

Few worship leaders avoid Hillsong and Bethel songs

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—For the past decade, a handful of megachurches have dominated worship music, churning out hits such as “Goodness of God,” “What a Beautiful Name,” “King of Kings” and “Graves Into Gardens.”

Although churches like Australia-based Hillsong and Bethel Church in California have met with scandal and controversy, worship leaders still keep singing their songs.



A new study released July 11 found few worship leaders avoid songs from Hillsong and Bethel, two of the so-called Big Four megachurches that dominate modern worship music.

The study revealed most worship leaders connect with songs because they’ve experienced them firsthand at a conference or by listening to them online, or because a friend or church member recommended them, rather than seeing the song at the top of the charts or on a list of new songs.

Elias Dummer, a Christian musician turned marketer who is part of the research team behind the study, said most worship leaders think they have good reasons for picking the songs they use in worship. But they may not be aware of how social forces—like the popularity of certain churches—affect their choices.

“While people say that they care about the songs, they pick the same four churches over and over again,” Dummer said.

The new study is based on a survey of more than 400 church worship leaders in the United States and Canada conducted in the fall of 2022, drawn from both social media groups of worship leaders and an email list from a major music publisher.

How do worship leaders select music?

Worship leaders were asked what they thought about the pace of new music being produced, how they picked new songs, what they thought the motivations were behind new songs and whether they’d pick a song—or avoid it—based on the artist or church that produced it.

Only 16 percent of worship leaders said they were less likely to choose a song with ties to Hillsong, while about 1 in 4 said they were less likely to choose songs with ties to Bethel (27 percent).

More than half of worship leaders said they were likely to choose songs with ties to Hillsong (62 percent) while nearly half (48 percent) said they were likely to choose songs with ties to Bethel.

Researchers also found recommendations from friends on social media (54 percent), congregation members (56 percent) and church leaders (76 percent) made it more likely that worship leaders would choose a song. Hearing a song at a live event (76 percent) or streaming online (70 percent) also made it more likely they’d choose a song.

“The most influential factors in discovering a new worship song are peer endorsements and personal experiences,” the study indicated. “Worship leaders mainly trust their friends and fellow church leaders to provide them with song recommendations.”

Just under half (47 percent) of those worship leaders were concerned about the number of new songs available for churches to sing. The study found the big four churches release about 40 to 50 new songs each year, on top of the hundreds of songs available from other sources—from modern hymn writers to artists on YouTube.

About 40 percent said there is a bit too much new music, while a small number (4 percent) said they were “completely overwhelmed” by new music. A quarter (27 percent) said they could handle more music.

That last number surprised research team member Marc Jolicoeur, worship and creative pastor at Moncton Wesleyan Church in Moncton, New Brunswick, Canada.

“We can’t exactly say why they would want more songs, whether that means they’re looking for more diverse theological views, for more diverse styles, or more diverse voices,” he said.

What inspires new worship songs?

Only a third of worship leaders thought songs were written with the needs of local churches in mind, while slightly more thought songs were divinely inspired.

Just over half (57 percent) thought songs were inspired by something that happened in a writer’s life. Few believed songwriters wrote songs out of obligation to a contract.

For his part, Dummer said worship songwriters likely do have contractual obligations to meet—and it is unlikely they have moments of personal spiritual inspiration for all of the songs they write.

“There’s a lot of throwing things against the wall,” he said.

Still, it's more likely that worship songwriters are writing from personal experience than from trying to communicate theological principles, said research team member Shannan Baker, a postdoctoral fellow at Baylor University. That's in part because it would be easy to get things wrong by using the wrong phrase or word.

Baker said she'd done some interviews with writers who said they often start writing sessions with other musicians by talking about what's going on in their life and seeing if a theme emerges. Despite the popularity of megachurch-driven hit music, worship leaders often consider songs on a case-by-case basis, rather than thinking about where those songs came from, she said.

Glenn Packiam, a former worship leader and songwriter turned pastor, said understanding how songs get written—or how they get chosen for worship—is a complicated task. And it often starts by trying to figure out what song, or what message, works best in a local congregation.

“Our No. 1 priority was to write songs for the people in our church,” said Packiam, who led worship for years at New Life Church in Colorado Springs. “We wanted to write songs that helped the church find language for the various experiences that we’re going through.”

He pointed to a song called “Overcome,” written by Jon Egan, a colleague of his at New Life in the early 2000s. That song became a rallying cry for the church when New Life pastor Ted Haggard resigned in scandal and later, when the congregation was reeling from a shooting at the church.

“That song ended up being a gift for our church,” he said.

Packiam, now pastor of Rockharbor Church in Costa Mesa, Calif., went on to study worship music as a ritual while earning his doctorate.

Once songs go out into the world, they will mean different things in

different contexts, Packiam said. They may provide comfort to those grieving or inspiration to those facing a challenge. The songs have a life of their own once people begin to sing them in worship.

Packiam believes there are more than consumer forces at work in worship songs.

“I don’t want to look at a particular song or a particular church that’s making music and say, ‘Oh gosh, it’s just a conglomerate machine,’” he said. “What if the Lord is blessing this and causing it to produce fruit?”