

Mission and Creativity: Congregational Song, Localization, and Identity in the Christian Evangelical Church in Minahasa

¹**Matt Menger**

¹Dallas International Universtiy – United States of America; SIL Global

Email: matthew_menger@diu.edu

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how creativity and theological and missiological formation occur through congregational song within the Evangelical Christian Church of Minahasa (GMIM). It asks: how do social and theological systems influence the creation of congregational music in GMIM's local context? The study uses a multidisciplinary approach to apply the Systems Model of Creativity and Optimal Distinctiveness Theory alongside constructivist grounded theory methods. Field data includes interviews, observations, and document analysis. The case study focuses on Nyanyikanlah Nyanyian Baru bagi Tuhan (NNBT), a locally produced hymnal illustrating the interaction between creative individuals, institutional structures, and theological and cultural norms. Findings show that congregational songs serve as tools for theological participation and collective identity formation. Creativity arises not in isolation but through social negotiation, balancing community belonging with distinct expression. These insights guide Christian communities seeking to cultivate creative ecosystems that shape faith, worship, and local identity.

Keywords: Congregational; Ethnodoxology; Music; Worship

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana kreativitas dan formasi teologis dan misiologis terjadi melalui nyanyian jemaat dalam Gereja Masehi Injili di Minahasa (GMIM). Pertanyaan utamanya adalah: bagaimana sistem sosial dan teologis mempengaruhi penciptaan nyanyian jemaat dalam konteks GMIM? Dengan pendekatan multidisipliner, studi ini menerapkan Systems Model of Creativity dan Optimal Distinctiveness Theory bersama dengan metode grounded theory yang konstruktivis. Penelitian di lapangan mencakup wawancara, observasi, dan analisis dokumen. Studi kasus berfokus pada *Nyanyikanlah Nyanyian Baru bagi Tuhan (NNBT)*, sebuah buku nyanyian lokal yang menunjukkan interaksi antara individu kreatif, struktur institusional, serta norma teologis dan budaya. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa lagu jemaat berfungsi sebagai sarana partisipasi teologis dan pembentukan identitas kolektif. Kreativitas tidak muncul secara terpisah, melainkan melalui negosiasi sosial yang menyeimbangkan keterikatan masyarakat dan ekspresi yang khas. Wawasan ini memberikan panduan bagi komunitas Kristen yang ingin membentuk ekosistem kreatif yang membentuk iman, ibadah, dan identitas lokal.

Kata Kunci: Etnodoksologi; Ibadah; Jemaat; Musik;

INTRODUCTION

I was pleased to see the men’s kolintang ensemble participating in worship at a Sunday morning service at my church in Manado, Indonesia. They performed two arrangements of local Christian songs before the service began, crafting a relaxed, joyful atmosphere. Throughout the liturgy of the service, they performed alongside the worship leader. One *kolintang* song immediately preceded the sermon, and after the pastor walked to the pulpit, he commented, “That introduction by the *kolintang* before my sermon refreshed us all!” He then launched into a stern message, critical of false teachings. Another song by the *kolintang* ensemble immediately followed his preaching, this time sung in the Sangir language instead of Indonesian.

After enthusiastic applause following the second song, the pastor stepped up to the pulpit again—but this time with a grin. He observed, “Brothers and sisters, I feel the perfection of the Lord’s power forming us. Before my sermon, which was sharp and hard to hear, we were soothed by the *kolintang* music. Did you all notice that?” Many nodded. “And after my pointed sermon, we were calmed and given peace again by the praises brought with the *kolintang*. Amen, brothers and sisters?” The congregation responded with a smiling, collective “Amen!”¹ This serendipitous moment exemplifies the consequence of what this paper explores: the “perfection of the Lord’s power” forming God’s people through the arts. The power of that experience was not only the musical style used (*kolintang*), the ensemble (men in the church), or the local language (Sangir). Instead, it was through a commingling of those and other factors: a local church gathered for worship in a specific place and time, a community expressing themselves, and communicating scripture through a meaningful local artistic expression. It was an entire system of creativity in that community, a confluence of knowledge and people.

Despite the vibrant creativity visible in local worship settings such as GMIM, little research has been done to systematically analyze how congregational song contributes to theological formation and communal identity within Indonesian churches, particularly in the Protestant context.² Many studies focus either on ethnographic description or theological content, without adequately accounting for the systems and social dynamics that enable or constrain creative worship practices. Ingalls, Reigersberg, and Sherinian opened a new avenue for discussion with their concept of musical localization, exposing an opportunity for new directions in ethnomusicology and the need for new, multidisciplinary studies.³ While global research into Christian worship has increasingly embraced interdisciplinary frameworks, there remains a need for case studies such as this one that connect these theoretical strands with lived artistic practices in local Christian communities.

¹ The entire church service can be watched online. This particular song, followed by the pastor’s comments, begins at about 1 hour, 13 minutes: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmXhQiGiDDc>

² Marzanna Poplawska has done some research in the Catholic context on Java and Flores in Indonesia, “Inculturation, institutions, and the creation of a localized congregational repertoire in Indonesia,” dalam *Making Congregational Music Local in Christian Communities Worldwide*, Congregational Music Studies Series (Routledge, 2018); Marzanna Poplawska, *Performing Faith: Christian Music, Identity and Inculturation in Indonesia*, SOAS Studies in Music (Routledge, 2020).

³ Monique Marie Ingalls dkk., ed., *Making congregational music local in Christian communities worldwide*, Congregational music studies series (Routledge, 2018).

How do social and theological systems influence the creation and use of congregational music in GMIM's local context? This article explores the system underlying *how* that engagement happens through several paradigms, applied in a case study from *Gereja Masehi Injili di Minahasa* (the Evangelical Christian Church of Minahasa, GMIM).

This article contributes a novel integration of theological reflection, grounded fieldwork, and psychological theory—particularly the Systems Model of Creativity and Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT)—to illuminate how worship songs in GMIM function not only as artistic products but as tools for identity formation and theological negotiation. By weaving together varied perspectives, this study offers a fresh lens for understanding how congregational song emerges from and contributes to the dynamic life of the church—not as a static artifact but as a negotiated and relational practice of formation.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study aims to explore how creativity and theological formation are enacted and understood through congregational song using the context of GMIM as a case study. The research employs a qualitative, constructivist grounded theory approach to achieve this aim. Rooted in Charmaz's model of grounded theory, this methodology is particularly suited for exploring the nuanced processes by which creativity and theological formation emerge from the lived experiences and social meanings within GMIM. The iterative coding and analysis inherent in this approach allow patterns and theories regarding these phenomena to emerge directly from the data.⁴ To operationalize this inquiry, the first author has conducted fieldwork in North Sulawesi since 2019, including semi-structured interviews with theologians, musicians, and songwriters involved in GMIM worship practices. The second author, a resident of North Sulawesi, offers contextual insight and supports cultural interpretation. Additional data include liturgical planning materials, published and unpublished songs, and the denominational hymnal *Nyanyikanlah Nyanyian Baru bagi Tuhan* (NNBT).

The study draws on multiple interdisciplinary lenses to interpret how creativity functions within this context and enriches the operationalization of the research questions. Theological and ethnodoxological perspectives ground creativity in a Christian understanding of the nature of God and humanity's participation in divine artistry. Social and psychological approaches, including the Systems Model of Creativity and ODT, provide insight into the fieldwork and data to understand how innovation and formation arise through the dynamic interaction of individuals and communities within the GMIM. This interdisciplinary framework supports a holistic understanding of how worship music serves as both a vehicle for creative expression and a formational tool within GMIM's ecclesial and cultural ecology.

⁴ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2. ed, Introducing Qualitative Methods (SAGE, 2014); Kathy Charmaz, "The Genesis, Grounds, and Growth of Constructivist Grounded Theory," dalam *Developing Grounded Theory*, 2 ed., oleh Janice M. Morse dkk., ed. oleh Janice M. Morse dkk. (Routledge, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315169170-13>; Kathy Charmaz dan Robert Thornberg, "The Pursuit of Quality in Grounded Theory," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 18, no. 3 (2021): 305–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1780357>.

