

MUSICIAN-CLERGY TEAMWORK THE CRITICAL PARTNERSHIP

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THE FUNCTION of music is ministerial. . . . Music should assist the assembled believers to express and share the gift of faith that is within them and to nourish and strengthen their interior commitment of faith. . . . The quality of joy and enthusiasm which music adds to community worship cannot be gained in any other way (Doran and Troeger, *Trouble at the Table*, p. 70).

Music is "ministerial," and one of the primary components of worship is music. Who are the principal leaders of music and worship? The musicians and the clergy. Who are the people who must work most closely together to ensure beautiful and powerful worship? The musicians and the clergy. Who are the members of a church staff most likely to be in conflict? Musicians and clergy.

The more I'm around churches, seminaries, church-related organizations, and the AGO, the more I'm convinced of the need to restate the obvious. The clergy-musician team is *the* most critical component in the success of a church. It's also the one that probably gets the least amount of attention. Some of us who teach in seminaries do our best to drive this point home, but there are plenty of seminaries where it doesn't get mentioned, or where such references go ignored.

These ideas come after a number of years of formulating thoughts on team relationships, sharing with my students at Wesley Seminary, offering workshops, and speaking at AGO clergy dinners—and from my most recent experiences as AGO National Councillor for Professional Development. To set the stage for the need for musicians and clergy to operate as a team, let me begin by quoting from some recent correspondence I have received as the councillor who is contacted when an AGO member has been abruptly (and often, wrongfully) terminated. (The ellipses have been added to ensure anonymity.)

Example I. From a rector to the musician (in writing). "I have several concerns. The canticles were mediocre. . . . Entrances were ragged in several places. The anthem sounded as though not enough rehearsal time had been spent on it. The singers appeared to be unsure about what was going to happen next. Too many bad notes and the contrast between accompaniment and choral production often did not fit. . . . In my pro-

fessional contacts with musicians nearby and far away, regarding the choice of conducting from a console or in front of singers, the response is unanimous: The best results in choral production happen when a conductor is standing in front of singers. They go further to say few if any keyboard persons can be successful producing a good choir sound sitting at a console. Your problem may be in part that you and I disagree on this reality. It continues to be a problem in our working relationship. I look forward to hearing from you. I want a written response from you by . . ."

Example II. Letter from musician. "Just before the service [the pastor] asked me to come by his office after the service for a few minutes. . . . He told me he thought it was time to make a change. He said I wasn't flourishing here, that I was not happy, and that he did not think I could achieve the goals he wanted achieved. . . ."

Example III. Letter from musician. "On [date] I was summoned into the [pastor's] office and advised that as of [a particular date] my services as Director of Music . . . would no longer be required. The [minister] had been on the job five months; I had been there ten years. There had been no attempt at resolving differences, real or imagined, only a constant sniping at myself and nit-picking of the music program over all that time. The music program as it stands today is a result of my work and the standard I upheld well known among colleagues. . . . I began in 1988 with eleven adults and about a dozen kids. Today there are 30 adults and over 50 children in the choirs. It was never made clear to me what my offenses had been, only that 'we had a problem which needed to be worked out.' And promises of meetings to discuss this 'problem,' which never happened."

I am not going to suggest that the problem is always *only* on the part of the clergy; clergy in my acquaintance often tell "musician stories" that are really the same stories musicians tell about clergy, with the roles reversed. For example, the rather worn "joke":

Q: What's the difference between a church musician and the PLO?

A: You can negotiate with the PLO!

The point isn't who is wrong, or who is right. The point is that we're all in this together and there needs to be a framework from which we can work at building a collegial relationship—a team.

Teamwork: you can't pick up a magazine or read a newspaper without seeing an article on teamwork. An article in *Success Magazine* even uses a term that we most commonly associate with the church, *koinonia*, as the focus of a piece called "The Secret to Teamwork." (I'll refer to this again later.) But before we get to the "hows" of teamwork, let's discuss the "whys."

