

East Texas Baptist University
Worship Essay

Terry W. York, D.M.A.
Associate Professor of Christian Ministry and Church Music
School of Music and George W Truett Theological Seminary
Baylor University

What Shall We Call Them?

An essay on the importance of the titles we give the people up front in worship

I don't claim to have "heard it all" (a phrase that seems to annoy "fate"), but when it comes to the titles we give the people up front in worship, I've heard enough. In his well-known and oft quoted play *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare asks a question of humankind that echoes to this day in venues as diverse as flower shop slogans and university philosophy courses. "What's in a name?" he asks, "That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet."(II, ii, 1-2). A rose may be a rose, but a minister/musician "by any other word" may be a different kind of flower.

I have watched this particular rosebud over the past several decades as it has blossomed in the "free-church" tradition. My observations, from earliest to most recent, include these titles: Song Leader, Minister of Music, Associate Pastor (Music), Minister of Music and Worship, Worship Pastor, Worship Leader, Lead Worshiper, Worship Producer, Celebration Pastor, and Minister of Magnification. Something is going on. It's a long road between Song Leader and Minister of Magnification. One imagines an intriguing journey. One title that has remained unchanged throughout the full length of the journey is Organist/Choirmaster. This title can be found in both free-church and liturgical traditions. It hasn't changed. Its wording, too, is succinct and purposeful. It tells its story.

The fact that the list is as long as it is indicates that one title does not fit all situations. Congregations are sending a message to someone as they choose or coin a title for the position. They are declaring a particular theology of worship. The title, then, becomes a significant indicator of how and why that congregation proposes to go forward in the practice of corporate worship. It could be that the congregation's personnel committee is establishing boundaries for the person with the title. Perhaps the title is nothing more than a job description in a nutshell.

What we do know is that there is never a time that words don't matter in worship. Words always matter in worship: the words of our songs, our prayers, our sermons, and the preferred translation of scripture, the words of institution before the Lord's Supper, and the words that introduce and explain

baptism. So, too, the titles (words) given those who plan and lead our worship, they matter. Let's begin the journey.

Song Leader has an honest matter-of-factness to it. This congregation expects to sing on Sunday and they need someone to get them started and stopped. They need someone to hold them together and to carry the tune. Here, worship is more than music. In fact, worship may be other than music. *Worship* and *preaching* may be synonymous here. In my experience, this title is to be found most often in small congregations and the person chosen for this position probably has no formal music training. However, they are often recognized as the best musician in the church (other than the pianist). This person must be a member of the congregation, for only a member of the congregation would know their songs and tempos, and how music functions in their midst.

Creativity here is to be understated and well within the context of the community's experience and giftedness. Any tendency toward change or creativity in the context of worship planning or worship leadership will be approached cautiously. You could bring in a donkey for the Christmas program or an "outside" soloist who is related to a church member in good standing, but probably not a string quartet from the nearest symphony orchestra. This is not a derogatory generality. The people of this congregation have experienced grandeur in nature and seen extravagant stage productions. Neither am I implying ignorance of what worship is, but there does exist a certain satisfaction with their "order of worship" and music's role within that order, and what is authentic expression in the context of their community. The "order of worship" is often as set in its structure as is any "liturgical" form.

Further, *Song Leader* does not imply either the presence or absence of a choir. The use of this title makes it possible for another person of some musical skill to hold the title of "choir director," if there is a choir. The title *Song Leader* is about helping the congregation sing their songs. It does not imply any formal assignment or expectations of extended ministry within the congregation. The Song Leader may well show up at hospitals and in the home of those needing help, but this person will show up as a member of the community, not because of any formal ministerial responsibility. In my experience, this is a respected and elected position, but seldom a paid position.

Minister of Music appeared on the scene shortly after the end of World War II as returning war veterans and seminaries met in the shade of the G.I Bill of Rights, a federal education funding program. It is a common title even to this day. It implies a pastoral ministry expectation of wide scope and spiritual depth. The apex of the minister of music's corporate responsibilities was/is the adult choir and detailed planning and preparation of Sunday's worship, excluding the sermon itself. Large, musically agile choirs

are often the primary goal of congregations who hire a minister of music. “Age-graded” choirs involving children 3 years old through high school are not only seen as ministries to those children and their families, they also serve as “feeder” choirs for the adult choir of their congregation, or of another, similar congregation, when those children grow up and leave home. The minister of music is ultimately responsible for all those choirs and will probably direct one or more of them. Now, senior adult choirs are quite prominent. Again, they are the responsibility of the minister of music.

