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Tips

to

Survive

Music Ministry

by Margaret J. Marcuson

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Hello.

Feeling stuck in your music ministry? Challenged? Or do you feel motivated and invigorated?

Whatever your circumstances, these tips will help you think differently about your ministry and your church, and show you new ways to approach music ministry and your personal life.

- **Find** a new perspective on some of the dilemmas and opportunities all church musicians face.
- **Learn** a different way to respond to people that gives you greater freedom.
- **Gain** clarity on what is yours to do as a church musician, without taking on burdens that don't belong to you.
- **Discover** how to enable others to carry out their own ministry and calling.

Music ministry is never easy, but it can be easier and more energized. You may want to read one tip a day, or one topic per week, as you begin to incorporate these ideas into your own ministry.

Margaret Marcuson

Worship

1 **Focus** your attention beyond yourself to God. As important as your presence is in worship, it's not about you, but about helping people connect with God.

2 **Pray** before and during and after worship. Ask others to pray for you. This will help them and you both.

3 **Know** yourself and your own strengths as a worship planner and leader. Incorporate what you do best into your worship life.

4 **Find** ways to worship outside of your congregational responsibilities. This is easier said than done, but we all need to sit in a pew from time to time. Some suggestions: worship on vacation Sundays or attend a midweek or Sunday afternoon or evening service at a church from a different tradition.

5 **Develop** a team of people to help with worship. Keep the congregation from being totally dependent on you for their worship experience, and give others a chance to grow in leadership.

6 **Laugh** at the inevitable glitches (especially at yourself). Don't take yourself or the worship experience too seriously. God has a sense of humor, too.

7 **Use** story and drama to connect with people emotionally. Depending on your tradition and local setting, this may include formal liturgy, actors, personal testimony, and forms of media. Worshipers need to have the emotional part of their brain engaged.

8 **Research** the history of worship in your individual congregation. Ask questions of the pastor, staff, and other leaders (here and there, not in a barrage). Ask things such as: what have been the great strengths, where have been the conflicts, who have been the key players?

9 **Remember** that worship can easily become a focus for anxiety in a congregation. Keep an eye on the process and don't be overly driven by the upsets of others. Ask yourself, "Why is this surfacing now?" and, "What else is going on in the congregation?"

10 **Keep** the long view when introducing worship changes. Don't take criticism of changes personally, and use it as an opportunity to learn more about your people and about the congregation.

Relating to the pastor

11 **Pay attention** to your relationship with the pastor. You can't do your job without him or her.

12 **Be curious** about the pastor. Over time, ask questions about how he or she got into ministry, about his family, and about other interests outside ministry.

13 **Find out** what his or her birth order is, and compare it with your own. If you are both firstborn children, you might be more likely to bump heads. If the pastor is a youngest, you might have to wait longer for direction (but whatever you do could be a lot more fun).

14 **Thank** the pastor regularly. Look for things to appreciate, even if you have a challenging relationship.

15 **Take** the long view. The best ministry is about long-term relationships. Be patient.

16 **Accept** the other's level of knowledge and willingness to learn. Some pastors know a lot about music, others don't. Some are open to being educated, others are not. If you have a pastor who's a learner, count your blessings.

17 **Be open** to learning from the pastor's expertise. Even if your relationship is difficult, you can learn from

that on how better to manage yourself. Overall, the more you can appreciate what the pastor has to offer, the better.

18 Don't complain *about* the pastor to someone else. If there's an issue of difference, state your position in a calm clear way. If the issue is a big one or you are upset, get input from a trusted and calm person, outside the congregation.

19 Don't complain *to* the pastor about the board/staff/membership/choir. You may need to think about issues in the choir or wider congregation and strategize for what to do next. That's different from complaining.

20 Laugh together, if you can. Or at least lighten up a bit. Seriousness is a sign of anxiety. If your pastor is serious and/or anxious generally, try at least to keep yourself light and not get overly infected.

21 Take responsibility when necessary. Admit when you dropped the ball, without making excuses or getting defensive.

22 Invite the pastor if you have something special happening, such as a concert elsewhere. Don't take it personally if he or she doesn't come. The invitation itself contributes to your relationship.

Music

23 Remember music is one of the two most volatile areas of ministry. (Children/youth is the other). Don't be surprised when people get reactive about the music ministry.

24 Consider carefully whether to ask clergy and other staff members to sing in the choir. You need some distance from this high-anxiety area of ministry within your working relationships. You can do it but keep your eyes and ears open.

25 Hire other musicians who are as emotionally mature as possible. Talent is important, but the ability to work with others and be supervised by someone is as critical.

26 Learn about the history of the music ministry in your congregation. Fights about music are often the focus of anxiety, not "about" the music at all.

27 Watch for those who are able to stay calm in the middle of turmoil in the music ministry. Look for ways to make them leaders.

