

Music, Community and Identity:
Church Musician as Minister and Theologian

Jason A. Shelton

DIV 5002
Senior Seminar & Project
Vanderbilt Divinity School
Nashville, TN

March 10, 2003

In the late summer of 2002, the Choralist¹ email group was abuzz with activity. All across the world, choral directors were asking one another, “What are you singing to mark the anniversary?” Of course they were talking about September 11, 2002, the one-year anniversary of the terrorist attacks in New York, Washington D.C., and Pennsylvania. There was overwhelming agreement that we must sing *something* to mark the day, but our responses to the *what* of the question were many and varied.

For some, the most appropriate and obvious selections would come from the patriotic repertoire, such as *God Bless America* or *America, The Beautiful*. Others declared their belief in our American response to the situation as being a sign of the eventual triumph of good over evil, and they sang hymns such as *Onward, Christian Soldiers, Once to Every Man and Nation* or *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. Still others opted for a more supplicatory theological approach, and chose songs like *O God, Our Help in Ages Past, God of Grace and God of Glory*, or *This Is My Song*.

Composers of choral and congregational music also responded to the event with a rush of new pieces. Titles such as *Christ in the Rubble, A Prayer for Our Time, Never More Will the Wind and Peace Between Neighbors* were popping up like wildfire as composers and poets struggled to come to terms with their own mixed feelings of grief and anger in light of the devastation we all experienced. My own composition, *How Sweet The Darkness*, was a setting of an existing hymn text by the English poet Rachel Bates:

When windows that are black and cold
are lit anew with fires of gold;
when dusk in quiet shall descend
and darkness come once more a friend;

When wings pursue their proper flight

¹ Choralist is an email chat service of ChoralNet, which bills itself as “a central portal to online resources and communications for the global choral music community.” www.choralnet.org

and bring not terror, but delight;
when clouds are innocent again
and hide no storms of deadly rain;

And when the sky is swept of wars
and keeps but gentle moon and stars,
that peaceful sky, that harmless air,
how sweet, how sweet the darkness there. ²

Why, given our “common” experience of a national tragedy, would there be such varied musical responses to the event? This question is at the heart of my final project. It is my thesis that music plays an extremely important role in shaping and proclaiming communal identity, whether we speak of community in terms of family, congregation, school or nation. To put it more simply, I would say that *what we sing is who we are*. ³ As such, it is completely sensible that different communities would find different ways of singing their way through emotionally difficult times. That we have done so throughout human history is well documented. That we have done so in remarkably varied ways bears further illustration, for I believe that it is in seeing clearly the foundational relationship of music to communal identity that we can begin to explore the particular responsibilities of the church musician as both minister and theologian.

SINGING *OUR* SONGS – MUSIC, COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY

The community which does not sing is not the community.
--Karl Barth ⁴

Since the earliest human civilizations, human beings have tried to express their relationship with the divine through song. In the story of the Israelites fleeing from captivity in

² Text by Rachel Bates, published by Hutchinson (UK). Text appears as #165 in *Singing the Living Tradition* (1992), the Unitarian Universalist hymnbook. No other copyright information is available.

³ This is not to disregard the importance of instrumental music, but for the purposes of this project I am concerned only with vocal music whose theological content has a clear relationship to and impact on communal identity.

⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV, Part Three, Second Half, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 867.

Egypt, both Moses and Miriam's first response to the drowning of Pharaoh's army is to break into song and dance:

Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them:
"Sing to the LORD, for he has
triumphed gloriously:
horse and rider he has thrown
into the sea."⁵

We cannot say with certainty that this song had any lasting effect on the community, but we can look at the documentation of the history of Israel and see that songs and music did, in fact, play a significant role in helping the community remember its covenant with YWH, a covenant which shaped its sense of identity. The book of Psalms is a wonderful example of this role, and is one which remains the bedrock of liturgical prayer and song for both Jewish and Christian communities.

Many of the Psalms speak of what it means to be people of the covenant. They retell the stories of liberation and struggle, and of YWH's continuing presence and guidance. They resonate in the minds and hearts of believers because they speak to the truths of the human condition and of the life of faith. Both praises and curses, lamentations and thanksgivings can be found in the pages of Psalms, which we might speak of as a unique hymnbook whose universal relevance seems remarkably never to go out of date.

One of the Psalms in particular illustrates the relationship between music and communal identity. In Psalm 137 Israel is mourning the destruction of Jerusalem and its subsequent exile in Babylon:

By the waters of Babylon –
there we sat down and there

⁵ Exodus 15:20-21, NRSV.

we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for
mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of
Zion!”

How could we sing the LORD’s song
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof
of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.⁶

Here we see a community which is strongly identified with place (Jerusalem), and which, in its grief, is unsure if it can sing those songs that remind the community of who they are supposed to be since the destruction of Jerusalem has eroded not only morale but communal identity itself. It is interesting to note, of course, that the psalmist is writing from the post-exile perspective. In effect, the psalmist is saying, “Remember when we were in exile and we couldn’t even bring ourselves to sing our songs?” Here the remembrance is two-fold – not only does Israel recall the destruction of Jerusalem, but it remembers what it was like to be in exile, to have lost its sense of self and community, to have lost its songs.

