



POLYPHONY
MUSIC RESOURCES

Breathe, bless, and be well



The Harmony Project 2.0
What Church Musicians Need to Thrive

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INTRODUCTION & METHODS

The Harmony Project 2.0 provides valuable, qualitative information in the form of major themes, big ideas and concepts to help church musicians and those who work with them better understand what makes them thrive.

INTRODUCTION

Like Polyphony, the organization behind The Harmony Project 2.0, this study is designed to help church musicians create a sustainable professional and personal life, one that will help them to flourish in music ministry for the long-term.

It also prompts Christian communities to consider how we can best support those who serve in music ministry and what we might need to do to encourage more young people to consider church music as a calling, given evidence of waning numbers seeking academic degrees in the field.

The Harmony Project 2.0 provides valuable, qualitative information in the form of major themes, big ideas and concepts to help church musicians and those who work with them better understand what makes them thrive.

We hope it will be a valuable resource to decision makers in churches (personnel committees, senior pastors, etc.) and anyone else involved in supporting church musicians (from support staff to sacred music publishers), as well as church musicians themselves.

Like arts and culture and business in North America, church music has undergone such a rapid rate of change in the last 50 years that one veteran traditional church musician interviewed said, “I feel like a dinosaur.”

The “worship wars” played a large part in this change, as countless congregations struggled to decide what style of music (and therefore what sort of church musician) was needed in their context.





Broadly speaking, many churches that would have been described as traditional (in worship and music style) in Protestant churches in the 1970s took one of three paths in the last five decades:

Contemporary

Adopted a contemporary worship and music model, moving away from traditional worship and music.

Blended

Shifted to a hybrid model of contemporary and traditional worship elements, often dubbed a blended style.

Traditional

Made an intentional commitment to traditional/liturgical worship and music style.

Church musicians who had been trained in (or preferred) a more traditional model of worship and music found it difficult to adapt in those churches that sought significant change. *(It is beyond the scope of this study to say why change was so difficult but suffice it to say the skills needed for these divergent worship styles are significantly different; few church musicians are equally adept in both styles although there are exceptions.)*

During the same 50 years, denominational worship and music departments that once supported the work of traditional church musicians declined, partly due to less financial support from local churches to those denominational entities and partly because there were fewer traditional church musicians to serve.

The worship wars have subsided. Broadly speaking, churches have sorted out their congregational worship identity: contemporary or blended or traditional/liturgical.

So where is a church musician to find the support, the network and the resources that make a lifelong vocation in church music

sustainable? Polyphony Music Resources is creating a network for church musicians to provide them with the skills and resources needed to continue to serve congregations well. This research project gathered the qualitative data needed to understand what church musicians need to thrive.

METHODS

The Harmony Project 2.0 enlisted four (4) interviewers to conduct 15-20 interviews each. The interview questions were adapted from similar questions formulated by a researcher^[1] at Notre Dame University and used in a Lilly Endowment study focused more broadly on helping clergy to thrive in their ministry settings. See below for demographics of the 75 surveyed musicians.

Interviews included a variety of probes and alternatives to draw the most thoughtful

insights and information, but all interviews followed the same overall progression of questions, outlined below. Interviewers encouraged interviewees to include as much detail as they could; the richer the stories the better. At the conclusion of the questions, interviewees were asked if there was anything further they wanted to add.

To see the entire interview assessment instrument, see the appendix on page 60.

Demographics of Surveyed Musicians

The Harmony Project 2.0 interviews were conducted amongst 75 church musicians.

Gender

25 participants were female and 50 participants were male.

Career Stage

20 participants were early-career, 26 were mid-career, and 29 were late-career.

Titles and Roles

Participant titles and roles varied from Ministers of Music and Associate Pastors of Worship to Organist-Choirmasters and Music Directors.

Job Type

Most participants serve full time in their title/role. A few are part-time and/or bi-vocational.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Calling & the Path to Becoming a Church Musician

When Work is Going Well

Challenging Aspects of the Work

Beneficial Relationships

Detrimental Relationships

Professional and Life Practices

Changes Over Time

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.”

How did you become a minister of music, music director, music/worship leader and educator?

Every person who was interviewed came to this profession because they saw someone else engaged in church music who loved their work. Some of these models were parents or grandparents; other models were influential ministers of music or music directors.

People who feel called to music ministry often have a Christian family influence or musical family influence, sometimes multigenerational. (One respondent, in contrast, reported being adopted with no one musical in their family of origin.)

The seeds of a calling to music ministry are planted relatively young, sometimes as children, often as teenagers and then nurtured through college experiences. As one interviewee put it, “Most of my faith development and my spiritual formation

growing up took place connected with church music.”

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Early Participation

Many described early participation in church, whether through graded choir programs, youth choir, serving as an acolyte, or singing with adult choir as a child. In several cases, people were drawn toward music ministry through early opportunities for leadership, such as playing piano in church, accompanying an ensemble, or even conducting. One interviewee connected his initial sense of calling to filling a need at his home church, where he served as the church pianist from a very young age.

Several referred simply to the visibility of the music program as being an initial draw, seeing music in a hymnal and being fascinated by watching the organist play. With some exceptions, many started in music young. Many played piano as a child, and several mentioned a particular instrument, music style, or ministry as their “in” to ultimately seeing themselves in music ministry. Examples included organ, guitar, drums, tenor sax, or other instrument, choir or classical choral tradition, and conducting.

Models, Mentors, and Pivotal Relationships

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. For some it is more through church; for others, it is more through music. Pivotal relationships include good music teachers, whether choir or band, pastors, ministers of music, Sunday

school teachers, or other people of faith. These were people who invested in them, supported and nurtured them, and in some cases played a direct role in their sense of call. Often the model/mentor is in the position the person initially feels called to go into, because they can envision themselves in that role. One interviewer said, “The minister of music really was my pastor.”

These same people may act as “connectors,” putting the aspiring church musician in touch with key people and/or educational programs. One interviewer recalled the youth minister who first mentioned she could do music and ministry and described it as a “mind blown moment,” where she saw the possibility that it could be a career. She was 16 at the time, and he helped her think through a plan, including college programs to consider, setting her on the pathway to music ministry.

“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.”



Another interviewee described his mother as a model in the role of music minister: “I remember seeing her behind the pulpit every Sunday leading the music ... and I wanted to be like her. ... This is all I’ve ever wanted to do.”

Formative Educational Experiences

While the seeds were planted early for many interviewees, several described the first sense of calling in their teens to late teens, while a few were only beginning to consider ministry in their mid 20s or during college. Influences during these critical times included leadership in a high school choir program, Passport camps (ecumenical, interdenominational summer camps for youth and children), internships during college, and other formative educational or musical experiences in college/seminary.

One interviewee didn’t learn that he had any musical talent until age 17, when a high school music teacher discovered his gift for singing and took a proprietary interest in his education, including changing his schedule to include choir and going with him to college auditions. From that point, he found a college mentor and eventually became an intern at a United Methodist Church, where he had opportunities to conduct for the first time. There, he said, he learned what community and fellowship were all about and realized that music, this gift he’d been given, didn’t have to be all about him.

“I began to realize over time that there’s no amount of money that’s ever going to make you happy,” he said. “There’s no amount of accolades that will ever make you feel affirmed. There is no amount of spotlight that will ever give what you do purpose. It won’t be enough. It’ll never be enough. But

“I began to realize over time that there’s no amount of money that’s ever going to make you happy. There’s no amount of accolades that will ever make you feel affirmed. ... It’ll never be enough. But I found that standing up in front of a group of people who were there ... in service to a God that they desired to praise ... getting to be a part of that would give my life meaning and purpose.”

I found that standing up in front of a group of people who were there because they wanted to be there, because they held great value in being in community together, that they all were there in service to a God that they desired to praise ... that was so unique and different [from] what the rest of our world values. And I realized that getting to be a part of that would give my life meaning and purpose. And that is more important than anything else I could ever be able to achieve as a musician.”

Calling Takes Many Forms

In the vast majority of cases, calling was a series of developments, something that became clear over time. “So for me, I think it was just a few key people all along nurturing me that made the difference in helping me see ... what my call could be.” A couple spoke of “surrendering to music ministry,” and one from a charismatic background mentioned “prophetic words ... like God has placed a mantle of worship on you.” Another 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.”

Several interviewees describe a culture of call, being positively impacted by others pursuing the same path, or growing up in an environment where the sense of calling is prominent and celebrated. One recalled that “it was a priority of the minister of music and his wife [to train] church musicians,” while others were impacted by recent seminary graduates who became mentors and young ministers who encouraged them to pursue their calling.

Less common but not just folklore are the stories where someone knew in a particular moment what God was calling them to do. One story was especially vivid. “I was back in my dorm room all by myself looking through all of these brochures, and I pulled out one from Furman University.

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I was going down the list of different things they had in music ... and this, I know, sounds crazy, but I heard a voice, literally heard a voice that said, ‘That’s where you’ll go and that is what you’ll do.’

And I looked around because I thought, ‘Where did that voice come from?’ And I called my parents that night and I said, ‘I’m pretty sure that God told me I’m going to go to Furman and major in church music.’

Well, God had not delivered that message to them and I know they were thinking, ‘We can’t afford Furman.’ But anyway, that set me on a path and I have never wavered from that.”

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The Evolution of Call

Some church musicians reported initially feeling called to other areas of ministry. One felt called to teach and said music in the church just seemed like a natural fit. Another felt called to music education as well as to the church. Yet another felt called to missions and served earlier in his career as a music missionary.

Others were drawn to worship leadership in particular or to the role of Christian formation in worship. One sensed a call specifically to a “developed, liturgical model for worship and music,” another to the intersection of liturgy and “modern worship,” working in worship structure and design, aesthetic and sound. Several who began as church musicians have sensed a move toward a more pastoral presence over time.

There is often an evolution in one’s sense of calling, and people don’t always end up where they thought they were headed. In some cases, it is teachers, again, who recognize their gifts and call them out to

other possibilities. Paths may wind from band to choir to conducting to seminary and doctoral work, with other twists and turns in between. One interviewee said their call looks different now, but “it’s still the same call to love people and to share music and to lead people in their ultimate journey ... and help be a navigator along the way.” Church musicians may not always know where they’re going, but by putting one foot in front of the other, they learn where their gifts are along the way.

