

Training Local Church Musicians
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Today we are at a crossroads in the field of Christian music education and local church music ministry. You, as music educators and future music educators are helping to shape what ministry will look like tomorrow. Will it be a vibrant, evolving witness of God's love in society or will it be an institutionalized "party-line" mentality that is safe, comfortable, and oftentimes irrelevant?

The signs of change are everywhere in our churches, seminaries and universities. Churches are experiencing the birth of new forms of worship and grieving the death of old patterns and traditions. Independent church growth consultants urge us to do one thing while denominational leaders may have another idea. Seminaries and Christian colleges struggle to include contemporary Christian music within a curriculum that has been devoted to the study of classical music for decades.

When each student graduates from seminary or a Christian college, he or she leaves with a template for ministry that will supposedly equip him or her to handle what happens out there in "real life." But does it? Are we as music educators really providing them with the tools to face a constantly changing ministry scene? Right up front, I want to say that I have never served in a full-time church position. For the last 22 years I have been self-employed as an arranger, composer, and producer of music, primarily for the church. I do not have a seminary degree. My degree is in piano performance from Baylor University. However, I have served as a volunteer music leader for 18 years in a church in Kansas City, Missouri. I have also listened to literally hundreds of music ministers, music educators and seminary professors across the United States and in other countries share the joys and trials of their job situation. I've heard them talk of how college or seminary didn't necessarily prepare them for life in the trenches of church work. I'm not so naïve to believe that Christian colleges and seminaries can teach each student everything they need to know to make it in the real world, but we've got to close the gap that currently exists between esoteric learning and practical skills that will help them make it through each week.

What crucial skills were missing from your formal education? What would you have **liked** to learn in seminary or college that would have truly equipped you to deal with the day-to-day realities of your present job?

I'd like to offer some suggestions to you based on my 25 years of working as a volunteer in music ministry and the feedback I've received from countless music ministers.

Before I launch into a list of all the musical skills that might be helpful for a new music minister, I'd like to talk about something even more essential. Whenever I listen to the problems music ministers face, it's not always about music. More often, it is about a spiritual, social, or psychological problem. I think we owe it to our students to address such issues as stress management, conflict resolution, job burnout, and the like. These are the nitty gritty issues.

We all know from experience that musicians don't live by a 9-5 clock. We are often expected to keep regular office hours and yet be available for rehearsals and performances in the evenings and on weekends, not to mention multiple services on Sunday. Where do you draw the line? Do you know how to say "no" when too much is expected of you? Do you have good boundaries? Stress can rob us of the energy we need to perform our job well and cheat our family out of quality time.

Be aware of burnout situations. We need to take care of bodies physically, spiritually, and emotionally. Do you schedule time to exercise or simply relax?

Have you ever had a conflict between another staff member at church, with your pastor, with a choir member, with someone on the finance committee? How did it go? Was there resolution or just resentment that got pushed under the surface? Learning to resolve conflict amicably is a very important life skill. I've observed that most church staff members leave not so much because of differences in worship philosophies or leadership styles, but because conflicts arising from those differences were never resolved. Even if you move to a new location, those kinds of problems will follow you wherever you go.

Are you a good administrator? Can you manage people, organize a program, recruit choir members and other directors, create and maintain a budget? As musicians we often get a bad rap because people assume we're more creative or right brain oriented and have no organizational skills. If you don't have left-brain, analytical skills, then recognize that upfront and surround yourself with people who are gifted in that area. You don't have to do it all.

In fact, it's extremely important to delegate, especially as your program grows. I have often fallen into the trap of thinking "If I want it done right, I must do it myself." Do you recognize yourself in that statement? That's a blueprint for burnout. It's also a bit arrogant. Consider managing your music program on a team model instead of a top-down management style. People may not always do things the way you would, but they learn through making mistakes and when we trust them with responsibilities. Can you motivate, mentor, and work **with** people on projects? Can you model servanthood? If you always have the most polished singer or instrumentalist in an upfront role on Sunday morning, this sends a message to the potential musician in the pew, that the stakes are too high for them and that there's no room for volunteers that may want to give their gifts. Be excellent in all you do, but allow for growth and even failure within that goal. Everyone brings varying skills and talents to the table, but they all want to belong.