The spirituals of the African-American community point to a similar association between music and communal identity. A key to this similarity is the consistency with which those Africans who had been enslaved in this country were able to identify themselves with the stories of ancient Israel. The slave songs and spirituals spoke of liberation from bondage, of being led

⁶ Psalm 137:1-6, NRSV.

to the promised land of freedom, and their imagery was drawn directly from biblical sources.

Where open communication between slaves was generally suppressed, these songs often served as the means of coordinating everything from prayer meetings to escape plans. As Otis Moss, Jr. puts it:

We took the apocalyptic literature of the biblical tradition and sent it marching across cotton fields, cane fields, corn fields, and plantations. The message was strange to the slave master because he thought, at times, he was being entertained when he was in reality being judged, “weighed in the balances” of truth and found guilty. We can hear the sounds, the songs and the protest! “Wade in the water, children,” “Everybody talking ‘bout Heaven ain’t going there”...⁷

These songs became not only tools but also integral aspects of black cultural and religious identity. This was never more clear than in the American civil rights movement of the 1950’s and 60’s. As Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote:

An important part of the mass meetings was the freedom songs. In a sense the freedom songs are the soul of the movement. They are more than just incantations of clever phrases designed to invigorate a campaign; they are as old as the history of the Negro in America. They are adaptations of the songs the slaves sang – the sorrow songs, the shouts for joy, the battle hymns and the anthems of our movement. I have heard people talk of their beat and rhythm, but we in the movement are inspired by their words...We sing freedom songs today for the same reason the slaves sang them, because we too are in bondage and the songs add hope to our determination that “We shall overcome, Black and white together, We shall overcome someday.”

I have stood in a meeting with hundreds of youngsters and joined in while they sang “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me ‘Round.” It is not just a song; it is a resolve. A few minutes later, I have seen those same youngsters refuse to turn around from the onrush of a police dog, refuse to turn around before a pugnacious Bull Connor in command of armed men with power hoses. These songs bind us together, give us courage together, help us march together.⁸

⁷ Otis Moss, Jr., “African American Music and the Freedom Movement,” in *African American Heritage Hymnal* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2001), introductory essays (pages not numbered).

⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Why We Can’t Wait”, in James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper, 1986), pp. 535-536.

The songs of the civil rights movement provided its participants with a strong communal bond. When they sang “Black and white together,” they looked around the room and often saw, for what probably seemed like the first time, that it was true. At the same time around the country growing numbers of young people were taking part in a movement protesting the war in Vietnam. Songs like *If I Had a Hammer* and *The Times They Are a-Changin’* became anthems for a generation of so-called hippies who believed in the power of ideals and protest to change the world. If you doubt the power of these songs to delineate communal identity simply stop in at a local folk festival and hear the power these songs still have to move and motivate huge masses of people.

The experience of bonding and the shaping of communal identity through music has also been part of the Christian tradition from its earliest days. Whether in Gregorian chant, metrical hymnody, or the contemporary songs of the “praise worship” movement, what our communities will and will not sing together plays a significant role in shaping our sense of “who we are” as a community. Because of the relationship between music and communal identity, it is important to recognize that what is appropriate musically for one community may not be appropriate for another. Judging the appropriateness of a particular song in light of the identity of the community which will sing it is part of the responsibility of the church musician as theologian which I will discuss later. For now, suffice it to say that we would be well advised to keep in mind that songs which we may find unsophisticated or crude according to our musical tastes or theological standpoint may well have tremendous significance and value for persons of other traditions. Here, Tex Sample demonstrates the delicacy of this point:

I remember once in class I was making fun of the song “In the Garden.” Not only did I parody its lyrics as hopelessly individualistic, privatistic, and full of escapist spirituality, but I launched into singing it in a nasal voice with affront forethought. I was on a roll until after the class when a thirty-five-year-old woman approached me and told this story.

“Tex, my father started screwing me when I was eleven and he kept it up until I was sixteen and found the strength somehow to stop it. After every one of those ordeals I would go outside and sing that song to myself: “I go to the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses, and he walks with me and talks with me and he tells me that I am his own.” Without that song I don’t know how I could have survived. Tex, don’t... you... ever... ever... make fun of that song in my presence again.”⁹

Many people find that they themselves identify with a particular hymn or song, or a whole body of hymnody, and this sense of identification bonds them both to their theological tradition and their particular community. They are able to say “*these are our songs*,” which becomes especially powerful when a common musical canon is shared with fellow members of a particular sect or denomination around the world. Having very little else in common, adherents to particular traditions may find that they share a connection in song. Marlene Kropf and Ken Nafziger reinforce this point as they report on the insights of their fellow Mennonites on the subject of singing:

