

Editorial: What's so hard about staffing a music ministry?

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If you're having trouble staffing a music ministry, you're not crazy, and you're not alone. Staffing a church's music ministry is more difficult than most people realize. And it's getting harder all the time.

But why? More importantly, what should churches do in response?

The first question has a set of overlapping answers that complicate an already difficult situation. The second requires churches to ask another and fundamental question, "What is the purpose of music in church?"

A reason why

I'm not an expert on music ministry staffing, but I can tell you what I've experienced and what I'm hearing from others. Of all the reasons music ministry is hard to staff, the three described below seem to be the most common.

I stay in regular contact with churches looking for people to lead their music and who place [classified ads](#) in the *Baptist Standard*. I've heard their frustration and disappointment. More than that, I've experienced it firsthand.

I'm old enough to remember—just 30 years ago—when ministry students would drive as many as two hours one way to serve a local church. They were glad to have a place to serve, and they were committed to it.

Within about 15 years—when I was a pastor of a small, rural church south of Fort Worth and looking for a pianist and a song leader—trying to find

music ministry staff felt hopeless. That feeling has spread to more and more churches since that time.

We looked everywhere for months and months. I queried all my contacts at churches, seminaries and beyond, not yet appreciating how much things had changed.

When I told a minister in Dallas what we could pay a pianist, he laughed and said: “Good luck. I can’t get a musician for less than that just to drive across town, let alone drive all the way out there.”

One reason staffing a music ministry is so difficult at present—especially for small and rural churches—is the cost. Small and rural church compensation has not been able to keep pace with the rising cost of education and living. So, musicians aren’t looking for work among small and rural churches. And, no, knowing that doesn’t boost those churches’ morale.

Other reasons why

When I was looking for a pianist, I talked with the professional pianist living in our town who taught piano at the community college. She sounded as defeated as I felt when she told me: “People just aren’t learning to play piano anymore. Keyboard, maybe, but not piano.”

Fewer people are learning to play and lead traditional music. Instead, people are learning to play contemporary or modern music. Many small and rural churches, however, still prefer traditional music.

The difference in music styles is another reason staffing a church’s music ministry is so difficult. The difference between traditional and contemporary or modern worship music is not just the congregation’s preference—how people feel about it. It’s also a difference in skillset.

Traditional and contemporary or modern music are different enough in significant ways that few musicians can transition between the two. Those who can aren't looking for work.

There's that phrase again—"looking for work."

There is a significant difference between leading people in singing and leading people in worship. A church needs someone called to lead people in worship, not a musician who just needs a job. No offense to musicians who need jobs.

A person may be a good or great musician, may be able to get others to sing along, and be a Christian to boot. But that doesn't necessarily mean that person is called or gifted to lead people to worship God.

And that brings us back to the question: "What is the purpose of music in church?" This is really where we disagree. Style of music is merely an easy target of the disagreement.

The fundamental question

When I was looking for a pianist and a song leader, before we spent any time looking for people to fill positions, I wish I had insisted that our church first answer the important question, "What is the purpose of music in church?"

If music in church is just to make people feel good—which often seems to be the case—then all we need to do is figure out what we need to provide the kind of music that scratches the itch.

But we're talking about music in church, which means we're talking about worship—and not the kind that happens Friday nights and Sunday afternoons in the fall. We're talking about when Christians gather to worship God. Does music in church have anything to do with that?

Yes, music in church has everything to do with worshipping God—not our preferences and feelings. What then does a church really need to worship God? First, a church needs to understand what worshipping God means.

The idealist in me believes when a congregation understands what it means to worship God, it will be able to see much more clearly what it needs for worship music. What that church needs may be right in front of it, or it may require a fundamental shift in the congregation.

Which leads to the next important question a church needs to ask: “Now that we understand what worshipping God means, will we follow God’s lead—without grumbling—even if it means we don’t have anyone to play that beautiful piano we spent so much money on?”

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