RESULTS

The Systems Model of Creativity and GMIM

Creativity has been viewed from many perspectives through history, but most typical are person-centered romantic ideas of lone, troubled bohemians from which creative expression erupts. However, psychology and social research tell a different story—creativity is best understood as a complex sociocultural system. This model accounts for diverse influences on the individual within their sociocultural context and describes how creativity works in the social setting of GMIM.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is a psychologist best known for the concept of “flow.”⁵ Most discussions about creativity focus on *what* it is, but Csikszentmihalyi also explores *where* it is.⁶ His research demonstrates that creativity is not solely based on individual action in isolation but is an active system characterized by converging dynamics within a complex context.⁷ Creativity is an emergent property growing from the interplay of several interdependent factors, each of which is necessary but, on its own, not sufficient to generate creativity. The knowledge to create and innovate comes from somewhere and depends on other ideas, processes, products, and people. In Csikszentmihalyi’s model, creativity is the result of three main components: a *field*, a *domain*, and the *individual*:

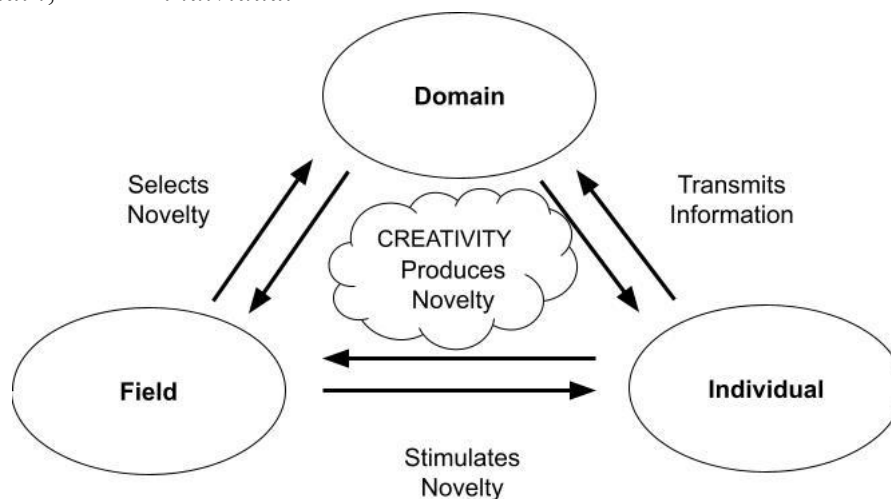


Figure 1: The systems model demonstrates creativity as consisting of the individual, the domain, and the field.

Within this system, the starting point is arbitrary, and the process is iterative. The system has circular causality and does not necessarily start with the individual; any component within the system may activate it. The essence of creativity is understood as the process of altering the domain; it occurs when an individual modifies something that lasts and is passed on over time.

⁵ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, 1st edition (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008).

⁶ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *The Systems Model of Creativity* (Springer, 2014), 115, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9085-7>.

⁷ *The Systems Model of Creativity* by Csikszentmihalyi is quoted extensively throughout this paper. This book is a helpful collection of his most well-known papers and is a helpful resource to access otherwise scattered articles, spanning his career, which may or may not be easily obtainable.

The Field

The field is the people in the system who select which new things will succeed and be incorporated into the domain. Innovative ideas need to be accepted by some group entitled to decide what belongs. This group includes gatekeepers, elders, cultural leaders, peers, consumers, and society at large. Fellow creators also play a role in determining acceptability. Innovations might be ideas, artistic expressions, or performances. Individuals are continuously generating new ideas, but most will be eliminated. Cultures tend to be conservative, as unchecked assimilation of all the novel ideas would risk destabilizing the social order. When the field decides that something important has been contributed to the culture through an innovation, it is often accepted. Approval of an innovation occurs when a critical mass of key community members actively support it, creating sustained momentum over time.⁸

A typical field in a commercial endeavor might be comprised of competing individuals with a scarcity mindset, all struggling to succeed—differences in cultural, economic, and educational capital foster competition.⁹ For ethnodoxology, though, the field might be a congregation or local community—or, as in the case study presented here, a denomination (GMIM). If worship is public, with a missional focus, the field will also include those outside the church who encounter artistic expressions. Thus, the field can consist of the artists and congregants (within the church), the community (outside the church), and any mixture of the two.

The Domain

New ideas are birthed not from nothing and nowhere but are built upon existing foundations. The domain is the information: the structured body of knowledge, attitudes, and skills for performing, creating, or innovating, which is stored and transmitted by existing practitioners and experts. The domain includes rules, instructions, and procedures to guide the individual. It has its own internal logic and pattern of development. For example, this could be a system such as music and its theory, a sport and its rules, or theoretical physics. Csikszentmihalyi asks us to consider how information can be preserved and communicated and how the way it is structured influences the creative process. The accumulated cultural creations (or work) in the domain are a reference that defines the boundaries.

Individuals cannot transform the domain until they fully comprehend how it works. The domain contains criteria—referenced by the field—for specifying what is excellent; matters of taste and aesthetics fall into this category. For example, a musician must first learn the traditions, notation system (if any), scales, rules for texts, and how the instrument is played before composing new songs. Some domains are more accessible than others, and information can be hidden or monopolized by the field. Power dynamics and changes surrounding who is allowed access to the domain are important considerations. In Christian history, an example of changing power dynamics in a domain would be the Reformation, which shifted the locus of scriptural authority. By promoting widespread vernacular Bible translation and encouraging individual study, the Reformation empowered lay individuals to engage directly with scripture,

⁸ Brian Schrag, *Creating Local Arts Together (Revised and Updated)*, (William Carey Publishing, 2025).

⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. oleh Richard Nice (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812507>.

thereby diminishing the exclusive interpretive control of the Catholic priesthood. The advent of the internet is another example of a change in accessibility.

The Individual

Finally, we turn to the individual: that inspired, creative genius. In the systems model, individuals contribute to variations in the existing domain. Csikszentmihalyi writes:

*Access to the domain and access to the field are all well and good, but when are we going to deal with the real characteristics of creative persons? When do we get to the interesting part—the tortured souls, the impossible dreams, the agony and the ecstasy of creation? The reason I hesitate to write about the deep personality of creative individuals is that I am not sure that there is much to write about, since creativity is the property of a complex system, and none of its components alone can explain it. The personality of an individual who is to do something creative must adapt itself to the particular domain, to the conditions of a particular field, which vary at different times and from domain to domain.*¹⁰

According to the systems model, creativity can be defined as the action of an individual modifying the content of a domain in a way that is recognized and accepted by the field, resulting in a change that becomes incorporated into that domain. The systems model challenges romanticized ideas of how creativity occurs and highlights the importance of the social context surrounding the creator.

Optimal Distinctiveness Theory

ODT is a model that investigates how groups form and establish an identity by appropriately differentiating themselves from others. First theorized by M. B. Brewer,¹¹ ODT suggests that individuals are driven by two competing needs: the desire to belong and the desire to be unique. These needs are best fulfilled by participating in groups that are inclusive enough to provide belonging yet distinct enough to allow for individual differentiation.¹² Individuals seek stability in identifying with a group; however, an inherent human need for distinctiveness and self-expression drives them toward creative expression. This need is crucial for the field's individuals and groups (and sub-groups). Creativity depends on a community where members share common ways of thinking and behaving, learning from one another and building on each other's practices through imitation. ODT helps explain how creativity manifests within the field as individuals challenge the domain's boundaries.

¹⁰ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: The Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, 1. ed, Modern Classics (Harperperennial, 2013), 55.

¹¹ Marilyn B. Brewer, "The Social Self: On Being the Same and Different at the Same Time," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 17, no. 5 (1991): 475–82, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167291175001>.

¹² Noah Askin dan Michael Mauskopf, "What Makes Popular Culture Popular? Product Features and Optimal Differentiation in Music," *American Sociological Review* 82, no. 5 (2017): 910–44; Deirdre T. Guion Peoples, "Nothing Compares to You: Prince and the Theory of Optimal Distinctiveness," *Journal of African American Studies* 21, no. 3 (2017): 443–60; Kjetil Klette Böhler, "The Political Force of Musical Actants: Grooves, Pleasures, and Politics in Havana D'Primera's 'Pasaporte' Live in Havana," *Twentieth-Century Music* 18, no. 2 (2021): 185–222, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572220000614>.

