Christian organizations that focus on men are nothing new. For example, the Holy Name Society, founded at the Council of Lyons in 1274, and the Knights of Columbus, founded in 1882, both continue to this day (Kauffman 1982). More broadly, Christian movements that focus on men are also nothing new: Muscular Christianity as well as the Men and Religion Forward Movement gained momentum in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Allen 2002, Bederman 1989, Putney 2003). A second wave of Muscular Christianity took hold after the Second World War, with special reference to Christian sporting activities (Ladd and Mathisen 1999). A third wave of Muscular Christianity can be identified in the late 1970s, starting with the establishment by Ed Cole of the Christian Men’s Network (CMN), which saw the creation of what we now know as “men’s ministries” (Gelfer 2009).

Some men’s ministries, such as the well-known Promise Keepers (PK), are non-denominational, while others are affiliated with specific denominations, the most numerous of which are Catholic (Gelfer 2008). Some men’s ministries have no further focus than men, while others have a tighter agenda, such as fatherhood (Gelfer 2010a). The uniting reason for men’s ministry is an anxiety about the fading of men within the church: either an anxiety about men losing power in the Church as a result of increasing feminine influence or a missiological anxiety that fewer men are being brought to Christ. The goal of men’s ministries is therefore to attract men back into churches. This is largely achieved by appealing to stereotypical masculinities based on sporting, military, and
mythopoetic images (Gelfer 2009) as well as a conservative understand-
ing of servant leadership within the home or what has worryingly been
described as “soft patriarchy” (Wilcox 2004).

Most men’s ministries are based in America. In recent years, when
talking about men’s ministries in Australia and New Zealand, I have
met a common complaint from both theologians and clergy, “that’s
not how we do things here.” Their argument is twofold: First, these
critics argue, I present a caricature of evangelicalism that does not
bear witness to its diversity; second, I do not acknowledge that evan-
gelicalism (and therefore evangelical men’s ministries) looks different
in Australasia compared to America. Australasian men’s ministries,
these critics claim, are more subtle. They are less prone to soft patri-
archy, less prone to appealing to sport and military images to entice
men, and consequently less prone to the problematic masculinity they
promote.¹

Part of this criticism is reasonable (at least according to research
sympathetic to evangelical diversity). It is true that American evangelical-
ism—due to the assumed creep of modernity and its values—is not the
conservative monolith once identified by progressive critics. There is a
spectrum of positions on this issue ranging from the paradox that evan-
gelical rhetoric remains conservative while its practice is increasingly lib-
eral/progressive (Bartkowski 1999, Gallagher and Smith 1999, Wilcox
and Bartkowski 1999) through to there being a “megashift” in the evan-
gelical worldview (Brow 1990). It is also true that Australasian evangeli-
calism has its own particular flavor. For example, Brian Dickey (1994)
argues that by the 1990s, the Australian evangelical domain can be seen
as a “self-contained, self-directing phenomena whose linkages are tenu-
ous and various, whose driving forces are largely endogamous, whose
endeavors are largely independent” (240).²

However, the claim of “that’s not how we do things here” requires
further unpacking. First, it must be recognized that while there may be
diversity to evangelicalism in America, this does not necessarily mean
that evangelical men’s ministries are similarly diverse. Indeed, the evan-
gelical caricature is largely justified when the masculine performances
in American men’s ministries are examined (Gelfer 2009). Second, it can-
not be assumed that because evangelicalism in Australasia has its own
particularities, men’s ministries in Australasia will also have their own
particularities (especially in light of the American caricature). Canvassing men’s ministry Web sites,3 this article looks specifically at Australasian men’s ministries to see whether the claim of “that’s not how we do things here” stands up to scrutiny. If it does, we would expect to find different forms of local men’s ministry. If it doesn’t, we would expect to find a repetition of sporting and military images, combined with the promotion of servant leadership.4

Australia

Militarism is the chief motif of American men’s ministries. Some American ministries, such as Battlezone Ministries or Band of Brothers,5 construct their whole brand identity around militarism, while others use military graphics on their Web sites, speak about men’s ministry in terms of a “battle,” or even equip their members with symbolic weapons.6 In Australia, Men in Action also adopts a military aesthetic, with its M.I.A. logo rendered in a military font and coupled with a pair of dog tags (clearly M.I.A. also resonates with “missing in action”).7 Following this combative theme and more generally aligning themselves with American ministries, M.I.A. promotes American Christian men’s books such as John Eldredge’s (2001) Wild at Heart, which revolves around the theme of a “battle to fight,” and Stu Weber’s (1993) Tender Warrior, of which one critic notes, “warrior and military metaphors saturate his book” (Kintz 1997, 116).8 Vision of Victory Life Men’s Ministry is a good example of a ministry employing military language, if not images. Their goal is “to train an army of men who know who they are in Christ and the Christ within to take this city and nation for Jesus.”9 Similarly, the 2011 Hillsong Men’s Conference slogan is “Are You Up for the Fight?”10

