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**GIVING CULTURE A VOICE IN CHURCH:**  
AN EXPLORATION OF POPULAR MUSIC AND HOLY SCRIPTURE

By

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## **Abstract**

### Giving Culture a Voice in Church An Exploration of Popular Music and Holy Scripture By Ebb Hagan

The proposition being put forth to be tested by this project is the following: exploring non-Christian popular music alongside Scripture can facilitate dialogue to increase understanding about how God may be working beyond the Christian community and thereby challenge insular conceptions of church.

This project proceeds on the supposition that popular music provides a way to understand those alienated from the church. Music can be a way to peer into the hopes and concerns of persons outside of the church environments. Composers and recording artists of popular music become, in some measure at least, unique representatives and interpreters of culture existing outside of the walls of the church. Of course, the role of popular music in culture is complicated. The same song is inspiring and beautiful to one person while simultaneously interpreted as profane or vulgar by another. Often differences of opinion or taste exist within the same subcultural group. Indeed, the perceived vulgarity of some popular music is what makes it compelling to certain consumers of music. More to the point, popular music can be compelling, inspiring, repulsive, uniting, and/or controversial depending upon many complex factors of social location, personal taste, and moral sensibility. This project will attempt to "bring popular music to church" as an experiment to see if popular music, with all its complexity, can help people of First United Methodist Church of Chipley (FL) become more open to those who are alienated from the hegemonic cultural Christianity of our community.

Giving Culture a Voice in Church  
An Exploration of Popular Music and Holy Scripture

By

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## THE PROBLEM

There are many personal theologies present among the congregants of First United Methodist Church of Chipley (FUMCOC) due to fluid movement between denominations over decades. One of the many points of contention caused by their non-homogenous theological beliefs is how, or even if, God reveals Godself in a secular culture that is not explicitly related to traditional Christian tradition, theology, or practice. This may result in an understanding of church that inhibits transformative engagement with the world. As a church, FUMCOC claims to take seriously the Great Commission of Jesus Christ recorded at the end of the Gospel of Matthew: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you...”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is important to understand how they interact with and understand the world around them to better understand and hear what secular culture itself is proclaiming about God's Creation which is deemed “good”.<sup>2</sup>

The First United Methodist Church of Chipley (FUMCOC) is a congregation located in the Florida Panhandle town of Chipley. A fuller discussion of the dominant Cultural Christianity is fleshed out below. There is a by no means a shortage of outward signs of the Christian faith present throughout the community. The concern arises whether these outward signs of God's good graces might push those who do not hold a Christian worldview into the interstices of local society, away from the dominant culture of the area. Another concern is that congregants of FUMCOC will deem unchurched persons “outsiders.” FUMCOC must make it a priority to seek those outside and alternative voices to give voice to those marginalized people. Through understanding those voices, the presence of God can become more easily recognizable in those

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 28:19-20. All biblical quotations will be taken from the North American Standard Bible (NASB).

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1:31

unexpected places. The United Methodist Church's mission statement is to "make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."<sup>3</sup> If we begin to hear and address the concerns of alienated persons using a language understandable to all involved, including media, the outward and inward signs of God's grace can begin to match one another in inclusive and redemptive ways.

## **THESIS**

The proposition being put forth to be tested by this project is the following: exploring non-Christian popular music alongside Scripture can facilitate dialogue to increase understanding about how God may be working beyond the Christian community and thereby challenge insular conceptions of church.

This project proceeds on the supposition that popular music provides a way to understand those alienated from the church. Music can be a way to peer into the hopes and concerns of persons outside of the church environments. Composers and recording artists of popular music become, in some measure at least, unique representatives and interpreters of culture existing outside of the walls of the church. Of course, the role of popular music in culture is complicated. The same song is inspiring and beautiful to one person while simultaneously interpreted as profane or vulgar by another. Often differences of opinion or taste exist within the same subcultural group. Indeed, the perceived vulgarity of some popular music is what makes it compelling to certain consumers of music. Even so, while taste in popular music can be specific to a subculture, songs can transcend boundaries of social class and artistic taste. To cite recent examples of this, *Old Town Road* by Lil' Nas X w/ Billy Cyrus stirred debate over whether the

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<sup>3</sup> United Methodist Church. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, 2016 Edition. (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016). Location 28. Kindle Edition.

song should be labeled Country or Rap,<sup>4</sup> and Kendrick Lamar won a Pulitzer Prize for his hip-hop album *Damn*.<sup>5</sup> More to the point, popular music can be compelling, inspiring, repulsive, uniting, and/or controversial depending upon many complex factors of social location, personal taste, and moral sensibility. This project will attempt to "bring popular music to church" as an experiment to see if popular music, with all its complexity, can help people of FUMCOC become more open to those who are alienated from the hegemonic cultural Christianity of our community.

The mainstream form of Western Christianity which exists in the United States is certainly not exempt from the tensions that can arise when interpreting music. Arguably, the tensions are even more pronounced in the Bible Belt, which spans most of the southeastern portion of the continental United States and beyond. The Bible belt is marked largely by a culture that is Evangelical Protestant and socially conservative.<sup>6</sup> Both at the national and local scales, there has been a history of denominational leaders denouncing popular forms of music.<sup>7</sup> To be fair, secular culture has often attempted to distance itself from religion as well. Both sides need to seek a meaningful understanding for reconciliation to occur.

## **THEOLOGICAL BACKDROP FOR PROJECT**

Throughout the history of Christianity beginning with the New Testament, there has been ongoing proclamation about the Kingdom of God and/or the Kingdom of Heaven. This kingdom is a metaphor about how the world would function and exist under the full and realized dominion

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<sup>4</sup> "Country or Not? Lil Nas X's 'Old Town Road' Raises Big Questions About Genre in the Streaming Age," *Billboard*, accessed on February 27, 2020, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/8506428/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-splits-country-music-industry-opinion-genre-streaming-age>.

