



**From Testimony to Song: A Local and Collaborative
Response to Globalised Contemporary Worship Music
in Aotearoa New Zealand**

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Introduction

I have served for 30 years in church worship teams, predominantly as a worship leader, a role in which one guides the congregation through collective singing during a church service. It has been a joy serving the church, and I have had the opportunity to lead worship in many different church services across Australia, Europe, the United Kingdom, and now back in Aotearoa New Zealand, where it all began. Looking back, I now see the unique strengths and challenges that church communities face in creating meaningful worship experiences. These experiences guide my research as I explore how local contexts can shape worship practices and how a community's unique voice can be expressed through collaborative songwriting in the contemporary worship music landscape.

My path to this topic was shaped long before I understood what worship leading and songwriting would mean to me. An attentiveness to people's stories, the challenges they face, and their faith in God to help them move forward has been a quiet thread running through my life. Having navigated through my own childhood trauma, I learned early to recognise pain in the room, even when it goes unspoken. That awareness became the foundation of how I lead worship.

As a worship leader, I have always believed that kindness and grace must precede invitation. To ask or expect someone to raise their hands or lift their voice without first honouring what they may be carrying feels, to me, like an oversight. Someone in that room may be in the depths of doubt, questioning their faith or unable to voice the affliction they are facing. This is their journey and not mine to rush. And yet, my own story has taught me the other side of that tension. Choosing to move forward beyond what I may be facing, allowing God to minister to my heart and worshipping through the storm has been a positive action of faith. Worship aligns the thoughts, the mind, speaking hope and life into the situations we may be facing.

The words we sing are important and valuable, and should be grounded in scripture. A worship leader should ensure the songs the church sings are biblically sound, to the best of their ability, because we sing so that "the word of God may dwell in us" (NIV, 2011, Colossians 3:16). Allowing scripture to resonate in the heart is an important part of the Christian faith. As the

author of *Worship Matters*, Bob Kauflin, similarly states: “We are what we sing” (Kauflin, 2008, p. 92). In music, the words we sing hold power, revealing not just who we are but shaping who we become.

Contemporary worship music (hereafter, CWM) has been a gift to Christian Churches worldwide. Typically, songs are ready to use, published with sheet music, backing tracks, and YouTube tutorial videos, all available to churches as resources, which can come as a relief to many congregations who may be struggling to have musicians or a worship leader. There is a plethora of ready-to-use worship music available in multiple languages. This truly is a blessing; however, given the saturation of the CWM market, the question that arises is: Is there space for the local church voice to be expressed through CWM?

As music is more available now, when options for Sunday morning set lists are endless, my concern is that we may be losing the church’s voice. In an Indonesian context, Menger (2024) raises similar concerns and notes that churches are asking the same questions: “Why do we always sing songs from other cultures to worship God? We have our own ways of worshipping God here, too” (p. 11). As I look back over the years of serving, there is something special about a congregation singing its own songs, having its own voice. When the congregation creates and performs its own music together, it becomes a powerful way for the church community to express and redefine its unique local identity and culture (Farhadian, n.d., p. 13). This shared ownership and community identity build a special bond in the local church.

However, my personal fear for the local church and its unique voice is that we may have dropped our creativity in favour of ‘ready-to-go’ worship. I am not dismissing the advantage of this availability, but I have questions as to why we don’t create as much as we used to. Maybe intimidation has played a role in this, too: worship leaders, songwriters and musicians may want to write songs for their local churches but fear comparison to what they may be currently singing. As Lim (2024) observes, “The shift towards localized expressions remains an uphill struggle for our churches” (p. 146). Local means someone has to write and create it; part of that struggle is, will the church accept it? So is there space for the local voice? How can we encourage local congregations to write their own songs? Is a hybrid approach to worship a better

option, amalgamating the two options, global and local, allowing for both to support the church's worship, as suggested by Lim (2024, p. 158)? Are we missing out on celebrating the cultural diversity of our local communities in song?

These observations have informed the two main questions underpinning this research project: What are appropriate techniques and strategies for collaborative and community-informed songwriting in a contemporary worship music context? And secondly, how can these techniques be used to create an album of original community-informed contemporary worship songs? In answering these questions, this project joins a growing academic conversation about the importance of local and culturally specific expressions of worship within the globalised CWM landscape. While conversation and commentary on this subject are being explored, there is still little around the methods of how this can be achieved. Following an exploration of the literature surrounding contemporary worship music and its global and local tensions, this dissertation will present the techniques used to gather congregational testimonies and discuss how the themes that emerged from those testimonies formed the creation of an album of worship songs for a local church community.