Working in churches can be a very transitory life. Moves to a new church can happen often and without much notice. Do you know how to negotiate the terms of a new job, a salary package? This is Business 101, Life Skills 101, but no one ever taught me that in college. Should you be fired, can you negotiate a severance package? Could you ask for a salary increase at your present job if it was merited? If you had to fire someone within your area of ministry, could you do it and allow him or her to walk away with dignity?

In addition to the practical business aspects of being in the ministry, how you travel your personal spiritual path will have a great impact on your success and happiness in the ministry. And I'm not talking about what religion classes you took in seminary or your knowledge of what the Bible says about this or that.

In his book, "The Different Drum", psychiatrist and bestselling author Scott Peck outlines an overview of spiritual growth that has been very helpful for me. According to Dr. Peck, our spiritual journey has at least four stages that roughly coincide with our physical and emotional development. In stage one, when we're infants, we don't have a well-developed moral sense, no sense of what's wrong or right. Everything is about us and our needs, and our parents usually take care of us and control our environment. This stage might be comparable spiritually to someone who is incapable of loving others and basically unprincipled.

Stage two is comparable to our life as children before we reach adolescence. This is a stage where parents and institutions help shape our moral code and sense of self. Children need lots of boundaries during this time and life is rather black or white. Consequently when we're learning about God and spiritual things, answers tend to be given in more legalistic terms. Unfortunately some people and some churches tend to get stuck in this stage where questioning and inclusivity is considered a lack of faith instead of a natural part of the growth process.

Stage three is comparable to our teenage years, when rebellion against authority is common and questions and doubts abound. We seek to define our individuality, and this may be at odds with the systems that our parents or society have defined for us. Who among us has not gone through times of questioning our faith or wondering if the things our parents taught us are really true for us? This is a natural part of our journey toward mature spirituality.

Stage four is comparable to mature adulthood, physiologically and emotionally. Although this is certainly not the final stage, what this means spiritually is that you know certain spiritual truths to be true, yet you are always open to learning more as the Spirit reveals it to you. And more importantly, you can live these truths for yourself while at the same time respecting other people's journeys, especially when they are different from yours. If you're interested in reading more about this, I would highly recommend Chapter Nine of Scott Peck's book, "The Different Drum."

My whole point in mentioning this is to remind you that your spirituality is an organic, growing, evolving process. Don't get stuck somewhere in the past and cling to it as if that

is your salvation. The verse about “working out your own salvation” suggests that it is an ongoing process...one of change.

So...are we prepared for change in our journey? What happens when our theology doesn't match the pastor's or that of our church or denomination? Do we have a global view of religion, a tolerance or acceptance of other spiritual paths? What happens when we experience a cataclysmic event like divorce or death or job termination and it makes us cynical and question our faith? I've heard so many music ministers who have experienced great loss or hurt at the hands of their church. I know you've heard these stories too. This is part of life, people. Wouldn't it be wise to prepare our students for that in advance? Just because your students are Christians and are taught the Bible, does not mean that they will follow the rules all the time. Good people sometimes make bad choices, so let's remind them of the grace that is available in advance and give them life skills to deal with the consequences.

Historically the Church has always dug in its heels when it comes to change. When people come to church they want to see authenticity. They want to experience worship that connects with them on the inside and is not merely a show. When you're hurting inside, you need an encounter with God, not religious platitudes or glitzy music. Are we willing to do what it takes to change? Are we willing to risk something new, to let go of something old that is familiar and comfortable, or maybe just sentimental? Are we willing to connect with our rich liturgical traditions instead of assuming that the best kind of music is only the newest kind? What is at stake is literally the health and lives of our churches. When we resist healthy, positive change because we're afraid, we may not see the consequences of our decision immediately, but trust me; you are saying “no” to growth.