Mennonites who were interviewed were acutely aware of diverse strands of connection that happen when they sing – connections with the universal church, with people of the past, their sisters and brothers in the faith, parents and other family members, someone they just happened to sit next to, the sensuality of men’s and women’s voices in harmony, and the many layers of emotional and spiritual connectedness in the congregation. This awareness of connection was illustrated by a group of students from Goshen (Indiana) College who were studying abroad for a semester in China. After being there a few weeks, they sent an urgent message home: “Please send us some Mennonite hymnals. In this strange land, we don’t know who we are without our songbooks.”¹⁰

The fact that the songs we sing reflect our sense of who we are accounts for the ever changing and adapting body of new hymns and songs being produced by the various traditions. As people of faith hone their theological and communal identities, new music seems naturally to follow which reflects and supports these changing ideas. This is of particular interest in my own

⁹ Tex Sample, *Ministry in an Oral Culture: Living with Will Rogers, Uncle Remus, and Minnie Pearl* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), pp. 78-79.

¹⁰ Marlene Kropf and Kenneth Nafziger, *Singing: A Mennonite Voice* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), p. 122.

Unitarian Universalist tradition, which has, in the past few decades, just begun to take seriously the idea of crafting our own distinct musical and liturgical traditions. In the past ours has been primarily a borrowed tradition, one in which the vast majority of our hymns and songs have been adapted from pre-existing material so as to reflect our liberal religious principles. This tradition has roots in the earliest days of the Unitarianism and Universalism, when hymnbooks were most often collections of well-known material whose references to the Trinity or hell had simply been removed.¹¹

Recent efforts by composers and poets within Unitarian Universalism have helped us forge a new sense of communal identity through providing for us songs and hymns which speak to our own peculiar religious tradition. Many of these pieces are included in our latest hymnbook, *Singing the Living Tradition* (1992). In an essay on the role of music as an evangelist for Unitarian Universalism, John Giles writes about one of these new songs and its power to move, shape and define us and our tradition:

I first became aware of the fierce pride that Unitarian Universalists are taking in these new hymns during the centennial celebration of the Parliament of World Religions, held in Chicago during September 1993. Part of the opening plenary session was devoted to hearing brief musical examples which celebrated the various religious heritages of the participants. Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Lutheranism, and even Native American sects each rendered beautiful, painstakingly prepared musical selections that witnessed to the faith of their adherents. Meanwhile, all the Unitarian Universalists in the audience began wondering how they would be represented on the program, or would they once again be subsumed under the vague rubric of “aberrant Judeo-Christians”?

Finally the Reverend Tony Larsen took the stage and began to sing an unaccompanied hymn from our hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*:

Spirit of Life, come unto me.
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea;
Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.

¹¹ see Jason Shelton, “Changing the Words: An Historical Introduction to Unitarian Universalist Hymnody,” *Journal of Liberal Religion* 4, no. 1 (2003).

Roots hold me close; wings set me free;
Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.

While he sang Carolyn McDade's beautiful hymn, the Reverend Larsen also signed it, using the international sign language for the deaf. As his powerful, untrained voice died away at the song's conclusion, hardly a dry eye remained in the house. Certainly the Unitarian Universalists in attendance were deeply moved, for many of us had seldom experienced such a powerful moment of evangelical witness for our religion, a witness heightened by the immediate emotional impact of the music.¹²

It should also be noted that considerable tension can develop within musical and liturgical traditions after they have undergone substantial ideological reform. For example, in his book *Why Catholics Can't Sing*, Thomas Day argues that the innovations in Catholic liturgical music since Vatican II have robbed the church of an essential component of its identity. His disdain for "folk masses" and the current trend of pop-styled songs is brought on by a nostalgia for the "glory days" of Catholic liturgy and ritual, which were characterized musically by the sublime beauty of chant and a significant choral tradition, and by an abiding sense that the music that has become its replacement is, in his terms, unsingable. He acknowledges, however, that silence (non-participation) on the part of the congregation has long been a part of the practice of many American Catholics, but points out that this tradition is not in keeping with the theological foundations of Catholic liturgical tradition. In short, his concern is that congregational non-participation is incongruous with the proclaimed identity of the church.¹³

Again looking to my own Unitarian Universalist tradition, much of the tension surrounding our latest hymnbook has concerned issues of inclusive language. The intricacies of the English language being what they are, we find that poetic texts do not always adapt easily to

¹² John E. Giles, "How Sweet the Sound: The Role of Music in Unitarian Universalist Evangelism," in Scott W. Alexander, ed., *Salted With Fire: Unitarian Universalist Strategies for Sharing Faith and Growing Congregations* (Boston: Skinner House, 1994), p. 111.

¹³ Thomas Day, *Why Catholics Can't Sing: The Culture of Catholicism and the Triumph of Bad Taste* (New York: Crossroad, 1990).

the needs of a gender-inclusive community. Awkward rhyme-schemes, messy verse and sometimes laughable phrases resulting from our attempts to modify “traditional” texts have certainly raised the level of our awareness of the pervasiveness of the problem, yet for many congregants there is something wholly unsatisfactory about singing words which have lost something of their poetic beauty even when they meet our standards of inclusivity.