There is a tension between complexity and integration. First, cultural complexity leads to increasing differentiation as distinct and autonomous domains emerge over time. Second, as these domains develop, they become more integrated, functioning in coordination and mutual support. This is a cyclical process: For culture to progress and remain vital, future creative insights will periodically reestablish connections among increasingly divergent domains, temporarily restoring cultural coherence—until further differentiation leads (once again) to fragmentation.

ODT helps ethnodoxologists understand how groups form and define themselves—desiring to belong together yet finding ways to be expressively distinct and unique. This applies to groups of artists, congregations, and other kinds of communities. It helps researchers understand schism: it could be a product of size and a need for healthy differentiation, not just a negative result of disunity. ODT also assists ethnodoxologists in understanding how artists create and why those artistic expressions succeed or fail: creators find a balance between working within the domain and innovating something new—yet not so novel that it is unacceptable to the field. In researching popular songwriting, Askin and Mauskapf note that “songs sounding too much like previous and contemporaneous productions—those that are highly typical—are less likely to succeed. Songs exhibiting some degree of optimal differentiation are more likely to rise to the top of the chart.”¹³ Artistic expressions are not born in a vacuum but relate to other cultural products and creative expressions. These relationships between objects determine how they are perceived—both how they relate as well as how they differ.

Knowledge, through creativity, is generated in the “boundary places” which are found where inclusion and differentiation meet.¹⁴ Makoto Fujimura uses the Old English word *mearcstapas*, translated as “border-walkers” or “border-stalkers,” to capture this sense of artists living in the tension, on the boundaries of culture—and the domain—creating and making culture. He notes:

*Artists are instinctively uncomfortable in homogeneous groups, and in “border-stalking” we have a role that both addresses the reality of fragmentation and offers a fitting means to help people from all our many and divided cultural tribes to learn to appreciate the margins, lower barriers to understanding and communication, and start to defuse the culture wars.*¹⁵

Often, artists and creatives see the need for inclusion or differentiation before the rest of the community. Above, Fujimura focuses on the inclusive movement in optimal distinctiveness, particularly how it can bring unity and reconciliation under challenging circumstances. Interestingly, he returns the conversation to the need for artists to have a strong identity and foundation in a domain when he notes that *mearcstapas* need a “solid grounding, a secure place

¹³ Askin dan Mauskapf, “What Makes Popular Culture Popular?,” 910.

¹⁴ Uday Mark Balasundaram, *Creativity and Captivity: Exploring the Process of Musical Creativity amongst Indigenous Cosmopolitan Musicians (ICMs) for Mission*, American Society of Missiology Monograph Series (Pickwick Publications, 2021), 51:161.

¹⁵ Makoto Fujimura, *Art and faith: a theology of making* (Yale University Press, 2020), 56.

to which they can return.”¹⁶ Creative individuals live at and explore the domain’s boundaries and search for optimally distinct identities for themselves and their groups.

Identity

In the Systems Model of Creativity, the field and the individual represent the social section. Whereas the domain comprises knowledge, the other two parts of the system involve people and relationships. This social aspect is the organizations that facilitate the selection and inclusion of creativity into the domain. Identity is a personal and communal idea that fits the individual and the field. A strong identity allows both to take creative risks and “plunge into life with a confident contentment rather than a fear-based, performance orientation.”¹⁷ Artistic expression establishes and upholds identity, and this relates to social power structures in different ways—sometimes causing conflict.¹⁸ Attempts to assimilate aesthetic norms through force privilege one group and silence another. Jesus provides the best example of a strong identity, and he communicated this to his disciples as an individual way of knowing who they were and who the people of God were. Scripture is filled with identity-forming truth. The Sermon on the Mount (Mat. 5-7) expounds upon the identity of members of God’s kingdom and how they should behave. Similarly, in his letter to the church in Colossae, Paul defines the church’s identity (Col. 3:12-14).

Many researchers in the arts have noted the powerful impact of artistic expression on group identity formation. In her research into the *olonkho* epic tradition among the Sakha people of Siberia, Robin Harris notes how it reinforces Sakha identity and how specific characteristics keep it relevant and robust to this day, even if sometimes only as “an identity marker and nostalgic touchstone.”¹⁹ The concept of authenticity, often assumed to be a hallmark of “good” worship music, is contextually shaped and carries embedded values of community identity. Yet, an overemphasis on authenticity can center individual devotion at the expense of communal formation or justice, especially when understood through a purity-oriented lens of worship aesthetics.²⁰ Roberta King reminds ethnodoxologists to study the arts in relationship to people because of their identity-forming power:

Shift from seeing the arts as separate entities apart from people to realizing that the arts are directly linked to people: music and the arts shape identity. Music-cultures and their related art forms are intimately linked to a people and provide the cultural milieu within which they interact socially and build their identity.... We need to revel in the diversity and creativity each people has to offer in worship and praise to God. All peoples are called to offer their best to God in ways that honor him. This requires our moving from expecting only one style or genre of art as the accepted form for worship

¹⁶ Makoto Fujimura, *Culture care: reconnecting with beauty for our common life* (IVP Books, 2017), 89.

¹⁷ W. David O. Taylor, *Glimpses of the New Creation: Worship and the Formative Power of the Arts* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2019), 369.

¹⁸ Schrag, *Creating Local Arts Together (Revised and Updated)*.

¹⁹ Robin P. Harris, *Storytelling in Siberia: the Olonkho epic in a changing world*, *Folklore studies in a multicultural world* (University of Illinois Press, 2017), 34, 211.

²⁰ Nathan Myrick, “Authenticity and Purity in Worship Music,” *Theology* 128, no. 1 (2025): 26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X241307355>.

*and praise to embracing the deeply ingrained, identifying art forms of all people as potential conduits for engaging with God.*²¹

Thus, when considering ODT, identity is understood to be important for both individuals and groups. Individuals may try to create their own identities, but they ultimately depend on others to recognize that identity.²²

Case Study: Creativity and Worship Formation in GMIM

In *Becoming What We Sing*, David Lemley describes his dream for a flourishing, creative church: “The composing church could be the church at worship in self-offering co-creation, fulfilled in the joy of effective ministry in the Spirit. Music-making that enables the Trinitarian, self-offering shape of the church as an alternate society could allow us to realize an ‘enlivening of the imagination by images that do justice to the central symbol of our faith.’”²³ Lemley describes the “composing church,” but I prefer the term “creating church.” And the creating church is not consuming but actively localizing the gospel. People believe, belong, and behave through aesthetic choices. Christian communities should create in response to local needs, as contrasted with a passive, recipient mindset. The church radiating local creativity safely circumvents consumerist proclivities and reinforces its agency in how it chooses to worship.

The music of GMIM serves as a case study to apply the theories and concepts mentioned in this study. The development and use of the NNBT illustrate how a denominational songbook can function as a systemically embedded medium of worship formation. As a curated collection of locally authored songs, NNBT reflects the interaction of creative individuals (songwriters and editors), institutional structures (the synod and church leadership), and domain knowledge (theological, musical, and cultural products and norms) within GMIM’s worship ecology. This understanding follows the Systems Model of Creativity, in which innovation arises not in isolation but through negotiation between individuals, the field that evaluates their work, and the domain into which creative acts are submitted. These songs were not created in isolation; instead, they emerged through processes of negotiation, in which individual expressions must be recognized as valuable by the field and beneficial to the domain.

The first edition of NNBT was published in 2002, with subsequent revisions resulting in the third edition, released in 2011. The hymnal’s title was inspired by Psalm 98:1, which begins: “*Nyanyikanlah nyanyian baru bagi TUHAN!*” (“Sing to the LORD a new song”). The hymnal emerged in response to a desire within the denomination for new music written by local composers.²⁴ This institutional aspiration reflects a social desire for distinctiveness within the broader Indonesian ecclesial landscape. In the 2011 edition, the preface emphasizes the hope

²¹ Roberta Rose King, *Global Arts and Christian Witness: Exegeting Culture, Translating the Message, and Communicating Christ*, Mission in global community (Baker Academic, 2019), 240.

