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Church Music Leaders in the USA: Prioritizing Technical Competence and Inclusion

Cover Page Footnote

The author thanks Dr. Nathan Myrick and Dr. Andrew Mall for their encouragement during the researching and writing of this article.

Church Music Leaders in the United States

Prioritizing Technical Competence and Inclusion

Heather MacLachlan

In his 2016 book aimed at Christian church music leaders, Zac Hicks presents the following scenario: “You’re approached by a middle-aged woman who says that God has given her a gift and she wants to serve the church by playing piano with the worship band. You audition her, and she fumbles notes, struggles to keep up, and can’t seem to hold a consistent rhythm. She knows she did badly but insists, ‘I’ve been given a gift, and I want to serve my church in this way.’ What factors play into your response to her?”¹ Hicks does not present an explicit answer to his own question. In his conclusion, he acknowledges that his work belongs to a tradition that he himself “hates”: “books that appear to be helpful manuals for faithful practice but really are overwhelming descriptions of impossibility.”² This article explains how church music leaders (“worship pastors,” as Hicks calls them) in the United States answer Hicks’s question, a question which they insist is deeply important to their working lives and ministries, but which is mostly ignored in academic and practitioner literature. My ethnographic study reveals that American church music leaders negotiate between two sometimes competing priorities: their conviction that volunteer musicians must perform with a certain degree of musical accuracy, and their desire to encourage broad participation in music ministries by volunteers of diverse skill levels. In what follows, I gloss these two priorities as “technical competence” and “inclusion,” respectively. I argue that, in seeking to advance both technical

competence and inclusion, church music leaders sometimes face an ethical dilemma. They are profoundly ethical people, and in their verbal explanations of their ethical approach, they stake a claim to the ethic of deontology. However, in practice these same leaders operate according to an ethic of care. Ultimately, I argue that leaders who prioritize caring for worshipping congregants prioritize technical competence, while leaders who prioritize caring for volunteer musicians prioritize inclusion.

My study is based on interviews with 25 music leaders working in predominantly white Catholic and Protestant churches in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Iowa, and Oregon. With one exception, these leaders are paid full-time or part-time staff members at their churches, and 19 of them hold at least an undergraduate degree in music. Only five of the 25 are women, and only two (one African-American man and one “mixed-race” man) identified as anything other than white/Caucasian. These interviewees are representative of church music leaders at large in that they regularly face a dilemma: How shall Christian leaders respond to volunteer musicians who cannot sing or play to the standard expected in their church’s music ministry? Robbie Reider, for example, who is worship and music director at Crossroads Church (a megachurch with seven campuses in Ohio and Kentucky), said that he finds himself facing this question “all the time.”³ Chris Wilson, of Apex Church in Kettering, Ohio, says that he has encountered this situation “dozens of times” during his two and a

half years working as Gathering Team lead,⁴ and Dusty Sturk said that “people are banging down the doors” wanting to participate on the worship team at Be Hope Church in Beavercreek, Ohio.⁵ Several of my interviewees thanked me for conducting this research project, asserting that it explores an important issue, and one even encouraged me to present the results at an upcoming Catholic church music conference.⁶ Andrew Rudderow (music director at Calvary Church in Souderton, Pennsylvania) expressed why my interlocutors believe that the question explored in this article is important: “There’s a fear of hurting people. And that’s real. It’s one of the most underrated parts of this job: you’re going to have to say ‘No’ to sensitive people. . . . It makes this job really tough.”⁷

The Ethical Dilemma Faced by Church Music Leaders

Recent academic writing has focused on contemporary English-language congregations’ understanding of what a church worship service is, or should be. As Mark Porter explains, “Explicit articulation of the exact nature of the relationship between musical sound and divine presence is relatively rare, and the use of sacramental terminology has the potential to imply a theoretical framework that is rarely found in explicit detail within congregations themselves.”⁸ However, it is generally clear that “the late 20th century also saw a rise in the expectation that worship music is an activity through which something of God can be received, often in a way that can be felt and experienced,”⁹ and therefore, the job of a church music leader is “to usher congregations into the presence of God—whether or not such reliable divine access

is available in this way.”¹⁰ The participants in my study agreed with this perspective; they told me repeatedly that their role, and the role of the volunteer musicians in their choirs and instrumental ensembles, is to “lead people into” or to “provide a context for people to enter into” the worship of God. “Worship” is a nebulous term, and several church music leaders who trained at Christian universities or seminaries told me their professors encouraged them to develop their own definitions of the concept. One recurring theme—in my interlocutors’ understandings, as well as in the literature—is that a worshipper’s complete attention should be focused on God during a worship service; this state of involvement “to the point of forgetting time, fatigue and everything else but the activity itself”¹¹ is often referred to as “flow.” Maintaining the “flow” of a worship service is the mandate of church musicians; practitioners who write for the benefit of their fellow church music leaders often reference this idea and this word.¹² The aforementioned Zac Hicks, for example, asserts that a time of worship “should be experienced as a story—smoothly, continuously and seamlessly,” and gives suggestions to his readers regarding how to maintain the “flow” of a worship service.¹³

What follows from this understanding is that anything that might divert worshippers’ attention away from the ineffable Divine—anything that might disrupt their “flow”—must be minimized or eliminated. Scholars of Christian congregational practice call this idea “the fear of distraction,”¹⁴ and it emerged as an important concern among the church music leaders I interviewed. For my interlocutors, inaccurate musical sounds—

wrong notes and rhythms, usually—are primary “distractions” that they seek, and even feel obligated, to avoid. For example, Kevin Samblanet, director of music and liturgy at Incarnation Parish in Centreville, Ohio, said of the sound of his guitar trio: “If it’s disrupting prayer, it’s counter to why we exist in the first place.”¹⁵ Carmen Stanczykiewicz, who served as the pastor of worship and communications at Salem Church of God in Dayton, Ohio, used the word “distractions” many times throughout our interview. She summarized her understanding of her worship team’s role by saying, “It all goes back to not creating distractions.”¹⁶

Working in this context, American church music leaders routinely face an ethical dilemma. An ethical dilemma is “a situation for which there are two possible resolutions, each of which can be justified in moral terms. A dilemma requires a person to choose between two actions, each having some benefits but also having some costs.”¹⁷ In the case of these leaders, they must choose between ensuring that a worship service “flows” as expected and including volunteer musicians whose lack of technical competence will likely lead to “distractions.” As with all ethical dilemmas, in this situation the leaders recognize that “the legitimate needs and interests of one individual or group must give way to those of another individual or group.”¹⁸ If a church music leader prioritizes technical competence, they will meet the needs of congregants who desire to focus, undistracted, on worshipping God; however, they will fail to meet the need of volunteer musicians who want to (or even feel led by God to) participate in the church’s music ministry. The reverse is also true: by prioritizing the inclusion of all musicians regardless of

their skill level, the leader will protect the sense of dignity and belonging desired by all volunteers; in so doing, however, the leader will force the congregants’ need to experience “flow” to give way to the need of the less-than-competent musicians. As scholars have noted in the literature on confronting and resolving ethical dilemmas,¹⁹ “a characteristic of an ethical dilemma is that it involves deliberation. It can rarely be resolved quickly or by simply applying rules or relying on facts.”²⁰ The balance of this article will show just how deeply church music leaders deliberate about the ethical dilemma they face, and how carefully they approach its resolution.

It is important to note here that church music leaders are not alone in facing their particular ethical dilemma. The ethnomusicological literature shows that organizers in a variety of secular participatory music contexts confront the same problem. Participatory music making is defined as that in which “the primary goal is to involve the maximum number of people in some performance role.”²¹ Leaders of participatory music scenes must decide whether to favor fulfilling their primary goal, knowing that this means including some who are not technically competent, or, whether to prioritize the “flow” of the music. To give just three examples: participants in bluegrass jam sessions are sometimes unable to play the notes as quickly or accurately as required. In this case, convenors of the sessions decide in favor of including all musicians, regardless of technical competence: “The ideas of equality and hospitality must be maintained, even if it means leaving the jam session open to ruin.”²² Similarly, in English folk music sessions participants aspire to a kind of “musical egalitarianism” and claim that

beginners are welcome to participate.²³ Musical mistakes are par for the course in this tradition, and indeed, English folk musicians stress that their acceptance of musical incompetence is what differentiates their events from Irish folk music sessions.²⁴ The organizers of Irish music sessions, by contrast, police the skill level of participants and strongly discourage those who cannot play to the standard expected (and even publish lists of “etiquette” or rules to make this clear).²⁵ Although Irish music sessions are informal and flexible—giving the impression of being “egalitarian musical gatherings”—fluent playing of the proposed tunes is required, and “continued acceptance” in a session “depends on a sensitive level of contribution—not joining in on unfamiliar tunes, for example.”²⁶