<sup>5</sup> "Damn., by Kendrick Lamar," The Pulitzer Prizes, accessed on February 27, 2020, <https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/kendrick-lamar>.

<sup>6</sup> "The US is split into more than a dozen 'belts' defined by industry, weather, and even health," *Business Insider*, accessed on December 12, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/regions-america-bible-belt-rust-belt-2018-4>.

<sup>7</sup> Christian Scharen, *Broken Hallelujahs: Why Popular Music Matters the Those Seeking God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), 54-55.

of God, and by extension Christ. Jesus himself spoke of the imminence of this kingdom from the very beginning of his ministry.<sup>8</sup> Jesus also told many parables on the nature of the Kingdom of God, and how it stands in contrast to the dominant worldly cultures and structures of the time.

The book *Christ and Culture* by H. Richard Niebuhr will provide a backdrop to the endeavor. In his book, Niebuhr explores just what the title of his book implies—how “Christ” and “Culture” interact and relate to each other. It is important, then, to provide meaning and definitions to those two words. Even when setting a definition for Christ, there is a recognition that any attempt to define the undefinable would inherently fall short. By “Christ”, Niebuhr meant Jesus—a living man, God incarnate, who came to redeem the world, and for whom all Christians willingly commit themselves to follow.<sup>9</sup> “Culture”<sup>10</sup> is a term Niebuhr uses to describe an artificial environment created by people which includes such phenomenon as language, morals, religion, organizations, structures, and beliefs. According to Niebuhr, "Culture" was things that the writers in the New Testament had in mind when speaking of "the world."<sup>11</sup>

The context of this study has individuals and faith communities that hold very strong beliefs in the way Christ and the Culture coexist. Even more vital to the task at hand, there is evidence that people who hold opposing views exist within the same congregation. This is certainly the case of the First United Methodist Church of Chipley. Therefore, these concepts are briefly discussed below. Some believe in one form or the other that Christ exists apart from and/or seeks to conquer Culture. Others believe, in variations, that Christ exists within, seeks to

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:14-15.

<sup>9</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1951), 11-13.

<sup>10</sup> The word “Culture”, when used with a capital “C” will mean the summary definition given in relation to Niebuhr.

<sup>11</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1951), 31.



redeem, and ultimately work to convert Culture. These can be conflicting views when considering if and how popular music speaks into the life of the Church.<sup>12</sup>

Niebuhr gives five possibilities of how Christians view and interpret the interactions of Christ, who represents all things true and holy, with Culture, which represents things not overtly controlled by Christ: 1. “Christ Against Culture” (The New Law Type), 2. “Christ of Culture” (The Natural Law Type), 3. “Christ Above Culture” (The Architectonic Type), 4. “Christ and Culture in Paradox” (The Oscillatory Type), 5. “Christ Transforming Culture” (The Conversionist Type).<sup>13</sup>

Without a doubt, representatives from all five types exist within FUMCOC. However, due to the limited space allowed in this paper, I will briefly summarize the five paradigms giving more attention to the two most dominant of Niebuhr’s options extant at FUMCOC— “Christ Against Culture” (CAC) and “Christ Transforming Culture” (CTC). This is an interesting dynamic, to say the least. If one were to draw a scale on which to plot the five types, CAC and CTC would exist as bookends to that scale. No person, of course, was completely committed to any one type, including those two.

#### 1. Christ Against Culture (CAC)

The “Christ Against Culture” (CAC) type according to Niebuhr, is based on biblical teachings such as 1 John 2:15—Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.<sup>14</sup> In this line of belief, Christ has complete control over the Christian, nulling any claim that Culture has on that person or group. Therefore,

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<sup>12</sup> When “Church” is capitalized and not part of a formal name, the meaning implied is the “world-wide Christian church.”

<sup>13</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1951), xli-liii.

<sup>14</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1951), 48.

there can be no loyalty of the person except to one or the other. There exists a clear line of demarcation between Christ and Culture<sup>15</sup> where split loyalties cannot exist.

The CAC viewpoint is prevalent in the Chipley, FL faith communities which are strict Pentecostal and Holiness. When asked if "secular" and Culture were synonymous terms, all interviewees who were raised in these traditions responded that they were. Pushed further, every one of the same individuals recounted that the idea of Christ always being at odds with and fighting against Culture was part of their childhood teachings. An interviewee who came from a church in this tradition recounts that they did not attend a dance or a movie until they had graduated high school and married into the FUMCOC church. The person also tells of their church being so emphatic in the separation of the church from the world that joining the high school marching band was forbidden because it did not perform explicitly for the "glory of God."

A common theme that arose during individual interviews of FUMCOC members who grew up in those traditions was that most things secular, even when morally neutral, can be a "wolf in sheep's clothing." Matthew 7:15 which states, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (NASB). The wolf/sheep analogy was so prominent that this study includes it in the name. One interviewee wondered aloud if this project was a way for Satan and Culture to infiltrate FUMCOC.

Where the "Christ Against Culture" paradigm falls short according to Niebuhr is in its failure to accept the inescapable reality of the world. We live in a world where it is nearly impossible to detach from Culture and that mindset tends toward separating Christ from physical creation.<sup>16</sup> On a purely practical level, it would be hard to imagine living a life entirely set apart. Of course, even with these strong beliefs and commitment to living a life set apart for Christ, there

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<sup>15</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1951), 45-47.

<sup>16</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1951), 81-82.

is no real way to detangle from Culture. Even communities such as the Amish have difficulty in living autonomous lives free from the outside world. It might be a desired way of life, maybe even admirable to some. However, the present reality necessitates that every Christian come to grips with some way and to what degree of interaction is acceptable.