Teamwork is widely regarded as the *best* way to build success. Management consultants say this; public relations people say this; behavioral scientists say this; and any of us who work with people simply know it to be true. The fact is: people are much more interested in a goal when they've had some say in both defining what the goal is and in deciding exactly how it will be achieved.

The preferred model is not that of a parent or benign despot, but more like that of senior partners in a law firm. The team concept implies:

- collegiality
- mutual support
- good communications
- humility
- consistency, reliability
- an acknowledgment of common goals

And the "bottom line" (which is defined not in corporate profits but in the success of the church itself) absolutely *depends* on our having each other's best interests at heart.

In the book, *Leader Effectiveness Training*, Thomas Gordon lists some of the qualities of a good relationship:

1. openness
2. caring
3. interdependence
4. separateness
5. where the needs of each person are met

And this is not a hierarchical model—it's a collegial model.

What does the word "collegial" actually mean? *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* gives as a first definition: *Marked by power or authority vested equally in each of a number of colleagues.*

Now if I were addressing this piece specifically to clergy, I would note that in the terms of polity set forth by the various denominations, the "buck does stop with you"—and we musicians acknowledge that. The clergy are those that "oversee the total ministry of the church," in the words of the *Discipline* of the United Methodist Church. The *Provisions of the Canons of the Episcopal Church (1988) Regarding Music and Ministry (Title II, Canon 6, Section I)* contain these sentences: "To this end the Minister shall have final authority

in the administration of matters pertaining to music.” (Other denominations will have similar wording.)

But policies that exist for the purpose of governance and standard operating procedures need not be the same.

Our differences. Since one of the qualities of a good relationship is “separateness,” let’s talk a little about some of the differences between clergy and musicians.

- We have unique pressures on us.
- We may come to our relationship with different attitudes, different “preconceived notions” about the way clergy and musicians work together.
- We have different educational backgrounds, different areas of expertise.
- Some of us are ordained, others are not.

Here are a couple of scenarios from *The Church Music Handbook for Pastors and Musicians* by N. Lee Orr.

The autocrat in the pulpit acquired much of his/her imperialistic attitude in the seminary, where he or she learned to view a pastor as a divinely inspired chief executive officer. In this wise and benevolent role the pastor shapes worship according to weekly insights, then bestows this prophetic vision upon the musician to fill out with musical connective tissue. Should the musician, working in the liturgical dark, select the wrong filler material, that only confirms the pastor’s suspicions concerning the musician’s liturgical ineptness. Or at least it betrays the musician’s inexcusable inability to read the pastor’s mind [p. 43].

Contrast that with this description:

The musician acquired her autocracy in school. Pushed to sing and play as well as she possibly could, the musician developed a passion for excellence; and not just in performance but also in her musical selections. Her teachers constantly insisted that she study, listen to, and perform only the finest art music. When she continued on to complete her master’s degree, she further refined her skills as well as her elitist attitude about what was best for worship.

Later, when she took the education courses to become a teacher, she subtly internalized the profile—often a necessary teaching tool—of explaining to people how to do things because she knew better. Sometimes this included explaining to the pastor [p. 45].

This would seem to be a pretty nice recipe for conflict.

I know of churches where the clergy have resigned because of the “autocracy” of the musician—but I know of even more situations where the musician has resigned because of the autocracy of the clergy.

And this just doesn’t have to be. Lee Orr’s solution may fall into the category of “easier said than done,” but let’s look at his ideas for change:

The power of Partnership. Pastor and musician must abdicate their thrones, open themselves up to dialogue, and “move from pride to partnership”. . . . Only in this way will worship regain its spiritual vigor, the congregation become empowered, and the church rise anew to face its challenge. Together, the minister and musician must each leave their fiefdoms of pulpit and choir loft and forge a partnership. For the pastor, this means stepping down from the lofty realms of being the CEO and standing on common ground with the musician, the rest of the staff, and the congregation. It also means that the musician must leave the secure artistic shelter behind the altar rail [or in the balcony] and join the entire church community—clergy and congregation—in worshiping together. Then everyone can join together as equal partners in making the liturgy as meaningful and dynamic as possible [p. 47].

