

Music as a Medium of Liturgy, Spirituality, and Cultural Identity: A Study of Worship in GMIM

Musik sebagai Medium Liturgi, Spiritualitas, dan Identitas Budaya: Studi tentang Ibadah di GMIM

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Abstract

This study examines the role of music in the worship of Gereja Masehi Injili di Minahasa (GMIM) as a locus where liturgy, spirituality, and cultural identity intersect. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews with worship leaders, music ministers, and congregants, and an analysis of liturgical documents and song repertoires. The thematic analysis identified three major findings. First, GMIM worship is characterised by a dynamic interplay between contemporary Christian music, hymns, and traditional Minahasan forms, which together structure the liturgical flow from joyful praise to prayerful contemplation. Second, music functions as a primary medium of spiritual experience, helping congregants focus on God, articulate complex emotions, and internalise theological themes, while also revealing the risks of distraction when musical practices become performance-centred or misaligned with the liturgy. Third, congregational participation is shaped by the leadership of worship leaders and musicians, whose technical competence, spiritual maturity, and cultural sensitivity facilitate intergenerational engagement, despite differing musical preferences. The study concludes that music in GMIM worship is not a peripheral ornament but a vital aspect of pastoral ministry, theological formation, and inculturation. It recommends training for music ministers, intentional integration of traditional and contemporary repertoires, and participatory worship planning to ensure that GMIM worship remains contextually rooted and responsive to contemporary challenges.

BACKGROUND

Music has been said to be one of the most essential things in Christian worship, both as a form of aesthetics and a form of theology and spiritual means that links human beings to God (Handoko, 2022). In the liturgical and non-liturgical practices of churches, music can be used as a spiritual language that inspires and evokes feelings and forms the experience of faith and attachment to the community (Wong and Purmanasari, 2024). Music has since been a part of worship identity, tradition transmission, and faith expression within the Minahasan communities in the context of the Gereja Masehi Injili di Minahasa (GMIM) (Nendissa et al., 2025). According to past literature, music during Christian worship can be used to develop a reflective environment, a place of worship, and

enhance the spiritual connection that congregants have with God. Hartati goes ahead to highlight that music plays a theological role in guiding the congregation to a deeper experience of faith by using lyrics and melodies that are consistent with the liturgical theme (Jumaroah, 2025). Music does not simply follow the liturgy; it also expresses theological sentiments that are not easily captured in normal words.

Another important role is played by the use of musical instruments in churches (Andrianikus & Saerang, 2023). As demonstrated by Simangunsong (2022), the instrumentation within HKBP liturgy, involving the use of taganging and keyboards, adds to the worship experience because they form rhythms and melodies that help the congregation sing. Even though the current study took place within a different church tradition, the findings can be utilised in interpreting the dynamics of music in GMIM, as the same tendency of combining traditional and modern instruments in contemporary worship applies. Such an inculcated approach can also be observed in the study by Silalahi (2024), who shows that the combination of traditional flutes with the keyboard fosters a culturally relevant worship experience, which may also be theologically healthy. These combinations indicate that Indonesian churches are becoming more welcoming toward contextual expressions of music based on local cultures (Sulistadi, 2025).

The qualitative aspect of worship depends on the role of music ministers (Pagegi 2025). The absence of attention to music in certain churches means that music would no longer be a tool that takes the congregation to the presence of God, but rather a distraction to the people who are singing or worshipping (Kiring, 2024). Musical quality, such as mastery of instruments, the right choice of repertoires, and structuring dynamics and tempo during the service, is one of the significant stages to a significant liturgical experience (Wijayanto, 2017). Moreover, the peer-teaching-based method of music training may improve the quality of instrumental performance, for example, playing the guitar and keyboard in church. This type of learning engagement not only enhances technical skillsets but also develops attitudes of cooperation, accountability, and humility, which are essential in church ministry (Masing, 2021).

The music ministry of IFGF Praise Manado underlines the aspect of character formation involved in church music (Pieter et al., 2021). Music cannot be termed as only a technical practice but also as a way of defining spirituality and character. The leadership of music also affects the congregation's involvement. Zelfianus (2025) claims that an effective worship leader can lead the congregation through a successful liturgical experience by selecting the right songs and establishing a worship environment that appeals to the congregation's emotional and spiritual aspects.

