

VITAL SIGNS: We can do better

By Bill Wilson

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I recently spent a memorable and meaningful few days with a group of music ministers. Throughout our times of worship, breakouts and social interaction, I had many significant conversations with these men and women about their life in the 21st century church. Many wanted to talk about the challenges of their specific settings.

Granted, I was only hearing one side of these stories. Believe me, I know that every story has multiple sides and complexities. Some of the things I've seen music leaders do defies belief. Even with that proviso, I am convinced that those who lead in music and worship ministry are the recipients of an obscene amount of vitriol, anger, criticism and unreasonable expectations from every corner. While my personal experience with congregations and their relationship with music/ worship leaders has been overwhelmingly positive, such is not the case for many.



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Healthy churches can do better. Start with a hard question: How can we bring our expectations back to earth, and turn our focus to the true calling of worship?

Here are some general thoughts to guide that conversation.

1. Let's acknowledge that worship and music leadership is more art than science. There is no formula for worship that will work in all settings. Just because something works at your cousin's church in Birmingham does not mean it will succeed at yours.
2. Music hooks our emotions. When it comes to our emotions, most of us are irrational. That makes for a toxic brew in a local church. No area of church life seems to invite more overreaction than worship and music. Since overreaction is usually a sign that something else is going on in your life that you are ignoring, you might want to ask the simple question: "What is this really about for me?"
3. Most of us are narcissists when it comes to worship and music. We know best and we want what we want when we want it. We need a good dose of humility about this. Actually, we need to become Christians, because from all appearances, too many of us check our Christlike spirit at the door most Sundays. Helpful, objective and constructive feedback is rare. Try setting up something to help with this.

4. There is no way to make everyone happy when it comes to planning music and worship. In fact, one sure way to make everyone unhappy is to try and make everyone happy. It's the wrong agenda for many reasons. Primary among them: Your church and music ministry is not there to please you. It is endeavoring to lead a group of people to worship God. By the way, one of the side effects of healthy worship is that it helps grow you into the person God intends you to be. Guess what? That is never painless.

5. Music ministers are often artists first, and administrators/schedule makers/people managers/relationship builders second. Granted, many of them need to work harder at some of their shortcomings, but don't most of us?

6. No music minister possesses all the skills all the people want him or her to have. If you think they do, you just don't know them well enough. If they tell you they do, they are deluded and/or dishonest. In addition, many were trained for a music/worship culture that no longer exists.

7. Music and worship leadership is a team effort. No one person deserves all the blame or the credit for what happens. Team leadership is a non-music specific skill. When interviewing potential music minister candidates, this should be as high a priority as anything on your list of desired traits. Remember: character trumps skills.

8. When it comes to music and worship evaluation and expectations, far too many people are harshly critical in a way that dishonors Christ and his church. This isn't American Idol, and the congregation is not on a panel of self-absorbed judges.

9. The relationship between pastor and music minister is pivotal. Make sure both know you expect a healthy and collaborative approach. Make available whatever time and resources are needed to help make that happen.

10. Changing the style of worship music is often seen as the essential element in attracting young adults/turning around decades of decline/reaching unreached people groups/attracting throngs of the disaffected and disengaged. Such shortsighted thinking has created monumental strife and started an untold number of vicious congregational civil wars. It has fractured more congregations than most of us can count. It seldom works, because the real issues at the heart of such concerns remain unaddressed.

I came away from my time inspired by the willingness of these men and women to learn and adapt to a changing church world. Sadly, I am deeply concerned about the congregational landscape they must navigate in the meantime.

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