

The Farmer and the Cowhand: Ministers and Musicians as Partners in Worship

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There's a wonderful song from Rodgers' and Hammerstein's Broadway blockbuster *Oklahoma* that frequently comes to mind when I think of the roles we play in the leadership of worship as ministers and musicians. It goes like this:

Oh, the farmer and the cowhand should be friends!
Oh, the farmer and the cowhand should be friends!
One man ropes a cow with ease,
The other steals her butter and cheese,
But that's no reason why they can't be friends!

Both the farmer and the cowhand share the same turf. They share the same basic goals, and are both set on achieving them, with as little outside interference as possible, and often with little consideration for the other. The farmer nurtures the pastures to make them grow and produce a fruitful harvest. The cowhand drives the herd across the pastureland to graze, to be fed, and to leave nothing but stubble in their wake.

I don't know in which role to cast the minister, or which role the musician will play, but the analogy is very similar to what the church is experiencing in its worship life today. Too often as the leaders responsible for deciding what is good in worship, we are not very good friends.

In even the most cursory review of the literature of worship published in the last few years, I turned up such titles as these:

What the Church Really Says About War
Trouble at the Table: Gathering the Tribes for Worship
The Humiliation of the Word
A Royal "Waste" of Time
Beyond the Worship Wars
Christianity and Culture in the Crossfire
Amusing Ourselves to Death

And one title was particularly disturbing for me as an organist: *The Triumph of the Praise Songs: How Guitars Beat Out the Organ in the Worship Wars*.

It's distressing, but Tom Long is right when he states, "Music is the nuclear reactor of congregational worship. It is where much of the radioactive material is stored, where a good bit of the energy is generated, and, alas, where congregational meltdown is most likely to occur."¹ He asks the provocative question, "Why is it that music, gentle music, is one of the most volatile and controversial issues in worship?"²

There is nothing for which I hold a greater passion than worship—the spoken Word and the "praise songs" that accompany it—which is a good thing, since I spend

most of my week at church and at the seminary either in worship, or planning for worship, or evaluating worship, or preparing for worship, or just thinking about worship on my own. Not that I'm obsessed with a skewed sense of piety like the English poet, Christopher Smart, who was committed to a mental hospital for dropping to his knees, many times a day, on crowded London streets and publicly confessing his shortcomings and his praise. It's just that for the first time in my life I am able to devote myself to the one thing that offers such rewards and poses such challenges for me.

As a musician I find myself constantly being stretched and inspired and awakened to an increasingly broadening spectrum of elements which, when skillfully and sensitively applied, have heightened the experience of worship for me.

It is all part of an evolutionary process, in which I am always learning and sharpening and growing into a new creation. The foundation I laid with graduate degrees and independent study is not always adequate, I am finding, for the complex and ever-expanding structure I am building upon it.

When Brian Wren, my distinguished colleague, asked me to share some thoughts about worship with a seminary class from a church musician's perspective, he said that brief seminar might be the only "brush" some of the students would have with music, the arts, and worship. This astounded me, until I thought back on my graduate courses that should have helped me be a better colleague to you as ministers. There were none! It was as though whoever designed the curriculum for organ majors never even considered that 99.9 per cent of us would be playing in churches and leading worship with ministers. We studied the large organ works and developed the skills for playing preludes and postludes. We studied the vast heritage of music written for the church, from Gregorian chants to gospel hymns. We learned how to play hymns as though we were singing them, and it became clear that some of us were much better singers than others!

But I was never required to take a theology class. I was never required to study the church—either in its polity or its worship—to evaluate why some things lasted and some didn't survive. I never studied how to lead worship from the organ, or tie all the seemingly unrelated elements into a well-integrated service. Those were things we were expected to learn through experience—and that experience came only where we could grasp it at the hands of other worship leaders—ministers, most often—who knew as little about music as we knew about theology.

Too frequently, like the farmer and the cowhand, we have approached the same pasture—the sanctuary at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning—with unrelated expectations and values. Too quickly many of us have found ourselves embroiled in a feud, brought on by our own arrogance, ignorance, and stubbornness, and fueled by our unwillingness to listen and learn.