In addition to its spiritual and theological aspects, church music is used as a cultural identity indicator (Walalayo, 2025). Ton (2023) demonstrated that music in GMIM worship performs the work of not only reinforces faith and affirms belonging to the community based on the choice of repertoires that reveal local culture (Bako et al., 2022). This follows the study of Hadi and Saputra (2023), who discuss how musicians in South Kalimantan have influenced the creation of concepts of church music based on the cultural identity of Banjar. These phenomena are also quite topical in the context of the GMIM, since the GMIM is characterised as a church full of Minahasan musical traditions, including kolintang, masamper, and other types of folk songs that have become Christianized and are performed in specific worship locations (Safitri, 2024).

Church music history can also present a valuable perspective on the evolution of worship music (Tandei, 2014). Yuniar, et al. (2020) demonstrate that knowledge on the history of church music assists the music ministers in choosing and organizing songs that are suitable to the liturgical and spiritual requirements of the congregants. Knowledge of the past offers the Church a structure to retain tradition and address modern forces (Collins et al., 2021).

Research on church music in Indonesia has evolved over the years, but most studies are still conducted on big churches like the Catholic Church, HKBP, GPIB, or urban charismatic groups. Religion, piety, high morals, ingenuity, and self-reliance are also the primary focus of the National Education System Law in the sphere of education and character development (Hakim, 2023). This principle can be applied to the character development of church music ministers, who must possess

spiritual and moral competency in addition to technical competency. Meanwhile, the growth dynamics of churches in North Sulawesi, especially GMIM, are also characterised by remarkable growth (Pengembangan et al., 2024).

Research into the youth generation with regard to music ministry is becoming increasingly topical. Grafura and Wijayanti mentioned that the digital generations are adaptive, creative, multitasking, and willing to be innovative (Rusmiatiningsih and Rizkyantha, 2022). These traits affect their patterns of participation in the music ministry, especially the kind of contemporary music they listen to and how they use technology in worship. Nevertheless, there is still a gap in the available research, as the influence of these generational peculiarities on worship music within the GMIM environment, which has a somewhat liturgical history and an established ministerial base, has not been explored in detail (Sulistadi, 2025).

Although other studies have covered aspects of church music and worship in Indonesia, there is still a paucity of research studies that specifically and exhaustively address the role of music in GMIM worship. The majority of the literature on GMIM addresses the idea of liturgical history, theology of worship, or church organisation development without delving into the practical aspect of the way music is used in worship. Furthermore, the available studies are inclined toward description but have not explored the spiritual life of the congregation, the perceptions of music ministers, and the theological concepts of music in the culture of Minahasan. GMIM is a church with robust local church musical practices, but research on the role of music as an inculturation medium is minimal. Few studies have used theological, ethnomusicological, and sociological analyses to discuss the role of music in GMIM worship. In addition, most of the earlier studies were conducted prior to the digital age and therefore fail to capture the shift in tastes and preferences of music due to globalisation, the influx of modern-day Christian music, and the dynamics of the young generation. Thus, a wider, contextualised, and more empirical study is required on the role of music in modern GMIM worship.

The proposed study will determine the types of music employed in GMIM worship, both traditional and contemporary, and examine how they reveal themselves in terms of supporting the liturgy and nurturing the spiritual development of the congregation. Moreover, it attempts to comprehend the theological and cultural interpretation of GMIM worship music and examine the beliefs of congregants, music ministers, and church leaders about the relevance of music in worship life. It is believed that the findings will yield pastoral-theological suggestions that will help develop a relevant and contextual GMIM music ministry.

In theory, this study contributes to research on liturgical theology and church ethnomusicology in Indonesia, and more precisely, the manifestations of faith based on local culture. In its practicality, it offers an empirical review of the role of music in GMIM worship and helps in the assessment of church music ministry. The findings can also be applied to the development of music ministers and the restoration of traditional Minahasan music in worship. Theologically, the work enhances the congregational consciousness of the spiritual purpose of music and promotes the evolution of GMIM worship based on the local culture but at the same time attentive to modern dynamics.