Global Songs, Local Voices

To understand this project, it is important first to examine the history of CWM. Contemporary worship music is defined as “Christian congregational song repertory modeled on mainstream Western popular music styles” (Ingalls, 2018, p. 5). Through an examination of relevant literature, this section aims to demonstrate the limited local options we have in the CWM genre, particularly within Aotearoa New Zealand, and discuss how this research aims to address this broader issue.

Contemporary Worship Music (CWM) is a genre of music used in congregational singing in many Christian churches today (Ingalls, 2018, pp. 5–6). Historically, “Worship bore a striking musical resemblance to the urban folk music that was associated with the counterculture of the 1960s” (Myrick, 2018, p. 24). This movement, which coincided with the civil rights and free-love era, held countercultural values while simultaneously being shaped by Pentecostal

Christianity (Bustaan, 2014, p. 17). Congregations such as Calvary Chapels of Costa Mesa and Anaheim Vineyard, two American churches, played a substantial role in shaping this genre (Ruth & Lim, 2021, p. 109), creating new worship that “reflected the sound and spirit of pop music at that time” (Ruth & Hong, 2017, p. 58). This blend of contemporary music and Christ-centred lyrics offered Christian church communities a new sense of expression, with Jesus at the centre.

CWM’s influence was not limited to America, as it spread globally. New Zealanders David and Dale Garrett also felt led by God to begin their music ministry in 1973, setting scriptures to the folk-rock music style through their recording label, Scripture in Song. “Their work soon spread around the world, providing one of the first non-American musical sources for the early stages of contemporary worship in North America” (Ruth & Hong, 2017, p. 59). This early example highlights the diversity of contemporary worship and its global reach. However, by the 1990s, another dynamic shift emerged. What had started from a smaller number of dominant churches had rapidly increased globally, narrowing what had been locally shaped to now include more voices within the movement.

The Globalisation of Contemporary Worship Music

By the early 1990s, a strong, growing feeling of enthusiasm for Contemporary worship had gained significant traction among mainstream denominations, such as Methodists and Baptists (Ruth & Lim, 2021, p. 269). However, concerns arose as competing worship music styles often fostered tensions within congregations (Ruth & Hong, 2017, p. 20). This led to debates within the broader Christian community around the use of this new style in worship.

The 1990s saw establishments like megachurch Hillsong in Sydney, Australia, influence and develop CWM during this period. Their worship established a new way of doing contemporary worship as it saw the rise of recognisable worship leaders having a central place within its music, figures such as Hillsong’s “former lead worship pastor Darlene Zschech. Her 1993 song ‘Shout to the Lord’ is one of the staples of the new Christian music canon. Having sold over five million albums worldwide, she is one of the most successful Christian music performers ever” (Wagner, 2015, p. 330).

Wagner explores how celebrity functions within Christian music and the worship industry, highlighting Darlene Zschech as the “face and sound” of Hillsong Music Australia, and shows how her status helped propel Hillsong’s growth from a local church to a global institution (Evans, 2006, as cited in Wagner, 2015, p. 330). Wagner (2015) also implies that the “use of celebrity to communicate” could be a key to Hillsong’s success (p. 330). This idea is further explored by Myrick (2018), who notes that record labels would require worship leaders to be connected with their local churches; however, the churches also began to seek out worship leaders with charismatic qualities (p. 25). Unfortunately, this meant churches began prioritising worship leaders with communicational appeal, appearance and professional vocal abilities.

As this global movement gained more traction, Lemley (2021) argued that this era marked a shift from “the subculture of a particular community to a recorded artifact with a particular affective quality, produced for a mass audience” (p. 119). This move towards mass production made CWM not only a spiritual resource but also a global product, bought, sold and streamed like any other music. As CWM grew into a global phenomenon, a tension emerged between the songs of the global church and the voice of the local congregation.

Tensions

While global CWM has enriched congregations worldwide, it’s not the only option available to the church. In a highly populated global market, the local church’s own voice can be lost or overlooked. This tension between global and local is not just unique to Aotearoa, New Zealand, but has been observed in other cultural contexts and a response to this within from the United Kingdom, noted that “as contemporary worship music becomes more global and the sacredness and authenticity of songs become harder to distinguish from popular songs, it is the responsibility of individual culture and congregations to selectively choose, adopt, and make these songs relevant for their own contexts” (Tang & Perigo, 2024, p. 6). Ingalls (2018) also speaks to this shift in CWM towards a mass-produced form of cultural expression: “the adoption of this mass-mediated body of song for worship has inaugurated widespread changes not only in the sounds of the congregational singing, but also in how evangelicals socially structure their

music-making, experience worship, and ultimately, understand themselves as a religious group” (p. 1).