Somewhat unique to church musicians are opportunities to start serving churches during college and seminary, some even right out of high school. One interviewee described a progression of working at churches, first as a choral scholar, then directing children’s ensembles, and finally overseeing the entire music program. Another noted feeling a sense of calling emerge when he was asked to step into a role as interim minister of music.



WHEN WORK IS GOING WELL

“Music ministry is going well when people are committed, programs are growing, and people are participating with their hearts.”

How do you know when your work is going well, and alternatively, what are the more challenging aspects of your work?

Church musicians use a number of metrics, many of them subjective but nonetheless informative, to determine when their work is going well. These include qualities of the church culture/work environment, feedback they receive from the staff and congregation, levels of participation in choir and other ensembles, and musical excellence. Notably, there is both a people element and a music element to consider.

Planning and Preparation

Behind the scenes of the highly visible role church musicians hold in weekly worship services, a wide variety of skills is required for the work.

Many ministers of music are working with two calendars simultaneously, planning for

Sunday services (short term) and upcoming events or high holy days (long term). And before they can rehearse music with their choir and/or ensembles, they need to select arrangements appropriate to the ability and number of people in their setting. Aside from creativity and craft, the amount of planning and preparation that goes into each worship service on the part of the musicians and music leaders is considerable.

With that in mind, it is no surprise that many church musicians interviewed for this project noted time for adequate preparation as a key marker of work going well. Having time to prepare for choir rehearsal and worship, to think ahead, feel grounded, and bring their spiritual gifts to worship planning, are all desirable components of a work environment where church musicians can get into a state of flow and thrive in their ministry. Many expressed gratitude for pastors who preach from the lectionary and other ministry staff who work together to plan ahead.

Time is also a coveted commodity for personal spiritual practices, such as meditation, reading, and study, leading to a sense of inner peace.

One interviewee put it this way: Work is going well “when I feel like I’m not only checking off boxes, but when I’m doing it with purpose and with intention, when I’m planning worship, not just plugging in stuff, but I’m thinking through theological themes or why this is important, how this weaves together, how the tapestry of worship kind of fits in. I love calendaring and having a plan. Looking forward and looking back. Delegating [is] a new thing and a good thing.”

Participation and Engagement

Participation is another recurring theme. Solid participation in choir, a key marker of a thriving music ministry, seems to spill over into increased participation or engagement in other areas of church.

One interviewee noticed that participation in the music program helped congregants to realize that it’s everybody’s church – children, youth, adults, and senior adults. People show increased interest and grow and learn in their own ministry, and you can see gifts for ministry being used to their maximum. You see people feeling the benefit of being involved, seeing their own value and how what they’re doing contributes to the whole.

Music ministry is going well when people are committed, programs are growing, and people are participating with their hearts. For one interviewee, who raises programming and staffing funding, revenue is another important metric and is directly impacted by attendance at ensembles and concerts. Another mentioned buy-in from the choir, in particular. “I love seeing people fall in love with music that maybe they didn’t like when they first heard it, or maybe they thought it was too challenging, but to see them go through the process and enjoy

“I love seeing people fall in love with music that maybe they didn’t like when they first heard it, or maybe they thought it was too challenging, but to see them go through the process and enjoy the process and get better because of the process, those are really fulfilling aspects to me to watch people learn and grow in those moments.”

the process and get better because of the process, those are really fulfilling aspects to me to watch people learn and grow in those moments. If we can wed a beautiful theology, the beautiful artistry, if that takes place underneath the umbrella of excellence in all things and all things to the glory of God, if we can do that, then that's a really good week."

The word "joy" came up over and over again and seems to draw upon this rich sense of engagement and buy-in. Whether feeling the energy in worship music or in the choir, or even in relationship with choir and church members, a sense of joy is connected to a greater confidence, a stirring of the Holy Spirit that strengthens the community and manifests as people getting along and seeing the big picture.

Work Relationships and Culture

Joy was also mentioned in connection to affirmation from other staff members. "Whenever your senior pastor comes alongside you and says, 'I really appreciate all the work you do,' ... you know that things are going well." Having ministry staff on the same page with a common vision for worship makes it rich and meaningful not only for the congregation but also for the leaders.

Indeed, church musicians see collaboration as a key marker of their ministry. This includes collaboration among ministry staff as well as volunteers. Collaboration is a thoughtful process. It can include creative tension, to be sure, but without conflict. "Healthy relationships with the other staff is a vital indicator of how well things are going." When ministry involves a lot of people, one interviewee noted, he feels like part of a team, or an "ecosystem." There is less work on one person, as the load is shared all the way around: planning, implementation, buy-in, growth, change, transformation.

Church culture is another indicator of church musicians' satisfaction with their work.

Church culture is another indicator of church musicians' satisfaction with their work. Churches and church staffs that are very intentional in building relationships, environments where they feel free to share, try new things, and give input, where there is openness and willingness to really listen and hear each other are highly desirable, as they allow for creativity, for church musicians to give their best to the choir and congregation. Feeling close to the church community, to one's colleagues, and to the choir (or other key persons in the church's music ministry) all set the stage for a church musician to thrive.



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Feedback

Church musicians had differing perspectives on the feedback they receive as a reliable measure of their work. It's important, they noted, to consider the source. One church musician's staff has built-in time to share feedback, which she relies on as she also does with her band. Across the board, church musicians seem to appreciate the feedback of trusted friends and the choir. People in the congregation noting a hymn that really fit the sermon or sharing how the music triggered their thoughts or emotions or moved them intellectually are all welcome and helpful feedback, as are most any words of affirmation.

"I think that the people themselves, you know, when esprit de corps is high and

when people seem to be very pleased with everything that's going on, I hear lots of positive comments. I hope that the congregational side of my journey is strong as well when people feel like they're heard and valued, they make comments to that effect. I feel like those are always good indicators of how well things are going."

At the same time, professionally trained church musicians need to be discerning, as not all feedback is an accurate reflection on their work. As one interviewee noted, "We have weekly opportunities to receive gratification for our work," which could be "a blessing or a curse." "I know myself," said another, "and usually know when I'm doing well and when I'm not."

Intangible Measures

While it's common to feel a momentous experience in relation to big musical events, church musicians agree that it's about the journey more than the destination. They see the consistency of leading people in worship every Sunday as more important. In individual interviews, they offered many intangible measures of work going well. Here are a few:

"When people are thinking and feeling, and both their brains and emotions are engaged."

"When people can feel God's presence and share in it."

"When we provide a safe space." One interviewee shared the story of welcoming a new member to choir, a professional singer, who had been away from the church for some time.

"I hear it in the congregation's voices, the volume, the intensity, and also in the quiet behind me in the congregation when the choir is singing and you know you have their attention, a sacred moment."

"When you see opportunity on the horizon, see people growing in relationship with God and each other."

"When the work is creative and intentional. (When it's not creative, that's work at its worst.)"

While it's common to feel a momentous experience in relation to big musical events, church musicians agree that it's about the journey more than the destination. They see the consistency of leading people in worship every Sunday as more important.

Ministry and Music Leadership

While not all church musicians are formally considered ministers, many who were interviewed for this project are. Ministers of music are uniquely trained and can be invaluable resources in church leadership, helping to provide a vision for worship and music ministry. Additionally, they often have more regular contact with a large and involved group of the congregation (choir and other music ensembles) than other staff members, and naturally provide pastoral care and spiritual leadership to those who are regular participants in their ministry. Several of them noted the importance of people recognizing the ministry part of their role, and on the flip side, find it frustrating when they do not. This is true with congregants but especially with colleagues on ministry staff.

On the other hand, some church musicians do not see themselves as ministers; still, they take seriously their role in giving their musical abilities to the worship of God.

Several noted the importance of practice time and the humbling experience of letting others hear them play. One organist shared an experience of playing in front of another organ colleague, asking her to critique some things. And while it was frustrating for him in that moment, he realized her observations made his playing three times better than what it had been over a month of practice. "You know you're having a good week in terms of developing as a musician

and practicing," he said, "when you make progress and find new avenues that you've missed."

Some church musicians know their work is going well when they are able to be present in worship themselves, fully participating and not just offering foresight and guidance. "Ultimately, we as worship leaders are also there to worship the one true God. We're not just there to facilitate 24/7. ... We need to still have our cup filled as we go through worship, because how else are we also going to have that connection with God?" This is more likely, of course, when the preparation time is adequate, and they can find themselves in the present moment.

Financial Support

Finally, one metric that is mentioned less frequently but still carries significance is funding for music. This could be for ensembles, such as orchestra or handbells, or for routine needs like organ maintenance. One interviewee who is active in both the church and the academy noted the need for advocacy for church music and music ministry on a church level as well as in university and seminary settings. "Pastoral staff and church has gotten on board with my vision and philosophy for music ministry. And whenever you have that, even if you don't have the money that you really want, that can really be a recipe for development and seeing things thrive. And so supportive vision and development of a vision is ideal."

CHALLENGING ASPECTS OF THE WORK

*“Church musicians face unique challenges ...
balancing music and ministry.”*

Church musicians face unique challenges, among them, balancing music and ministry, working with volunteer ensembles, and managing relationships with staff and church members. Practical considerations pose additional sources of stress, and burnout and self-doubt can run deep. There are also specific challenges related to age, gender and sexuality, as well as bigger picture changes within denominations and the church in North America as a whole.

Attendance, Preparation and Schedules

Attendance at choir rehearsals (and other ensembles) is a weekly concern. 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 the level of participation of those volunteers. In contexts with a small choir size, for example, church musicians are tasked with finding music for just a few voices in line with their choir's level of ability.

There are often multiple layers of challenges, as the above example makes clear: finding good music for a specific context, having committed choir members, and in many cases, adjusting the expectations of the congregation. One interviewee illustrated it well in this reflection:

“I think the biggest struggle for me in a small church is they're still trying to hold on to this model of ... a choir singing a big anthem every Sunday, and it's just not possible because it takes six or eight weeks to learn something hard and if you have people who are only there for half of those, they don't know it. ... That's been my biggest challenge here is just trying to maintain this model that is unsustainable with the human resources that we have.”