The novelty of this study lies in its contextual specificity to GMIM, interdisciplinary approach of applying practical theology, ethnomusicology, and cultural studies, and the application of empirical data through interviews and observations. This study is also a reaction to modern trends in worship music and is relevant to the discussion on theological inculturation in Eastern Indonesia.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design, specifically a case study design, that centres on the musical activities in the worship of the Gereja Masehi Injili di Minahasa (GMIM). A qualitative approach was selected to allow the researcher to learn more about the phenomenon of worship music through the experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of people involved. The case study design is provided due to the intensive study of a specific situation, which is GMIM worship

as a special liturgical and cultural space. By doing this, the research will be able to produce comprehensive information about the roles, significance, and dynamics of music in worship based on the real-life experiences of church members and ministers.

The information was gathered through participant observation of worship services in selected GMIM congregations that were purposely chosen. The observation was done to gain first-hand insight into how music is used, how music ministers relate to the congregation, and how the liturgical scene is created by the use of music. In addition to the observation, the music ministers, worship leaders, psalmists, and some members of the congregation were interviewed in-depth. The interview sessions were semi-structured to give the participants the freedom to express their views freely without making the topic too broad that it was not about the research. Documentary information, such as weekly liturgies, books of hymns, church files, and tape recordings of worship, were also gathered to reinforce the field data.

Thematic analysis methods were used to conduct data analysis in stages. The initial process was to transcribe the data and read it thoroughly to gain an initial general picture. The researcher then engaged in coding, where he found categories that had arisen through the data that included the liturgical functions of music, emotional response of the congregation, inculcation practices, and generational dynamics. These were then formed as major themes which were used to interpret the study. The analysis was conducted through iterations to and from the data and theory to ensure that the interpretations derived were both empirically sound and conceptually applicable.

The credibility of the data was ensured by source, method, and theoretical triangulation. Triangulation of the sources was performed by comparing the data collected through interviews, observations, and documents. Triangulation methodology was applied, that is, the application of multiple methods of data collection to minimise bias. Triangulation was done in theory, meaning that the field results were compared to the views of practical theology, ethnomusicology, and cultural studies. Member checking of various participants was also performed by the researcher to ensure that the interpretations were in line with their experiences. The research activities were conducted in line with research ethics, whereby the participants had to give informed consent and ensure that the identity of the participants was not disclosed.

This approach will enable the research to produce a holistic picture of music and its significance in GMIM worship, both as a liturgical item and as a tool for influencing the spirituality and cultural identity of the congregation. The intense qualitative method gives the researcher room to observe the phenomenon in totality, as it is complex, given the socio-cultural setting of church music among the Minahasa.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The results on the role of music in GMIM worship can be grouped into three in-depth themes (the different types of music used in worship and the different functions of music in worship, the role of music in personal spiritual life, and the dynamics of congregational response and interaction during musical worship) because of the research focus and the pattern of responses that may be anticipated for the items in the questionnaire. First, the answers refer to the vast diversity of music expressions involved in GMIM worship, which encompasses contemporary songs of praise as well as slow worship, local traditional songs, and instrumental accompaniments. The respondents report worship services where band-based music (keyboard, guitar, drums, etc.) is regularly mixed with more traditional or locally coloured features. The liturgy in a number of the traditional Minahasan melodies and styles is intertwined in the liturgy either by singing by the congregation or through special musical offerings, such that worship becomes conversant and contextual. Instead of seeing these various forms of music as competing, respondents are more likely to describe them as complementary: contemporary praise with its energetic involvement in worship is sometimes indicated at the start of worship, whereas hymns and slower worship songs are sometimes associated with contemplation,

confession, and prayer. Certain instrumental interludes are also cited as times when a reflective ambiance is created, to allow silence in prayer, meditation, or between liturgical passages.