Plus, we find that some texts are remarkably resistant to change. This is especially true when it comes to singing Christmas carols. Even for the most doggedly humanistic Unitarian Universalist congregation, “Joy to the world, the *word* is come” simply does not work, and we are not fooling anybody by singing only the Latin phrase “*venite adoremus*” instead of “O come, let us adore him.” Here we see a conflict between identity-based values (inclusivity) and a musical tradition which the community holds dear. Most congregations I know of get around the problem by simply printing the “real” words on an insert for the Christmas Eve order of service.

All of these examples are given to illustrate the point that music can and often does serve as a primary means of communal identification. If a person were completely unfamiliar with the theological traditions of a particular religious community, I would argue that they could get a strong sense of what the group is about by thumbing through their hymnbook or by taking note of the songs the community sings over time. “Even for a movement like Unitarian Universalism, which claims to hold no particular text as “sacred” more than any other, our hymnbooks have functioned very much like sacred scripture. They serve as proselytization tools for visitors to our churches by making statements about our common values and beliefs through the theological content of our hymn texts and the variety of musical traditions whence we draw our tunes.”¹⁴ Especially in the case of religious communities, *what we sing is who we are*.

¹⁴ Shelton, *Ibid.*, p. 2.

ISSUES OF RESPONSIBILITY: CHURCH MUSICIAN AS MINISTER AND THEOLOGIAN

If we recognize the role music plays in proclaiming and shaping communal identity, especially that of a religious community, then we must also consider the responsibilities placed upon those who decide what the community does and does not sing. Clearly identifying the locus of such responsibility within the community is not always an easy task. In some communities, a professional musician takes on this role. In others, the minister determines what will be sung, and the musician carries out the minister's intentions. In still others, musical selection may be a kind of group activity without clear leadership. In each case the importance of music is recognized in much the same way, but communal polity or tradition dictates the way in which decisions regarding repertoire are made. For the purposes of this project, however, I am primarily interested in looking at the role of the professional church musician within the context of a religious community.¹⁵

For many church music professionals, the primary area of tension in their work is in their relationship with the parish minister or pastor. In his book *The Church Musician*, Paul Westermeyer sketches some of the extremes possible in the musician/minister relationship, and captures them with titles like "The Pastor as Manipulator," "The Musician as Dictator," and the like.¹⁶ Simply imagine the gross exaggerations of stereotypical roles (ministers and control, musicians and the *artiste* temperament) and his point will become clear. But Westermeyer does not acknowledge what I see as the far-less colorful, yet often foundational tension between ministers and musicians.

¹⁵ Professional, as I use it here, means a person serving in a recognized leadership role in the community, whether paid or volunteer.

¹⁶ Paul Westermeyer, *The Church Musician*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1997), pp. 87-94.

I have talked with many ministers about their relationship and working style with their church's musicians. A question which I always find interesting to ask is, "Who plans what?" For many, the minister plans all of the service elements, including the hymns, and leaves the musician to determine only what the choir will sing for the service. The common complaint among my musician colleagues is that the minister chooses hymns which are not very singable by the congregation, just because she feels like the words fit the particular liturgical theme. But among ministers, the prevailing sense is that musicians lack the theological sophistication to make appropriate hymn choices for worship.

In my experience, neither of these assumptions is necessarily true. With some notable exceptions, I have not encountered many hymns that are truly "unsingable." While not every hymn may flow easily from the congregation the first time they sing it, with careful preparation and competent song leadership (including occasionally *teaching* a song or hymn to the congregation), most of what is printed in our standard denominational hymnbooks is quite singable by the average congregation. The key, as I see it, is adequate preparation and intentionality on the part of the musician. However, when ministers wait until the last possible minute to set the morning's order of service, adequate preparation is all but impossible.¹⁷ Plus, when the relationship between the minister and musician is in this kind of tension, the subsequent disinterest of the musician will be quite palpable in his less-than-enthusiastic playing or leading of the minister's "unsingable" hymns.

But let us also consider the complaint of the minister about the musician's lack of theological sophistication. In some ways, this complaint is well founded. Musicians are generally not trained as theologians. Their exposure to theological materials is generally limited to a cursory review in their music schools and conservatories of the texts of the mass and a few

¹⁷ see Westermeyer on the Chaos-Control model of ministerial leadership, *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

other texts found in the great works of classical literature. Mere exposure to the words, however, is certainly no substitute for the kinds of exegetical skills a theologically-trained person might have. The area of theological development seems to be a major gap in the training of many church musicians, especially those who come into the role with only music school training.

However, I would argue that this gap is not necessarily as wide as it may seem, nor does it need to be so. On what grounds do ministers make the assumption that the musician with whom they work is incapable of making well-reasoned, theologically appropriate choices regarding musical selection? While music school or conservatory training is not likely to have focused on theological sensitivity, does the musician not have a theological heritage, a sense of her own spiritual journey which informs her work and ministry? Should she not be expected to make use of this experience in their process of musical selection? My sense is that the distinction in roles is really one of convenience for both minister and musician. For the musician, while she may complain about the minister's choice of hymns, at least she does not have to go to another meeting (certainly a plus in light of her part-time or volunteer status in most cases). And the minister maintains total control over the service, which certainly makes his planning less stressful.