Most of us musicians were taught that a good hymn must have enough harmonic variety to make it interesting—so we played every Bach chorale we could put our hands on. None of the simplistic gospel hymns for us, which you could play with three different, yet very predictable chords. Choirs, and a few good singers in the pews, loved singing out on the moving parts, but most of the congregation held to the melody. Logic would tell us that, since most were singing the melody anyway, it didn't matter so much that the inner parts were so intricate, but we don't always listen to that still, small voice of reason.

Most of us musicians looked at the music first, and then at the words (if we looked

at them at all). We were trained to watch for commas, so we would know where to breathe, without a lot of consideration of what words followed or preceded the punctuation. In the church where I grew up, we might as well not have had “third verses” in the hymns, because we always sang the “first, second, and last.” It was not until I began to explore my own ability to compose texts that I realized how unfair a practice that is to the poet.

Archibald Davidson, in his book *Church Music: Illusion and Reality*, offers that the appeals of speech and music, for ministers and musicians, are in opposite directions. Ministers begin with an appeal to the intellect, which sparks imagination and spurs emotions. Musicians, on the other hand, are conditioned to appeal first to the emotions, which engage the imagination, and finally inspire the intellect. Thus both music and speech are capable of following the same channel, although in different directions. Both directions are vital in worship.

As musicians, we were taught that “choruses” or “refrains” were a waste of time—they were redundant, and the seconds wasted in repeating them could be better spent in conveying fresh thoughts. One noted church musician stated flatly that, whenever he saw a hymn that said “refrain,” he usually did!

Of course, this eliminated many of the hymns I had learned growing up as a Southern Baptist. As did most Southern Baptists who seriously applied themselves to church music, when I was in college, I became an Episcopalian. It was not a difficult transition for me, since I was sub organist at the large, old, gothic Episcopal church in a capital city, and had recently discovered the beautiful wording of the *Book of Common Prayer*. Like the Catholic Church after Vatican II, I threw out the wheat with the chaff and began a new diet of hymns, mostly from the Oxford Movement through the death of Queen Victoria, which spoke a new language to me. At the same time, I was organist at the Christian Science Church, and those hymns spoke a new language to me as well—one that was not always easy to discern.

But the one thing I wasn’t singing anymore were the choruses—and now, that’s what seems to be stirring the souls of congregations and fueling the “worship wars” many of us are battling today.

Lately I’ve been thinking a lot about “praise choruses,” and what it is about them that I don’t like, and yet I remember from my youth how meaningful it was to sing them. I thought I was worshiping then, but often today I feel bored and convinced that I am not offering to God the “praise” that is due.

Two answers come to mind, which are validated in the recent books by Tom Long and Marva Dawn on “new” worship.³ First, there is something important about committing part of our faith to memory. I love to watch my congregation as we declare the Apostles’ Creed together. I can see their faith written on their faces as they enumerate the tenets of their belief: the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. I hear them sing from their hearts the tunes of responses and Psalms, uncluttered with lines and spaces and sharps and flats. A “praise chorus” is simply a refrain, easily learned in one or two readings, and then sung in community, from the heart. In chapel at seminary this week, we sang two hymns that had refrains: “All glory, laud, and honor” and “Blessed assurance.” As we began the chorus each time, people looked away from the hymnbook and began to experience the space around them. Some focused on the pulpit, some let their eyes wander around the room at classmates and colleagues, some delighted in the color of

the stained glass. Our minds were at the same instant bound to the simple words we were singing, and liberated to explore God around us. And there was an audible change—not so much in volume as in spirit—when we began each refrain. That is the gift of a “praise chorus” in worship.

The difference I was able to determine between these two hymns we sang (and most of the hymns I grew up with) and so many of the “praise choruses” I cannot tolerate, I blame on (or rather, attribute to) the ministers in my life who have taught me the value of words and imagery and expression. For me, the meaningful “refrains” had verses attached that conveyed to me something of the majesty and wonder and mystery of God. I was not just singing “Alleluia” or “Praise the Lord” over and over, but each refrain was punctuated with reminders of why I should be singing those words. We could endlessly sing “This is my story, this is my song: praising my Savior all the day long,” which is a nice thought, but a shallow one, without the verses that remind us of God Incarnate, unmerited salvation, boundless mercy, and gentle love. The refrain reminds me that my song should ever be one of praise, but the verses tell me why.

