

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF MUSIC

Principles for Starting a Song-Writing Ministry

Submitted to Dr. Keith Currie, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the completion of the course,

WMUS 687

Music and Worship Ministry Project

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part One: Purpose	1
Part Two: Introduction	2
Start	2
Goal	4
Plan	5
Part Three: Seven Guiding Principles of a Songwriting Ministry	10
Words over Music	10
Songs for the Congregation, Not the Performer	14
Feedback is Our Friend	18
Pursue Excellence, Not Perfection	19
A One-Man Band Can Never Grow Bigger Than One-Man	22
Inner Worship to Outer Worship	24
Singing is Not the Goal, Discipleship is the Goal	26
Part Four: Conclusion	28
What's Next?	28
Bibliography	30
Appendix A – Links to EP Files	31

Appendix B – Principles for Starting a Song-Writing Ministry Summary.....32

Appendix C – Affirmation from Song-Writing Partners33

PART ONE: PURPOSE

With the approval of Dr. Keith Currie and Dr. David Schmal, I have chosen to complete the Music & Worship Ministry Project as the Final Thesis for the Masters of Art in Music and Worship. The objective of the project is to produce an Extended Play Record (EP) that contains five original worship songs written specifically for this EP. The components of this project include: songwriting, arranging, performing, recording, and producing. This project will achieve two purposes: first, the songs in this EP are meant to be sung in my local church – Koinonia Evangelical Church (KEC); second, this project is the medium through which I complete my research on building a songwriting ministry in KEC. It answers the question: what are some foundational philosophies to starting a local church songwriting ministry? By working through the different stages of producing this record, I was able to identify seven guiding principles on which KEC will build its songwriting ministry. The table below presents the seven principles and their application to the songwriting ministry:

Principles for Starting a Song-Writing Ministry	Application to the Song-Writing Team
Words Over Music	Be a Theologian
Songs for the Congregation, Not the Performer	Be a Songwriter that Writes for the Congregation
Feedback is Our Friend	Be a Humble Artist that Embraces Feedback
Pursue Excellence, Not Perfection	Be a Musician that Pursues Excellence
A One-Man Band Can Never Grow Bigger Than One Man	Be a Team-Orientated Learner and Partner
Inner Worship to Outer Worship	Be a Private Worshiper and a Faithful Servant

Singing is Not the Goal, Discipleship is the Goal Be a Disciple-Making Disciple

Table 1 - Seven Principles for Starting a Song-Writing Ministry

This paper will present these seven guiding principles, where they apply in this project, and how they will affect the ministry in the future. Preceding these findings will be an introduction that highlights the events leading up to this project, the goal and plan for this EP. Lastly, the conclusion will summarize the findings, discuss implications from this EP, and forecast future directions for this ministry.

PART TWO: INTRODUCTION

Start

When I first began the Master's degree a few years ago, I did not intend to complete an EP for my Final Thesis. In fact, I wanted to host a Worship Recital because that was something that I've done for my Bachelor's degree in music. Also, songwriting and production has never crossed my mind since I was not actively writing songs at that time. Though I have always wanted to write songs, I could never complete a song that I was satisfied with. I thought that my lyrics was terrible and without depth. Through time, I gave up on writing songs altogether in my serving and focused on execution, arrangement and leadership. As I progressed through the course, I have not thought about changing my original intention of hosting a recital until a series of events that happened in this year.

At the turn of 2019, as per tradition, my supervising pastor and lead pastor of KEC – Rev. Wilbur, invited me for a New Year's dinner at his house. At the end of that gathering, we spent some time in prayers and blessed one another for the New Year. One of the blessings that Pastor Wilbur prayed for me was “music and words”. He prayed that it is not *just* music that I will use, but a combination of music and words, which will lead to a “triple portion” in fruits of serving

others. I humbly and gratefully received this prayer at that time, without much thought of how this blessing might be fulfilled. In hindsight, songwriting is one of the fruits that has bloomed from that prayer.

A few months later in March, still without any thought or interest in songwriting, I attended the Worship Central Conference in Vancouver. In one of the sessions, Dr. Darrell Johnson encouraged worship leaders and songwriters to write more worship songs based on the Lord's Prayer. Carrying that prompting and passion from the conference, I began to set music on the following words: "Let Your kingdom come/ let Your will be done/ let Your name be known here on earth as it is in heaven". What surprised me when I tried to write that song is the flow of words, music and idea. The songwriting stream that was once in a state of drought now seems to be in overflow. Granted, an overflow of ideas does not necessarily mean an overflow of *good* ideas. Nonetheless, I began to harness this flow and started to write songs much more consistently and at a much higher volume. Around the middle of the year, I have around two dozen songs that are in progress or completed in my phone. Some of them are not meant for congregational singing, some of them are mediocre, but some of them seem to surface as possible songs in worship. It is around this time that I began to think about recording these songs as my Final Thesis.

Yet another few months later, around late summer, I shared with some of my core music team members about my journey in song writing and my experience in the conference. What completely amazed me was that these three members began also to write songs at around the same time on their own! Joyce, one of our worship leaders, has been writing songs for a long time; but since she had a daughter a few years ago, she did not write songs as actively. When I shared my songs with her, she encouraged me, and said that she had picked up song writing

again. Milton, another worship leader and band leader, told me about how God had planted a vision in him to write worship songs for the church. Elaine, one of our worship office staff, was on maternity leave until September of 2019. Shockingly, when she returned, she told us that she has already written a few songs during that time! It seems that God has moved us four leaders to write worship songs for the church at the same time. When I realized that this was happening, my pastor and I prayed and prepared for the possibility of forming a songwriting team. With this in mind, I was confident that I would want to complete a worship EP as a pilot project for the songwriting ministry. I hoped that the EP would allow me to learn, explore, and experiment with the process and thinking behind a songwriting ministry in the local church.