All of this convenience, however, comes with a considerable price tag. Given what has been said about the role of music in shaping communal identity, our communities cannot afford to have their musical lives dictated by controlling ministers or elitist musicians who are unable to work collaboratively for the common benefit of the community. In contrast, a creative partnership will allow ministers and musicians to establish a collaborative relationship with community worship, not personal ego, as the central focus. This change in focus comes from a recognition that "Worship is the *work of the people*...It is not the work of one person. It is the

work of the people together. It has a rhythm in which individuals fade in and out of view for the sake of the whole body.”¹⁸

The kind of relationship I envision between ministers and musicians will not come into being without some rather substantial shifts in the way each approaches their work, and, for good or for ill, the transformation must begin with the minister. After all, the most talented, theologically sophisticated church musician in the world will suffocate under a controlling minister. In fact, this person may even be seen and treated as a threat to the minister’s authority. This is ego getting in the way of doing the work of the people. To counter it, ministers will not only have to become more accepting and inviting of the church musician, but they must also learn to *empower* the musician to grow in her own role as both minister and theologian.

Empowered church musicians are included in the decision-making process of worship planning. They understand something of the theological traditions of the community, and how the community’s musical repertoire reflects, enhances and sometimes challenges those traditions, and they are valued for the input that comes from their particular perspective. That is, they understand the role of music in shaping and proclaiming communal identity. The church musician as theologian is able to suggest musical selections based on his understanding of the theological content of each piece (what a theologian might call *textual criticism*), and is able to be in dialogue with the minister about thematic ideas which allow them to weave together communal worship that is integrated, balanced, and clearly about the needs of the worshipping community rather than being about its leaders.

Further, empowered church musicians come to see the importance of their own role as *religious* leaders within the community. The church musician as minister sees her own needs for theological and pastoral growth, especially in areas of church leadership for which she was never

¹⁸ Westermeyer, *Ibid.*, p. 101.

prepared in music school. She also sees the music program not as a showcase for music that reflects her particular tastes or interests, but as an integrated component of communal life which reminds the community of who they have been in the past, who they are now, and who they proclaim themselves to be in time to come. In this model the needs and vision of the community, not the ideals of the musician, dictate the kind of music program it will have, and the church musician as minister is able to respond to those needs from the point of view of the nurturing pastor as opposed to the dictatorial *artiste*.

The idea of “church musician as minister” merits some qualification and clarification. For most, approaching the role of church musician as ministry will be (and should be!) a challenge. It requires an all-encompassing vision of the role of music as a ministry of the church, and the church musician as being in a position of service to that ministry. While I recognize that there are some musicians who feel called to pursue ministerial preparation and ordination (like myself), I want to make the case here that *every* church musician is involved in a ministry of the church, whether or not they themselves are ordained or given the title “minister.” By virtue of its role in shaping and proclaiming communal identity, *music itself* ministers to the church through providing a theological and relational lens through which the community can see itself in times of celebration and of mourning, and in the “ordinary time” in between. This ministry, however, must be channeled through persons who are responsible for creating the space for the work to take place. Thus church musicians, regardless of their particular title (Director of Music, Director of Music Ministry, Minister of Music, etc.), must be empowered to work as servants of the ministry of music which is always present and active in our religious communities. It is in understanding the role of church musician as servant to the ministry of

music that we can speak generally of the church musician as minister, whether or not the person is ordained as such.

Even if there is a major cultural shift in the way ministers regard and work with church musicians, there is still a lingering question: Where do empowered church musicians find the resources that will allow them to develop the theological, pastoral and leadership skills they need in order to be effective in their ministry as church staff members? This is a key question, for the church musician as minister and theologian recognizes that much of her work, perhaps more than half, in fact, has nothing at all to do with her particular gifts and abilities as a musician.

Communication skills, theological assessment of communal musical needs, the ability to recruit and sustain membership in various musical groups, pastoral skills which allow the musician to lead and nurture program participants through the cycles and seasons of life, and a collaborative working style which allows for mutually beneficial relations among church staff are all necessary components of the community's ministry of music. At present, there are very few places that offer the kinds of resources that help church musicians grow in these areas. And those that do tend to be Masters level programs in sacred music with particular denominational affiliations. By their very nature these kinds of programs are of limited accessibility, catering to a particular group with a particular focus. As I have articulated it, however, the role of music in the religious community has some universal truths which are applicable in any situation. Is it possible for these principles to be explored in a multi-faith setting? I believe that it is, and that the benefits of doing so are tremendous.

MODELS OF THEOLOGICAL AND PASTORAL EDUCATION FOR CHURCH MUSICIANS

For the past two years I have been chair of the Professional Leadership Development Group (PLDG) of the Unitarian Universalist Musicians Network (UUMN). The PLDG was formed at the meeting of the UUMN Board in October 2001. It was at this meeting that we learned of the proposed restructuring of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), and the significant change of the UUA's Department of Ministry to the new Ministry and Professional Leadership Staff Group.