## 2. Christ of Culture

The “Christ of Culture” model proclaims that believers can be just as comfortable in Culture as they are in Christ. Christ informs the believer about Culture and Culture reveals to them more about Christ.<sup>17</sup> Christ is the hero, teacher, and great enlightener of Culture.<sup>18</sup> Niebuhr did see some dangers in this paradigm and the blurring of lines between Christ and Culture. He saw that “Christ of Culture” believers existed in a space between the more radical “Christ Against Culture” Christians and secularists, both of whom would accuse “Christ of Culture” Christians of moral and religious relativism. This is especially true of old-style liberal Christianity in America where being a good Christian meant being a good American citizen. The blurred lines of demarcation would then include all “good, Christ-loving Americans”. That relativism, according to Niebuhr might lead to a less firm belief in sin, the need for grace, or the Holy Trinity.<sup>19</sup>

## 3. Christ Above Culture

The third paradigm presented in *Christ and Culture* is one that many congregants at FUMCOC strongly lean towards. The “Christ Above Culture” Christian is one who believes that because Christ is the Son of God and Culture is conceived from the world God created, they are intrinsically linked and therefore Culture cannot be considered entirely godless.<sup>20</sup> The downside

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<sup>17</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1951), 85.

<sup>18</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1951), 92.

<sup>19</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1951), 108-109.

<sup>20</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1951), 117-118.

to this paradigm, which Niebuhr believes has been the dominant belief throughout the history of Christianity, is that there is a tendency to institutionalize and strictly define the infinitely indescribable Christ.<sup>21</sup> That critique is where the members of FUMCOC part from the “Christ Above Culture” model. They are open to the belief that Christ is more than strict definitions and human descriptions. That preconceived notions limit ministry opportunities.

#### 4. Christ and Culture in Paradox

The dualistic nature of Christ is what defines Christ and therefore creates a paradox in the "Christ and Culture in Paradox" paradigm. "Grace is in God and sin is within man", therefore Christ embodies this continuous struggle between God and humankind.<sup>22</sup> Unlike “Christ Against Culture” Christians, the adherents to this model recognize that they are intrinsically linked to Culture and must rely on the grace of Christ in this life.<sup>23</sup> Niebuhr believed that the inadequacies of this philosophy were that adherents tended to focus on religious concerns and leave cultural institutions to be dealt with by others.<sup>24</sup> Many of the congregants of FUMCOC fall into this category. The Baptist churches from which some FUMCOC members transferred, also lean toward the “Christ and Culture in Paradox” worldview according to those people. They claim to have been taught from a young age to discern this spiritual battle and to vigilantly reject those things that do not serve Christ. While not prohibiting members from the use of secular media or attending functions not explicitly Christian, a former member of a local Baptist church said that if there is a Christian alternative to the secular, then the things which promote Christ should always take precedence over those which endorse Culture and its agenda. Whether knowingly or

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<sup>21</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1951), 145.

<sup>22</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1951), 151.

<sup>23</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1951), 158.

<sup>24</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1951), 188.

unknowingly, they have developed a mindset that allows them, for example, to love God and enemy even as they go to war as part of the military to eliminate that very same enemy.

##### 5. Christ Transforming Culture (CTC)

The “Christ Transforming Culture” type, for Niebuhr, marks the hope that Culture is ultimately under the dominion of Christ and transformed by Christ. There is a more hopeful attitude in this paradigm because there is an intrinsic belief that history and its trajectory are not solely based on the actions of humans. Rather, it is God who is ultimately in control and uses human agency to respond to the hope of a future devoid of corruption.<sup>25</sup> God uses us to influence the culture around us. In time, Christ guides the redemption of Creation.

Many members of FUMCOC interviewed about the interactions between the Christ and Culture believed that Christ resided in and worked from within Culture. For those who grew up in the church, there were no stories of restrictions on attending dances, going to movies, or participating in other non-church events. Of the eighteen people raised in the United Methodist Church (UMC) tradition and interviewed for this project, not even one had reservations about exploring secular music alongside Holy Scripture. When asked about the Matthew 7:15 wolf/sheep analogy, one of the UMC respondents asked a very profound question: “What if it is God, as a sheep, going into the World disguised in wolf’s clothing?” That was a subtle, yet major swing in thinking about how the Kingdoms of God and the World interact.

The belief in Christian perfection that espoused by Wesley is why many at FUMCOC, as Methodists, fall into this category. They believe that perfection in this world is not possible, but the need to strive towards perfection changes the spiritual life and compels them to fulfill the

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<sup>25</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1951), 193-195.

mission statement of the United Methodist Church—make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

The “Christ Transforming Culture” paradigm leaves room for things in Culture having value for the Christians. Niebuhr might argue that those things are not perfectly holy but acknowledges that some throughout the history of Christendom people like John Wesley believed that God could indeed perfect people in this world.<sup>26</sup>

### **CONGREGATIONAL ANALYSIS**

The First United Methodist Church of Chipley is the only United Methodist Church congregation within the Chipley, Florida city limits. It has two primary services that meet every Sunday morning—one contemporary and one traditional. The average combined attendance for the two services is around 140 per week. The attendees are predominantly socially and theologically conservative. All members are Caucasian. There is a healthy balance of ages. This balance of ages is evident in participation during worship services and the make-up of the various church committees.<sup>27</sup> The female to male ratio of members is 4:3.

The church property of First United Methodist Church of Chipley, in a way, serves as a great metaphor for the worshipers. It sits in the most prominent position in town both literally and metaphorically. The sanctuary is located next to the Washington County (FL) Courthouse on a major highway that divides the town into north and south halves. It is also set at the highest elevation point of the town. The two spires which constitute the steeple are quite literally the most prominent features seen as vehicles enter the downtown business area whether approaching on Florida Highway 90 West or on Florida Highway 90 East.

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<sup>26</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1951), 218-219.

<sup>27</sup> An example of this balance is present in the church’s Finance Committee which has committee members ranging from 14 to 87 years of age.

