

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

10-22-2020

A Journey Towards Diversity: A Review of The Next Worship

John MacInnis

Dordt University, john.macinnis@dordt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

MacInnis, J. (2020). A Journey Towards Diversity: A Review of The Next Worship. Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/1218

This Blog Post is brought to you for free and open access by Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Work Comprehensive List by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

A Journey Towards Diversity: A Review of The Next Worship

Abstract

"It is time for us to dedicate our energy and creativity to connecting across cultures."

Posting about cultural and ethnic diversity in worship from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/a-journey-towards-diversity-a-review-of-the-next-worship/>

Keywords

In All Things, book review, The Next Worship, glory, God, diversity, world, Sandra Maria Van Opstal

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt University.

in things

October 22, 2020

A Journey Towards Diversity: A Review of *The Next Worship*

John MacInnis

Title: *The Next Worship: Glorifying God in a Diverse World*

Author: Sandra Maria Van Opstal

Publisher: IVP Books

Publishing Date: December 3, 2015

Pages: 224 (Paperback)

ISBN: 978-0830841295

After the so-called “worship wars” and the uneasy truce that followed, after several generations of faithful North American Christians being raised completely on contemporary worship music, after a flood of new technologies in church music ministries, an emerging understanding of how Millennials and Gen Z actually think, and an accelerating diversity of peoples, cultures, and ideas, it is reasonable to ask of congregational worship, “What’s next?” Sandra Maria Van Opstal’s readable, insightful, and irenic book *The Next Worship: Glorifying God in a Diverse World* expounds her answer.

Eminently qualified to write such a book, Van Opstal draws upon her own background as an urban minister in the Christian Reformed Church and a worship leader specialized in the development of multicultural worship resources. She shares stories, conversations, and her own spiritual journey which produced a calling to push for congregational worship that moves believers towards lives of hospitality (saying “We welcome you!”), solidarity (saying “We stand with you!”), and mutuality (saying “We need you!”).

In general, Van Opstal's approach is to describe what corporate worship can be and should be, and, to a lesser extent, what is inevitable. Demographic trends in the U.S. are quite clear: By 2044, the U.S. will be a majority-minority nation. Van Opstal expertly guides her reader to a realization that the next worship is not necessarily louder and faster, driven by a pop-rock aesthetic and incorporating more screens and videos. It is multiethnic and multicultural, and this is nothing to fear. The majority, indeed, the very leadership of the Christian faith, will be non-white and non-Western, so it is time for us to dedicate our energy and creativity to connecting across cultures.

Throughout the book, Van Opstal challenges her reader to consider the right motivations for pursuing multiethnic and multicultural worship, for example, in our musical choices. To do this, her controlling image is a meal, where culture is tasted and on display, friendship and kinship are enacted, and we are often at our best, practicing hospitality. Multiethnic worship should not be catering to preferences or entertainment, spicing up the ordinary with something new. Multicultural worship should not be trendy or pragmatic—a way to boost the numbers. Rather, to sing another's songs, to sincerely desire a glimpse of the world and of God through their eyes is to connect our stories together and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to know communion.¹

After setting the table (as it were) in the introduction and first chapter, Van Opstal explains in Chapter 2, "Is PB&J Ethnic Food?", that all people and all congregations are ethnic. Each of us needs help in perceiving the lens through which we see the world, how we experience time, how we define anything as normal. College students in the U.S. today may consider band-led, contemporary worship music as normal—transcending ethnicity and culture—but is it? Furthermore, in the church's efforts to cultivate music that can be perceived as authentic, it may have prioritized expression over formation. Van Opstal contends that formation into God's image (2 Corinthians 3:18) means becoming people focused on the good of others, to our own loss, even the loss of our desire to feel authentic.

Van Opstal knows that some will resist multiculturalism; so, after showing that one's own perception of authenticity in worship is enculturated, she moves to address a congregation's willingness to embrace diversity. She provides a striking interpretation of Jesus' "Parable of the Great Banquet" in Luke 14. Here, Jesus describes a feast where some invited guests take a pass and those on the margins are brought in, apparently as a second choice—but, not so. As Van Opstal demonstrates, the master's desire was for everyone to be at his table, and some privileged invitees were attempting to shut down the whole affair in protest to the master's generous intentions. In contrast to the well-off, who will join in on their own terms, Jesus' consistent example asks us to reach across boundaries and to strive for reconciliation.

Perhaps the *pièce de résistance* of this book is Chapter 4, “Hosting Well: Shared Leadership.” Here, Van Opstal names ways in which church leadership has gone awry in North America: worship leaders treated as rock stars; ego battles; the man with the plan in charge of everything. The sort of cultural sensitivity promoted in this book overall is here on display; truly, how leadership is understood and practiced in one context may not be helpful or even desired in another. Leadership values can range from egalitarian to hierarchical, low context to high context, and so on. Misperceptions abound—some might assume that leaders will “step up” in a context where leadership opportunities are by invitation.

Shared leadership in a church’s worship is an ideal for Van Opstal, such as dividing mic time and allowing for a variety of approaches and styles in worship planning and execution. In a brilliant list, she describes many reasons why leaders are hesitant to share, most demonstrating some manifestation of fear. Of course, gender, ethnic, and socio-economic biases play into how leaders are chosen. To conclude this chapter, Van Opstal quotes a prominent worship leader from a megachurch who, after time, came to recognize the privileges he took for granted, not least the absence of gender or racial discrimination.²

After setting up the need for multicultural worship as well as how it can go wrong, Van Opstal moves to actual worship planning. It is evident by her writing that, for Van Opstal, fostering multicultural and multiethnic worship is more of a journey—with easy initial steps—than expressing a well-articulated ideal. She provides four models, each with pros and cons: Acknowledgement, in which there is a dominant style with hints of others; Blended, in which there is equal representation of different styles; Fusion, in which styles are mixed into something new; and Collaborative Rotation, in which different leaders bring forth different styles.