28 Keep your sense of humor. Whether it's a musical, administrative, personnel or budget issue, getting quickly to laughter will help you sustain yourself.

29 Challenge other musicians to respond maturely to criticism. Stay aware of the tendency to get defensive and to defend your team to the congregation. Defensiveness rarely helps.

30 Be clear on your own philosophy of music and its contribution to worship. Over time, share that with the pastor, lay leaders and with musicians in a self-defining and non-blaming way: “That’s my professional opinion.”

31 Coach other music leaders to use music as a way to enhance and enliven worship, not as an end in itself. Some will find this easier than others. If they can’t see this point you may need another staff person or volunteer in that position.

32 Keep your own eye on the larger goal of connecting people with something beyond themselves. Church music is not just about the music, but also to help people move toward God.

Leadership

33 Know who you are and what you want to be about in this life. This is a deeply spiritual question, and working on answering it will make you a better leader. Try writing a page or two in longhand on the question, “I am called to”

34 Work on yourself *and* stay in touch with those you lead and those you report to, especially the pastor. Both are challenging, but anyone who is motivated can get better at them.

35 Get clear about what you think, and communicate it with lowered anxiety. The more you do this, the more results are likely to improve.

36 Expect resistance when you move forward with new or unfamiliar ideas. Don’t take it too seriously, yet don’t underestimate the power of resistance. Stay on track while connecting with those who are resisting.

37 Be neutral about the difficult issues in the congregation and in yourself. You will find yourself learning more and being less hooked by the challenges you face, and this will improve your leadership. This doesn’t mean you should never take a stand, only that you need to manage your feelings.

38 **Take** each issue and barrier that arises in church life as a gift from God: an opportunity to work on your own growth and ability to manage yourself. This is easier said than done, of course. But it is possible to get better at this as we practice.

39 **Find** a coach, mentor or colleague who can help you reflect on the leadership challenges that arise. When something comes up where you just can't see straight, you need an outside perspective on how you are being hooked. Ideally, this person should be someone who asks questions more than gives you advice. Someone outside your workplace will have more distance.

40 **Consider** how your own family history may be affecting your leadership. We all learn how to relate to others in the families we grow up in. If you can face the hot issues in your family, you will automatically become a better leader.

41 **Think** about your legacy more than immediate results. Short-term quick-fix programs will not affect a congregational system in the long run. God has an eternal view, and you can at least keep a five-year horizon in mind (even if you don't think you will be there in five years).

42 **Remember** the best leaders are themselves in their role. God called you to this congregation not to imitate someone else but to use your own gifts in your own way. That doesn't mean you say "my way or the highway," but that you relate to your church and the people in it out of your authentic self.

Learning

43 Use your congregation as a continuing education seminar. Everything that happens in your church, positive or negative, is an opportunity for you to learn about yourself, about the church, about the people in it and their families.

44 Read books that interest you outside of ministry and music. Make friends with your local librarian who can recommend new and old books.

45 Find colleagues who still enjoy their ministry after many years, have a sense of humor, and are flexible, and take them to lunch from time to time. You will learn something about what it takes to hang in there for the long haul.

46 Be a learner. Some suggested areas, beyond the usual worship and music ministry nuts and bolts: family systems theory (highly recommended), entrepreneurship, and whatever else interests you. And find something completely unrelated to ministry and fun for you to explore: beekeeping, auto repair, painting.

47 Develop your own curiosity about the world and people in it. More than a specific field of study or method of learning, this is a way of being in life that will help sustain you in ministry. Some people do well with a daily discipline of study; others like to go away for a chunk of

time. It doesn't matter what you do as long as you do something that feeds you.

48 Don't worry too much about learning the latest techniques of ministry, whether administrative, new music, alternative ways of worship or any area. Keep tabs on what others are doing, but remember your ministry has to fit you. This is not an argument for a know-nothing ministry but for ministry as authentic self.

49 Remember that it is not the amount of information you take in but what you do with it. You can never learn everything there is to learn. Develop discernment about what information is truly important to you in your context and filter out the rest. (One colleague has a separate e-mail address for denominational e-mails and only checks them weekly.)

50 Glean from members of your congregation knowledge that can benefit your ministry. It will help you to learn from them and will help them to know you view them as a resource. Don't be a know-it-all. You are not required to be an expert in everything and in fact it is not only exhausting but also impossible.

51 Study the history of your congregation and the families in it. Nothing (except your own family history) will teach you more about how to minister in the place where you are.

Pastoral Care

52 Train your choir(s) and your worship teams to share in pastoral care. You will multiply the pastoral care capacity of your group, and build leaders at the same time.

53 Learn about the families in your team. This is a form of pastoral care. It will give you a window into the emotional dynamics in the music ministry. In the church, more than almost any other institution, people bring family emotional baggage with them in the door.

