



Mary and Bob often find themselves sharing common ground when it comes to philosophy and ministry. When approaching ministerial concerns from different angles, He Said - She Said is a venue to share differing perspectives.

What Goes Around, Comes Around

Bob's Perspective:

Last November, [Intelligent.com](https://www.intelligent.com) surveyed 800 employers and found that 45% of companies plan to eliminate bachelor's degree requirements this year for a number of positions. It seems that more and more employers are placing a higher value on experience, rather than formal education. The reasons for this are cited as (1) Classroom education doesn't necessarily equate with actual skill, (2) Higher education is becoming too unaffordable – trends are now showing huge drops of enrollment, and (3) Not everyone is suited for college – a dropout rate of nearly 40%.

Now I'm not here to say that formal education is useless. College education for skilled professionals in areas of medicine, law, and upper business management is, by all means, necessary! Just imagine going to a poorly educated dentist and finding yourself in [a Carol Burnett sketch](#).

All joking aside, many students are coming out of college with degrees in particular fields but are unable to perform necessary duties due to inexperience or lack of specific training. Formal education is not difficult to come upon (if you're lucky enough or resourceful enough to finance it), but what about actual training and the gaining of experience?

Last summer, there were numerous openings for liturgical musicians in our diocese – some of which are still not filled. I see the reason for this in two parts. First, while there are many talented musicians in our area, not many are suited for accompanying or musically leading a liturgical event. The second reason is that, in some cases, the expectations of the parish are unrealistic regarding work hours and wages. That being said, I believe that, in many cases, if the first criterium was fixed, the second would follow.

Because of this shortage, I recently left my retirement of 2 years behind to rejoin active full-time ministry in my home parish. However, I did this with a unique goal in mind. At my age, I know that longevity in this area is growing short. Therefore, my goal is to work myself out of a job!

My very presence and success in this field, while due in part to formal education, owes a great debt to those who encouraged me, taught me, and mentored me along the way. As a young musician, I only looked at "church gigs" as a little side money while my band was getting it together for the big time. What changed my perspective was the voices of those with much more life experience that took the time to sit me down and show me a better way. They helped me to enhance my musical skills and



treated me as an apprentice – letting me work alongside them to develop necessary knowledge and skills, and point me toward the elements of formal education that would serve my need.

Back to working myself out of a job. Part of my new position is to develop an intern/apprenticeship program at our parish. We're currently on the threshold of completing the criteria for the application and acceptance portion of the project. The next step is to recruit prospective candidates. The process is then envisioned to provide hands-on training in the areas of music directing, proficient knowledge of liturgy, and spiritual formation.

The ironic part of all this, is that it was at here at this parish (way back when) that I received much of my hands-on education (not formalized as we're attempting), provided mainly by the Music Director at the time, whom I now consider a visionary.

Talk about "what goes around, comes around!"

Mary's Perspective:

In writing our blog, I have always tried to remember the perspective of not just those embroiled in liturgical ministry, but the broader vision of others who may not be as connected to Church life. In this reflection, you may need to hang in there to see the broader picture!

Being a half-generation younger than Bob, my perspective on higher education was influenced by the culture and expectations surrounding me in my high school years. A product of parents who both had college degrees, I was raised with the assumption that you need a college degree to be successfully employed in a field where climbing the corporate ladder equated to earning a substantial salary. Going to a college-preparatory high school, I experienced less emphasis on the trades, and more on science, technology, and business. That's not coming from a point of judgement; it is simply an analysis of the culture. I finished college in three years (because I couldn't afford a fourth year without taking out loans!) and graduated (with honors) with a BS in Psychology.