Many “praise choruses” seem to be only half of the song—like a Taizé refrain without the superimposed verses by the cantor—the part that appeals to the intellect is absent, and it is only in losing ourselves in its emotional appeal that the music is satisfying. We are being fed with the “junk food,” and not the manna, of worship.

What we have on our palate today in worship music is a long string of genres and styles from Latin motets to bluegrass ballads, with Lutheran chorales, Genevan Psalms, shape-note hymns, and praise choruses at different points along the way.

I was taught, like most of the church musicians who were my classmates, that we need to put vertical “hash marks” along that string, delineating the precise points at which musical style becomes unacceptable as a vehicle for worship. Most of us chopped off a significant portion of the string from either end, and were left with about a four hundred-year span of what we were willing to consider as appropriate worship music. From this segment, we would, through our personal taste, musical aptitude, and denominational emphasis, select the music that our congregations would be allowed to use to express their praise. Textbooks did not present criteria for evaluating the music, but emphasized selected “lists” of appropriate music. If a hymn or anthem didn’t “make the cut,” we were taught that it was something we should not sing.

This subjectivity soon put us out of touch with what members of our congregations would choose for themselves. Our congregations in the twentieth century began to lose much of their denominational “purity.” A centuries-old parish in the English countryside might possibly get away with singing everything from *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, which came out so long ago that many of the “modern” inclusions seem “ancient” to us today. But a moderate-sized Presbyterian church today may have only a small percentage of its members who could sing one Scottish Psalm tune from memory, and the majority of its pews filled with former Baptists or Methodists or Episcopalians, or worshipers from Papists to Pentecostals who bring with them individual and personal heritages of congregational song. Each of these worshipers puts “hash marks” at different places along the string, and no one “list” can possibly contain everything that is appropriate in our worship today.

Rather than placing vertical “hash marks” along the string, we should draw a horizontal line parallel to the string. Above the line is excellence and below the line is inferior music, and we should seek to identify selections from every genre that have

the integrity we desire for our worship. This still places quite a subjective responsibility on the part of those who plan for worship, but the more I do it, the more I am convinced that there is something good everywhere along the line, if we take the time to look for it.⁴

Nothing is more essential to us, as the people of God, than our need to worship God, and with fellow believers “in every time and place,” to offer worshipful acts of praise, thanksgiving, supplication, and petition. Worship is what happens when we realize that we are in the presence of the Living God, who remains such a mystery to us, in spite of what we know and believe. This “mystery” is the essence of our faith, and of our worship. Whatever in our worship may be popular, inspirational, beautiful, musically rich, poetic, or exciting is nothing unless it underscores our relationship to this mysterious God and powerfully lifts our hearts as the only worthy offerings we can give. Trying to turn worship into something useful outside this encounter or attempting to make it cosmetically more appealing misunderstands its basic character. Worship should be, to borrow theologian and worship scholar Marva Dawn’s evocative phrase, “a royal waste of time.”

To be effective, music in worship needs to be both vertical and horizontal. It must lead upward to the mystery that is the God we praise, and it must be lateral in having communal meaning with those who worship around us.

The “vital” congregations, as identified by Tom Long, include large servings of congregational music in their worship. But the distinction is more than quantity. Music becomes the thread that ties the flow of the service together: gathering the people, reinforcing the spoken word, expressing thanksgiving and joy, and sending the people away to love and serve in the world.

But how do we evaluate the music that is appropriate as a vehicle for our worship? What makes one piece worthy, and another worthless, as an expression of our praise? How much easier defining standards of musical excellence would be if it were dictated to us how many repetitions, how many decibels, how many harmonic changes per measure, how much poetic imagery per line, make our music acceptable to God!