Goal

The outcomes of this worship project contain many different layers. On a tangible layer, the worship project includes five recorded original worship songs that I have written by myself.

1. *Standing on Your Miracles*
2. *Hymn of Christ*
3. *If You Should Count Iniquities*
4. *Amazing Love (And Can it Be)*
5. *Fight by Faith*

These audio recordings are not simply demo recordings from a phone, but an amateur or a semi-professional recording of a thought-out and rehearsed performance. Along with five audio files, there will be lead sheets (in multiple keys) of these songs that can be used for the local church, and rhythm chart arrangements that are used for the recording and future worship services¹.

More valuable than the physical and tangible outcomes, however, are the intangible learning

¹ See Appendix.

outcomes from this project. On a personal level, this project challenges me to grow musically; it also encourages me to grow in knowledge of God and in relationship with God. For without theology of God, there is no worship of God; without relationship with God, there is no worship of God. Therefore, this project is impactful to me in a personal level. On a ministry level, the learning from this project is summarized into part three of this paper. These lessons learned will be foundational in working with the songwriting team and building our ministry in the years to come.

Plan

The approach to this EP will be more Do-It-Yourself (DIY) and exploratory than industry-standard professional. This means that most of the arrangement, performing, recording, and production will be done “in-house” by myself or my team. The reason for this is because that will maximize my learning in this project. For example, rather than hiring a professional producer to produce these songs, which means I will not learn about how that production process might work, I will learn on the go and produce the tracks myself. This might not result in the highest quality product, but it will surely allow me to learn what to listen for and how to listen in the production stage. The second reason for a more DIY approach is the limitation in budget. As this is a pilot project for the ministry, there is not yet a designated amount of funds to support it. Thirdly, by doing this project “in-house” first, I can access more accurately of how such projects can be reproduced in the future by our own team.

Having decided on the approach, the first item that I have done in my preparation stage is to create a timeline and milestones. The stages are laid out as follows:

1. Preparation
2. Composition, feedback and re-composition

3. Arrangement
4. Rehearsal
5. Performance and recording
6. Production and mastering
7. Publishing
8. Reflection²

By setting the due date of this project to be the last week of the semester, I was able to create a timeline where each stage takes around two weeks. Some of the process will have overlaps in them, as they are not entirely sequential.

The **preparation** stage includes tasks such as lining up personnel, scheduling rehearsals, and making the timeline. At the same time, I continued to work on my songs in the **composition** stage. This was where I created lyrics document, lead sheets, and rough demo recordings to show to my pastors and team for feedback. Upon discussing with them and receiving their input, I revised my songs and continued to work on others. When the compositions were about 90% finalized, I proceeded to work on the **arrangements**. I have taken two approaches to the arrangements: acoustic and rhythm section. For two of the five songs, I have decided to go with an acoustic arrangement of piano and vocals only. I believe the simplicity in this arrangement matches the songs well; and this arrangement is also simpler to execute in recording for a first project. For the other three songs, I arranged them for a rhythm section and a small portion of auxiliary synthesizers and sounds from the digital audio workstation (DAW). For these, I created rhythm charts in the format that our church worship team uses, and I also put together a rough arrangement demo with Logic Pro and basic midi instruments. I then sent these demos to the

² See Appendix.

singers and the band members, and scheduled a **rehearsal** time with them individually. By rehearsing and going over their parts with them, I was able to clarify any questions they might have and speed up the recording process. Around two weeks after sending out the arrangements and demos, I started the **recording** process. I have decided to record each instrument and singer individually, as this will take the least amount of time for the group (although it takes up the most time for me). This method also allows me to focus on learning one recording aspect at a time (one vocalist, or one acoustic guitar). The recording took place in the sound-treated rehearsal room in my church office, with some recording equipment that we have purchased before. The only exception to this is the drums. We recorded the acoustic drums at a recording studio because of the limitation of equipment and acoustic consideration in the office. Recording the drums at a studio is also a good opportunity for me to learn how professionals produce tracks. The next step after recording is to mix, **produce**, and master the tracks. I have consulted with the studio engineer and he has given me some tips and tricks of production. With some research on books such as *Zen and the Art of Mixing* and online courses, I have been able to complete this stage with great effort and perseverance. Lastly, the songs are ready for **publishing** online through distribution platforms such as Spotify and Apple Music; and the **reflection** paper is underway.

Another item of preparation that is needed is to calculate a budget. The financial budget of this project is relatively small because of the DIY approach. Most of the equipment that we needed for recording, such as an audio interface, a DAW, microphones, speakers and monitors, headphones, microphone preamp, were purchased by the church previously, or owned by myself. Therefore, the only financial expense that I used for this project is on recording the drums and booking the studio. The studio charged \$75/ hour, and we used three hours to record the drums,

which amounted to \$225. In the future, I need to consider increasing the budget as there may be more songs to record, or we may need different professional services such as mastering and album cover design.

In addition to the financial expense, I need to consider the time expense. For my case, this may be more critical since we are just beginning the ministry and financial expenses may not accumulate significantly. However, how many man-hours are needed to complete a DIY project of this size? This is an important factor to consider for the ministry's reproducibility. Below are some data that I have gathered from this project. Table 1 is the hours calculated for an acoustic arrangement; Table 2 is the hours calculated for a full rhythm section arrangement:

Stage	Hours (approximate)	Hour (approx.) used for Ministry Project
Arrangement	Acoustic arrangement: 1 hour per song	x 2 songs = 2 hours
Rehearsal	Each musician: 0.5 hour per song	x 2 songs (pianist) = 1 hours
Recording	Vocalist: 1 hour per song	x 2 songs = 2 hours
	Instrumentalist: 0.5 hour per song	x 2 songs (pianist) = 1 hour
Production and mixing	Acoustic arrangement: 3 hours per song	x 2 songs = 6 hours
	Total: 6 hours per song	Total: 12 hours for 2 songs in this project

