

# “The Asbury Outpouring” of February 2023: A Follow-up Report

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## Abstract

Now that over a year has passed, how might the February 2023 revival at Asbury University—what the school itself has termed “The Asbury Outpouring”—be understood and described? What are the ongoing effects of that undeniably landmark event? What steps has Asbury University intentionally taken to build on, steward, share, explain, commemorate, and otherwise follow-up? What sources can help answer these and other related questions? This article takes up, in reverse order, these pressing questions.

**Key Words:** analysis, effects, follow-up, Gen Z, sources, students

## Introduction

In February 2023, a normally scheduled chapel service at Asbury University, located in the small town of Wilmore, Kentucky, USA, spontaneously extended into a transformative 16-day spiritual event. News of the ongoing worship, fellowship, and fervency among Asbury students spread widely through social media, and thousands from around the United States and beyond traveled to Wilmore to see for themselves and take part. The editorial team of *Global Missiology* decided to publish in our April 2023 issue a description of the Asbury event—not a premature analysis or evaluation, but a description—through select eyewitness accounts (GME, Keener, & Pachuau, 2023). Our editorial team indicated at that time that we might carry some analyses later in order better to understand, with the added perspective of time, what had taken place. As one fulfillment of that expressed possibility, and in light of this current issue’s focus on “Awakenings, Advances, and Revivals: Noteworthy Outpourings of God’s Spirit,” as editor I have compiled this follow-up article on “The Asbury Outpouring.”

## Sources

Different people have relied on various sources for understanding and describing what happened at Asbury University in February 2023 as well as subsequently. Those Asbury students, faculty, and staff who were either present when the Outpouring began, or joined in soon thereafter, have had their own, as well as others’, direct experiences and observations on which to draw. The tens of thousands who during the 16-day Outpouring traveled to the campus to see and experience for themselves what was going on also have had their own eyewitness accounts, be they as alumni, skeptics, sympathizers, media, or those holding other standpoints. There are the newer Asbury students, faculty, and staff who have experienced the Asbury community in the Outpouring’s wake. Family members and friends of those who were present, and of those newer Asbury community members, have no doubt tapped into the accounts given by their loved ones and friends.

What about those of us who, with various objectives and levels of interest, have observed from a distance? While some of us may have contacted a few current Asbury acquaintances—all of whom were already overwhelmed by other requests for their accounts of the “revival” taking place—I dare say that for the most part our sources have come from the array of online testimonies, videos, reports, and analyses that started appearing on social media and news outlets soon after the

Outpouring began. According to my unscientific survey, both early on and ever since those reports in general have been favorable, with many enthusiastically celebrating the revival, some mixing in caution, and a few criticizing. (It is also quite possible that some readers posted comments, blog entries, or even articles about what has commonly been referred to as the “revival” at Asbury.)

As with the April 2023 *Global Missiology* piece that compiled select eyewitness accounts, this article has chosen to rely most heavily on Asbury-connected descriptions of what took place and of what has transpired since. Specifically, I have especially relied on four sources that include accounts from different times along the way—from historically prior to February 2023 up to the present:

- “The Asbury Outpouring,” a publicly accessible section of the Asbury University website devoted to photos, accounts, and other related information (Asbury University, 2024a).
- *Taken by Surprise: The Asbury Revival of 2023*, a book published late last summer and written by historian, Asbury College alumnus, and former Asbury College faculty member Mark Elliott (Elliott, 2023). (Note: “Asbury College,” from which Elliott graduated, was renamed “Asbury University” in 2010 (Asbury University, 2024b).)
- *Generation Awakened: An Eyewitness Account of the Powerful Outpouring of God at Asbury* by Asbury’s centrally involved Vice President for Student Life Sarah Baldwin, just published in May (Baldwin, 2024).
- An even more recent (May 23) phone interview with Bridgette Campbell, Asbury’s newly created Coordinator of Outreach Ministry Teams (Campbell, 2024).