With cultural changes over the last 30 years or so in the church in North America (and rapidly accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic), churches of every size are having some of the same difficulties. For many, the biggest challenge is time. In years past, even in large metropolitan areas, Sundays and Wednesday nights were times when people went to church. Sports and other activities weren't scheduled during that time.

Over the past few decades, however, that landscape has changed. Families have competing commitments on Wednesday evenings and Sunday mornings alike. It's hard to get people to choir practice on Wednesday evenings and to church on Sundays. Add to that the long commute many church members have getting to church in cities and suburbs, and the cultural and generational shift away from church attendance, and the issues compound.

Churches are having a difficult time getting the engagement they had pre-COVID, and that takes a direct toll on music ministries. Many older members have not come back since the church opened back up, which is a real loss. A different, but related challenge is having aging congregations. In both cases, churches are “[losing] a lot of wisdom and sanity and leadership abilities” and trying to find ways to create new leaders to fill the void.

The energy required on the part of a

music minister to get volunteers – a word many don't like but that communicates people who aren't paid – to come to choir, orchestra and handbell rehearsals, and commit to retreats and tours, is tremendous. We live in such a busy society now where there are options for all kinds of things for young people, in particular. And typically, they don't choose church first anymore. On one hand, church musicians know not to take it personally when their members prioritize something else; on the other, participation is essential to what they do. In some cases, church musicians have had to “adjust expectations on quality and just say this is people offering their gifts.”

Whether to accommodate the changes in their members' attendance patterns or for their own time commitments – being bi-vocational or working with various ensembles, for example – several church musicians interviewed mentioned the need for a flexible schedule. Others just want their church members and colleagues on ministry staff to understand their varied schedules and specific needs. One spoke frankly about not wanting people to hear her practice on organ, which meant she needed to schedule work hours when the building was not in use. This created a conflict, as the rest of the staff didn't seem to appreciate her need for a favorable environment for music practice and preparation.



Church musicians are uniquely set up to work in two different realms, people and music.

Relationships

Church musicians are uniquely set up to work in two different realms, people and music. While church musicians are largely known and recognized for their leadership in music, they are nonetheless driven by relationships, which can be especially challenging in the church, whether with members of the congregation, volunteer musicians or fellow ministry staff.

Choir

In most cases, relationships with choir members are a life-giving part of the music minister's work.

Accompanists & Music Associates

Working relationships with accompanists and music associates can enrich or frustrate.

Pastors

Relationships with pastors largely determine the health or detriment of a working environment.

Working with pastors can be difficult. Every church musician has at least one story of a challenging, if not toxic, working relationship with a pastor. In some cases, work styles and expectations are not in alignment. A pastor may have a different leadership style or poor administrative skills that adversely impact the work of the music minister.

In other cases, the pastor is a poor fit for the congregation, and the church musician is caught between what the pastor wants and what the church seems to want in music and worship. Pastoral transitions present special difficulty. Several church musicians alluded to being the longest tenured person on their church staff, "the rock," and feeling pressure to keep the church going and honor the traditions and identity of their parish, not to mention taking on more responsibilities than their job description. This is a heavy burden and can become especially difficult when a new pastor introduces change too quickly, disregarding years of tradition and

history. (On the flip side, church musicians sometimes find themselves in a similar, contentious situation, where church conflict is present at the beginning of a new post.)

Pastors are as varied as church musicians themselves and can fall anywhere on the spectrum of being healthy to toxic leaders. Sadly, some have difficult personalities and foster an environment of interpersonal conflict that puts a strain on the church staff and congregation. Some church musicians feel left out of leadership. Poor communication from the pastor can lead to church musicians (and other staff members) feeling siloed, then overwhelmed. This feeling can extend beyond the relationship with the pastor to include other staff and the congregation/personnel committee, as well.

Several ministers of music referenced working with a senior pastor who had a background in music, appreciated the value of the church's music ministry, and was especially thoughtful and collaborative in worship planning. That is the ideal.

Some pastors have strengths and interests that are well suited to working with ministers of music. Several ministers of music referenced working with a senior pastor who had a background in music, appreciated the value of the church's music ministry, and was especially thoughtful and collaborative in worship planning. That is the ideal.

Many church musicians experience jealousy from colleagues because of the visibility of their position and respect for the music program as a whole.

Many church musicians experience jealousy from colleagues because of the visibility of their position and respect for the music program as a whole. Church musicians have a prominent role leading music and worship. Pastors and other staff members can feel like they are in "competition" with a music minister who is grounded in his or her own ministry and sense of calling:

"The relationship between the director [or] minister of music and the head of staff is by far the most important relationship. If that relationship is solid and the two are getting along, you can endure most things. But if the senior pastor doesn't have your back, if the senior pastor thinks you're taking too much leadership, if it's an insecure minister, and he or she thinks you're getting too much of the glory, you can get a lot of feedback. The really healthy senior ministers

realize that if the musician is getting glory, it's reflected on them, too. Those who are less confident find themselves in competition with the director of music."

One person interviewed recalled being on a staff in a previous position that was actively working against each other, to the extent that their services became more about impressing and outdoing one another than about worship. Another lamented times when he felt like a lone ranger, just filling in the blanks for worship leadership. Several expressed frustration with other staff members who were not pulling their load. 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.

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.

One church musician reflected that the hardest part in ministry "is not having the support of the pastor ... not having the encouragement to feel free to live into my calling, the encouragement to help the congregation, to lead the congregation in how they worship the best, not how he – what's always been a man for us – how he thinks the church worships the best, not listening to the voice of the congregation."

One interviewee noted that as a lay-led church, “the pastor has a vision, but the church does, too.”

Reflecting back on a long career in ministry, one church musician summarized it this way: “I was much happier when I just felt like my relationship with the pastor was really healthy. ... When communication was clear, when expectations were clear, when I felt trusted, when our opinions and perspectives aligned enough to make working together feel easy. I think it can be really difficult to work with a senior pastor who has a very different vision of what a Sunday morning should look like than what your ideal vision would be.”

When a church doesn’t know who they are, or the pastor and music minister are in conflict over worship, the congregation may not be able to put their finger on the problem, but it has a way of coming through in worship. The best environment

for a church musician to flourish is one in which the church knows its identity, and the pastor, music minister, and congregation have a shared vision of worship.



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Practical Considerations

Practical considerations, while perhaps not as weighted as relational concerns with ministry staff and parishioners, are an ever-present part of the work. Several interviewees noted keeping up with email and even rudimentary tasks such as stapling as a stressor. Lack of money and lack of practical resources were also recurring themes. 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. For many, managing personnel is new, and some find themselves supervising difficult people. Delegation is another growing edge, figuring out how to include others in areas where assistance is needed.

Technology needs and expectations around music and worship are a 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, and several interviewees noted that the adaptations made during that time are now an expected part of their church's offerings, a new reality that has added substantially to their workload but not to their salaries.

"I really lost my way in the pandemic because all the things that I love about ministry ... were just about taken away. And the whole Zoom meetings and virtual stuff did not connect at all with [me]. Doing video, producing videos to be shown, you know, where you come in with eight singers and you whip something together and none of the process. It was only the product and none of that fed my soul at all."

Post-COVID, logistics are still a large part of the job. Because of the scheduling demands, not only of weekly rehearsals

and worship services but also community-specific and liturgical events, church musicians are at their best when they are organized, planning several weeks and even months ahead. Working in a state of flow allows for more creativity and collaboration and helps to avoid being driven by logistics alone or settling for "fill-in-the-blank" worship planning. When logistics are more the aim than the heart of worship and there's no room for the spiritual side of things, it lowers morale. As one interviewee put it, "we end up feeling depleted by what's supposed to fill us." Long-term, but also Sunday to Sunday, church musicians want to keep the music fresh and intentional.

Music ministry sometimes works on a longer range schedule from the rest of the church, and when something changes, they may have to alter contracts with musicians or change repertoire. These are critical parts of the work that may not be on anyone else's radar, but the unpredictability that often comes with the territory presents a very real challenge for church musicians.

Burnout and Self-Doubt

Like their colleagues on staff, many church musicians experience loneliness and a sense of isolation in ministry. Burnout is common from taking too much on or feeling overworked and can manifest in feeling disconnected from the community or in physical exhaustion or illness. Some require medication and counseling for depression.

At least one person interviewed suffers from "imposter syndrome" because of not having an undergraduate or church music degree. Due to this lack of training, he feels like he doesn't belong at the table with music ministers or with pastors and feels excluded from collegial circles. Starting in his position just before the pandemic prevented him from connecting with the congregation early on, which presented a further challenge.

A number of church musicians alluded to difficulty finding a job, at least one because of gender and another due to music style. For some traditional church musicians trained in music education or more classical repertoire, there are not as many job openings requiring this set of skills.

Barriers to Thriving

Several church musicians interviewed for Harmony Project 2.0 noted specific challenges related to age, gender, and sexuality, as well as denominational conflict and the underbelly of COVID. Of note, each of these challenges represents the kind of polarization that has become endemic in contemporary North American culture.

Biases Against Inclusion

In the early years of their work, some young church musicians find they are not afforded the same trust, grace and authority of other ministry staff, whether from colleagues or church members. Others have felt resistance to their leadership due to being female, gay or divorced and working in the church. Biases based on gender and against the LGBTQ community may result in difficulty finding a job or lack of support for ordination, which in turn can lead to self-doubt and disillusionment.

COVID-19

While some church musicians rose to the new opportunities presented by the pandemic, others found themselves deeply affected by the changes not only in their routine but in the culture of their congregations. "I was depressed," one said, "because my life is viewed so much through the rhythm of rehearsal ... at school and church." But even more than that, "the gospel seemed to be more politicized at

church," which made this church musician's stomach churn more than any other time in his ministry.

Denominational Conflict

Conflict is not unique to any particular denomination, and many of the latest schisms are centered around inclusion of the LGBTQ community. One interviewee whose denomination is currently in the midst of this conflict commented that it is tearing churches and families apart. "It became less about issues over human sexuality a long time ago," he said, "and became more about power, money, control, and buildings." He and his staff have been targets of hateful comments and acts, and he has found himself at odds with the minister who initially introduced him to his current post. In their tradition, they take an ordination vow to "do no harm to the ministry of another," and he struggles with feeling like this colleague has broken that vow.