How, exactly, do we do this? What steps need to be taken so that clergy and musician begin to operate not as separate entities but as a team? I offer these possibilities.

I. ACKNOWLEDGE COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

Not surprisingly, this is a *much longer list* than the earlier, rather modest catalog of our differences. In an article in TAO some years ago, the Rev. David Moores made the first two of these observations:

- *People who go into our professions are highly intuitive.* “As highly intuitive types, both clergy and musicians deal with the world and make decisions more often using information best described as subjective,” he says, “not hard facts or objective data. This use of the subjective opens both types to much greater creativity and imagination, but it also causes them to act much more decisively on the basis of their feelings alone.”

- *We’re also generally highly motivated—self starters.* Workaholics even. We are prone to getting stressed out—in Holy Week, always, but at other times, too.

- *We both feel “called” to our work.* While clergy are generally accepted as having been “called” to their work, musicians aren’t always seen quite the same way in terms of a “vocational call.”

William Sloan Coffin in his book, *A Passion for the Possible*, has some interesting observations about calling, and he goes to great lengths to distinguish between *career* and *calling*. He cites the writing of Professor William

May of Southern Methodist University, who observes that both the word “car” and the word “career” come from the Latin word *carerra*, for “racetrack,” suggesting that “both a car and a career have you going in circles rapidly and competitively. . . . A car is an *auto*-mobile, a self-driven vehicle. It frees you from traveling with others.” To Professor May it represents “glass-enwrapped privacy as you speed down public thoroughfares toward your own private destination.”

“‘Calling,’ on the other hand, comes from the Latin *vocatio* (vocation), from *vocare* (to call), which was defined by a 17th-century Puritan divine as ‘that whereunto God hath appointed us to serve the common good.’ Career-oriented people, Coffin goes on to say, read books like *Winning Through Intimidation* and *Looking Out for Number One*. “A calling, by contrast, seeks the common good, not private gain. It sees service as the purpose of life, not something you might consider doing in your spare time. It is not against ambition, but considers ambition a good servant and a bad master.”

Clergy are usually considered to have been “called.” Much of the three-day orientation period at the seminary where I teach is devoted to sharing ways the students have felt called, and the meaning of that call. What is often not recognized is that this feeling of being called is very often true of musicians, too. Many of us feel that we are called to be serving a particular church, that we are there because of our unique ability to meet the needs of those particular parishioners. “But it’s my life,” one abruptly terminated musician cried—and for many musicians, it *is* just that.

- *We both tend to be “nurturers.”* Clergy “shepherd” their congregations, and musicians “shepherd” their choirs. There really is no way to run an effective music program without being a nurturer of the entire person—not just of the singing mechanism or the choral organization. The pastoral aspects of our jobs are often the most critical—and the success of our music programs may well depend more on our ability to nurture than on our finely honed choral techniques or our fiery improvisations.

- *We both “preside over mysteries”*—we both deal in spiritual realms. Again, the Rev. Moores has hit on a critical point. “The important role that intuition plays is complicated by the fact that both church musicians and clergy preside over ‘mysteries.’ Who understands the evocative power of music? Who understands the evocative power of ritual? Yet clergy and musicians preside over these complementary mysteries [and ministries], and while there is great mutual respect, there can be an underlying element of insecurity and

fear, which causes each minister subconsciously or consciously to wish to control the other." He goes on to say: "It might help both clergy and music leaders to see how both of them have a priestly function. A priest is one who speaks for God to the people and speaks for the people to God. This two-way communication is paralleled by the ministry of the church musician, who creates the atmosphere of transcendence [thus bringing the 'divine' to the people] as well as directing people's thoughts, and especially feelings, to God by the music that is created."