Churches thus face a challenge in how they respond to these challenges – how congregational identity can remain engaged with aspects of localised worship, rather than being shaped by the global market alone. As Tang and Perrigo (2024) argue, “a potential danger here is that global culture can be quickly imported to a degree where local expressions around the globe begin to lose their own identity or even consider another form of cultural expression more holy and superior” (p. 5). What this highlights is a need to consider how music can connect with the local identities of churches. This could relate to song selection and adaptation or, as this research explores, through localised approaches to songwriting.

Despite advocating for this approach, it must be said that global CWM has many significant values to the church, and in no way am I suggesting global worship music is a villain to the church. There have been countless songs over many years that have and will encourage the church in its worship. However, I would argue that a hybrid approach of both global CWM and locally created CWM would be beneficial to many congregations. This aligns with Lim’s perspective on hybrid worship, which is an approach that can support both applications (Lim, 2024, p. 156). This places an emphasis on Christian communities responding to local needs in what they create, making the pursuit of a local voice not just possible but necessary. Black (2020) advocates for “a human-connection dynamic with original content. If the church knows their worship pastor took the time to write a new song or poem for worship, they are inclined to give it extra engagement simply because it came from one of their own. Creating original content helps combat spectatorship while simultaneously guiding the church’s worshipping life” (p. 20). This advocates the importance of a local response, who it represents and the need for local change.

Reflecting, mirroring and engaging with the life stories of the congregation facilitates authentic forms of expression within worship. Ruth & Hong (2017) acknowledge this, arguing “Real people live with being Christians with cancer, Christians with AIDS, Christians coming back home with limbs missing from war, Christians being evicted and Christians losing their homes. If

you don't paint that picture, too, then I think that you are misrepresenting what faith really can look like" (p. 76). Arguing for the importance of reflecting the reality of life, if we are to truly serve our church, which is something global worship cannot do in a local context.

Worship leaders who know and care for their congregation serve better by having a "concern that the content of a worship service be relevant to the contemporary concerns and issues in the lives of worshippers;" they should be sincere and spiritually grounded (Ruth & Hong, 2017, p. 17). It is therefore the worship leader who holds this tension of song selection and creation with care and consideration, to slow down the pace of the globalised offerings and think through the material for their congregants, in whatever form that comes. Menger (2025) advocates that "the church radiating local creativity safely circumvents consumerist proclivities and reinforces its agency in how it chooses to worship" (p. 144). It is within this tension between global and local authentic expression that the worship leader must turn their attention to what matters most in song selection: the lyrics.

Lyrics over Style

The lyrics we sing as a congregation should declare God as King; we should never underestimate the importance of what a song's lyrics are conveying. In a worship context, Black (2020) argues that "Since music is one of the best avenues to absorb words, those charged to create original content must make sure the lyrics are true, sound, and biblically accurate" (p.15). Lyrics, in other words, should serve the purpose of the church, which is to proclaim who God is and lead the church to Christ; the focus not merely about how they make us feel. Navarro (2001) emphasises this point, asking, "Do the words in our songs, both choruses and hymns, say something about Jesus? Are we proclaiming the gospel in our song?" (p. 27). Alongside these questions, he cautions against the over-emotionalisation of some current CWM offerings. Kauflin (2008) supports this by stating in his book *Worship Matters* that "Too often we can be tempted to choose songs because of the music rather than the theological content," a decision reflecting style over lyrics (p. 93). For lyrics to be effective in a congregational setting, they need to be accessible to everyone singing them. When lyrics are too complicated to comprehend or too vague to tell the story, we miss the essence of gathered worship. Kauflin (2008) reminds us that, "In

congregational worship, poeticism and creative imagery have their limits. If you don't understand each line of a song you're singing, people in your church probably won't either" (p. 93).

It is also important to address the emotional element in worship songs. Emotions matter in worship, but when this becomes the measure of authentic worship rather than theological truth, the songs are doing a disservice to the church. Lemley (2021) argues that "The predominant musical styles and song structures of CWM tied to certain affective experiences became a criterion of affirming theological convictions" (p. 60). This musical style and response became linked to how theology was experienced, conveying that if one simply feels emotionally moved, then the theology feels true and meaningful.