Over the course of generations, the congregants of FUMCOC have developed what I call an interdenominational cross-pollination of personal theologies. This is due to the movement of persons and families between churches. Contributing factors include congregational splits, intermarrying of people from different denominational backgrounds, the transient nature of Methodist ministers, and the tight-knit nature of the area faith communities. This has left the congregants of FUMCOC with a non-homogenous understanding of secular music and its role in the everyday lives of Christian believers.

There are numerous churches near the FUMCOC property. This includes the largest Assemblies of God congregation in the county and the largest Southern Baptist congregation, both of which are strongly evangelical. There are also two Mainline Christian congregations: First Presbyterian Church of Chipley (Presbyterian Church, USA) and the only Episcopal Church in the city.

As one of only three mainline Protestant denominations in town that boasts thirty-eight churches registered within the city's zip code,<sup>28</sup> the members of FUMCOC must be able to speak the lingo of our tradition and that of more conservative evangelical and charismatic churches. Even with that challenge, the adherence to and respect for the Wesleyan Quadrilateral—experience, tradition, reason, and scripture—allows FUMCOC to have fruitful relationships within the religious ecology of the town.

The need for having the ability to talk across denominational lines has been necessary within the church as well. There has been a steady flux of members both into and out of the congregation from other Christian denominations. This is an ongoing process that has been present for decades. Most of those who grew up in other churches have come to be members of

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<sup>28</sup> Church Finder, accessed on October 4, 2019, <https://www.churchfinder.com/churches/fl/chipley>.

FUMCOC through marriage, with the most common being Methodist and Southern Baptist marriages. Other former denominations that are present through marriage are Pentecostal, Holiness, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and Roman Catholic. Also contributing to the cross-pollination of theologies was an influx of conservative Presbyterians who left the local congregation after the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) started ordaining openly homosexual persons into leadership positions in 2011.

With the positive elements of having the ability to fuse inter-congregational theological beliefs and vocabularies, there is an issue of having a cohesive theology and vocabulary with FUMCOC. Not all congregants hold the same beliefs on many issues, as stated above. One of these is whether a demarcated line, a blurred line or no line at all exists between Christ and Culture. Interestingly people from all sides of the argument claim that the prevalence of Christian culture of the area is proof of their respective sides.

## **THE PROJECT**

It is of utmost importance that this endeavor contributes to the task of Christian education within the FUMCOC community in a way that continues. Therefore, Holy Scripture grounded instruction remained a focus. For United Methodists, Holy Scripture is foundational. Also important is the personal *experience* of God which compels us to go and make disciples of Jesus for the transformation of the world. Our spiritual journey does not end after the conversion moment of accepting God's prevenient grace. The journey is ongoing and constantly unfolding as we act as agents of Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit to transform Culture. To see worldly things in a new light that reveals God acting in secular culture.

*Education* is another focus. But not in a way that is strictly teaching doctrines and practices. To this end, the biblical and theological were paired with the secular to understand the



full scope of God's work in Christ *and* Culture. The following were selected and utilized in each lesson and throughout each stage of the project: 1) a passage from Scripture, 2) a relevant secular song, and 3) a theologian.

Grounding in Scripture, through observation of culture outside of the church, and becoming informed by tradition is the aim. That way, over time, FUMCOC will become a community of reflective/reflexive listeners.

*Scriptural Analysis* being the basis of the project, draws out the ongoing narrative of God's interaction and care of the entire world and Culture that has sprung from it. All involved must become more immersed in Scripture. That allows God to speak into our world in new and meaningful ways. It also balances those involved by creating a community that not only reads Scripture together but discusses it and keeps each other accountable to interpretations.

### **Three-Prong Process**

The approach taken in executing this project was three-pronged. First, establish a foundational framework for the congregants to become comfortable with secular films, television programs, poetry, literature, visual art, and music used during sermons. Second, develop and preach a three-sermon series aimed at reaching the most people with the least effort. Third, form a small group to explore more topics and genres, but with fewer people.

### Laying the Foundational Groundwork for the Project

This first element of the project was the most time consuming and arguably the most intentional of the three stages. The process began from the very beginning of my tenure at the First United Methodist Church of Chipley in July of 2018 due to a new congregation appointment. In speaking with known long-time members from the outset, no previous pastors used overtly secular media in their sermons or Bible studies.

Non-Christian poetry in sermons was used on the very first Sunday. Comfort amongst the hearers was paramount at this stage. Softer, more benign pieces were chosen. To begin with a shock-and-awe strategy may have resulted in outright rejection of the messages and could have set the project back by months, if not more. The use of more audacious and bold poems followed over the course of the year. No known issues arose.

Illustrations gleaned from beloved and well-known films, television programs, and literature were also used in sermons and during studies. This began relatively early in the process beginning with excerpts from the likes of *Forrest Gump*, *Monsters Inc.*, *Seinfeld*, *The Flash*, *Charlotte's Web*, and *Dr. Seuss*. By the end of the sermon series portion of this project, illustrations from sources such as Quinton Tarantino movies, *The Walking Dead*, *The Wire*, and Stephen King novels became a normal fixture. Once again, no issues arose. Slowly establishing comfort levels with progressively audacious sources seemed to work.

The last component of laying the groundwork for the project involved using secular images and art in the bulletins and PowerPoint presentations. More tame pictures at first, progressing towards more provocative images.

The intentional and slowly progressing move from more gentle elements of secular culture to more challenging ones paid off dividends by all accounts. The varying works of art and media utilized seemed to make the congregants of FUMCOC more comfortable with non-Christian media in the church setting. The groundwork by all estimations had been set and the next phase commenced in the Fall of 2019.

### Sermon Series

The sermon series serves as the anchor of this project. Each sermon designed in a way to stoke the imaginations of the congregants to show that secular music, when explored with

Scripture, can speak life into the church. There is an intentional focus on a specific genre for ease of execution during the project. That focus is 1990s Alternative Rock. Individual sermons and series can be developed in the future using any genre.

