

Malachi: A decade as God's Messenger

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Malachi is band like many other bands. There are rehearsals, sweaty concerts, albums and T-shirts. There are many ways in which Malachi resembles secular rock bands-- similarities that upset some people-- but the band recognizes that there is one thing that sets them apart: The Lord Jesus Christ is at the heart of their music and mission. Malachi has spent the last decade making a "joyful noise to the Lord".

Randy DeWitt was a high school student. Neither of his parents were Lutheran, but he began to attend confirmation classes at Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church in Pewaukee, Wisconsin. Randy was also a drummer. He noticed that there were several young members at Christ who loved music; a few were performing in rock bands. Randy convinced them that they could use their musical abilities in a unique service to their Savior. And so, in spring of 1983 the first contemporary Christian rock group in the WELS came into being.

The group originally chose the name Messenger. That worked fine for the first Mother-Daughter banquet that they played for in the church basement. Then the band discovered that there was another group in the Milwaukee area that was using the very same name. To avoid any potential copyright problems, the search for a new name began. Band member Kenn Neuman was brainstorming at work one day and shared the band's frustration with a colleague. His friend suggested

using the Hebrew version of the group's original name: Messenger could become "My Messenger", Malachi.

When the other band members heard the biblical suggestion, they realized it reflected their vision for the group. "This is a revelation of the LORD's word to Israel through Malachi" (Mal 1:1). The members of the group were first and foremost Christians. The band did not exist because any of the members were great musicians. They all grew in their musical abilities as they practiced and performed, but they started and stayed together because of a love for the Lord and a desire to share his love with others. The musicians realized that, like their prophetic namesake, they were only messengers for God. As such, they were not speaking their own message; they were speaking on behalf of their Savior. (Kisting interview)

News of the bands existence spread through the ranks at Christ. In the Fall of 1983, the leaders of the congregation asked the band members if they would be willing to fill out a "mission statement" just like the Ladies Aid, youth group and other organizations were filling out. The young musicians realized that filling out the form would help them to clarify their goals and help them plan for the future. Malachi accepted the form. "As our purpose is the learning and spreading of God's word through the media of music."

The group had to think through its specific objectives: "[Malachi] gives members of our congregation and fellowship

an opportunity to express their interest and talent in music for the service of their Lord as well as their fellow Christians." When asked to relate their mission to the overall work of the congregation, they replied: "The Gospel Band can and does contribute to the existence and purpose of Christ Lutheran Church." They pointed to the fact that the band would be involved in

- 1) Fellowship
- 2) Service (entertainment in a Christian context)
- 3) Study of God's Word (Studying content and meaning of songs)
- 4) Spreading of his word.

The band members committed themselves to reaching their goals by: "Monthly church [attendant] together [followed by] Bible Study (led by Pastor or Elder); weekly practice; greater involvement with promotion and sponsoring of concerts; writ[ing] more songs." (Mission Statement)

When the group completed the form, they returned it to the congregational leaders. In the Fall of 1983 the church council and a voters assembly both decided to recognize Malachi as an official organization of Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church.

For a while the group struggled with its musical identity. At first they simply considered themselves to be a "Gospel band", playing any songs that had a religious bend to them. Trying to avoid mistakes that other bands had made, they sought advice from Joy Incorporated, a local LCMS band that played Christian music with a pop/adult contemporary flavor. Pastor Behling suggested that the

musical Godspell might provide a style of music to emulate. Very quickly, however, the band turned from the influences of the Broadway stage to the recordings of other artists working to fuse religious themes with popular musical styles. The whole contemporary Christian movement (CCM) was growing by leaps and bounds and there was already an impressive collection of music to choose from. Occasionally they would attempt an original composition, but Malachi concentrated on playing covers of songs by well known artist such as Amy Grant and Michael Card.

As time went on, however, they band members realized that their hearts weren't into Pop music. The group expanded its horizons and began playing tunes with a little harder edge, covering songs by Petra and others. As the group began to focus on playing rock music, they began to focus on people who would most appreciate hearing the Gospel proclaimed with rock music. Soon the band was committed to serving teenagers by playing rock music. There had been an unwritten assumption from the beginning that the band would draw most of its support from the youth of the synod, but the band decided to make it official. The members rewrote their original purpose statements.:

Malachi's mission is to relay Christ's message to young people who are faced with-- and too often caught up in-- a culture that offers confusing messages, changing standard, and self centered values, using Christian Rock music to give young people God's clear message of salvation, the unchanging standards of his law, and his values as revealed in his word.

