

# Worship music, abuse, and scandal

On 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2023, Soul Survivor church in Watford published a statement on their website. “We need to share some difficult news with you today,” it began, “safeguarding concerns relating to Mike Pilavachi have been reported to the national Church and, working closely with the Diocese of St Albans, these are currently being looked into according to the Church of England House of Bishops guidelines” (Soul Survivor Watford 2023). Over the following weeks and months, a now-all-too-familiar pattern unfolded: vague statements from the church were supplemented by more-detailed claims published in other media, the pastor in question resigned, speculation on social media and on blogs put pressure for more to happen, further details emerged, a report was commissioned, a podcast series began to narrate the journey, and survivors began to speak out more publicly about their experiences (God Loves Women 2023).

Over the course of the last few years, it has become increasingly difficult to think about evangelical and charismatic Christianity without reference to a series of high-profile scandals that have repeatedly made media headlines. These scandals have become the topic of documentaries and created vast amounts of social media discourse. Stories have broken surrounding Mark Driscoll at Mars Hill, Carl Lentz and Brian Houston at Hillsong, Mike Pilavachi at Soul Survivor, Mike Bickle at IHOP Kansas City, and Alan Scott at Dwelling Place Anaheim, to name just a few. The more visible cases have centred around highly visible institutions that are near to the social and ecclesial heartbeat of influential traditions of worship music. Their exposure has made visible the devastating effects that some personalities and institutions have had on the lives of those who have been subject to different varieties of abuse and trauma.

While many of these scandals passed me by as just another example of the kind of situation we’ve sadly come to expect, the Soul Survivor events hit a little differently. I had been to the Soul Survivor festivals myself, and they had been my gateway both into charismatic Christianity and into buying my first ever worship album. My former church in Oxford had employed a former Soul Survivor worship leader, Mike had even visited us for one of our regular worship team evenings, and I had felt that Mike radiated a sense of authenticity and honesty. Having been invited by a journalist to submit a few thoughts for inclusion in the *Church Times*, I began to think through not just the scandal itself, but the ways in which it might be bound together with the dynamics of worship music that had been such a big part of the Soul Survivor culture and events, and the ways in which it might bring some of the stories that had shaped our basic values and attitudes into question:

The story behind Matt Redman’s “The Heart of Worship” is one of the most formative narratives in the Soul Survivor worship ethos. It’s about how the band and their worship music got too big for their boots; so, one day, they decided to strip everything back — to return to the simplest form of prayer and worship. Reducing everything to just one person and a guitar showed how it’s really all about God and not about the performance, the power, or the other human elements that so often get bound up with worship music. This story has been a foundational narrative in so many worship teams I’ve been part of — we’ve told ourselves that this is our job, this is the attitude we need, and that this is how we should be. But, now, we learn that that story

could well have been bound up with abuses of power, with inappropriate relationships, with favouritism and gaslighting. I don't know what to do with that. (Porter 2023)

While the worship wars of the late twentieth century represent a time of relatively vehement contestation regarding the status of contemporary worship music, and rock music in general, as either good or evil, much of the recent scholarship on worship music has been critical but sympathetic, understanding that worship music is flawed, but appreciative of much of what it has to offer:<sup>1</sup> room for emotional expression, opportunity to participate, permission to use popular musical styles in worship. Seeing the overreactions of conservative critics and noticing the role that the music seems to play in the lives of others can help to foster a generous attitude which is wary of dismissing what this music has to offer without properly understanding what it is trying to do, of focussing on its dangers without an awareness of how they might be mitigated, or of devaluing a set of repertoires and practices which seem to play an important role in the lives and spiritualities of a great many people. This series of scandals challenges a sympathetic reaction: perhaps many of these assessments have been overly generous in their evaluation; perhaps worship music is indeed inherently bound up with unhealthy and potentially abusive dynamics; perhaps we (or I) need to think more deeply about the dark side worship and stop trying to assume that many church phenomena are good first and flawed later.

A turn from sympathy to scepticism isn't the only possible reaction to the different events that have taken place – music has rarely been at the centre of these different situations, and the scandals emerging within charismatic and evangelical settings have been mirrored by similar situations coming to light both in a range of other Christian traditions and institutions and in a range of industries that had nothing to do with the church. It would be relatively easy to argue, therefore, that worship music was purely incidental to the emergence of abuse and that these scandals were a matter of problematic individuals and inadequate safeguarding structures that had nothing to do with music and simply happened to sometimes be in the same place at the same time.<sup>2</sup> It is, perhaps, not immediately obvious which route makes more sense to take. Is worship music the problem, or isn't it? Should those of us engaged at the interface of scholarship and practice be taking critical aim at a popular mode of worship, or allowing worshippers to continue in a practice that clearly means a lot to them and which many find, in some way, life-giving and beneficial?

