

Eyewitness Accounts of the “Asbury Outpouring”

Compiled by the *Global Missiology – English* Editorial Team

Featuring Lalsangkima Pachuau and Craig S. Keener

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In light of this issue’s emphasis on “Theological Education and Mission,” the *Global Missiology – English* (GME) editorial team thought it important to include something about the widely known events that began in early February following a regularly scheduled Asbury University chapel service in Asbury, Kentucky, USA. The editorial team also determined that it was too early to offer any analyses or evaluations and that the focus should be on trustworthy eyewitness accounts. Perhaps GME will carry articles in a later issue that will seek further understanding of what has been taking place.

Many GME readers will have already read, viewed photos and videos, discussed with others, and even formed opinions about what has been variously termed the “revival,” “awakening,” or “outpouring” at Asbury. For the purposes of this GME contribution, the editorial team suggests first visiting the “Asbury Outpouring” section on the Asbury University website at <https://www.asbury.edu/outpouring/>. Statements by Asbury University President Kevin J. Brown are available there, along with other pertinent information. An appropriate next visit would be two early blog posts by Asbury Theological Seminary President Timothy Tennent: “Thoughts on the Asbury Awakening (February 14: <https://timothytennent.com/thoughts-on-the-asbury-awakening/>) and “Asbury Awakening Continues” (February 21: <https://timothytennent.com/asbury-awakening-continues/>).

Two Asbury Seminary faculty members—while fielding avalanches of other outside requests for their viewpoints on what has transpired—have graciously provided to GME their own eyewitness accounts. In response to inquiries from friends and colleagues in his native Mizoram in Northeast India, Dr. Lalsangkima Pachuau, who is John Wesley Beeson Professor of Christian Mission and Dean of Advanced Research Programs, composed in Mizo a report about the Asbury events. Pachuau has provided a slightly modified English translation of that report for publication here. Also, Professor of Biblical Studies Dr. Craig Keener has offered his own account and observations. Included as well is a link to Keener’s February 23 YouTube video account, “Reflections on the Outpouring.”

Following Dr. Pachuau’s and Dr. Keener’s observations are a few additional links to other eyewitness accounts and one particularly pertinent article for those involved in higher education.

Lalsangkima Pachuau

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As soon as the news spread about what was happening here at Asbury, reaching even my remote corner of Mizoram in Northeast India much faster than I had expected, several friends asked me about the “Asbury revival.” Because the demand first came mostly from my Mizo friends and

colleagues in Mizoram, I quickly wrote about it in the Mizo language and posted it on Facebook. As I have said there, I'd feel much better to call it "awakening," however, because it has been called "revival," I will mostly use that term. Some of the requests came because of my close academic connection with "revivals." I have studied, written, and reflected on the topic, including in my doctoral dissertation. And so here, I will mix my experience, academic viewpoints, and observations of this (Asbury) revival. Let me first say a few things about my personal background related to it and a few of my assumptions:

1. I came from a church that is largely defined by its history of "revivals" (or more appropriately "awakenings"), starting with the so-called "first wave" in 1906 which was clearly influenced by the 1904 Welsh revivals through the missionaries via a similar movement in the nearby Khasi hills. My church, the Mizoram Presbyterian Church, was planted by missionaries of the Welsh Calvinistic (Presbyterian) Mission. I came to my personal commitment to ministry through one such movement in the early 1980s, yet, quite apart from it too! Inspired and challenged by the movement then, I eagerly sought what I'd later call "a spiritual renewal" in the revival, but could not get anything from it! However, the search led me to an affirmation of the Lordship of Christ for my life in one of the most unusual church events, the Wednesday evening meeting. I immediately changed the course of my life to be in Christian ministry.
2. I view revivals or awakenings as those momentary experiences coming at specific times. They come and go; they are neither ongoing nor perpetual. Because the Asbury awakening coincided with "Transfiguration Sunday" (February 18 for Protestants), I was reflecting on it also in connection with the sermon I prepared and preached on the topic in a nearby Presbyterian Church. The Transfiguration was a very special manifestation of the divinity of our Lord Jesus, and the experience of one recipient, Peter, was so profound that he suggested pitching a tent then and there. However, Peter together with Jesus and his other disciples had to return to the normal grind of daily life. Of course, that experience would surely have had a profound impact on Peter and his two friends. Perhaps, what's most important is how such an experience impacts life beyond it. As long as we are mortal, spiritual awakening will have to come only as a momentary experience. Even the first believers had to move on from the Pentecost experience.
3. Revival experience is a unique one involving a profound realization of God's presence in one's life, yet as a temporal experience prone to much misunderstanding and misgiving. Many of its recipients often overemphasize it and its significance. Proponents often try to manufacture it according to their imagined idea of what it should be. On the other hand, there are those who would suspect such experience as anything but divine. Such opponents continually look for its shortcomings to condemn it. Perhaps while presenting an opportune moment for some to encounter and relate with God, it also gives room for those (proponents and opponents alike) who would put themselves and their experience or ideas above and beyond God's.