It is important to note that all of these sources acknowledge questions, doubts, and critiques of the revival and, as appropriate, offer replies to them. Forthcoming sources that are already being forecast will no doubt do the same. Also, what happened in February 2023 was centered in Asbury *University* (specifically Hughes Auditorium), not Asbury Theological *Seminary* located across the street (although the seminary community was also affected, helped host overflow services, and was otherwise connected). Finally, while “revival” has been a common label for what occurred, this article will use “The Asbury Outpouring,” the label that Asbury University settled on after the descriptor “outpouring” arose among school administrators amidst the flurry of nurturing the spontaneously bourgeoning event (Baldwin, 2024, p. 80).

### **Asbury’s Follow-up**

Eight days after the Outpouring began on February 8, Asbury University President Kevin Brown made the difficult decision to announce on February 16 that the Outpouring’s final public worship would be the previously planned Collegiate Day of Prayer service on February 23 (Baldwin, 2024, pp. 102, 108). In response to criticisms of Asbury thereby “quenching the Spirit” or “stopping the revival,” Brown noted, “We cannot stop something we did not start.” Moreover, along with stewarding the Spirit’s surprising work the university was also fulfilling its obligations to meet student’s educational needs and to protect the overtaxed university staff and town of Wilmore (Elliott, 2023, locs. 1080-1102). Asbury’s Outpouring follow-up, necessarily unclear and unplanned as it was at the time, thus was set in motion by the decision to encourage all students to resume their regular schedule of classes, chapel services, and other activities.

The return to regularly scheduled programming (which officially had never been suspended) was reportedly both tinged with fatigue from the Outpouring's intensity and enthused by students debriefing and testifying to their life-changing encounters with the Spirit (Baldwin, 2024, p. 173). To help students process what had taken place and “navigate life,” the university sought to connect students with mentors and small groups (Flynn, 2023). There were varieties of experiences among the students, including some that, unlike the many who deeply encountered God during the Outpouring, have been characterized by one university administrator as “not so positive” (Zonio, 2024). Some students, for example, eschewed the continuous worship gatherings and “stayed in their dorms trying to block out the 2 a.m. shouts from outside their window” (McCracken, 2024).

During March and April, soon after the Outpouring, Asbury students—on their own initiative—traveled to colleges and churches to witness and share with others God's special work among them (Elliott, 2023, loc. 2029). Following the students' lead and in response to the numerous requests for students to come and speak, the university brought on extra staff to arrange for “Outpouring Witness Teams” to travel, as of January 2024, “to over 50 different venues in 16 states and 8 countries” (Campbell, 2024; Asbury University, 2024c).

In line with the central roles that electronic media played in spreading news about the Outpouring, the university created a new section of its website devoted to “The Asbury Outpouring” (Asbury University, 2024a). That section currently has numerous links to recordings of Hughes Chapel worship from February 19-22, photos taken by various individuals during the Outpouring, select testimonies, summaries of “Witness Team” trips, media reports, recordings of one-year commemorations, and much more. The site also enables anyone to submit their own “testimony from the Outpouring” (Asbury University, 2024d).

Select attempts by Asbury University administrators, faculty, staff, and students to interpret and explain various aspects of the Outpouring are scattered on the internet for those wishing to explore further nuances of how Asbury has followed up on the events of February 2023 (for two also linked on Asbury's “Outpouring” web page, see Brown, 2024 and McCracken, K. 2024).

## **Effects**

One year after the Outpouring, many Asbury-related leaders were still sorting through the longer-term effects. “A year after those events, it is still challenging for me to distill the ways in which our community—and I—have been affected” (Zonio, 2024). “It is a story that we are all still learning, and it is a story that is still being written” (McCracken, 2024). “The outpouring raised a great deal of questions for me, many of which cannot be answered now” (Brown, 2024). Far be it, therefore, from this distant follow-up report to attempt any sort of definitive, much less comprehensive, description of what has resulted or changed from the February 2023 episode centered in Asbury's Hughes Auditorium.