Everyone has his or her own idea about what authentic, vibrant worship is. In preparing for this speech, I came across these quotes from two opposing authors, which I found rather telling. “To attend the typical Protestant Sunday morning worship service is to experience something odd, something like a charade...Lacking is a sense of the terrible mystery of God, which sets language atremble and silences facile chattiness...If the seraphim assumed this Sunday morning mood, they would be addressing God not as ‘holy, holy, holy’ but as ‘nice, nice, nice’”.¹

On the other side of this stylistic chasm is an out-spoken advocate of the church growth movement. William Easum, author of *Dancing with Dinosaurs: Ministry in a Hostile and Hurting World*, and former United Methodist pastor “claims that the right method for arriving at a suitable style for church music is to determine which radio stations most of the ‘worship guests’ listen to. ‘Soft rock’ is usually the answer, he declares.”² He further quotes John Bisagno, former pastor of First Baptist Church in Houston, “Long-haired music, funeral-dirge anthems, and stiff-collared song leaders will kill the church faster

¹ Edward Farley, “A Missing Presence,” *Christian Century*, March 18-25, 1998) p. 276.

² William Easum, *Dancing with Dinosaurs: Ministry in a Hostile and Hurting World* (Nashville, TN, Abingdon, 1993) p. 84.

than anything in the world...There are no great, vibrant, soul-winning churches reaching great numbers of people, baptizing hundreds of converts, reaching masses that have stiff music, seven-fold amens, and a steady diet of classical anthems. None. That's not a few. That's none, none, none."³

With extreme statements like that, it's tempting to either draw swords and prepare for battle or simply throw up our hands in despair. However, Frank Burch Brown in his book, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, has some assumptions that may guide our discussion of this matter. Let me quote just a few.

1. There are many kinds of good taste, and many kinds of good religious art and music. In view of cultural diversity, it would be extremely odd if that were not true.
2. Not all kinds of good art and music are equally good for worship, let alone for every tradition and faith community. In terms of worship, therefore, it is not enough that a work or style of art be likeable; it must also be appropriate.
3. Every era and cultural context tends to develop new forms of sacred music and art, which to begin with often seem secular to many people.

It is an act of Christian love to learn to appreciate or at least respect what others value in a particular style or work that they cherish in worship or in the rest of life. That is different, however, from personally liking every form of commendable art, which is impossible and unnecessary.⁴

Do we have generous, open views of worship and its various styles? How do we define worship, how narrowly or broadly? Can we honestly assess our personal musical tastes and realize they are **our** personal tastes and not try to foist them on our congregations? We, as educators, have incredible knowledge, insights, and gifts to share with our students. However, ours should not be the only voice they hear. We are not the gospel truth when it comes to worship styles. We should encourage diversity and openness to many paths and styles without creating a sense of bias.

In order to get another perspective, I checked in with one of my good friends from college, who is a minister of music at a large, vibrant Baptist church in Brentwood, Tennessee, outside Nashville. My friend, Dennis Worley, has been involved in the music ministry for most of his adult life. In addition to his tenure at various churches, he has worked for the Christian music publishing industry and has a "pulse" on what is contemporary and what meets the needs of churches today. Dennis and his wife, Karla, and I were music majors together at Baylor University and we were often frustrated with the lack of interest in contemporary Christian music by the music school faculty. Word Music started in Waco, Texas, where Baylor is located. There were incredible resources available through this company and much interest on the part of the students, and yet our

³ Ibid, p. 85.

⁴ Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2000) pp. 250-251.

music faculty didn't have a vision for this kind of music ministry. We had to learn about this on our own.

When I asked Dennis for advice to music educators and students such as you, he said, "Institutions need to open their eyes and minds. However, it's beyond style. It's about exposing yourself to and developing every possible way our generation chooses to worship now." We need to have a deep appreciation for both ends of the spectrum in music, even if we don't understand it or like it. Whatever we do should be done with excellence and authenticity.

In my opinion, one of the reasons why worshipers don't enjoy classical music is that it is performed so poorly in church. I think the same can be said for hastily thrown together praise and worship music performed by the equivalent of "garage bands." People sometimes wrongly judge the content of music by the medium in which it's presented.

Dennis' son, Seth, is a film major at Baylor. Dennis said, "If I were training Seth for the music ministry, I would make sure he is exposed to all the sounds and forms of worship expression available."