54 Challenge your team members to grow through their difficulties. Don't stop at handholding, but help them to develop emotionally and spiritually.

55 Watch for the most demanding members. While they need support, they can use up a huge proportion of ministry resources (including your energy) and still come back needing more and more.

56 Find those who are resourceful in the face of personal challenge. Look for ways to develop their gifts and move them into leadership.

57 Know your own family history. When we are aware of our own emotional "hooks," we are more able to be present and genuinely helpful to people.

58 Hone your awareness of time spent with people. Recognize that people are your ministry. Be aware that your own anxiety can cause you either to want to bolt too quickly or to spend hours with people when they may not need it.

59 Pray for those in need. Research continues to indicate that those who are prayed for do better in terms of their physical health. In addition, when we offer someone to God we are better able to let go of the outcome.

60 Set times when you are not available. Constant availability can lead to burnout.

61 Pay attention to key laity in their time of need. Pastoral care is part of the larger ministry of the church, and those times can cement important relationships and solidify your overall ministry.

Spiritual Life

62 Find someone outside the congregation to serve as a spiritual sounding board. This can be a spiritual director, a spiritual friend or a mentor.

63 Pray for your music ministry members and the wider congregation. This is part of your work.

64 Practice prayer for yourself. It is impossible to sustain the work of ministry over time without spiritual sustenance. And, don't be afraid to ask others to pray for you and your ministry.

65 Look for a way of prayer and worship that fits for you. Plenty of people will give advice on how to do it (contemplative prayer, charismatic prayer, walks in the woods). There is no right way to pray. Just do it, and you will get better at it. Find the way that you pray best and practice it. Go with the flow, and do what works for you.

66 Read some Scripture devotionally. It doesn't have to be a lot, but it needs to be something that is not related to worship preparation. One verse a day is better than none, and it may be better than a whole chapter.

67 Create time for a spiritual retreat. Overnight is better, but a day will do. Some distance is essential for the discernment necessary to be a spiritual leader.

68 **Do** some spiritual practice. It almost doesn't matter what it is, whether prayer, silence, Bible study, or devotional reading, as long as you do it regularly.

69 **Try** some new practice or discipline. If you are inclined to contemplative prayer or if your tradition uses only informal prayers, try using written prayers. If you always use written prayers, practice pouring your heart out to God. If you love silence, join a prayer group. This is about developing your spiritual repertoire.

70 **Go** out into nature sometimes. Do this whether or not you are an outdoor person. Seeing trees, hearing birds, and smelling earth will help shift your perspective.

Family

71 Know that for those in ministry family life intersects with congregational life in a way that is not true for almost any other job. If we can enjoy the benefits without getting knotted up about the drawbacks, we, and our families, will be a lot happier.

72 Set boundaries for yourself and for your family. An inability to take a day off or vacation does not benefit you, them, or the church. At the same time, some flexibility is always warranted. This is just as true for those in ministry who are single as for those who are married.

73 Remember that the intersection of church and family exists for those who are single, too, especially in the way family of origin issues impact ministry. Keep learning about your family.

74 Give your children room to be themselves, if you have children. That doesn't mean tolerating anything and everything, but it does mean controlling your expectations of what it means to be a kid of someone in ministry.

75 Manage what you say at home about people at church, both with your spouse and children, if you have them. Remember that in many cases they have relationships with these people, too. We can get family support at times of stress, but we need to be conscious

that we are not just running off at the mouth about church people.

76 Watch your own sense of responsibility for the church. Those who feel responsible for everything at church find it harder to set the boundaries that are essential for a healthy family life. Remember it is God's church, and you can let go sometimes (in fact, the more the better). To the degree you can do this you will be better able to be present for your family.

77 Take your vacation, either all at once or in shorter chunks, but take all of it.

78 Have fun with your family, or with friends if you are single. Fun is worth it for its own sake, and it will benefit your ministry, too, by freeing you up. Find out what is fun for you and do it (and this will be easier if you let go of some of the emotional responsibility for the church, see above).

79 Keep a sense of humor, just as essential in family life as in church life.

80 Pay attention to your relationship with your parents (whether they are alive or not, whether it has been good or not). This will help your children and grandchildren more than anything else you can do (far more than nagging).

“Complaint Department”

81 Know that complaints are an issue in every area of ministry. The more you don't take complaints and criticism personally, the better off you will be emotionally and the more you will be effective in ministry.

82 Acknowledge the complaint, regardless of how you personally feel. The person who made the complaint deserves to know that it was received.