²² Alan Noble, *You are not your own: belonging to God in an inhuman world* (InterVarsity Press, 2021), 25.

²³ David Lemley, *Becoming What We Sing: Formation through Contemporary Worship Music* (William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2021), 318.

²⁴ Badan Pekerja Majelis Sinode GMIM, *Nyanyikanlah Nyanyian Baru Bagi Tuhan*, 1st ed. (Tomohon, Indonesia, 2009).

that the songs would enrich GMIM’s worship by drawing on local artistic and cultural resources.²⁵ A second volume is currently nearing publication.²⁶ NNBT exemplifies the community’s intentional effort to articulate its theology, identity, and culture through musical expression. ODT offers insight at the institutional level: GMIM, through NNBT, asserts its distinctiveness within its own congregational life and in relation to other Indonesian denominations and the global church. The hymnal becomes a tool of musical localization, balancing the need for theological and liturgical inclusion in the broader Protestant landscape with a desire to express a unique Minahasan identity yet still recognizably within the bounds of national and global Protestant norms.²⁷

Hymnals are unique cultural and theological artifacts that operate across multiple modes of communication and are interpreted differently depending on context. This malleability reflects an ongoing process of dynamic, local theologizing. NNBT functions both as a curated object and a theological expression; however, its meaning is not fixed on the printed page. Instead, its significance emerges as it exists with the lived experiences of individuals and communities, particularly in performance. Each instance of congregational singing or musical presentation constitutes a realization of the songbook’s content, shaped by location, social setting, and embodied features.

Editorial Intent and Theological Themes

The editorial intent behind NNBT reflects the intersection of theology, identity, and ambition within a complex creative system. As a curated compilation of original worship songs, NNBT represents a deliberate attempt by GMIM’s leadership to articulate and disseminate a localized theological vocabulary that is both doctrinally coherent and culturally resonant. This act illustrates how institutions, as part of the creative field, shape the domain by evaluating contributions and selectively amplifying some. NNBT can be understood as an effort to root worship in the lived experience and musical voice of the Minahasan Christian community. At the same time, when viewed through the Systems Model of Creativity, the songbook illustrates how institutional actors (the field) draw on theological and musical traditions (the domain) and validate the contributions of individual songwriters (the individuals) in the production of a new, contextually meaningful corpus of worship music.

The prefaces to the three published editions, alongside interviews with editors and practitioners, reveal that NNBT was intended not simply as a functional worship aid but as a formative mechanism—shaping how GMIM congregations sing, what they sing, and how they imagine God and community.²⁸ In this sense, the hymnal operates as a vehicle of intended formation, a form of theological communication embedded in musical practice. Theological themes in NNBT reflect GMIM’s Reformed heritage while embodying local agency—

²⁵ Badan Pekerja Majelis Sinode GMIM, *Nyanyikanlah Nyanyian Baru Bagi Tuhan (Edisi Empat Suara)*, 3rd ed. (empat suara) (Tomohon, Indonesia, 2011), xii.

²⁶ For further background and detail about NNBT, see: Matt Menger, “The Original Hymnody of Gereja Masehi Injili Di Minahasa:” *Global Forum on Arts and Christian Faith* 12 (Juni 2024): A26–53.

²⁷ Ingalls dkk., *Making congregational music local in Christian communities worldwide*, 3.

²⁸ Badan Pekerja Majelis Sinode GMIM, *Nyanyikanlah Nyanyian Baru Bagi Tuhan*; Badan Pekerja Majelis Sinode GMIM, *Nyanyikanlah Nyanyian Baru Bagi Tuhan*, 2nd ed. (Tomohon, Indonesia, 2010); Badan Pekerja Majelis Sinode GMIM, *Nyanyikanlah Nyanyian Baru Bagi Tuhan (Edisi Empat Suara)*.

dynamic, local theologizing through the arts. ODT helps describe how NNBT invites congregations to inhabit a worship identity that is both historically rooted and locally expressive. NNBT also signals GMIM's desire to be a self-determining organization within the Indonesian Protestant landscape. The hymnal's publication marked a shift from reliance on external hymnals to the production of local songs, positioning GMIM as a producer rather than a passive recipient of imported liturgies. One GMIM leader noted that "The focus on creating our own music is particularly important... When a song is 'cooked' in our 'kitchen,' the theology and the music are our product, a Protestant product. The lyrics, the song, and the arrangement [are ours] instead of coming from all over the place."^{29,30} The creative process behind NNBT illustrates what hybridization theory describes as an ongoing negotiation of theological allegiance and cultural expression rather than a static fusion of local and global forms.³¹ This institutional move—deeply embedded in GMIM's postcolonial reality—represents a reassertion of ecclesial voice and cultural legitimacy through music.

Editorial decisions within NNBT also suggest a cautious openness to local song styles—a conservative musical localization. While many included compositions adhere to Western tonal and choral conventions, a small number engage local genres. These inclusions, though limited, reflect an intentional step toward contextual musical expression. They reflect the field's vigilant gatekeeping of the domain, encouraging innovation that strengthens communal identity without introducing too much malleability: experimentation within the domain is selectively approved by the field, and this innovation signals a desire to expand the scope of acceptable worship. These editorial aims reflect a multifaceted act of mediation—shaping doctrine, identity, and church culture.

Congregational Reception: Community Engagement with NNBT

The use of NNBT across GMIM congregations reveals the vital role of community interaction in the life of a worship resource. While the hymnal reflects centralized institutional intent, its function as a formational tool ultimately depends on how the churches themselves engage with it. This reception process is central: theology is embedded in the printed page and co-constructed in performance.³² It also illustrates the role of the field in the systems model, as congregants function not only as worshippers but as evaluators who determine which songs are embraced, adapted, or quietly abandoned—shaping the domain. Similarly, the Systems Model of Creativity reminds us that creative output—such as NNBT—is never evaluated in isolation but is received within a field of practitioners whose responses validate, reinterpret, or resist its intended use.

Interviews with theologians, musicians, and songwriters consistently pointed to NNBT's symbolic and ongoing role as a product of local authorship and agency. Many

²⁹ Interview with Rev. Janny Rende, 16 June, 2025.

³⁰ All translations from Indonesian and Manado Malay into English were done by the first author.

³¹ Michelle Kallmier, "Conformed and Conforming: Hybridization, Discernment, and the Gospel/Culture Interface," *Missiology: An International Review*, 12 Maret 2024, 00918296241236716, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00918296241236716>.

³² Matt Menger, "Unraveling the Local Hymnal: Artistic Creativity and Agency in Four Indonesian Christian Communities," *Religions* 15, no. 9 (2024): 9, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15091130>.

respondents affirmed its significance as a denominationally sanctioned collection of songs—a visible expression of GMIM’s ability to shape its worship life. For example, one pastor-musician involved in preparing the upcoming second NNBT commented on the desire for local authorship and agency in shaping the theological agenda: “We prepared songwriters to focus on more themes so they could also be included. It is about ensuring that every part of our liturgy is reflected in our new songs.”³³

The affirmations reflect the field’s general acceptance of the hymnal as a legitimate contribution to the domain of liturgical practice. The songs often emphasize communal themes such as confession, identity, and divine sovereignty, aligning with GMIM’s Reformed theological tradition. Using plural pronouns and horizontally oriented lyrical structures reinforces worship as a collective and embodied act.³⁴ The use of NNBT for congregational worship in GMIM is widespread but uneven. It is regularly featured in GMIM’s weekly liturgical guide, the *Menjabarkan Trilogi Pembangunan Jemaat* (Articulating the Trilogy of Congregational Development, abbreviated MTPJ) and often includes NNBT songs in the Sunday liturgy. Nonetheless, actual usage in congregations frequently narrows to a familiar core repertoire. This limited rotation is a process of informal canonization—where certain songs gain traction while others are bypassed. In cases where recommended songs are deemed difficult or unfamiliar, worship leaders may substitute alternatives. This suggests a degree of flexibility within the congregational field.