Ethics and Christian Congregational Music

In recent years, scholars have paid increasing attention to the intersection between music making and ethics. In 2014, Jeff R. Warren provided a helpful definition of ethics in the musical context: “the responsibilities to other people that arise when we encounter them in the world.”²⁷ Because making music is “a site of human encounter ... all musical experience is bound up in questions of ethical responsibility.”²⁸ Marcel Cobussen and Nanette Nielsen affirm that music making is always an interaction, and that therefore music can be “caught in ethical dilemmas that are due to the context of its creation or reception.” The reality that these dilemmas can be addressed in a variety of ways “inevitably” implies that people involved in music are agents who bear a “responsibility” which they deploy as they act within a (wide or narrow) scope of ethical choices.²⁹

Writers in the field of ethics identify a number of theories of ethical action, categorizing these theories in varying ways.³⁰ My own case study of American church music leaders implicates two of these theories: the ethic of deontology and the ethic of care. The ethical framework of deontology asserts that “duties must be obeyed or rights acknowledged regardless of the consequences”; for this reason, this approach is often called nonconsequentialism. People who ascribe to deontological ethics often adopt the divine command theory, which claims that “the duty or right to be obeyed is revealed by a divine authority” such as the Bible or the Qur’an.³¹ The ethic of care is a contemporary ethical theory which emphasizes caring for others as the foundation for ethical decisions.³² An ethic of care “elevates the injunction to care or to love to the status of a duty” and calls people to make judgments “in terms of their impact on relationships.”³³

Recent writing on ethics in Christian church music has explored the implications of ethical choices in this milieu. Nathan Myrick, for example, recently made a strong case for Christian church musicians to adopt an ethic of care, going so far as to write, “congregational music is *unethical when it is uncaring*, that is, when it is performed in a manner that fails to pay attention to the honest, relational needs of persons of varying positions of power in view of justice.”³⁴ Myrick and other scholars center their questions of ethics in church music around musical genres, asking, which musical genres should an ethically responsible Christian listen to and perform? And which should they limit or ignore?³⁵ Even more specifically, which musical genres should an ethical and sensitive

church music leader present (or not present) during Sunday services at their church?³⁶ These investigations center on the impact of genre choice on worshipping congregants, and by implication, on the music leaders' relationships with those congregants.

In this article, I extend this scholarly trajectory in two ways: by focusing on church music leaders' relationships with volunteer musicians, and, by exploring the complexities of working out an ethic of care when faced with the ethical dilemma posed by the conflicting needs of congregants and technically incompetent musicians. In what follows it will become clear that American church music leaders often sound like nonconsequentialists, verbally outlining a deontological ethical approach informed by divine command theory. In other words, they cite specific Bible verses as guide and justification for their decisions when explaining how they confront their ethical dilemma. However, we can also understand these leaders as operating according to an ethic of care. They are primarily committed to caring for both the musicians under their leadership and the congregants who attend church on Sunday mornings. Their challenge, of course, is that these two groups have different needs, and that these needs sometimes compete; caring for both groups—meeting their needs completely and simultaneously—can be impossible. When this ethical dilemma presents itself, church leaders must ask themselves, for whom should I care more? Which group's needs should come first in my calculation as I decide how to act? As we shall see, when faced with this ethical dilemma, some church music leaders place the needs of the volunteer musicians first. These leaders are the ones who ultimately prioritize inclusion. Other church music leaders, operating from

the same ethic of care, decide that the needs of congregants must come first. This second group, as a consequence, values technical competence in music making most highly.

Practitioner Literature and the Emphasis on “Excellence”

The practitioner literature—written by church music leaders for other church music leader—mostly skips over the practical application of a leader's ethical responsibility to volunteer musicians. “How-to” books by practitioners are often very detailed, giving suggestions and making categorical claims about a myriad of issues connected to church music ministry.³⁷ But only rarely do such books deal directly with the question animating this article, a question that is bound to present itself to church music leaders. Nathan Corbitt, for example, refers to it glancingly: “Until very recently, in my thirty years of conducting choirs and instrumental groups, I have never excluded a singer or player from being part of the group because he or she ‘could not sing’ or play an instrument.”³⁸ (The reader is left wondering, what did Corbitt do more recently?) Fred Bock describes a situation where a leader “has no choice” but to work with an organist whose playing is not up to par: “These are tough, no-win situations and I don't envy anyone who finds himself stuck in this predicament.”³⁹ Unfortunately, Bock does not offer any advice on how to resolve this predicament. The only practitioner-authored book I found which both asks and answers the question is by Austin C. Lovelace and William C. Rice. Writing about membership in church choirs, Lovelace and Rice state that “the singer who because of age or health has become a vocal liability may be a disturbing influence if

he continues to sing.”⁴⁰ They counsel that the choir conductor should meet with the singer to bring about “his quiet acceptance of the need to retire voluntarily. If, as a final resort, dismissal becomes necessary, it can be done more effectively by the cabinet [the choir’s elected governing body].” Lovelace and Rice further exhort their readers to establish a maximum age for church choir members and suggest 55 years as the age limit.

Unlike the theme of ethical treatment of volunteer musicians, another theme does appear frequently in written works by practitioners: the idea that church music should be “excellent.” Writers in this vein use the word “excellence” frequently⁴¹ and insist church music leaders ought to pursue excellence in their work.⁴² They make categorical statements such as, “For the Christian musician, a habitual vision of excellence should be the norm, whatever the style.”⁴³ They usually note that perfection is an impossible goal, but claim biblical support for the idea that church musicians are called to do “their best.”⁴⁴ “Excellence” is understood by these practitioner authors as fidelity to a printed score (in the case of choral singing) or to a commercial recording (in the case of contemporary praise and worship music)—and in this sense, “excellence” is coterminous with technical competence. It is important to note that these authors do not usually provide a rigorous definition of excellence, assuming a shared understanding by their readers. A fair reading of their writings reveals, I contend, that they generally agree with Karen DeMol, who, after acknowledging that “excellence” in music is difficult to define,⁴⁵ goes on to state that “excellence is technique, getting all the notes and playing them in tune with

good articulation on an instrument of superb quality.”⁴⁶ For DeMol, technique includes craftsmanship in composition, the performance space being “acoustically live and balanced,” the sound system being in good working order and well monitored, and expressiveness—meaning shaping the sound to make it “aesthetically rich.”⁴⁷ Like DeMol, practitioner-authors agree that “we champion music of high technical and expressive quality,”⁴⁸ and they offer copious references to various Bible verses to support their stance. To give just one recent example: Under a chapter sub-heading of “Excellence,” Jeff Deyo advocates for “being inspiring rather than distracting” and states that church musicians’ goal “is to do everything we do for God with great skill.”⁴⁹ As scriptural justification for this position, Deyo cites the following Bible verses: Psalm 78:22, Matthew 25:29, 1 Chronicles 25:6–7, 2 Chronicles 30:21–22, and Romans 12:4–6.

In addition to elucidating an overarching commitment to excellence, practitioner literature often asserts that musical “talent” is an important qualifier for those who would participate in church music ministry. Talent, or gifting, or skill, as well as training, is seen as imperative for church music leaders.⁵⁰ As Charlotte Kroeker writes (in a book subtitled *Achieving Excellence in Church Music*), a church music leader ought to be one who is “the most gifted musically” and “the best musician we can find.”⁵¹ In a book addressed to pastors, Barry Liesch advises recruiting “good musicians” who can both read notation and improvise on their instruments;⁵² for this reason he encourages readers to offer financial compensation to such specifically-trained people. Regarding volunteers, who will be the foot soldiers of church choral and

instrumental ensembles, some writers in this genre are more generous, asserting that all people have some level of musical talent and are therefore potential recruits to music ministry.⁵³ However, others defend the notion that volunteers are not equally “gifted” or talented, and that those who do not perform to a certain standard should be excluded.⁵⁴ Jeff Deyo, for example, argues that “God equips the called,” and that those who are not adequately equipped to perform music are therefore not called to do so.⁵⁵ Nathan Corbitt asserts that only some, not all, people have a “musical gift” and that “the gift of music includes talent.”⁵⁶ Expanding on how musical talent is manifested in individuals, Corbitt explains that a talented musician has “a good ear” and the ability to match pitch “combined with technical ability and emotional expression.” He cites as an example the description of King David in 1 Samuel 16:18, noting that King David was “skillful on his instrument” and was an effective communicator.⁵⁷ Intriguingly, Corbitt notes that this Bible passage also describes King David as handsome: “While we may not like implications in an image-driven technological society, David was good-looking (by whatever cultural standard). Not only was he pleasing to listen to, but also to look at.” Corbitt does not pursue the implications of this point, and it is not taken up by other authors. However, the more general claim—that volunteers are differentiated by their “talent” or musical skill—pervades the practitioner literature.

The 25 church music leaders interviewed for this article sometimes use the word “excellence” in their discourse, revealing that this term is permeating the working culture of American churches. In addition, they broadly affirm the two themes advanced

by practitioner literature: that excellence—meaning technical competence—in church music ought to be a priority, and that volunteer church musicians have varying levels of ability to achieve that competence. Also, they universally agree that they have an ethical responsibility to care for those who volunteer—both for those who are “excellent” in their musical performances, and for those who are not. Unlike the authors of practitioner literature, these church music leaders squarely confront the challenge that sometimes arises when their commitment to technical competence competes with their commitment to inclusion. In what follows, I explain how they do it. I begin by describing two of my interlocutors who exemplify how church music leaders prioritize competence and inclusion, respectively.