83 Maintain humility. Sometimes complaints are about an area where you need to improve.

84 Avoid getting defensive. It takes energy, and it undermines your effectiveness.

85 Apologize when necessary. It will go a long way toward defusing criticism.

86 Expect criticism and complaints when you take a stand or move in a clear direction. This is not about you; it is about the whole system reacting to an upset in the balance. Stay on course, and don't let it throw you. Coach other leaders to do the same.

87 Notice that complaints may bubble up in areas that are not related to the direction you are moving. For example, if you take a stand or make a move to develop worship in a new way, problems may come up in the youth

group or the building committee. This is normal. Churches, like other systems, resist change in a variety of ways.

88 **Watch** the way people express their views about something they don't like. Those who can define their position in terms of themselves are more mature than those who say "you should," or "you shouldn't" or "they always" or "they never." This will give you a clue as to those who are more mature than others.

89 **Use** care when expressing YOUR views about something you don't like. Try not to react but to think through your response first. As above, define your position in terms of yourself rather than others: "I" rather than "you" or "they." Take responsibility for your own position.

90 Notice when the petty everyday stuff starts getting to you. Some days, weeks and months it will wash off your back, other times it will be like fingernails on a chalkboard. This IS about you and your own emotional state, and finding some ways to get a little distance physically or emotionally will help.

91 Remember that a complaint-free church is probably going nowhere. That much togetherness works against growth and development. Complaints are part of the price of progress. Don't take it too seriously.

Administration

92 **Make** sure you are reliable. If you say you will do something, do it. Your credibility as a leader will be enhanced, and the ministry as a whole will benefit.

93 **Exercise** the ministry of delegation. Others will grow as you are able to let go. Even if you are a fabulous administrator and love it, find ways to involve other people.

94 **Understand** the difference between leading and managing. Both are essential and they are not the same thing. Know your own strengths in these two key areas and find others who can complement you.

95 **Remember** that the best leaders surround themselves with people who are better at certain tasks than they are. Don't hesitate to do this in all areas of church life, and especially this one.

96 **Know** your own rhythm of work. One of the blessings of ministry is the great freedom around setting your schedule. (But be sure to show up Sunday morning...)

97 **Set** limits for meetings. They expand to fill the time allotted. To the degree you are able, set limits for the time you are free to attend the meetings you don't set.

98 **Respect** the challenge of change in this as in all other areas. For example, long-time administrative secretaries are a very important part of the system, as are long-term volunteers. If you need to make a change here recognize that there will be waves and prepare for them.

99 **Bear** in mind the emotional aspects of time management. It's not just about setting priorities and making lists. Just working harder and trying harder is not the answer to every problem—sometimes letting things sit is the better part of valor.

100 **Ask** for help when you need it, whether you struggle in this area or feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of paper.

Money

101 Remember that this is a high-anxiety area for many people, including most pastors. Family issues around money will be played out in the church. You may not be in the inner circle of church money matters, but see what you notice at stewardship and budget time.

102 Learn as much as you can about your own family history with money (over as many generations as you can). This will help you manage your anxiety about your budget and salary.

103 Remember the responsibility for money challenges rests with the congregation. It is their church. When you feel anxious about budget matters, ask yourself, “Whose anxiety is this, really?”

104 Stay in touch with the money people in the congregation. You don’t have to talk about money or budget with them to work on your relationship.

105 Cultivate your own sense of provision and possibility, both practically and spiritually. If you know you have options, you’ll be freer as budget discussions go on. If you trust God’s provision, you’ll be less anxious.

106 Define your own views on budget matters to the pastor and other key leaders, as appropriate to your particular role. This will be much more effective than

trying to willfully convince people to give more money to the music ministry.

107 Remember you are in multiple triangles around budget and salary matters. You can advocate appropriately, but then you have to let go of the outcome. You can't control the decisions that others make.

108 Expect church anxiety around change to show up in budget matters. Don't take it too seriously or personally, even if the worship and music budget gets cut.

109 Keep looking for the emotional processes at work within the church. Money is a convenient focus, but problems with money, like conflict about music, are always symptomatic of other issues.

110 Be generous yourself. Depending on your relationship with this congregation, you may give here or elsewhere. Wherever you give, a life of generosity will help you be looser about money conversations at church.

For a more extensive discussion of money matters, get a copy of my book [Money and Your Ministry](#).

AND TIP NO. 111 (all the others depend on this one):

Remember that it's not all about you. No single musician can make or break a ministry. Let go and trust God and God's work in the people.

About the Author

The Rev. Margaret Marcuson served as pastor of the First Baptist Church of Gardner, Massachusetts for thirteen years. She works with church leaders across denominations and around North America as consultant and coach on church leadership and money matters. Margaret is the author of *Leaders Who Last: Sustaining Yourself and Your Ministry* and *Money and Your Ministry: Balance the Books While Keeping Your Balance*. A soprano, she has sung in church and community choirs for nearly fifteen years. She lives in Portland, Oregon.

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