

ON CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP

The Leaderboard

How a Copyright Service Quietly Decided What the American Church Would Sing

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Adapted from the chapter "Worship as Vibe" in The Hollow Altar: A Confessional Lutheran Invitation to Weary Evangelicals.

If you have ever moved between non-denominational churches in different cities, you may have noticed something you could not quite put a name to. The buildings are different. The carpet is a different color, the lobby coffee comes from a different urn, the pastor preaches with a different cadence. But the music is the same. Not similar — the same. The same four or five songs, very often in the same keys, sometimes in arrangements pulled from the same master recording and played back through the same rehearsal track that the worship leader runs from an iPad on the stage. You could walk into a church in Topeka and a church in Tampa and a church in Tacoma on the same Sunday morning and hear, with high probability, the same handful of songs sung at the same tempo to the same swelling bridge.

This is not an accident, and it is not a coincidence. There is a structural reason for it, and the reason has a name.

The name is Christian Copyright Licensing International — CCLI — founded in 1988 in Portland, Oregon, by a Christian businessman named Howard Rachinski. Rachinski had noticed a real problem and built a service to solve it. Through the 1970s and 1980s, American churches had begun singing songs they did not own. The songs came from charismatic and contemporary Christian artists, and the churches were photocopying them onto bulletins, projecting them onto overhead transparencies, and distributing them without licensing or royalty. The artists were not being paid. The churches, very often without realizing it, were violating copyright. Rachinski's service offered a single annual license fee that covered the use of any song in CCLI's catalog. The church paid one bill. The artists received royalties, distributed by a formula based on how often each song was reported as used. It was elegant, and it worked. By the late 1990s, most non-denominational churches in America were CCLI-licensed.

I want to be careful here, because it would be easy to turn this into a villain story, and it is not one. CCLI is, in itself, neither virtuous nor sinister. It is a licensing service, no different in structure from ASCAP or BMI. It solved a genuine problem of justice — artists deserve to be paid for their work — and it solved it well. I have no interest in indicting CCLI as an organization. The songwriters whose names you would recognize are, by every honest account, sincere Christians who love Jesus and want to write music that moves people toward Him. Their motives are not the question.

The question is what the infrastructure does to the music inside the room.

The leaderboard

Twice a year, CCLI publishes a list of the most-used songs across its licensed congregations, drawn from the usage reports the churches themselves submit. The list is public. You can look at it right now. And in the contemporary worship industry, that list is not merely information — it is a leaderboard. It tells worship leaders, songwriters, publishers, and record labels exactly which songs are landing in actual rooms, and exactly which songs are not.

Consider what that does. A song that breaks the CCLI top tier generates real revenue for its writers and publishers. It secures a place on conference set lists. It gets recorded by other artists, which generates further usage, which generates further revenue, which lifts it further up the leaderboard. A song that does not break the top tier disappears.

The economic logic that follows is not complicated. The songs that win on the leaderboard are the songs that get written. The songs that win on the leaderboard are the songs the conference circuit features. The songs that win on the leaderboard are the songs that worship leaders across the country learn first — because their pastors heard them at a conference and came home and asked for them by name. The leaderboard does not merely report what the church is singing. It shapes what the church will sing next.

The concentration

Now look at who is actually on the list.

For the better part of a decade, the CCLI top tier has been dominated by an unusually small number of organizations. Hillsong, out of Sydney, generates Hillsong Worship, Hillsong United, and Hillsong Young & Free. Bethel Church, in Redding, California, generates Bethel Music and a stable of solo artists around it. Elevation Church, in Charlotte, generates Elevation Worship. Maverick City Music, a newer collective, has joined the top tier. Together, these handful of organizations have written or co-written roughly two-thirds of what gets sung on Sunday morning in non-denominational America.

This has not changed. If you pull up the current CCLI charts today, the same names sit at the top — Elevation, Bethel, Hillsong, Maverick City, with Chris Tomlin and Passion and a few solo artists like Brandon Lake filling out the rest. The concentration the church drifted into years ago is the concentration it is still living inside.