BENEFICIAL RELATIONSHIPS

“Church musicians draw strength and encouragement from a variety of relationships that have a positive impact on their work.”

What kinds of relationships have had the greatest impact on your well-being at work, both beneficial and detrimental?

Church musicians draw strength and encouragement from a variety of relationships that have a positive impact on their work – most notably their choirs, ministerial staff and senior pastors – but also colleagues in music ministry, professional organizations and friends outside of church.

Choir

Church musicians benefit from strong relationships with their choirs, in particular. One interviewee’s response to the question of what relationships have had the greatest impact on his well-being at work was resounding: “Every choir I’ve ever had.” This is a common thread across interviews with pastoral musicians, with many naming their choir as the most significant relationship in their ministry. Music ministers look forward

to choir rehearsal, as these brief statements make clear:

- “Every Wednesday night is my favorite time of the week.”
- “I want their time to be enjoyable and life-giving as much as they are life-giving and enjoyable to me.”
- “We don’t have a huge choir, but that group of people is the greatest joy and relationship in my ministry.”



Church musicians have a mutually encouraging relationship with their choirs. They walk together through life, death, marriage, divorce, and the birth of children and grandchildren. To be involved in people's lives helps church musicians live into their role as pastors as well as music leaders. Many pastoral musicians form deep, familial friendships with choir members who are open to relationships with staff members. These are often people who are active in other areas of the church, as well, and whose opinions carry weight in the congregation.



Working with a congregation and choir members who are supportive of their calling and ordination is grounding for pastoral musicians and pivotal for some.

Several pastoral musicians, especially those whose churches are near universities, have access to additional church and even professional musicians in their choirs and ensembles. It can be validating and encouraging to experience the support of such high caliber musicians serving with you in music ministry and have them follow your lead. One noted a church administrator who is a musician and how advantageous that has been to their program. Having good relationships with music associates and accompanists (organists and pianists) is an added benefit.

Ministerial Staff

Working on a healthy ministerial staff, where there is mutual respect among colleagues, is hugely advantageous.

One pastoral musician in a large setting captures the energy and freedom of serving with highly qualified musicians among a supportive ministerial staff: "Having the opportunity to work with people of great intellect and self-motivation and compassion is very energizing for me. Serving with clergy that are very supportive, both verbally and

with presence and with a broad range of permission for choosing repertoire or selecting concert themes or those kinds of things ... that breadth of permission in relationships is very meaningful." Equally valuable is recognizing the humanity of fellow staff members, "see[ing] me as the music minister and others on my team as three-dimensional people beyond the benefit that we're providing through our musicianship." This is something that can come from congregants or members of choir or other ensembles but is especially significant coming from fellow staff.

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. These are the kinds of relationships with fellow staff that are highly desirable and celebrated, where church musicians feel valued and believed in. A staff that looks out for each other, trusts each other, and has a sense of comradery in their work empowers church musicians to be creative, not competitive, and to enjoy their work as part of a whole rather than feeling siloed or isolated. For those who are fortunate enough to experience it, there's something deeply impactful about having true friendships and enjoying the people you work with on a church staff.

Pastors

For all the difficulties that can be present between senior pastor and minister of music, there are also beautiful examples of healthy and complementary relationships that serve the church well.

Many church musicians in their early ministry serve with more experienced pastoral staff and find it to be a rich time of learning and growth. One interviewee spoke of his pastor as someone who modeled investment in the community, in staying in the congregation long term.

Another spoke with admiration about a senior pastor he'd worked with who was thoughtful and thorough, honest and compassionate, and always made time for what was important: checking on staff, quality discussions with church members, time with his family. "I don't know how he did it, but every element, every aspect of his role, he took very seriously and made sure he took time for." These values and commitments impact not only the pastoral relationship but also the formation and character of the church musician's own ministry.

Great pastors create an environment for pastoral musicians to thrive. Several mentioned working with pastors who appreciate and emphasize the role of music in worship and are supportive of the music program. Another spoke of a pastor who was not intimidated by having people in the church who related better to the music minister than to the senior pastor. "He is beautifully okay with that," he said. "He supports and encourages that." There is no "turf."

A pastor's affirmation of a church musician's work and calling is a powerful thing. It can create a sense of being valued, knowing one's thoughts and ideas have merit and worth and weight, that one's ministry can make a difference. One interviewee relayed

a story from early in his ministry when his church's former minister of music, who was a fantastic soloist, came back to the church and sang during the service. His senior pastor called him in the next week, and while acknowledging the beautiful solo, said "but I really appreciate the gifts that you bring to us week to week in worship." Forty-four years later, he still remembers that moment.

"I really appreciate the gifts that you bring to us week to week in worship."



Colleagues in Music Ministry

Church musicians benefit greatly from the support of colleagues and mentors in music ministry. Many point to these relationships as key to their survival, having peers who understand the work and its challenges, or in some cases, having relationships with a well-established "connector" in ministry, who is a natural networker and community builder.

While having a retired minister (in any role) remain in the congregation can be problematic, several interviewees point to their predecessor in music ministry in the same congregation as a significant source of encouragement and help, which clearly

speaks to the health and mentoring savvy of that individual. Many church musicians continue to enjoy beneficial relationships with teachers, college professors and administrators, churches of origin and their home pastor or minister of music or someone who they bonded with in a first ministry setting.

Colleagues from seminary or graduate school, fellow ministers of music and ministry friends in different denominations are also great sources of support. Peer learning groups, whether with pastors or musicians, can have an immediate impact on ministry. One interviewee mentioned a particular study with paid facilitators through TMF, Texas Methodist Foundation, that included guest speakers and noted that for someone whose vocation is highly visible on a regular basis, “there is value to not being in charge.”

In 2023 Polyphony Music Resources and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship partnered to offer a Thriving in Ministry cohort for church musicians for the first time. This group of 16 church musicians (eight women and eight men) met throughout the year in person and online to deepen friendships, build a collegial community and to share resources and ideas.

Professional organizations and conferences are common gathering places for getting together with fellow ministers of music. Those who have prioritized such gatherings and relationships find them to be vital, while those who have not prioritized them seem to regret not having this kind of support. One interviewee said this is the one thing she would change if she had it to do all over again.

While not a common response, one interviewee pointed to composers and arrangers who write music that works skillfully in church as some of his role models in ministry.

Additional Supports

Like all humans, church musicians need support to be at their best. In addition to choir, pastors, ministerial staff and colleagues in ministry, church musicians find support from a variety of sources, including family, professional counselors, friends inside and outside the church, and older church members.

Family is critical, and while some appreciate their relationships with parents, in-laws, or spouses in ministry, others prefer to keep their ministry and family life as separate as possible. Support from families runs the gamut from elderly parents to kids. Some church musicians also develop close, intentional friendships that become like family.

Some church musicians seek professional counseling on a regular basis to keep themselves mentally healthy, and some seek counseling periodically to help them through especially difficult times.

Many church musicians find it beneficial to have a separate community of friends outside of church, where they are less tied to a professional role and don't have to think about their work or answer questions about church conflict. Others enjoy long-standing relationships with church members from previous churches served.



“After doing this for all these years, I don’t buy into that,” he said. “I was very close to a handful of people who I could go to in times that were tough ... and had I not had some of these close, close friends that I could talk to, could cry with, you know, could share my hurts and pains, I don’t know that I would have remained at the church.”

One interviewee reflected on the philosophy that as a minister, you should not become “friends” with church members. “After doing this for all these years, I don’t buy into that,” he said. “I was very close to a handful of people who I could go to in times that were tough ... and had I not had some of these close, close friends that I could talk to, could cry with, you know, could share my hurts and pains, I don’t know that I would have remained at the church.”

Church members may want to look up to their pastoral staff, but they should also know that staff members are human, with their own faults and frailties. “Having some really close friends who were members of the church helped me [get] through difficult times. ... And I think if you don’t have that, you’re at a disadvantage.”

For one interviewee, the most beneficial relationships are with “people who approach ministry with a holy curiosity ... not coming in as the hotshot that’s got all the answers ... more so coming in saying, ‘Teach me something. What don’t I know about this place? What don’t I know about this thing? What could we discover together?’ ... Those have been the most impactful relationships for me, and where I found the most ease in terms of working dynamic.”

Like all serious disciples, church musicians benefit from relationships with people who are still open to growing in their faith, who rather than becoming more set in their ways or deciding they’ve seen it

all, are wonderfully open-minded. This is especially refreshing and inspiring in older congregants. One interviewee remembered several older members of the congregation – women, in particular, who provided a deep, familial level of support when he and his wife had their children.



“People who approach ministry with a holy curiosity ... not coming in as the hotshot that’s got all the answers ... more so coming in saying, ‘Teach me something. What don’t I know about this place? What don’t I know about this thing? What could we discover together?’ ... Those have been the most impactful relationships for me, and where I found the most ease in terms of working dynamic.”

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.”

Some of the same relationships that have the greatest impact on church musicians’ well-being at work – with pastors and other ministerial staff – are also capable of doing the most harm. Church members who are not healthy themselves or do not respect boundaries can also be challenging.

Pastors and Ministerial Staff

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. Examples abound of staff members who are difficult to collaborate with, who use their tenure to make others feel powerless, who are divisive by nature and sow lack of effort, trust and confidence. On either extreme, there are pastors who don’t seem to care and are so disorganized or busy putting out fires that worship isn’t a priority, and pastors whose controlling nature extends far beyond worship planning into the staff’s personal life.

Sadly, there were multiple mentions of clergy who created a toxic work environment, took their trauma out on colleagues, or were otherwise unhealthy and needed intervention. One interviewee thought back to a pastor he once worked with and remarked that “he himself was not toxic, but his being appointed to this church was toxic; because he was not a good fit, and he knew it and fought it because of ambitions in his own life.” The good news is these challenging circumstances are not a life sentence for the church. Once the problematic person is removed, the church is often able to rebound.

To be clear, toxic persons and difficult relationships are two different things. And while the hope is not to find oneself in a position with a toxic pastor or other staff member, there is a high likelihood of some difficult working relationships along the way. The rhythm of church work is not *if* the challenges are going to happen, but *when*, as one interviewee noted.