Valuing Technical Competence and Inclusion as Exemplified by Church Music Leaders

Christian Frey, age 27, is the pastor of corporate worship at the Danville, Iowa, campus of Harmony Bible Church. During an interview with me about how Christian church music leaders respond to those who volunteer to sing and play in their music ministries, Frey articulated a clear and consistent commitment to the idea of technical competence, which—following the practitioner literature cited above—he glossed as “excellence.” As he explained, his worship ministry established a four-point “worship essentials” plan some years ago.⁵⁸ This plan consists of “exposition, engagement, expression and excellence,” and as Frey stated, “I’m almost legalistic with those parameters.” He emphasized that excellence is last on the list of essentials, but nonetheless, this idea guides his ideas about who should participate in music ministry:

“I’m really opposed to including everyone, because then you’re putting the priority of excellence in jeopardy.” Frey also insists that the musicians who do perform on his team be “very well-prepared.” Playing wrong notes, he said, “would be counter to the culture of what we’re trying to do,” and playing with fluency is required; someone who is “hyper-focused on playing the right note” (because they have not memorized their part, for example) is performing below expectation. This is not an arbitrary position held by Frey. Like all of the church musicians included in this project, he has a religious rationale undergirding his choices. “Our God is a God of excellence,” he says. Frey cited the biblical example of King David, and specified Ecclesiastes 9:10 (“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might”) as another biblical text which informs his commitment to technical competence. Frey ended his interview with me by saying, “The excellence piece is ingrained in who I am. But it’s good to acknowledge that it’s controversial.”

Rick McNeely, age 61, exemplifies those church music leaders who focus primarily on inclusion when considering which volunteers ought to participate in their church music ministries. McNeely is the minister of music and worship arts at the Lebanon Presbyterian Church in rural Ohio. His guiding principle, which he repeated throughout his interview with me, is that “everybody is welcome.”⁵⁹ Accordingly, McNeely does not hold auditions for volunteer musicians, although he tries “to be very aware of people’s skills when they first begin” singing or playing in one of his church ensembles. He emphasized that his ministry’s primary focus is on relationships, and that “the music just seems to work itself out.” McNeely shared an example of how

his philosophy was borne out in the life of his church: a woman in her eighties, who had decades of church choir experience, volunteered to sing a solo on Christmas Eve. Although she could no longer sing on key, McNeely scheduled her to sing the solo, and “because the approach is relational, everyone understood.” Like his peers in this study, he finds support for his approach in Christian scripture, and quoted Psalm 150:6 to me: “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.” McNeely aims for high-quality and technically proficient music making in his ministry, and happily reported that his church choir once performed Vivaldi’s *Gloria* (“and we are in a small farm town!”). He stated, however, “I’m not naive. I know how much work it is to approach things this way. But I feel it is right in my setting.”

Christian Frey and Rick McNeely are representative models for how American church music leaders prioritize technical competence and inclusion. Their peers in this study not only value both of these priorities and articulate doctrinal reasons for them, they also act on them. Some church music leaders, like Frey, prioritize musical competence over inclusion, while others, like McNeely, favor inclusion more than competence. With that said, none of those interviewed for this article were absolutists in their discourse about the challenge they face, and most asserted that they pursue both musical competence *and* including as many volunteer musicians as possible in their ministries. Even Frey’s and McNeely’s practices are more nuanced than my descriptions above account for. For example, when a high school or college student performs an audition for Frey that “does not go well,” Frey tries to “do all [he] can” to connect the student with the youth worship ministry, where the musical

standards are somewhat lower. Further, he said, “I’m constantly telling the current [volunteer musicians] to be on the lookout for new people who have musical skills and might want to join. I don’t want our worship team to be seen as ‘the cool kids.’ That’s simply not true and I wouldn’t want people to think that it is.” And McNeely said that after the Christmas Eve solo described above, he agreed with the church’s lead pastor not to schedule such a performance in the future. Over time, he said, he helped the volunteer soloist “to realize that she had a gift to serve in children’s ministry.”

Contextualizing Church Music Leaders’ Decisions

The church music leaders I interviewed said that while responding to underprepared (or “untalented”) volunteers is an important issue, for most of them, it is not overwhelming. That is because, as Judy Fesko, who is music director at Trinity Lutheran Church in Lakewood, Ohio, explained, “People who don’t feel comfortable [performing music] generally don’t volunteer.”⁶⁰ Chris Spivey, pastor of music and media at Willamette Community Church in Oregon, was specific: “Generally, people don’t want to sound bad. Those who can’t match pitch don’t usually audition. And others realize the time commitment [required] and say to themselves, ‘This is not for me right now.’”⁶¹ Like others I interviewed, John Mohler (pastor of worship and operations at Patterson Park Church in Kettering, Ohio) says he depends on volunteers self-selecting out of his music ministry: “I rely on weak musicians’ sense of self-awareness. And it works! I’ve observed people bow out of the orchestra.”⁶²

A scarcity of volunteers – or a surfeit of volunteers – seems to be a factor in how often

church music leaders rely on volunteers self-select into, or out of, music ministries. Elliot Hetzer, music director at Restoration Park Church in Medway, Ohio, pointed out that because he works at “a smaller church,” he is reluctant to turn any volunteers away: “In smaller churches, you just can’t be as selective.”⁶³ In larger congregations where contemporary Christian music is performed, there are far more singers who volunteer than instrumentalists. Since the contemporary praise and worship genre is founded on the rock band model, church music leaders do not usually want more than a half a dozen singers in the group at any one time. Therefore, as Christian Frey said, he has “told a lot of singers that ‘we don’t have a need for [you] right now.’”⁶⁴ At John Mohler’s church, the orchestra and the choir are the ensembles which lead worship on Sundays. Because his church is located in the Midwest, where high school band programs are dominant, Mohler finds himself with a surfeit of wind instrument players: “If a string player volunteers, I just say, ‘Welcome!’ But wind players have to be put on a waiting list.”⁶⁵

Church music leaders in this study broadly agreed that there is one factor that would always disqualify a volunteer musician from church music ministry – and it is not musical competence, nor the need for their particular voice part or instrument. As Ansen Lancaster, worship and creative pastor at Centerville Community Church in Centerville, Ohio, said bluntly, “I will not include someone who has great skills but who has a terrible attitude.”⁶⁶ Church music leaders I interviewed gave me a number of examples of behaviors which would demonstrate a “terrible attitude”: arriving late to rehearsals, complaining about the music leader’s choice of repertoire, and

being rude or unkind to other musicians. Another aspect of an unacceptable attitude—the one most often mentioned during interviews—is less explicitly revealed in rehearsal behavior. Church music leaders worry about and are willing to exclude volunteers who have the “wrong motivation,” that is, volunteers who seek to participate in a church music ensemble so that they can “show off.”⁶⁷ As Dusty Sturk explained, his church is a “broadcast location,” meaning that Sunday morning services are live-streamed on the internet, and the camera is frequently focused on the musicians on stage. “People perceive being on camera as glitzy and glamorous. And so some people might volunteer for maybe not the right reasons. We preach a lot [to volunteer musicians] that it’s *not* a glamorous position, and we have a rule: No divas. You are a servant of the church.”⁶⁸ After the Covid-19 pandemic, when more and more American churches began putting their worship services online, the potential for volunteer musicians having the “wrong attitude” has, we can assume, only increased. Jason Martin, pastor of worship at Pathway Church in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, emphasized that an audition can reveal whether a volunteer has adequate musical skills, “but it doesn’t indicate their motive. Do they just want to be on stage?”⁶⁹ Chris Spivey told me that the very first thing he seeks to discover about a new volunteer is their motivation. “It’s a yellow flag—not a red flag, but a yellow flag—when someone says, ‘I’m really good at this.’ Generally, though, people who say, ‘I want to use my gifts,’ they have the right motivation.”⁷⁰

The broad trends that provide context to the activities analyzed in this article—volunteers’ willingness to self-select, the importance of the scarcity or abundance

of volunteers, and the consensus that volunteers should be excluded for having the “wrong attitude”—are just that: generalities which fail to capture the granular realities of church music leaders’ decision making. These leaders are deeply aware that their own, usually individually-crafted, approaches to technical competence and inclusion in their music ministries must account for those volunteers who want to participate for the “right reasons,” but lack the musical skills necessary to do so (even if such volunteers rarely present themselves). All of the church music leaders featured in this article told me that they had, at some point, encountered an incompetent musician who wished to be included in their music ministry. Such incidents stood out in their memories because these leaders care deeply about their relationships with all volunteer musicians (or, as a philosopher would say, they operate according to an ethic of care). Elliot Hetzer vividly recalled a bass player who wanted to be a member of the church’s worship team, but who “struggled with the simplest of chords.”⁷¹ Hetzer eventually phoned the bass player, offering to help by simplifying the chord charts. Evidently, the bassist’s pride was hurt by Hetzer’s overt recognition of his mistakes. As Hetzer remembers, “the bass player ended the call by saying, ‘I think I’m fine but I’m not willing to play anymore.’ And we haven’t seen him since.” Other church music leaders told me of instances when volunteers “stormed out,”⁷² leaving either the music ensemble or leaving the church altogether.⁷³ Andrew Rudderow said of this possibility, “It’s the worst thing. Somebody could be hurt, and could leave the church, and then tell others that [our church] is terrible.”⁷⁴