In order to reflect on these questions a little more deeply, I pursued three different lines of enquiry. Firstly, beginning towards the end of 2023, I reached out to a small selection of those who had made public statements about their experiences to see whether they had thoughts or reflections on the issue. Secondly, I scoured social media and a range of podcasts, blogs, and online videos to see whether worship music was featuring in the discourse around some of the more-recent scandals to emerge, in particular the Soul Survivor scandal and the scandal at the International House of Prayer in Kansas City that followed later in the same year. And thirdly, I began to explore the literature on spiritual abuse and a range of related subjects to figure out whether there was a way to triangulate this with the now relatively well established pool of academic research that has emerged over the last 10–20 years on worship music practices and experience.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the introduction to Andrew Mall's (2021) volume in which he discusses his positionality as a lapsed Christian music fan, a perspective which is relatively common in the wider scholarship.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Cowan (2023) for a discussion of the different responses that can be taken.

Initial conversations with some of those who had spoken out publicly in relation to the different scandals threw up a range of, often slightly tentative, suggestions as to what kind of connections it might be possible to draw between worship music and abuse. My first conversation partner drew attention to the way that contemporary worship music can tend to deflect from other aspects of life and experience – that as long as the music on a Sunday was good, nothing else was considered important. They pointed to the use of music as a tool to solve everything, with its offer of divine encounter providing a shortcut to healing and life, potentially trapping worshippers in an addictive dopamine cycle when what they really need is space to talk through different issues on a deeper level. They drew attention to the connection between music and power, that the person who controls the music is the one who controls everything in the gathering, something that could sometimes provoke rivalry. They seemed to be aware of the way in which worship music could participate in different tensions and potentially-problematic dynamics while, at the same time, leaving connections to dynamics of abuse relatively indirect and implicit within this overall pattern of interaction and experience.

A second conversation partner focussed more on the wider market context in which worship music is embedded, pointing to the potential of music as a marketing tool that can serve to normalise otherwise crazy-sounding teaching, to its ability to help bypass logical red flags, to music industry dynamics that prioritise the making of money, and to the constant pursuit of a new sound as something that then became a priority. They emphasised the gap between the priorities that drive the creation and performance of worship music and the kind of pastoral care and concern that should be a greater priority in the context of a church. They emphasised the importance that is often placed on control of the worship environment and the creation of a club of mutually supporting insiders that is a result of the wider industry dynamics as well as pointing to the dangers of worship music experience itself – the false sense of intimacy that it can provide, and the vulnerability that is inherent in many worship music spaces.

My third conversation partner was hesitant to place music at the root of any problems, holding on to the idea of music as a relatively ambiguous phenomenon that can relate to the things around it in a variety of different positive or negative ways, but they still pointed to the close connection between music and power. They focussed closely on psychology and matters of character, drawing attention to potential connections between musical performance and narcissistic character traits relating to a need for adulation and adoration which, in turn relate to personal insecurities. They pointed to the dangers of the potentially dangerous and boundary-less world of emotions that is opened up in a lot of music, the relationship between a search for intimacy in worship and a search for this in human connections, the inability to talk about what's really going on in your soul, and a complicated world of messed up and broken people that they believe ultimately sits underneath a lot of Christian musical practices.

Each of these three conversations represented a very individual and personal perspective. None of them claims to be particularly definitive, and it is clear that they are coloured both by my particular prompting and by traumatic events which prompt reflection on previous experience in the light of trauma. Each of these perspectives, however, ties into a range of themes which are present within the broader literature and which I seek to outline in some of the sections that follow.

## Spiritual abuse

Perhaps the most obvious place to start is the literature on spiritual abuse. An understanding of how the dynamics of spiritual abuse have been understood can offer a basis for considering the different ways in which worship music may or may not be able to contribute to their development.

A number of authors have begun to define and explore the nature of spiritual abuse. In a 2022 review of empirical literature, Ellis et al. draw attention to a variety of different approaches, focussing in particular on David Johnson and Jeffrey VanVonderen's now relatively well-cited suggestion that spiritual abuse involves "the mistreatment of a person who is in need of help, support, or greater spiritual empowerment, with the result of weakening, undermining, or decreasing that person's spiritual empowerment" and that "within an abusive R/S [Religious/Spiritual] system, (a) leaders typically focus on making their power and position known, (b) there is a preoccupation with member performance and obedience/submission, (c) members must follow unspoken rules, (d) there is either extreme religious objectivism or extreme subjectivism, (e) the members must be loyal to the church over God, and (f) there is a sense of paranoia/secretiveness within the R/S community" (Ellis et al. 2022, p. 214).