Where do we start to establish a basic standard for music in worship? I turn again to Tom Long, who defines the first mark of musical excellence in worship as a functional one:

Good music is that which empowers the congregation and gives the congregation a means to express the thoughts and feelings of their worship. If a hymn or other musical piece is beyond a congregation’s range or reach, then it cannot be called excellent, no matter how superb it may be on internal and technical grounds. On the other hand, this does not mean that every hymn a congregation enjoys singing is excellent. Some music sung or played with exuberance is sentimental, trivial, and unworthy of worship. To be truly excellent, music in worship must pass two tests: functional and internal. The music of worship should be good music as measured by inherent musical standards, and it should be effective music as measured by how well it actually works in a given congregation to give voice and expression to praise.⁵

One of the major “battlefields” in the “worship wars” is the heated conflict over

popular taste versus musical excellence. Should we as worship leaders allow our congregations to sing the hymns they know and love, or should we demand that they sing “better” music? Should we permit our congregations to sing what they like, or only what’s “good” for them? Erik Routley, the expert on church music and worship a generation ago, responded wisely: “You have to begin with what a congregation knows and likes, with what they will sing. But the church musician must always put a little musical pressure on the congregation to move them along into more mature musical expression. You begin where they are, but you don’t leave them there.”

For any musical expression in our worship to have validity, it must be one that the congregation is willing to sing or hear, and one that will leave them changed in some way at the end. The most perfect hymn, the most beautiful anthem, the most passionate voluntary, means nothing in worship if the congregation is not open to receiving it and then claiming it as their own.

One “true confession” I find myself admitting to as a professional church musician—and one that many of my colleagues will not yet acknowledge—is that there isn’t a well-defined class of what we might call “church music.” Rather, church music comes in a variety of styles and genres. Each piece speaks to us differently, and each of us listens and absorbs with different ears (and history, and tradition, and values, and baggage). Styles of music vary, and need to be selected out of alertness to the moment in worship. What may not be “churchy” in one setting may be intensely devotional in another context. As Tom Long reminds us, “Not everyone likes every form of music, and an ethic of tolerance and mutual participation is required. People need to be willing to sing music they do not necessarily like for the sake of the unity of the body.”⁶

In *A Royal “Waste” of Time* (her sequel to *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down*), Marva Dawn reminds us that the Scriptures don’t give us much instruction in what is appropriate for Christian worship. She cites Colossians 3:16-17 as the best guide we have for evaluating our worship: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

What an ideal for “good worship” those verses give us! Dawn reminds us that good worship takes effort—on the part of planners and participants alike. Many congregations have turned worship into what pleases people instead of “the work of the people.”⁷ We must realize that the best way to ensure that worshipers come back week after week is to give them such a rich vision of God, with such warm hospitality, that they realize God is exactly whom they need.

What constitutes that “rich vision” varies from person to person, from place to place, from season to season. The best we can discern in terms of striving to attain that vision through our worship and music is to consider some rather vague and subjective criteria that may allow us to approach achieving worship that is worthy.

First, does the music we choose give us a glimpse of God? Is it faithful to what we know and believe about our mysterious Creator and the relationship we share?

Second, does the music, through its notes and harmony and rhythm and poetry, reflect the best effort we can offer as our praise?

Third, does the music serve not only a “vertical” purpose of directing our praise

to God, but also a “horizontal” purpose of making us aware of the community around us and the diversity it represents?

Fourth, does the nature of the music encourage participation by the whole congregation, or does it exclude some because of its complexity or its simplicity?

Finally, does the music inspire a meaningful response from the congregation to the other elements of worship (prayer, confession, praise, the reading and preaching of the Word) and encourage the proclamation of the Word to continue beyond the doors of the sanctuary?

The more time I spend in worship, the more I learn, and the more I learn, the more I realize I do not know. One thing of which I am truly convinced is that ministers and musicians must engage in active, meaningful dialogue about what worship is, and how to achieve the most worthy expression of it in our congregations. We must be willing to speak with honesty and listen with open ears to what each of us has to say, lest we find ourselves spouting words from dusty pulpits and coaxing notes from breathless pipes to empty pews.

Notes

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship* (The Alban Institute, 2001), 53.

² Ibid.

³ In addition to Tom Long’s book cited above, I would recommend two books by Marva Dawn: *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 1995) and *A Royal “Waste” of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 1999).

⁴ This idea of horizontal and vertical approaches to worship music is expanded from Tom Long’s book cited above.

⁵ Ibid, 62.

⁶ Ibid, 64.

⁷ Marva Dawn, *A Royal “Waste” of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World*, 296.