Table 2 - EP Time Budget (Acoustic Arrangement)

Stage	Hours (approximate)	Hour (approx.) used for Ministry Project
Arrangement	Full rhythm section arrangement: 3 hours per song	x 3 songs = 9 hours
Rehearsal	Each musician: 0.5 hour per song	x 3 songs x 5 instrumentalist (pianist, acoustic guitarist, electric guitarist, bassist, drummer) = 7.5 hours
Recording	Vocalist: 1 hour per song	x 3 songs = 3 hours
	Instrumentalist: 0.5 hour per song	x 3 songs x 4 instrumentalist (pianist, acoustic guitarist, electric guitarist, bassist) = 6 hours

	Drummer: 1 hour per song	x 3 songs = 3 hours
Production and mixing	Full rhythm section arrangement: 10 hours per song	x 3 songs = 30 hours
	Total: 19.5 per song	Total: 58.5 hours for 3 songs in this project

Table 3 - EP Time Budget (Full Rhythm Section Arrangement)

The time budget breakdown above only accounts for the process from arrangement to production and mixing, as these are the stages with the clearest beginning and ending. The preparation stage and composition stage are not accounted for in this calculation, as the beginning and ends of these two steps are too ambiguous to measure. Furthermore, the breakdown above is an approximate summary of this project. I am certain that the numbers will inflate as the arrangement or band size gets more complex; the hours should also decrease as the I become more familiar with the recording and production process. The approximate hour cost of each acoustic arrangement, from arranging to mixing, is about 6 hours; the hour cost for each rhythm section arrangement, from arranging to mixing, is about 19.5 hours. In total, this project, with two acoustic arrangements and three rhythm section arrangement, took at least 70.5 hours in the arranging and production process.

The last consideration in planning this record is the personnel. With all the considerations that I have discussed above – such as time and budget considerations, learning, and future reproducibility, I have opted to invite some music team members to be a part of this project, as opposed to hiring professional musicians. The idea is to include these members in the ministry in the future as well. I also took on whichever role that I needed to learn or grow in, such as singing and production. Below is a list of the personnel involved in this project:

Vocalist (*Standing on Your Miracles*): Milton Ho,

Vocalist (*Hymn of Christ*): Joyce Cheng,

Vocalist (*As Far as the Ends of the World, Amazing Love*): Fizianna Kwan

Vocalist (*Fight by Faith*): Carson Li

Pianist: Carson Li

Acoustic Guitarist: Carson Li

Electric Guitarist: Milton Ho

Bassist: David Fong

Drummer: Cary Wong

Synthesizers and Percussion: Carson Li

Recording, Production and Mixing: Carson Li

Drum Recording: Dennis Law (Noisyhouse Studio)

Arrangement: Carson Li

Supervising Pastor/ Songwriting Consultant: Rev. Wilbur Fong

These three months working on the EP was definitely challenging and exciting at the same time. Personally, I am not completely satisfied with the final product; but I am definitely pleased with the learning that happened and encouraged for what is to come. The next part of this paper will summarize some of the learning that I have gathered. I will give some examples of how these principles came to be, why these principles are important for KEC, and how they will be applied in the future.

PART THREE: SEVEN PRINCIPLES FOR STARTING A SONGWRITING MINISTRY

Words over Music

The course that I took before the pursuing this final project is WRSP 635 – Building a Theology of Worship. Having just attended these lectures by Dr. Vernon Whaley and others like

him, and reading texts such as *Recalling the Hope of Glory* by Allen P. Ross and *Engaging with God* by David Peterson, it is almost instinctive to develop a priority for theology in worship. Dr. Don Ellsworth was not exaggerating when he said that “the worship leaders have regular access to the minds of their flock and are key distributors of the church’s theology”³. In fact, their power to shape a church’s theology is at times greater than the preacher, since worship songs are often repeated, but sermons are preached only once and filed away⁴. If the worship leader who merely chooses the songs can have such power over a congregation’s concept of God, how much more so are the worship leaders that write the songs for the congregation to sing? In this songwriting journey, then, I have placed heavy emphasis on the lyrics and the theology that it communicates. I strive to write lyrics that are **theologically sound** and **scripture-based**.

The first criteria for the lyrics is that they must communicate **sound theology**. Accurate theology leads to faithful worship; but inaccurate theology leads to idolatry⁵. This is embedded in the DNA of our music ministry from the first day. We have a system of song approval in place, where the music directors and supervising pastor always screen every single song in its content to ensure they have accurate theology. This also means any unclear wording or ambiguous concept will not be approved. This emphasis is most evident in the writing of *Hymn of Christ*. The concept of this song originated from Philippians 2:5-11 and one of our sermon series called *Simply Jesus*. The song has five verses that describe the ministry of Christ: He Came, He Died, He Rose, He Lives, and He Will Come Again. The chorus is a distilled version

³ Vernon M. Whaley, *Building a Theology of Worship Journal* (Virginia Beach: Academix Publishing Services, 2019), 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 11

⁵ Kevin J. Navarro, *The Complete Worship Leader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 18.

of Philippians 2:9-11, “Jesus, Jesus/ the name above all other names/ Jesus, Jesus/ forever we will sing your praise”. There are two particular places that I have struggled with in theological accuracy: the original verse one, and verse four. In verse one, I wanted to capture Philippians 2:6, that Jesus, “being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage”⁶. In my text, I wrote that “He held the form of the Divine/ But came to save a soul like mine”. However, upon discussion with Dr. Currie, this line seems be misleading about the identity of Jesus. It seems to suggest that Jesus is not God, or He was no longer God when He came to earth, neither of which is true. Therefore, the final version reads, “He left His throne of majesty/ to come and save the lost like me”, which I believe communicates a similar idea to Philippians 2:6 without any ambiguity about Christ’s identity. Another instance is in verse four, which is about the resurrection of Christ. One of the original versions says, “He won the battle over hell/ victorious He’ll always reign”. After preparing for the sermon on *He Will Come Again*, I quickly realized that the original lyrics are incorrect in theology. First of all, Christ is not victorious over hell, but over death⁷. Secondly, hell is a place of “eternal conscious punishment for the wicked”⁸, and Christ is the righteous judge that punishes the wicked⁹. Hell is not His enemy; hell is a punishment and He is the judge. Realizing all of this, I quickly reworked verse four to: “the Son of God can’t be contained/ even death is no match for His reign”. This version communicates the resurrection in a more indirect but not

⁶ Philippians 2:6 (NIV)

⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:57 (ESV)

⁸ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 1149.