The *Komisi Kerja Musik Gereja Sinode GMIM* (GMIM Music Working Group) has actively addressed the gap between liturgical planning and congregational engagement. They produce weekly singing tutorials, shared publicly on YouTube, to supplement the MTPJ song selections. The four most recent weekly tutorials (from March 16 to April 6, 2025) received between seven and thirteen thousand views in the two weeks after their publication, in a denomination with just over one thousand congregations.³⁵ The videos feature Indonesian cipher notation, chords, and other visual aids. Trained singers, including members of the *komisi*, perform the songs. Each video begins with an animated GMIM logo and a brief speech by the synod president, reinforcing the official endorsement of the tutorials and encouraging their use. Interviews indicate that these efforts have been well received and highlight an emerging ecology of pedagogical support aimed at increasing the use of NNBT, particularly among smaller congregations with fewer musical resources.

Even when setting aside the performance of songs from NNBT, the hymnal retains an influential symbolic role. Its existence marks a shift in GMIM’s liturgical identity—from dependence on external worship materials to creative ownership of its theological voice. This symbolic weight is especially significant in a postcolonial context, where producing indigenous worship materials is itself an act of ecclesial agency. As GMIM prepares to release a second volume of songs, there is hope and expectation that the new collection will build on this foundation—deepening theological content, diversifying musical styles, and fully embracing Minahasan aesthetic traditions. The reception of NNBT illustrates how worship formation

³³ Interview with Rev. Junisar Watulangkow, 9 April 2025.

³⁴ Menger, “The Original Hymnody of Gereja Masehi Injili Di Minahasa.”

³⁵ To explore the weekly tutorials and current statistics for the videos, the GMIM Music Working Group’s YouTube channel can be accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/@komugersinodegmim>

unfolds through editorial intent and local interaction. The songbook serves simultaneously as a tool for institutional communication, a repository of theological expression, and a site of creative negotiation—shaped by both its compilers and the congregations who, week by week, determine its ongoing relevance.

Reflections on the Systems Model, ODT, and GMIM

Csikszentmihalyi believes the Systems Model of Creativity has practical implications and opportunities to enhance creativity. Ethnodoxology is an applied field that approaches this system from a Christian worldview. Its focus on how Christians from diverse cultures engage with God and the world through their artistic expressions adds depth to Csikszentmihalyi’s theory. The domain can be approached from several perspectives in ethnodoxology. Both scripture and culture are foundations for knowledge, and the creative system can be evaluated over time to understand the decision-making processes of the field in including or excluding certain artistic expressions for worship and other contexts.

In Christian worship, there are many bodies of knowledge from which creators can draw. Ethnodoxology can understand the Christian faith as a broad domain based on scripture. David Taylor describes “genetic tendencies” within liturgical traditions, which sometimes experience changes that “result in a fundamental disruption of [the] artistic ecology.”³⁶ The “artistic ecology” is another way of thinking about this broad, overarching domain: a way worship is understood rather than a particular style or localized domain of artistic expression within a worship practice tradition. However, it is important to recognize that although there are unifying, transcultural aspects to Christian worship, there is no single Christian culture, and cultures have fuzzy boundaries—illustrated by this case study. Practically, worship always occurs in a local setting. There is a basic framework of Christian discourse within which localization occurs, and each localization draws on that discourse to create something new. This local setting is, for ethnodoxology, of primary importance. Roberta King writes, “Witness and worship that slavishly follow what others bring from the outside does not engage many of the deep-level questions confronting local peoples who are living within their local contexts.”³⁷ Critical contextualization and other conversations attempt to address these issues—ethnodoxology advocates for worship in a local domain. The case study of GMIM and its development of the NNBT hymnal demonstrates this advocacy for worship within a local domain, highlighting how a denomination actively shapes its musical and theological expressions to reflect its specific context and needs.

Ways of Knowing

The development and use of NNBT illustrate how collective knowledge, encompassing both theological truth and artistic expression, shapes a domain for worship. The domain represents collected knowledge, and for ethnodoxology, it also includes the gospel, theology, and the truth contained in scripture, in addition to artistic expressions, history, cultural artifacts, and other forms of communication. Theology and beliefs, as well as God’s general revelation to humankind, are central to any innovation that might occur and, for ethnodoxology, heavily

³⁶ Taylor, *Glimpses of the New Creation*, 333.

³⁷ King, *Global arts and Christian witness*, 145.

influence any domain for worship. All creation reveals God to humans. Makoto Fujimura believes, “The deepest realm of knowledge is in Making, and, conversely, Making is the deepest integrated realm of knowing.”³⁸ For him, creativity and the arts are a way of understanding the world and its Creator. David Taylor writes:

*I argue that all the liturgical arts can, somehow, someway, disclose the true knowledge of God, train the church in the worship that marks the praise of the physical creation, awaken desire for God through the beauty of the cosmos, foster obedience and love, chide ingratitude and pride in our failure to acknowledge God’s abundant provision, summon the faithful to the praise of God in their common life of worship, and acquire a sense for God’s sense of things.*³⁹

Uday Balasundaram also emphasizes music and movement as ways of knowing and relating to God, others, and creation. He considers that:

*The failure to recognize the process of musical creativity as a legitimate or authentic vehicle for carrying the weight of Christian truth undermines the effectiveness of the church when it comes to embracing the fullness of its creative and missional being. A root issue that needs to be addressed therefore is the legitimacy of musical creativity as a system of knowledge.*⁴⁰

Creativity connects to the relational and emotional side of the mind and is a way of embodied knowing and communicating knowledge to others. Artistic expression allows humans to “grasp the world through our physical bodies” and emotionally connect to others. The arts “immerse us in a sphere of metaphors” and allow individuals and communities to understand more about themselves and life.⁴¹ It is an Enlightenment idea that humans only know through their intellect. The title of Uday Balasundaram’s book *Creativity and Captivity* derives from this issue:

*The captivity of the church to Enlightenment notions of “mind over matter” and the undue emphasis on reason (rational cognition) as that which defines what it means to be human, over and against other forms of cognition, and the application of this understanding... is what we refer to here as the epistemological captivity of creativity.*⁴²

The “captivity of creativity” lives in the preference for cognitive and rational communication methods over relational and artistic approaches.⁴³ The domain in the systems model is more than intellectual knowledge—it is all kinds of knowing.

A key difference between culture and scripture as aspects of the domain is the stability of this knowledge—scripture is unchanging, and core Christian beliefs (such as those verbalized in many historic creeds) are relatively stable. However, there are innumerable malleable possibilities for *how* Christians know these things and ways in which some critical

³⁸ Fujimura, *Art and faith*, 19.

³⁹ Taylor, *Glimpses of the New Creation*, 330.

⁴⁰ Balasundaram, *Creativity and Captivity*, 51:21.

⁴¹ Taylor, *Glimpses of the New Creation*, 15.

⁴² Balasundaram, *Creativity and Captivity*, 51:66.

⁴³ Balasundaram, *Creativity and Captivity*, 51:67.

knowledge has been neglected or misunderstood. Jesus exemplifies this as he preaches. He “invites his listeners to imagine a world that resembles the ‘kingdom of heaven.’ This, too, is what Jesus invites the church to do through the arts: to imagine the world as God sees it, in faith, in hope, in love.”⁴⁴ Jesus is not changing what is true, but he is preaching (a creative act) to further reveal parts of the immutable domain of Truth in each culture. In the situation of GMIM, the creation of NNBT exemplifies this multi-faceted knowing, as local composers integrate theological truth with cultural and musical expressions to create worship that is both doctrinally sound and deeply resonant.