Even so, there are reliable quantitative and qualitative measurements that suggest the extent of the effects, particularly beyond Asbury and Wilmore. Conservative estimates are that at least 50,000 (with some accounts suggesting as many as 70,000, or even 100,000) outside visitors came to the campus during the 16-day Outpouring (Brown, 2024; Tooley, 2024) and then returned to their own communities. These visitors represented a wide range of ecclesiastical traditions, including Catholics and nondenominational churches, and they came from at least 40 US states and at least 40 countries (Elliott, 2023, loc. 1994). Students from over 280 colleges and universities were among the visitors, exemplifying the “Gen Z” focus of what transpired (Brown, 2024).

Together with thousands of hearers of Asbury’s Witness Teams that have gone out, the extent of people who were affected by first-hand, eyewitness accounts are difficult to comprehend.

Media reports of the Outpouring were far-reaching as well and included some of the most widely known and accessed outlets, e.g., *The New York Times* and CNN (Asbury University, 2024a). Moreover, “Asbury has identified over 250 podcasts, 1,000 articles, and dozens of sermons and conference sessions addressing what happened. More than 100 local, national, and international media outlets visited our campus. There have been approximately 250 million social media posts related to #AsburyRevival or #AsburyRevival2023” (Brown, 2024). Add in the unimaginable number of various other electronic messages, videos, photos, and posts about the Outpouring, and God only knows the effects resulting from electronic communications.

There have been credible reports of revivals subsequently occurring on several other US campuses (Brown, 2024), as well as in Europe—part of what one analyst has termed “The Asbury Popcorn Effect” (Greig, 2023a, 2023b; Elliott, 2023, locs. 1972-1980). Continual text messages to Asbury University administration from around the world have conveyed wider interest and testimonies connected to the Outpouring (Baldwin, 2024, pp. 173-174). As for life on Asbury’s campus itself, testimonies abound about “freedom,” a “lighter” feeling, a sense of “surrender,” increased spontaneity in worship and prayer, as well as “new commitments to Jesus and baptisms [that] are part of the life of our community.” Student anxiety, depression, and emotional struggles also persist, but the overarching testimony is that “a renewed call to prayer, fresh faith, and revived surrender abides with us” (Baldwin, 2024, pp. 181-182).

Here are just a couple of the many student testimonies (Asbury University, 2024a) about the ongoing personal effects of what transpired back in February 2023:

“My prayer life has been reignited and I depend on His Spirit even more day to day. Jesus has brought me deep-seated joy and peace by reminding me of how good He is.”

“God completely changed my life through the Outpouring of His Spirit. He has placed new callings on my heart. Now, I know my job is to go and spread the fire that He released here.”

## Analysis

So how might the Outpouring be understood? Per the summaries above of select Asbury-related sources, of university follow-up, and of ongoing effects, there continues to be a widespread sense of amazement and awe at what transpired. At bare minimum, everyone agrees that “something happened,” as one student put it a year later (McCracken, 2024). The vast majority of participants and observers wholeheartedly testify that God moved in a special way that—whether or not historians end up including February 2023 at Asbury in their lists of significant “revivals”—fits the simple description of one Asbury administrator: “The Outpouring was a spontaneous work of God filled with many examples of His grace” (Asbury University, 2024a). The particular significance of the Outpouring for Gen Z students has been uniformly emphasized as well (Baldwin, 2024, pp. 10-12; Brown, 2024).

As noted earlier and not surprisingly—some might say “appropriately” or even “necessarily,” citing such biblical admonitions as I Thessalonians 5:21 and I John 4:21 to “test” any such acclaimed spiritual event—there have been skeptics and critics. Also as mentioned above, the sources cited here, and others like them, have acknowledged and appropriately responded to many

of the criticisms. Mark Elliott has provided a helpful summary of criticisms and responses to them as an appendix (“A Critique of the Critics”) in his book published about six months after the Outpouring (Elliott, 2023, locs. 2096-2515).