What has come to be called the "Asbury Outpouring" started on Wednesday, February 8, after one weekly worship service in the University chapel. Briefly and simply described, it came as an uninhibited praise and worship of God. It did not actually start during the service itself but at the closing of it. Some students could not have enough of singing praise to God, and it took off from there. More joined in, and they experienced inner renewal in the form of repentance and reconciliation. Some reported experiencing a deeper longing for and encountering God resulting even in the alleviation of mental and psychological issues they had. And so they persisted in

singing praise to God, offering prayers, and sharing testimonies. The service went on without coming to a formal close. And I believe it went on until a brief pause was made on the 17th of February.

I personally learned of the revival the day after on Thursday (February 9) during the Seminary chapel service. When I entered the chapel that day the atmosphere was different, and the community seemed expectant. Mentions about a special awakening among University students in the chapel just across from our chapel were made prayerfully! We then prayed together and offered special prayers in the direction of the University chapel where the wondrous work of God was made known. (The Asbury University chapel, Hughes Auditorium, and the Seminary's Estes chapel face each other across the campus, divided by a street and an open space in between). Being so inspired, we had a wonderful time praising God and offering prayers during that service. After lunch, I ventured out toward the University campus wondering if I might see anything. Yes, it was a beautiful day and this was also my normal route for afternoon walks. When I reached the chapel, I found the main door closed and only a couple of students sitting nearby chatting. I decided that the service might have ended, and there was nothing going on anymore. I worked from home the next day (Friday) and didn't visit Wilmore again throughout the weekend. I live in Lexington, and our campus in Wilmore is some 10 miles away from my home.

I reached my office at midday on Monday and was immediately engrossed in preparations for my departmental meeting (Advanced Research Programs) scheduled for 1 pm. Just before the meeting, one of the members of the committee, Tom (Prof. Thomas McCall), told me that he may have to leave the meeting if he gets a call in connection with "what's going on across the street." That's when I realized that things had not ended as I thought they were. The meeting took quite a long time, and afterward I had to take care of several related matters. I then went home straight away.

That evening, I finally learned something definite about the revival. My wife, who attended the "revival worship" at Hughes with a friend from work that afternoon reported with great excitement her experience and what she saw. What she witnessed, she said, was nothing short of the wondrous works of the Spirit of God. When I reached my office on Tuesday, the next day, there was no mistaking what was going on. I looked towards the University chapel, and there were people lining up to enter the chapel. Even the worship in our Seminary chapel was quite lively. Tom and I chatted briefly after the service, through which I came to a fuller sense of what was happening. I could see that there were a few like Tom who were working hard behind the scenes, and was possibly quite exhausted by now. (Here is the link for those interested in reading what Tom wrote in *Christianity Today* about the Asbury awakening: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2023/february-web-only/asbury-revival-1970-2023-methodist-christian-holy-spirit.html?fbclid=IwAR1RlpL5KaL2-1Id3fSOqoK4PLsrnPA1orAWFJTOTwiiO1uZRGkCHh0BU3I>).

I reached the University chapel after lunch around 1 o'clock on Tuesday. Though I did not get a seat right away, I was glad to be inside to see and experience it personally. I was not familiar with many of the contemporary devotional songs they sang, yet I was able to have a profound encounter with God in prayers through those songs. The lyrics became my prayers as I joined along! I could hardly keep my eyes open due to the bliss I was experiencing and was not too sure of those around me! When I finally did look around more closely, it was no longer the African-American student at the piano who was leading the music anymore. It was our Seminary students,

who were music leaders in our chapel the previous day, leading us with guitars and drums. Though I initially felt that I would not have time to take part beyond an hour, almost two hours had already elapsed.

