

# DERELICTION OF DUTY OR INARTICULATED BELIEFS?

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I have read with interest the notices of “Wrongful Termination” cases in the back of recent TAOs. I can only imagine the pain, frustration, and divisiveness behind those little black boxes, especially when the Guild has determined that a wrongful termination has occurred. We were discussing this in the class on Philosophy of Church Music, one of the courses in the *Leadership Program for Musicians Serving Small Congregations* (LPM) that I administer locally and teach in. LPM is a national joint Lutheran Episcopal curriculum designed to help “undertrained” church musicians be better at leading worship and music in their parishes. The students start out in Year I with a suspicious look in their eyes as they come to my class. Philosophy of Church Music? It sounds so dreadful, so impractical, so boring. Yet by the time the Year II students get to the point where we discuss wrongful termination issues, they have come to realize that many unfortunate incidents between clergy and musicians, and between music staff members could be avoided if everyone understood and could clearly state what their Philosophy of Church Music is. After a year and a half of discussing many different ways of articulating how we feel about what we believe church music to be (i.e., a philosophy of church music), we all agree that this is one of the most practical courses a person can take if they want to have a successful ministry in music in the church.

In this discussion, a woman who plays for a small Episcopal church told how the Baptist church asked her to come work for them. They did indicate that she would have to abide by their rules and she assured them that she had no problem being flexible. In our discussion, though, she came to realize that she wasn't sure how flexible she really could be when it came right down to it. Many of us want to be thought of as nice, congenial, easy-to-get-along-with kinds of people. Most of us aren't interested in purposely affecting an aloof “prima donna” attitude that communicates “my way or the highway.” But that is where the trouble begins. If I am looking for a position as organist or choir director or music director, I want the search committee to view me as amiable, friendly, a team player, especially if I am anxious to leave my current situation. Once I am

hired, though, I may come to realize that the things they want me to do or play or prepare for are things that really grate against my sensibilities, musical tastes, personal theology, or all of the above.

However, most search committees, when asked what the church's philosophy of church music is, would not have a clue as to how to answer. And too many musicians applying for those jobs cannot communicate to the search committee and/or the clergy what their own philosophy of church music is. When irritants are not properly articulated, then adjectives like “too loud,” “too slow,” “too fast,” “too traditional,” and “too contemporary” start getting hurled back and forth. Feelings are hurt, lines are drawn in the sand, and good musicians are lost to congregations who are left with wounds that can take years to heal. I believe that if every church and every church musician took the time to write out what their philosophy of church music is, we would have far fewer clergy/musician conflicts. To that end, let me suggest some questions that we as musicians and search committees can ask to formulate a clear philosophy of church music.

For the individual musician, I would suggest beginning with a piece of paper folded in thirds. Start by listing “the hills you will die on” on the left side. By that, I mean what are the theological/musical issues that are non-negotiables for you. When I was asked by the pastor and search committee of the church I currently serve if I could help them move into a style of worship at one service that would be more folk/Christian-pop based, I told them that I could but I would in no way do it where the musicians were up front. For me, “a hill to die on” is the issue of what is in my mind an entertainment model for leading worship. Personally, I do not believe that a performance mode can be avoided when musicians are up front no matter how spiritual they may feel in their hearts. I have colleagues for whom music leadership from the back is an oxymoron. Neither is right or wrong; they are simply differences in philosophies; but for me, this is an issue I can't be flexible on. Other areas of non-negotiables could be in historical liturgical conformity (can you play Christmas carols during Advent?) or wedding policies (would you play “Honky-Tonk Woman” at a wedding if asked, as I once

was?) or certain styles of music (I am no good at leading Hispanic hymns). It could be the quality of the musical instruments or the size of the music program or the theological stripe of the congregation. Anything that would cause you to feel you were violating some kind of personal integrity should go on that left side.

On the right side, list the things that make no difference one way or the other. For some, it could be the placement of the organ or the choir. It could be the size of your office or whether the clergy are male or female or the distance from your house to the church. This category is for things that don't bother you, but be careful. Sometimes we think something presented theoretically wouldn't bother us but in reality it does, so don't be too quick in making your list on the right side.

In the middle, list things that could go either way. Back to the folk/Christian-pop style services. For me, this would depend on a lot of factors. At the church I currently serve, that service has communion every Sunday and a very solid historical liturgical format, things that are important to me. In another setting that was more casual, I might not be able to lead that style of service well. This is the list that you will use to formulate most of your questions to the potential search committee. These are the gray areas where you will need to find out as best you can how this particular congregation wants you to function.

Take the three lists and formulate each of them into a paragraph or two that states in nonjudgmental ways what you believe about church music and your role in it. Send it to the search committee early on in the interview process and ask them to send you their Philosophy of Church Music statement. This can clarify early on whether the match has good potential or not and will save everyone a lot of time.

If you are part of a search committee charged with finding a new music staff member, start by making a list of things in the worship and music life of your congregation that are important to each of you on the committee. If your clergy is not a part of the committee, ask him/her to make a list. Put a survey in your monthly newsletter seeking input from the congregation as to what they believe worship and music should be like. Then put together a job description that starts with your congregation's philosophy of church music. Tell in a few paragraphs what your congregation believes are its "hills to die on" when it comes to worship and music. It's all right to say, "We have a significant minority who believe . . ." This will give potential candidates a chance to determine if the "significant minority" is something they will have a problem with or not. Then list the duties of the

job in detail. Do *not* assume that the organist will know that he or she will have to pick out the hymns or attend weekly worship meetings. Spell out *everything* the person will be expected to be involved in. When interviewing a candidate for the position, formulate your questions from the Philosophy section of the job description as well as from the details of duties. Interview them in the space and on the instruments they will be expected to play. It is good to go hear them in their current setting, but that doesn't mean they can work well in your setting. I am aware of an unfortunate situation where the candidate was interviewed on a small electronic in the small church they worked in, given the job, and is now struggling to play a four-manual combination pipe/digital instrument for a huge congregation. Neither the church nor the organist is very happy. Have your clergy at the interview if at all possible. Don't be afraid of asking lots of questions about how they like to work and what they believe is important in worship and church music. Ask them to describe their ideal church. Is it your ideal?

Now, for those of you who are in sticky situations with your clergy or your music staff: I would suggest that each person involved in leading worship and music go to work on their philosophy of church music based on the threefold piece of paper model above. Have a neutral third party from the personnel committee or the denominational office compare the lists and point out where the philosophies are in conflict. It is one thing to end a working relationship because of differences of opinion. It is another thing to end up in the "wrongful termination" box in the back of THE AMERICAN ORGANIST. There is nothing wrong with thinking about worship and music differently from a fellow staff member. What is not all right is to allow dreadful undermining kinds of behaviors to occur that do not deal with the real issue.

An honest, well-thought-out Philosophy of Church Music is a gift to everyone involved. Don't have a job interview without one.

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