This, of course, also means that we have built-in "cop-outs" if we choose to use them. For instance, it's easy for clergy to think the musician cares only about the music in the service, whereas many musicians care *greatly* about the way *all* the service elements knit together; and conversely, musicians might be tempted to think the clergy think only "the word" is important in the service, that nothing else that happens really matters. More assumptions. More traps. All unnecessary.

- *Both clergy and musicians tend to be conflict-avoiders and people-pleasers.* The trap is that while we're in the "people business," we can't let pleasing them be the overriding goal of our lives.

I have heard one clergyman—literally—give two different answers to the same question—one at one end of the hall, the other at the opposite end. He wanted to please people so badly that he told them exactly what they wanted to hear, regardless of what the truth actually was. As a teacher in a Pastoral Counseling course I once took said: We cannot have "a crippling need to be loved by everyone."

- *Often, we're also both underpaid.* For the level of education and training we have, and in comparison to the salaries of other professionals, clergy and musicians often are underpaid. While talking about it alone will not change the situation, we really do need to acknowledge it as the point of stress it can be. The senior pastor in point of fact is often the CEO of the congregation. For the level of responsibility and commitment, which may include administering a large budget and a complex organization, to say nothing of being "on call" for pastoral emergencies, being looked up to as the infallible spiritual leader of the congregation, having to attend multitudes of meetings, and meeting with multitudes of expectations—when one adds up all of these responsibilities, the salary is often extremely modest.

Musicians, too, have lots of stresses: there may be many people to organize and complex programs to run, and if the musician is not full-time at the church,

s/he often may work not one job but two, or even three. This isn't an easy way to earn a living, and while the AGO is doing everything it can to enable musicians to receive a fair wage, churches also need to be tolerant of the stress that comes for each of us because of the poor salary.

- *We both have our fair share of insecurities* (see earlier discussion of the people-pleasing risk).

- *And we're both evaluated—publicly—every week.* A clergyman with whom I used to work told a story about another clergyman who was accustomed to greeting his parishioners at the back door at the end of the service.

Sam came through the line, and as he shook the pastor's hand, he said, "Pastor, your sermon reminded me of the peace and the mercy of God." The pastor was at first pretty pleased, even a little proud of himself, but then he decided to ask Sam exactly what he'd meant by his comment. "Well, Pastor," Sam said, "it reminded" me of the peace of God because it passed all understanding. And it reminded me of the mercy of God in that I thought it would endure forever."

This particular clergyman with whom I worked often received compliments at the door, but instead of taking them at face value, he often interpreted them as having the subtext of offering just another "hurdle" to overcome: "You were good today, but can you be as good again next week?" was how he heard it.

We should not underestimate this "evaluation" factor. This is a lot of pressure in itself. Our jobs are not like a bureaucrat's job where s/he may work on a project for years—and never see it completed. Nor do we have the kind of job where nobody is really in a position to evaluate the quality of work we did on our piece of the project.

In the old advertising slogan of an airline, we really do "earn our wings every day." The conduct of the liturgy and spoken word of the clergy, the playing of the liturgy, the sung and played anthems and responses, hymns and voluntaries—all of these are "on view" every moment of the service.

[For further reading on the "pastoral mind," I recommend *Pastor as Person* by Gary L. Harbaugh.]

II. DEVELOP A SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIP

Realizing all we have in common, the next thing for us as clergy and musicians to do is to realize the extent to which we depend on each other. Some specific suggestions come to mind here.

- *Don't make assumptions.* Clergy, don't assume that the musician is trying to steal the spotlight; or conversely, mu-

sicians, don't assume, just because s/he hasn't said anything, that the clergy have no appreciation for all the effort you put into the Christmas cantata (or whatever music has been the focus of your recent major efforts). In fact, and simplistic as it sounds, if it's negative, *don't assume anything at all!*

People who work as closely together as we do have to extend "a line of credit" to the other person. Even when some oversight seems incredibly important at the time, we need to focus on the relationship from a long-term standpoint, on what you know to be the esteem in which you and your work are held, not only by that person but by the congregation you both serve.