⁹ Revelations 19:11 (ESV)

misleading way. Similar thought process on the accuracy of theology is applied to every single song in this record. Though not every song fell into inaccuracy of theology, every song is studied carefully and approved by my supervising pastor in its content.

The second criteria for the lyrics of this record is that it must be **scriptural**. This means that I strive to write every song with the Word of God, not the music, as the starting point. The best-case scenario, though not always possible, is that the song has some sort of direct quotation of the Word of God. Personally, I do not think I can write better words than the Word of God itself. And this is beneficial as it places the Word of God directly into the congregation's minds and mouths as they participate in worship. The Apostle Paul writes in Colossians, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs..."¹⁰. Note how the dwelling of the Word of God precedes singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. It is implied that the Word of God leads to songs, which is exactly the model that I abide by in my songwriting. One of the most obvious example of this in this record is *As Far as the Ends of the World*. This is a song of confession born directly from my meditation on Psalms 103:3, "If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?". This became the first line of the first verse in the song, "If You measure our wickedness/ no one could stand in Your presence". After acknowledging our sins in verse one, verse two mentions the promise of forgiveness taken directly from 1 John 1:9. The chorus is an assurance of forgiveness taken from Psalm 130:11-12. The bridge is the climax of the song based on Romans 6:5, which is a dedication of one's life to God because of the forgiveness that He has given. This is an extreme example of how I integrate scripture into songwriting, and not all the songs that I write will end up with this many scriptural quotations. This is still a principle that I

¹⁰ Colossians 3:16 (ESV)

abide by in all my songwriting, as I trust that the Word of God itself will bless me and whoever will be singing the songs.

The implication of this emphasis on words does not mean that I sacrifice the quality of music in songwriting. It simply means that lyrics and content receive much of the attention first in the songwriting process. And when a decision is to be made between words or music, the answer is always to serve the words with music. In the development of the songwriting ministry, there must be an objective evaluation criteria in place for the theology of songs. If the team shares a song that has unclear theological foundations, the songwriter must provide scriptural evidence to support their lyrics. I would encourage the team to write songs that are scripture-based, as that will often lead to a theologically sound piece. The last, and perhaps most important, implication of this is that the songwriting team must become a team of theologians. For us to become effective as worship leaders and songwriters, “we must renew our love for theology... because theology gives us the motive, the reason, and the language for worshiping the Living God”¹¹.

Songs for the Congregation, Not the Performer

In the last section, I mentioned about the song approval system that we have put in place for our worship songs. In that process, the supervising pastor and music directors checks on the theology of the worship song. Since I have been working in this system, when I began to write songs, I became very conscious of this idea. For this project, and for the ministry, we will write mainly for the congregation, as that’s the primary function of these worship songs. To evaluate

¹¹ Vernon M. Whaley, *The Role of the Worship Leader Workbook* (Virginia Beach: Academix Publishing Services, 2010), 36.

whether a song is written for the congregation, we can check whether it is **easy to sing** and **understandable** for the congregation.

To evaluate whether a worship song is **easy to sing**, we must test it from the congregation's perspective, not the performer's perspective. Most members of the congregation are not trained singers or musicians, which means that a song's range, rhythm, and memorability must be written at the level of the congregation. Minister of Worship Greg Scheer, in his book *The Art of Worship*, identifies the following range as a comfortable range for congregational singing.

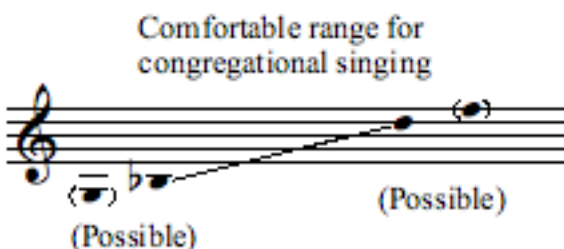


Figure 1 - Congregational Singing Range¹²

The range above is interpreted as written for female voices, and is transposed down an octave for male voices. This range compensates for low and high voice types by finding a middle ground. Additionally, Scheer mentions the consideration of the tessitura of the song. If the tessitura is high in the comfortable range, the more tiring it is for the congregation to sing. This is a great place to begin when evaluating if a song is **easy to sing**. When I began to write *Hymn of Christ*, the original verse's melody is as follows:

¹² Greg Scheer, *The Art of Worship: A Musician's Guide to Leading Modern Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books), 61.

9 C D(add4) G D/F# Em7

left His throne of ma - jes-ty
Count-ing Him - self as a slave

to come and save the lost like me
Hewashed my sins and bore my shame

Figure 2 - Hymn of Christ Original Verse

Though this is not technically out of the range listed above, the notes at the end of the phrase fall outside of the comfortable range. What would most likely happen in this version is that the male voices will drop out near the end of that phrase. Though transposing it up a step or two may help the lower register, that might push the tessitura too high for female voices. When I showed this to Milton, one of the members of the songwriting team, he advised me to revise the melody at the end of the phrase to the following, which helps with the overall melodic arc, and creates a dynamic push to the chorus.