Other descriptions run parallel to this or nuance it further in a variety of different ways. In her 2016 thesis devoted to the development of a spiritual abuse questionnaire, Kathryn Keller surveys a number of different analyses of spiritual abuse, drawing on the work of Bhaktavatsala Dasa which identifies equivalence between external appearance, position and spiritual success, the endorsement of unrealistic expectations, dynamics of total surrender or infallibility, the misuse of teachings for manipulation, shame and fear, premature transcendence and perception of spiritual elitism (Keller 2016, p. 67), and the work of David Ward, who highlights the suppression of doubts, questions, and critical thinking (2016, p. 68), a drawing of equivalence between obedience to leadership and obedience to god, spiritual bullying, acceptance via performance, spiritual neglect, and dissonance between inner and outer feelings and experiences (2016, p. 69). Samuel Fernández likewise surveys a range of different definitions, mostly centring around questions of authority, a religious context, and the misuse of spiritual power. Fernández suggests that "abuse of conscience, or spiritual abuse, can occur in any religion or faith-based community; however, it takes on different features, dynamics, and strategies depending on the specific institutional settings in which it occurs" (2022, p. 1). In an article on the process of leaving a context of perceived spiritual abuse, Hans Vigdel, Marianna Nygaard, and Tormod Kleiven (2024) explore the dynamics of spiritual abuse in some depth. They highlight the need to understand the power interactions that exist in contexts of spiritual abuse and, for those that leave contexts of spiritual abuse, they highlight a range of different dimensions: the experience of God as controlling; experiencing God as confusing, experiencing God as an excuse to remain passive; experiencing shame evoked by perceived images of God; and the imposition of a certain view of God's will.

From these different definitions it becomes clear that spiritual abuse often seems to revolve around questions of power – the empowerment of a leader or institution, the disempowerment of those within it, and the misuse of the difference in power that opens up. While there are distinctions to be made between the definitions of spiritual abuse given here and dynamics of sexual or financial abuse which are often more prominent in the headlines, it is not so hard to see how misuse of spiritual power may easily open up into a range of areas and dimensions, impacting the lives of those caught up in its hold across the many different areas of their lives

with which the spirituality and their involvement in community come into contact. This misuse of power manifests through a variety of different avenues and in a variety of different ways. Different strategies are used in order to develop it and it is misused in a range of different ways. Those affected have a variety of different experiences and experience a variety of different consequences as a result.

## Power, vulnerability, and emotion

While worship music is not solely the domain of megachurches, its production and circulation is often bound up together with them, with a large proportion of recent repertoire being created and distributed by an incredibly small number of individuals and congregations (Worship Leader Research 2023). These churches often create the models that other, smaller or less-influential, congregations try to emulate. Insights into the logic of how megachurches work demonstrate a close connection between music, emotion, and power. In their 2020 volume, *High on God*, James Wellman, Katie Corcoran, and Kate Stockly examine the dynamics that have made megachurches particularly compelling to Americans in particular. They discuss the way in which desire is caught, the way in which leadership is sacralised, and the driving force of emotional energy behind it all. In particular, they describe a ritual cycle in which music leads congregations into a vulnerable space in order to be ready to receive the sermon:

worship—from the tone and tenor of the music to the fluctuation of lighting, to the way slides and images rotate, all invite participants “to be fed,” in the language of evangelicalism. That is, one is led to a “womb-like” or “alone-together” position, such that the human body is unlocked and less defensive, and the mind is free to receive what is coming in the sermon. [...] Creating the “need to feed” response, in fact, is the point of worship. People, without worship, have their defenses up and their critical faculties in place, and are not ready “to receive the word,” “to feed on Jesus,” “to let the spirit make me new.” (Wellman, Corcoran, and Stockly 2020, p. 111)

This sermon serves to reinforce a particular power relationship, in which emotions flow in one particular direction:

A defining characteristic of charismatic authority is an intense emotional bond between the leader and his followers. [...] Another component is that the attendees feel emotions expressed by the senior pastor. (Wellman, Corcoran, and Stockly 2020, p. 131)

Kate Stockly expands further on this work in her chapter in the *Routledge Handbook of Megachurches*, talking explicitly about the relationship between this emotional dynamic and abuse. Stockly suggests that:

affect and emotions are also integral for understanding how power works in their church systems. [...] Investigating the ways in which emotions function to build charismatic bonds between congregants and leaders can help shed light on how corruption is fostered and tolerated in megachurches. What happens to the love, trust, and attachment that congregants experience for their pastors when those pastors turn out to be stealing from the church, sexually abusing other congregants, or committing violent acts? (2024, pp. 230–1)

The development of emotional bonds between pastor and congregation is not inherently abusive in and of itself, but they are clearly developed here in such a way that power and structures of feeling are unequally distributed. Where abusive dynamics arise, the logic of this dynamic may prevent that abuse from being held in proper check, and in some situations clearly has potential to help enable the possibility of abuse in the first place.