One qualifier to note is that most of the world, and I dare say most of the Christian world, remains unaware of Asbury University in general and of what happened there in February 2023. Pointing out that lack of awareness is by no means intended to belittle Asbury or the Outpouring. Rather, those of us who have such a monumental experience (as well as those of us who examine it) can unwittingly assume that our preoccupied focus is shared by others. The claim that “the Lord continues to move across the Wilmore community, Kentucky, the United States, and the world” since the Outpouring (Asbury University, 2024a) should not be taken as a comprehensive enveloping of all humanity. Understanding what occurred and its continuing effects needs broad kingdom perspective.

### *One Skeptic’s Criticism*

One such approach that has expressed skepticism about the Outpouring—both during the 16-day event and one year later—comes from someone with a multinational background, with extensive personal experiences of “revivals,” and with Reformed theological leanings (Sey, 2023, 2024). Against a backdrop of initial concerns about Asbury’s revivalist history, “seemingly little or no gospel preaching, the female pastors, [and] the disorderly and charismatic chaos” reported during the “revival” (Sey, 2023), “A year later, it looks like what happened at Asbury was a fad, not a revival” (Sey, 2024), the criticism asserts. That assertion is further based on reports from churches near Asbury that they had experienced no significant numerical growth or life changes in their memberships. Moreover, the approach analyzes, the Gen Zs involved likely were primarily experiencing a counter-cultural moment that lacked biblically-grounded discernment cultivated by regular, “ordinary preaching” in Sunday morning worship (Sey, 2024).

The latter, one-year-later criticism also decries the “hundreds of comments,” received after the initial skeptical analysis, carrying charges of pharisaism, Thomas-like doubting, and blaspheming the Holy Spirit (Sey, 2024).

Those directly involved in The Asbury Outpouring likely would feel (perhaps have in fact felt) a sadness and a sting upon learning of that kind of penetrating analysis, particularly since (though buttressed by intentional research and extensive, related life experience) it was offered from a distance. One would hope that, if it has not occurred already, some constructive interaction could take place around the theme of following Jesus in and through the “normal” rhythms of life, for example. As one report of the February 7, 2024 one-year anniversary chapel service notes:

In a benediction to the students after the anniversary service, Meerkreebs [Asbury’s Pastor in Residence Zach Meerkreebs, who preached at the Outpouring-sparking February 8, 2023 chapel service] left Asbury with a prayer and a challenge: “Fall back in love with the ordinary.” It was not an attention-grabbing message or a revved-up cry for the Spirit’s return. Each statement on Hughes’s stage echoed the idea that spirit was still present, even after crowds dispersed. It was a challenge to bring our memory of the extraordinary into the ordinary parts of our lives (McCracken, 2024).

Surely genuine, personal, and sympathetic interaction around that kind of theme—more than the rightfully decried one-way, online criticisms noted above and that inevitably reinforce

misconceptions—would lead to even healthier spiritual growth and even more biblically-grounded discernment.

### *Two Areas of Special Note*

How did *race relations* factor into the Outpouring? While people of color had been part of the succession of worship teams throughout the Outpouring, the administrative team that had been assembled to help meet the Outpouring’s logistical challenges began to notice a lack of representation in their own makeup. They then took concrete steps to rectify that lack in a way that has persisted (Baldwin, 2024, p. 150).

Remarkably, on the afternoon of February 7—the day before the Outpouring combusted at the conclusion of the regular Wednesday chapel service—a “Witnessing Circle” was held on campus in connection with Black History Month commemorations. That witnessing circle ceremony, led by an area pastor and some friends of Asbury, was lamenting the tragedy of people held and passed on as slaves in that region by reading mid-nineteenth-century wills of property owners. Reportedly a Haitian American participant lead the group in a heartfelt singing of the Black national anthem and in a time of weeping and repentance. This same Haitian American guest took part in that evening’s music practice and prayer time for the Wednesday chapel, having been invited to help lead the chapel music on February 8 (Baldwin, 2024, pp. 178-179; Keener, 2023).

Race relations were thus not ignored or insignificant in how the Outpouring unfolded.

