

Report | Sofija Lazić Pedersen

Report from Christian Congregational Music Conference Ripon College, Cuddesdon, Oxfordshire, 5–8 August 2025

As we gathered from all parts of the world in Cuddesdon, local and global perspectives were most certainly present among the participants as well as in the presentations. There was a rather conspicuous Nordic representation as we were six participants from four countries.

Ripon College is a historic, active seminary for pastoral training for the priesthood within the Church of England. Older buildings provide its nickname *Holy Hogwarts*, and these are juxtaposed with modern, practical buildings containing lecture theatres and seminar rooms. The fabulous Edward King Chapel is a modern free-standing building where the conference started. It wasn't until the final day that I got to see the original chapel located above the library, which is also lovely. Both invite prayer and singing, and I wish we would have used them both more.

The first plenary session was presented by Cristina Rocha, and gave us a perfect introduction to Hillsong in Brazil. It was based on her latest book: *Cool Christianity*, which explores the affective style, but also the social implications for young Brazilians that attend church in former night clubs.

After that it was time for the first difficult choice of choosing panel sessions. I chose "Pain and lament". The first part was challenged by noise from the adjoining room, where participants sang 35 years of Christian Copyright Licensing Incorporated, abbreviated CCLI top 100-hits! The first evening ended with Robert Beckford's plenary session on Decolonizing Gospel and worship music in post-diaspora black Pentecostal Britain.

The second day started with a plenary session by Carolyn Ramzy on Coptic digital diasporas and redefining congregational belonging online. It was a powerful testimony to the doubled high stakes of being both a woman and an Arab. The un-churching part also resonated with me personally, as another former Orthodox woman.

After tea, I chose to listen to a mosaic of congregational songs from Canada in a panel discussion showing many different sacred threads being woven into one. After lunch, there was a Nordic presentation on the theme of female empowerment and Christian musicking throughout three centuries, with three of the editors of this journal: Helen Rossil, Samuli Korkalainen and myself.

Later in the afternoon, I attended a presentation of an African diaspora in Italy, and one on the legacy of Isaac Watts hymns, which will be shared further in an upcoming book. The evening ended with (another) reception, as the scholarly research from a project initiated by participants and an earlier conference, entitled *Amazing grace* was launched. All participants of the conference were given digital access.

Thursday morning started with a plenary session by Kate Williams, who addressed difficult ethical issues that she had encountered as a publisher when a well-known composer whose music was published by her company was accused of extensive sexual harassment and grooming. Yet again, I jumped between panels, listening to both Abigail Cawte, a fellow doctoral student from England on her studies about women instrumentalists in church worship bands, and Douglas Bachorik, who spoke on the influence of emotion on thought in congregational singing.

After spending the afternoon on excursions in Oxford, we were then invited to celebrate our new annual sister journal, *Journal of Praise and Worship*, which is affiliated with SMU Perkins School of Theology, at the Bodleian Divinity School. It was a fabulous evening with drinks and canapes in the heart of Oxford. We wish the journal all the best for the future, well-aware of the labour ahead of them for the first issues.

On the final day, I chose a great panel about developing theories and methodologies, much-needed for a doctoral student still early on in her studies.

When I left, after my first real research conference as a doctoral student, I was full of all the impressions of the conference, the participants, many of whom became new friends, and beautiful Oxfordshire. For me as a theologian, although a practical one, the music aspects were well represented, the theological less so. However, I knew I would attend a conference in practical theology just two weeks later, and therefore it was easy to forgive the lack thereof at this conference. I did, however, leave with many notes on how to proceed with my own thesis.