Likewise, the creation of moments of vulnerability is not something that should be automatically understood as problematic. Music is particularly adept at opening up spaces of vulnerability, and it is important to acknowledge that it can function as something of a double-edged sword. Elizabeth MacGregor has characterised musical vulnerability as “the inherent and situational openness to being affected by the semantic and somatic properties of music” (2022, p.30), suggesting that this vulnerability can open up both positive and negative susceptibility, and therefore comes with the need for the development of a corresponding ethic of care. Writing on the topic of spiritual abuse, Ivan Platovnjak makes a similar suggestion, writing that “each human being’s anthropological vulnerability, on the one hand, exposes him or her to the possibility of being wounded, but on the other hand, it is a condition of the possibility of an intersubjective relationship that enables him or her to become fully human.” (2024, p. 202). Nevertheless, where these dynamics of vulnerability are combined with an unbalanced distribution of power, they are clearly open to exploitation and misuse. Vulnerable spaces need to be safe spaces, and there need to be appropriate mechanisms in place for them to be so. This is hard to do when power is concentrated in the hands of a small number of leaders and individuals.

In a 2020 article on music education as manipulation, Ketil Thorgersen argues that “manipulation is a necessary component of all art and aesthetic communication, that manipulation is an act that can be used for good or bad purposes,” (2020, p. 153). He suggests that “it is the intentions, actions and consequences of the manipulation that are the measure of its rightness” and draws attention to the work of Brown and Volgsten who ascribe six different functions to music in group processes – bringing about conformity; communicating, persuading and manipulating; reinforcing social identity; sorting people into groups; co-ordinating group-level cooperation; offering an avenue for emotional expression, conflict, resolution, and social play (2020, p. 155). Some of these functions are inherent to almost all music, and some of them clearly play an integral role in the functioning of congregations. Worship leaders can often be quick to downplay concerns about the dangers of emotional manipulation, highlighting instead the value in emotional expression. They can often be considerably less forthright, however, about the ethics of care which MacGregor suggests need to sit alongside musically vulnerable dynamics and situations (cf. Myrick 2021). Indeed, in many ways, worship music discourse can seek to avoid thinking about such questions too closely, relying on rhetorical strategies for disarming opponents rather than genuine attention to its own potential weaknesses and flaws.

## **Industry, celebrity, and money**

A number of authors have commented on the way in which the development of a profitable worship music marketplace, with high-status individuals and congregations who earn both fame and money by replicating a certain kind of success, contributes to the pressures and ethical tensions that those involved in worship music often have to navigate. Focussing in on the Christian music industry as a phenomenon, Andrew Mall draws attention to the way in which “participants struggled to reconcile their commercial goals with their ethics and ideologies, as well as the evangelical mission of Christianity” (2021, p. 59). At the same

time, he draws attention to the way in which the market uniquely seeks to understate the labour of individuals in favour of acknowledgment of God (2021, p. 63), and the way in which ideas such as anointing are used to diffuse a sense of celebrity (2021, p. 104). As individuals have gained power and influence, and have become part of infrastructures which seek to perpetuate both of these, a sense of ethical tension has developed alongside strategies for diffusion which rely on downplaying aspects of reality through spiritualised language.

In a similar manner to Mall, Monique Ingalls has drawn attention to a variety of different tensions surrounding worship at the Passion conference. Some of these centre on the way in which individuals manage their own presence among a wider community of worshippers as they are called both to see themselves as part of a community of faith, and to ignore the presence of anyone other than God (Ingalls 2008, p. 279). Others centre on the worship leaders themselves, who feel the need to disavow their own fame or success, as well as the fact they are engaging in a performance of some kind (2008, p. 202). Discourses and strategies are used that seek to downplay or mask an aspect of reality, leaving it unavailable for acknowledgment or engagement (2008, p. 217).

While these tensions may be navigable in some way or another, they can both distract from concerns that genuinely need to be thought about as the pressure towards success takes precedence, and serve to develop a set of strategies for disavowing aspects of reality that mean learning to habitually dismiss or explain away realities that you are confronted with, or developing a cynical orientation towards them rather than fostering a completely truthful and wholehearted engagement with the realities within a group or congregation. They can serve to dismiss and hide the real locus of power and, in doing so, that power becomes less accountable as it becomes unavailable as a legitimate object of discourse.