CWM has been guilty of producing overly affected worship songs, lacking scriptural substance, and Kauflin (2008) cautions that "We need songs that have substantive, theologically rich, biblically faithful lyrics. A consistent diet of shallow worship songs tends to produce shallow, subjective Christians" (p. 92). One example of this tension has been the debate over CWM lyrics being too "I" focused. The solution, it would seem, is balance. Kauflin (2008) defends the use of subjective first-person language in worship, pointing to Psalm 86 as a biblical model where personal pronouns appear thirty-one times without losing its God-centered focus (p. 101). Songwriters and worship leaders thus have a need to be mindful of over-emphasising the affective qualities of their music by having songs grounded in scripture, providing a repertoire that disciplines the church. To tie the threads of this literature review thus far, collaborative and community-informed songwriting provides an important and fruitful avenue for churches and worship leaders to pursue, given that it allows for lyrics grounded in scripture and expressing the unique identity of the church congregation.

Collaborative and community-informed songwriting

As a foundation for considering collaborative songwriting in a popular music context, I considered the work of Joe Bennett (2011), where he identifies seven models of collaborative songwriting, each beginning with a reactive starting point such as a riff, a backing track, or a title more specific than a theme. Bennett (2011) describes the co-writing process as moving through six stages: “stimulus, approval, adaptation, negotiation, veto and consensus” (p. 4), as reflected in professional songwriting collaborative scenarios. As pertinent as these models are in this context, the collaborative methods described by Bennett are not necessarily fit for purpose for non-professional songwriters, such as congregation members. Therefore the process used in this project involved gathering testimonies from congregation members and examining these for recurring themes of faith. These overarching themes were then used as the foundation of the songs. Therefore, this process of incorporating lived testimonies became the main collaborative method of the songwriting for this album, and my collaborative role was to faithfully interpret the testimonies of the congregation and translate them musically into song.

Songwriting within the local church that implements collaborative participation conveys the collective uniqueness of its congregation, capturing a sense of time, place and lived faith. Lemley (2021) suggests an idea where “worshippers may be invited into the compositional process to contribute sounds and stories from their everyday lives that can inform worship making into everyday spaces where music becomes a soundtrack, repository, or site of empowerment for faithful discipleship” (p. 191). There is much promise in this model, extending worship past the Sunday service as the lived experiences of the church, its prayers and stories, hold significance and are valuable to the church’s membership. This view is supported by Black (2020), who states that “The church benefits from the different gifts, experiences, and skills of the broader church through collaboration” (p. 21). A partnership allows the church to participate in songwriting as a shared act of growing in faith together, representing their own cultures, and unifying the expression of corporate praise to God. It has been argued that worship transcends all cultures (Tang & Perigo, 2024, p. 5). Why the need to localise worship, a view that could marginalise the local church? Some churches may be suspicious of localising worship (Lim, 2024, p. 146). However, just like translating scripture, it’s simply a way for Christian

communities to strengthen their own identity and express it in their own way (Connor & Menger, 2021, p. 15). The process undertaken in this project addresses this tension.

The local voice

As churches welcome original songs that represent the congregation they serve, many have struggled to implement their own identity within the CWM movement. Lim (2024) argues that many churches in the global south continue to depend on translated Western congregational songs, and he encourages worship music that reflects their own cultural identities (p. 157). He also notes that churches have “resisted efforts to explore and harness our socio-cultural heritage to worship God,” also highlighting it can be “easier to adopt and mimic established expressions than to have localized efforts face the risk of rejection by the faith community” (Lim, 2024, p. 157). While efforts are being made to change this, as Menger (2024) investigated, there are local Indonesian churches taking back their stories, concentrating on their local views and needs within liturgy (p. 8). Other authors who have researched indigenous expressions, like Said (2021), who interviews New Zealand worship songwriter Cindy Ruakere, contend, “We’ve reduced worship down to White pop...we’ve narrowed it down to this tiny little grid of ‘it sounds like this’” (Ruakere, as cited in Said, 2021, p. 7). This demonstrates how indigenous expressions can be sidelined. When churches disregard their own voice, the loss affects the community.

