

By Doug Haney & Ann Bell Worley

# THE HARMONY PROJECT 2.0

*Abridged Report*



POLYPHONY  
MUSIC RESOURCES  
*Breathe, bless, and be well*

## INTRODUCTION

Like arts and culture and business in North America, church music has undergone a rapid rate of change in the last 50 years. Polyphony Music Resources aims to nurture church musicians in their ministry and in their well-being so they thrive wherever God calls them. The Harmony Project is a research initiative designed to help fulfill that mission. Its first iteration consisted of interviews with 25 church musicians.

Building upon that foundation, The Harmony Project 2.0 gathered qualitative

data from interviews with 75 additional church musicians in order to understand what they need to thrive and how their communities can best support them. This abridged report is aimed at communicating the study's primary findings in a brief and digestible format for the benefit of both church musicians and the communities they serve. The full report is available here:

**[The Harmony Project 2.0: What church musicians need to thrive →](#)**

## CALLING AND THE PATH TO BECOMING A CHURCH MUSICIAN

Every person who was interviewed came to this profession because they saw someone else engaged in church music who loved their work. People who feel called to music ministry often have a Christian family influence or musical family influence, sometimes multigenerational. The seeds of a calling to music ministry are planted relatively young, sometimes as children, often as teenagers and then nurtured through college experiences.

Many described early participation in church, whether through graded choir programs, youth choir or serving as an acolyte. In several cases, people were drawn toward music ministry through early opportunities for leadership, such as playing piano, accompanying an ensemble, or even conducting.

Often one individual is essential in helping people to recognize their calling. This is the person who says to a potential church

musician: I see in you this gift. In the vast majority of cases, calling was a series of developments, something that became clear over time. One person interviewed described his sense of calling as being communal: "It was other people seeing gifts in me and helping me to realize those gifts and to develop them and to live into them." Some described a culture of call, being impacted by others on a similar path or growing up in an environment where a sense of calling is prominent and celebrated.

Some church musicians reported initially feeling called to other areas of ministry, such as teaching or missions. Others were drawn to worship leadership or to the role of Christian formation in worship or liturgy. Several who began as church musicians sensed a move toward a more pastoral presence over time. There is often an evolution in one's sense of calling.

# WHEN WORK IS GOING WELL

Church musicians use a number of metrics to determine when their work is going well. Notably, there is both a people element and a music element to consider.

## Time to Prepare

Behind the scenes of the highly visible role church musicians hold in weekly worship services, time to prepare is essential. Having time to prepare for choir rehearsal and worship, to think ahead, feel grounded and bring their training and spiritual gifts to worship planning are all highly desirable components of a work environment.

## Participation

Solid participation in choir, a hallmark of a thriving music ministry, seems to spill over into increased participation and engagement in other areas of church. There is an unmistakable joy when members are committed and engaged, and the energy in the choir, in worship and in relationships among church members is palpable.

## Collaboration and Relationships

Church musicians see collaboration and relationships as key markers of their ministry, both with staff and volunteers.

## Church Culture

A healthy church culture where the staff and congregation are intentional about building relationships and an environment with freedom to share, try new things, and give input sets the stage for a church musician to thrive.

## Positive Feedback

Positive feedback from trusted friends and the choir, such as noting a hymn that really fit the sermon or sharing how the music triggered their thoughts or emotions is welcome and helpful, as are most any words of affirmation.

## Ministry & Music Leadership

Ministers of music are uniquely trained and can be invaluable resources in ministry and music leadership, helping to provide a vision for worship. They have regular contact with a large and involved group of the congregation and naturally provide pastoral care and spiritual leadership to participants in their ministry. Several noted the importance of being recognized as ministers by congregants and especially colleagues on staff. Of note, the smaller group of church musicians who do not see themselves as ministers still take seriously their role in giving their musical abilities to the worship of God.



# CHALLENGING ASPECTS OF THE WORK

## Attendance, Preparation, & Scheduling

Church musicians face unique challenges, the most pressing, perhaps, being attendance, preparation and scheduling. While church musicians are committed to musical excellence in their programs, they are only as capable as their volunteer singers, and their ability to produce quality music is contingent on levels of participation. Cultural changes over the last 30 years have seen a dramatic rise in competing commitments, making it harder for individuals and families to attend choir and worship on Wednesday evenings and Sunday mornings alike. This takes a direct toll on music ministries.

