

Hallelujah!

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A Composer and Publisher Speaks of Music Ministry

By

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As a minister's son, tradition is very important to me because my musicianship and my faith developed hand-in-hand. I grew up in rural Appalachia – near towns called Frog Level and Sandy Mush, not far from Dirty Ankle. My mother was the church pianist. She was my first teacher and my father was my first true ministerial model. They established my foundations of worship and praise.

I work for a publishing company now and those early upbringings helped me to prepare myself. My job is to keep my company in business by meeting the needs of worshiping churches, so I have to continually try to take the pulse of churches and what materials they might be needing, what the choirs are singing, what the instrumentalist will need, and what kind of resources will enable and encourage worship in those places.

We have a variety of catalogs, which meet a variety of needs. A liturgical catalog addresses one repertoire. Another catalogue continues the very important legacy of Fred Waring, and another is designed to meet the needs of new churches and their emerging worship vocabulary. We have collegiate catalogs; we have praise and worship catalogs. We even have a new program that publishes music, but doesn't use paper. We're anticipating that the choir of the next 20 to 30 years will no longer hold music in their hands, but rather will hold a device to which music can be downloaded instantly from other worshiping churches. I can just see a bunch of us with our cell phone out, singing the anthem for Sunday. It's a wild-west sort of worship in the publishing industry right now.

I'm constantly challenged with balancing ministry with industry. I have the job of staying in business, and yet, I have also been called to try to open windows of worship opportunities for people with the gift of music, not unlike what you do every Sunday when you select worship songs or hymnody, rehearse and anthem, or plan your cantatas and productions.

Every morning I get up and try and make sense of all that, and try to find composers, musicians, ministers on mission, who are trying to write and be vital in their artistic efforts to meet the needs of both traditional and transitional churches.

I play a piano arrangement of *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing* and the setting has to do with the words of that hymn; the beautiful, poetic imagery of God's fount of blessings; His provision for us, like an artesian well of promise. Of Course, you have to have a history with that hymn and tune to fully appreciate it, the shared oeuvre of worship music that helps us communicate on that poetic level.

A lot of people coming into your church do not have that shared history. Yet, we know that this is a great way for people to learn scripture and to understand the deeper theologies that are so important and foundational to faith.

You are just like the travelers of old who put up the wayside Ebenezers and Bethels in response to the worship and the praise in their lives. Not all of those monuments lasted. The winds of time wore them down; the weather took some to oblivion. But thankfully, in hymnody, anthems literature, and in music history, some of those Ebenezers raise in the desert are still standing because they were made of worthy materials.

In England recently, I had the opportunity of celebrating the Tercentennial of Charles Wesley by writing a cantata, and was able to present that music at the chapel there. I saw the desk where he sat and poured his faith into his pen by writing *Hark, The Herald Angels Sing, Christ the Lord Is Risen Today, And Can It Be, Jesus Lover of My Soul, and A Charge To Keep I Have*, and all of these incredible text which have such depth and meaning and power in peoples' lives. As I sat there and studied where he work and experienced the sacred space of the inspiration that was there, it was a moving experience for me because I realize how out of my hands any of the success of my own work, or the work of any of us really is. It's not up to us; we have to be faithful to build as best we can, to meet the need as best we can.

I perform 70 concerts a year. I'm very rarely at my church, First Baptist in Austin, TX, a traditional church with an organ. But, it's a rare occasion when I am able to worship with my family – maybe a little more energizing and focused for me when I'm able to stand and sing with my children. Maybe because you are on the podium all the time, you may not get that opportunity either.

This particular week I was standing there and it came time – the organ did the kind of familiar kind of crescendo as the introduction swelled and everybody began to check the bulletin and fumble for the hymnal. It was a hymn that everybody knows and probably didn't need the book, but I searched and flipped the cool pages and found my place and began to sing. I got about halfway through the first stanza and looked over at Jonathan and I looked over at Aubrey and they were just standing there like wooden solders, you know? And because of my fatherly influence, I just stuck the hymnbook in front of them and they looked at me and they started to sing. They know music; they're not ignorant of music; they know these hymns. They just needed to understand the moment!

And by the time the fourth stanza came, dad, son, and daughter were singing our parts, coming together on this song they had heard for years. But that's not the transcendent thing. About halfway between this and this, something happened in my heart; it was revealed to me what exactly this moment meant. Here I had in my hand, this treasury of composers, poets, lyricists, pastors, preachers, musicians, and teachers and I was passing this down and joining my voice with my song and my

daughter. And it was in the simple gesture it rolled over me – my responsibility as a parent to transfer all that I knew about my faith and to live that in front of my children.

It was a strange way the hymnbook ministered to me. It was not because of musical content, it was not because of the style, it was not because of the language being too Victorian or too contemporary, or too inclusive (the buzzword now). It had to do with the act of worship and the act of being in community with my children, as we sang together. And if I imagine in my heart's eye, and I look over to my right, I can see my mother holding the hymnbook for me – and Grandma Polly holding it for her and on down the line to a dim candlelit room where Charles Wesley stood at his unusual little desk and bent over writing those incredible words.

My son studies cello; He's a senior in college now and I look forward to when he come back and introduces me to some of the material he's been working on as a young musician and as a poet. It won't be like my music, but it will be a continuation of a legacy of praise that goes back father than we can ever imagine. And it's that sharing that empowers all of our ministries as we attempt to tell the old, old story in a new, new way.