Another particularly striking feature of what took place in the Outpouring—one that arguably evidenced the Spirit’s work as much as any feature did or could—concerned Asbury’s handling of *financial matters*. On one hand, as news spread about the students’ fervor, it would have been easy for the university leadership to be tempted to capitalize on the fund-raising opportunities associated with such an event. Surely many current and potential donors would have been more than happy to support the accelerated spiritual growth desired at any Christian institution. However, in order to avoid any appearance of co-opting the reported breakout of a revival for financial gain, senior leadership in fact suspended previously arranged fund-raising activities and normal donation solicitation. The administration also did not initiate special offerings by which the thousands of visitors could contribute (Baldwin, 2024, p. 92; Elliott, 2023, 1176-1181).

What, then, about the unanticipated but unavoidable avalanche of expenses associated with the flood of visitors? How were costs to be covered for security, food, water, and portable toilets, for example (Elliott, 2023, 1176-181)? As it turned out, unsolicited and seemingly spontaneous donations poured in, sometimes by cash or checks handed to administrators and staff or simply left at worship venues (Baldwin, 2024, pp. 91-92). Even the city of Wilmore received unsolicited funds to cover their associated expenses as well (Elliott, 2023, 1189-1195).

The amazing generosity exhibited by contributors is cause for much joy and gratitude. The particular point to underscore here, though, is how the university’s leadership was not driven by financial pressures as much as they were by Spirit-produced wisdom, godliness, integrity, and zeal to represent Jesus Christ in an honorable way as a Christian institution. The Scriptures are replete with admonitions and examples to pay special attention to how money is desired, procured, or managed. In all of these areas, the Spirit’s work is evident in how during and after the Outpouring the Asbury University leadership exemplified godly integrity.

## Some Concluding Footnotes

Speaking personally, I resonate with the first-hand accounts of the February 2023 Asbury Outpouring. By God's grace I, too, know the experience of the Spirit coming on a gathering in an almost indescribably powerful manner. The only response, really, is humility, repentance, awe, worship, and unity. Scripture and subsequent history are full of countless examples of God's people responding before God by falling down prostrate and then being uplifted in God's grace.

Various explanations, labels, and criticisms of such occurrences are inevitable. Moreover, how to describe, analyze, and even evaluate an apparent awakening or revival are important parts of the corporate life and witness of churches and Christian institutions, organizations, and individuals. The Spirit of God is quite capable of overseeing the panoply of human perceptions of both regular and irregular occurrences among his people. Today's distant and near instantaneous news feeds can both help and hinder how those human perceptions, and related discourse and interactions, take shape. Thankfully, while rapidly developing electronic wizardry can seem out of control and destructive, God has not been taken by surprise or lost control of how the world functions and communicates.

For those who experience deeply spiritual events, the why's, how's, and what's are entirely secondary, at least in the moment. During those episodes—however long they may last—simultaneously life can accelerate, insights can deepen, sin can be exposed, addictions can be broken, and deep wounds can be healed. The awe, wonder, and joy of knowing God is the central treasure of it all, as evidenced among the Asbury community during the Outpouring's continuous worship.

God works in multitudes of particular, complex, and changing contexts, traditions, and peoples. He displays his "manifold wisdom" through his kaleidoscopic Church (Ephesians 3:10). He will not allow any single sector of his Church (much less any other sphere's entity, be it national, political, linguistic, or anything else) to either co-opt or monopolize his redemptive work or how to describe, analyze, or evaluate it. Whether or not this report shares all of Asbury's distinctives is thus not at issue. More important is a recognition of the Spirit's presence and work in the Outpouring. Thankfully Asbury University, though willing to acknowledge the Spirit's particular work in February 2023 by settling on the label "The Asbury Outpouring," did not attempt to co-opt or monopolize that work for its own purposes; nor did they allow outside visitors to co-opt the extraordinary happening for their ends, either. Asbury's ongoing testimony is that they, joined by many others, profoundly "don't take what happened for granted; we simply continue to share our stories about what God did and is doing when people ask" (Zonio, 2024).

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