## Relationships

While church musicians are largely known and recognized for their leadership in music, they are nonetheless driven by relationships, and relationships with pastors largely determine the health or detriment of a working environment. While some pastors have strengths and interests that are well suited to working with church musicians, others can be jealous of their music ministry colleagues because of the visibility of their position and set themselves up as competitors. Some church musicians feel a pull toward more pastoral roles and are discouraged when they don't receive support for that calling from their senior pastor.

## Practical Considerations

Practical considerations, from keeping up with email and rudimentary tasks to lack of funds and resources, are an ever-present part of the work. Many church musicians are seminary educated, which prepares them from an academic perspective but does not prepare them for many of the day-to-day challenges of ministry. Lack of planning and overscheduling are common pitfalls, as is

managing personnel, which is new for many.

## Technology

Technology needs and expectations around music and worship are another common source of stress, as many music ministers find themselves in charge of audio/visual equipment and management that was not part of their training. This increased exponentially around the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Burnout, Conflict, & Politics

Like their colleagues on staff, many church musicians experience loneliness and a sense of isolation in ministry. Burnout and self-doubt are common. Additional barriers to thriving include biases based on gender and sexuality, which can impact job placement and/or ordination. Denominational conflict is widespread, with many of the latest schisms centered around inclusion of the LGBTQ community. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, some church musicians found themselves in a newly politicized culture in their congregations. Of note, each of these challenges represents the polarization that has become endemic in contemporary North American culture.



## BENEFICIAL RELATIONSHIPS

### Choirs

Church musicians have a mutually encouraging relationship with their choirs. Many pastoral musicians form deep, familial friendships with choir members who are often active in other areas of the church and whose opinions carry weight in the congregation. Working with choir members and a congregation that is supportive of their calling and ordination is grounding for pastoral musicians and pivotal for some.

### Ministerial Staff & Pastors

Working on a healthy ministerial staff where there is mutual respect among colleagues is hugely advantageous. Church musicians place a high value on working with people who are competent in their fields, who have intention and purpose behind their

work, and who collaborate to plan services and think about the long-term health of the church. For all the difficulty that can be present between a senior pastor and minister of music, there are also beautiful examples of healthy and complementary relationships that serve the church well.

### Colleagues & Additional Supports

Many church musicians point to relationships with colleagues in music ministry as key to their survival, having peers who understand the work and its challenges. These may be colleagues from seminary or graduate school or fellow ministers of music and ministry friends in different denominations. Additional supports include family, professional counselors, friends inside and outside the church, and older church members.

## DETRIMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

Some of the same relationships that have the greatest impact on church musicians' well-being at work are also capable of doing the most harm. Through the course of their careers, many church musicians have found themselves working with a pastor or other staff member who is ineffective at best or toxic at worst.

Some church musicians find their senior pastors only want to work with those who agree with them or are so focused on preaching that little direction or emphasis is given to the worship service itself. It is difficult for church musicians to work with pastors or congregations who don't support their calling.

This is still a more common problem for women, especially when it comes to

ordination. Church members who are not healthy themselves or do not respect boundaries can also be challenging.



# PROFESSIONAL AND LIFE PRACTICES

## Spiritual Practices

Church musicians employ a variety of professional and life practices that contribute to their well-being and rejuvenate their work. Spiritual practices like scripture reading, reflection, prayer time, meditation, silence and solitude are central for many. Practicing Sabbath, taking sabbatical, periods of spiritual retreat, and a regular practice of gratitude are all ways of recentering and prioritizing one's life and work.

## Learning & Development

Church musicians naturally engage in lifelong learning and enjoy opportunities for professional development. Practicing their instruments and craft is extremely life-giving, whether it's playing piano, conducting or otherwise studying music. Conference gatherings are a common source of rejuvenation and refreshment and

an important way for church musicians to remain engaged and current.

## Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance is an ideal for most every 21st century professional and a slippery proposition for ministers, whose lives are often deeply intertwined with the people in their parishes. Attempts to achieve it include establishing clear office hours and scheduling standards, limiting engagements and prioritizing days off and time with family



# HOW MINISTRY HAS CHANGED OVER TIME

## Spiritual Practices

Across the board, church musicians acknowledge that declining attendance, engagement and overall commitment to the church have profoundly impacted their work, making it more challenging to continue traditional programming. But amid what could easily be seen as negative changes, there remains a strong sense of optimism and hope: “I also see the way in which what we do is touching hearts and touching minds and bringing people together. And when folks are together in a choir, for example, producing music, it’s one of our only intergenerational enterprises in the world. It’s one of our only collaborative, creative things that we do as people.”

## Emphasis on Quality

Many church musicians note that we have moved beyond the bitter struggles of the so-called “worship wars” to a new day where there is less tension between styles of worship and more emphasis on quality wherever it falls on the wide and diverse spectrum of music.

## COVID

Covid-era changes were many and immediate, deeply impactful and long lasting for church musicians. Covid seems to have ushered in what one interviewee refers to as “the inevitable shift in our culture away from church.” Music ministers everywhere were called upon to adapt and innovate in order to keep churches active and connected through virtual worship. Many found ways to keep their ensembles going and learned new technologies, adding substantial time and stress to their work, though nothing to their salaries. Now that churches have returned to their pre-Covid schedules and routines, music ministers are continuing many of these practices. “But people don’t realize that,” one reflected. “They think it’s

just back to normal.” For church musicians, the pandemic marked a significant and enduring change.

## Cultures of Call & Mentorship

Church musicians in the latter stages of their career recall a time when churches were more actively engaged in identifying and calling out next generations of ministers. Traditional pathways to ministry, through cultures of call and mentorship, have declined, creating something of a vacuum in the academic pipeline. Some who were interviewed feel a sense of urgency to reverse course.

There was a time when churches would look to seminaries to find seminary-trained musicians. That is not always the case anymore. But with rare exception, church musicians see their work as ministry and not just a music job. Many point to their theological education as a formative part of who they are and something that shapes every aspect of their work in the church. There is more of a recognition now than in the past that calling to ministry can shift and change, and perhaps that simple acknowledgment can help us to reimagine this conversation and the culture of call in the church.

“I do think there’s been a shift on the whole,” one interviewee said, toward a “stronger, more readily accepted position of a pastoral musician.” One church musician noted feeling isolated as someone who “always wanted to see music as part of a bigger picture,” but the collective responses to our interviews suggest he is not at all alone. Creative, big picture thinking from church musicians has the potential to reinvigorate not just church music, but the church itself.

## THE BEST PARTS OF THE WORK

Church musicians love their work. In their interviews for this project, they speak in compelling, almost poetic ways about what they find most life-giving and energizing about music ministry. And while they acknowledge the elation of high holy days and big musical productions, the weekly ins and outs of practice and fellowship seem to be equally, if not more, significant to why church musicians love what they do.

### Communal Experience of Worship

The answer that kept recurring, almost like a chorus, is that there is nothing quite like making music with others. This is part of who church musicians are and the reason they are drawn to this beautiful and challenging ministry. The communal experience of worship that music ushers in is not an experience that can be manufactured but one to aim for and recognize and welcome and appreciate when it happens. Interestingly, the cultural shift away from the church in North America over the last 50 years highlights the unique act of corporate worship. “The practice of people sitting around with each other and sharing their voice, especially their singing voice, is such a vulnerable act. And people just don’t do things like that anymore. And so the fact that we get to do that every week is a gift.”

### Relationships

A number of those interviewed mentioned the privilege of having relationships with people in the church, getting to work intentionally with every age group from preschool through senior adults.

### Rehearsal Times

Perhaps because it combines the elements of relationships and making music in preparation for worship, rehearsal time is almost universally a favorite aspect of

church musicians’ work. One interviewee referred to it as an “intimate,” extended time with the choir, where he gets to exercise his music education chops and lead devotion, a time to really experience God’s presence.