## **Problem avoidance**

Similar questions of accountability, openness, and honesty about experience can extend to a much wider range of areas. My own work has pointed to the way in which contemporary worship music ontologies can serve to close down the possibility of acknowledging individual needs, values, and experiences. I have drawn attention to the strategies which are used for not talking about individuals' diverse experiences of worship music – in particular the lens of musical neutrality in which worship music is understood to involve an unmediated direct connection between the individual God to which the music is somewhat incidental (Porter 2016, p. 32). This downplaying of the significance of music, while serving to legitimate the use of certain styles within a church music context, also prevents the contestation of those styles or the acknowledgment that they may indeed have some kind of value or significance. In more-recent terminology, such strategies might be referred to as a form of spiritual bypassing, which is described by psychologist John Welwood as “a widespread tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks” (n.d.) but which can relatively easily be understood to encompass a wider range of issues in which spiritual ideas are used to avoid engagement with aspects of lived reality.

Other areas present similar challenges. The question of music's association with the presence of God is one that is often joked about, but rarely genuinely explored within regular congregational environments. Many worshippers are well aware that a particular sound or gesture on the part of the band can conjure up a sense of divine presence and will, for example, talk about something such as the “Holy Spirit pad” (Porter 2020, p. 81) with a sense

of humour and insider knowledge. However, this joking often steps short of a deeper examination of the way in which it might genuinely be the music which mediates a sense of divine presence, rather than this presence being encountered in an unmediated and direct way at a time which just happens to coincide with the music bringing about a particular atmosphere or feeling. Worshippers know that the music is connected to the divine experience, but discussion of a particular mechanism or connection is often taboo to the extent that it can be joked about on the margins of a congregation without ever receiving any more-serious or official acknowledgment within the structures of the congregation itself.

In an article published in the journal *Marketing Theory*, Jeaney Yip and Susan Ainsworth point to the mixture of freedom and constraint offered by megachurch and prolific worship music producer Hillsong. Drawing on theory of governmentality, they suggest that the church constructs a subject position centred around freedom and choice, whilst simultaneously limiting what is thinkable and possible (Yip and Ainsworth 2020, p. 1). They suggest that music is the primary way in which consumers are initially drawn to Hillsong, and that, once they are drawn in, the wider range of products and services encourages ongoing dependence on the church (2020, p. 8). Music, they suggest, is both entertaining and enjoyable, offering immediate gratification and opening doors to further engagement (2020, p. 9). “Government is achieved by offering a church experience that is enjoyable, therapeutic and motivational, reassuring individuals they are powerful, their material aspirations are worthy and they should aspire to more. It works by making people ‘feel good’ and encouraging them to participate in a performance that stands apart from everyday life but is also different from any church they have ever known” (2020, p. 12). The flip side of this is that

negativity, including critical reflection, has no place in the Church. But if Hillsong’s aim is to have ‘global reach’ and to provide all the religious consumer needs, it actively represses aspects of human experience over the life course. In effect, the dualism it uses to construct its own identity in contrast to traditional churches is inherently limiting. By allowing itself to only be a vehicle for promoting positivity, prosperity, enjoyment, entertainment, success and progress, it cannot include that which this represses: negativity or critique, poverty, modest living or restraint, suffering, obligation, accepting limitations, failure and stasis or decline. Thus, it cannot assist with the whole of life or human experience, nor extend itself to areas without a sufficient middle class who could realistically aspire to upwards mobility (2020, p. 14).

Musical experience itself may contribute to certain dynamics of problem avoidance and thus helps to perpetuate a dynamic in which certain kinds of problem are pushed under the carpet in favour of a repeated enjoyment of the experience that the music has to offer. In a 2020 publication, Michael Silverman, Lori Gooding, and Olivia Yinger seek to develop a theoretical model of music-induced harm, pointing, in particular, to the connections that can be drawn between unhealthy musical use and maladaptive coping strategies. Music listening, they suggest, can “result in social isolation, avoidance coping, and group rumination” (2020, pp. 4–5). They point out the complex interplay between deliverer, music, and recipient that might serve to produce musical harm, an interplay which is sensitive to a variety of different individual and situational characteristics. In a similar manner, Monika Marik and Thomas Stegemann suggest that “music can be both helpful and harmful to emotion regulation. It can be an effective or an ineffective tactic, depending on the situational context and the individual. For example, music can be overused, similar to taking drugs to escape one’s problems, or it can be used to encapsulate oneself. Music can induce very unpleasant