However, when churches embrace localised songwriting, the congregation feels represented and unified. Indigenous forms of worship impact a congregation’s cultural identity and can lead to a deeper connection. Said (2021) echoes, “Indigenous forms of worship impact cultural identity, where Christian worship drawing upon Māori language and music forms has led to deeper connections to congregants’ cultural backgrounds” (p. 1). Revelation 7:9 reads “After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (NIV, 2011). Representation, or the lack thereof, is a theological problem; it is God’s design that worship is to be expressed in all languages by all peoples. This argument is significant as embracing local voices is not without its challenges and requires respect and guidance to convey without

hindrance and within context. As Brad Haami warns, “these things have power, but only in the right context. If you do it outside of that context, it’ll become just entertainment and it will become...a tokenistic thing” (Haami, as cited in Said, 2021, p. 10). Even one song done with truthfulness carries more substance than many done without context. Worship leaders and church songwriters must be aware of this responsibility by engaging in worship that reflects their congregation’s spiritual and cultural needs.

Worship leading and songwriting

Songwriting for the local church holds significance, as it widens the discipleship of the church (Black, 2020, p. 18). It can shape and form the congregation’s understanding of God and his truths. Black (2020) similarly raises that “Good theology leads people to encounter the living God and be transformed into his likeness (p. 14). This is reinforced by Wheeler and Whaley (2011) when addressing the role of a worship leader, emphasising that “Our twenty-first century worship leaders teach biblical theology just as much as they teach music. Often, they are in the position to shape a congregation’s concept of God, Christian service, evangelism, Christian graces, and discipleship – all through worship” (p. 42). These intertwined roles of worship leader as songwriter can significantly contribute to the spiritual formation of the church, allowing congregations to encounter the living God and be transformed into his likeness through both theological and musical expression.

As a worship leader, my role is to guide and lead the church together in unity, to source or write songs that carry theological weight, which teach and encourage the church in their worship. 2 Chronicles 20:21-22 depicts singers leading the army into battle, giving thanks to the Lord, demonstrating that worship precedes God’s movement, a scripture that has personally resonated with my own role (NIV, 2011).

The intention for a worship leader should be to motivate and guide the congregation toward a response to God, engage their expression and remind them of the power of praise. Worship that is led from a different motivation lacks spiritual and scriptural grounding, which could result in a performative display. Navarro (2001) argues that worship leaders who lack a personal

relationship with God risk leading their church into hypocrisy (p. 21). This identifies the importance of this role.

Kauflin (2008) highlights that “Many churches today are weaker and worldlier because pastors have abdicated that role. Thousands of pastors have looked to the culture rather than to the Bible to determine how their church will worship God” (p. 258). Psalm 150:6 calls all living things to praise the Lord, reminding the worship leader that the voice of the congregation belongs to God (NIV, 2011). It is crucial that this voice, the congregation’s song, is located within the church’s pew, and Menger (2025) echoes this, stating “Christian communities should create in response to local needs, as contrasted with a passive, recipient mindset” (p. 144). Having a worship leader who also serves as a songwriter brings a unique gift, crafting music that speaks directly to the community it serves.

Worship leaders hold much responsibility, and the assignment is to understand the heart of God, “led by the Spirit of God” Romans 8:14 and carry the word of God, searching the scriptures (NIV, 2011). Zac Hicks embodies this by saying, “Worship pastors are ministers of God’s Word who just happen to use the medium of music to communicate it” (Hicks, as cited by Balentine, 2017, p. 24). Having established the significance of the worship leader as a songwriter, the following section outlines a practice-based methodological approach that I deployed from this position, writing songs that drew on themes from participants’ testimonies.

From Listening to Making

Situated within a local church in Aotearoa, New Zealand, this project used qualitative practice-led research to draw on the testimonies of congregation members. The primary motivation was to identify the techniques used for collaborative songwriting and how these strategies create a community-informed worship album. As this project was focused on identifying a local voice that represented its church community, faith and culture, it called for a more bespoke and considered songwriting methodology.

I needed ten voluntary participants from within my local church community to gather data for this research. To ensure appropriate methods and protections were in place for the participants, an ethics application was submitted and approved through the Waikato Institute of Technology. The application detailed the overview of the project, who could participate, the consent process, questions and data storage. To welcome volunteers to participate in this project, an announcement was made during a Sunday church service, ensuring the invitation reached the community directly. To maintain anonymity and voluntary participation without personal bias, I placed information packs at the back of the church on the information desk, allowing people to engage privately. I then accepted the first ten volunteers who contacted me.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured method, allowing the participants to speak in depth and freely.¹ These interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis and in a location chosen by each participant, to support a sense of safety and comfort when sharing personal experiences. The conversations were audio-recorded using an app on my phone to facilitate data recording and ease of transcription. Interviews ranged from 20 minutes to no more than an hour to respect the participants' time. Participants were thanked for their contributions and for sharing their stories.