Most significant about the change, at least from the UUMN's perspective, was the recognition of musicians and administrators as falling under the auspices of this new department in the restructured organizational chart. For the first time in the history of our association, musicians and administrators were noted along with ministers and religious educators as part of the core of a church's staff, and were being considered for associational resources to further their professional development. It was made clear to the board that we were being given a golden opportunity to take our place at the table. It was to this end that the PLDG was formed.

A guiding concern for the group since its inception has been the cultivation of resources which would help us all become not only better musicians, but also more effective church staff members. In beginning our work we looked at models for professional development offered by other organizations, especially denominationally affiliated groups of musicians. What we found was that different denominational groups had strikingly different programs, all of which seemed to reflect the character of those denominations as we understood them. A selected offering of available programs is worth a look.¹⁹

¹⁹ The program overview is adapted from the PLDG's report to the UUMN Executive Committee dated May 3, 2002. The information presented is the result of a synthesis of our research and findings. Mark Slegers (Portland,

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The Methodist program includes three distinct tracks of certification based on musical and theological education. All tracks include biblical and theological training, knowledge of Methodist structure and resources, skill development, support, and accountability. Furthermore, there are standards for “Christian character,” interpersonal competence and leadership, requirements for membership as a Methodist, knowledge of church polity, a psychological assessment and the following academic requirements:

Track I: Master Degree Track: (At least) a master’s degree with a major in music with studies in music ministry.

Track II: Bachelor’s Degree Track: a degree in music or in church music, including classes in Bible, and other liberal arts classes.

Track III: Experiential: 4 years experience in directing a church’s music program and at least 24 semester hours of undergraduate work in music or music ministry.

During the certification process all candidates are supervised for four years and are committed to continuing education and spiritual renewal. There is a biannual renewal of certification.

ASSOCIATION OF LUTHERAN CHURCH MUSICIANS

The ALCM does not offer a credentialing program *per se*, but does present its many members with a wide range of information and support services, including:

1. A printed (loose-leaf bound for easy updating and additions) and web-based Guide to Basic Resources, including basic information on and resources for worship planning, song leading, hymnody, service playing, church music history, choirs and so on.

OR) and Tom Benjamin (Columbia, MD) were primarily responsible for making this material available to our group, and it is to them that I am indebted for this section of the project.

2. A Parish Education Series, information packets for those leading workshops in hymnody, musical worship planning for members of one's congregation.
3. The Leadership Program for Musicians Serving Small Congregations, a set of informational modules.
4. A variety of national and regional conferences offering a wide range of practical workshops for the church musician.
5. A substantial journal and a newsletter, containing a wealth of practical material.

PRESBYTERIAN ASSOCIATION OF MUSICIANS

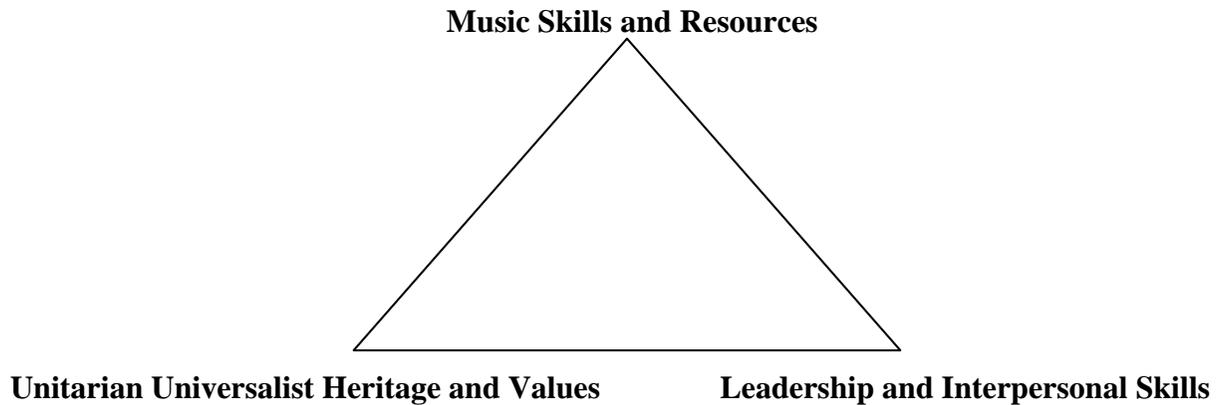
The PAM, large and highly organized, offers three levels of certification based on the academic music degree (if any) that one holds. Work toward these certificates may take place in a variety of settings: conferences, colleges, and seminaries. Areas of study include various aspects of music leadership and skills, church polity and history, bible and faith development.