Negotiated Distinctiveness: Creativity, Belonging, and Formation in NNBT

ODT explores the tension between collective identity and individual expression in GMIM’s worship life. These diverging motivations become socially and theologically significant in communal artistic and liturgical contexts. They help explain how participants navigate tradition, innovation, unity, and individuality, particularly in creating and performing worship music. The production and reception of NNBT exemplify this dynamic. For the GMIM synod and *komisi*, publishing a denominational hymnal was a conscious act of musical localization and institutional agency. This is similar to efforts at the congregational level to revitalize local languages, such as creative liturgies incorporating the Tontemboan language.⁴⁵

NNBT consolidates a shared worship vocabulary rooted in Reformed theology and locally composed songs. Within this collective expression, individual songwriters still had room to assert their creative identities. Yet these songs were not universally adopted; the evaluative field mediated their acceptance—the editors of MTPJ, worship planners, and congregants ultimately determine which songs are used. From the systems model perspective, this dynamic reflects the interaction between individuals, the domain of worship music (including theological tradition and stylistic conventions), and the field that evaluates new contributions. Songwriters innovate within a known domain, and their work is judged against established criteria. Songs perceived as overly simplistic, emotionally disengaged, or stylistically inappropriate are often excluded from regular congregational use, even if included in the hymnal.⁴⁶ This outcome reflects not a failure of creativity but the natural process of ODT: the successful songs offer enough novelty to feel fresh and meaningful while remaining sufficiently embedded in cultural norms to be embraced.

NNBT is not only about singing but also positioning—individuals and communities are locating themselves within a theological and cultural narrative. The practice of singing songs for congregational worship (from NNBT or elsewhere) means joining an ongoing, unspoken dialogue about what faithful worship sounds like in a Minahasan context. ODT helps explain this process’s social logic: worshippers seek identification with the GMIM community and opportunities for local or individual expression. The systems model, in turn, reveals how this process is structured and sustained. NNBT is both a cultural artifact and a process shaped by

⁴⁴ Taylor, *Glimpses of the New Creation*, 77.

⁴⁵ Wulan Teresa Lintang dan Ramli Sarimbangun, “Relevansi Bahasa Daerah Tontemboan dalam Liturgi Kreatif Minggu Ke-5 di Jemaat GMIM Bukit Zaitun Tewasen Wilayah Amurang IV,” *Educatio Christi* 2, no. 1 (2021): 13–24.

⁴⁶ Menger, “The Original Hymnody of Gereja Masehi Injili Di Minahasa,” A47.

institutional design and congregational engagement, continually evolving as it is sung or set aside. The songbook exemplifies the ongoing negotiation of identity and expression, demonstrating how congregational song actively shapes and reflects the distinctiveness of the GMIM church within its local and broader Christian landscape.

Inspiration

Ethnodoxology perceives the work of the Holy Spirit in inspiring and enabling individuals. Divine inspiration is not considered in secular understandings of the systems model. This does not discount the importance of *imago Dei* and the belief that every individual is made to be creative, but it is an additional part of the system. The Spirit works in and through all Christians; some are also given special skills and inspiration. NNBT, with its emphasis on locally authored songs, reflects GMIM's engagement in God's creative mission within its own cultural context. The Spirit draws people into participation. In scripture, we find several examples of individuals who were given special abilities: Exodus chapters 35 and 36 describe this. First, "All who are skilled among you are to come and make everything the Lord has commanded..." (Ex. 35:10 NIV). Following this general call, everyone participated by bringing a variety of materials. Bezalel and Oholiab are then recognized as individuals with special giftings (Ex. 35:10–36:1). Bezalel and Oholiab are filled with the Spirit of God—but they are not creating *ex nihilo*. They learned these skills from someone and somewhere (the domain). As individuals, they were given special abilities, but they still learned and created in a community—their inspiration did not arise out of a vacuum.

Balasundaram describes Christian indigenous cosmopolitan musicians as "participating in the creativity of God" and becoming "channels of the creative activity of God through their musical creativity as they renew the church and its form with others in the context of the mission of the creative God."⁴⁷ As individuals participate in the mission of God through creativity, they create within a domain to renew and shape it. The arts form the congregation's imagination (the field), and all corporate worship "remains centered on the glorification of the Triune God... for the sake of the world that God so loves."⁴⁸ As artists participate in the *creatio Dei*, they invite others to share in the *missio Dei*. The focus is on "someone with whom the church is able to create a new reality in Christ. Mission, then, is both to reach the other and to create with the other."⁴⁹ This sees *missio Dei* as an invitation to participate in *creatio Dei* joyfully. This participatory vision is actively pursued through NNBT, which serves not only as a collection of songs but as a communal expression of faith—a shared journey of theological and missiological engagement.

Revitalization

When creativity is devalued, so is creation and its Creator. The connection between ethnodoxology and cultural revitalization efforts closely relates to the domain. The information in the domain can be quickly lost when intergenerational transmission breaks down. The Systems Model of Creativity helps ethnodoxologists understand the dynamics behind cultural shifts. Without a complete and vigorous system, revitalization will not occur. In GMIM, the

⁴⁷ Balasundaram, *Creativity and Captivity*, 51:30.

⁴⁸ Taylor, *Glimpses of the New Creation*, 319.

⁴⁹ Balasundaram, *Creativity and Captivity*, 51:333.

intentional creation and promotion of NNBT work toward revitalization in some regards, aiming to re-energize congregational song through locally authored and contextually relevant music. When revitalization efforts focus solely on the domain, knowledge is preserved, but in stasis—innovation is missing. Healthy conflict and boundary-stretching lead to change, but without rules created by the domain and enforced by the field, the needed exceptions (creative acts; innovations) are impossible. Individuals need to be innovative and imaginative, and the field needs to understand the domain and act as healthy gatekeepers, allowing some innovations to succeed. At the extreme end of Schrag’s stable-malleable spectrum, a completely stable domain is resistant to all change and blocks the creative system.⁵⁰ Ethnodoxology encourages conversations, fueled by local agency and participatory methods, to stimulate appropriate challenges to the domain and encourage a flourishing system. With the upcoming NNBT revision, more new songs in local musical styles will be included in another step toward musical revitalization in GMIM.

Relational Formation

From the systems perspective and for ethnodoxology, creativity is relational: its centrality in a theology of creativity aligns closely with the field. Just as Csikszentmihalyi proposes that creativity and innovation are not the products of lone geniuses, a Trinitarian understanding of creativity sees the center as rooted in relationship within “Trinitarian expressions of being.”⁵¹ Balasundaram notes that “all human creativity (being and activity) is derived from the creative being and activity of the Triune God of Christianity who is fully embodied in the church and wholly given for the world. The implication, therefore, is that creativity is primarily relational. It emerges and is sustained primarily in relationship with the Creator and his mission.”⁵² Artistic expression, then, can be understood as a way of relating to self, others, and the world.⁵³ In GMIM, the collaborative, distributed process of composing and adopting NNBT songs exemplifies this relational nature of creativity, fostering deeper connections within the worshipping community.

Contemporary worship culture often elevates perceived authenticity over musical or theological substance, a tendency that may unintentionally undermine communal well-being and distract from formative relational attachments in worship.⁵⁴ In worship contexts, aesthetic innovation or technical excellence is not always the primary measure of value. Instead, artistic expressions are often affirmed because they serve theological, instructional, or devotional purposes. The value of such works is determined not by external critics but by the community of faith itself—those who inhabit and uphold its practices and beliefs. This community, functioning as the evaluative field, assesses artistic contributions based on their alignment with tradition, doctrine, and shared aesthetic sensibilities. Sacred texts, theological frameworks, and liturgical norms—all part of the domain—provide the structures that guide what is embraced, repeated, or set aside in worship. Contrary to romantic notions of creativity, most renowned

⁵⁰ Brian Schrag, *Artistic dynamos: an ethnography on music in Central African kingdoms* (Routledge, 2021).

⁵¹ Balasundaram, *Creativity and Captivity*, 51:143.

⁵² Balasundaram, *Creativity and Captivity*, 51:19.

⁵³ Balasundaram, *Creativity and Captivity*, 51:81.

⁵⁴ Myrick, “Authenticity and Purity in Worship Music,” 31.

artists in history were great *because* of their connections to communities rather than *despite* those ties. The widespread acceptance and use of NNBT songs in GMIM reflect the community’s connection to and validation of these artistic expressions as serving their theological and devotional needs.