Sport is another key motif of American men’s ministries. Again, some ministries, such as the National Coalition of Men’s Ministries-affiliated Sportspersons Ministries or Third Coast Sports, use sport as their main theme, while others use sporting imagery and language in a more general way. In Australia, returning to M.I.A., we find its interest groups are largely focused around sporting themes: four-wheel driving, cricket, cycling, fathering, fishing, golfing, and hiking.11 The Full Throttle men’s conference uses a range of sports cars and motorbikes on its Web site, chief among which is a Holden Monaro, an archetypal Australian muscle
car. Full Throttle even includes among its highlights a “‘show & shine’ car & bike competition.”

Katoomba Christian Convention’s men’s ministry also uses a car show to attract men called Men and Machines. A report of the event states the biblical message was “not lost amongst the kebabs, revving of engines, and admiration of fast cars.” This sentence demonstrates how eating meat, which is typically employed as a signifier for normative masculinity (Gal and Wilkie 2010, Parry 2010, Sobal 2005), is used to appeal to men in Australian men’s ministries. The same report states, “there were clear signs of vegetables added to the traditional night-out kebab. There can be no complaints from the women-folk this time around!!” Elsewhere in the resources section of their Web site, the ministry provides parables via their Men and Meat video and the services of a traveling butcher for ministry events: “Gary … is a butcher/deacon/lay preacher in Young who is willing to travel to Sydney (or surrounds) to carve and/or speak at your Men and Meat event. He charges for only the cost of the meat.” St. Augustine’s church in Neutral Bay ran such an event resulting in an “unprecedented outreach event that saw sixty blokes, half of whom were guests, get together to learn about how to cut up a cow” (Smith 2008, 1). Alongside meat, only alcohol is considered such a potent source of masculine sustenance (Gelfer 2010b), and this too is mobilized by St. Lukes church in Miranda in its “A is for Ale …and J is for Jesus” initiative, where men “get involved in some beer-related trivia and sit back to listen to a yarn or two about beer and Jesus” (Smith 2008, 14).

Servant leadership is another key motif of American men’s ministries. Again, some ministries, such as Dad the Family Shepherd, use servant leadership as their main theme, while others mobilize it in a more general way. In Australia, M.I.A. also follow this theme, noting the ministry is “about encouraging men to become the leaders in their church, homes, families, work places, and communities; to take the place in life that God meant for men.” Elsewhere, servant leadership of the family is a key message of numerous ministries such as Adelaide Men’s Convention, Katoomba Christian Convention’s Men’s Ministry, or Living Waters Men’s Ministry.

A final key motif of American men’s ministries is their mythopoetic narrative, which often intersects in complex ways with the secular
mythopoetic men’s movement, appealing to initiation, the “father wound” and generic notions of the “masculine soul” (Gelfer 2009). In Australia, M.I.A. links to The Tasmanian Men’s Retreat, Journey into Manhood, based around the theme of initiation and organized by Men Transforming Men, “a ministry that helps men recognize their brokenness and gently rebuilds identity through a journey of wisdom.” Men Transforming Men also run Men’s Rites of Passage programs, founded by the American Christian mythopoet Richard Rohr. Similarly, Ellel Ministries’ Initiated course refers to the father wound, “highlight[ing] important components needed in ‘rites of passage’. It is designed to teach Dads how to ‘initiate’ their sons and call their daughters into true femininity.”

New Zealand
While in Australia, men’s ministries tend to be Australian organizations that echo their American counterparts, New Zealand ministries operate in a slightly different manner. Rather than finding specifically local ministries, a significant percentage of the activities are based in American men’s ministries operating in New Zealand. While by no means the only men’s ministry activity in the country, the following discussion highlights two such organizations, which are representative of men’s ministry in New Zealand: Christian Men’s Network New Zealand (CM NZ) and Promise Keepers New Zealand (PK NZ).