There is strong support system, with many and varied resources, including:

1. A website with up to date information on membership, job openings, conferences, resources (print, CD's, videos), FAQ's, PAM Guidelines. Some of the smaller PAM publications are given in full here. There is an extensive index.
2. Several summer conferences, in various locations, with a remarkable array of offerings, all useable as credit toward certification.
3. Many publications, ordered online or by mail or phone, on all aspects of church music activity, history and leadership. Media include CD's, videos, printed music, books, etc.

In coming up with our own program, we decided to use a synthesis of the ideas present in the above models as well as those used by other professional organizations within our own Unitarian Universalist Association (ministers, religious educators, administrators, etc.). Our program is based on the belief that effective church musicians in Unitarian Universalist congregations will be strengthened by a foundation of common knowledge, supplemented by

training and resources which reinforce that foundation and which support the particular musical and personal skills of each individual musician. It can perhaps be best represented by a visual model:



In this model we see a structure that is usable by persons in any staff role within our Association, as the piece of the pyramid at the top (Music Skills and Resources) is interchangeable with any particular skill set. These are the specialized skills and resources that distinguish one role from another. So this component of the program will look one way for musicians, but would have an entirely different look and approach for religious educators or administrators. Yet what are commonly needed for any person who wishes to function in a leadership capacity in our congregations are the two pieces which make up the foundation of the pyramid – Heritage and Values and Leadership and Interpersonal Skills. Here we have the pieces that speak to our communal identity (theology, history, polity, etc.) and the ways in which that identity affects our style of working with one another (pastoral care, interpersonal skills, professional ethics, etc.).

How this works in practical terms is the task in which our group is currently engaged. Where we are headed is toward the development of a curriculum for Music Leadership

Certification which combines the collective wisdom of our members in focusing on the Music Skills and Resources aspect of the program while looking to other resources within the UUA for development of the foundational elements as part of a broader program of professional development for the entire church staff. The draft of our proposed curriculum, affirmed in principle by the UUMN board last summer, can be found in the appendix of this document.

While there has been considerable excitement generated by the model for theological and pastoral education we have proposed, I am aware of several limitations of our model. For one, as with any model which is primarily conference or workshop oriented, it works best on a national or regional level. The reality for the musicians in our local congregations, however, is that they are generally isolated from their colleagues. Outside of Massachusetts and a few large urban areas, Unitarian Universalists tend to have only one congregation per town or city. Thus, offerings of ongoing professional development are limited to annual conferences and workshops on the national or district level, with little or no opportunities in the local church area. The considerable commitment of time and finances required by such distant opportunities necessarily limits participation to those who can afford to attend, often excluding those who in all likelihood are most in need of the training.

A second, and perhaps more important limitation, especially in light of our communal and theological commitment to diversity and interreligious dialogue, is that our program, like the others profiled earlier, is exclusive in that it is only open to fellow Unitarian Universalists. While there is certainly value in learning and growing in one's theological, historical, pastoral and musical traditions with colleagues among whom a common faith is shared, there is also a danger of isolation and a tendency toward hegemony which bypasses the universal aspects of music as a ministry in *every* community. Gaining a broad appreciation for the role of music in

shaping and proclaiming one's own communal identity necessitates understanding its role in other communities as well.

Part of my understanding of my own call to ministry as a musician is in helping to bridge the gap between the role of the local church musician and the role of music (and the musician) as a community builder *between* traditions. I believe that there is considerable value in developing a program for the theological and ministerial development of church musicians in a broad-based, open community which is not bound or beholden to any particular theological tradition. While outlining the specific details of such a program would be outside of the scope of the present project, it is my intention to begin working on those details in the very near future, with the hope of designing a course which could be offered to church musicians of any denominational affiliation. Such a course would focus primarily on helping musicians understand the relationship between their own communal theological traditions and their musical repertoire, which will allow them to build a foundation for the critical evaluation of hymn, song and anthem texts in light of their theological (and not just musical) content. Doing this work in a multi-tradition environment will have the added bonus of providing an opportunity for intra- and interfaith dialogue among church musicians, perhaps leading to an unprecedented sharing of resources and helping our communities join together in singing a new, common song which transcends the artificial boundaries of our differences.

CONCLUSION

To proclaim the church musician as both minister and theologian is to speak in terms of responsibility. The church musician is responsible for creating a space for the congregation to

give voice to its faith in common song. This requires the musician to have an understanding of the role of music in proclaiming and shaping communal identity. The community cannot sing that which is not its own song. To do so is to be inauthentic, and inauthenticity is a sure sign that the community has lost its sense of identity and has little hope of survival.

What we sing is who we are. For the church musician to take on this responsibility and be successful in its fulfillment will require congregations to expect more from their church musicians than just “pretty” music or the programming of only those pieces they know and love (and have known and loved as long as anyone can remember). It will require ministers to open themselves to a collaborative partnership with musicians so that the work of communal worship is always about the community of faith whom they serve together, and never about the minister’s or musician’s own ego or personal issues. And finally, it will require church musicians themselves to see the need for complementing their musical gifts with theological, ministerial and professional growth. When these elements come together in the community of faith, the result will be a transformative ministry of music in which our singing will “bind us together, give us courage together, [and] help us march together.”²⁰

POSTSCRIPT

My thoughts on the possibilities for transformative, collaborative music ministry have not been formed in a vacuum. They are the result of my conversations with church musician colleagues around the continent who have shared with me both their struggles and their triumphs in their work. But mostly they come from my own reflections on my relationship with the Rev. Mary Katherine Morn, who told me when I interviewed for my current position as Director of

²⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Ibid.*, p. 536.