Second, the respondents continuously described music as an important tool that influences their internal attitude and spiritual orientation during worship. Music is also said to aid congregants in focusing, getting into the presence of God, and expressing feelings that one would struggle to describe using normal language. Numerous testimonies on the effect of some songs that bring a powerful impact of comfort, gratitude, or repentance are mostly noted when the lyrics match the circumstances of their personal lives. The sequence of songs, both exultatory and more personal worship, is usually perceived as a process of spiritual journey where the congregation sings out and then gives up on the journey. It is also observed that the correct choice of songs and tender musical accompaniment will help the participants to be less distracted and instead attend to the sermon, corporate prayer, and sacramental moments more attentively. Conversely, songs that have been considered too performance-based, too loud, or less relevant to the subject matter of the service are linked to the loss of concentration and spirituality.

Third, the data shed light on the influence of music on congregational involvement in worship and observable interactions. The congregations that the respondents talk about do not just listen to the musicians; they immediately respond by singing, clapping, raising their hands, swaying to the rhythm, or getting into silent contemplation. Worship leaders and musicians are perceived as having a central role in eliciting these responses: their skill in leading transitions, conveying the meaning of songs, and reading the emotional mood of the room is often cited as critical to the participation of the congregation in the service or not. Meanwhile, some of the testimonies indicate that age groups vary in their reactions: younger attendees are more likely to be responsive to modern high-energy tracks, whereas older attendees seem to feel much more at ease with hymns and less energetic and traditional music performances. There are also times of particularly strong connection recorded by some of the respondents, such as when congregants are moved to tears whenever particular songs are played or when the whole congregation sings a traditional chorus that they all know well, which is then recalled as a time of unity and communion with the spirit.

Discussion

The three themes that emerged from the findings are musical variety and function, music as a medium of spiritual experience, and the response and interaction of the congregation, which are similar to the theoretical context discussed in the introduction and the wider discourse of practical theology and ethnomusicology. In this section, each of these themes is addressed separately and put in conversation with the literature available and the context of GMIM worship in particular. The first theme, the variety of genres in GMIM worship, shows concretely what has been opined in previous research regarding music as one of the most basic aspects of Christian liturgy bearing both aesthetic and theological consequences (Handoko, 2022; Wong and Purmanasari, 2024). Worship music cannot be classified into a homogeneous category. In the case of GMIM, the co-existence of contemporary praise songs, slow worship songs, traditional regional songs, and instrumental pieces supports the fact that worship music is an act of layering due to global trends in Christianity, the liturgical traditions of different denominations, and local culture. The manner in which the interviewees mention how the incorporation of traditional melodies and local musical idioms into the worship environment takes place resonates with studies that emphasise inculturation as a major process of church music in Indonesia (Silalahi, 2024; Sulistiadi, 2025). Once such traditional Minahasan elements as regional melodies or even the philosophy of kolintang and masamper are introduced to the church, worship is not only personal contact with God, but also a statement of ethnic belongingness (Walalayo 2025; Ton 2023).

On the theological level, the existence of many genres ought not to be interpreted simply as the need to be up to date or even attractive but as an expedient expression of the belief that the gospel can and must be written in the vernacular of each culture. The results suggest that congregants perceive various musical genres to perform different liturgical and spiritual roles: lively

contemporary songs can be useful in gathering and waking up the body of Christ at the start of worship, whereas hymns and slower worship songs tend to be identified with confession, intercession, and Eucharistic reflections. This practical distinction is compatible with the liturgical theology that emphasises that music must be selected and disposed of in correlation with the theological focus and spiritual trajectory of both sections of the service. The use of music as an interpretive lens in which the congregation listens to and responds to the Word can be achieved through instrumental interludes or low-key accompaniment of prayers or scripture readings.

However, tensions are likely to arise due to the diversity of forms of music, and the findings implicitly highlight these issues. The existence of both traditional and contemporary repertoire may lead to differences in preference between generations, with respondents reporting that younger members of the generation will be more enthusiastic about band-driven songs, and the older members will also feel more at home with hymns and other traditional expressions. This tension reflects the debate in the greater church music world on the issue of worship wars between the older and newer styles. The task in the GMIM case is not to remove these differences but to manage liturgies that do justice to continuity and innovation to enable the congregation to feel like a united body despite its divergent tastes. The testimonies of the services where the elements of tradition and innovation are intertwined indicate that they can be integrated with prudent pastoral and musical judgment.