(Revised Mission Statement)

The first official Christian rock group in the WELS had its church-home in Pewaukee.

When Malachi was adopted by Christ Ev. Luth. Church, it received tremendous support from the members of the congregation. There was a general understanding that the band would not perform for worship services, but there was strong encouragement to play for various meetings and fellowship activities held by the congregation. Dave Matthews and other members donated musical equipment. When the band played at locations outside the church building (even out of state) there were people to help transport equipment and set up the stage. One person at Christ put it this way: "I don't like their music. It's too loud for me, but they are doing this work to help spread the Word of God and they deserve my support" (Crownical).

The congregation continued to support Malachi during its next big project-- a demo tape. The band felt that a professionally produced recording of a few cover tunes and original songs would help to promote Malachi and open doors for performances at community events, local festivals, even the State Fair. Once the decision was made, the band tried to raise money for the recording studio fees. After three rained-out car washes, Pastor Behling suggest<sup>ed</sup> going to the congregation and asking for donations. Malachi began hosting an annual Easter breakfast, and Lois Mitzner helped them to get matching funds from Lutheran Brotherhood. All these efforts eventually led to Malachi being added to the

church budget. The group received its own bank account, kept financial records and made regular reports at meetings and in the church newsletter, the Crownical. The regular funds helped Malachi send out copies of the demo tape, advertise for upcoming performances, cover travel expenses to youth rallies and print its own Bible studies on music.

In 1986 contemporary Christian music and Malachi in particular began to get greater exposure in the WELS. National news media began reporting about the dangers of popular music, and the Northwestern Lutheran also brought up the issue. That year the WELS Commission on Youth Discipleship released its two-part video tape "Rock and the Christian's Role." The tapes were produced to teach teenagers how to evaluate secular musicians and their songs from a biblical perspective. The tapes also mentioned CCM as an alternative to Top 40 radio. There was also the caution that CCM often contained false doctrine, and the tapes tried to teach teens religious discernment also (Kriehn p13). In 1986 Malachi became an example of good orthodox Luthern music for teens. Malachi was featured in Youthink (Saar and Kisting p10) and its picture appeared with a Northwestern Lutheran article about the blessings of CCM (Payne p75).

In 1988 the band took the next musical step and recorded a full length album. This time there were no cover tunes. The band wrote several songs on its own. Pastor Michael Turriff contributed one song, "For You". Then

the songs had to be recorded, mixed and copyrighted. Thanking God for his blessings, the band decided to call the album "Freedom".

Once "Freedom" was completed, Malachi asked Northwestern Publishing House to consider stocking copies in its music collection. NPH purchased copies of the album from the band and began selling the cassettes at its retail store. Stephen J. Kehl wrote an article in the Nov. 15, 1988 Northwestern Lutheran about Malachi and its album. The article admitted that the group would have a limited appeal: "Although rock music is not for everyone, some of our members enjoy this high energy music. It may be a more meaningful mode of fulfilling their listening music needs." The article also stressed Malachi's position as an orthodox band:

These lyrics set themselves apart from the deceptive decision theology that dominates some Christian contemporary music. John Kisting sets forth our Lutheran sola scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide with words like these from his song "Faith": "It's not a decision I can make."

(NL p 400)

The issue also included a form on page 398 that could be filled in and sent to NPH to order copies of "Freedom." The January 1, 1989 edition of the Northwestern Lutheran also had an ad/order form for the album. The article reached a willing audience; NPH started getting orders for the cassette by mail.

The article also reached an unhappy audience. NPH began getting complaints by mail. Some people were upset by



CCM and were even more upset that the synod seemed to be supporting it. A small battle in the WELS war over CCM was fought on the pages of the Northwestern Lutheran, and Malachi's name came up rather frequently. The opening shot read:

It was somewhat surprising to find advertising in the November 15 issue, pages 398 and 400, and more especially the subject being advertised... It is interesting to note that the subject of Gospel rock was chosen for advertisement. Did the SUBJECT motivate a departure from policy? It seems that gospel rock is one of the most volatile, controversial subjects within our church today. Does the presentation of Malachi, with a very positive review, indicate there is a move within the WELS to nurture the youth of synod with this mode of music?