The strength of making a specific sermon series the initial anchor of the project is to reach the most people in a specific context and manner. With an average of around 140 in worship attendance, sermons during regular worship services reach more people in a targeted way. The post-sermon talk-back sessions attracted around thirty people. Those sessions allowed for in-depth conversation and deeper instruction. Identified, were thirty individuals of varying genders, ages, and biblical knowledge who were willing to commit to being present during the sermons and participating in the sermon talk-back sessions.

Selection of three specific songs based on relation to the Scripture chosen, the life of the congregation, and the continued relevance of the artist(s). Time and technology limitations merely allowed for the recitation of lyrics during the worship services. Profane lyrics needed substitution with respect to the location within the sanctuary and for the hearers.

Sermon Talkbacks included music, video when available, and questions.

- Did the song and the Bible passage work together? Before you heard the sermon? After?
- Was the blending of music and Scripture done in a meaningful way? Was it gimmicky?
- Are there songs that resonate with you that are secular in which you can feel the presence of God or hear God speaking to you?

Sermon Test Case and Analysis—Sermon #1: *Jesus Don't Want Me as a Sunbeam* by Nirvana/*the Cry of Dereliction/Psalm 22*

Nirvana, led by vocalist/guitarist Kurt Cobain, was arguably one of the most influential bands of all time. To this day, their music is in heavy rotation and it is not uncommon to see

people of all ages wearing either Cobain or Nirvana t-shirts. Cobain is the poster boy for disaffected youth in the 1990s for many.

The focus of the sermon revolved around abandonment and the need to recognize loneliness in and around the church. Has the church been too successful in promoting a content, peaceful Jesus who is beyond the troubles of the world? When people think of Jesus, does their mind immediately conjure up images of him laughing, praying peacefully, or sitting calmly with a lamb in his lap? Have we domesticated the image *and* message of Jesus that would be unrecognizable to Jesus himself and his followers?

The sermon addressed that Jesus did indeed come to ease burdens<sup>29</sup> and give a peace that passes all understanding.<sup>30</sup> Those things need to be proclaimed. However, there is a place and a need to also proclaim a Jesus who was harassed by people surrounding him<sup>31</sup> (critics?), didn't always know whom he could count on in times crisis<sup>32</sup> (Peter and Judas), and felt abandonment<sup>33</sup> (on the cross). If people like Kurt Cobain and others who had these very same desperate feelings knew about *this* Jesus, they just might understand that it is precisely people like them that Jesus “wants as a sunbeam.”

These ideas present in the sermon are relevant to the church and were talked about during the sermon talk-back session that followed. Acceptance and community are important for the Chipley, FL residents. This includes the people of First United Methodist Church of Chipley. A lifetime of living amid these other faith traditions has helped many of the members of FUMCOC develop a language for interacting with members of neighboring churches. In *Theological*

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<sup>29</sup> Matthew 11:28-30.

<sup>30</sup> Philippians 4:7.

<sup>31</sup> Luke 4:14-30.

<sup>32</sup> Matthew 26:69-75; 26:14-15.

<sup>33</sup> Matthew 27:45.

*Reflection Across Religious Traditions*, Edward Foley writes, “While our ways of believing are vastly different, it seems that the language of believing provides broader common ground than that of traditional Christian theology...”<sup>34</sup> Granted, Foley was writing about inter-religious dialogue in his statement, but this sentiment is just as valid in this context. The members have respect for their traditions but are willing to discuss faith matters with people from other traditions without sharp disagreement.

FUMCOC congregants effectively use the common ground discovered with others both within and outside of the congregation. Just like Sunday mornings during times of worship, members are present in the middle of most Chipley community functions as well. In the workplace, congregants are serving as teachers in the local schools, school administrators and Board of Education Officials, retired judges, coaches in youth sports, running farming operations, cleaning houses, former sheriff’s deputies, and managing local office complexes. That is just a small sample of where church members are present outside of the physical church property. At local events, congregants are volunteering at cancer fundraisers, volunteering at voting polls, and shuttling both old and young alike to events. It is a running joke that there is no need to have mid-week services because they gather every day of the week. And when gathered, they are sharing with others from neighboring faith communities. It is not uncommon for someone to state that they feel as comfortable spending time and sharing their faith with a Pentecostal as they do a Methodist.

This has led to a “Christ of Culture” mindset with its marks of relativism. Being a good citizen of Chipley more than not means that you are a good Christian. Relativism within the Christian community, however, can cause outsiders. Trust and acceptance of the community are

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<sup>34</sup> Edward Foley, *Theological Reflection Across Religious Traditions: The Turn to Reflective Believing* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 29.

not always extended to people not members of other faith communities—people like Cobain and the people to which Jesus ministered. Can understanding that is possibly revealed through the music of Nirvana and Scripture highlighting the alienation of Christ begin to reveal opportunities to interact with others outside of the church walls?

During the sermon talk-back session, lyrics were distributed, and the song was played for the group. The existential crisis and guilt of not being able to live a life of authenticity that seemed to plague Kurt Cobain was discussed. Also used to enlighten the group was the theology of Paul Tillich in his seminal work *The Courage to Be*. Particularly, Tillich's claim that true courage when addressing guilt is "the courage to accept oneself as accepted in spite of being unacceptable...this is the genuine meaning of the Pauline-Lutheran doctrine of 'justification by faith'"<sup>35</sup>

The participants of the sermon talk-back session were all very receptive to the idea of using themes of the song and the life of Kurt Cobain to breathe new understanding into scripture. The most prevalent theme of the session was whether FUMCOC proclaims the complete story of Jesus. Also discussed was whether the church hinders others within our congregation from displaying the hurt and pain of their lives at church because of desire look perfect. Participants agreed that the song, story, with Scripture, gave a greater understanding of the marginalized persons who are living around us. The group also began to consider how the culture existent at FUMCOC might need to transform to reach those disenfranchised persons like Cobain. The participants felt that the veneer of living perfectly blessed Christian lives needed to be torn down so that healing in Christ could truly be available to all.

