

The “Hours Per Week” Misconception

by Fran Morton

“How many hours a week do you *really* work for the church?”

I and many church musician colleagues have been on the receiving end of this question more times than we like to remember. I’ve received it delivered with two different meanings:

- **Meaning #1 (supportive):** After a particularly challenging Lent/Easter season, the question meant, “I think you are working more hours than we pay you for—you are giving us more value than we recognize.”
- **Meaning #2 (critical):** From a congregant who thought I was overpaid, the question meant, “I haven’t seen you at the church for your full 20 hours every week, so I’m recommending we pay you only for the hours that you are (verifiably) present at the church.”

The big problem with both these statements is that they interpret the church musician job as just another job that pays by the hour, e.g., retail sales, delivery drivers, bank tellers, bookkeepers. In these jobs people are paid for the hours they spend in a particular place, doing a specific function on a particular day and time. If they’re not there at that time, on that day, doing that function, they don’t get paid.

Of course, part of our job is being there on Sunday

mornings and at scheduled rehearsals. But these can’t be done successfully in the absence of all the other things we do that congregants don’t see, i.e., selecting music, practicing, recruiting singers and handbell ringers, planning worship, participating in ALCM and other professional organizations, taking lessons or doing other actions to maintain/enhance our own professional skills, managing volunteers, collaborating with other local church music directors on interfaith or ecumenical programs.

Now, here’s the trick: how do we make a convincing argument to my congregant (in Meaning #2 above)? Can we convince them that what they see is only the iceberg’s tip, that we create value doing many things they don’t see and that can’t be done in our office? Having tried, I can say with confidence—we can’t. People who make this argument really believe church musicians are no different from delivery drivers, bookkeepers, or bank tellers: when we’re not on the organ/piano bench or directing a choir, or physically in our office at the church, we’re not doing anything of value that the church should pay for.

What to do? First, be realistic. We’ll never get 100 percent of the congregation to understand clearly what we do and to value our contribution. However, we do need (at a minimum) the clergy, the governing council, and the people to whom we’re directly responsible to be on

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board. The best way to do this is to provide a clear understanding of what we do and of the church context in which we work. We need to document key responsibilities, duties, and context in a position description. Many churches these days will have a written position description for the music director. If your church doesn’t have one for your position, create it. If they do, review it carefully.

A good position description creates a picture of what any incumbent in the position does when everything is going fine; it covers activities taking place both at the church and away; it describes context and collaboration needed; it focuses on outcomes. Sadly, not all position descriptions are created equal, and we need to assure that the ones we work from are the best they can be. Position descriptions need to be precise, say what they mean, relate our work to the overall context of the church, fit the “size” of the job (recognize that a part-time musician can’t be expected to take on full-time commitments). Below are some things you need to look for (or create) that will make a good position description

■ **“Do” versus “manage/oversee”**—There is a huge difference in effort required from us to “Develop and implement a choir music filing system” in contrast to “Design and oversee development of a choir music filing system.” The first statement says we actually will be doing all the work. The second one says we create the design and then oversee others doing the actual work. Make sure that you understand exactly what’s required and the level of commitment before you sign on to anything that says you will do all the work.

■ **“Responsible for” versus “advising/consulting”**—“Responsible for” says the buck stops at our door, whereas “advising/consulting” says we have a key helping role, but the buck lands at someone else’s door. Example: “Consult with the worship team to create a Taizé evensong service” is very different from “Responsible for creating a Taizé evensong service.”

■ **“Satisfactory/robust/growing” versus a specific standard**—undefined statements that tie us to a Facebook-type “Like” measure are to be avoided at all costs. If a quality statement is included, be sure it contains the precise criteria being applied. Example: “Assure that the church’s pianos and organ remain in optimum condition at all times” leaves us subject to anyone’s interpretation on any day of the year. Instead, “Assure that the church’s

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pianos and organ are maintained according to their maintenance contracts, and any unusual conditions are reported promptly to the music and worship chair.”

■ **“Music director will provide music for” without any context.** For example: “Music director will supply music for Vacation Bible School and lead student singing during this program.” This is a very complex task, and our ability to perform it successfully depends heavily on collaboration. Our position description needs to say, “Music director will consult with Christian education/VBS team and agree upon music to be included and the role of music in VBS. Music director will supply music and accompany singing based on the current year’s mutually agreed requirements.”

■ **“Other duties and special projects as assigned”**—these “kitchen sink” statements are particularly to be avoided. An example: let’s say our church does not have a youth choir and they want to start one. A pure “kitchen sink” description might say, “Music director will develop and direct a youth choir as soon as possible.” Again, this makes us responsible for everything: researching music, selling parents and kids on the idea, coordi-

nating with the Christian education team, and on and on. And if it doesn’t work out for some reason, everyone would be looking to us for an explanation. Instead, we need to craft a statement that honors the context and the need for collaboration: “The church wants to start a youth choir. As a first step, the music and worship chair and music director in consultation with the pastor, the Christian education/faith formation chair will research the requirements, budget, and willingness of parents and children to participate. They will prepare a feasibility report for review by the council and congregation.”

When we’ve finished the position description, what do we have? We have a document that covers the major parts of our responsibilities, is “sized” to the director job we have, and honors the context of our church. The answer to our critical congregant then is, there is a document mutually agreed to by everyone involved in overseeing the music program. Finally, we’ve made the “how many hours a week” critical statement go away—it’s been eliminated by a document that demonstrates the value we bring.



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