9 C D(add4) G D/F# Em7

left His throne of ma - jes-ty
Count-ing Him - self as a slave

to come and save the lost like me
Hewashed my sins and bore my shame

Figure 3 - Hymn of Christ Revised Verse

In addition to the range of the song, the rhythm of a song must also be carefully written so that it is not too complex for the lay person. Continuing to use *Hymn of Christ* as an example, the syncopated 16th note in the verses above is a potential challenge for some members. What I have chosen to do in this case is not to replace it with a straight eighth notes rhythm, but rather to reuse the same rhythm throughout all verses and chorus. This provides the complex rhythm a sense of familiarity as the song is sung.

Lastly, I aimed to write songs that are memorable in melody and in words. Too many sections of different ideas can be difficult for the congregation to remember, especially when

they are not singing to a hymnal. In *Hymn of Christ*, I have originally written the following as the lyrics for the bridge, “Hallelujah/ I will join my voice with heaven’s roar/ Hallelujah/ The praise is Yours forevermore”. However, upon testing this song in some settings, I find that these lyrics, in addition to five verses that’s already written, creates too much new material and not enough familiarity. Therefore, for the final version, I have opted for a bridge that cries out “hallelujah” four times in each repetition. I find that this memorable bridge balances out the lengthy storytelling verses. *Hymn of Christ* was tested to see if it was **easy to sing** in terms of its range, rhythm, and memorability. Though these parameters are somewhat subjective and malleable, they are still applied to all five of the songs in this record diligently to ensure that they are written for the congregation.

The second broad criteria to assess whether a worship song is written for the congregation is whether it is **understandable** by the congregation. For a piece to be understood by members of the congregation, it must be written in the musical language and lyrical language that the congregation can understand. One challenge of musical intelligibility that we ran into in KEC’s worship is the form of a song we led in our retreat – the Mandarin version of *Strong Love* by Jon Thurlow. This song has six sections that cannot be easily identified in our conventional form identifications – verse, development, chorus. We know that this song is a challenging song to lead and to teach for the average congregation, because they would not be able to understand the form of the song. Similarly, when I wrote my songs, such as *Hymn of Christ*, I was careful not to include too many sections that will confuse the congregation. I originally had a development section in *Hymn of Christ* (in addition to five verses, a chorus, and a bridge!), and I quickly removed it because its form is too confusing for the congregation. In addition to musical intelligibility, a worship song must also be lyrically intelligible. Unlike a pop song, a worship

song cannot be unclear in its content, since it needs to be understood to be sung wholeheartedly. When I submitted *As Far as the Ends of the World* to my pastor for approval, he commented that my original verse two was too ambiguous, even though the theological content is probably correct: “I come before Your holiness/ my sins I bring in repentance/ in fear I ask for the promise/ by faith I receive forgiveness”. His feedback was that the “promise” was not clear enough for the congregation, even though I know what it means. What will most likely happen for the congregation is that they will stumble and wonder what the promise is, or they will simply sing it without really understanding what it means. Both of these scenarios are a result of unclear song writing.

In summary, a worship song must be written for the congregation for it to be effective. In the process of writing for this record, I collected the standards that our church has been using for song approval and applied them to my songs. These standards boil down to whether a song is **easy to sing** for the congregation, and whether it is **understandable** for the congregation. The same standards will be introduced to the songwriting team and will be used to approve the songs that we write in the ministry. When the answer to both of these questions is yes, the song is likely appropriate for use.

Feedback is Our Friend¹³

The title of this principle is taken directly from Rory Noland’s *The Heart of the Artist*. I did not choose to rephrase because I wholeheartedly agree with everything that he writes in the chapter. KEC is a church that has **feedback** ingrained to its bones. There is a debrief meeting after every event or change; feedback is given to staff periodically just as a company would to its

¹³ Rory Noland, *The Heart of the Artist: A Character Building Guide for You and Your Ministry Team* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 161.

staffs. This culture of feedback will undoubtedly carry itself into KEC's songwriting ministry, beginning with this project.

Proverbs 11:14 (NASB) reads, "In abundance of counselors there is victory"; I would add that in abundance of feedback there is improvement, for this is exactly the case for my project. In the two principles that I have highlighted above, nearly all the improvements to the songs were pointed out to me by my supervising pastor, fellow worship leader team, or trusted friends. Although feedback will inevitably carry with it a sting that hurts a little. I know that left on my own, I would never be able to identify the faults and shortcomings of my songs.

Constructive feedback from trusted, honest evaluators will allow us to grow and becoming all that we can be¹⁴. This is why in the timeline of this project listed above, there is a distinct stage called "Composition, feedback, and re-composition". I believe wholeheartedly that feedback is critical to this project. I will also adapt this timeline to a workflow in the songwriting ministry, while ensuring that feedback is placed within the composition stage, before the song approval stage. Personally, I have to learn how to deliver feedback gracefully and respectfully. As a team, myself included, we have to learn to receive feedback gracefully and humbly. When we embrace feedback as our friend to growth, we will continue to grow as humble songwriters.

Pursue Excellence, Not Perfection¹⁵

In an ideal state where feedback is abundant, growth is natural. What is also the case is the abundance of feedback brings an awareness of imperfections. When team members, pastors and yourself evaluate your own work, you will quickly realize the many different areas that can be improved upon, especially when you compare your work to the same type of work by other

¹⁴ Ibid., 157.