Character formation and creativity are both based on attachments and relationships. “Our brains draw life from our strongest relational attachments to grow our character and develop our identity. Who we love shapes who we are.... Our brains are designed to use our attachments to form our character.”⁵⁵ Ethnodoxology appreciates the Spirit at work in the field, transforming it and equipping it for worship. Just as the Spirit is inspirational for the individual, the Spirit is also at work in the field. David Taylor writes,

*If the arts in worship can form God’s people into the image of Christ, it is only because the Spirit of God enables them to be fit for such a task. The liturgical arts are not intrinsically spiritual. They are not inherently charged with divine electricity. They do not magically make human beings more whole and holy like Christ, nor do they possess automatic capacities to mediate divine grace, and they are certainly not to be seen as self-sufficient vehicles of God’s glory in and through creation. They are instead... enabled by God to serve the praise of God on earth as it is in heaven.*⁵⁶

The transformational power of the arts in worship is due to creativity and innovation and the Spirit of God working in and through the congregation and artists as they create and express themselves in worship. The Hebrew term *hesed* captures the idea of deep relational attachment. Hendricks and Wilder define it as a “kind and loyal care for the well-being of another.”⁵⁷ This is like the New Testament Greek concept of *agape*, but they feel that *hesed* encapsulates more depth of meaning. The word “love” is the closest English equivalent. Still, because of over– and mis–use, it no longer carries the profound significance of attachment they identify in *hesed*, which they purposefully use to “freshen and restore the depth of meaning” of what love is intended to be.⁵⁸ Jesus’s command to love enemies (Mat. 5:43-44) and Paul’s adjectival description of love (1 Cor. 13) summarize this kind of loving attachment. When individuals live in a community of joy-filled *hesed* relationships, individuals and the community are closer to living as *imago Dei*. Identity as *imago Dei* and based on a relationship with the Creator is foundational: Balasundaram notes that musical creativity “is popularly conceived as a metric for individual prowess, innovation, and capital gain. In the missional context, however, musical creativity is, first of all, a relationship with a personal God.”⁵⁹ Competition and commercialism were mentioned earlier; this is a meaningful way the field in Christian contexts behaves differently.

⁵⁵ Michel Hendricks dan Jim Wilder, *The other half of church: Christian community, brain science, and overcoming spiritual stagnation* (Moody Publishers, 2020), 79.

⁵⁶ Taylor, *Glimpses of the New Creation*, 328.

⁵⁷ Hendricks dan Wilder, *The other half of church*, 80.

⁵⁸ Hendricks dan Wilder, *The other half of church*, 82.

⁵⁹ Balasundaram, *Creativity and Captivity*, 51:22.

Love is the foundation of true creativity. As Paul notes (1 Cor. 13), the communication of creative expression to others is meaningless, or at least distorted, when *hesed* is damaged (or nonexistent). “Until we restore our loving attachments to God and each other, we are wasting our time doing ministry, church, or anything else for that matter.”⁶⁰ Creative expression is also wasted when those “loving attachments” are broken. Without *hesed*, churches do not function as families but as institutions. Their transformational and missional powers are lost. The development of NNBT (and the second upcoming volume of songs), with an emphasis on local authorship and communal engagement, fosters a *hesed*-driven environment, where creativity serves to strengthen relational bonds.

Healthy *hesed* has more profound implications for not only the life of the church but any Christian community—including artists. It describes how Christian artists should live and a kind of attachment that moves beyond generic artistic camaraderie and toward a joy-filled, worship-infused, purpose-oriented creative community. This connection also exists between congregations and the creators within it. Christian communities focus on the well-being and *hesed* of the group rather than individual accomplishment. *Hesed* is the opposite of a performance-based relationship; the relationship is more valuable than creativity (in fact, by prioritizing the relationship, creativity will thrive). The *hesed*-infused field functions differently so that creativity is not elevated above relationships—instead, it flows from them. Insights from ODT enrich this relational model. This suggests that individuals flourish in communities where they are both meaningfully connected and uniquely recognized. In a *hesed*-oriented worship culture, creative acts are more than artistic expression; they are aspects of covenantal participation. The individual seeks to be known not merely as a member of the whole but as a distinct voice that contributes to the whole. The community, in turn, must make space for that voice while preserving its shared theological and cultural identity. This balance reflects true *hesed*: not fragile or anxious about difference, but strong enough to include and affirm it. NNBT’s success in GMIM is directly tied to its ability to cultivate this *hesed*-driven environment, allowing individual creative voices to contribute to a shared worship experience that strengthens communal bonds.

ODT describes how differentiation occurs, but for ethnodoxology, flourishing and healthy relationships as the Body of Christ are also valued. Creatives are “border-stalkers” and introduce discomfort and change. How can ethnodoxology work within these inherent tensions? Reconciliation is a critical component of a flourishing creative system, and this paper sheds light on the role of Christian communities that function within the field and how they are uniquely transformed through reconciliation with one another and with God.

A community is a group of individuals bound by a shared narrative, collective identity, and recurring patterns of interaction—yet this is malleable, always in a state of dynamic change.⁶¹ Ethnodoxology values communities and healthy interpersonal relationships, and people are inherently interdependent. People “work at creating shared understandings between themselves, which are foundational to human relationships.” These “shared understandings”

⁶⁰ Hendricks dan Wilder, *The other half of church*, 94.

⁶¹ Schrag, *Creating Local Arts Together (Revised and Updated)*.

form the basis of community. Shared beliefs are critical and link information into theories of explanation, without which community life and communication breakdown.⁶²

While the community is another way of acknowledging the two social aspects of the creative system (the field and the individual), this paper views reconciled communities as a special case—the Spirit of God and the truth of the gospel call Christians to behave in community differently. Reconciliation is the restoration of relationships and implies the mending of something broken or damaged: trauma, culture wars, and sin damage relationships. Dehumanization of the other rejects their status as fellow *imago Dei* and mutes their voice. Many scholars have recognized the transformative power of creative expression in catalyzing reconciliation and pointing toward a better future.⁶³

Balasundaram’s research into indigenous cosmopolitan musicians recognizes their unique role in crossing boundaries to reconcile the local with the global—an important factor for GMIM in an increasingly globalized world.⁶⁴ Artists invite the community into the work of reconciliation by showing what needs repair and mending. They invite communities to participate in redemption through an eschatological re-imagining of what should be. “Divine creativity is a triune act—from the Father, through the Son, and by the Holy Spirit—in which God is always ‘with us’ and ‘for us.’ This means that our creativity is a Spirit-inspired activity that centers on healing, beautifying, and reconciling the world.”⁶⁵ Related to this is the idea of *kenosis*. *Kenosis* is generally defined as “self-emptying,” and the Incarnation of Christ illustrates this (John 1:14). This involves openness, compassion, a willingness to embrace the other, and generosity. It is the setting aside of one’s own will and submitting to the will of God instead. For musicians, this is a self-sacrificial love (closely related to *hesed*) that sets aside the needs of the self (the individual) and puts others and their needs first.⁶⁶ To avoid inappropriately evaluating other cultures from our perspective, we first need to dismantle our monocultural beliefs about truth and righteousness. This process forces us to face the depths of relativism and ultimately helps us to accept transcultural norms based on scripture, allowing for both affirmation and critique of cultures. *Kenosis* relates closely to the earlier discussion of power. Christian artists experience *kenosis* by putting aside power and status as individuals and recognizing the divine, worshipful purpose for which they create and the shared humanity of the field. Christian artistic communities, such as within GMIM, should create for a different purpose. Power is shared and bidirectional. The calling of the Christian artist is “less a matter of ‘How can I do my art right?’ and more a matter of ‘How can I love this people well?’ When the latter question is answered properly, the former question, I suggest, usually takes care of

⁶² King, *Global arts and Christian witness*, 29.

⁶³ Fujimura, *Culture care*; Fujimura, *Art and faith*.

⁶⁴ Balasundaram, *Creativity and Captivity*, vol. 51.

⁶⁵ Jennifer Allen Craft dan Norman Wirzba, “Placemaking for a New Creation,” dalam *The Art of New Creation: Trajectories in Theology and the Arts*, Studies in theology and the arts (IVP Academic, 2022), 149.

⁶⁶ There are a variety of theological perspectives on *kenosis*, and this paper is not an attempt to delve into or promote one position. Rather, this is a broad examination of *kenosis* as a generally helpful concept when thinking about the creative process in Christian communities.

itself.”⁶⁷ Creativity for worship, then, is purposeful and selfless creativity. It is creating as an act of love and service.