Inclusion in Practice

Church music leaders often place a high priority on inclusion in their music ministries. This is true not only because they care so much about those who volunteer, but also because they maintain a posture of adhering to consistent principles—articulating an ethic of deontology. Luke Rosen, director of music ministry at Corpus Christi University Parish in Toledo, Ohio, summarized how he emphasizes inclusion by saying, “I really make sure if someone is coming to me with this desire, I will respect that desire, and I will go as far out of my way as needed to fulfill that desire.”⁷⁵ He explained that his “nonaudition policy” has actually surprised some of his volunteers during his 21 years in the parish. Judy Fesko gave an example of inclusion in practice: one of her choir members was a woman who “couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket”; she sang with the men until she needed to leave to care for her children. “It was an interesting situation. . . . I accept that [our music] is not going to be professional-level. I just want to provide people with opportunities.”⁷⁶ Charlotte Mariasy is the director of liturgy and music at St. Rose Catholic Church in Perrysburg, Ohio. She recalled working with an electric bass player “who was always a half a beat off, and out of tune.”⁷⁷ More recently, she recalled both a young girl and a lady of nearly 80 years who struggled to sing in tune. But, as Mariasy said, “I could never tell them they cannot be part of [our church’s music ministry].” David Sievers, the pastoral associate of music and liturgy at St. Luke’s Catholic Church in Beavercreek, Ohio, is another church music leader solidly committed to inclusion: “Some [church music leaders] plan music with the sound they want in mind, versus the sound they

have. But my approach is, start with the sound you have and make it the sound you want.”⁷⁸ Therefore, Sievers accepts that his church choir includes singers who struggle to sing in tune, and a bass who can only sing the melody.

Rosen, Fesko, Mariasy, and Sievers work at mainline (Protestant and Catholic) churches. Their peers at Evangelical churches, more of whom are represented in this study, also prioritize inclusion and join them in employing a variety of strategies to minimize the distractions created by singers singing out of tune, or instrumentalists playing wrong notes. Five strategies were mentioned repeatedly during interviews. First, inclusive church music leaders know that “placement is everything.”⁷⁹ They therefore carefully organize seating in church choirs, placing a weak singer between two stronger and louder singers, for example, or ensuring that a weak singer stands in the back row. They also take great care with the placement of microphones, making sure that incompetent singers and instrumentalists are relatively farther away from microphones, and therefore their sound is less amplified for all to hear. In a related move, church music leaders concern themselves with the relative sound levels of microphones, turning down the sound level on microphones in front of incompetent musicians—or directing those in charge of audio to do so. Elliot Hetzer, a strongly inclusive music leader, gave an example of how this works in practice. He described a “weak singer” whom he assigned to sing melody, since she could not sing in harmony.⁸⁰ “She was miked but not fully in the mix,” Hetzer said, adding, “I could never imagine turning someone off.”

Second, church music leaders strategize by pairing fully competent musicians with

less competent musicians—that is, seating them or standing them side by side, and telling them to perform the same part. Chris Spivey described this as “putting an A or B player next to a C or D player.”⁸¹ Sometimes this kind of pairing happens organically, as in the church choir at Epiphany Lutheran Church in Centerville, Ohio, where Director of Arts John Benjamin insists that “all God’s children get a voice in the choir.”⁸² Benjamin was gratified to see how young singers in the choir sat with their mothers and were helped by their mothers to sing their parts accurately. In other situations, church music leaders deliberately create such pairings; my interviewees described doing this for singers, guitarists, and pianists. As Robert Rhodes (pastor of worship arts ministries at Washington Heights Baptist Church in Centerville, Ohio) pointed out, the pairing strategy works well for almost every kind of musician except for drummers, and it works especially well for harmony singers—and church music leaders seem to be continually in need of harmony singers.⁸³

The third strategy employed by church music leaders to promote inclusion is intentional scheduling. Michaela Bonner, the director of praise and worship at Epiphany Lutheran Church, told me that she schedules her team members for specific Sundays.⁸⁴ She said carefully, “I’ve never had a situation where I would never schedule someone. But I may schedule someone only once per month, and I will make sure to schedule them with a strong musician for the same week, so that the stronger musician can be a mentor and play over top . . . so the stronger one can cover [the weaker one], so to speak.” As Bonner’s words imply, the scheduling strategy is often connected to the pairing

strategy. A fourth strategy used by church music leaders is to pick simple repertoire to be performed by teams of musicians in which everyone is not fully competent. As Chris Wilson put it, “Over the last couple of years we [at Apex Church] have leaned heavily into developing our volunteers, and excellence has not been such a priority. So we’ve become more creative. A decent band can do simple pieces really well, and this will help the church worship.”⁸⁵ Similarly, church music leaders committed to inclusion often simplify parts in standard repertoire for the sake of individuals. Robert Rhodes believes in “putting people in a situation where they are going to flourish, not drown,” and therefore he is willing to simplify passages in certain songs, so that developing musicians can play and “the essence of the song will come through.”⁸⁶ Michaela Bonner gave an example of this kind of simplifying of parts: she has told guitarists who are unable to play the regular rhythm guitar part to strum only once per chord change.⁸⁷

A fifth strategy that allows church music leaders to include incompetent musicians in their Sunday morning services is emerging, enabled by cutting-edge technology. This technology projects the sound of the drum, bass guitar, piano, electric keyboard, electric guitars, acoustic guitars, and/or vocals of an original recording, while allowing live musicians to perform along with it. I heard about this technology, and the strategy it supports, from Carmen Stanczykiewicz; I imagine that as it becomes more widely used, more church music leaders will use it in the same way. This “wonderful new technology,” in Stanczykiewicz’s words,⁸⁸ is part of the MultiTracks compendium of recording and performing applications aimed at church music leaders.⁸⁹ The

MultiTracks suite of tools is based on more than 20,000 commercial recordings, all of them Christian worship songs. It allows church music leaders to create chord charts of these songs, plan rehearsals of the songs, and other related tasks. One of the MultiTracks applications is called MultiOuts. Using MultiOuts, a church music leader “can send multiple audio outputs from [their] iPhone or iPad to [the] soundboard.”⁹⁰ By this method, a musician can be on stage playing or singing, plugged into a microphone, but free to make mistakes—because the MultiTracks sound is what is projected and heard by the congregation. Stanczykiewicz related how this technology helped “a woman who was a bass player whose audition did not go well at all. But she was willing to work on it. So now, she plays on Sundays, hearing the bass part and the click track in her ear—but the congregation hears the professionally recorded version. This is a wonderful way to get someone involved.”⁹¹ Stanczykiewicz recalled another woman, a keyboard player (“a very basic player who could play chords but couldn’t reproduce melodies”). This keyboard player wanted to quit the worship team, but Stanczykiewicz proposed that she play the chords she was comfortable with, while the MultiTracks application projected the lead lines. The keyboard player assented to this. “My goal is to have as many people as possible participating,” said Stanczykiewicz, “so this was a great win.”

Church music leaders deploy these five strategies—which require extra time and effort from them—in order to be as inclusive as possible. They connect their attempts to be inclusive to their ethical understanding, that is, to their “responsibilities to other people,” as Jeff

R. Warren would have it. Further, they understand that responsibility to consist of caring for volunteer musicians, first and foremost; they see themselves as responsible for subordinating other priorities to the duty of preserving their own and others’ relationships with the volunteers. As a number of them told me, their church music ensembles are communities akin to families or “small groups” (voluntary associations of church members who meet regularly, usually midweek). And as John Benjamin said, he would never ask someone to leave their small group—therefore, he could not in good conscience ask anyone to leave his church choir.⁹² As Luke Rosen put it, “There’s nothing worse than joining a community and then being rejected by that community.”⁹³ Kevin Samblanet spoke about a guitarist and singer in his small ensemble “who thought she was good. She couldn’t play well, or harmonize, and I admit there were many times when I moved the microphone [away from her].”⁹⁴ Samblanet told me that this situation persisted for 18 years, because he was unwilling to exclude this incompetent musician from church music ministry. “You can’t call yourself a Christian and alienate people,” he said definitively. Matt Missler, who served as creative arts pastor at Fearless Church in Dayton, Ohio, explained it this way: “I focus on the heart of Jesus, which is not anti-excellence, but the focus is on loving others—even enemies! If I were leaning hard on the side of excellence, I would [make mistakes] on the side of caring for people. So I lean on the side of caring for people: I think that’s God’s heart.”⁹⁵ Charlotte Mariasy recounted, “I always say, ‘What would Jesus do? Would He kick so-and-so out of the choir?’ And I don’t think He would. And how can I expect

the choir members to live as Christians if I don't? Especially if I'm in leadership, If I don't show compassion and understanding, I shouldn't be in that role."⁹⁶

Difficult Conversations and Saying “No”

Inclusive church music leaders know that being radically inclusive generally allows them to avoid difficult conversations. Indeed, they expressed relief at not having to verbally confront incompetent musicians about their incompetence. They expressed being “thankful” that poor singers also sang very quietly,⁹⁷ called themselves “lucky” when subpar players voluntarily dropped out of church music ensembles,⁹⁸ and said it was “a blessing” not to have to speak directly about this issue to volunteers.⁹⁹ Gary Appleton, the choir director at Patterson Park Church, said that while working at a previous church he conducted a nonauditioned choir. One of the altos was “clueless” about her inability to sing; following the first strategy outlined above, Appleton attempted to seat her in different seats to minimize the sound of her voice, without much success.¹⁰⁰ Eventually the alto singer quit because the rehearsal time conflicted with her work schedule: “The Lord took care of that one for me,” Appleton said.