¹⁵ Ibid., 123.

people and churches. In this project, there was a period of a few weeks where I was extremely discouraged by the result, because of how “imperfect” the project sounded. It happened immediately after I recorded the drummer. Our drummer is a self-taught drummer, and has been living for a few years without an actual drum set to practice because of the limitations of his home. As a result, when he came to record his parts (and recording always bring the worst out of a performance), the result was not the imagination that I had. I affirmed him of his efforts, but I also let him know honestly about the room for improvement; he humbly agreed with me. When I put all the audio together, I became quite discouraged because it was very far from what I had imagined (based on albums from groups like Elevation Worship or Bethel Music). I, then, proceed to spend many hours trying to perfect the drum sound and the timing, along with the overall production of the songs. The same can be said about the musical and lyrical content. When I compare my own writing with songs by more experienced writers, I begin to develop a distaste for my work. Consequently, I can spend countless hours working the piece, while never arriving at the finish line. I can imagine that I will never complete this project if there was no due date. This is the problem when an artist pursues **perfection**.

The solution that Noland suggests is to pursue **excellence** instead of perfection. While perfection is an unrealistically high standard usually measured against another person, excellence is “doing the best you can with what you have”¹⁶. Excellence is healthy because its primary measuring constant is yourself – “what you have”. When an artist pursue excellence, they commit themselves to achieve the best they can, while acknowledging humbly their limitations. They can, then, work to remove the lid that is limiting their excellence, which in turn leads to healthy growth.

¹⁶ Ibid., 137.

How does one simply pursue excellence and not perfection? In this project, I reoriented myself by identifying, acknowledging, and working within my limitations, retuning my expectations, and setting new goals for the next project. This changes the expectation of the project from being the final product to a stepping stone in a larger process. John Maxwell puts the concept like this, “If I need to be inspired to take steps forward, then I’ll attend an event. If I want to improve, then I’ll engage in a process and stick with it”¹⁷. Engaging in a process allows for growth. When I felt the discouragement from working the audio mix, I identified the key factors that limited the quality: the time I had, the budget I had to record the instruments, the personnel that I had, and the skills and experiences that I had. I humbly accepted these as the limitations for my first project, and readjusted my expectations. I then did all I can to improve on the quality of the mix by reading and learning from different platforms and articles. Now that the project is complete, I know what a fair expectation for these projects can be, and I can set a new goal for myself for the next work. This turns the EP from being a final product into a step in the growth process.

I foresee that this will be a great challenge in the songwriting team. The other three members all have characteristics of a perfectionist in their approach to art. One of them, Milton, frequently identifies himself as a perfectionist and he often has difficulty finishing a song. I plan to introduce the team to read Noland’s chapter on excellence, and encourage the team to view their projects as part of a larger process. To do this, my pastor advised me to set up even bigger limitations and smaller projects in a much shorter time frame. For example, instead of recording a whole album worth of songs, we will first upload acoustic one-take versions of our original

¹⁷ John C. Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership: Follow Them and People Will Follow You* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 26.

songs to a platform such as YouTube. We will engage in this process at a regular pace to gain momentum. When the songs turn out with a good feedback, we will then begin to plan for an album. In this way, small milestones pave for big milestones, and the cycle repeats. This approach highlights the process nature of these projects, and encourages all songwriters to pursue excellence with momentum, rather than perfection in a final product.

A One-Man Band Can Never Grow Bigger Than One Man

Another lesson that I learned in the production process is the need for teamwork in this ministry. J. Oswald Sanders puts it like this in *Spiritual Leadership*, “A one-person office can never grow larger than the load one person can carry”¹⁸. This is true when I led the EP project; and is equally true when we begin the songwriting ministry. Sanders explains that one of the facets “of leadership is the ability to recognize the special abilities and limitations of others, combined with the capacity to fit each one into the job where he or she will do best”¹⁹. Recognizing strength and weaknesses, and fitting specific persons to do different roles will be a key to the growth of the songwriting ministry. This was evident in two areas when I labored on my project.

The first area is simply the sheer amount of work that is present in such a project, especially when tackled with a DIY approach. The 20 hours per song is not just a time issue, but also effort and energy combined. When this adds to the recurring ministry load, it quickly becomes unsustainable for any one person to complete all parts of the project. I found this out in a tough lesson through this project; and I am glad that I found out before the ministry officially

¹⁸ J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership: Principles of Excellence for Every Believer* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers), 138.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 137.

began. My pastor warned me about this going forward: he said that I must **distribute** as much as possible all the tasks equally to all four members of the team, so that all four cylinders can be firing at once, instead of one cylinder firing at the pace of four. This means that I have to reproduce myself and the skills that I've learned in this project as much as possible and as quick as possible. This includes the technique of recording, producing, and arranging. Distribution and training will be a big deciding factor of whether this ministry (and I myself) can be sustainable in the long run.

The second reason why teamwork is needed is the need for **diversity**. After writing since March of this year, I am starting to notice a familiar pattern in my songs. Harmonically, I tend to lean towards the | 4 | 5 | 1 | 6m | chord progression and its permutations for chorus and bridges. Melodically, to go with the chord progression, I like to place emphasis on the 3rd scale degree or the 6th scale degree, and descend from there (See *Fight by Faith*, chorus, bridge; *Hymn of Christ*, verse, chorus; *Amazing Love*, chorus). If the songwriting ministry is to grow in the long term, it needs diversity to speak to congregation of different age, background, and culture. Milton, for example, writes many songs in the style of 90's Hillsong and Singapore worship music. His melodic emphasis often leans on the 4th scale degree with the 1 chord (similar to chorus of *Standing on Your Miracles*). Just this musical diversity alone is beneficial to the ministry, not to mention the result of co-writing between different combinations of this team. Furthermore, perhaps more important than just the result of diversity in ideas and styles, embracing diversity as a team is biblical worship. Paul writes in Romans, "welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God"²⁰. Accepting and welcoming one another is an act of

²⁰ Romans 15:7 (ESV)

worship that brings glory to God. When four people of seemingly different musical backgrounds and taste can work together to create a God-honoring artwork, it brings glory to God! Unity in diversity²¹ is the calling of the church, and the songwriting team can definitely learn to function in this way.