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<sup>35</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be, Second Edition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 163. Kindle Edition.

Sermon 2: *Faithfull* by Pearl Jam/Luke 17:11-21

Pearl Jam has just released their 11<sup>th</sup> studio album and has never disbanded. They have an avid fan base and still sell out tours within hours of ticket release. In addition to their success as musical artists, they use their influence and fame in giving a considerable amount of time and money to charitable causes through their Vitalogy Foundation.

In the song *Faithfull*, Pearl Jam tells the story of a mythical person who is screaming out to a god that does not hear their cries. They are cries that go out like echoes and nobody hears echoes. The person gets to the point that they are tired of screaming. The same was true when Jesus encountered the ten lepers. How long had the lepers been ostracized by their family and faith community? Having to keep a distance from travelers passing by, did their cries echo past those people? This must have caused those ten people to believe that God did not hear their cries.

Jesus, God incarnate, did hear and respond. Not only that, but scripture tells us that one of them was made well, or whole—body, soul, and spirit.<sup>36</sup> As the body of Christ in the world today, do we as a church hear the cries of the needy? It is an important question to ask ourselves as Christians. It is such an important question that we need to remember it and repent of it regularly. Part of the Holy Communion liturgy of The United Methodist Church explicitly reminds us about this when we confess that “we have not heard the cries of the needy”<sup>37</sup> during the ‘Confession and Pardon’ portion of that liturgy. This is an issue we need to think about and act upon every day, not just once a month.

During the sermon talk-back session, lyrics were distributed and the song was played for the group. The theology of Karl Barth and his focus on Jesus being the ultimate and knowable

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<sup>36</sup> Luke 17:19.

<sup>37</sup> The United Methodist Church, *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 12.

incarnation of God was related. If the people of FUMCOC are an incarnational people who abide by the teachings of God Incarnate—Jesus Christ—then we need to act with eyes to see and ears to hear those in need of God.

The participants of the sermon talk-back were receptive, yet apprehensive, to the idea of using the lyrics of Faithfull as the basis of the sermon. In this sermon, the full lyrics served as the foundation with scripture informing and enlightening the hearer. A limit in which the congregation was willing to be stretched was reached. This boundary was noted and future sermons will be aware of the participant's uneasiness.

The participants of the sermon talk-back did recognize that often we see, hear, and think differently at church than when engaging the world. Many in the group had never considered that they were the only “Jesus” that some people might encounter and how they interact with others around them could change conceptions of Christ. One participant encouraged the others in the group to begin considering how the people of FUMCOC are the church, so the church goes out with us when we leave the church property.

Sermon 3: *Hurt* by *Nine Inch Nails* (NIN)/*Matthew 19:1-10* (*Zacchaeus*)

The leader, and the lone member of NIN, is Trent Reznor. Reznor remains relevant due to skill as a composer. His musical compositions are included in scores for television, movies, and video games. In 2013 Reznor became the chief creative officer of Beats Electronics' Daisy Music service.<sup>38</sup> He later helped launch Apple Music in the same role When Apple, Inc. acquired

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<sup>38</sup> “Trent Reznor Named Creative Chief of Beats' Daisy Music Service,” Rolling Stone, accessed on February 27, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/trent-reznor-named-creative-chief-of-beats-daisy-music-service-174918/>.



Beats Electronics. He left Apple, Inc. in 2018.<sup>39</sup> The song Hurt has been re-recorded numerous times by artists such as Johnny Cash and Leona Lewis.

Hurt tells of living a life of loneliness, regret, and telling lies to others. To the point of even lying to oneself. It is a life that has evolved into an "empire of dirt." At the end of the song, there is a moment of clarity in which if given the chance to start over, that chance would be taken and, maybe more importantly, "keep myself."

In Luke 19:1-10, Zacchaeus was seemingly a man who had acquired worldly wealth. He had worked hard, was a Jew, most likely was a reasonable fair businessman, and sought righteousness. Still, he was rejected and despised by his people because he was a tax collector. Zacchaeus saw how his life had progressed and was trying to make amends. The lyrics of Hurt show the pain of loneliness and regret. It ends with Reznor expressing that if he had to do it all again, he would travel another path.

During the sermon talk-back session, the lyrics of the song were given out, videos for the NIN, Johnny Cash, and Leona Lewis versions were shown. Wesleyan theology on prevenient grace was used. Methodist doctrine proclaims to us that even in times of distress, regret, and loneliness, the Holy Spirit is present and active in our lives. A person need only recognize that the depravity in which they find themselves is real and that the forgiveness of God is only a breath away. The discussion that evening revolved around the idea that no Christian is completely holy and/or perfect. All people have problems that weigh them down, therefore there is a need to offer grace and empathy to others inside and outside of the church walls. A person in

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<sup>39</sup> "Trent Reznor on why he left Apple Music, 'It felt at odds with the artist in me,'" The Music Network, accessed on February 27, 2019, <https://themusicnetwork.com/trent-reznor-on-why-he-left-apple-music-it-felt-at-odds-with-the-artist-in-me/>.

the group expressed how grace is in low supply these days, so we need to give and receive grace to every person, in all places.

A fascinating phenomenon arose during this sermon talk-back session that was enlightening: the song was received and interpreted differently depending on which artist the participant preferred. This, even though the lyrics of all three versions presented were nearly identical. In general, the participants who were in their 30s to 40s preferred the NIN version, participants who were 50 years of age and older preferred the Johnny Cash version, and those under the age of 30 preferred the Leona Lewis version. Also of note, the Johnny Cash video, which was the only one that utilized Christian imagery, was preferred by nearly all the participants. The auditory and visual facets of the song versions affected people in surprising ways.

