

**“Pastor as Artist, Musician as Minister:  
Rethinking the Clergy-Musician Relationship in the Context of Worship  
Planning”**

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When speaking about the role of the pastor and the role of the musician, it has become common to refer to the pastor as theologian and the musician as artist. Such a delineation has its benefits. For one thing it has the appearance of drawing nice and tidy lines around two categories of people who have, historically, had a difficult time staying out of each other's lanes. For another, it attempts to give respect where respect is due – to pastors who spend years of their lives studying theology; to musicians who spend years of their lives studying music. But alas, the pastor/musician relationship cannot be addressed that easily. It's only a matter of time before a theologian finds fault with an artist's choices from a *theological* position. And we've all been part of worship that had the utmost theological integrity but still put everyone to sleep. Furthermore, respect that is achieved by staying as far away as possible from each other is less respect and more avoidance.

But the real reason I want to reject this dichotomy between pastor as theology and musician as artist, is that it's inadequate for at least three reasons.

1. It fails to take into account the *artistry of all worship leadership* including perhaps most importantly, the preaching.
2. It fails to understand the *ministerial role of the musician* and the pastoral role that the musician occupies regardless of the restrictions that different traditions place around ministerial leadership.
3. It fails to take into account the *unified nature of worship*, where spoken and sung Word are still both Word and prayer, a unified liturgy best planned in a unified way.

**First**, this traditional dichotomy of preacher as theologian and musicians as artist fails to take into account the artistry of all worship leadership including the preaching. In Walter Brueggemann's important book, *Finally comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation*, Brueggemann makes the case that we live in a world where truth is greatly reduced. "We shall not be the community we hope to be," Brueggemann writes, "if our communications are in modes of utilitarian technology and managed, conformed values."<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann asks the provocative question, "Is there another way to speak." Drawing on the biblical texts he proposes that the preacher must become a poet that speaks against a prose world.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1989, p. 2.

“By poetry I do not mean rhyme, rhythm, or meter, but language that breaks open old worlds with surprise, abrasion, and pace. Poetic speech is the only proclamation worth doing in a situation of reductionism, the only proclamation, I submit, that is worthy of the name *preaching*. Such preaching is not moral instruction or problem solving or doctrinal clarification. It is not good advice, nor is it romantic caressing, nor is it a soothing good humor. It is, rather, the ready, steady, surprising proposal that the real world in which God invites us to live is not the one made available by the rulers of this age.”<sup>2</sup>

I submit to you today, that Brueggemann is arguing for nothing less than the artistic vocation of the preacher. And if he is right (and I believe that he is), this means that the preacher should find in the musician at least an understanding ally, if not a mentor, teacher, and co-conspirator. Ally, because musicians are keenly aware of the difference between a kind of performance that privileges artifice, and a kind of performance that privileges authenticity and a breaking open of the truth. Mentor or teacher, because until twenty or thirty years ago, preachers were trained to be expositors of scripture, explainers of complicated things – technicians of texts. Only recently have we been trained as poets, and performers.

One of my preacher professors, Anna Carter Florence, was a graduate of the Yale Drama School. While I learned how to preach an organized sermon with a clear focus and function, Anna taught me the different approaches of actors Stanislavski and Gritowski, and the economy of words of the poets. She taught me the poetry of Denise Levertov, whose poem “The Poetics of Faith” begins, “Straight to the point can ricochet.” When the preacher suddenly sees herself as artist and not just theologian a whole new world of possibility opens up for the preacher to understand the musician and the musician to understand the preacher.

**Second**, preacher as theologian, and musician as artist fails to provide an adequate framework because it does not recognize the ministerial function of the musician. I realize in an ecumenical group I am stepping into a sticky wicket by naming the musicians as a potential ministers. I am not saying today that I think that the musician’s role is equivalent to the pastoral role. We are trained in different ways for different purposes. This is a good thing. However, the musician in worship, when allowed to blossom into his/her full potential seems similar to me as the role of cantor in the synagogue. The purpose of music in worship, at least in my Presbyterian tradition, is to be sung prayer.<sup>3</sup> In most cases, this makes the musician the leader of a great deal of prayer in the worship. If we fail to recognize this role, we turn worship into idolatrous performance. The choir performs for the congregation instead of leading the congregation in the worship of God. If we honor

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> “To lead the congregation in the singing of prayer is a primary role of the choir and other musicians” in “Directory for Worship,” *The Presbyterian Book of Order*, W-2.1004 (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly).

it, the musician is given greater responsibility but also held to a higher accountability. He/She must ask of all music in the service, will this lead to a deeper worship of the Triune God?