Van Opstal includes an insight from Mark Charles, a Navajo resource development specialist for indigenous worship, that deserves sustained contemplation. Charles explains that the default approach to cultural diversity for many U.S. churches is assimilation, because an underlying value of the U.S. as a whole is assimilation.³ Next, Van Opstal expounds concrete planning steps for prioritizing multiethnic worship, rather than hoping it will just happen. If the biblical concept of the church is multiethnic, multigenerational, multilingual, and multicultural (as described in Revelation 7), we can choose to live like it, today.

Shifting focus from the present to the future, Van Opstal addresses a lacuna in worship arts literature, mentoring the next generation of worship leadership. Training other worship leaders is actually an important aspect to this type of ministry, and, like teaching someone to cook, it involves observation of good models and then integration

in the process. As with any learned behavior, leadership includes qualities that can be identified and strengthened, such as emotional intelligence and self-awareness.

A question not really considered here concerns how a church musician may become multi-musical, able to collaborate and create with various musical styles. Where does that training happen and how is it done well? Similarly, Van Opstal does not explore what combination of experience in popular, folk, and classical music styles and instruments provide the best purchase for multi-musical work in our churches today. This is a missed opportunity to address a superficial and reductive approach that thinks only in terms of traditional and contemporary.⁴

This is a book rich in resources. Each of its eight chapters concludes with lists of key concepts, questions for personal reflection and group discussion, and a prayer. In the back, Van Opstal includes nine appendices that share books, websites, networking opportunities, an explanation of how cultural values can range, components for congregational worship and an order of service model, multilingual song lists, steps for teaching a song in a different language to a congregation, and a description, in broad terms, of worship cultures and leadership expectations experienced in African-American, Asian-American, and Latino-American contexts.

At stake more broadly, and by implication, in Van Opstal's assertions concerning congregational worship is what the church, you and I, are called to in this world. For the twentieth-century Christian martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, our calling lies specifically in Christ's example: "In the incarnation God makes Himself known as Him who wishes to exist not for Himself but 'for us.' Consequently, in view of the incarnation of God, to live as man before God can mean only to exist not for oneself but for God and for other men."⁵ Working this out, it would appear that we in the church have no ethnic or cultural legacy to defend, no walls to build and buttress, no fear of losing our identity—for a Christian must mean one who stands with and for another.⁶

Clearly, liturgical choices and theology are linked, each inspiring and nurturing the other. A church's decision to form loving hearts in our multiethnic and multicultural world can flow from deep theological commitments. Moreover, a theological tradition probably already possesses resources for creative exploration in service planning. Though she does not say it specifically, Van Opstal demonstrates that a Reformed concept of liturgy, such as following a dialogic principle, can provide a versatile and effective venue for multicultural engagement.⁷

Music is a potent tool in your liturgical belt to dismantle the fences we make, but music won't fix everything. We must be committed to an integrated, long-term process in our

desire to embrace cultural and ethnic diversity; this book can get you started. The suggested prayer, included in Chapter 7, is a fitting summary meditation:

God, humble us. Give us eyes to see the gifts you have given our fellowship. May we be able to give honor to those who have gone before us and creatively dream about where we are going. And move in our midst that we would be open to grow in our worship of you, the God of all peoples.⁸

FOOTNOTES

1. Sandra Maria Van Opstal, *The Next Worship: Glorifying God in a Diverse World* (Downers Grove, IVP Press, 2015), 22.
2. Sandra Maria Van Opstal, *The Next Worship: Glorifying God in a Diverse World* (Downers Grove, IVP Press, 2015), 95. "I realized that so long as a white guy was continually being asked to plan and lead, we were only going to get so far in our efforts of multicultural worship. I was ashamed to say that I am not the solution; I am the problem."
3. Sandra Maria Van Opstal, *The Next Worship: Glorifying God in a Diverse World* (Downers Grove, IVP Press, 2015), 130-31.
4. In the context of undergraduate education, perhaps for those programs specialized in training church musicians, the College Music Society's 2014 report "Transforming Music Study from Its Foundations: A Manifesto for Progressive Change in the Undergraduate Preparation of Music Majors" offers some guidance. This CMS report champions three pillars in shaping college music curricula: creativity (ability to improvise and compose), diversity (conversance with artistic values and expression in other cultures), and integration (approaching all creative work holistically).
5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 292.
6. Likewise, the Reformer John Calvin taught that all Christ accomplished was to be freely shared, with no regard for himself. It must follow that our identity as disciples of Christ mandates concern for and solidarity with those forced to the margins, the minority, and, indeed, those asking if their lives matter. "The exposition which God gives of his own purpose removes all doubt. The Father is not said to have consulted the advantage of his Son in his services, but to have given him up to death, and not spared him, because he loved the world. . . And surely it is most worthy of remark, that Christ, in devoting himself entirely to our salvation, in a manner forgot himself." (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian*

Religion (II.xvii.6) (London: James Clarke & Co., 1949), 458.) Note that Christ is the powerful one who denies himself completely for us. Pursuing culturally diverse worship is another way in which we may follow Christ's example, preferring others and forgetting ourselves.

7. Cf., Appendix E, "Components of Worship," adapted from *The Worship Sourcebook*, 2nd ed., Carrie Steenwyk and John Witvliet (Grand Rapids: The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship / Faith Alive, 2013).
8. Sandra Maria Van Opstal, *The Next Worship: Glorifying God in a Diverse World* (Downers Grove, IVP Press, 2015), 157.