### Practice, Planning, & Teaching

One ensemble conductor spoke of how she loves seeing a finished product come together, especially when working with gifted amateurs. “Just seeing that all these different people with all these different brains and different levels of comfort can come together and make such a beautiful product ... it’s so symbolic of the body of Christ.” Several church musicians who are instrumentalists spoke to the significance of their practice and teaching time. “My calling from God is serviced through organ,” said one, who sees his ministry in both teaching and performing. For others, worship planning is a favorite activity.

Church musicians take their work very seriously and feel fortunate to get to serve in their roles. “I served a minister one time [who] said the things that we touch, the music that we do, the worship that we plant, the things that we deal with are holy and the people are holy. ... I try never to take that for granted because I really believe that in our work we are making a difference in people’s lives.”





## CONCLUSIONS

### Church Music and the Health of the Church

It would be naïve to claim that focusing on the health of church musicians will cause churches to be healthier and more vibrant. However, we will make the claim that when you see a vibrant music ministry you will often find it within a vibrant church. Healthy music ministries are part of an ecosystem of vitality in a local congregation; the two are inextricably linked.

It is all the more important, therefore, that we encourage and nurture church musicians. When church musicians flourish, they are satisfied in their work and can stay the course even in the face of challenge. Flourishing church musicians lead vibrant music and worship ministries, and this contributes significantly to the health and vitality of a local congregation.

### Nurturing the Call to Music Ministry

The Lilly Endowment has conducted extensive research on clergy flourishing and programs to strengthen pastoral ministers and churches. The Harmony Project seeks to focus similar attention on church musicians. Our interviews confirm that the nurturing of students to consider whether they might serve as church musicians has waned if not disappeared altogether. As a result, Polyphony is exploring a Culture of Call initiative and seeking funding to further research and study this issue and engage partners who will develop a blueprint to once again nurture the call to music ministry in students.



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHURCHES AND CHURCH MUSICIANS

I. We recommend that church musicians reflect on their call to ministry, consider how they in turn may nurture this calling in students, and engage church leaders in conversations to renew a culture of call within the local congregation.

II. We recommend that church musicians talk regularly with peers about their successes and challenges in congregational ministry and seek formal coaching to help them evaluate how they are doing in their current position and how they are feeling about their life goals.

III. We recommend that church musicians receive training in conflict resolution and the art of negotiation as most have found themselves needing skills to navigate difficult relationships, often with supervisors or other staff.

IV. We recommend church musicians acquire skills that can bring added value to local church ministry, such as video and live-streaming skills that many acquired during COVID, and have frank conversations with supervisors or personnel committees to determine what are reasonable expectations and what is a sustainable workload.

V. We recommend church musicians spend time maintaining musical skills through dedicated practice time and ongoing private lessons with qualified instructors, as well as adding technological and administrative skills that will strengthen music and worship ministry. We further recommend church musicians acquire new skills that, in an emergency, may enable them to pivot to another job.

*“Healthy music ministries are part of an ecosystem of vitality in a local congregation; the two are inextricably linked.”*



# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PASTORS AND PERSONNEL COMMITTEES AND CONGREGATIONS

## Pastors and Personnel Committees

- I. Conduct an annual performance review, not only of the employee but of the job description to determine whether it is current and to create space for honest dialogue about the strengths of the church musician and whether there is good alignment between those strengths and skills and what the job requires.
- II. Invest in employees through ongoing training, and if employees must take on significant new responsibilities, compensate them accordingly.
- III. Evaluate how many groups, teams and committees as well as paid staff an employee must manage and acknowledge that managing volunteers is a labor-intensive task.

## Congregations

- I. Say thank you regularly and be specific in our affirmation. Celebrate employment anniversaries, and if possible, offer a monetary bonus. When criticism is necessary, speak to a church musician in person, in private.
- II. Budget for continuing education for worship and music conferences and allow time away to connect with and to observe fellow church musicians.
- III. Acknowledge that every church musician will do some things well and other things less well. The success of music ministry is a shared responsibility between a congregation and a pastoral musician.

*Polyphony Music Resources is committed to helping church musicians flourish in their ministries and to using the findings of this research to benefit both church musicians and the church as a whole.*

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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