Music at First Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashville that, more than anything, she wanted the music director to be her partner in worship. She has treated me as such from the day I was hired, from my initial bumbings and “growth opportunities” through my decision to respond to my own call to ministry and attend seminary. It is to her that this project is dedicated with love and deep appreciation.

Appendix A

Unitarian Universalist Musicians Network Certification Curriculum (draft)²¹ Summer 2002

General Requirements for Certification:

- Applicant is a member of Unitarian Universalist Musicians Network
- Applicant shows a commitment to the church's total ministry.
- Applicant has served for three years as a music leader in a Unitarian Universalist congregation (or in Unitarian Universalist congregations). Music leadership is defined as ongoing, regular leadership with responsibility as a choir director, accompanist, song leader or worship leader.
- Applicant demonstrates a commitment to continuing education (participation in professional, community, denominational and ecumenical groups)
- Applicant has successfully completed courses and workshops described below
- Applicant has submitted some "body of work" – portfolio, essays, curriculum, etc.
- Applicant has committed to a standard of ethical conduct as set forth by the UUMN.

Certification Curriculum

Workshops and classes may be attended at:

- UUMN conferences
- District conferences
- Seminaries
- Accredited colleges
- Conferences of other professional music organizations (AGO, ACDA, AGEHR, MENC, etc.)
- Leadership Schools
- On-line courses offered by seminaries, colleges, UUMN or other approved sources

NB: In some areas, demonstrated competency through experience may be considered in lieu of formal coursework.

MUSIC SKILLS & RESOURCES

Complete at least 15 hours of workshops or classes (or demonstrate equivalent competency), dealing with music in UU worship and congregational life. Topics should include:

- I. Developing and organizing a music program
 - A. Approaching music as ministry and service
 - B. Recruiting and sustaining the adult choir
 - C. Beginning and sustaining the children's choir
 - D. Budgeting and special Funding

²¹ As with all of the work of the PLDG, this curriculum is the result of a group effort. However, it was given its initial shape and form by Beth Norton (Concord, MA), who deserves recognition here for her tremendous efforts.

- E. Growing the program
 - F. Programming special music services
 - G. Working with a Music Committee
- II. Music for UU worship
 - A. Congregational singing
 - B. Keyboard repertoire
 - C. Solo vocal and instrumental repertoire
 - D. Choral repertoire

UU HERITAGE AND VALUES

Complete at least 15 hours of workshops (or demonstrate equivalent competency) dealing with

- I. UU theology and history
 - A. UU theologies
 - B. UU principles and purposes
 - C. Social justice
 - D. UU (musical) history
- II. UU congregational structure and governance.
 - A. Congregational polity
 - B. UUA structure

LEADERSHIP AND INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

Participate in at least 15 hours of workshop or classes (or demonstrate equivalent competency) dealing with the following:

- I. Professional ethics and standards of conduct
 - A. Boundaries
 - B. Collegial relations
 - C. Relationship with congregation members
 - D. Copyright law
 - E. Ethical employment procedures and employee rights
- II. Church staff skills:
 - A. Working styles and group dynamics
 - B. Effective communication strategies
 - C. Staff evaluation
 - D. Working with a music committee
 - E. Volunteer development
- III. Pastoral Care Basics
 - A. Systems theory and group dynamics
 - B. Effective communication and listening skills
 - C. Boundaries and limits and self care
 - D. Conflict management

ELECTIVES:

Candidate will design (in consultation with Certification Advisor) an elective program of at least 30 class hours (or the equivalent). At least 10 class hours may be in candidate's particular area of musical expertise. At least 20 hours should support in candidate's areas of growth. Such an elective program might include:

- I. Musical Skills and Resources
 - A. Choral Directors
 - 1. Choral repertoire for UU worship
 - 2. Choral conducting and rehearsal technique
 - 3. vocal technique
 - 4. sight singing
 - B. Keyboard players/accompanists
 - 1. Keyboard repertoire for UU worship
 - 2. Applied keyboard skills
 - 3. Improvisation
 - 4. open score reading
 - 5. accompanying
 - 6. hymn arrangements
 - C. General
 - 1. Studies in world music
 - 2. Composition and arranging
 - 3. Solo vocal and instrumental repertoire for UU worship
 - 4. Song leading
- II. UU Heritage and Values
 - A. Studies in world religious traditions
 - B. Studies in UU history
 - C. Studies in UU Theology
- III. Leadership and Interpersonal Skills
 - A. Conflict management
 - B. Systems theory
 - C. Pastoral care
 - D. Working styles & temperaments (Myers Briggs, etc.)