As mentioned above, the third wave of muscular Christianity started with the founding of The CMN by Ed Cole in 1977. CMN NZ is a partner organization of CMN, and its Web site is largely a reiteration of CMN rhetoric. There is very little information on the Web site that is specific to New Zealand, which might offer an insight into how New Zealand men’s ministry may have its own particular flavor. The only real element of the Web site that refers to New Zealand at the time of writing is reference to the Lions Roar 2010 event, which was held in Life City Church Tauranga. However, it is noteworthy that while this event was held in New Zealand, it explicitly reflects the simultaneous activity of CMN, which is also branded as Lions Road 2010. The main speaker at this event, Tony Cameneti, is not a New Zealander but rather an American currently based in Australia. The absence of New Zealand-specific information on the Web site means that CMN NZ is left only to promote the kind of masculinity envisioned by Ed Cole. It does this via its online
shop, which sells a variety of products, chief among them Cole’s bestselling book *Maximized Manhood* (1982). In it, Cole rails against a variety of threats to his biblical vision of manhood, such as lust, idolatry, and fornication. Cole’s plan was to battle these problems by re-establishing the male authority figure in the home, or what is now euphemistically described as “soft patriarchy.”

By far, the most active manifestation of men’s ministry in New Zealand is PK NZ. PK famously filled sports stadiums across North America in the early 1990s and continues to this day. Its main emphasis is on serving the family, a generous interpretation of which results in the kind of “feminist hallucinations” written about by Judith Newton, who witnessed thousands of men “hugging, holding hands, talking intimately in small consciousness-raising-like groups … Sights and sounds like these evoked memories of the personal transformations that feminists had once dared to hope for from men” (2005, 3). However, early PK rhetoric, which urged members to take back authority in the home while promoting narrow visions of masculinity, resulted in it largely being interpreted as a backlash against feminism (Conason et al. 1997, Eldén 2002, Kimmel 1997, van Leeuwen 1997, Messner 1997, Poling and Kirkley 2000).

Promise Keepers New Zealand follows PK’s main activity of touring the country and staging events intended to inspire and attract men via what it considers to be appropriate signifiers of masculinity. The 2011 conference is focused on the theme *Game On*, employing the sporting imagery used from the earliest days of PK. Previous conference themes have continued the masculine signifiers: *GPS* in 2010, alluding to technology; *Forging Tomorrow’s Men* in 2009, with a graphic of a steel works; *Leave No Man Behind* in 2008, with a graphic of soldiers rescuing a fallen brother; and *Fuel* in 2007, alluding to motor racing. In earlier years, the PK NZ event branding has been directly transposed from its America parent. In 2006, for example, both ran an event called *Unleashed*, and in 2005, *The Awakening*, using exactly the same promotional graphics.

Promise Keepers New Zealand has a number of videos on its YouTube channel. The most popular New Zealand-specific videos (by number of views) provide insight into the images PK NZ perceives to be appropriate for the task of fishing for men. *Construction Site Drama: Undercover Christian Comes Out* shows three monosyllabic construction workers in overalls and hardhats, sitting on scaffolding, skirting around the issue of why
one of them has recently stopped being grumpy and “staring at hot chicks”; he has, of course, found God.  

My Story: Amos Perese Ale, Ex Gang Member is a testimony from an ex-biker gang member, who talks about his earlier misdemeanors and how finding God delivered him from a drug addiction.  

Tank Pull FV432 Armoured Personnel Carrier Vs Muscle Power shows men from a PK NZ event pulling a 16-ton armored personnel carrier down a Christchurch street.  

Leave No Man Behind Event 2008 offers a montage of heavy metal music and footage of warfare during which Mike Connell from Hastings tells PK NZ attendees that they were “born for battle.” Equipped with “weapons of war,” God “wants them to fight.”  

Maori Battalion Marching Song—Promise Keepers Honours Veterans first glorifies Maori soldiers before attendees perform a “spontaneous” Haka (a Maori ritual dance typically, though not exclusively, connected with battle).  

Truck Pull Christchurch is similar to the armored personnel carrier but features a 7,500-kg truck.  

The PK NZ Web site also allows us to see how it considers itself to be networked with the wider world of men’s ministry via the links it provides to other individuals and organizations. PK NZ does have local links on its Web site (albeit to local chapters of international organizations: CMN NZ and Full Gospel Business Men’s Fellowship International, New Zealand) but largely frames its identity (and therefore the type of masculinity it promotes) via well-known American men’s ministries, such as Man in the Mirror, National Coalition of Men’s Ministries or the military-inspired On Target Ministries and Top Gun Ministries. PK NZ also links to well-known American writers, such as Dave Murrow “church for men” (2005) and John Eldredge, whose Wild at Heart (2001) has been used as manly inspiration for the murderous evangelical Mexican drug cartel La Familia (Gibbs 2009).  