This is a remarkable thing, and it has no parallel anywhere in the history of Christian worship. The historic hymnal of the Western Church drew its texts and tunes from across two thousand years — from authors whose names the Church remembered for centuries

precisely because the Church had selected and preserved their work over time. The contemporary worship hour, by contrast, draws its texts and tunes from a few square miles of California, North Carolina, and suburban Sydney, written within the last fifteen years, selected by a leaderboard that measures what works on listeners right now.

I want to say again that this is not a moral failing on the part of those organizations. They are doing what they do — writing, recording, licensing — with the resources and conviction they have. The question is not whether they are sincere. They are. The question is what the *concentration itself* is doing to the room.

A worship hour whose musical content comes overwhelmingly from a few recently founded organizations, all writing in essentially the same idiom for essentially the same target experience, will produce a particular kind of Sunday morning. It will be musically homogenous across the entire country. It will be calibrated to a single emotional register — the swelling bridge, the held note over the four-chord loop, the moment the band drops out and the lead vocalist pleads softly with God in the second person. It will sound, everywhere, like the same song being sung in the same key at the same tempo by people drawn from the same demographic into rooms built from the same playbook.

What the leaderboard is really selecting for

Here is the part that matters most, and it is the hardest part to say.

The songs that win on the leaderboard are written to produce an experience — an experience of intimate emotional connection with God in the present moment. The lyric is almost always in the first person and the present tense. *I* worship. *My* heart cries out. *Your* presence is here, *now*, doing something new. The musical setting is engineered to support the feeling: suspended chords that lift the listener out of harmonic time, dynamic builds that mirror the lyric's emotional arc, vocal performances calibrated to feel uncalculated even when they are highly calculated. A half-step pitch shift in the studio. A modulation up a whole step at the bridge — not because the song's musical argument demands it, but because the genre demands a lift in its third minute and that is the simplest available one.

The result, in the room, is that the worshipper has an experience. It is reliable. It arrives, with high consistency, across thousands of congregations, every single Sunday. And it is interpreted, by everyone in the room, as an encounter with God.

It may be an encounter with God. It also may not be. And there is no reliable way, from inside the experience itself, to tell the difference.

That is what it means to call an altar hollow. The room is producing something. The something is real — the worshippers are not inventing what they feel. But the something the room produces is a feeling, engineered by a small number of organizations to be reliably producible by trained musicians playing chord charts on a Sunday morning. And the worshippers have, almost without exception, been taught to call that feeling by the name of God Himself.

The older way

For nineteen centuries, the Church did not work like this.

The music of Christian worship was tied to a text the Church had received and was passing on — the Psalms, the historic canticles, the chants of the ordinary, the hymns the Church had written to teach what it believed. The music was, at its base, a vehicle for words the Church possessed and was handing forward across time. The feeling produced by the singing was a side effect. The object was the words — what the words said about God, what God had done, what God was giving His people in that very service.

The contemporary worship hour has quietly reversed that relationship. Now the feeling is the object and the words are the vehicle. The lyric exists to create the feeling. The feeling is the encounter. The encounter is what the worshipper came for. And when the worshipper goes home, what he carries with him is the feeling — vivid for an hour, fading by the afternoon, gone by Tuesday. He leaves hungry. The song moved him; the song moved everyone. But a feeling cannot feed a man through the week.

CCLI did not intend any of this. It set out to pay songwriters, and it does. But the leaderboard it created turned out to be an engine, and the engine has been selecting, twice a year for thirty years, for songs that produce a feeling — because the feeling is what gets a song reported, and being reported is what gets a song written next. None of it required a conspiracy. It only required a market, doing what markets do, inside a room that had already decided the worshipper's experience was the measure of the hour.

The good news is that there is another room. It is not hypothetical, and it is not something clever we would have to invent to do better. It is a room that has been in continuous use for very nearly two thousand years, with a shape and an order and an altar that is not hollow — built around words the Church received rather than feelings the market can manufacture. It has been there the whole time.