emotions or can overwhelm people when it is linked to a traumatic situation” (2016, p. 64). Dave Miranda and Michel Claes distinguish between three different modes of musical coping – problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance/disengagement. In the first, music is used “to reflect upon the resolution of stressful situations they confront” (2009, p. 218), in the second it is used primarily as an emotion regulation strategy, and in the third it is used “to avoid thinking about problems” (2009, p. 219). Contemporary worship music may, at times, be used to contribute to each of these strategies, and the diversity of congregational experience suggests that it probably is, however it is important to remain aware of its potential contribution to problem avoidance, particularly since the wider dynamics surrounding it often have the potential to tend in this direction.

Abusive dynamics are often able to gain ground when an institution does not make room for experiences to be acknowledged, where stories of difficulty are dismissed, where something is known and never talked about. In many ways, contemporary worship music helps individuals to develop a habit where they learn to dismiss certain aspects of their experience, where they learn not to take them seriously and are not able to discuss them openly and honestly in a community that is based around a quasi-unified emotional state. This is disempowering and serves to maintain a particular way of doing things while ensuring that tensions remain internal to worshippers and are never expressed within the structures of community in a way that might potentially serve to destabilise them or bring any aspects of practice into question. Worship musicians and leaders, I suggest, are highly skilled at particular kinds of problem avoidance. Worship music as a phenomenon is full of a variety of different tensions, but to talk about them openly risks dismantling some of the power which is inherent in the music, which those who attend services enjoy, and which the leaders of those congregations often serve to benefit from. Rather than risk a successful model unravelling, it is often easier to allow the tensions to persist and to develop a range of strategies for downplaying their significance. This serves to avoid a set of problems until they become publicly visible as the result of some kind of scandal or collapse.

## Connecting the dots with testimony

Ultimately, these different dynamics end up being discussed by survivors and by those who have left, often in a way that emphasises the negative side of the experience. Some of those who have posted retrospective analyses of their past experiences in the wake of recent scandals on various social media platforms understand music to have contributed to the dysfunctions of their former spiritual homes. Posts focussing on the International House of Prayer in Kansas City, a prayer room in which worship was used more intensely and for much longer periods than a typical congregational environment, are particularly critical of musical dynamics, while some of those that focus on Soul Survivor tend to open up space for reflection on broader aspects of charismatic culture.

Some describe music as a recruiting tool. Reflecting on IHOP, one podcaster suggested that:

They get everybody in with the music. And like, if you were raised soft fundamentalist, like I was, this music is the only thing that’s allowed. (Survivors Discuss 2024)

In the case of Soul Survivor, we see a similar analysis:

[the musicians] were celebrities that pulled in the crowds that then in my mind were then manipulated by Mike Pilavachi and the team that he had created to support his sort

of ego ... if you look at all those conferences and stuff, and if the money went so the guys that were selling those records and being told to and encouraged to and said this you know the new generation need to hear your songs and every other justification for doing it they're still going to do it (Sam Howson 2024b)

In both of these examples, music is used to draw in the crowds. In the second, it is suggested that this is done so in order to feed the ego of the pastor, and that perhaps the musicians were manipulated into doing this by being encouraged that they were really doing something else. This sense of a power imbalance between pastor and worship musicians at Soul Survivor can be seen in online article penned both before and after the emergence of scandals:

“My role as worship pastor entails, first and foremost, forging my relationship with Mike, as senior pastor,” says Martyn, “finding out what’s on Mike’s heart, what his vision is and where the church is going at this time. We need to express that in worship musically, and corporately in song, so that we might lead people to God in that arena.” (Cross Rhythms 2003)

Mike hated it when musicians spoke to the congregation — he wanted to be the only person with a direct relationship to them. When I first started, I’d encourage people to clap, or raise their hands, share a Bible verse or introduce a song. This was absolutely not allowed. I was repeatedly reprimanded for any attempt to communicate publicly. Mike always wanted control. You had to appear humble at all times. (Gate 2023)

Mike Pilavachi himself seemed to display some level of consciousness as to the way in which his relationships with worship leaders could be read as problematic. He tells the story of how he met Matt Redman and discovered some of his traumas, and how in order to get Matt to lead worship he bandaged another worship leader’s arm in a sling to pretend they couldn’t lead worship one evening, and used this to pressure Matt Redman into taking over:

the kid said, the guy said I can’t lead worship I’m not ready yet, and I said of course you need – no no no I don’t want to, I can’t... and then I found myself saying let me get this straight let me make sure I’m hearing this correctly. Are you telling me that the God who shed his blood for you, who died on a cross for you, is going to be robbed of the worship that he deserves because you won’t lead worship? Now, now let me just say, hold on, hold on, let me just say okay years later I have realized that that was manipulative, it was devious, it was deceitful, and it was shamelessly playing with the young teenager’s emotions. But I’ve also learned over the years, if it works do it – and it worked. (Catch The Fire Toronto 2012)