As another put it, “People are neither good nor bad. People are capable of good and bad. We are all divine children of God. ... That is what I’ve come to understand.”

It is difficult for church musicians to work with a pastor who doesn’t support their calling. 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.

Conflict with Church Members

One interviewee noted that his church trends older, and he is younger, and he sometimes feels the need to prove himself. Feeling unsupported as pastoral musicians is still a more common problem for women, especially when it comes to ordination. This lack of support can come from pastors or from the congregation.

There are plenty of instances where church members create problems for ministers of music. They may remain devoted to a previous minister of music or make unfair assumptions based on their own biases. One church musician shared an anecdote about someone who assumed he was ignorant about a liturgical style of worship because of his background in nondenominational churches even though he has a degree in education with an emphasis in choral conducting. It was a difficult relationship to navigate because this person had been a member and stakeholder for years. He was someone who was very dedicated to the church, but the church musician also was dedicated.

“Part of being in church worship and being in church culture is figuring out what your role is and where you fit in,” within the dynamic of people who are already there and invested in the community. “If you don’t realize that, you’re not going to be there a long time.”

Another important realization is that there will always be “crazy makers,” congregants who just have “a burr in their saddle,” and people who do not respect boundaries. One minister of music, for example, had congregants who wanted her to wear certain brands of clothing. There are volunteers who do a lot of work but are also a lot to manage.

“One of the things that’s wonderful about the church,” one interviewee noted, is that “all are welcome and all can be served and the grace of God is available to all. And sometimes that means that we have individuals that we want to serve and who want to serve [the church] whose mental health may be unstable or whose unresolved concerns in life can become toxic and contagious. ... That can be a real challenge because of course our spouses and our children and our hobbies are reflected online and toxic congregants have access to those kinds of things. And that can be discouraging, threatening, unsettling.”

“All are welcome and all can be served and the grace of God is available to all”

Colleagues in Ministry

One interviewee offered a very different perspective in his response to this question, noting he has felt isolated from ministry colleagues in town who consider his congregation the “liberal” church. As a result, he hasn’t felt freedom to extend invitations to those who disapprove of their doctrine and openness.

PROFESSIONAL & LIFE PRACTICES

“Church musicians employ a variety of professional and life practices that contribute to their well-being and rejuvenate their work.”

What kinds of professional or life practices have had the greatest impact on your well-being at work?

From spiritual disciplines and prioritizing time with family to physical exercise, self-care, and lifelong learning, church musicians employ a variety of professional and life practices that contribute to their well-being and rejuvenate their work. These are practices church musicians can learn from each other and that churches can learn to better support.

Spiritual Practices

Church musicians are committed to their own spiritual well-being. Spiritual practices, including scripture reading, reflection, prayer time, meditation, silence and solitude are central for many. Several mentioned apps that guide them through the lectionary or through ancient spiritual formation practices, such as lectio divina (Latin for “divine reading,” a contemplative way of reading Scripture), with the goal being to

experience the presence of God. Practicing Sabbath, taking sabbatical, periods of spiritual retreat and a regular practice of gratitude are all ways of re-centering and prioritizing one’s life and work.

One interviewee spoke of sitting with difficulty in an environment of acceptance as a spiritual practice, another of accepting and appreciating feedback and trying to “be Christ” in all situations. Another spoke about taking encouragement from the people God brings into your life. “Everywhere I’ve ever been,” he says, “there have been either a small amount or a host of people who are incredibly talented, talented musicians that challenge me to want to be a better musician. And then [there have] also been people that have just been incredible ministers who challenge me to want to be a better minister. So iron sharpens iron.”



“I think part of what’s caused me to thrive,” one interviewee said, “is that I took my own spiritual well-being very seriously and had to pursue that outside of my job environment because it just didn’t provide for it.” The goal is “getting yourself into God’s presence – thin places,” said another, “where the veil is thin between heaven and earth.”

Lifelong Learning and Professional Development

Church musicians are lifelong learners and enjoy opportunities for professional development, whether through music and/or ministry conferences or personal practice time. As musicians, practicing their instruments and craft is extremely life-giving, whether it’s playing piano, conducting or otherwise studying music. One interviewee said it this way: “Music continues to be my source of nourishment, of fulfillment, of rest.” Setting a goal and achieving it through practice is satisfying, as is staying engaged with good music

makers. Some continue to take lessons and work professionally, accompanying other musicians or teaching. There is value in participating in professional or community music groups just because one wants to, when there is no leadership stake.

It should be no surprise that church musicians enjoy listening to and learning about music, whether hymns and classical music or more contemporary music, and learning about the lives of those who created it. They may be intentional about exploring music outside their own worship canon and/or have a favorite music style or composer: “I listen to a lot of choral music. That’s just the music I like listening to. So I keep up with ... the current sound. Who’s the hot choir right now? What are they doing?” Others have more eclectic taste. And listening can be an active experience, whether done solo or with a group.

One spoke fondly of listening to music on the back porch with a glass of wine, while another regularly attends live music and concerts: “To me, that is a worshipful experience just because it’s a corporate human event.”

Many church musicians prioritize worship and music conferences as opportunities for professional growth and connecting with colleagues in music and ministry. Conferences and organizations mentioned during the interviews included Alleluia (Baylor), Montreat (PAM: Presbyterian Association of Musicians), American Choral Directors Association, Chorister’s Guild, American Guild of Organists and Polyphony Music Resources. These experiences provide opportunities to be inspired and to talk around the table and share ideas with peers.

One interviewee noted that attending conferences can be stressful both in terms of scheduling (around church and family commitments) and budget. Nevertheless, such gatherings are a common source of rejuvenation and refreshment and an important way for church musicians to “fill their tanks” and remain engaged and current. Providing adequate time and funds for church musicians to be members of professional organizations and attend such gatherings is a real opportunity for churches to support this vital ministry. Several church musicians interviewed for this project

point to their seminary or further graduate education as being formative, both in terms of education/theological thinking and establishing long-term relationships with “similar others,” in the words of Notre Dame’s Matt Bloom, or people who “get it.”

Church musicians also benefit from ecumenical gatherings of clergy and peer learning groups, which provide additional professional connections and can help lessen feelings of isolation. While some have groups they meet with locally on a regular basis, in other cases, Polyphony was mentioned as one of the only such resources for church musicians specifically to talk with peers about what’s going on at work. These connections outside of one’s parish are further opportunities to collaborate and be inspired and to help one’s ministry thrive.

A retired church musician who was interviewed for this project told his church: “If you ever put me on the Personnel Committee, I will give each staff member an additional two weeks, not a vacation, but they’re to take two weeks a year when they visit other churches and see what’s going on.”



Work-Life Balance and Time Away

Work-life balance is an ideal for most every 21st century professional, especially those with kids, 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 intentional scheduling standards and prioritizing days off and time with family.

Several church musicians were especially conscientious about morning and afternoon rituals. One bookends the workday with a morning routine to get into the rhythm of the day and “sacred time” with his spouse upon returning home. Another is committed to not working past 5:00 or 5:30 except on Wednesday evenings and typically does not take his laptop home. Another, who is rigid with his schedule at the church, changes into comfy clothes as soon as he gets home as a way of notifying his body that the workday is over and it’s time to relax.

Limiting engagements is another powerful way church musicians maintain balance between their home life and ministry. “Stepping away from things, being intentional about protecting that time,” is essential, one noted. “It’s okay for me to take the time I’m given contractually ... to step away [and] re-center.” It is all too easy for church musicians to devote too much time to their work, to let the church “love them to death,” but in the long run, periods of rest and recharge benefit them personally, their family relationships, their ministry, and the churches they serve. One interviewee said he never works on Friday unless there’s a funeral. Whatever pressing engagements are there will still be there when they return.

Whether it’s maintaining a day off, taking vacation or sabbatical, time away from ministry is critical. How church musicians use that time varies widely, from hobbies and self-care to enjoying community and

even professional development. While some find social time with friends in the congregation to be restful and enriching, others find it beneficial to draw a harder line, keeping private and home life separate as much as possible. “This is church, this is work, and this is my personal life,” one interviewee emphasized. “And that’s kind of a sticky wicket because church work is so involved.” In contrast, one interviewee noted taking vacations with friends from his choir but with a caveat: during vacation, they have a mutual agreement that he is not the pastor.

“Stepping away from things, being intentional about protecting that time is essential.”

Like anyone else, church musicians enjoy a variety of creative pursuits, hobbies and habits outside the realm of their work to help them decompress and relax. These vary widely, with several interviewees mentioning activities like working in the yard or working with their hands, “where you can see immediate results of your work.” Being outside in nature, whether on the beach or in the mountains, hiking or kayaking, was another frequent response.

Many church musicians use their time off for physical exercise and sport, including golf, horseback riding, hiking, running and swimming. While one interviewee laments not being more physically active, another is religious about it, running daily and working with a trainer every week. The purpose of exercise, for many, extends beyond the physical realm to mental health and well-being. One noted that working out helps her chemically, to be able to regulate consistently under stress.

A number of church musicians interviewed also mentioned listening to podcasts or audio books, reading, writing and journaling. These activities can be purely for fun or serve a larger goal of learning and continued development. One church musician makes a point of “listening to pastors and theologians and reading the Gospels over and over and reading all the books I can find that interest me now, like Mary Oliver ... and some poetry.” Of all her life practices, she reflected, “I think reading is most important to me.”

An Unexpected Response

While most church musicians interviewed felt the need to pull back and be alone when things are hard, one offered an entirely different response. “Go be with the people,” he said. “I learned early on that the best way for me to get out of my head, for me to gain perspective on what it is we think we’re doing and what it is we’re trying

to do ... [is to] make those pastoral visits, go see people in the hospital, call up choir members, go out to lunch with somebody, just something that helps to reconnect me to the whole reason why I’m in this thing to begin with. And the whole reason I’m in this thing is because God called me to it ... to be a part of how God is saving people. So it seems that I ought to pay attention to the people at some point here.”

“And the whole reason I’m in this thing is because God called me to it ... to be a part of how God is saving people.”



CHANGES OVER TIME

“The point of a music minister is to use music to minister to people, and then you have to figure out how to do that.”

Have your experiences of music ministry changed over time, especially in ways that have impacted your well-being?