### Weekly Small Group

The focus and elements of the Weekly Small Group were much the same as the sermon series—biblical text, relevant song, and theological discussion. The difference was that the only thing brought into the discussion was the songs to be explored. No pre-determined scripture, theologian, or theological concept was brought to the meeting. This was done to foster a collaborative environment so that the participants could begin to develop their own theological savvy and conjure up their conceptions about how God can use popular music to speak into the Church.

Questions for participants:

- What is it about the music that resonates with the hearer?
- What is it about the lyrics that resonate with you?
- Is there meaning not readily recognized? Possible stories by the writer(s)?

- Does this song speak to you in any personal way that you would like to share with the group? In a communal way? Where is God in this song? What might the song say about God's interaction with Creation?

While not reaching as many people, this group allowed more interaction and choice for the participants. Members of the group began to present songs that they know and love after the initial session. Like the sermon talk-back sessions, there was more time to begin to train the participants in cultural exegesis. Terms and concepts could be fleshed out, questions could be answered in real-time, and "homework" could be given. The initial songs explored in the small group were chosen from the 2019 year-end charts:<sup>40</sup>

1. Small-Group Test Case and Analysis: *This is God's Country by Blake Shelton<sup>41</sup>, Country*

The music of This is God's Country was described by the groups as being upbeat and inspirational. The lyrics speak of living a life that might not seem good to some, but to many would be an idyllic existence. There is also an air of staking a claim for God of a particular community in the lyrics. A blending of Christ and Culture is evident in the song—the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion are alluded to along with “shine” (moonshine). A participant commented that the song sounds a lot like the community of Chipley, FL and nearly anyone who lived here could relate to it. However, the group was able to recognize that not all see Chipley as a “heaven on earth” just because the signs are all around. The participants agreed that is the community is going to “talk the talk, we need to walk the walk” otherwise it could be a negative portrayal of a Christ-filled life and community.

The idea that Chipley was a town like Shelton sings about in This is God's Country comes from simply looking around the area. The dominant culture of Chipley and Washington

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<sup>40</sup> “Year End Charts,” Billboard, accessed on January 3, 2020, <https://www.billboard.com/charts/year-end>.

<sup>41</sup> Lyrics can be read in the Appendix.

County, again, is overwhelming Cultural Christianity. There are signs of this phenomenon everywhere from license plates, greetings and salutations, political signs, commerce signs, and clothing, just to name a few. Signs of Cultural Christianity are ubiquitous. It is common for people of all ages, races, and genders to wear clothing that either has Christian symbols, phrases, or Bible verses printed on them. There are places of business that have Christian names or have Christian symbols on the premises.

In Florida, a person can obtain three types of standard vehicle license plates without paying extra. One has the county name on it, one has the state motto "the Sunshine State" printed on it, and the other states "In God We Trust." While the percentages of how many of those plates are chosen per year are not available, it is obvious to a person driving in the area that the most dominant choice for residents in the area is the one which states "In God We Trust."

The desire to identify as Christian goes beyond the personal, private vehicles. Like Shelton's song, there is an air of territorial aggression for claiming Chipley and Washington County for God. Several Washington County Sheriff's Department vehicles have a sticker on the back window that says, "In God We Trust." Political signs for many persons running for local and regional offices also have either words or symbols that show a voter that they are Christian. Physical signs are seemingly everywhere. The marks of the Christ and Culture in Paradox paradigm abound. There is a need for both appearing Christ-focused, but there is no hesitation to use the levers of government control to enforce what is deemed proper behavior.

The perceived need to identify as Christian even extends to how a person speaks in public. In random samples of visits to retail stores, an average of 76%<sup>42</sup> of the time the clerk

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<sup>42</sup> Ten separate trips were taken with ten separate stores being visited each time. Overlapping visits to smaller retail businesses was avoided. However, big-box stores were visited on multiple occasions, but during different trips. In total, one hundred separate visits to retail stores were recorded.

either said “have a blessed day” or a variation of that phrase. This was in substitution of a standard variation of “good-bye” or “thank you” that had no religious connotations.

The omnipresent expressions of Christianity, once again, is not the issue, but it does show that outward signs of a person's faith are crucial to a large segment of the local population. It is a sign that seeing God in all sectors of life is the goal of local Christian communities of faith. Some want to claim that the community of Chipley has been set apart for Christ. The questions remain: How do Christ and Culture interact with one another? And, what role do secular expressions—particularly popular music—play in revealing God’s presence on both sides of that interaction?

The scripture spoken of was Revelation 4. While not being directly relating to what “heaven” looks like in that passage, the song was describing what most of the group would consider heaven on earth. The imagery of calm water and its representing new life and serenity was discussed. The recognition that not all would view our area as "heaven" showed that the participants of the small group were more theologically nuanced than previously determined even if they did not realize it themselves.

## 2. *Old Town Road* by Lil' Nas X<sup>43</sup>, Rap and R&B

The music was lively and made you want to sing. Smiles and joy were present with every person in the room. The lyrics of Old Town Road speak of a life that is fast and loose. The message that resonated with the group was that people can talk about you, good or bad, and try to give advice, but you ain't hearing none of it. The lyrics tell us that he's going to “ride ‘til I can't no more.” The question asked by a participant: Is this is a healthy and sustainable way to live? At some point, this way of living is detrimental and can lead to a variety of bad situations.

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<sup>43</sup> Lyrics can be read in the Appendix.

The passage explored was Luke 15:11-32—the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Even though the lyrics don't seem to allude to a moment of regret, the notion was raised whether God is there and would be there if regret occurred. Despite our mistakes, God is willing to forgive us if we repent and ask to return to God's good graces. An individual even expressed how we should be extending these very same graces to others outside of the church. Used in this session—  
Wesleyan theology of grace.

### 3. *Without Me* by Halsey, Pop

The group described the music as being fast, yet heavy. The lyrics speak of a person who has helped the person for whom they loved to reach new heights of success and acclaim. That loved one has now left, leaving the person singing alone and bitter. The idea of betrayal and abandonment resonated with the entire group to varying degrees. Where could God be in this?