I'm not good at singing and do not always enjoy newer songs. Being brought up in a hymn-singing church, I have done enough to like traditional hymns. That day I did not sing much, though I was able to join a few songs. Yet the contemporary Christian songs they sang touched me as they became my prayers. Looking back, I feel that I participated fully in the singing as I was in deep prayers most of the time. The sensation, I believe, is somewhat similar to how it would be if one were led to drift along by a gently flowing stream. Was it my openness that helped me experience what I did? I do not know. Afterward, I did wish to be back in the same chapel and to experience it again, but I could not find another opportunity except for being a part of the overflow in one of our Seminary chapels. Meanwhile, more opportunities were also given to youth and visitors from elsewhere for sharing the experience. One beautiful thing about this revival was that it was led and owned by students.

I believe it would be most beneficial if each one who came here and encountered the work of God's Spirit did so in a way that spoke most profoundly to each. I am sure such experience could help one grow stronger and firmer in being a disciple of Christ. I've learned that there's quite a lively discussion on social media about what we were experiencing. Some of my students showed me some of the debates. I remember reading some comments saying things like, "It will spread further and wider if it's genuine," "They will be known by their fruits," and some listed out how it should fan out if it were indeed an authentic revival. I've decided to shut myself out of these comments as they become distracting and disturbing. I simply do not have the audacity to see more of such comment, even though I know that there are also many positive and meaningful comments.

I do not think the Asbury community took pride in the revival as such. If I understand the mood rightly, we humbly received it as it came. We do not seek to own it or intend to make anything out of it other than hoping to be transformed into Christlikeness. We meekly yet joyfully receive what we see and hear. We would not even know how to spin glorious yarns about it. Personally, I can hardly differentiate between what I've experienced here and what I've often experienced in the past occasionally with, for instance, how I feel when I listen to a well-prepared and eloquently delivered sermon on a Sunday morning. In such instances, I'd be reminded of God's glory and the depth of God's grace, of His care and concern for us, and would be filled with immense joy. I have no idea how this revival phenomenon came and will develop. I receive it with joy while it lasts, as I cannot expect it to stay for long. What stays, I pray, is a deeper commitment to follow him and to serve others.

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Nomenclature is always a problem, since the title "revival" never appears in the modern sense in Scripture and events called "revivals" historically vary considerably in character. Naturally many attached the popular label of "revival" to the February 2023 experience at Asbury from its association with previous "Asbury revivals" in 1905, 1908, 1950, and 1970. These experiences

each averaged a week or two, and it seems likely that various occasions derived symbolic significance partly from the historical memory of their predecessors.

The biblical template for the present event seems to fit the title “outpouring” often preferred by spokespersons at the university: a collective experience of God’s Spirit resembling some of the occasions in Acts. The focus in Acts is empowerment for mission (Acts 1:8; cf. 4:31), which fits the previous “Asbury revivals” along with many other college revivals. A key fruit of such collective experiences at Asbury historically, albeit one measurable only over a long term, has been renewed commitment to mission reflected in a surge in new workers.

Since I am writing shortly after the end of the public phase of the meetings, the present essay offers merely a meditation on some of the experiences based on some first- and secondhand participant observations. The university’s chapel normally meets three mornings per week for 45 to 50 minutes. Occasionally a few students linger after chapel to share another song or two. On Wednesday, February 8, however, the gospel choir continued to worship after the closing song, and the crowd of a few students spontaneously grew over the course of the day to hundreds. Far from being an event planned by the university, the event caught administrators off guard, requiring them to make decisions about how to adapt to a rapidly changing situation.

Although participation was student-led and spontaneous, historical precedent undoubtedly led the administrators to recognize and respond supportively to what was taking place, balancing recognition of student initiative with a degree of guidance and oversight to prevent the event from being coopted by external actors. During this period, school leaders such as campus chaplain Greg Haseloff, dean of students Sarah Baldwin, president Kevin Brown and many others poured themselves tirelessly into servicing the event, often investing long days and nights praying with students at the altar. Students were confessing and repudiating various practices such as pornography and seeking healing from fears and traumas.

Outsiders often evaluate such events against the template of other events traditionally called revivals, but it seems also germane to weigh them against recent experiences in Asbury’s history. In my 12 years at the nearby seminary (which is administratively independent but derived historically from the same institution), I have witnessed nothing like this, and colleagues who experienced the 1970 outpouring (such as the seminary’s Robert Coleman and the university’s Anna Gulick) have reported nothing comparable at the institution for some 50 intervening years. Many, including myself, have prayed for revival with reports of the 1970 outpouring in mind, but we (or at least I) were caught off guard when the event actually happened, and especially by its unanticipated scale.