[For more thoughts on assumptions, I commend to you the chapter on Clergy-Musician Relationships in *The Church Musician* by Paul Westermeyer.]

- *Acknowledge mutual dependence.* Underlying this is a working philosophy that's based on the simple fact that we need each other. Your success is my success. Your failure is a diminishment for me, too. Of course, this is all very biblical. Paul says in I Corinthians 12:16, "If one member suffers, we all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

For example, this "good working relationship" doesn't allow for jealousy on the part of the clergy for the devotion of the choir to the musician. It doesn't allow for competition, pettiness, envy, or jealousy—period.

- *Practice open, honest communication.* The point is, of course, that we *must* communicate directly with each other. No game playing, no laying of traps, no interpreting things the way *we* want to interpret them. [One method of communication that's proven effective over the years is called the "I Method" as discussed in Thomas Gordon's books and in many others.]

Again, to state the obvious, communication goes both ways. If someone storms out of another person's office in anger, it may not be "insubordination"; it may simply demonstrate a serious breakdown in communication, one for which both parties must take responsibility.

- *Never fail to show your appreciation.* A recent article by a management consultant in *The Wall Street Journal* began with the sentence: "People work for love and money and seldom get enough of either. So if you give top priority to supporting and rewarding people, you will be blessed with results beyond your dreams."

Someone else has said that "90% of the things we do are prompted by a desire to feel important." This is echoed by B.C. Forbes, who wrote in *Forbes Magazine*: "No human being can be genuinely happy unless s/he stands

well in the esteem of fellow mortals. [The person] who would deal successfully with us must never forget that we possess and are possessed by this ego. . . . A word of appreciation can often accomplish what nothing else could accomplish."

Thank people! How obvious! But how few people actually do it. Write them notes. Be specific in your praise. Thank them publicly.

Clergy: Mention your appreciation of all the choir's work, of the organist's dedication, of the instrumentalists' beautiful playing—and do this from the pulpit. Go down to the choir room for a prayer with the choir before the service. In every possible way affirm their role as *co-worship leaders*.

To Musicians, I say: Tell the choir how much you appreciated a particular sermon; and tell the clergy, too!

In a letter to *The New York Times Magazine* a few years ago, someone wrote these words: "Having been one of the orchestral students fortunate enough to play under Leonard Bernstein at Tanglewood in the 1970s . . . my experiences with [him] will remain with me forever. The Maestro's energy, enthusiasm, and sheer genius came across to us with an infectiousness that was impossible to resist. No gesture was superfluous; every movement had meaning. And when he lavished his praise on us, we could only respond by giving him more of the same, tenfold."

[If you feel you need some "directions" in this area, allow me to suggest the format of "One minute praisings," which are discussed by Blanchard and Johnson in *One Minute Manager*.]

III. WORK TO BUILD A RELATIONSHIP

I referred earlier to an article in *Success Magazine* that talks about the importance of *koinonia*, of the "spirit of fellowship." And this is in the "secular world"! Think how much more important it is in a church situation. The article quotes from the book, *The Fifth Discipline*, by MIT management expert Peter Senge, which outlines ways to "infuse any organization with *koinonia*." He discusses such ideas as:

- *getting together just to get to know each other*. It's simply true that trust cannot grow, or work happen as effectively, with people we really don't know.

- *exchange ideas without trying to change the other person's mind*. This means we listen more than we talk. We don't argue, we don't interrupt, we listen. Underlying this is an attitude that can be described by McGinnis in his

book, *Bringing Out the Best in People*, as: "Expect the best from those you [work with]." Or the equivalent biblical language: "Love thy neighbor as thyself." We all do our best work in an atmosphere where "failure isn't fatal"—where we can make a mistake and know that nobody is going to bite our heads off. To state the obvious, people make mistakes. And, most of the time, the world doesn't end. (Remember the Renaissance artist who always put a mistake in his painting to remind people of his humanity?)