The phrase “Teamwork makes the dream work” may be overused, but it is definitely the truth. In the area of songwriting and production, teamwork allows for **distribution** of tasks that leads to sustainable long-term growth. Teamwork also contributes to **diversity** in art and ideas, which brings glory to God and blessing to the congregation.

Inner Worship to Outer Worship

Before seeking to bless the congregation, however, the songwriter must write songs first for themselves. The songs that I have written I have first used in worship personally before bringing it out to the church. The songs should then serve the church, before serving the world. I call this an inner to outer focus. This is like the zoom-out function on Google maps: You find your location in your apartment, and zoom out to the neighborhood, then the city, then the province/ state, then the country, and finally the continent. This zooming-out focus should be the songwriting team’s principle, and is definitely my aim in this project.

The first area of focus is the songwriter’s relationship with, because the worship ministry begins in **themselves** first, before reaching the church. Noland summarizes this idea with a principle that he has learned during his time at Willow Creek Community Church: My ministry is the product of my relationship with Christ²². The songwriting ministry and songwriting project

²¹ Rory Noland, *Worship on Earth as It in Heaven: Exploring Worship as a Spiritual Discipline* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 211.

²² Noland, *The Heart of the Artist*, 328.

is the product of my relationship with God. In fact, the “first step in becoming a worship artist, and an effective lead worshiper (and a worship songwriter!), is to become a vibrant private worshiper”²³, because we “can’t lead others in an experience that [we] aren’t having regularly”²⁴. This means that the songwriting ministry is not just songwriting. There must be times of pastoral care and spiritual growth within the core members. This can also happen in the form of completing spiritual exercises and disciplines as a group together. When the songwriting team is experiencing God in worship regularly, they are much more in tune to God and His voice, which makes us much more effective in writing songs that lead others to God.

The second focus is on the **ministry**. The songs should be used in private worship by the songwriters, then be used in the local church. Sometimes I will get distracted by how one day this song that I write might impact millions and millions of people. I believe that I was getting ahead of myself - since God’s calling to songwriters is often to serve the local church before the global church. In a podcast with Worship Ministry Training, worship pastor Andi Rozier (also from Vertical Worship) sees the calling of a songwriter this way, that they are “anointed globally, appointed locally”²⁵. He means that the anointing that songwriters receive is the same across the globe, it is the same spirit that God has put in them. The skill and mission that I have is the same as the one that Chris Tomlin has. However, God has appointed me to the local church, while He has appointed Chris Tomlin to the global church. As a songwriter, we must

²³ Rory Noland, *The Worshiping Artist: Equipping You and Your Ministry Team to Lead Others in Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 22.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁵ Alex Enfiedjian, “Starting a Songwriting Ministry”, Worship Ministry Training (podcast), May 1, 2017, accessed December 10, 2019, <https://worshipministrytraining.com/starting-a-songwriting-ministry-at-your-church-w-andi-rozier-vertical-church-band/>

focus our attention to serve the local church, before getting ahead of ourselves to daydream about the global church. The practical result of this should be worship songs that are birthed from the spiritual condition of the local church. For example, the song *Fight by Faith* and *Standing on Your Miracles* are both written specifically for KEC during this time period. These songs simply would not have the same impact and resonance when taken outside KEC. Since the month of July, KEC has been battling a venue challenge. We are a portable church that rents a local high school gymnasium for gathering. Since July, the high school vice principal has declined our rental of the gym without a clear explanation. This means that our four hundred adults congregation is now separated into two services and crammed into a multi-purpose room that sits two hundred. This is definitely a crisis for KEC, and *Fight by Faith* and *Standing on Your Miracles* are two songs that recall the faithfulness of God and encourage the congregation to follow faithfully. Although these two songs may not ever be applicable to any other church, they have fulfilled their purpose in serving the local church. This should be the focus of the songwriting team. Our songs are written to serve this congregation alone at this moment. This will help us narrow our focus and keep our hearts in check.

The inner to outer focus of the songwriting team places priority on the songwriter's inner life before serving the church. It also directs the attention to the local church before the global church. When God wills, and when we remain humble, He will bring this ministry from inner to outer; but before then (and even if it never happens), we simply worship wholeheartedly and serve faithfully.

Singing is Not the Goal, Discipleship is the Goal

As I continue to lead my songs in worship, I've realized that it is easy to be distracted by the product or the response of the congregation and lose track of the ultimate purpose behind

writing worship songs. When the congregation seems to catch on to the song well, and they sing loudly and engage into the song, does that mean the song has fulfilled its purpose? Or are we writing songs just for the sake of artistic expression? Or is there a greater purpose behind songwriting and worship?

Dr. Vernon Whaley articulates the purpose of worship with five “outcomes”: worship is formational, transformational, relational, missional, and reproducible²⁶. In other words, success of a worship service is not measured by the decibel of the congregation’s voice, it’s measured by the person’s life! On the same note, worship songs have the same purpose – and their success is not measured by how engaged the congregation is (though a congregation’s engagement in worship can be some sort of indicator of their lives), it is measured by the lives of the congregation! A worship song is successful when it **forms** the inner life of the singer; a worship song is successful when it **transforms** them to be more Christ like; a worship song is successful when it restores **relationship** between the worshipper and God and the worshipper and others; a worship song is successful when it stirs up the worshipper to **mission**; a worship song is successful when it produces and **reproduces** disciples. These are the outcomes against which we must measure our worship songs; hits, views, likes, or popularity of the song does not equate to success in worship.

This is perhaps the easiest principle to understand, but the hardest principle to take into heart and apply. For one, hits, views, likes and popularity surely feels good to the artist. It is tempting to call these feelings success. Secondly, while we can manufacture a good quality recording that can lead to popularity or views, only God through the Spirit can produce these five

²⁶ David Wheeler and Vernon M. Whaley, *The Great Commission to Worship: Basic Principles for Worship-Based Evangelism* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), Kindle location 897.

worship outcomes with worship songs. To achieve these worship outcomes requires humility before God, dependence on God, and prayers to God. May these outcomes be the fruits of Koinonia's song writing ministry.