Eventually one of the more biblically literate participants suggested that the song could be considered in light of the Old Testament book of Hosea. The themes of betrayal, abandonment, and cheating were relatable between Hosea and *Without Me*. The biblical text also gave hope for reconciliation even if the song did not. The message taken away was that God is not us. If we are willing to return with a contrite and willing heart, God will accept us. There was also a recognition that not all within the community around FUMCOC know that forgiveness is available to them. Then, our congregants must act as agents of Christ in the world beyond the walls of the church rather than hoarding forgiveness to ourselves.

### 4. *High Hopes* by Panic! At the Disco, Rock

The music was deemed inspirational by the group. Everyone wanted to sing even if they didn't know the lyrics. The lyrics speak of a person who has beaten the odds despite the odds being stacked against them. Much of the success spoken of in the song was due to a prophetic

word that the writer's mother had spoken over them. The song was relatable to all in the group. Even though most of the participants were from middle-class families, they had to work for what they had achieved. For the most part, they also believed that having a family and a faith community praying for them was essential to their success. One person acknowledged that this was not the case for many of his friends. He expressed to the group how we as a church should be the family that those people never had. FUMCOC calls itself a family and should act as such, even to those not part of our faith community.

The passage of scripture used with the song was Philippians 4:13— "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." Even when things are not ideal and changing, having a community of believers in your corner gives you strength. You can be up one minute and down the next, but faith in Christ and the prayers of others levels off the peaks and valleys.

## **FINDINGS**

The issues that arose during this project were fascinating and, in many cases, surprising. There were many more complexities when dealing with music than expected. Many of these variables were difficult to understand and identify before the project began. A sample of these issues faced is just how essential personal taste was to how a person interpreted or accepted the message of the song. Personal taste in musical style impeded some of the participants. In the case of Hurt, where three different versions were presented during the sermon talk-back, the artist singing the song mattered.

The complexities of FUMCOC as a whole and individually over the course of the project arose throughout. The five paradigms set by Niebuhr failed to encapsulate those complexities. They were, however, a good guideline for the project. Admittedly, throughout the process, there was a need to fit the First United Methodist Church of Chipley congregants into neat boxes and

guide them to a preconceived place. Trying to force them into a predetermined category and see things in a predetermined way hindered the project. The nuances that they displayed and embodied were very complicated. Understanding the people of FUMCOC took well over a year and is ongoing. Understanding is a characteristic that is seemingly in low demand these days.

The ability of people within FUMCOC to recognize how Christ is using them in his work to transform Culture will hopefully propel those congregants beyond their immediate social groups, watching and listening for Christ in things not previously believed to be life-giving to the church. They have begun to see Christ in areas of Culture that excite them. The participants speak of hearing and seeing things in movies, music, etc. that were previously missed. Even when Culture is critiquing the church, a number of the participants listen to what Culture is saying rather than outright rejecting it.

Other findings revolved around the style of the music and how a wider variety of genres should be used. This is something easily addressed in the future. As stated earlier, for ease of execution during this project, a singular musical genre was selected. As the Weekly Small Group revealed, the use of any style of popular music would be enough to start a discussion.

Lastly, one of the more fascinating findings was that, as a whole, older congregants enjoyed this project more than their younger counterparts. The younger participants related that the Sermon Series seemed gimmicky at times and less authentic than standard Sunday messages. This, I believe, is something worth exploring in the future.

## **FINAL SUMMARY**

The limitations encountered during the project were surprising. These limitations did not manifest in the song selections for the Sermon Series or the Weekly Small Group. Rather, the most obvious limitation was how the songs selected were used. The case and point for this was



the use of Faithfull by Pearl Jam as the *basis* of the second sermon. It was not the song that was the issue, but rather that the belief that the sermon should revolve around scripture with the song informing the message, not the other way around. I agree with that assessment and will be cognizant of that moving forward.

The other notable limitation was that the Sermon Series reached the greatest number of people but limited individual interaction. On the flip side of that, the Weekly Small Group reached fewer people, but those who participated were deeply involved in the process and more enthused by further exploration of how God uses popular music. Both have strengths and both have weaknesses.

Several participants spoke of listening to popular music at home, work, and during commutes to discern what God was revealing through the artist's interpretation of the world around them. A surprising revelation was that one of the most ardent *Christ Against Culture* type proponents told a story of how they heard a song on the radio in the car while traveling with their child. This person said that a conversation ensued about how, while it is not overly clear on the surface, they could hear how God speaking to them through the lyrics.

Using popular music to inform FUMCOC how God is working in and around unexpected places is a concept with which most congregants are now comfortable. As a church that is growing and attracting previously unchurched persons and families, this concept can be used as a tool of understanding. It can also be used as a bridge to understand how people outside of the church view the world. Most of the conversation, group and individual, that took place during this project led me to believe that the participants were beginning to understand that popular music is a great tool for understanding Culture. The sermons, group meetings, and conversations also spurred some congregants of FUMCOC to engage with others beyond the church in a more

open and honest conversation about Christ and Culture. Most of those conversations took place within family or friend groups, but it was a big step in challenging the limited concept FUMCO had about the church and Christ's relation to Culture.

### **What's Next**

Can the use of secular music in preaching and Christian education truly be compared to a wolf in sheep's clothing if the fruit it is producing is good? If using popular music in services and studies increases our understanding of Christ and breaks down the metaphorical walls around us and allows a greater understanding of the people around us, then this project has born good fruit. Too often we take Scripture out of context and this seems to be the case in this instance. The passage that follows the wolf/sheep analogy did not come up. Matthew 7:15-20 states the following:

Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn *bushes* nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits. (NASB)

Not all things that are not explicitly Christian are detrimental to Christ. Therefore, we reject God's good fruit offered to us. It is this good fruit that comes from God through secular music that can be edifying to the Church which is the body of Christ in the world.

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