One church musician’s insight provides a good starting point:

“In one respect, I don’t think ... music ministry has changed that much. Because the point of a music minister is to use music to minister to people, and then you have to figure out how to do that. I think now this calls for a lot more creativity than perhaps it did in the past.”

The good news is, there is still plenty to discover and explore if church musicians are “alert to the possibilities.”

Responses to this question ranged from areas of personal growth to much broader cultural changes impacting the church in North America. Interviewees spoke to a significant shift in the “worship wars” of the past few decades and lessons learned

from the pandemic, as well as changes in traditional avenues of calling and perceptions of church musicians.

Personal Growth

Several church musicians relayed changes in their ministry from the early years of their career, shifting from the exacting standards of the academy or their own idealism to a more contextual and relaxed approach.

One described the process of realizing that “the music that passed muster in the academic setting was different music than [what] spoke to our congregation. I needed to diversify and let go of some of my higher ideals when it comes to music. We don’t need Bach every Sunday in my particular church.”

For many, the initial expectation was that they were going into a “music job,” but in practice, they realized it was more about

the people. “When I came into the job ... I thought my primary responsibilities were to select music ... for the different choirs that I was directing.” Now, however, this church musician spends “precious little” time on the music compared to “ministering to the people who are making the music and the people that are in the pews on Sunday mornings.”

Working with people often challenges us to change. One church musician related having to become more extroverted and to stop avoiding conflict. In the early years, “because I didn’t like conflict, it caused conflict. And so I had to learn how to deal with conflict.” Another described himself as “extremely liberal and idealistic” in college and had to back off from that. It’s easier “if I just accept people as they are, whatever stage or spectrum, and [find] something to love about them,” he said.

Decline and Opportunity

Across the board, church musicians acknowledged that declining attendance, engagement and overall commitment to the church have profoundly impacted their work, making it more challenging to continue traditional programming.

As congregants have become busier and less available, there are inevitably more time conflicts than there were years ago. “We’ve had to be much more intentional about our time and much more communicative up front.” Some have even moved adult choir practice from its sacred time slot on Wednesday evenings due to poor attendance.

In some settings, children’s and youth music programs with storied histories have shifted from the structure of graded choirs to a focus on just getting kids to enjoy singing and balancing the pop-culture appeal of solo artists with the value of classical music training in an ensemble.

Amid what could easily be seen as negative changes, there remains a strong sense of optimism and hope. Although music ministry is shifting, many church musicians see in these circumstances new opportunities to be faithful to their calling.

Here’s how one voiced his outlook in the face of struggling choral ministry programs, in particular: “It’s led me to wonder ... does [this] mean that the shape of this ministry needs to shift because everything else around it has shifted? ... And what could that look like? ... I don’t have any answers, but I feel a lot of faithfulness in engaging the question.”

On the whole, church musicians seemed to accept this cultural shift as an opportunity to think critically about their work:

“I just have tremendous hope for the ministry of sacred music, even in our changing times. I know so many of us in our executive staff meetings are scratching our heads about attendance or about shifting perceptions of the church or about the new generations and their interest in attending. But 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.”

“I think music has a substantial place in us understanding our faith and transmitting our faith. And so despite all signs to the contrary, I have a great hope that ... hundreds of years from now ... the role that I occupy professionally will still be a very important one in our society.”

One minister of music shared a story specific to his community that beautifully illustrates how churches can impact the world around them by adapting creatively to changes beyond anyone’s control.

“I think music has a substantial place in us understanding our faith and transmitting our faith. And so despite all signs to the contrary, I have a great hope that ... hundreds of years from now ... the role that I occupy professionally will still be a very important one in our society.”

The symphony in his city, whose performance hall was close to the church, went bankrupt. He had strong relationships with many of its members and reached out to ask what he could do to help, saying, “I’m praying for you, I love you, I want to support you any way I can.” The orchestra regrouped under a different name and now uses the church as its home base. “I am the pastor to these professional musicians,” he said, and the community “sees us as a place that has sought the welfare of the city.”

Worship Wars: From Reaction to Reform

One seasoned interviewee who now serves in an academic setting aptly stated: “I think that church music ministry has gone from a spirit of reaction whenever I was in high school and in college to a sense of reforming.”

In their own words, many church musicians note a similar sensibility, that music ministries have moved beyond the bitter struggles of the so-called “worship wars” to a new day. One minister of music, who served a church with a large music staff, recalled the difficulty of that earlier era, where she saw church people behave terribly. “One of the ways that I’ve tried to change is to cultivate a ministry of tolerance and a ministry of curiosity.”

Several people interviewed pointed to less tension between styles of worship (traditional and contemporary) and more emphasis on quality. “I still am convinced that in the end, content wins out,” one said. Quality content that challenges us with good theology and well-crafted music, he believes, “will overcome a need to be the latest, greatest, whatever.”

While a large majority of professionals interviewed for this project are invested in the more traditional or “high church” approach to music ministry, a few respondents expressed a desire to connect with other church musicians who are incorporating contemporary music in their settings, as well.

Though smaller in number, those who have embraced intentionally blended music styles have “struggled to find a group of professionals, music ministers who also value both and can be a place of support,” which adversely impacts well-being. Nevertheless, as one interviewee said, “I do sense a greater willingness and friendliness toward thinking about those categories as being porous.” There is broad recognition of an even wider diversity of music and an appreciation for quality wherever it falls on that spectrum.

In this cohort, there seemed to be less polarization between two styles of worship and more of a concern to keep the long history of quality sacred music thriving. “I’m trying to hang on to that tradition here at our church and show people that there’s great worth in choral music and not just allowing the music ministry to be in the hands of ... a small few, like let’s say a praise team or a band,” one interviewee reported.

This brings up some additional challenges, both in the vocabulary of church music, where everyone no longer speaks the same musical language, and in the publishing industry, where there are no longer centralized denominational sources for music. One interviewer expressed hope “that publishers will read this and find out ... we really need writers,” for children’s, youth and adult choirs. Beyond what is regularly “churned out,” there is a desire and a market for theologically-sound, well-developed sacred music.

Insights From the COVID Era

Covid-era changes were many and immediate, deeply impactful and long lasting for church musicians. As one put it, “I think whatever changes were happening were sort of accelerated ... by Covid,” especially relating to lay involvement in programs and in worship, and the continuing evolution around music styles. 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. There was “that initial shock that I think most of us had, which was, ‘What do we do? Everybody’s staying home now, what are we supposed to do now?’ And all of a sudden, the Lord put before us like tons of possibilities. And I became kind of the point person for all of those things.”

Many found ways to keep their ensembles going and learned new technology to create videos and stream services, adding substantial time and stress to their work. Now that churches have returned to their pre-Covid schedules and routines, music ministers are continuing many of these practices, which add several hours of work per week. “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 lasting change. For some, there was an initial sense of relief during the pandemic and an appreciation for working at home, but there was also a steep climb to going back, “rebuilding programs essentially from scratch.” One noted this new reality as “another reason to ensure that you take care of yourself and take that time off because there’s always going to be something else that needs your attention.” One interviewee confessed he still hasn’t gotten back to the level of enthusiasm he had before. “You just sort of have to make decisions about what is most important and what to let go,” said another. “You just can’t do it all.”



Calling and Pastoral Musicians

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 and music 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. “I think the biggest challenge ... is that students are not being called. ... We reacted so much to the revivalist ideas of past generations,” like altar calls and calls to full-time ministry, “that we got away from having any kind of call.”

There was a time when churches would look to seminaries to find seminary-trained musicians. That is not always the case anymore, either because churches are not placing value on theological education or because many seminaries no longer have the robust music programs they once did. One interviewee noted that people can bring whatever musical gifts and training they have to a given church and discover how best to serve in that context. 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.

Several persons interviewed initially felt a call to music (or to teaching music or to music missions) and later felt more drawn to pastoral roles over the course of their careers. Others stay firmly in the realm of music but see their role as a pastoral one. “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.” In years past, he continued, “I think a lot of musicians considered themselves as musicians. A lot of pastors consider the musicians as musicians. And overall, I think there’s a willingness to say, no, this is a pastoral musician; they are as much a pastoral presence as they are a musical presence. ... That’s where a title makes a difference.”

One church musician went to seminary planning to leave music behind and found his passion in liturgy and worship, in the service of Christian formation. His love of music re-emerged but is inextricable from a larger calling “to form people in a Christian ethic.” He has felt somewhat 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. This kind of creative, big picture thinking coming 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 ... they speak in compelling, almost poetic ways about what they find most life-giving and energizing about music ministry.”

What, for you, have been the best parts of being a church musician?

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. Frequent mentions include making music with others, helping to usher people into the presence of God, and engaging with the congregation at all stages of life and development. 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.

Making Music Together

The answer that kept recurring, almost like a chorus, is that there is nothing quite like making music together with others. “Being able to make music with people,” one said, “is as close as we get to heaven on earth.”

Several noted a feeling “like we’re all moving as one,” when everyone is focused and together. “I don’t think there’s anything greater than that worship moment when the individual ... takes second place to the community and we’re all aiming at God.” In the church, there is a “synthesis of music and community and higher purpose that all mixes together.” It is not just about being with people, like attending a Rotary Club meeting, but being with these people in this way. “There’s just something about this kind of Christian community ... that I don’t think any other music group has in the same way. And I just love the music.”

Making music with others is part of who church musicians are and the reason they are drawn to this beautiful and challenging ministry. When people gather in the church to sing or play their instruments, one reflected, “this group of ragtag people, me included, are never together the same way twice ... that’s the only time in our lifetime that it’s going to be exactly that way.”

There's something beautiful about people who "are willing to give of their time to come and sing – and some of them sing well and some of them don't – but they love what they're doing and they offer themselves."

One church musician said people have asked why he likes to work with volunteers, and he responded that he would not want to work with anybody else. "I love academics, I love hearing wonderful choirs," he said, but more than that, "I love the people who just give of themselves every rehearsal, no matter what we're doing ... and seeing them enjoy it."



"The experience of making music in community is a sacred practice ... a holy thing. And that is a tremendous gift to be able to do that."

"The experience of making music in community is a sacred practice ... a holy thing. And that is a tremendous gift to be able to do that," one interviewee reflected.