I'm happy to say that Baylor is showing interest in a more inclusive church music degree program. In fact, Baylor University hosted a first-ever symposium entitled "Music and the Church" in 2002 on the Baylor campus, sponsored by the Billy Ray Hearn Endowed Symposium on Church Music. It addressed questions such as:

1. What's the difference between Christian music and church music? Is there a difference?
2. Have we gone too far with our worship music? What's too far?
3. Is our traditional worship outdated...or timeless?
4. Does the message change the audience or does the audience change the message?

The purpose of this symposium was to bring together pastors, youth pastors, worship leaders, and other Christian musicians led by representatives from the church, the Christian music industry and academic institutions. More cutting edge events like this are needed to continue the dialogue.

I'd like to make one last point before I talk about the practical musical skills. And that is the importance of knowing what your "worship voice" is. Simply defined, your worship voice is whatever unique skills, talents and spiritual gifts you have that contribute to corporate worship. Think broadly here. This could be anything from your talents as a singer or instrumentalist to something more esoteric like being a sculptor, weaver, playwright, actor, film editor, choreographer, just to name a few. And then there are the practical needs in making worship happen like organizers, sound techs, lighting techs, and computer personnel who create the bulletins or PowerPoint displays. Encourage your students to use his or her spiritual gifts, for these gifts are different from talents. Not everyone has equal talents, but every believer has a spiritual gift that can be used to build up the body of Christ.

As music educators we also need to be honest with women about the opportunities or lack thereof in church work. I've known many gifted women who have graduated from seminary only to find there are no real leadership roles available to them in their denomination because of gender bias. In my opinion that's inexcusable. If you have influence within your denomination, work for more equality. Women, you should be pro-active and research your particular field of ministry while you are getting your education. There is a glass ceiling out there, make no mistake, but I would encourage you to follow your dreams and God's call on your life in spite of the church.

On a very practical level, you will need to be as diversified as possible in your skills when you graduate, no matter what your main instrument is.

You need to be able to read music and have an understanding of music theory. If we were musicians in Mozart's time, we would all know and utilize figured bass, because that was the musical shorthand of the day. Today the equivalent musical shorthand is chord symbols. They are no longer just for guitar players. Virtually every contemporary Christian music book and many octavos contain chord symbols along with the notated accompaniment. In many cases, the accompaniment is so simplistic that one needs the chord symbols to improvise and embellish what's there.

If you're not primarily a keyboard player, I would encourage you to hone these skills. Being able to play through a hymn, a choral score, read open score, or play a piano accompaniment is essential if you want to be in music ministry. If you can find someone to teach you simple improvisational skills, I would highly encourage you to take advantage of that. Oftentimes jazz players can teach you improvisational skills and new harmonies that will help you play contemporary Christian music. If you've never played keyboard or guitar with a rhythm section, think about trying that. Knowing how to keep a steady beat with an ensemble is crucial in today's music.

Practice sight-reading just for the heck of it. Start at the beginning of the hymnal and play at least one or two hymns a day. That's how you get better. Work toward being able to play a hymn in a steady tempo without stopping or pausing, as if you are accompanying.

You may imagine that you'll never have to write or arrange music if you're a church choir director, but there are many situations where your unique set of players or singers may not match up to what is being published. Having the ability to simplify parts or transpose a song to a different key could be just the ticket to assuring success in your music program. Become a weekend arranger. Learn computer notation software such as Finale or Sibelius.

As an arranger, you should understand the rudiments of modulation. No matter **what** style of worship you prefer, be prepared to plan for all styles. Can you create a medley of hymns or choruses? What are the elements that allow songs to flow seamlessly from one to another?

Can you write a leadsheet and a rhythm chart? You may have an idea for a contemporary version of a hymn or you may have heard a new praise and worship song that needs to be notated in a special key for your players. Can you write that down?

Perhaps you'll have melodic instruments or high voices that can sing descants or obbligatos. Can you write a simple countermelody to a hymn or a descant part to a contemporary chorus? One way to start is to imitate existing descants. Many of the leading publishers who publish orchestrations for hymnals and their supplements have written instrumental descants for C instruments.

