

Review

Van Opstal, Sandra Maria. *The Next Worship: Glorifying God in a Diverse World*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016. ISBN: 978-0-8308-4705-1

By Melissa Davis, DMA

Sandra Maria Van Opstal's book, *The Next Worship: Glorifying God in a Diverse World*, urges ministry leaders to embrace multiethnic worship as the future of congregational worship in the North American modern Church. She argues the need for new practices, dispelling many misconceptions of multiethnic worship by challenging the fears and complacency of the Church. She states that congregational worship should reflect the diversity of all of God's people for true biblical community and mission (p.23). Addressing this long-neglected issue, Van Opstal positions her book as an exploration of what the modern North American Church can become to reach a changing world. She provides a definition of multiethnic worship, "20 percent or more of the congregation is not from the majority group" (p.111), so that worship leaders can readily identify their church's need to diversify its worship to provide a welcoming environment for the marginalized. As Van Opstal has worked with worship leaders of varying racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, this book emerges as a refreshing, bold conversation with many insights and practical models for immediate implementation. It is well-organized as each chapter provides the reader with a clear bullet-point summary of key concepts, probing questions for personal reflection and discussion and concludes with a related prayer to help worship leaders consider how they can best serve everyone in the Church. The author respectfully conveys the Church's historic faults in worship through tradition, power and privilege, oppression, justice, and pride, and optimistically suggests that although change will take time, small change is still change.

To uncover all facets of multiethnic worship, Van Opstal centers the book around the biblical image of the table, a place of 'friendship, commitment and intimacy' (p.17). The idea of all of God's people sharing a meal together at the table is meant to demonstrate reconciliation, shared leadership, and unity amid differences. She organizes the book by topic, with each chapter devoted to a single facet of multiethnic worship and cleverly given a corresponding meal-related title. Allowing the reader to digest each topic one at a time, chapters contain a mixture of well-cultivated research, opinions, personal stories, references to other scholarly works, and examples of worship leaders currently practicing the concepts discussed. Countless introspective questions and personal anecdotes are woven throughout the book to promote deep thought on issues presented, to allow the reader to identify or

empathize with the author and begin envisioning real life applications for diverse worship.

The Next Worship dispels the notion of “normal” vs. “ethnic,” where some people are perceived as “normal”, ethnicity-free, while others are considered “ethnic” and “other” (p.34). Van Opstal’s first chapter, titled “Tension at The Table”, opens with a question by one of her college students, “Why are you forcing me to sing in other languages? That’s not at all helpful to my personal worship.” His preference for the perceived “normal” worship - English, rock, contemporary Christian music - was clouding his ability to worship with others. When we view the worship of the dominant culture of a church as “normal worship” we falsely suggest that everyone can relate to it. Boldly challenging the student’s value of individual worship in a corporate worship setting, Van Opstal also challenges his view of worship with Revelation 7 - where every tribe, nation, language, and tongue glorifies God together in true community. She argues that worship is cultural and contextual. Contrary to popular belief, she states that we must acknowledge that we are *all* ethnic - operating within a cultural context, and we come together to practice here on earth the ultimate worship experience in heaven.

After illuminating that all come to God’s Table equally from their own cultures and contexts, she then implores readers to begin the work of self-awareness, then cultural and emotional intelligence. She argues that cultural anthropology - the understanding of the values and behaviors of other cultures - must precede all other practices. Comparisons between Black, Latino, White and Asian cultural values in worship are made in chart form throughout the book, which offer readers a glimpse into the nature of disparate people groups. This helps readers to understand their blind spots and biases, and how cultural values heavily influence the corporate worship experience. She argues that culture, form, and style do in fact matter in a worship setting as ‘a heart of worship’ does not suffice as true worship’s only criteria (p.45). Cultural preferences, our deep values, and beliefs each play a significant role in how we worship and therefore must be considered.

The author highlights the North American Church’s failure to embrace multiethnic worship, with its tendency more toward tokenism. Churches are prone to creating worship teams that look multiethnic, instead of truly sharing leadership and fully empowering all team members to shepherd their congregations from their own cultural lenses. Churches claim to want multiculturalism but can easily convey a dominant culture in their overall corporate worship structure. Offering the pros and cons of four models of multiethnic worship in chart form - Acknowledgment, Blended, Fusion, Collaborative Rotation (p.103), the reader can identify his/her church’s current model, see the blind spots that prevent authentic multiethnic worship and potentially transition to a more inclusive worship model. Van Opstal references Soong-Chan Rah’s view of Blended diversity as the dawn of the “salad

bowl” (p.105) in his book, *The Next Evangelicalism*¹. All unique salad items are in the bowl together but rather than giving expression to each flavour, the Church tends to drown each distinct element – the structure, worship style, approach to community life, and style of preaching – in ranch sauce. Van Opstal echoes Rah’s view that in this drowning, all elements become the same – no longer distinguishable, but carefully states that it is not only in Anglo-dominant settings that this happens. Any dominant culture can blindly drown all worship elements in their own sauce. She cautions the reader to be careful that we are not allowing our sauce to cover everyone else’s flavors. She reminds us that solidarity in worship is best communicated when we learn what makes people who they are and understand how God’s story meets the story of His peoples (p.102).

For some, the author’s bold language may seem offensive, but for the marginalized the book is a cool drink of water in the desert. An incredibly useful addition to the literature on multiethnic worship, this book uniquely gifts readers with the resources of multiple appendices that allow for examination of personal, ethnic, and church community values, a helpful list of books on race, culture and worship, resources for networking, a list of worship movements, musical artists and song lists across multiple genres, sample multicultural service orders, tips for teaching a language song, and descriptions on the nature of particular worship cultures. This book is highly recommended as a Christian college or university course textbook or as a resource for North American church worship leaders/pastors, encouraging their personal growth in how to serve *all* of God’s people well.

Van Opstal emphasizes that everyone should feel responsible for owning their failures regarding multiethnic worship. While there is no one recipe for perfect multiethnic worship, she encourages the reader to be mindful that God is patient with humans and such patience will be required from us as we gather around God’s global table.

Dr. Melissa Davis, DMA, is an active concert soloist, music professor, choral conductor, worship leader, vocal instructor, and clinician. As a music director and worship leader in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), she has worked in crafting weekly worship services that speak to multiethnic, multigenerational congregations. In 2016, she became Founder, Artistic Director, and conductor of the 50-member Tyndale Community Choir, uniting Christian singers throughout the GTA. A dynamic mezzo soprano soloist, Ms. Davis has toured internationally singing in France, Wales, the Caribbean, the United States, and throughout Canada

¹ Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).

in concert and playing lead and principal roles in various opera productions. With numerous invitations to give community vocal and worship music workshops, she has also been invited to present clinics, lectures and recitals at York University, the University of Waterloo, Tyndale University, the University of Illinois, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, the University of Arkansas, and the University of Toronto. Dr. Davis has served as a music faculty member at the University of Arkansas, as Director of the Music Department and Assistant Professor of music and worship arts at Tyndale University and will be joining the York University music faculty as Assistant Professor of Voice in July 2023.

Author Copyright.

Melissa Davis, review of *The Next Worship: Glorifying God in a Diverse World*, by Sandra Maria Van Opstal, Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research. www.nimner.ca, (May 26, 2023).