Another paraphrased a line from Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town*, which she attributed to Chuck Poole^[2], "Isn't life wonderful and isn't life awful! That's the way I feel about music ministry. Most of the time it's wonderful, [and] there are times where it's awful, but the wonderful times get us through the few times that are not so good. So, always sing. We can always sing."

One church musician's simple statement summarized the collective sentiment. Looking back on many years in the profession, she said, "The music itself is what still stirs me."

Worship

Closely related to making music with others is the communal experience of worship that music ushers in, on high holy days and in ordinary time alike.

"Being involved in music that inspires others, shepherds them to a more vulnerable place, a path to the cross - that's what brings the most joy in my ministry," one interviewee reflected. "The very best thing is being able to lead people in worship. That has to be number one," said another. Still another: "To give people opportunities to worship in a new way or in a meaningful way is very much a gift in ministry."

One church musician mentioned the Fred Pratt Green hymn, "When in Our Music God Is Glorified," and the "new dimension in the world of sound that we discover in worship. And you combine that with the people who buy into that, who believe that, and who live that with their lives and their voices. ... The thrill of being together with God's people and voices being as one in worship, that is beyond words."

This is not an experience that can be manufactured, but it is one to aim for and recognize and welcome and appreciate when it happens. "When it's truly worshipful, helping people to worship."

It doesn't happen all the time. But when the music is so immersive, when it's so good that you forget you're at church. ... It's kind of a transcendental experience; it takes you to another place. And to me, that's the divine."

One church musician described it this way: "I really feel there's the music of God going on all the time. And my work in music ministry ... has allowed me to come into harmony with that music of God. It's like empathetic vibrations when you take a tuning fork and whack it and put it on a piece of wood, that piece of wood vibrates. And those times, that's what I love is when we sing an anthem or even hymns, feeling like I'm ... joining with God and the heavenly masses that were there from the beginning through creation that brought about creation,... coming into sympathetic vibration with God and God's work."

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. "People are pretty incredible. And I think we in our vocation get to witness that more than others."

One church musician spoke to how she experiences this personally, how being a church musician "enables me to be close to God and worship. I get to do things to develop my spiritual life that nobody else gets to do. I get to experience music, I get to experience theology, I get to experience some mystical writing, I get to experience the feelings of worship, as well as the intellectual parts of worship. And that's my job, which has enabled me to have ... a much deeper relationship with God than I think I would ever have had if I was doing something else." She aptly noted that "the

power of music and our ability to wield that power is a heavy responsibility."



Relationships and Deepening Faith

For many church musicians, the only rival to the primacy of music and worship in their appreciation for their work is the breadth and depth of their relationships with people in the church.

A number of those interviewed mentioned the privilege of getting to work intentionally with every age group within the church, from preschool through senior adults. Music programming is one of the few ministries that transcends age. While many staff members are dedicated to one age group or another, music ministers may have a role in shepherding kids in their programs all the way through youth choirs and see them through college and young adulthood to the time they are having their own children.

One music minister had church members ask if they could play their instruments in the praise band: a girl who played tuba, a grown man who played guitar, and a young man who didn't attend anymore but came back to play piano. "They never thought they could do that in church," he said. Like many church choirs, his praise band spanned in age from people in their youth to adults in their 60s.

Church musicians go through big life events with people in their congregations, participating in weddings, graduations, and funerals – as ministers and sometimes as educators. They are making music with them, which is pastoral in a different way from the walking and talking that other ministers do. Being with people in the highs and lows of these milestone events, you are witnessing people at some of the most significant times in their life, including times of grief. You are often "losing people in some way, reflecting on the formative time you spent together." And with kids especially, as the saying goes, the days are long, but the years are short. "It's the same way in ministry," one experienced church musician said, the "days are long, but ministry and your career [are] short."

For many church musicians the people are the best part of their work. "I love the unification ... the uniting of the people and the relationships that I get. ... At the end of the day, that's probably what I walk away most grateful for." For many, the music and the people are inextricable. "For me, it has been helping people to find more engagement and ownership over their own church and their own spirituality by expanding what we did in music. ... [Helping] people see that whatever talent they had, had a place there." One referred to "aha" musical moments in both youth choir and senior adult choir tours, seeing how it "draws people closer, makes them better musicians, makes them better at loving and accepting each other."

These kinds of musical experiences shape the church into who they are as an intentional community, where all people feel wanted and valued. It extends beyond the realm of music to the broader realm of ministry. For one church musician, the best part of being a church musician is "inviting people into a deeper love of God. And that happens a lot of different ways, but most often one-on-one conversation. ... And then teaching people that their questions are not signs of a weak faith, but signs of a strong faith. And then engaging those questions with them. A lot of folks have been scared to ask the things they want to ask because they think it makes them sound like a weak Christian. ... [S]o inviting them into that space [is] like, no, bring it all. God is big enough for all of it."



Rehearsal and Planning

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. Sundays may feel more like work, whereas at rehearsals, church musicians spend more

time engaging the whole person. There is a real sense of accomplishment in “rehearsing with a group and then seeing that group offer something in worship that clearly is meaningful to them and to others,” when they see what they have done is worth doing.

One ensemble conductor spoke of how she loves seeing a finished product come together, especially when working with gifted amateurs. “They never cease to amaze me,” she said. “They pull it together, and 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 whose work is instrumental 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. Teaching, he said, makes him a better performer. Another said simply, “The time that I spend practicing is usually the time when I feel closest to whatever God is directing me to do.”

For some, worship planning is another favorite activity. Speaking of the full scope of his work, one minister of music said, “I love getting to look at music and figuring out how it works into a worship service. I love the creative aspect of planning worship. I love the choral technician side of working with an ensemble to help bring out the best that they have to offer. I love working beyond music ministry in the larger church sense of ... how music ministry fits into the other pieces of what we’re doing as a congregation. And I love that. I love working alongside others to fit this piece of the puzzle into the greater breadth of the church.”



Holy Work

Church musicians take their work very seriously and feel fortunate to get to serve in their roles. In their own words:

“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.”

“We provide [people] with hope, we provide them with comfort, with strength during difficult times, and a lot of times it turns into just a job for us; but for them what we do is so much more, and I’m grateful for the few opportunities that I’ve been reminded of that.”

“There is very little difference between what I would do for enjoyment ... and what my work responsibilities are, the opportunity to perform and rehearse inspirational music with people that I love, for a cause that I love, in beautiful settings for supportive audiences.”

“I mean, it is a joy to come to work every day because it doesn’t feel like work.”

CONCLUSIONS

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

CHURCH MUSIC AND THE HEALTH OF THE CHURCH

“When church musicians flourish, they are satisfied in their work and can stay the course even in the face of challenge.”

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

The decline of regular church membership in North America is well documented. The rise of the “Nones” (those confessing no religious affiliation) has been alarming to church leaders. 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.

And so, it is all the more important 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

“In our churches the nurturing of students to consider whether they might serve as church musicians has waned, if not disappeared altogether.”

The Lilly Endowment is a lifeline to North American churches. Their philanthropy supports research on clergy flourishing and multiple programs to strengthen ministers and churches. However, while there has been some support for worship ministry, there has been little direct support for practicing church musicians.

In the “Calling and pastoral musicians” section above, there is an almost universal experience among the 100 interviewees that they were divinely guided into this vocation. And it seems that in our churches the nurturing of students to consider whether they might serve as church musicians has waned if not disappeared altogether.

One of the results of this study is that Polyphony is exploring a Culture of Call initiative.

The next step in this process is to focus on this issue at the next Polyphony Annual Conference, February 1-3, 2024. There will

be two specific sessions addressing this initiative: one will be a panel discussion on nurturing the call in future church musicians, and the other will include a guided conversation and brainstorming on how to empower church musicians to prioritize conversations with students who have the potential to pursue music ministry.

Beyond this, Polyphony plans to seek funding to research and study this issue and to engage partners who will develop a blueprint to once again nurture the call to music ministry in students.

HIGHLIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Polyphony's mission is to nurture church musicians in their ministry and their well-being so they thrive wherever God calls them. We do not hold the view, as one academic was reported saying to a church musician graduate student, that "you are wasting your talent [on the church]." There are many churches who hold music and the arts in high esteem and see these as gifts

from God that are essential to the worship of the people of God.

So, if church music is essential to worship, it stands to reason that church musicians are essential to churches. Congregations need church musicians who are trained musicians-theologians-ministers.

For Churches and Church Musicians

Highlight 1

The calling to music ministry and the power of models and mentors.

Every person who was interviewed came to this calling because they saw someone else engaged in church music who loved their work. Sometimes these models were parents or grandparents; other times this was an influential minister of music or music director.

The seeds of a calling to music ministry are planted relatively young, sometimes as children, often as teenagers and then nurtured through college experiences.

Often one individual is essential to this process. This is the person who says to a potential church musician: I see in you this gift.

Recommendation 1

We recommend that church musicians reflect on their call to music ministry and consider how they in turn may nurture this calling in students. There is a sense in which the art and craft of church music is passed from generation to generation. We also recommend that church musicians seek to engage church leaders in conversations to renew a culture of call within the local congregation. Imagine the pride a congregation may take when one of their own explores and discovers they want to serve the local church through music ministry.

Highlight 2

Pastoral musicians have a people-orientation but also require unique support and space to prepare for Sunday. Almost universally pastoral musicians emphasize relationships over musicianship. Even in places where there is a premium on standards of excellence, pastoral musicians lean into the primacy of relationships. At the same time, church musicians are similar to senior pastors in that every Sunday morning they must show the results of their preparation in the week(s) before.

Recommendation 2

We recommend that church musicians talk regularly with other church musicians about their successes and challenges in congregational ministry. Church is a people business. Behind almost every story of a church musician who faces a difficult season of work is a story of a conflict with leadership or laity. Rarely does a church musician languish due to musical deficiencies; people skills are paramount.

We also recommend church musicians seek out formal coaching to help them evaluate how they are doing in their current position and how they are feeling about their life goals. Just as a singer needs a voice teacher to provide a “different set of ears in the room,” so a church musician needs a coach to provide a different perspective. It takes time to find the right coach or mentor, but church musicians need feedback from someone they trust who is not their supervisor.