The title Minister of Music also implies the responsibility and expectation of pastoral ministry to the entire congregation, not just choir members. It is this extra-musical ministerial connection that brings a pastoral element to the minister of music’s worship planning and leading. The minister of music is perceived by the congregation to be a minister throughout the week, adding credence to his/her worship planning and leadership on Sunday. Toward that end, ministers of music are often ordained into the gospel ministry. They are expected to be able to analyze the theological verity of music selected for use in the life and work of the congregation. The person holding the title and responsibility of Minister of Music must be fully reliable and qualified as both minister *and* musician.

When this title is used, the congregation sees worship and ministry and community as braided, intertwined into a whole.

Associate Pastor (Music) is simply an underscoring of the *ministerial* expectations and confidence a congregation has for its Minister of Music. This title is often initiated by the pastor as a “step up” for the person and position in question, from Minister of Music. Indeed, this person may well be addressed as “Pastor Tom,” etc. with this title. The actual responsibilities may not change at all as the title moves from Minister of Music to Associate Pastor. Worship will not be affected by this change. However, the minister’s comfort level with his/her role may be affected if the change in title is meant to suggest that more ministerial contact with the congregation is being strongly suggested.

Minister of Music and Worship is similar in intent to Associate Pastor (music) in that it is an underscoring of a portion of the Minister of Music’s role and relationship within the congregation. In this case, however, it is an underscoring of the place of worship in the person’s job description. It is an indication that worship is receiving new focus and, perhaps, elevation in the congregation’s consciousness. This renewed focus might stem from a deeper understanding of worship, or, it might stem from a new commitment to church growth, seeing worship as the best way to be perceived as relevant to the surrounding culture. The intent is crucial. It affects the minister’s “to-do list” each day and it also affects worship. The intent of adding “and Worship” may even challenge how the minister interprets his/her

ministerial call, especially if the intent of the change is to turn worship more toward the “un-churched” than to God.

Worship Pastor is an intriguing title because ministry once spread across the life and breadth of the congregation seems to be confined, now, to the hour and event designated “worship.” The arena for this person’s ministry and pastoring is clearly delineated; it is to be in the context of worship. Even so, in many cases, this person is expected to function as a minister of music. When that is true, the use of the title *Worship Pastor*, is simply an announcement that the congregation is aware that worship has become the face of the church and is the “currency” of advertising out in the larger community. Yet, words matter, and the expectations of the congregation for the minister of music or Associate Pastor (Music) have changed a bit. If this person slacks off on hospital visits, ceases to perform weddings or preside at funerals, its acceptable. They are the *worship* pastor.

In like manner, worship is affected by this title. Worship becomes ministry to the congregation. Come *here* to have *your* needs met. Where is the focus in that understanding of worship? Authentic worship is transforming and healing. But it is so as a by-product of worship that is for God, about God, to God. Awareness of the cares and concerns of the congregation has always been a part of the congregation’s gathering for worship. Prayers, scripture reading, hymn-singing, and preaching should be informed by this awareness. But these concerns are to be gathered, confessed, and offered to God so that, having done so, proper focus and worship “in spirit and truth” can take place. (John 4:23).

Worship Leader strikes me as having the same simple honesty as we saw in the title, *Song Leader*. The expectation seems to be that this person’s relationship to the congregation is ministerial only to the extent that worship is coincidentally a ministry to the congregation. This person, according to the title, is not a pastor, nor does the congregation expect them to be. Ministry by this person beyond Sunday morning’s worship might be welcomed, or it might be seen as presuming on the pastor, whose title *does* indicate a ministerial connection to the congregation. One must ask, “If there is no pastoral connection to the congregation, how is this person supposed to know the cares and concerns that accompanied the congregation to this place at this hour?” Confession, if it exists in the worship planned by this person; concerns, if something that “negative” is allowed to be acknowledged in worship, could well be of a generic, uniformed nature. Will this person be seen by the congregation only on Sunday mornings? Does the congregation expect to see the worship leader only on Sunday mornings? How does that affect the worship planned, led, and experienced?

We must allow for the possibility that this person does know the cares and concerns of the

congregation as a member of that community, but will they be afforded a ministerial connection to the congregation that will allow him/her to give spiritual guidance beyond introductions to the next song?

Does the title *Worship Leader* indicate that worship is an hour that can be planned and led by someone who is distanced from the congregation but who qualifies for the position on the basis of being a good guitarist and “spiritual”? Words matter. This person may well be a spiritual leader within the congregation, fully capable of enabling authentic and informed worship, but the title leaves many blanks to be filled in regarding their understanding of worship’s place in the full life and work of the congregation. This leads us to the next title; a small change, but one that acknowledges that *Worship Leader* doesn’t express all that we think and know about worship.

