

Conflict Viewed Systemically

Paul Westermeyer

This article appeared in *The American Organist* Feb. 2015 p. 70

Relationships between clergy and musicians can be disfigured by bad behavior on the part of either or both parties. This can be driven by the wickedness the Psalms describe, sheer cussedness, personality conflicts, power struggles, mistakes, or simmering disputes that can burst into flame. These relationships are possible between any two people who work together, not only pastors and musicians.

This disfiguring should not be minimized, but neither should a system that sets conflicts in motion. Pastors and musicians who try to work out relationships as well as they can but run into brick walls should be aware of the system that builds the walls. They should not lay guilt trips on themselves when they cannot resolve what is beyond their control.

Pastors are trained in curricula which largely omit music from the theological conversation. The musical issues that attend the history of the church, like those stimulated by hymnody—sketched by Louis Benson almost a century ago (“Lecture Two” in *The Hymnody of the Christian Church* [1927])—are not on the map of most seminaries in this country. *Musicians*, in a parallel way, are generally shut out of theological curricula along with teachers who have spent their lives studying church music. Musicians are, with a few notable exceptions, forced to learn their craft outside of the church’s schools.

Since *musicians* who work in the church deal fundamentally with worship, they are plunged into study beyond their musical curricula. This in turn propels them to join denominational and cross-denominational groups of church musicians among whom they often learn more about worship and its music than many pastors learn in their studies, but they have no dialogue with the pastors. *Pastors* have no dialogue with the musicians. The result is a system where clergy and musicians are set against each other. Musicians are trained to think of themselves as employees of the church. If they join a church music organization and encounter another viewpoint, they usually have no theological language to express it and no dialogue with the clergy. Clergy are taught in their study, usually unconsciously, to regard musicians as employees with technical skills whom they, with little or no understanding of the church musician’s vocation, are expected to control. There is no community, no collegiality, and no thought of mutual planning—only employee and employer, each wary of the other.

People in the congregation are not without their faults, and some of them can be as wicked and disruptive as some pastors and musicians. These people intuit the systemic estrangement or cleavage between clergy and musicians, then exploit and exacerbate it by triangulation or other means to get what they want. Power plays result, the church is turned into a battle field, and people retreat to three islands controlled by lay leader, pastor, and musician—or by alliances with battle lines drawn in what becomes lifeless desert sand. The conflicts can be more or less open. Since worship is public, however, hiding them is virtually impossible. They’re obvious when battling pastors try to conduct services simultaneously in the same worship space or when a pastor stops a hymn and belittles the musician or when a pastor sings loudly and tries to change a tempo. The presumably less obvious silence between a pastor and a musician who have not spoken to one another for three years probably shouts the loudest, however, as the people retreat to their islands.

Thankfully there are oases. These are the churches Don Saliers, calling on Alejandro

Garcia-Rivera, refers to as communities of the beautiful (TAO [June 2014] 48:6). They are found Westermeyer p. 2

In every population center, in every denomination, and in various shapes and sizes. What unites them is gathering around word, font, and table “for the life of the world” (Alexander Schmemmann). In these gatherings a hospitable *community* of checks and balances is discovered, pastors are not allowed to be dictators or CEOs, musicians are not permitted to use music for their show, music is not seen as a sales tool or a matter of individual likes and dislikes, the folks in the pews are understood to be active participants and not spectators or power brokers, and everybody’s vocation is affirmed into the world. All of the normal human struggles are there—personality conflicts, power plays, disputes—but they are transformed by springs of living water.

Can we resolve conflicts? Maybe, sometimes. My counsel to students, colleagues, and myself has been something like this. In an oasis, rejoice and let others know that there *are* streams of living water. In a conflict, summon all of the wisdom available to solve it, realizing that, at least for the present, there may be no solution. Since no situation is perfect, sometimes the least evil option is to stay and try to help. Sometimes there is simply no choice but to leave. When treated badly or fired unjustly, the problem is how to address the local and systemic problems to do the best good for the longest time. The understandable response is to lash out. In all of these situations, when word, font, and table are cut loose, their festivity subverts the system. (See Mary Catherine Hilbert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* [1997], p. 114.)

Abuse and injustice cannot be tolerated. We have to do whatever we can to counter them and to change a system which supports them. Church musicians are often on the receiving end of abuse and injustice, so they have the privilege of the poor. They can see and name what they experience. Naming it responsibly is no easy matter, especially in our world where, as one pastor told me, leaders are often driven by fear. Fear yields chaotic destruction. John Eliot Gardner reminds us that Bach’s music is about constructive “decency, compassion, and ‘good neighborliness” (*Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven*, p. 477). Proceeding constructively, honestly, and compassionately is part of our vocation as we make music with the people we serve and as we support it in the rest of our “life together” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer).

I am grateful to my pastor, Timothy Bernard, for help with this article. PW