Church music leaders who prioritize technical competence sometimes do engage in difficult conversations. Difficult conversations (or “hard conversations,” as my interlocutors also called them) occur when a leader tells a volunteer musician that the musician may not participate—or may not continue to participate—as a singer or instrumentalist in a church music ministry. Usually, leaders initiate such conversations for one of two reasons: the volunteer's behavior indicates that they are participating or auditioning for the “wrong reason(s)” (as

we saw above), or more frequently, because the volunteer's musical skills are insufficient. As Gary Appleton described it, if a person wants to sing in their current church choir, but cannot match pitch, he will “let the hammer down, lovingly and kindly.”¹⁰¹

Difficult conversations are infrequent; for example, John Mohler estimated that he was involved in hard conversations only ten times during 37 years of service as a church music leader.¹⁰² He and his peers are thankful that such conversations do not occur often. As Christian Frey described it, such conversations are “one of the parts of my job that I dread the most.”¹⁰³ Frey added that, in an attempt to forestall highly emotional conversations, he requires interested volunteers to fill out a form before they audition; one of the sections of the form asks how the applicant will react if they are not accepted onto the music team. But regardless of how unpleasant difficult conversations may be, church music leaders who prioritize technical competence see them as necessary. Dusty Sturk argued that church music leaders are “not doing anyone a service by not stating the truth. Openness and honesty is really important, even if it leads to some hard feelings.”¹⁰⁴ Leaders invested in technical competence ultimately see difficult conversations as part of their mandate. As Carmen Stanczykiewicz said, “You can't be a leader if you can't have hard conversations.”¹⁰⁵

With that said, even church music leaders who agree that “being honest is loving, and being loving is honest”¹⁰⁶—that is, those who are willing to prioritize technical competence above inclusion—demonstrate their ethic of care in the way they speak and behave. Specifically, they work hard to make these difficult conversations as gentle as possible, intentionally declining to say

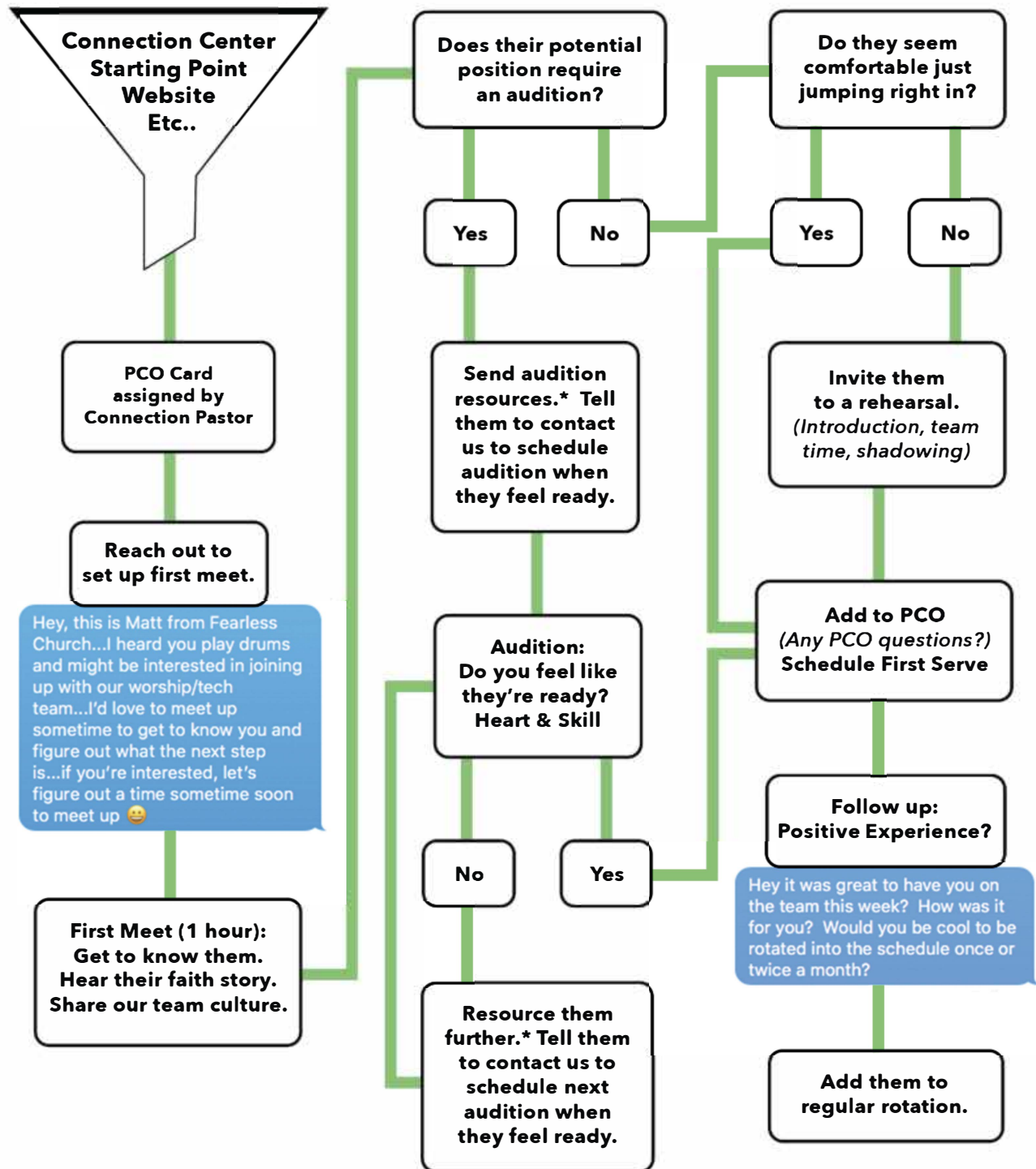
“no” to an eager volunteer. Take, for example, the two leaders quoted immediately above. Carmen Stanczykiewicz has worked out specific wording she uses during difficult conversations, avoiding actually saying the word “no”: “I would like to help you find an area for you to serve in where you thrive and where people around you can thrive as well.”¹⁰⁷ Similarly, Dusty Sturk told me, “I never want to say ‘no’ with no other options. . . . If there’s a way to not say ‘no,’ I will take every opportunity not to do it.”¹⁰⁸ Therefore, Sturk said, if an auditioner is truly tone-deaf, he will ask them to fill other roles on the music team, such as discipleship lead (facilitating Bible reflection and prayer prior to rehearsals) or social gathering coordinator: “And I will create a new position for someone, one hundred percent!” Other church music leaders similarly avoid directly saying “no”; Andrew Rudderow, for example, said that his goal “is to *never* say ‘no’ at an audition. The focus is not yes or no, but rather, how long—as in, how long will it take for this person to be ready to play on Sundays?”¹⁰⁹ During his work at Fearless Church, Matt Missler became so committed to never saying “no” that he developed a flowchart to guide his fellow church leaders in speaking to volunteers at the various stages of the audition process (see Fig. 1).