A cursory knowledge of orchestral instruments and their transpositions is important. You may not plan to ever conduct a church orchestra, but never say never! One rarely starts out with a full compliment of strings and a balanced number of brass and winds. It's good to know how to take a fully published orchestration and cut it down to suit your situation. In some cases you may even be able to contact the orchestrator and get the original computer file, which would allow you to change and adapt the instrumentation to your needs. For instance, tenor saxes double nicely when French horns are not available. They have similar ranges, although they have different transpositions, which would necessitate re-writing the parts in a new key.

Have an understanding of what groups of instruments work well together. You may not have all the instruments you need or want in a church, but if you have an odd assortment, which is likely, it's helpful to know how to match or not match up certain instruments. For instance, if I had a flute, clarinet and trombone, I would probably not have those three instruments playing unison or in the same grouping. The flute and clarinet could play together because of their complimentary tone and range, but I would feature the trombone more as a solo instrument, independent of the woodwinds, perhaps as a bass continuo or as a tenor countermelody.

Another much needed skill is the art of conducting a rehearsal. This can encompass anything from how to conduct a church choir rehearsal to conducting a full professional orchestra. There are the obvious things that a choral conducting class will teach you.

- Proper vowel production
- Choral blend
- Interesting warm-ups exercises
- Vocal repertoire
- Phrasing
- Various conducting patterns and rhythms
- How to motivate your choir
- How to prepare a choral score for conducting

In addition to that, you should consider the non-musical aspects of a church choir rehearsal. For many people, the choir is their family, their most important place of belonging. What will you do to nurture that? Do you stay in contact with members on a regular basis? Do you have choir officers? Do you have a devotional or prayer time

weekly? What should be your expectations for a volunteer choir as opposed to a college group that meets daily or a semi-professional chorus?

Conducting a praise band or rhythm section is an entirely different animal. For one thing, you're primarily dealing with instrumentalists. They may even be high school students. Can you lovingly and confidently coach a rhythm section through the various styles of music that they'll be playing? What about transitions between songs? Who will set the tempos? Do you understand the concept that the more players you have, the less notes each one should play? Do you know the relationship between drums and bass and how keyboards and rhythm guitars can compete with or compliment each other?

Can you handle the demands of an orchestral rehearsal where the playing ability may be extremely uneven? How do you maintain good morale with both the beginners and the advanced players? One option is to create opportunities for advanced players to be showcased but also encourage them to play with the whole group, beginners and all, and have a good, affirming attitude. Encourage mentoring within the orchestra.

How will drama and rehearsing drama play a part in your ministry? If this is not your gift, can you delegate this to others?

In any rehearsal situation, your attitude should be affirming, whether or not the group meets your expectations. Give a compliment before every constructive criticism. Never criticize your accompanist in front of the entire choir. Give constructive criticism privately after the rehearsal. Be as clear and as prepared as you can be in your conducting patterns. Don't walk into a rehearsal "sight-reading" a score, especially if your choir is sight-reading.

Learn how to play the piano or organ and conduct at the same time. You never know when you'll be without an accompanist.

Here are some other quick suggestions for music educators that might work in your classroom. I think these ideas will inspire creativity in your students once they're on the job front.

1. Along with the classics, study the role of contemporary Christian music since 1950. Help students see how trends from that period affect us now. Then jump back to hymnody of the 19th century and see how that influenced writers in the first half of the 20th century. The point here is to see that we are all connected to and influenced by our past. Sometimes what is written is reactionary and sometimes it is complimentary.
2. Conduct a study of hymnals from many denominations including hymnal supplements. Discover what Catholics and Jews are using in their worship. Are there any similarities to the Protestant faith? Are they struggling with "worship wars" like us? This is a wonderful way to create awareness and inclusivity of other faiths, and it also provides an instant database of resources for future worship planning.