ODT offers unexpected resonance with the Christian theological concept of *kenosis*. Far from eliminating identity, *kenosis* presupposes it; Christ does not cease to be himself but fully expresses his identity through radical love. In the context of worship and creativity, kenotic participation reframes distinctiveness as a gift offered up to be enjoyed by the community, not as a proud boundary drawn around the self. In GMIM, this might be seen in how songwriters contribute new music not to elevate their personal voices but to serve the church. Together, ODT and *kenosis* inform a theology of creative agency that values voice and expression as they are presented in humility and communion with others.

Imago Dei and Creatio Dei

Ethnodoxology sees human creativity as a response—a way of participating and taking pleasure in the creativity of the Creator because “creation is an expression of the pleasure of God.”⁶⁸ As creating is pleasure to God, so it should ideally be pleasure to humans. Romantic conceptions of creativity emphasize autonomy and the role of the genius creating nearly *ex nihilo*. This view, however, elevates human creators inappropriately: the cult of creativity⁶⁹ can risk displacing the Creator, turning creative expression into an end in itself rather than a means of faithful participation in divine work. Ethnodoxology begins with the truth that the first creative act was by God, *ex nihilo*, and all human creativity derives from it, as *imago Dei*. The Systems Model of Creativity supports this by emphasizing the sociocultural origins of human innovation (inspiration from something) over and against the romantic narrative of creativity (inspiration from within). Fujimura describes artists as “co-creating” with God—not that human creativity is equal in power or quality to God’s, but people co-create in the sense that God calls humankind into participation, and people respond.⁷⁰ In combating the romantic conception of art, Bruce Ellis Benson prefers to call it “improvisation,” because creators always start with something. The creation of NNBT in GMIM exemplifies this co-creative, improvisatory process, where local composers, inspired by God, build upon existing theological and cultural foundations to produce new music for worship.

The creativity of God provides the foundation for all human creativity. Human making and creative expression draw people “more intimately and knowledgeably into the world” and enable them to participate with God in beautifying God’s creation.⁷¹ Creativity is an essential element of what it means to be human, and the calling to dwell in a broken, fallen creation is also a call to co-create in the re-creating.⁷² Creating is an act of worship as humankind fulfills its creative mandate:

In corporate worship the church takes the stuff of creation and makes an art of it.... The church does so not only to make sense of its life before God

⁶⁷ Taylor, *Glimpses of the New Creation*, 337.

⁶⁸ Taylor, *Glimpses of the New Creation*, 88.

⁶⁹ Samuel Weil Franklin, *The cult of creativity: a surprisingly recent history* (The University of Chicago Press, 2023).

⁷⁰ Fujimura, *Art and faith*, 22.

⁷¹ Craft dan Wirzba, “Placemaking for a New Creation,” 149.

⁷² Craft dan Wirzba, “Placemaking for a New Creation,” 147.

*in praise, nor only because of its desire to remain obedient to the will and Word of God, but also because liturgical art is a way for the people of God to take pleasure in God's beloved creation.*⁷³

Worship is not only a vertical expression of devotion but also a horizontal space of missiological engagement, suggesting that the communal creativity of worship can serve as a medium for both interfaith dialogue and witness.⁷⁴ While creating can be functional, it is also joyfully gratuitous. Taylor observes that creation is an “overflow of the grace of God,” an “absolute gift,” and something that people are privileged to do: we do not *have* to, but we *get* to.⁷⁵ Fujimura describes the overflowing creativity of God and people before sin enters the world with the fall:

*God does not need us to do anything. God's Creation is a gratuitous exercise of love. We know that God rested on the seventh day; it follows that God worked on the others. Then God, who makes humans in God's image, expected Adam and Eve to do the same: to create out of their love of Eden. Whatever Adam and Eve would have created, it would not have been to fix the world, which did not yet need fixing, but to make a gratuitous gesture of love.*⁷⁶

The view of scripture is that everyone is *imago Dei* and thus inherently creative. In addition, each Christian is connected to the source, as in Jesus's image of the vine and the branch. “Through the Father's attachment to Jesus, divine love flows to us through our connection to the vine.”⁷⁷ Attachment to the vine brings nourishment, which leads to bearing fruit: character change, maturity, love for others, and creativity. Balasundaram also writes about *creatio Dei* as a fundamental theological principle and a way of legitimizing the arts as a theological pathway.⁷⁸ *Creatio Dei* is a way of interpreting scripture and knowing God. NNBT is an example of GMIM exercising its *creatio Dei* mandate, using artistic expression for worship and missiological engagement. It is interesting to note that Csikszentmihalyi also acknowledges the fulfillment and aliveness experienced through human creativity, which ethnodoxologists view as people living out their purpose as *imago Dei*. “When we are involved in [creating], we feel that we are living more fully than during the rest of life.”⁷⁹ Could it be that people are more alive when creating? Indeed, is it possible to live without creating? “Even without success, creative persons find joy in a job well done.”⁸⁰

The goal of *hesed* and *kenosis* is to establish a “culture of participation,” characterized by “collaboration and collective sharing of creativities, mentoring, cross-cultural exchange, affirmation of personhood as it relates to creative contribution and in-process community

⁷³ Taylor, *Glimpses of the New Creation*, 89.

⁷⁴ Ramli Sarimbangun, “Worship as a Medium of Interfaith Dialogue - ‘A Missiological Perspective,’” *Eduvest - Journal of Universal Studies* 4, no. 11 (2024): 10202–13, <https://doi.org/10.59188/eduvest.v4i11.44782>.

⁷⁵ Taylor, *Glimpses of the New Creation*, 89.

⁷⁶ Fujimura, *Art and faith*, 63.

⁷⁷ Hendricks dan Wilder, *The other half of church*, 87.

⁷⁸ Balasundaram, *Creativity and Captivity*, 51:143.

⁷⁹ Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity*, 2.

⁸⁰ Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity*, 5.

formation.”⁸¹ This “culture of participation” serves as an end goal for applying the Systems Model of Creativity. Flourishing communities are actively creative for worship (upward) and mission (outward). Fujimura describes his vision for this way of being:

*A healthy community is one that is secure, anchored in tradition and faith, but also allowing for a dynamic movement outward, sending forth artists and missionaries, caregivers and entrepreneurs. It is centered and confident in its identity as a flock because it knows the purpose for which the Good Shepherd has gathered it: to serve and bless and transform the wider world.*⁸²

He goes on to ask where these communities are. This case study explores the creative environment of congregational worship in GMIM to offer a fuller understanding of the creative process. Creativity is a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human, to be *imago Dei*. As *imago Dei*, people are privileged to participate in *creatio Dei*. The Holy Spirit inspires individuals to create, and they do so joyfully through what they know and understand in a domain affirmed by a field. Creativity pushes boundaries, and through this “border-stalking,” creativity draws individuals, fields, and the communities within them into reconciliation with God and others. *Hesed* and *kenosis* describe how communities live fully reconciled and enjoy this creative freedom. Understanding how creativity happens, not just *what* but *where* it is, allows us to do that better. The experience of GMIM in developing and using NNBT demonstrates a community actively engaged in *creatio Dei*, fostering vibrant and localized expressions of faith.

CONCLUSION

The creation and reception of congregational songs in GMIM reflect acts of missiological participation and communal formation shaped by the interplay of creative groups and individuals, institutional structures, and cultural identities. The dynamics revealed through the Systems Model of Creativity and ODT illustrate how congregational worship music serves as a site of negotiated belonging and distinctiveness. Based on these findings, church leaders are encouraged to recognize and support local artistic creativity as a formative theological and missiological activity rather than merely a functional one. Institutions should consider providing space for more diverse musical contributions that reflect local artistic expressions. Furthermore, reflecting on the evaluative role of communities in shaping liturgical resources could help bridge gaps between editorial intent and congregational practice. These insights provide a foundation for ongoing exploration of how Christian communities can cultivate creative ecosystems that nourish local artistic expressions, identity, and faith.

⁸¹ Balasundaram, *Creativity and Captivity*, 51:342.

⁸² Fujimura, *Culture care*, 89.

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