It is a known fact that the rock beat generates an emotional response which often overrides realistic judgment. Does this ad indicate that our synod now favors a religious music based on emotionalism and intends to spread it through the church by advertising it in the Northwestern Lutheran?..."

(Hill, NL p51)

That challenge brought this response:

I agree that Malachi's music generates an emotional response from me. I can't listen to the words "Do you see your Savior dying on a tree?" without a vision of Christ's suffering brought to mind. Similarly, many other traditional hymns stir emotional responses within me. It's my opinion that some hymns are favorites of ours BECAUSE they stir emotion within us. It is the emotion we feel that spurs us into action.

Malachi's members are WELS Christians using their God-given talents to keep in touch with our young people during a period in their lives when it is ~~is~~ so easy for them to reject tradition and lose their faith. I believe it is a God-pleasing use of the blessings God has given them.

(Hopfensperger, NL p133)

Others maintaining that CCM was flawed, defended the original letter:

In response to the letter entitled "advertising in the NL" (Feb 11) I would like to quote from the back page of the 1953 Northwestern Lutheran Annual: "The exclusive business of the church is the preaching of the gospel." It goes on to say that Northwestern Publishing House is a business concern whose business is to offer to all "literature which is distinctively Lutheran and which is suited to your particular needs."

Since the music of Malachi (November 15, 1988)... is definitely not "distinctively Lutheran" and since the message of so very much of contemporary Christian music (pop style) promotes reformed doctrine with its man-centered love and decision theologies, it seems to me that neither Northwestern Publishing House nor the official organ of the synod, the Northwestern Lutheran, should be promoting this genre of music in any way.

(James, NL p231)

Now the battle was not over CCM in general, but over the orthodoxy of Malachi and other WELS musicians.

...Our Lutheran hymnal has a dozen hymns by Charles Wesley, one of the founders of Methodism.

On the other hand, Tresa Buz and the members of Malachi are WELS Lutherans. Tresa wrote many of the songs in her albums. Malachi's album includes songs written by the members of the group in addition to one written by a WELS pastor.

Which would best be classified as "distinctively Lutheran"?

I hope we have learned that we can guard doctrinal purity and still not smother creativity...

Making blanket statements of condemnation without regard to individual merit is an improper use of Christian freedom. Solomon wrote in Proverbs 14:15, "A simple man believes anything, but a prudent man gives thought to his steps."

(Scheibe, NL p313)

The last letter in the Northwestern Lutheran debates was written by Leah Fein, a DMLC student, and co-founder of the CCM group Shining Star:

"Responding to letters condemning contemporary Christian (CC) music, it's important to keep NPH advertising policies and "Lutheraness" of CC music separate and not use one to reject/defend the other.

King David says, "Sing to the Lord a new song" (Psalm 98). CC music can have a place in our lives of worship if it agrees with our beliefs. Scriptural CC music praises God and spreads the gospel.

We have Christian freedom to worship God in any way done decently and in order. Whether playing organ in Wisconsin or bongos in Africa, God loves our worship.

WELS has by grace been preserved in the truth of God's word. Let's not add cultural/chronological bias. Jesus didn't send us into "all the world" specifying a musical genre. Otherwise we'd still be playing harp and lute and dancing in the streets. That was the original CC music."

(Fein, NL p313)

Throughout the letter writing, no one ever questioned Christ Lutheran Church's involvement with the band. Even though Malachi was an official organization of Christ, Pewaukee, even though the congregation was mentioned by name on the cassette jackets and in many articles about the band, and even though the band was often photographed in front of the church, no one ever questioned the congregation's role in the band's activities. No one ever called up the church or complained about Pastor Behling. Malachi and its music were at the center of the debate. (Kisting interview)