Prioritizing Technical Competence

Competence-prioritizing church music leaders do, however reluctantly and however obliquely, tell some volunteers that they may not play or sing in their music ministry. They do so because, for them, technical competence, or excellence, is their most important priority. Robbie Reider, for example, works at a church which has laid out “seven hills that we will die on,” including authenticity, biblical truth, and so

on.¹¹⁰ One of these “hills” is excellence; as Reider explained, “this is more than a value, this is something we would bleed for.” And therefore, he said, “If we ever do say ‘no,’ we try to do it in person, and we try to do it in a way that honors [the hearer].” Other interviewees spoke in terms that echoed the practitioner literature cited earlier in this article. Robert Rhodes said that over his years of working in music ministry he has come to the idea that “excellence produces excellence. Our relationship with the Lord should inform how hard we work on our art. We should do our very best for Him, and Lord willing, encourage others to do their best.”¹¹¹ As a consequence of this commitment, Rhodes says he is obligated to sometimes engage in difficult conversations: “I try to be really honest. It’s a delicate situation. But if the way someone plays or sings would be distracting or inhibiting to the congregation’s experience, I have to speak to [that person].” Similarly, Carmen Stanczykiewicz lamented that “some church people are under the impression that [musicians] can show up and wing it. But I believe we are called to do our best, to steward the gifts God has given us. My conviction is that the worship team should be facilitating worship, and not creating distractions.”¹¹²

Church music leaders who prioritize technical competence—and who therefore sometimes exclude volunteers from music ministry—articulate ethical reasons for doing so. Like inclusion-prioritizing leaders, they too couch their explanations in terms of responsibilities to other people. However, in contrast to their peers, the competence-focused leaders are oriented toward caring for church members at large—the people who worship in the pews—rather than for the people who volunteer for music



*Check Resource List for more information.

Figure 1: New Volunteer Onboarding Flowchart. Revised 9.15.20. Courtesy of Matt Missler.

ministry. Robert Rhodes spoke most directly in this vein. He first cited Matthew 5:16 (“Allow others to see your good works”). “Seeing anyone do something masterfully makes us want to do it that way as well,” he argued.¹¹³ In other words, musical competence is crucial because when church musicians demonstrate excellence in front of the congregation, they spur the congregation members on to excellence in their own service. Because Rhodes cares so deeply for the members of his congregation, he insists on technical competence from volunteer musicians. Other church music leaders used analogies to explain more obliquely that musical competence is an ethical responsibility owed to the general body of church members. For example, Robbie Reider compared volunteers for music ministry to volunteers for children’s ministry. A person who claims to love children, but who lets a baby in the church nursery slip out of their lap, should not be allowed to continue holding babies, he said; “at that point, you have to protect the nursery from those people.”¹¹⁴ Similarly, he said, volunteers for music ministry must be competent in their work, to avoid causing harm to congregants (presumably by distracting them and interrupting their “flow” of worship). Carmen Stanczykiewicz pointed out that church pastors have to spend hours preparing their sermons.¹¹⁵ In the same way, she argued, church musicians should rehearse for hours in order to be able to play competently on Sunday morning. After all, she pointed out, the musical portion of a Sunday service is roughly the same duration as a sermon—and by implication, the musicians have the same responsibility to congregants as does a pastor. Ansen Lancaster also offered the analogy of a pastor (“A terrible communicator likely won’t be

hired as a preacher”) and then spoke in more general terms: “In no other area do we make a concession to place someone in a role just because they want to do it, even though they’re not good at it. . . . Musical proficiency is a necessary ingredient in what we’re doing. And I’m not looking to treat worship, which is significant in the life of the church, like it’s not.”¹¹⁶ Here again, by implication, Lancaster evokes his care for churchgoers, who need to be served by musicians who are proficient at their tasks; the congregants’ need to engage in the significant activity of worship undistracted by wrong notes or rhythms comes first in Lancaster’s ethical calculation.

Technical Competence in Practice

As I have emphasized throughout this article, and as I expand on below, American church music leaders promote technical competence while being simultaneously committed to inclusion—that is, they care for the churchgoers whom they serve as well as volunteer musicians in their music ministries. It is also worth reaffirming that leaders who prioritize inclusion are equally concerned with technical competence and minimizing the “distractions” that incompetent musicians might create. David Sievers spoke for his peers in this study when he told me, very firmly, that technical competence and inclusion are *not* opposites, and that responsible church music leaders aim for both.¹¹⁷ This nuanced approach is evident in how church music leaders who affirm their commitment to technical competence also develop procedures to vet, train, and eventually include as many volunteers as possible. Generally, these procedures are used at Evangelical churches that perform contemporary praise and worship music at Sunday services.

One way in which leaders at such churches demonstrate their commitment to both technical competence and inclusion is by declining to publicly use the term “audition” to describe their procedures. This is not a universal practice, but during interviews it was notable how often Evangelical church music leaders either displayed discomfort with the word, or deliberately replaced it with different terms. Christian Frey said that he “hates” using the word “audition” because “it implies a high-pressure situation that is incompatible with the heart of worship.”¹¹⁸ Chris Spivey told me that intentionally avoids saying “audition” or “tryout” (“because it’s scary, trying out”) and instead issues “invitations” to new volunteers.¹¹⁹ Robert Rhodes confessed that it was his girlfriend who alerted him to the emotional valence of “audition,” whereupon he changed the name of his church’s procedure to “assessment.”¹²⁰ Other words or phrases used include “in-person jam session”¹²¹ and “onboarding process.”¹²² Church music leaders negotiate this vocabulary carefully because they are committing to a standard of musical competence (requiring potential musicians to undergo a vetting procedure) and to inclusion at the same time (avoiding the word “audition” because it might dissuade some musicians, prompting them to self-select out of the music ministry before they can ever be considered).

Church music leaders described their vetting procedures to me at length, and unfortunately space does not allow me to describe each of them in detail here. In general, at churches where some kind of procedure is used, most or all of the following events take place—although not necessarily in this order: a potential volunteer expresses interest, usually by

filling out a form; the volunteer attends a private meeting with the church music leader, during which the leader listens to the volunteer sing or play; the volunteer attends a rehearsal, or multiple rehearsals, of the church’s worship team; the volunteer joins in the rehearsal; the volunteer is assessed as being ready to perform on Sunday morning, and is then scheduled to play during a worship service. There are, of course, many variations on this series of events. For example, during the in-person meeting (the event most usually called an “audition,” if this word is ever used), volunteers may be asked to perform preassigned repertoire or may share songs of their own choosing. Alternately, the in-person meeting may be devoted to conversation, and the volunteer’s musical skills are assessed during a rehearsal with established members of the team. Jason Martin explained that so-called auditions at his church include himself, one other church musician, and the aforementioned MultiTracks application, which is used to simulate the full band, and to which the auditioner must play along.¹²³ Chris Wilson altered Apex Church’s procedure; in the past, the procedure began with an in-person meeting, but Wilson now requires volunteers to submit a video of themselves performing as a first step. “We decided to do this in part to head off potential difficult emotions,” he said, pointing out that people who cannot organize a recording of themselves probably cannot perform at the level required by Apex Church.¹²⁴ Robbie Reider, who (as we saw above) professed a willingness to “bleed” for excellence in music ministry, has developed a worship training program that can last from a month to a year. One of the advantages of the program, which pairs new volunteers with coaches and requires them to attend weekly

90-minute training sessions, is that it allows volunteers at every stage of the program to say, “I’m part of the worship ministry.” The volunteers in training “are considered to be actively serving,” said Reider, showing how the program helps volunteers to understand themselves as included, even as it is also aimed at technical competence.¹²⁵

One of the goals of such competence-focused procedures is to develop volunteers whose skills are not yet adequate to the task of performing at Sunday services. Therefore, some Evangelical church music leaders spend a significant amount of time during the week coaching volunteers in what amount to private lessons (although this was another term that my interviewees tended to reject). At the time of our interview Ansen Lancaster was privately coaching volunteer singers, a drummer, a guitarist, and a bass player.¹²⁶ Similarly, Chris Wilson had seven musicians “in development,” each of whom received a weekly private lesson from him.¹²⁷ Coaching is built into Robbie Reider’s worship training program, as we saw above, although in that case the coaches are well-established church musicians who play with and mentor trainees during “band lessons,” which are held in addition to the worship team’s regular rehearsals.¹²⁸ Chris Spivey has even hired outside experts, on topics including sound projection, vocal training, and worship guitar, to address his volunteer musicians during special meetings, in order to enrich the coaching that he himself is able to provide.¹²⁹ One of these experts was Jeff Deyo, a practitioner-scholar cited in this article.