Alongside this worship role, I have noted in our congregation that the choir functions as a kind of prayer group. People gather with all kinds of life stories, and experience all kinds of life events. When the musician recognizes that he/she is there not to prepare a choir for choral performance, but to lead a group of leaders of prayer in their own preparation, then spiritual leadership is paramount. Our congregation recognized the ministerial role by giving the ministerial title. Michael Britt is our “Minister of Music” and he is respected as such.<sup>4</sup>

**Finally**, pastor as theologian, and musician as artist fails to take into account the unified nature of worship. I can tell when a worship service is planned like this: the pastor chooses his texts, writes his prayers, forms the liturgy, and maybe chooses hymns alone in his office. The musician chooses a couple of anthems, a prelude and postlude that she likes and inserts them into the liturgy. We bounce through worship between preacher’s selections and musicians selections with little concern for how it’s all integrated together. In some more hierarchical arrangements, (hierarchical not necessarily because of theological tradition), unity is achieved by the pastor telling the musician what to do. Musicians who are afraid of conflict end up dispirited and beaten down. Musicians who love conflict end up creating a mess. There is a better way!

That better way is achieved when pastor and musician see their roles as complementary, as allies in the worship event. They see each other as bringing gifts that are different, but complementary to the planning. Michael and I start with the biblical texts. We read them together. We talk about them. I usually have some ideas, but I ask him for his. We talk about different possibilities. He knows the hymnbook better than I do, but sometimes I have a suggestion that is compelling. I know the history of texts, a study of the biblical tradition, but sometimes he has vision that is compelling.

Sometimes I’ll suggest a hymn that looks perfectly complementary to another piece we are singing – complementary because of the texts. But Michael can say, “Andrew, those keys are difficult to put right next to each other.” If I made the selection in my office, the flow of the liturgy wouldn’t work out right. I’d intuitively know it, but not until the moment. Michael’s training, education, and expertise can spot it before it occurs.

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<sup>4</sup> I recognize that the blurring of boundaries is fraught with perils for musicians who are tempted to “play pastor” without the requisite training and guidance. In our context, Michael involves the pastoral staff in any situation where counseling or pastoral support is required. His role could be compared to that of a deacon in the Presbyterian context where members of the congregation are equipped and expected to minister to each other.

But there's another reason for this kind of planning together. Some Sundays my preaching is off. I miss the mark. The sermon falls flat. If we've planned together the choir can carry the day. Alternatively, maybe the choir is off one Sunday but the sermon carries the day. Because we're unified in purpose we rejoice in our differences and see them as helping the one cause instead of competing with each for attention or praise. On those days where we are both on, the worship is awesome and we can sense the Spirit of God at work in and through our worship. Some people think it's only due to dumb luck. Others believe it's only because of the spontaneity of the Spirit at work. But Michael and I know better – the Spirit moves just as importantly in and through the worship planning process. We give thanks to God for our team-oriented discernment.<sup>5</sup>

Let me just close by telling about a new building at Austin Seminary. (I hope I get this story right since I'm in Texas today.) Apparently, the board member who gave money for the building – a lay person - was fond of saying that the most important mission of the seminary is “to send us preachers who aren't boring.” So they put “Send us Preachers Who Aren't Boring” in Greek above the doorway of the new building.

Artists know something about what is not boring. “Not boring” can be achieved by entertainment but that is not worthy of the gospel. It doesn't last. “Not boring” can also be achieved by artistry that, in the words of Brueggemann, speaks poetry against a prose world. If preachers are being called to learn how to become poets, and musicians are having to learn how to become ministers, then surely this speaks a hopeful word for the clergy-musician relationship going forward.

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<sup>5</sup> We also plan worship at Brown Memorial Park Avenue through a worship committee and often through a worship planning process that engages a wider swatch of the congregation. I focus here on the clergy-musician relationship, but similar observations can apply to a larger team.