The students’ worship focused on the awesomeness and holiness of God, and student leaders and administrators labored to preserve the “sanctity” of this experience by what they called “radical humility.” This stance meant that worship leaders focused attention on Jesus, rejecting celebrity status of singers or speakers. As word spread, students remained at the fore, without introductions or giving access to “big names” from outside. The worship protocol was relatively simple, and Jesus alone was to be honored.

In light of my past experiences with movements of the Spirit, I am prepared to say that I witnessed and experienced something beyond human manufacture. Although I witnessed others being touched on a deep level, I also felt the palpable sense of God’s presence both within and outside Hughes Auditorium (the site of the main meetings). I did not experience this at all times,

but the times that I did were spontaneous and unexpected. Consecration, being set apart for God, seemed to flow naturally from the sense of God's holiness. This sense of holiness did not entail legalism (insofar as I and some others I know experienced what has transpired) but appreciation for God's gracious gift of welcome and empowerment. Adoration of God's holiness relativized human honor and any significance typically attached to it. Worship was central, but the long periods of singing (revival historian Michael McClymond compares this practice to songs at the Welsh revival of 1904-1905) were interspersed with periods of Scripture reading, preaching, and testimony, the last often sifted to keep the focus on God.

The focus on Jesus also entailed unity among his worshipers, transcending ethnic and denominational differences. Regional demographics facilitated larger initial arrival of white participants, but the initial impetus arose from the largely African American gospel choir plus a chapel speaker (Zach Meerkreebs) of Jewish descent. The rotating worship teams generally continued to reflect the initial experience's multiethnic composition. I have known Lena Marlowe, an African American senior involved in the gospel choir, since she was a freshman. She has always exuded a vibrant spiritual life while also embracing the value of academics and a vision for social transformation. She notes that the outpouring's first days focused on repentance, but within a few days the mood among students shifted to joy.

The social dynamic of the outpouring necessarily shifted over time. The event began as students experienced an unanticipated sense of God's holy presence. The university administration, engaged in the meetings, showed little interest in promoting the events externally, but social media posts (unintentionally including my own) and Asbury's past history naturally led to media attention and ultimately the pilgrimage of thousands. The Asbury and local communities responded sacrificially to extend hospitality. Some visitors may have come as spectators or to accumulate new spiritual experiences, but workers who prayed with seekers testify that many were simply desperate for a deeper relationship with God. The influx of outsiders, however, left some students feeling overwhelmed and somewhat displaced. Given the strain on the small community's resources, as well as the recognition that God is not limited to one locality, the leaders seeking to steward the outpouring announced the close of the meetings' public phase. The main meetings, which had featured continuous worship for more than 360 hours, returned to a focus on the younger generation, while the seminary chapels and other venues continued to provide overflow room for other visitors.

This public phase closed on the previously scheduled Collegiate Day of Prayer on February 23. In view of Asbury's history, the national organizers had chosen Asbury University as the host campus months earlier. This event was not in the minds of the gospel choir as their worship simply ran over on February 8. It nevertheless provided a fitting climax for a transition in which the university sought to disperse the movement, recognizing that many other campuses had also begun reporting similar experiences of student-initiated collective prayer and worship.

[See as well Keener's February 23 "Reflections on the Outpouring" @ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2RX3Ugw5KM0> – ed.]

While reports and analyses abound about what has occurred recently in Asbury, the GME editorial team would like to commend three further eyewitness accounts. All three accounts were given by outside visitors to Asbury and have already appeared elsewhere:

- “Short Report from Asbury” was a February 24 post on the *Missio Nexus* website as an account by that network’s President, Ted Esler: <https://missionexus.org/short-report-from-asbury/> .
- “Fire Fall Down: The Asbury Revival” is by Husezo Rhakho, a Baylor doctoral student from Nagaland. His account was a March 2 guest post authorized by Philip Jenkins: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2023/03/fire-fall-down-the-asbury-revival/> .
- “At Asbury, the Bible, Prayer, and Jesus Were in Focus” is by Robert Cunningham, Director of Christ for Kentucky, a public theology and strategy ministry, and an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). Cunningham’s account was posted on March 6 on the PCA magazine *byFaith* website: <https://byfaithonline.com/at-asbury-the-bible-prayer-and-jesus-were-in-focus/> .

Finally, Sara Weissman’s “The Aftershocks of the Asbury Revival,” published March 2 on the *Inside Higher Ed* website, also seems appropriate for this April GME issue on “Theological Education and Mission”: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2023/03/02/asbury-revival-comes-close> .

As always, reader comments are welcome at GlobalMissiologyEnglish@gmail.com.