It is not necessarily music here that is being used to manipulate but, rather, music is participating in a broader power play within the leadership structures of the church. We see a situation arise which hinges on the ability of the pastor to control the worship leader. This potentially plays in to a broader awareness that the worship leader’s role is an important one, and that the music is key to the pastor’s relationship with and ability to say what they want to the congregation.

The role of the music is taken up more directly in a range of different media focussing both on Soul Survivor and on IHOP. In this media, themes of vulnerability or of control emerge a number of times in different contexts:

The loud and repetitive music coupled with prayer altered my state of consciousness so that by the time ... Bickle came on stage to talk about the story of King David, I was defenceless. (The New Evangelicals 2023)

I mean what is a mega church movement without a university slash music school? [...] they have to kind of delve into that altered state of consciousness and high suggestibility. (Survivors Discuss 2024)

You've just gone through this entire process being built up [...] you're singing as well, you're all in agreement and then you're like wow I'm receptive for a talk. Mike Pilavachi used that incredibly well. In some respects that's, I think, how he built his position and his power was based on that band. (Sam Howson 2024a)

Music is powerful, right, doesn't have to be worship music, any music is powerful and I think Mike was so diabolical in the way that he knew that. And so I honestly think we were just kind of drunk on music – I don't even mean worship, just music – we were just like drunk on music and sounds and we were made to believe that a really powerful worship session, which really what that means is just a skilled singer or a skilled musician doing music. (Green Room with Sydney and Chloe 2025)

In retrospect, these different individuals are very conscious of the way that music was used to make them vulnerable, and after they recognise the harmful uses to which that vulnerability was regularly put, they characterise that vulnerability in highly negative terms, as devious and manipulative in character.

Reflections on IHOP go further than some of the others, since much of the musical content was improvised and therefore allowed a particularly close connection to be developed between what was being taught from the platform and what was being thematised within the music:

The prayer room itself, if you come in once in your life, you might find it to be the most beautiful thing you've ever experienced [...] the music, the people, the fervour, and it's like, wow, this is amazing. But if you lived in the community and you were really part of the community, you know, and now people on the outside looking back, there was a lot of things that were how music was used to control the emotions ... Sometimes people would sing from the notes from Mike Bickle's message or something they remembered from the message. People in their seats would take those notes and go deeper and the information would indoctrinate them more. In the prayer room, there are a lot of things that can emotionally control people and keep them in that community. (Survivors Discuss 2024)

The lyrics of [Misty Edwards'] song were filled with like this anguish and a sort of lovesick nature and they were like really explicitly sexual, and there was always this kind of confusion of like whether or not she knew what she was talking about, whether like was she just the most sheltered unaware individual who just like didn't understand that all of her music was double entendres and that was like very very sexual [...] so we've talked about the bridal paradigm in the past and how this was like one of the central doctrines that Mike Bickle latched on to is this idea that this metaphor of Christ being the bridegroom and the church being the bride and this sort of lovesick longing [...] And meanwhile Bickle was using that same sort of terminology and that same

metaphor to groom young women. Like it was it was he it was explicitly the same tactic that he was using to have teenagers and children like become enraptured by him where he would he would groom these young women and tell them that one day they will be together that one day in the future [...] and also Misty Edwards this has been written about was having a very like abusive toxic relationship with someone who was extremely controlling. Not just Mike but there was another [...] worship leader who was like explicitly blackmailing her in relationships Just really really depressing heartbreaking stuff. And so in her music you hear this like anguish and this genuine real emotion. And I think that that's why people really gravitated towards it because in a community where not a whole lot of genuine emotion was expressed. (Leaving the Message 2025)

In this last case, the relationship becomes particularly confusing and complicated as a worship leader who, herself, is experiencing abusive and toxic relationships is, at the same time, foregrounding similar themes in a way that connects to teaching drawing on sexual imagery but which allegedly disavows this dimension in favour of a much more metaphorical understanding. Her own relational anguish seems to scream through, but in a way that no-one is ever confident enough to interpret explicitly as referring to human rather than divine romance.