Once each interview had concluded, they were transcribed and reviewed. As interviewees were free to share as much of their story relating to the questions asked, some digressed, resulting in excess information; only relevant information was used. Each interview transcript was collated in a spreadsheet, with interview questions arranged vertically down the side of the spreadsheet, and each participant was assigned a horizontal column across the spreadsheet. The corresponding responses were entered into the relevant cells, allowing for easy cross-referencing of answers across the ten participants.²

I used thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and topics in the participants' responses. These were then categorised to reflect their shared meaning. For example, I grouped responses that included shame, brokenness, and worthlessness under the theme "Inner battles", and "Awe

¹ See Appendix A for a list of interview questions.

² This spreadsheet can be viewed on Google Sheets via this link: [📄 Themes and scriptures from interviews](#)

of God” included reflections on God’s glory, holiness, and majesty. This resulted in twelve overarching themes, once all responses had been categorised.

The songwriting process then began by selecting a theme, reflecting on it, journaling ideas, and researching scriptures that aligned with the theme. Some of the scriptures used were directly quoted by participants. This method was used as the foundation for all songs written within this project. It was important in the early stages, as the lyrics were forming, to address the direction of the lyrics. The key focus was: would this song be vertical or horizontal in its approach? Vertical refers to a focus directed towards God, declaring who he is, while horizontal lyrics speak of our relationship with God.

The next stage of the songwriting process was very fluid, with some songs emerging with chord structures first, whilst others were formed by lyrics, then melody, followed by chords. Sometimes I needed to create a chord progression to help form a feel or evoke an emotion, which then shaped the lyrics and melody. I continued crafting the song by exploring alternative chords and progressions and further experimenting with the feel and tempo. Melody and phrasing were refined throughout the process, along with tweaking lyrics and adding additional scripture where needed. Basic demos were recorded to pass on to band members to workshop further arrangement ideas and instrumentation.

Once songs felt strong, they were trialled during our Sunday worship services. This allowed for continued collaboration and feedback from band members, acknowledging what worked and what didn’t, how the church responded to the songs, and making alterations where needed. These services were recorded live to allow for current demos to be made as the song was being formed and moulded. This entire process was repeated for every song except one, which was saved for the album. After finalising the structure and form, we recorded the tracks using Logic Pro, then sent them to be professionally mixed and mastered. The producer received production notes for each song, and we had many calls back and forth to refine things like vocal effects, guitar sounds, and what might need cutting. Once we were all happy with the final product, the songs were mastered.

Creative Discussion

Contemporary worship music has, in many ways, become a global conversation led by a small number of influential voices and institutions. Within that landscape, the local voice risks being overlooked. Not because it lacks value, but because modern worship was not built to amplify it. The project's conviction is that the local voice matters and that the stories of faith of an ordinary congregation have something unique to offer the wider worship conversation, and in this discussion, I hope to present the process for three songs created within this project, exploring how the community voice was expressed and how the overarching themes shaped the creative and songwriting decisions.

The interviews that supported the framework of this project were meaningful and honest; the participants shared stories openly, reflecting on life's ups and downs, stories of loss or pain. This is a position Lim and Ruth (2017) share, supporting the representation of the lived experience within the church and the importance of "painting that picture" of life's journeys (p. 76). These conversations revealed that faith is something lived through, a continued dependence on God, in a sense, a metaphorical pilgrimage, to learn as we go (Taylor, 2023, p. 15). This album, *Spoken*, celebrates the journey of faith.

Aotearoa New Zealand has a strong sense of culture and identity, and it was important that this project resemble that. One way I implemented this was by writing in our native language—Te Reo Māori, a language that reflects the members of the church and the culture they live in. This was a high priority for my writing. As I worked through different themes, it was essential that the song reflect our people and their language. However, I was determined not to make this representation tokenistic. Instead, I needed a genuine approach done with care and consideration, with a bespoke design. As Said (2021) notes, tokenism occurs when cultural expressions aren't embedded in the culture of worship itself but treated as musical entertainment (p. 11). By creating this worship song, grounded in spiritual practice rather than cultural performance, I could ensure this song carried real cultural weight, not just the appearance of it. This was a concern, and it was important to me as I am not fluent in Te Reo Māori, so I needed support throughout this process.

