

"The Call of the Music Minister to Promote Unity in the Body of Christ," by Christopher Shelt, chair of music department

Church music has become a battleground in many churches today. Those not actively taking aim at other believer's musical practices still find themselves in the chaotic crossfire of conflicting musical causes. We find the dead and wounded lying about in the choir lofts, pews, and bandstands of our churches, casualties of a house divided against itself. Clearly, something is wrong. Yet, those embroiled in the conflict are often unaware of why it is occurring.

At the core of the musical skirmishes in Christianity today is a lack of philosophical consensus within the musical culture of the church. We live in an era characterized by a quagmire of competing worldviews. Thanks to modern media technology, we live in an equally complex, mire of musical culture. In the fast paced world of today, this matrix of worldview and music is changing at an ever-increasing rate. It is alive and moving. Trying to analyze such a culture is like trying to do exploratory surgery on a person who is dancing!

The individual that can think about modern culture with a clear head is rare. As a result, much of the chatter about Church Music is just that. It is in the realm of opinion. Barrages of ill-informed opinion cannot produce an adequate consensus to serve the needs of the church in changing times. The world is in a state of "culture wars," with differing thought systems competing for preeminence.

It is clear that seeking the purity and peace of the church as a music minister in today's changing times is a challenge of significant proportions. What can a music minister do to promote unity in the body of Christ? Here are several ideas to ponder:

ONE: A music minister can model and propagate an attitude of submission to God's Word. Unity begins with this commitment in any aspect of the Church's life. We must seek God's truth as the final arbiter of the Church's practice regarding music ministry. Personal agendas should be put aside and a contagious attitude of submission to God's Word promoted. We will never achieve perfect conformity to Scripture in this life, but unity will never be achieved apart from seeking wisdom from God's Word. If we must argue, let us agree to argue from Scripture, not our own opinions!

TWO: A music minister should evaluate the validity of his or her call to ministry and to a particular congregation on the front end of the relationship. The music leader has the responsibility to ensure that his or her unique combination of gifts and beliefs are compatible with a calling to the congregation under consideration. Prospective church musicians are often very unaware that some of their strongest convictions about worship and music standards are not shared by the congregation where they have been hired.

Congregational search committees, sometimes out of ignorance and sometimes our feelings of desperation because of the scarcity of candidates, will hire a church musician that is an utter mismatch. Conflicts begin to emerge months after the musician is hired and deep friendships and personal ties have formed. Such situations have sent many a congregation into turmoil.

The music minister must protect a prospective church from a "mismatch hire" if at all possible. Positions of ministry should not be taken because of the salary (greed) or the prominence of the position (pride), or the fabulous acoustics (art for merely arts sake) in the church. The church is the body of Christ and should be treated with conscientious regard!

To help with this, a prospective music minister should share openly his or her ideas and convictions about Music Ministry in an adequate dialogue with the governing body of the church, asking questions and getting answers. Such a person should ask the Lord: "I am truly called here?," "Can I strengthen this body or am I likely to cause division?" The music minister can easily become a source of division in the church if philosophical differences and expectations are not worked out on the front end.

THREE: A church musician should adopt a transformational model of leadership founded on biblically informed persuasion rather than an assertion of raw power and political maneuvering. This involves the study of God's Word with ministry constituents and effort to develop a philosophy of music ministry that applies God's Word to the ministry context. The transformational leader leads by way of vision and ideas and relies less on raw structural authority. This leadership model creates momentum toward established goals by way of affecting paradigm shifts in the thinking of those being led. The leader works toward establishing key commitments in the hearts and minds each and every member of the organizational body so that the natural creativity and capability of various individuals is not stifled but is directed by guiding principles shared by all. Christian leadership should be driven not by politics but by persuasive proclamation of biblical vision and principle (cf. Romans 12:1,2). Such a model relies on teaching of ideas. The wise church musician teaches ideas during rehearsals, teaches a Sunday school class if so gifted, as well as informally over coffee or over lunch.

FOUR: A church musician should proactively build a culture of biblical relationships. Because music ministry is often very goal-oriented, with weekly responsibilities to produce the musical ingredients of worship, individual people and their needs can be overlooked. Music ministers need to make time to get to know their ministry constituency personally. Hospitality should be fostered. Players and singers should be trained in biblical conflict resolution. Love overcomes a multitude of sins. It must be remembered that singers and players are eternal souls first, musicians second.

FIVE: A church musician should have well-developed ideals but an attitude of great patience. This requires willingness for change to come slowly. Congregations, like individuals, are sanctified gradually. One must strategize needful change wisely. An attitude of waiting for God to change hearts must be embraced. Change attempted too fast is usually divisive and always counterproductive.

SIX: A church musician should acknowledge the whole communion of the saints in your selection of musical repertoire. A balanced expression of truth, employing a plurality of musical styles within the boundaries of excellence and appropriateness to ministry purpose, is needful. Merely cultural bias (ex. "We only sing contemporary music here;" or "We are a classical only congregation", "...gospel," etc.) should be avoided. Leadership in music ministry must be willing to adapt to cultural differences. Cultural bias harms the unity of the body and creates unnecessary barriers. A music ministry must not bias musical expression toward his or her own cultural prejudices. The music leader must lovingly seek to make use of musical expressions that can address the real needs of the corporate body as a whole.

SEVEN: A church musician should promote sacrificial love within the musical life of the church. The biblical paradigm for handling merely cultural differences (where no principle of Scripture is violated) is found in the law of love. There are not only cultural differences in musical tastes and styles, but individual preferences

as well. Individual differences will preclude any one musical expression to be equally preferred by all. However, out of love for the family of faith, Christians should be taught to rejoice when their brothers or sisters in the Lord are biblically edified by a genre of music that may not be their personal favorite.

EIGHT: Be humble enough to resign when you are no longer able to maintain an edifying relationship with a congregation. It takes a wise individual to know when one's time of usefulness is over. A church's well being should not be sacrificed for the music minister's self interest.

The role of leading in Music Ministry is vital to a church's health. Men and women in such a role need to be skilled leaders, exercising great wisdom in performing their duties. Substantive training is needed, not just in music, but in scriptural ideals concerning worship theology, body life and discipleship. Our only hope of transforming a morass of cultural expression into God honoring obedience is multiplying trained church musicians who can thoughtfully apply God's Word. In answer to this age of worldly, complex, and rapidly changing musical culture, we need church music leaders who will bring timeless, authoritative, biblical principles to church music ministry in prayerful submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, so that music's tremendous potential for ministry might be unleashed in the power of the Holy Spirit. Only by the multiplication of such leaders can unity even be reasonably attempted on a widespread basis.