3. How do you pick repertoire? Analyze a sample packet from a publisher with a CD. Discuss tracks versus live instrumentation. Is there ever a time when canned music is acceptable and good to use? Why?
4. What is your role regarding educating the congregation when it comes to styles and kinds of music? How does the pastor play a part in this? It can be very helpful to hear the biblical basis for new worship patterns addressed by the pastor. It helps create a unified team.
5. What is your responsibility to promote musicianship in children, youth, and seniors? Consider voice lessons, theory lessons, instrumental lessons, and a fine arts school. Where would the personnel come from? Who would manage this? Find a church school or church that models this and ask **lots** of questions. Research this subject on the Internet.
6. Is your church amenable to a concert series? What is involved in setting that up and maintaining that? Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, FL has had a great series for over 25 years. They probably have a website you can check out.
7. Discuss the contrasting roles of worship as evangelism and worship for worship's sake. Talk about the pros and cons of the seeker model started by Willowcreek Church in Barrington, Illinois.
8. How do you plan a worship service? Where do you find resources? What are the pros and cons of using the liturgical calendar? If you don't use it, are you open to drawing upon those traditions occasionally at Advent or Lent for example?
9. How do you hire a professional orchestra? Do you know how to contact the local musician's union? Running a rehearsal with union players is much different from working with volunteers. Do you have the space for a large orchestra in your sanctuary?
10. Be an expert on CCLI and the copyright law. Now is the time to educate your students about the pitfalls of copyright infringement. Do you know what performing rights licensing organizations are? Do you know what a mechanical license is and how to request one?
11. Have knowledge of acoustics and architectural design for future new sanctuaries. Educate yourself on the subject of organs and whether your church needs and wants one. Should it be a traditional pipe organ or electronic? Have knowledge of sound systems and electronic equipment such as drums, keyboards, and guitars. Do you know how to buy an acoustic piano for your sanctuary? What features should you consider? Visit a music store one day as a class.
12. Can you use PowerPoint to enhance your worship graphics? Does your pastor use it in his sermons and how does that mesh with the rest of the worship service?
13. Have knowledge of drama, videography, and film in order to produce video clips. Listen to what Nena Bryans says in her book, "Full Circle,"

“Television, with all its pros and cons, has caused a dramatic change in the way we perceive reality. When watching a television event we are plunged into an experience which taps into our senses of feeling, hearing, and seeing.”

On the other hand, “a service of worship will seem subdued and restrained, lacking in vitality if only words are used. Particularly is this true for the younger generation. When a past-thirty adult misses church he will ask, ‘What did he say?’ – meaning ‘What was the sermon about?’ The under-thirty adult is more likely to ask, ‘What happened?’”⁵

I don’t think you can ever have enough resources when it comes to planning worship services. The Internet is an obvious place to start for this generation and the ones to come. In my library, I have a myriad of hymnals, hymnal supplements, praise and worship chorus books, and blended worship hymnals. Encourage your students to begin working on their personal library right now.

When I entered Baylor as a freshman, my intention was to become a concert pianist. As often happens, that goal changed by the time I graduated, even though I completed my piano performance degree. Several things stirred my eventual desire to become an arranger and work in the music publishing industry. One was my involvement as an arranger for a singing ensemble called “Spirit of Love” and the chance to record an album for Word Records. The opportunity to perform with Continental Singers for two summers opened my eyes to traveling music ministries. Working at Word Music as an unofficial “intern” and making demo recordings with the Young Church Singers, a studio group created by Word gave me a taste of the music industry. My point is that many times what we do outside of the classroom has much more influence on our career choices than our “book learning.”

The music industry and church music ministry has many more job opportunities than we may know about. Not everyone has the desire or is gifted to become a professional singer, instrumentalist, or choir director. Yet you may still want to work in the field of music or be in the music ministry. I know you’ve heard this before, but you can witness to the power of Christ in your life at a secular job just as much as you can if you’re called to the “ministry.” Familiarize yourself with the myriad job opportunities within the music industry. National Music Educator’s Conference periodically lists employment opportunities in music. Their list is by no means exhaustive, but take some time to check out these alternatives.

If I could leave you with just one idea it would be a statement I recently read in a Wayne Dyer book. He wrote, “Don’t die with your music still in you.”⁶ In other words, you have a unique and essential gift to give this world, whether student or teacher. It may only be an intuition that you have right now. Be passionate about it. Take a risk! That voice is God inside of you beckoning you to take the risk and share the music that only you can create.

⁵ Nena Bryans, *Full Circle* (San Carlos, CA, Schuyler Institute for Worship and the Arts, 1988) pp. 14-15.

⁶ Dr. Wayne Dyer, *10 Secrets for Success and Inner Peace* (Carlsbad, CA, Hay House, 2001) p. 19.