Church music leaders articulate a profound commitment to caring for all volunteers when they discuss their mandate to serve as coaches. For example, Dusty

Sturk requires that potential volunteers submit a video of themselves playing or singing at the beginning of his church’s vetting procedure, but grants everyone an in-person meeting, “even if the video was poor. . . . If there is something to develop, I want to develop it.”¹³⁰ Andrew Rudderow said that he “deeply appreciates the development philosophy” and therefore will do “as many one-on-ones [private lessons] as needed.”¹³¹ Chris Spivey expressed this commitment most vividly: “If a person has just a glimmer of a marginal gifting in music, I’m willing to help them walk that road” he said.¹³² Those leaders who do not themselves teach private lessons regularly recommend private teachers in the community, and keep lists of local teachers for this purpose. At the various churches where she has served, Carmen Stanczykiewicz has repeatedly requested that a budget line be devoted to paying for 12 weeks of private lessons for developing musicians.¹³³ Another strategy church leaders employ to develop singers, specifically, is to encourage them to join the church choir. As John Mohler pointed out, “It’s easier to hide a wandering voice in a large choir,” and therefore singers who are learning to match pitch, or to sing in harmony, can hone their skills in a choir without causing a distraction.¹³⁴ Chris Spivey led a Christmas choir at his church in 2021, and found that it was “a good introduction into music ministry, because [developing singers] are not miked, they’re surrounded by others, and those around usually make them sound better.”¹³⁵

When church music leaders find that coaching is unproductive—meaning that a volunteer does not develop to the level expected of Sunday-morning performers—they resort to another strategy, that of redirection. Church music leaders often

see themselves in a pastoral role; indeed, as we have seen, some of them even have the formal title of “pastor.” As pastors, they are devoted to caring for volunteer musicians, to honoring their energy and goodwill, even if those volunteers cannot perform competently on Sunday mornings. As Christian Frey put it, “People have to be stewarded, shepherded, pastored. Worship leaders should work with other pastors to find ways a person can serve. We should be proactive in redirecting people, not turning them away.”¹³⁶ Accordingly, church leaders encourage incompetent musicians to serve the church via another, usually nonmusical, ministry. Nonmusical ministries to which church music leaders point volunteers include puppet ministry, lighting (in the sanctuary during Sunday services), being a greeter (at the door of the church), and hospitality (serving coffee and refreshments before and after Sunday services). Church leaders who are eager to foster a sense of inclusion among such volunteers also redirect them to worship-adjacent roles, giving the volunteers a chance to be a part of the worship team while not actually singing or playing an instrument. Worship-adjacent roles mentioned by my interviewees were: sound engineer who works the sound system, camera operator who films the musicians for online streaming, technician who controls all of the visual content projected on screens during worship services, and music librarian. Leaders also redirect musicians who are “in development,” that is, musicians who have some skills but are not yet ready to perform on Sunday mornings. In these cases, leaders redirect volunteers to “lower-stakes” musical opportunities, such as participating in handbell choir, playing piano to accompany one song during a Bible study, accompanying children’s singing

during Sunday school, serving as worship leader at a youth service, and “playing acoustic” (meaning not miked) for a low-attendance general worship service.

Church music leaders promote technical competence by deploying vetting procedures, by extensive coaching, and by redirecting. Interestingly, they exert themselves in these ways on behalf of musicians who may or may not be Christians themselves. One can interpret this fact as another way in which the priority of competence is pursued in congruence with the priority of inclusion. As I will argue, however, this way of operating is sometimes discriminatory against women, and therefore, rather less than inclusive. As we have seen, church music leaders usually try to make their vetting procedures as welcoming as possible; as Chris Wilson pointed out, “anyone can click” the link marked “Audition” on the Apex Church website.¹³⁷ Further, although vetting procedures usually aim to assess volunteers’ spiritual qualifications for ministry, these assessments tend not to be standardized or rigorous. So, for example, during the audition process church music leaders do not require volunteers to affirm the Nicene Creed or their church’s statement of faith. I did hear about one church which requires criminal record checks for all persons who serve there, including volunteer musicians,¹³⁸ and another where an automatic disqualifier is “if the person has a bad reputation, like if they are awaiting trial for a felony such as spousal abuse.”¹³⁹ But most often, church music leaders trust in their abilities to elicit testimonies from musicians, either through the initial application form or during the in-person meeting. Further, they trust themselves to “get a sense” of the truth of those testimonies through

conversation and by observing rehearsal behavior.¹⁴⁰ In some cases, church music leaders explicitly do not require Christian affiliation of their volunteers. Dusty Sturk of Be Hope Church, for example, said that “there are lots of atheists and agnostics [on the worship team]” and that he is happy to place them on a team “as long as they want to contribute for the right reasons. . . . It’s a great community to be a part of, whether they believe in God or not.”¹⁴¹

Competence-prioritizing church music leaders who use inclusive vetting procedures, as well as inclusion-prioritizing leaders who accept all volunteers, operate in a culture which is deeply gendered. As is true in music cultures the world over, in American churches women are more likely to sing, and men are more likely to play instruments. This is the case in church choirs and is even more evident in worship bands which perform contemporary praise and worship music. And it is the singers who, most often, are asked to prove their spiritual bona fides. Gary Appleton told me about the application form for a church choir where he served previously; this form asked, “Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal savior?” and “it was clear, the church expected choir singers to be Christians. But it was not the same for instrumentalists,” he said bluntly.¹⁴² John Mohler defended this kind of distinction: “I don’t want to encourage hypocrisy. A singer shouldn’t be singing words they don’t believe. But it’s different for instrumentalists—they are playing notes. Accepting [instrumentalists] into the church orchestra is an outreach opportunity. It’s a way to get them into the church to experience the love of Christ.”¹⁴³ Rereading both of these leaders’ statements, substituting the word “women” for “singers”

and the word “men” for “instrumentalists”—which would be generally, although not always, accurate—makes it clear that their ministries have both spiritual and musical requirements for women, but only musical requirements for men.

This sexist double standard is even more clearly delineated in Evangelical churches where contemporary praise and worship music is the norm, that is, where instrumental playing is more limited to men, and singing is more limited to women. Jason Martin explained that he has never had a nonbelieving (meaning non-Christian) singer perform with his church’s worship team. “To sing a song is to teach that lyric,” he asserts, and singers should not attempt to teach ideas which they themselves do not embrace.¹⁴⁴ However, Martin admitted, he has recruited non-Christians to “fill in” on instrumental parts on a short-term basis; Martin sees this as a “chance for them to be immersed in a faith gathering and for the Holy Spirit to work on them.” Martin does not offer this chance to singers; he himself serves as a vocalist if there are no other Christian singers available. “I acknowledge this can seem inconsistent,” he said. Robbie Reider explained the distinction between the genders in a more sophisticated way.¹⁴⁵ Referencing Paul Hiebert’s idea of bounded sets and centered sets (an idea which has had deep impact on church mission work since the 1970s), Reider explained that in a bounded set, which is conceptualized as a box, a person may be inside or outside of the box.¹⁴⁶ In his church music ministry, the parameters of the box are, “You claim Jesus is Lord, and you’re not sleeping around or doing drugs.” Reider said that generally, singers are expected to be part of that bounded set, that is, they are

expected to be inside the box. However, “it’s different for instrumentalists. If someone plays drums or keyboards or bass, if they are interested, but not a Christian, well, [participating in Crossroad’s music ministry] could be a backdoor into faith for them.” Reider explained that non-Christian instrumentalists can be part of a centered set; that is, if they are moving toward a center point (that of Christian faith), even if they are currently far from the center, he will welcome them as members of his worship team. Here again, the theorizing of sets, and indeed the language of “singers” and “instrumentalists,” tends to mask a gendered reality in church music ministries: women volunteers must fulfill spiritual qualifications which are not as often required of men.

Conclusion

American church music leaders are deeply ethical people. They frequently cite Bible verses and Christian teaching as guidelines for their ministry decisions, thereby verbally advancing an ethic of deontology. At the same time they operate according to an ethic of care, making decisions based on their commitment to care for those who volunteer to sing and play in their church music ensembles, as well as for those in the congregation at large. They therefore prioritize including as many volunteers in their ensembles as possible, while also prioritizing the undistracted

worship experience of the congregants. Most of the time, they are able to pursue both of these priorities simultaneously and without conflict. As this article has revealed, however, sometimes the drive for inclusion and the drive for musical technical competence do compete. When they do, church music leaders employ a variety of strategies aimed at minimizing distractions and at developing volunteer musicians to the Sunday-morning standard. These strategies require significant investments of time and effort on the part of church music leaders, investments of which the church community is generally unaware, and which the literature for scholars and practitioners usually ignores. Unfortunately, these strategies do not counteract the gender-based discrimination which is present in American Christian churches. Also, these strategies do not always suffice to address the challenge church music leaders face. In that case, they resolve their ethical dilemma in one of two ways: they either prioritize technical competence, choosing to meet the need of congregants to worship without distractions, or they prioritize inclusion, choosing to preserve the sense of dignity and belonging so important to volunteer musicians. In closing, it is my hope that the academic study of Christian congregational music will be enriched by the close analysis of the activities and rationales of the church music leaders who graciously contributed their ideas to this article.