Conclusion  

The claim of “that’s not how we do things here” argues that men’s ministries in Australia and New Zealand are different from their North American counterparts because evangelicalism in these countries is different. The assumption is that men’s ministries in America may be riddled with caricatured and problematic masculinities, but not so in Australasia. However, the preceding evidence suggests otherwise. This fits with the sometimes paradoxical interpretation of evangelicalism in
Australasia. While, as we have seen, Dickey (1994) argues that Australian evangelicalism’s “endeavors are largely independent” (240), this is not the whole story. Indeed, Dickey also notes that “importation of ideas and methods has also occurred more recently from the United States direct to Australian evangelicalism” (219-220). Referring to the shift away from Australian evangelicalism’s Colonial ties, Dickey claims that its substantial changes over recent decades are the result of a “new wave of ideas and practices [which have] reached Australia across the Pacific, not the Atlantic” (239).

Situating the analysis in a more historical context, Stuart Piggin (1996) goes so far as to suggest that American influence on Australian evangelicalism has produced its finest moment. “Never before and never since the 1959 Billy Graham Crusades in Australian capital cities,” Piggin states, “have Australians been so concerned with the Christian religion” (154). It is noteworthy that Piggin describes the Billy Graham Crusades as “very masculine” and being run like a military operation, including team hunting for kangaroos (156). Piggin also shows how the nineteenth-century Muscular Christianity phenomenon was taken up with enthusiasm in Australia because of a similar concern about the lack of men in churches, despite the assumption at the time that in Australia “the men are men and the women are, too” (53). Clearly, there is a distinct American influence on Australasian evangelicalism alongside its more independent characteristics. There are also explicit historical precedents for importing foreign anxieties about and responses to the fading of men and masculinity within the churches, contemporary American men’s ministries being simply the latest example.

While not all men’s ministries in Australia echo their American counterparts, plenty do. The key motifs of militarism, sport, servant leadership, and mythopoetic narratives are all present in organizations that are typical of men’s ministries in Australia. In New Zealand, men’s ministries not only resemble their American counterparts, they are largely local franchises of American men ministries. Indeed, while there are some genuinely local organizations (albeit again largely echoing American ministries), the significant majority of men’s ministries activity in New Zealand is a direct result of PK NZ.

So, when I am faced with the criticism of “that’s not how we do things here,” my response is twofold. Certainly, it is true that evangeli-
calism is diverse and Australasia has its own particular evangelical voice. However, when it comes to men’s ministries, this diversity is largely missing, both in America and in Australasia. The unfortunate conclusion is “that’s exactly how we do things here.”

**Works Cited**


Notes

1. “Problematic masculinity” here means masculinity constructed via permutations of combativeness and domination, which allows little room for alternative or diverse masculine performances.

2. Of course, the New Zealand evangelical domain is different again. There is a danger here of glossing over both the historical and contemporary differences between Australian and New Zealand evangelicalism, but this article is less about differences (both between Australia and New Zealand and between these and other countries) and more about the similarities.

3. Men’s ministry Web sites are an excellent resource to analyze as they demonstrate how the ministry sees itself when communicating to the outside world via text, images, and video. Web sites are also insightful—via the links they contain—in terms of identifying the networking between ministries, which is one of the characteristics of the third wave of Muscular Christianity. The limitations of such an analysis, of course, include privileging the voice of the ministry organizers over the grassroots members whose intentionality may differ and may be seen as equally representative of the ministry. It is noteworthy that participant observer accounts of men’s movement activity in general—for example, Magnuson (2007) and Schwalbe (1996)—tend to be significantly more sympathetic to their subject of enquiry.

4. In terms of scope, the men’s ministries examined are loosely evangelical in orientation. A more expansive comparison between Catholic men’s ministries would provide further insight into the similarities and difference in men’s ministries in these two regions.


6. For example, Champions of Honor use the “champions sword” to commission men into the ministry: “a Roman Gladius Sword with a 24” cutting double edge blade. It has a bloodline in the middle of the blade” (http://www.championsofhonor.com/tier-items.html?page=shop.product_details&flypage=flypage.tpl&product_id=27&category_id=5).


15. It is surprising that more has not been made internationally of alcohol in men’s ministries. The only significant organization to fully exploit it appears to be the Baptist Men’s Movement in the UK, which partnered with the pub chain J. D. Wetherspoon to host their annual Big Breakfast event, http://www.baptist.org.uk/news_media/latest_news/bmm.html.
27. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7c5n8M8q_E.
28. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7c5n8M8q_E.