When all else fails, keep your sense of humor and remember the words of Somerset Maugham: "Only mediocre people are always at their best!"

IV. PLAN TOGETHER FOR WORSHIP—HOLD STAFF MEETINGS!

Include volunteers; they, too, need to be affirmed, brought into the planning process. They'll do better work and feel better about the work they are doing.

Staff meetings help us arrive together at decisions:

- Who's responsible for what?
- What deadlines apply to what tasks?
- What kind of things drive each of us crazy (so with luck we can avoid them!)

Without staff meetings, where you can agree on these things, it's easy to see that conflicts can arise if everyone is not operating on the same wavelength. For instance, if a new pastor wants to do something differently (like pick the hymns) but doesn't articulate it clearly, and the long-term musician is operating on another assumption (s/he is used to doing the hymn selection). . . . There are so many things that can happen that I don't have the space to discuss here. Let me just say that in every situation I know of where staff meetings have been instituted, the staff's working relations have improved and the entire ministry of the church has become far more effective.

IN SUMMARY. Clergy and musician alike, we're all in this together. As Kennon Callahan writes in *Dynamic Worship*, "Worship is the breath of God. It is where we discover the grace of that breath and draw it in for a full life and growth. . . . Worship gives power to our life. . . . Worship builds community in our life. . . . Worship gives meaning and hope to our life." And what is one of the activities most central to the corporate worship experience? *Making music!*

To do the numbers, music occupies 40–60% of most services. But much more than filling time, music "has great strength and power to move and to set our hearts on fire in order that we may

call upon God and praise [God] with a more vehement and more ardent zeal," proclaims John Calvin—and he isn't the reformer with the greatest musical track record, by any means. The role of music in Martin Luther's life is well documented, and his may well be the most frequently quoted statement by a theologian about music: "Music is a fair and glorious gift of God—I am strongly persuaded that after theology there is no art that can be placed on a level with music."

Clearly, without a dynamic and supportive presence in the pulpit, a church's potential is crippled, as is the work of the musician who serves it. The Episcopal Church's *Provisions of the Canons of the Episcopal Church (1988) Regarding Music and Ministry* (Title II, Canon 6, Section 1) say: "In fulfilling [his/her] responsibility the Minister shall seek assistance from persons skilled in music. *Together* [italics mine] they shall see that music is appropriate to the context in which it is used."

We have the unique opportunity to make a real difference in the lives of the people we serve. And we can accomplish this goal most effectively in the context of a *team* approach.

There's a plaque on the wall of a southern legal services office that the senior pastor with whom I work often quotes: "All of us is smarter than any of us is." That pretty much says it all.

SELECTED RESOURCES

There are many books written on leadership and team-building, some focusing on the church context; these are some resources I've found particularly helpful.

- Brian Kelley Bauknight. *Body Building: Creating a Ministry Team Through Spiritual Gifts*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.
- Kenneth Blanchard and Spencer Johnson. *The One Minute Manager*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1982.
- Kennon Callahan. *Dynamic Worship*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994.
- Carol Doran and Thomas H. Troeger. *Trouble at the Table*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992.
- Max DePree. *Leadership Jazz*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1992.
- William Sloane Coffin. *A Passion for the Possible*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993.
- Thomas Gordon. *Leader Effectiveness Training*. Toronto: Bantam Books, 1977.
- Gary Harbaugh. *Pastor as Person*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984.
- Alan Loy McGinnis. *Bringing Out the Best in People*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984.
- David R. Moores. "Clergy-Organist Relationships." *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST*, August 1985.
- N. Lee Orr. *The Church Music Handbook for Pastors and Musicians*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991.
- Paul Westermeyer. *The Church Musician*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1997.