

From singles to



# PLAYLISTS

## Music and worship for the millennial generation

BY KENDRA BUCKWALTER SMITH

For more than 30 years, the church has fought “worship wars” over the presumed expectations of young adults in worship. The assumption was that old, stodgy, liturgical music wasn’t “cool” or “relevant” to young adults; surely that was why they weren’t attending church. Yet for all the hand-wringing over relevance, few have stopped to ask the right question: What are young adults’ experiences with music?

The music culture in the United States has undergone a dramatic shift in the last several decades. In the ’60s and ’70s, many artists made “concept albums” with an overarching theme or story. Each song was one piece of the whole, and artists expected people to listen to the whole album, often in one sitting.

But somewhere between Madonna’s “Like a Virgin” and DJ Jazzy Jeff & the Fresh Prince’s “Parents Just Don’t Understand,” the recording industry switched to the hit single.

Trying to adapt to popular culture, many in the church decided to break up the overarching story (or concept album, if you will) of worship into singles. And that’s when the worship wars began.

### The shift to playlists

But something new is afoot. While the hit-single culture may still reign supreme, young adults have begun to reconstruct the concept album through the playlist. The playlist is simply a series of songs reflecting the listener’s musical preferences, mood, or experience; think of it as the successor to the mixed tape. We create playlists for when we’re happy or depressed, for work or exercise or jogging, for people or memorable times in our lives. Before I took a trip to Africa, friends created playlists for me so I could experience home—the sense of comfort and security—while I was away.

With these themes come meaning. And with the search for meaning, the playlist has become a cultural phenomenon for the millennial generation.

The playlist is changing (some might say recovering) Christian liturgy. Last summer, the Christian blogosphere was abuzz with young adult testimonials to the virtues of high liturgy. Rachel Held Evans posted a piece entitled “Why Millennials are Leaving the Church,” and Andrea Palpant Dilley wrote “Change Wisely, Dude.” These posts identify a shift in what young

adults seek in worship. Rather than “youthful” worship meant to amuse or be relevant, they seek worship that points them toward God and fills them with a sense of the sacred.

“We’re not leaving the church because we don’t find the cool factor there; we’re leaving the church because we don’t find Jesus there,” Evans writes. “What millennials really want from the church is not a change in style but a change in substance.” Dilley notes that she and some of her peers “*want* to walk into a cathedral space that reminds us of the small place we inhabit in the great arc of salvation history.”

### New Presbyterian hymnal could be the church’s playlist

At the forefront of these changes is *Glory to God*, the new hymnal of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

## ONLINE BONUS

### Playlist: The Millennial Download

Created specially for this edition of *Presbyterians Today*, our Spotify playlist shares the songs of a generation—songs personally selected by the young adult editorial team. Listen along as you read: [pcusa.org/today](http://pcusa.org/today).

The hymns in *Glory to God* are organized to tell the story of our salvation in Jesus Christ. The book is framed by two major parts: hymns that sing of “God’s major acts” (such as creation and the resurrection) and songs that express “our response to God,” including the ways we join the Spirit’s work. Between these parts is a third section, “the church at worship.”

This organization addresses the division, anxiety, and insecurity in our church and throughout the world. Amid such brokenness, our focus must be directed toward the God in whom we already are redeemed, the God who already is transforming the world into the promise of God’s kingdom.

Such a focus draws us out of our own anxious living and into the assurance of new life. In a very real way, then, the hymnal committee constructed a playlist for the church—a playlist with a meaning and purpose.

Edwin Chr. van Driel, a member of the hymnal committee and associate professor of theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, said the committee recognized “that the church needs more than just another collection of hymns.” Rather than basing selections on popularity, they chose hymns that respond to a divided, anxious church.

“*Glory to God* is indeed widely inclusive, as it embraces a wide variety of musical and liturgical styles and traditions,” van Driel says. “But it does so while shaped by a very clear, maybe even radical, theological vision which, rather than avoiding the denomination’s anxiety or smoothing over its deep divisions, tries to meet it head-on.”

This collection situates our experiences in the context of God’s future for us. Some playlists might help get us through spin class, but the *Glory to God* playlist has a much longer vision.

#### Why we sing

T. David Gordon, professor of religion at Grove City College and author of *Why Johnny Can’t Sing Hymns*, reminds us that the function of music in worship is not entertainment, but praise. It is directed toward God, not the congregant. In a playlist culture, these hymns of praise allow us to discover God’s call on our lives.

In *Beyond the Worship Wars*, Thomas Long says of typical praise music, “In the short run, it gets you on your feet clapping your hands, but in the long run it cultivates a monotonic, downsized faith, a faith too naïve and simple to handle complexity, too repetitive to deal with real change.”

But *Glory to God* doesn’t offer “typical” praise music.

“For young adults, especially a generation that is known for seeking authenticity, words written ahead of time and possibly centuries prior can seem impersonal and rehearsed,” says Craig Pope,

pastor of Montgomery Presbyterian Church in Savannah, Georgia. “I get that. I feel that personally, sometimes. But I think there is much to be gained in repetition, and in the generosity of spirit it takes to say those words, to give them your attention, even when they don’t immediately connect to you.”

Samantha Gaerte, a millennial who was raised in an evangelical church, couldn’t agree more. She found a home in a distinctly liturgical congregation in Pittsburgh. “When I’m singing a hymn, it forces me to actually think about the words instead of just a feeling.”

Gaerte’s active reflection creates a unique, meaningful, personal experience. Over time, these experiences grow in depth and substance.

“An old hymn that folk have been singing in church and camp and Bible school and maybe even while they weed the garden is now so full of emotional associations, memories, and intertextual linkages that a supercomputer could not crunch all the meanings,” Long says. “Singing a well-known and well-loved hymn means a thousand things, at every level possible, and all at once.”

The challenge for all of us is to sing from the church’s new playlist, *Glory to God*, not as a habit but as a story rich with meaning and emotion, a story to be sung with as much gusto as the playlist we flick on when we start our morning run.

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## LEARN MORE

Did you know that 25 percent of the contents of *Glory to God* were written after 1990? To learn more and order the new hymnal: [presbyterianhymnal.org](http://presbyterianhymnal.org)

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