When Malachi first formed the members had no idea how controversial combining contemporary music and religious lyrics might seem to some people. John Kisting admits "We were a little naive at first" (Interview). They had wondered whether they should draw a sharp line between the secular and the sacred. They had considered being just be a group of Lutherans who happened to play popular secular songs to entertain and encourage fellowship. As they studied more, they became convinced that there was no conflict between their lyrics and the style of music they

wanted to perform. They were pleased when the 1991 Synod convention adopted the following resolution:

WHEREAS 1) Scripture protects the freedom of personal choice in matters of adiaphora (Philippians 4:8, I Corinthians 10:23); and

WHEREAS 2) musical notations and rhythms are neither inherently good nor evil, but become such to the individual conscience; and

WHEREAS 3) all the arts, especially music, ought to be used in the service of him who gave and made them. (Luther's Works p.316, Vol.53.); therefore, be it

Resolved, that each Christian endeavor to determine the fitness of Christian contemporary music on the basis of the lyrics, the lifestyle of the artist(s), and any visual portrayals.

(Proceedings of the Fifty-First Biennial Convention, p. 100)

Aside from the album and article that caused so much commotion, 1988 was an important year for Malachi for another reason. It was the year that Malachi Ministries was formed. Malachi Ministries helped the band in spreading God's word. The band members decided that instead of doing a large number of shows for small audiences they should concentrate on doing a few concerts for larger crowds. A concert might be sponsored by a church or a youth group, or it might be sponsored by the band itself. Malachi Ministries was the umbrella term used to cover all the people who helped get the work done, from people who helped transport and set up equipment to those who made posters and sent out invitations to a performance.

Malachi Ministries also included Christian counselors. Malachi made use of the services of the Christ-Centered

Assistance Program (CCAP) that started at Christ Ev. The CCAP was designed to help people with chemical dependencies. Lay-members of the congregation were trained to act as peer listeners and counselors. Peggy White and/or another CCAP counselor went along with the band to individual concerts and even on extended tours. They were available throughout the performance, during intermissions and after the shows. Any teens who wanted to talk with them could. The CCAP counselors would encourage the teens to get in contact with their pastors, or would point them to the services of Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Services. Malachi Ministries also had business cards made up with phone number to call to reach the counselors after the band had gone. It was one more way for Malachi to share God's word with teenagers.

Malachi Ministries helped produce the bands first album "Freedom". They followed that with the 1991 release, "Washed Clean". In January, 1993, the band recorded a concert given at Wisconsin Lutheran High School and released it as a live album with the title "Admission: \$Free". Over 3,600 copies of their albums have been sold. Now that's not anywhere near the range of a superstar like Michael Jackson or Madonna, but it's not bad for a band with a basically WELS following. And just as it happens with many other bands, there are bootleg copies of Malachi cassettes.

From the moment that Malachi was formed, there were many people who put in a great deal of hard work.

Musicians, helpers, counselors and fans came and went. Others took their place. In 1993, the band's tenth anniversary, something changed. Band members left, but there was no one to replace them. By the end of the year, Daniel Saar and John Kisting were all that remained. In 1994 they decided to put the band on hold and search for new band members. They located new singers and musicians, but there was no drummer. They have decided to continue searching. If no suitable percussionist is found, Malchi will call it quits after a decade of making music to the Lord. (Kisting interview)

No matter what happens to the band in the future, whether it disbands or continues to serve the Lord for another decade, there will always remain its testimony to the grace of God. There is a Malachi song called "Heavenly Father". The lyrics declare:

My Lord, My Father, You're all around me  
To hear my prayers day and night  
Your word will give me that highest hope  
To reach that goal, my heavenly home.

I know that you will show me the light  
Every path I turn on wrong or right  
Someday I'll reach that Heavenly home  
And with you I'm almost home

My Lord, my Savior, You gave your life  
For me a sinner, who now sees the light.  
And to the Savior, who died on the cross  
Who gave to us everlasting life

Amen, dear Lord. Take me to my home.

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A member of Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church wrote:

Thank you for the opportunity for me and my family to share with you our love for Jesus through your concerts... My daughter Lisa who recently miscarried her first child is very emotional with Suzanne's "Heavenly Father" which gave her strength at her time of loss as well as "Believe it's True" providing a good deal of comfort... Thank you all for sharing your God-given talents with us in a way that can only bring us closer to our beloved Savior. (Crownical)

Whatever the future holds, they have been faithful messengers of Christ.

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