The second theme, music as a spiritual experience medium, directly validates the claim in the literature that music is not just an accomplishment but is also a theological and spiritual language (Jumaro, 2025). The narratives provided by the respondents about music assisting them in entering the presence of God, concentrating their minds, and expressing intense emotions can be correlated with the concept that music mediates the affective and imaginative aspects of faith that cannot be sufficiently expressed through propositional discourse only. In the GMIM case study, this is reflected in the speech of the participants on how they discuss the movement as a transition between joyful praise and intimate worship, as a transition between celebration to surrender, communal to personal. This experiential aspect has significant implications for pastoral theology. Where music is one of the chief instruments whereby congregants are comforted, convicted, encouraged, and repentant, designing songs, creating musical arrangements, and instructing musicians cannot be regarded as incidental technical business. They form part of the weekly shepherding process of the congregation. Even the descriptions of distraction of hearing music that sounded too loud, performance-focused, or not in harmony with the homiletic theme can be regarded as a warning: music can not only enrich but also disintegrate attention. Here, the results overlap with the literature critiques that have discouraged the commodification of music in worship, where the band becomes the focus of worship instead of Christ being mediated through music. The music ministry in GMIM must be theologically responsible; thus, it must have standards that extend beyond taste or popularity standards—standards that are based on the compatibility of the lyrics and the biblical lesson, the appropriateness of the music style to the liturgical occasion, and the ability of a song to engage the participation rather than the spectatorship of congregants.

Moreover, the accounts of personal connections with some lyrics and melodies demonstrate that worship music serves as a spiritual memory bank. Songs that have followed people through sickness, domestic strife, and work conflict take on biographical value which is rekindled whenever they are sung in the congregation. In practical-theological terms, this implies that GMIM's repertoire of songs is not merely a collection of liturgical instruments but a dynamic collection of corporate and individual accounts of faith. Understanding this fact can motivate pastors and music ministers to purposefully incorporate older music with newer music that addresses current realities, especially those connected to the digital generation whose daily soundscape is informed by contemporary Christian music on streaming services and social media.

The third theme is congregational response and interaction, and the recommendations made in the study consider the contribution of worship leaders and musicians as facilitators of participation. Previous research has highlighted that the quality of music ministry is based not only

on technical ability but also on spiritual maturity, pastoral sensitivity, and the ability to lead the congregation through the liturgical journey (Pagegi, 2025; Pieter et al., 2021; Zelfianus, 2025). These insights are substantiated by the focus of respondents on how worship leaders select songs, transition between them, and interpret the atmosphere of the room. When leaders present songs by giving the congregation a brief explanation of the theological material, by asking the congregation to stand, clap, or engage in a period of silent reflection, the congregation is assisted in engaging their minds, hearts, and bodies. On the other hand, in a situation where leadership is perceived to be in a hurry, overly performance-based, or not related to the real situation of the congregation, there is a likelihood of superficial or fragmented participation.

The accounts of visibly felt reactions, including uplifted hands, weeping, light-hearted applause, or reflective silence, indicate that the music in GMIM worship makes the congregation feel like bodied beings. This echoes liturgical scholarship that comprehends worship as a lived practice where gestures, postures, and movements are part of the expression of faith and are not accidental extra-curricular activities. Notably, respondents mentioned special occasions when the whole congregation sings a well-known refrain or when a traditional song makes people feel proud and belonging. These are opportunities to be considered as thick liturgical moments when spiritual, emotional, and cultural aspects are intertwined and mingled. They also show how music may be a reconciliatory place within a church body that consists of several generations and social backgrounds of the congregation.

Meanwhile, implicit pastoral and pedagogical questions are asked in some of the accounts. When younger congregants are especially attracted to modern styles and older people feel much more comfortable with the repertoire of traditions, what can GMIM do to avoid generational segregation and marginalisation of specific groups when it comes to worship planning? In this case, information about intergenerational worship and the digital generation comes into play (Rusmiatiningsih & Rizkyantha, 2022). Instead of creating individual services that would appeal only to particular tastes, the results imply the potential of purposeful crossovers and the creation of music patterns that various generations can both offer and accept. An example could be a worship set that starts with a modern praise song that can appeal to the youthful worshippers, then transitions to an old hymn with a new melody, and finally includes a native song as part of the service that can help the service connect with the identity of Minahasan. In this kind of design, no group is simply accommodated; every group is welcomed to enrich its musical and spiritual voice.