Some individuals connect particular emotional and psychological dysfunctions with the dynamics of the music. One suggests that the entirety of IHOP was based on the pastor's own problematic coping strategies:

Eerie, profound realization: Mike Bickle brought us all into his personal trauma response via the prayer room. Got a problem with others or the world? Hurting & broken? Just shut it out, turn up the music, & ignore reality. #ihopkc (Jessica Dedrick 2025)

Another draws attention to the way in which the language of worship is used to disguise talk about music, effectively gaslighting those who hear it through its refusal to acknowledge a basic aspect of reality:

Let's face it [...] for the average person, when they say worship, they mean music and so yeah, being a music minister might be a thing even. You get paid to oversee the music, you get paid to coordinate bands and make that and facilitate that happening on a Sunday and I know people could say well you just you've just been pedantic with titles and stuff but it's I think it's the word worship is the problem because I felt like hang on I'm being told this I'm being told this this cup is red, look at this nice red cup, it's so red and vibrant and red. I'm like well no, that's that's a kind of greeny blue colour – no but it's red, it's red, right it's red, you know, and obviously at its worst level that's gaslighting (Sam Howson 2024b)

Similar strategies extend to a refusal to acknowledge the basic human motivations of many of those involved, with honest talk ending up with you cut off from a public platform:

I would imagine if we were to take some of these like mega church worship pastors I think they probably either think, or maybe even are to an extent – like all of us think they're doing it for God – but it's the other motivations that don't get talked about because we don't talk about Bruno no no no no, you know don't mention the war ... it

was like if I mention to the person that holds the keys – the keys being the person that unlocks the potential platform for me to lead at Soul Survivor, get the record deal, just be on the you know in front of people on the Sunday – if I confess that there’s a part of me that’s like proud [...] I got a pride issue [...] – all of a sudden it’s like the shutters come down and you’re locked out you know (Sam Howson 2024b)

Talking about certain issues carries a risk of losing a position or access, and certain aspects of reality end up being concealed from view as a result.

## Reforming worship culture

Through these different descriptions, we can see that there is a specific subset of people who look back on many of their experiences with a degree of cynicism and disillusionment. The benefit of hindsight and a little critical distance enables them to reflect on dynamics in a way that they would struggle to voice within the institutions themselves. On the whole, this is a particularly jaded and critical subset of those who were there, and it is by no means representative of the way in which everyone who has been part of these environments would want to speak about it. However, the fact that many of these perspectives show clear points of resonance with the wider field of literature which I have outlined suggests that these perspectives are worth taking seriously. Worship music dynamics and environments can indeed align with and contribute to dynamics of abuse, and it is important to pay attention to those who have experienced these environments in a negative manner as one line of insight into how that can occur.

While I am still hesitant to suggest that worship music itself is the root and cause of the different scandals that have arisen, it seems that there are clear points where the dynamics of worship music culture and dynamics which enable abuse come into relatively clear alignment. Through the way in which worship music culture often serves to reinforce the power of a small set of leaders, through the vulnerable spaces that it opens up, and through its strategies for dismissing many experiences of worshippers, its failure to provide space for their voices, its paradoxical relationship with certain aspects of reality, and its lack of accountability mechanisms, it has the potential to enable abusive dynamics rather than to hold them in check.

In my first book (Porter, 2016), I suggested that, while it is important to provide new spaces for the acknowledgment of worshippers’ experiences of contemporary worship music and to enable these experiences to be taken seriously in ways that they often haven’t been, the provision of these spaces would not automatically result in any particular change to worship music practices themselves. I no longer believe that this suggestion is sufficient. A healthy worship music culture needs to actively affirm a greater range of experiences on the parts of its worshippers both in discourse and in music, it requires a redistribution of emotional power that doesn’t rely so heavily on the whole-hearted adoption of an authority figure’s emotional narrative, it requires not just the disavowal of celebrity and riches, but an active divestment from them, and it requires a genuine acknowledgment of the mediating role of music in spiritual experience that is honest about the way in which it conjures emotions and the feeling of divine presence without pretending that these are independent of its power to make these happen.

When the musical culture of a church distributes power among a range of different agents, where it is able to do justice to the full range of human experience, and where it is able to be

fully honest about its own status, power, and influence, then it will be better able to contribute to a healthy and less-abusive culture. Worship musicians may need to take some time to reflect on how to do this. Such a culture may well not include the same kinds of emotional highs that have become such a draw as part of the worship music experience, it may not involve the same kind of congregational unity that worship music has served to foster and construct, it may involve less money, smaller profits, smaller congregations. In a world in which the ugliness of power abuse is increasingly apparent, this may, however, feel like less of a sacrifice, and more an act of integrity that points to a better and more-hopeful future.

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