PART FOUR: CONCLUSION

What's Next?

At this point, all the songs of the EP are ready to be published. The artwork concept is ready; scores and arrangements are typed out; administrative information is compiled as well. However, having completed all the steps, I do have a second thought on releasing this record. Throughout the discussions about this album, my pastor fully supports the idea of beginning a songwriting ministry (Koinonia Music). Because of this, I want to release the songs in this album under the ministry, as opposed to under my personal name. Moreover, I hope to include songs from other song writers in this album, so to embrace the concept of diversity and teamwork. In light of all this, I propose to delay the release of this project to around summer of 2020, when I will work with the songwriting team to include some of their songs into the album. At that point, an official Koinonia Music English Worship album will be released.

Meanwhile, Koinonia Music will kick start the songwriting process by setting out small milestones, beginning with sub-ministry area - Cantonese worship songs (Joyce and Elaine primarily writes Cantonese worship songs; Milton and I have written two to three). In 2020, we will launch a campaign of song publishing and sharing online. The rough idea is that, in each month, there will be a new original song performed acoustically in one take released on YouTube. We will promote these songs to our Cantonese congregation and collect feedback and observe how the songs resonate with the church. When these go well, the next step is to prepare a

full band arrangement for the songs that are most impactful. After completing a few of these songs, we will consider working on a full-length album with additional original worship songs.

This is an exciting beginning for our church and our music team. For me and for the songwriting team, we must be diligent and grow in all seven areas that I have summarized in this paper:

- 1) Be a theologian
- 2) Be a songwriter that writes for the congregation
- 3) Be a humble artist that embraces feedback
- 4) Be a musician that pursues excellence
- 5) Be a team-oriented learner and partner
- 6) Be a private worshiper and a faithful servant
- 7) Be a disciple-making disciple.

These seven roles correspond to each of the seven principles of beginning a songwriting ministry. When the team catches onto this vision, I believe our lives will first begin to change. May God then bless the fruits of our labor, and use them according to His will.

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APPENDIX A – LINKS TO EP FILES

Link to Ministry Project root folder:

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1LIvX1LRZFe9zXGIFhqpjgzPAEJ93oIbx>

Link to Lyrics and Leadsheets:

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1rQAYm_eSHS17JBVQK_Bd4imOdIAFWqMP

Link to Rough Demos:

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1rXSSfS5IKBh-SiEy45T2EBXgXwN1YfLY>

Link to Rhythm Charts:

<https://drive.google.com/open?id=1NL5y0RKkUBnly4dMIEmaJa15S1TQpFpk>

Link to Arrangement Demos:

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1qSDQwzZlxJMJQuYYBD_00Vs6jjpOma5

Link to First Mixes:

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1d6xZLyRFipr_w6Axk4W72Hd87fB0lnIm

Link to Final Mixes:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1XwCgzfl0gY_Pon4e4HuxzLpykMYTcRFS

Link to Cover Art Concept²⁷:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1wpKYrYkdgnxdcn-6163Gh6vZODIA7sTm>

Link to Planning Document (timeline, personnel, etc.):

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1Z4JGw8ROEVz1uPn6n0LjI7ib5NDor_tSr0QSMshRyWA

²⁷ The cover art concept and the title of this EP, for now, is based on the Exodus story, as that is the sermon we preached right after we were notified of our venue challenge. We shared a message on Exodus crossing the Red Sea, and the main scripture for that day was from Exodus 14:13, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord”. We held onto that scripture and was encouraged regarding the future of this church. *Fight by Faith*, the first original song that I led in the church, was inspired by the message of that day; therefore, the concept for the first EP is based on that specific scripture.

APPENDIX B – PRINCIPLES FOR STARTING A SONG-WRITING MINISTRY

SUMMARY

Principles for Starting a Song-Writing Ministry	Application to the Song-Writing Team
Words Over Music	Be a Theologian
Songs for the Congregation, Not the Performer	Be a Songwriter that Writes for the Congregation
Feedback is Our Friend	Be a Humble Artist that Embraces Feedback
Pursue Excellence, Not Perfection	Be a Musician that Pursues Excellence
A One-Man Band Can Never Grow Bigger Than One Man	Be a Team-Orientated Learner and Partner
Inner Worship to Outer Worship	Be a Private Worshiper and a Faithful Servant
Singing is Not the Goal, Discipleship is the Goal	Be a Disciple-Making Disciple

APPENDIX C – AFFIRMATIONS FROM SONG-WRITING PARTNERS

Carson is a natural worship leader, who moves and inspires people with passion, forcefulness and genuine love for Christ. His messages are well-structured, concise, easy to comprehend, and more importantly, in such a way that his audience can associate. He is a team leader with vision, willing and ready to listen and is supportive to our initiatives. – Joyce Cheng (Vocalist)

This project was made possible through Carson's commitment, his dedication, and growing passion towards music and worship over the years. I think this, among other experiences, will lead him to the fullest potential (and joy) he was given. – Cary Wong (Drummer)

It is no surprise that Carson is talented in music arranging. The original version & full arranged version of *Standing on Your Miracles* is two completely different songs. I was blown away by how he utilized his knowledge and skills to bring what he had envisioned in the song to life. Other than that, I fully enjoyed the recording process and working with him. – Milton Ho (Electric Guitarist, Vocalist)

Carson puts his heart into his work. I see that in how he plans ahead, sends out demos, and I know it when we talk. He has some awesome feedback habits: He actively asks for it, listens to it, and then acts on it. I'm glad I got to be part of this project, and I'm excited that it will lead into more. – David Fong (Bassist)