The song “He Whānau” was written and inspired by the theme “community.” The word “Whānau” is often “translated as ‘family,’ but its meaning is more complex . . . Whānau can be multilayered, flexible and dynamic” (Walker, n.d., para. 1). In this context, it is used to convey the gathered family of a church that all have common ground—their shared faith in God.

I felt this song should be written intertwining Te Reo Māori and English, the two languages of this beautiful country. The song begins in English, with the first line of verse one posturing the church: “Here are we together.” The pre-chorus is our first section with Te Reo Māori, weaving in English. We sing: “He Hōnore (Honour), He korōria (Glory) to you, our Saviour and King,” acknowledging who we are here to worship. The chorus section, which is completely in Te Reo Māori, says “He whānau e manawanui ana ki a ihu karaiti.” In English, this translates to “To be a family becoming wholehearted followers of Jesus, together.” This statement is our church vision, so adding it to the song echoed the “community” theme.

As I stated earlier, this song required extra care and attention. Once the lyrics felt solid, my next concern was how to place the melody within the sections written in Te Reo Māori. I collaborated with a local Māori priest to review the lyrics and melody placement. I sent recordings so he could analyse my work. After a couple of tweaks and reshaping the melody, we settled on the recorded option. Regarding arrangement, we decided it needed to be simple and allow the voices to shine, with minimal instrumentation and an acoustic guitar focus, so that it would feel like home. When we trialled it at a Sunday service, the church’s feedback was overwhelmingly encouraging and joyful. They loved it and wanted more. This response from the church, when used in a Sunday service, reflected what Said (2021) had stated would happen: that indigenous forms of worship impact cultural identity, enriching congregants’ connection to their cultural backgrounds (p. 14).

Reflecting on local attributes again, another way we conveyed our locality was by incorporating local sounds within the song “I’m In Awe.” Its introduction includes sounds of cicadas, a stream and the birdsong of the native tūī, which has a unique call; it is also referenced in the first verse

of the song in the line “The wind sounds your glory, the Tūi your song.” These were recorded from a popular local bush walk, Mokorua Bush Reserve, here in Whakatāne.

The theme for this song was “The character of God,” specifically his glory and sovereignty. To achieve this, I used scripture extensively, some lyrics quoting directly, and others were inspired by the biblical texts. However, this created a particular tension: the verses needed to be theologically dense, accessible, and written using contemporary language that wouldn’t alienate worshippers. An important constraint, then, was using as much scripture as possible without sacrificing clarity or closeness. I was influenced by Navarro’s (2001) writings: “We need to write words that have gospel integrity and avoid writing misleading words about our God” (p. 28). This tension should be important to the creative church. As we moved on to the chorus, it felt as though it needed to have a strong statement but be minimal in its approach, due to the dense verses. The chorus repeats the line “I’m in Awe, I’m in Awe and at your feet, I’m in Awe, I’m in Awe.” This song underwent a structural change; the old first verse felt as though what was being said should be the song’s final statement, so a new first verse was written, now introducing the birdsong and sounds of nature, as mentioned earlier, into the new first verse.

The next song to discuss is “You Paid It All,” inspired by the theme “The need for Jesus: Our salvation, truth, and hope found through Jesus.” As part of my contextual analysis, I reviewed songs that could inspire songs on this album, such as “Yet Not I but Through Christ in Me” by CityAlight, an Australian Church worship collective. This simple expression of a modern-day hymn spoke to the core of gathered worship. Its simplicity of instrumentation but richness in lyrics and simple melodies challenged me to write a song with these central markers. As this style was new to my songwriting practice, it went through multiple forms and lyric changes. The intention was to bring the church’s attention to the cross, emphasising that the song needed to be scripture-rich but simple in arrangement.

This was the first song I wrote for the album, and in the beginning stages, its direction was unclear; the verses were “to God,” and the chorus was about God – the vertical-horizontal dilemma. This needed to be changed to improve the stability of the song, so the chorus shifted from “He paid it all” to “You paid it all.” The form of the song also underwent a major overhaul:

during trials at Sunday services, the chorus and bridges were repetitive and over-sung, so we tightened the structure and removed extra repetition, and it began to breathe. This song and its style are an approach I enjoyed and would like to further develop. For congregational singing, this style really does what it needs to do, uniting the voice of the congregation.