The results also confirm the significance of continuous training and the development of music ministers. Research on peer teaching strategies and collaborative learning in church music has already revealed that these strategies may not only improve technical proficiency but also promote virtues such as cooperation, responsibility, and humility (Masing, 2021). The GMIM setting would be enhanced with structured training programmes for worship leaders, band members, and choir singers which would incorporate both musical theory and musical practice together with theological reflection on worship. This training might cover more practical questions that are indirectly identified by the respondents: how to select songs according to the lectionary or sermon, how to use volume and sound balance, how to use traditional instruments when appropriate, and how to guide the congregation with both ecstatic praise and reflective silence.

Combined, the three themes highlight the importance of the fact that music in GMIM worship is not a peripheral ornament but a primary point of spiritual growth, cultural appropriation, and community involvement. Musically, the music reflects the identity of GMIM as a church, rooted in the culture of the Minahasan and related to the rest of the body of Christ worldwide. Pastorally, the discoveries call GMIM congregations, including GMIM Inspirasi Tomohon, the locus of this case study, to keep on assessing whether their musical practices are helping them get in touch more with God and with each other. The collision between traditional and contemporary forms has ethnomusicologically provided fertile ground for further studies on how local musical languages are being re-signified in Christian worship.

Finally, the limitations of this study are mentioned. The qualitative case study model which is concerned with one congregation or a small group of congregations, does not enable generalisation to all GMIM situations. Furthermore, the opinions documented mostly belong to congregants and music ministers; those who are left by the contemporary music traditions, children, teenagers, and others, will be under-represented. They may include qualitative and quantitative methods in the future, expand the scope of the congregations to be investigated, and involve a more systematic examination of certain repertoires, musical forms, and performance traditions. However, the current research offers a significant first map of music operation within GMIM worship as a wide range of musical expressions, as a means of spiritual encounter, and as a stimulus to congregational reaction, and provides real starting points for pastoral, liturgical, and educational considerations within GMIM.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the role of music in GMIM worship as a complex and multidimensional practice that shapes liturgy, spirituality, and cultural identity. Drawing on observations, interviews, and document analysis, this study shows that music in GMIM worship is characterised by a rich interplay between traditional Minahasan forms and contemporary Christian repertoires. Rather than standing in opposition, these musical expressions tend to complement one another, with energetic contemporary songs gathering and energising the congregation, hymns and slower worship songs accompanying moments of confession and prayer, and traditional tunes affirming communal memory and identity. Thus, music functions as an integrative medium that holds together continuity and change within the worship life of the church.

The findings also affirm that music is the primary medium of spiritual experience for congregants. Through lyrics and melodies, worshippers are helped to focus on God's presence, articulate emotions that are difficult to express in ordinary speech and internalise theological themes. When musical choices are coherent with the liturgical theme and are led by pastoral sensitivity, music becomes a vehicle of comfort, challenge, and transformation. Conversely, when music is perceived as overly performance-oriented, disconnected from the sermon, or insensitive to congregational needs, it risks becoming a source of distraction and fragmentation in worship.

Furthermore, this study highlights the decisive role of worship leaders and music ministers in facilitating congregational participation. Leadership that combines technical competence with spiritual maturity and cultural awareness enables the congregation to actively participate as singers, listeners, and embodied worshippers. Given generational differences in musical preference, GMIM faces the ongoing task of curating worship that is genuinely intergenerational, in which various age groups learn to give and receive through each other's musical languages.

In conclusion, music in GMIM worship should be understood and developed as a vital locus for pastoral ministry, theological formation, and cultural inculcation. The study recommends sustained investment in theological-musical training, intentional integration of traditional and contemporary forms, and participatory processes of liturgical planning so that GMIM worship remains rooted in Minahasan culture while responding creatively to the challenges of the digital era.

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