Highlight 3

Working with colleagues is sometimes difficult. Every church musician has at least one story of a challenging, if not toxic, working relationship with pastors. In some cases, work styles and expectations are not

in alignment. In others, the church musician is actually caught between what the pastor wants and what the church seems to want in music and worship.

Recommendation 3

We recommend that church musicians receive training in conflict resolution and the art of negotiation. While this may seem odd because it assumes there will be conflict to resolve, the fact is that out of 100 interviews (from the two Harmony Projects combined), nearly all church musicians have found themselves at some point in their career needing skills to navigate difficult relationships, often with supervisors or other staff. Laity who are in business seem to acquire these skills; church musicians seem surprised they need them.

If church musicians are going to stay in vocational work for a lifetime, they need skills to help them navigate the challenge of work relationships that range from benign to toxic.

Highlight 4

In spite of challenges and stress, church musicians love their work.

In the 75 interviews conducted summer of 2023 only one person specifically stated they were thinking about leaving music ministry. Church musicians demonstrate a willingness to adapt and to learn new skills when they are in places of service that are generally positive and supportive.

Recommendation 4

We recommend church musicians acquire skills that can bring added value to local church ministry. During COVID, many church musicians had to learn new video and livestreaming skills because their church did not have these teams in place. There now is a new expectation among music search teams that church musicians have significant technology skills. We also recommend church musicians have frank conversations with supervisors or personnel committees to determine what are reasonable expectations and what is a sustainable workload.

Highlight 5

Church musicians are finding ways to thrive even when facing challenges.

Many church musicians are lifelong learners and avid readers, continuing to keep musical skills sharp through practice and performance. There generally is a desire for a network of support from people who do what they do.

Recommendation 5

We recommend church musicians spend time maintaining musical skills; this requires dedicated and regular time for vocal and instrumental practice. Ongoing private lessons with qualified instructors should happen every few years. We also recommend church musicians add technological and administrative skills that will strengthen music and worship ministry.

We also recommend church musicians acquire new skills that, in an emergency, may enable them to pivot to another job. Too many church musicians find themselves trapped in employment because their training and experience are so specific to church music. One colleague who is an organist at a large church said he maintains his teacher certification just in case he ever needs to return to music education. During the COVID pandemic I knew a professional cellist who studied computer programming and now is employed in a tech field. He did so because the pandemic revealed that life as a gig musician was not economically sustainable for his family. While many church musicians have a long and satisfying career serving in stable work environments, there are others who will find themselves needing an employment safety net at some point.



For Pastors & Personnel Committees

Performance Reviews

Conduct an annual performance review, not only of the employee but of the job description. Is the job description out of date? This review may necessarily include an evaluation component but should also 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.

Training

Invest in employees through ongoing training. And if employees must take on significant new responsibilities, compensate them accordingly.

Volunteer Management

Evaluate how many groups, teams and committees as well as paid staff an employee must manage. Managing volunteers is a labor-intensive task. This can be rewarding and is important to congregational engagement; but after COVID, many staff report that volunteers are more reluctant to make long-term regular commitments to teams or committees or choirs.

For Congregations

Appreciation

Say thank you regularly and be specific in your affirmation. Celebrate employment anniversaries, and if possible, offer a monetary bonus. No one goes into church music expecting to earn the same as those with equal education in the business community. While words of gratitude cannot replace adequate compensation and benefits, positive attention and affirmation from church members is helpful to church musicians as they reflect on the impact of their ministry.

Budgeting

Budget for continuing education for worship and music conferences and allow time away to connect with and to observe fellow church musicians.

Critiques

When criticism is necessary, speak to a church musician in person, in private. While email is a helpful tool, it is too often used to vent. Christian communities need to show grace even to paid employees.

Expectations

Acknowledge that every church musician will do some things well and other things less well. The success of church music and a music ministry is a shared responsibility between a congregation and a pastoral musician.

EPILOGUE

*Church music is a good life,
not an easy life.*

EPILOGUE

To paraphrase a colleague, “Church music is a good life, not an easy life.” As authors of The Harmony Project 2.0, it has been our privilege to listen in on the rich and varied stories these 75 church musicians have so generously shared.

We hope others who now “overhear” these conversations will find themselves moved and inspired, as we have been, by this world of minister-musicians who love God, love the church, love their congregations, and clearly love their work.

To our knowledge, this is the only study of its kind gathering qualitative data focusing on the well-being of church musicians.

Our prayer is that this report will benefit all who have invested their lives in training and service to the church through music ministry, as well as the congregations they serve throughout the church in North America, the primary focus of our study.

We dare hope that the art and craft of pastor-musicians remain vital and even experience increased attention and support, for the sake of worshipers and the health of the church.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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WE ARE GRATEFUL

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To 100 church musicians who participated in hour-long interviews, sharing their stories of call to ministry and the joys and challenges of church music in the local church.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions and Probes

QUESTIONS ASKED OF INTERVIEWEES

Note to Interviewer

This is a semi-structured interview. These questions represent the kinds of stories to seek in the interview. However, honor the respondent's stories and follow those as best you can. It is not necessary to ask all questions: make as much progress as possible without pressing or rushing the interview.

Question 1

We would like to hear how you became a minister of music, music director, music/worship leader and educator. We would like you to go back as far as you need to and then work your way to the present moment. The richer the story and the more details, the better. Please feel free to go back as far into your past as you need to.

1a: Will you please describe what was happening in your life just before the time you first began to sense something about your future work and calling? [Be sure to provide ample time for the interviewee to tell her/his full story.]

Probes

- What other memories do you have during this time?
- What other events do you remember from this time?

- What were some of the first signs or indications of that possible future?
- What were the other ways that you began to sense or see what kind of work you might pursue in your life?
- How did you begin to understand what kind of work you might engage in?

1b: What other events do you remember that occurred during this time? They do not need to be directly related to your journey into music ministry; please feel free to share anything that stands out as memorable.

Probes

- What were you learning about yourself during that time? [Provide ample time for the interviewee to tell his/her full story.]
- What other memories do you have of this time?
- What other events do you remember from this time?

Question 2

2a: How do you know when your work is going well?

Probes

- What helps you to be at your best in your work?
- What kinds of experiences exemplify work-at-its-best for you?

- Can you tell me a story of such an experience?
- Can you think of a specific example of a work-at-its-best experience?

2b: I'd like to turn to the more challenging aspects of your work. Would you please describe those?

Probes

- What keeps you from being at your best in your work?
- What kinds of experiences exemplify work-at-its-worst for you?
- Can you tell me a story of such an experience?
- Can you think of a specific example of a work-at-its-worst experience?
- Are there particular activities that are especially negative?

Question 3

3a: What kinds of relationships have had the greatest impact on your well-being at work?

Let's begin with those relationships that have been beneficial — relationships with individuals or groups.

3b: Have there been any relationships that have been especially difficult? Any relationships that you might describe as especially detrimental or even toxic?

Question 4

What kinds of professional or life practices have had the greatest impact on your well-being at work?

Probes

- What have you done to sustain your well-being during particularly difficult times?
- How do you restore your well-being when you are especially exhausted or overworked?
- What things have worked best for you to sustain or rebuild your well-being, especially during challenging times?

“I can't imagine retiring from this work ... I want to do this until I absolutely can't anymore.”



Question 5

Have your experiences of music ministry changed over time, especially in ways that have impacted your well-being?

Question 6

What, for you, have been the best parts of being a minister of music, music director, music/worship leader?

Probes

- What are the life-enriching aspects of your role and work as a minister of music?
- What are the most meaningful experiences?
- Are there particular activities that are especially positive?

Offer a sincere note of thanks. End the Interview at 45-60 minutes.

“A word of wisdom for a first-year minister of music would be to find someone who’s done it for 40 years and get them to be your mentor, and then find someone who’s 10 years into it, and get them to be your mentor, ... it’s good to have mentors of all ages. ... Doing this alone and in the vacuum of only your congregation is just death.”

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

*Doug Haney
& Ann Bell Worley*



DOUG HANEY

Doug Haney is the Executive Director of Polyphony Music Resources. After a vocational career of more than 30 years as a church musician, Doug became convinced that church musicians who love hymnody and choral and instrumental music need a community to help them thrive in their work and calling. With the blessing of a group of colleagues from around the country, Polyphony officially became a 501c3 in 2021.

Doug retired from Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, in April 2023 after serving there as minister of music for 19 years. Doug has earned a Certified Church Administrator Certificate through The Church Network and a facilitator certificate in Appreciative Inquiry, a strengths-based, positive approach to leadership development and organizational change.

Doug is married to Lori Haney and they have two adult children and four grandsons.



ANN BELL WORLEY

Ann Bell Worley is a Houston-based writer and editor with publications in religion, parenting and children's literature. Her editing credits range in scope from children's books to novels to sermon collections. Ann holds a Bachelor of Music in Church Music from Baylor University and a Master of Divinity from George W. Truett Theological Seminary. Following her seminary education, she served as an Associate Pastor at Woodland Baptist Church in San Antonio and as a Pastoral Resident at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas and has since returned to her roots in the Episcopal Church.

Ann is married to Todd Worley and has two children, one neurodivergent and one neurotypical. You can find much of her recent writing on her website and blog, www.graycoloredglasses.com, which focuses on her family's story and the challenges of raising a medically complex child.

SUPPORTING POLYPHONY

Polyphony aims to nurture church musicians in their ministry and in their well-being so they thrive wherever God calls them.

BREATHE, BLESS, AND BE WELL

If you would like to know more about the work of Polyphony and would like to support this work, we encourage you to visit the Polyphony website: PolyphonyResources.org

Polyphony Music Resources is providing programs and platforms for church musicians' professional development. Through research, advocacy and training, we are encouraging church musicians to build a sustainable lifelong vocation and exploring

how to identify talented students who may serve the church through music ministry.

Polyphony relies upon the financial support of membership fees, donors and grants. To give, go to PolyphonyResources.org/Give



FOOTNOTES

^[1] Flourishing in Ministry: *How to Cultivate Clergy Wellbeing*, Matt Bloom, Rowman & Littlefield, 2019.

^[2] Referenced in chapter 10, “Awful and Wonderful,” *A Church for Rachel*, Charles E. Poole, Mercer University Press, 2012.

*“I would hope this project would help us
connect more with one another.”*