These localised songs allow the church to be heard and encouraged by the songs inspired by their journeys of faith. This research highlights the value of collaborative songwriting within congregational settings, contributing to the broader conversation surrounding integrating the local voice and its uniqueness back into congregational song. The use of local narratives is something churches should be pursuing by implementing local songwriting and understanding its place in liturgy (Menger, 2024, p. 8), something globalised worship cannot offer. The album *Spoken* is both proof that the local voice has value and a model that other churches in Aotearoa could follow.

Reflections

Looking back, a few limitations shaped the project in ways worth acknowledging. Time was the most obvious constraint, as this was my first time writing and recording a full album, and within the boundaries of a Master's degree timeline. Outside of an academic setting, I'd give that process far more breathing room. However, there is beauty in working under pressure and reflection on what you are actually capable of producing. Recording predominantly at home was a deliberate choice rather than a compromise with mixing and mastering costs ahead; it made both practical and financial sense, and it's an approach I'd take again.

The one limitation that genuinely affected the project was the musicians' availability. The original vision was to involve the full local worship team, but competing personal commitments meant a smaller group ended up carrying most of the workload. In hindsight and regardless of those constraints, this quietly reshaped the sound and feel of the album in ways I couldn't have planned for.

A shift in direction made early on in my songwriting approach was that I had initially planned to write a song for each individual testimony I gathered; once I began writing, I moved away from that. I felt that for songs intended for corporate congregation use, I combined themes from individual testimony to overarching themes. However, I think both options would work, as long as the songs remain non-literal retellings of the testimonies.

I'm confident this method could be replicated, and this process could be used by other local churches, possibly in contexts with limited funding or limited musicians. For the local voice to rise, we as songwriters, worship leaders, and musicians need to speak up for the people we are honoured to serve. We must "capture the central thought and convey it so that the congregation can harvest its nutrients and grow" (Stroud, 2020, p. 15). It is a challenge worth accepting.

Final Thoughts

The project began with other people's words: their stories, their journeys, their voices; moments shared where openness and vulnerability resided. Hearing these stories carried a great responsibility; holding those voices and honouring them in the songwriting process will be a treasured memory. It takes a lot to share some of the more difficult times in our lives, to be open; it can be confronting. As I reflect on that, I find it interesting that when someone shares something personal that they could be judged for, it, in turn, brings more understanding and care toward the person. I have always loved deeper conversations, walking through challenges together, and this project was a labour of love, of stories told.

The research on local and global tensions that informed this work revealed limited methods for collaborative songwriting in contemporary worship. What was foregrounded was that collaborative songwriting in a community context often has a shared foundation, like scripture or cultural material, to invite the collective voice into song creation. However, a significant gap was revealed, with few models that fit this project's specific placement of a songwriter working not from their own testimony but from the testimony of others. For songwriters and worship leaders looking to write for their local community, this project offers a way to create material that

catches the heart of the church they serve. There is a need for songwriting guidance, and this project sits in that gap where the literature is quiet.

Looking back at the twelve themes that shaped this album, patterns begin to appear. What at first felt like twelve distinct themes gradually revealed themselves as something more unified: four bigger ideas that the community held in common: a recognition of who God is, our confidence in God, His love towards us, and that all of it is carried together in and by how we belong; our community. An important consideration in this process is to honour the personal stories and themes shared by the members of the community: these stories are not lyrics; they are a gift. The themes also resonated deeply with scriptures. The three core elements combined in this process – testimony, themes and scripture – allowed a song to carry something true without exposing the person behind it.

A valued part of the process was being able to trial these songs live, and they were received well. The album as a complete work has not been heard yet; that will be done at a special listening party for the church. So what remains to be seen is how the community will experience *Spoken* in full, hearing it from beginning to end as a unified album rather than individual songs in a Sunday service. That moment has not happened yet, and what it produces, whether emotional or spiritual, is soon to be explored. For now, I can reflect that the words that thread this work together honour the journey of life. It has made me step back as a songwriter to let others be heard. This is a pathway I intend to walk again. My hope is that *Spoken* reveals the church's heart, its values and its strength. This album is a gift to the church and its congregants, though the greater gift was what they gave to me: their trust, their vulnerability, their stories.

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Appendix A: Semi-structured Interview Questions

- What does worship mean to you?
- Can you share a situation where you felt God helped walk you through something challenging or meaningful?
- What helped you hold onto your faith during this time?
- Was there a particular Bible verse or scripture that stood out to you in that season?
- How do you remember or reflect on that season today?
- What would you say this experience taught you about God and your relationship with Him?
- Would you be comfortable with this story inspiring a worship song, in a general and anonymised way?