NOTES

- 1 Zac M. Hicks, *The Worship Pastor: A Call to Ministry for Worship Leaders and Teams* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 41.
- 2 Ibid., 193.
- 3 Robbie Reider interview, April 20, 2022.
- 4 Chris Wilson interview, February 7, 2022.
- 5 Dusty Sturk interview, February 22, 2022.
- 6 Luke Rosen interview, January 25, 2022.
- 7 Andrew Rudderow interview, April 26, 2022.
- 8 Mark Porter, *Ecologies of Resonance in Christian Musicking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 81.
- 9 Ibid., 79.
- 10 Ibid., 80. See also Marcell Silva Steuernagel, *Church Music through the Lens of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 77.
- 11 Csikszentmihalyi cited in Steuernagel, *Church Music through the Lens of Performance*, 71.
- 12 See for example Jeff Deyo, *Spark: Igniting the Culture of Pure Worship in Your Teams and Your Congregation* (Minneapolis: Worship City Ministries, 2021), chapters 7 and 8.
- 13 Hicks, *The Worship Pastor*, 184–85.
- 14 Mark Porter, *Contemporary Worship Music and Everyday Musical Lives* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 110–11. See also Joshua Busman, “Amateurism-Without-Amateurishness, or Authenticity as Vanishing Act in Evangelical Worship Music,” in *Ethics and Christian Musicking*, ed. Nathan Myrick and Mark Porter (New York: Routledge, 2021), 91.
- 15 Kevin Samblanet interview, April 26, 2022.
- 16 Carmen Stanczykiewicz interview, May 10, 2022.
- 17 Stephanie Feeney and Nancy K. Freeman, “Ethical Issues: Responsibilities and Dilemmas,” *YC Young Children* 71/1 (March 2016): 86–87.
- 18 Ibid., 87.
- 19 For example: Neil Cranston, Lisa C. Ehrich, and Megan Kimber, “Managing Ethical Dilemmas,” in *Handbook of Ethical Educational Leadership*, ed. Christopher M. Branson and Steven Jay Gross (New York: Routledge, 2014): 232–33; R. Rocco Cottone and Ronald E. Claus, “Ethical Decision-Making Models: A Review of the Literature,” *Journal of Counseling and Development* 78/3 (Summer 2000): 275–83.
- 20 Feeney and Freeman, “Ethical Issues,” 87.
- 21 Tom Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 25–26.
- 22 Michelle Kisliuk, “‘A Special Kind of Courtesy’: Action at a Bluegrass Festival Jam Session,” *TDR* 32/3 (August 1988): 153.
- 23 Jonathan P. Stock, “Ordering Performance, Leading People: Structuring an English Folk Music Session,” *World of Music* 46/1 (2004): 47.
- 24 Ibid., 43.
- 25 See for example <https://www.irishmusicsocietyofoulu.org/media-files/General%20Session%20Etiquette.pdf>, especially no. 14: “It is most important not to disturb the flow of the music.”
- 26 Hazel Fairbairn, “Changing Contexts for Traditional Dance Music in Ireland: The Rise of Group Performance Practice,” *Folk Music Journal* 6/5 (1994): 585 and 567.
- 27 Jeff Warren, *Music and Ethical Responsibility* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 30.
- 28 Ibid., 30.
- 29 Marcel Cobussen and Nanette Nielsen, *Music and Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 6.
- 30 For example, Cranston et al. describe six categories of ethical theories; Noel Stewart describes three (see *Ethics: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy* [Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009]); and Noel Preston describes five (see *Understanding Ethics* [Sydney, Australia: Federation Press, 2007]).
- 31 Preston, *Understanding Ethics*, 40.
- 32 Cranston et al., “Managing Ethical Dilemmas,” 231–32.
- 33 Preston, *Understanding Ethics*, 48.
- 34 Nathan Myrick, *Music for Others: Care, Justice and Relational Ethics in Christian Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 77.
- 35 For example: Timothy Rommen, “*Mek Some Noise*”: *Gospel and the Ethics of Style in Trinidad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
- 36 Myrick, *Music for Others*, 108.
- 37 For example: Brian A. Wren, *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 109–14.
- 38 Nathan J. Corbitt, *The Sound of the Harvest: Music’s Mission in Church and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 327.
- 39 Lois Bock and Fred Bock, *Creating Four-Part Harmony: Effective Ideas for Ministers of Music* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Co., 1989), 56.
- 40 Austin C. Lovelace and William C. Rice, *Music and Worship in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976), 101.

41 A trend noted in Sarah Bereza, “Deceitful Hearts and Transformed Lives: Performing Truth and Truthfulness in Fundamentalist Christian Vocal Music,” in *Ethics and Christian Musicking*, ed. Nathan Myrick and Mark Porter (New York: Routledge, 2021), 232.

42 For example: William L. Hooper, *Ministry and Musicians* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1986), 108; Robert D. Berglund, *A Philosophy of Church Music* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 55.

43 David W. Rushton, “A Christian Perspective on Music,” in *Christian Worldview and the Academic Disciplines: Crossing the Academy*, ed. Deane E. D. Downey and Stanley E. Porter (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 332.

44 Corbitt, *The Sound of the Harvest*, 327; Calvin M. Johansson, *Music and Ministry: A Biblical Counterpoint*, 2nd ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 25 and 110–11; Charlotte Kroeker, *The Sounds of Our Offerings: Achieving Excellence in Church Music* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2011), 194.

45 Karen DeMol, “On Musical Excellence,” *Pro Rege* 20/4 (June 1992): 1.

46 Ibid., 3.

47 Ibid., 4.

48 Ibid., 9.

49 Deyo, *Spark*, chapter 8.

50 Donald P. Hustad, *Jubilate II: Church Music in Worship and Renewal* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Co., 1993), 74.

51 Kroeker, *The Sounds of Our Offerings*, 194.

52 Barry Wayne Liesch, *The New Worship: Straight Talk on Music and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 221 and 226.

53 Johansson, *Music and Ministry*, 111; Paul Westermeyer, *The Church Musician* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 27.

54 Lovelace and Rice, *Music and Worship in the Church*, 145; Berglund, *A Philosophy of Church Music*, 69.

55 Deyo, *Spark*, chapter 8.

56 Corbitt, *The Sound of the Harvest*, 322.

57 Ibid., 321.

58 Christian Frey interview, April 7, 2022.

59 Rick McNeely interview, March 15, 2022.

60 Judy Fesko interview, February 3, 2022.

61 Chris Spivey interview, May 11, 2022.

62 John Mohler interview, February 24, 2022. Interestingly, one of the members of Mohler’s church orchestra, Brian Stiffler, strongly doubts the efficacy of this tactic. Stiffler holds a doctorate in education and wrote his dissertation about self-evaluation by conductors: “People are terrible at

self-evaluation! And I’ve seen this inability to self-evaluate, in various groups I’ve played in over the years” (interview, March 8, 2022). See Brian Stiffler, “The Effects of Conducting and Non-conducting Contexts on Teacher Self-evaluation and Musical Error Detection” (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2004).

63 Elliot Hetzer interview, April 28, 2022.

64 Frey interview; also Rudderow interview.

65 Mohler interview.

66 Ansen Lancaster interview, March 14, 2022.

67 McNeely interview.

68 Sturk interview.

69 Jason Martin interview, May 5, 2022.

70 Spivey interview.

71 Hetzer interview.

72 McNeely interview.

73 David Sievers, interview, January 21, 2022; Samblanet interview.

74 Rudderow interview.

75 Rosen interview.

76 Fesko interview.

77 Charlotte Mariasy interview, January 27, 2022.

78 Sievers interview.

79 Ibid.

80 Hetzer interview.

81 Spivey interview.

82 John Benjamin interview, January 24, 2022.

83 Robert Rhodes interview, February 17, 2022.

84 Michaela Bonner interview, February 3, 2022.

85 Wilson interview.

86 Rhodes interview.

87 Bonner interview.

88 Stanczykiewicz interview.

89 See www.multitracks.com.

90 See <https://www.multitracks.com/products/playback/>.

91 Stanczykiewicz interview.

92 Benjamin interview.

93 Rosen interview.

94 Samblanet interview.

95 Matt Missler interview, March 2, 2022.

96 Mariasy interview.

97 Benjamin interview; Fesko interview.

98 Rosen interview.

99 McNeely interview.

100 Gary Appleton interview, March 8, 2022.

101 Appleton interview.

102 Mohler interview.

103 Frey interview.

104 Sturk interview.

105 Stanczykiewicz interview.

- 106 Robbie Reider interview, April 20, 2022.
 107 Stanczykiewicz interview.
 108 Sturk interview.
 109 Rudderow interview.
 110 Reider interview.
 111 Rhodes interview.
 112 Stanczykiewicz interview.
 113 Rhodes interview.
 114 Reider interview.
 115 Stanczykiewicz interview.
 116 Lancaster interview.
 117 Sievers interview.
 118 Frey interview.
 119 Spivey interview.
 120 Rhodes interview.
 121 Rudderow interview.
 122 Missler interview.
 123 Martin interview.
 124 Wilson interview.
 125 Reider interview.
 126 Lancaster interview.
 127 Wilson interview.
 128 Reider interview.
 129 Spivey interview.
 130 Sturk interview.
 131 Rudderow interview.
 132 Spivey interview.
 133 Stanczykiewicz interview.
 134 Mohler interview.
 135 Spivey interview.
 136 Frey interview.
 137 Wilson interview.
 138 Martin interview.
 139 Mohler interview.
 140 Rhodes interview; Lancaster interview.
 141 Sturk interview.
 142 Appleton interview.
 143 Mohler interview.
 144 Martin interview.
 145 Reider interview.
 146 See Michael L. Yoder, Michael H. Lee, Jonathan Ro, and Robert J. Priest, "Understanding Christian Identity in Terms of Bounded and Centered Set Theory in the Writings of Paul G. Hiebert," *Trinity Journal* 30/2 (2009): 177–88.