lead not only to new insights, but to new practices that make space for formation, for wonder, and for transformation. For if church music is anything, it is a space where the ordinary becomes sacred, where breath becomes prayer, and where the people of God are gathered not to perform, but to be transformed.

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