Lead Worshiper symbolically moves the one up front down into the midst of the congregation, indicating a deep intuition, if not a conscious admission by those who decide on titles, that worship must be the work of the congregation, even in, no, especially in, the planning and leading of that worship. This makes that person a fellow worshiper, but does the title suggest “most important worshiper”? Well, while we are trying to figure out the details and intricacies of *Worship Leader* and *Lead Worshiper*, another title comes on the scene and allows us to back up and look at a bigger picture:

Worship Producer. Worship is, in fact, a drama of sorts. But is it to be a production? Let’s consider it for a moment. When we enter into worship (note that I did not say, “Enter into the presence of God,” a presence we cannot escape) we acknowledge the eternal now of the entire story of God’s redemptive work. Christ *is* born today in the now of the eternal day. Christ the Lord *is* risen today. We enter into the ever now, ever unfolding drama of *The Story* when we enter into worship. That is drama of the highest sort.

The congregation that chooses this title for the one up front, at some level, sees their worship as a show to be professionally and excellently...produced. This understanding of worship sees the production as the best gift possible to be given to God and, at the same time, something that can gain the attention and, perhaps, the admiration of a TV-movie-savvy society. What does this congregation expect of the person with this title? What does this congregation understand worship to be? Where is the focus of this title? Is there not at least a slight possibility that this title indicates the person’s first responsibility is to the technology, equipment, and this week’s script? Is this different than the traditional minister of music’s responsibility of proper house lighting, a microphone(s) that works, proper rehearsal of choir, and worship planning?

In this instance, are the gathered people the congregation, the studio audience, or the viewing

audience? What *is* the congregation's role in worship? Our two remaining titles for the person up front will voice some specific ideas about the answer to the question.

Celebration Pastor enunciates the viewpoint of some as to what worship is and is not. One wonders where this person and the congregation they serve place lament in their hour of worship, at the times when that is the only honest expression they can utter. Worshipers are human beings, and humans do not always wear party hats. Must we always wear party hats in worship?

Worship can always be a time of thanksgiving (definition of "eucharist"), even if we are experiencing the joy/anger dichotomy of thankfulness for the strength to make it through a situation that causes us to be angry with God. On the cross, Jesus cried the portion of Psalm 22 that asks, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That cry can be prayed, even sung, perhaps even danced, but not danced with a snare drum hitting the off-beats. Always party hats, never sackcloth?

Celebration Pastors can weep with us in worship when that is our honest expression, but they may have to step over or around their title to do it. Why give them such a title? Who are we trying to impress? God, who knows our hearts, even when they are sad or angry? Would we dare want to communicate to the world that life is one big celebration for Christians? Is worship limited, confined to expression of celebration only, whether real or pretended? I am not suggesting that is the experience or motivation of those who choose this title for the person up front, but it does cause one to pause and ponder.

Minister of Magnification like Celebration Pastor, returns a sense of involvement with the congregation beyond starting and stopping worship, but we are still confined to the sanctuary/auditorium/gymnasium, /worship center (Selah). Minister of Magnification certainly places the focus back on God; that's good. But the lament question resurfaces, as it must in times of war and hurricane and disease and famine. Worship cannot be a time of escape from reality. It must be a time of confessing our reality and allowing our reality to be transformed as prayer and praise works its way up through the pain and pressures of our heart. Why not call the person up front the Pastor of Praise or the Pastor of Prayer or the Conductor of Confession or the Lament Leader? Why? Here is the reason, because, like Minister of Magnification, those titles speak of only one aspect of the experience. Unlike the others, however, Minister of Magnification does speak of the first and final, overarching intent of all the elements of worship, separately and as a whole. But happy worshipers will feel more at home, it seems, in this place than will those who are present, honestly, and only, because they remember that this is, or at least used to be, the right place and right time.

Each of these titles speaks to a particular understanding of worship. Each falls short of the worship that is due the one true God, the triune Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each of these titles speaks to an understanding of the relationship of worship, ministry, and community. It is not enough for any of us to be satisfied with our understanding of worship, ceasing therefore to search the scriptures for deeper understanding and purer expression. Such satisfaction would be self-centered and self-serving, demanding nothing, or nothing more, of us in worship. We are to journey through the questions, living them as we go.

This essay is offered as one voice, spoken in one moment of one conversation, eagerly anticipating response in continuing conversation. To all my sisters and brothers in Christ, to all who proclaim in word and deed that Jesus Is Lord, this admonition: read, listen, think, pray, take courage, speak, and act. It is your work, your liturgy, your worship.

Terry W. York

c. Copyright 2007 TextandTune.com