During my school years, I worked in office jobs, and was offered a full-time position in Accounting upon graduation. Nine months later, I was invited to become the technical writer of the same company. In my "spare time," I played music in church. Over the next 30+ years, my career has included writing over 100 books, assisting other companies with accounting, HR, marketing and writing needs, and spending a significant amount of time serving as a liturgical musician. You'll note that none of these descriptions included the



word “psychology.” However, I do believe that my bachelor’s degree helped to open some doors. I also made it a point throughout the years to commit to learning – from attending workshops and conferences to hands-on work with mentors who were invested in my success. My point on this is that it wasn’t either/or, but rather both/and. To be well-rounded and effective, I needed formal training, informal experiential learning, and the support of others who cared about my success within the organization.

As part of my new diocesan job, I have had the opportunity to see a broader picture. I have learned from colleagues in OH and MI that one of the greatest needs in the Catholic church is finding qualified, well-formed liturgical musicians. The 17 music openings in our diocese this past summer alone support that observation. Anecdotally, we could expound on why there are so many openings and so few qualified candidates.

First, there’s the question of expectations. Some leaders (pastors, business managers, whoever is responsible for writing the job description) depicted their opening as needing someone to plan and play the weekend Masses, manage the choir and cantors, and possibly handle funerals and weddings...for 12-15 hours per week. Pay commensurate with those expectations. Well, the truth is, those responsibilities take a lot more than 15 hours per week, and if a musician is to be able to commit all their time and energy to the church, the salary needs to be enough for them to be able to pay their bills and eat on a regular basis. 12-15 hours at whatever dollar amount per hour won’t sustain them.

Then there’s the question of perceived needs. I know of many clergy who advertise a need for a liturgical musician, and expect that the qualified candidate will have a degree in music performance. Sounds reasonable, right? Except when they hire the degreed performer who knows nothing about liturgy, they end up with lovely music that doesn’t support good liturgy. They got what they asked for, yet both the church and the musician end up feeling disappointed.

Add to the mix the fact that many of the esteemed institutions that used to offer concentrated formation in liturgy have rolled their programs into existing other curriculum, or discontinued the programs completely out of financial consideration. There are no longer enough students to support this type of specialized formation, leaving an even smaller pool of well-formed potential church musicians from which to hire.



So, what's a church to do? Budgetary constraints, immediate needs, and a lack of qualified candidates combine to make for a hiring decision that may be a great fit – or may be a “warm body” who isn't the right fit at all. The quality of worship suffers. Parishioners aren't as excited about coming to the church with lackluster celebrations, contributions wane, the budget is tighter, and you've entered a bad spiral.

On the flip side, we know many people who have gone to great lengths to secure loans to pay for college – some who graduate with six figures of debt. I will try to contain my opinions on this, but I do think there should be a “reasonable meter” when it comes to financing education. As in, if I take on this much debt to get a degree, do I have reasonable chance of securing a job that will enable me to pay off that debt within a moderate amount of time? I know of college students graduating with over \$100,000 of student loans, with very specific degrees in art or music. The number of job possibilities, and the potential salary of such jobs, makes me suspect they will be saddled with that debt for literally the rest of their lives. Between the lenders, educational institutions, and clear-headed thinking of the student and the parents, it seems to me that there should be some measure of reasonableness before one agrees to loan – or accept said loan – exorbitant amounts for a degree that may not prove fruitful. (Proud mama note... my husband and I have been blessed with four children who have managed to obtain college educations without incurring lasting debt, and I recognize that is definitely not the normative experience in today's day and age.)

These were the strands of thought that fed many a walk Bob and I took as the concept of this apprenticeship program took root. If the pool of talent is waning, then we need to consciously seek out potential candidates to add to the pool. If the education system is lacking in the specific formation that would help produce good liturgical musicians, then we need to be intentional about offering needed formation. Insert some profound story about a little red hen asking who would make the bread...

Here's the other part of the story: Bob is so committed, he is standing behind this financially. Coming out of retirement, he agreed to a compensation package where a portion of what he could have easily just taken home is becoming seed money for the program. We want candidates to be exposed to a variety of voices and training, so we want to be able to pay for books, workshops, webinars, perhaps a seminary course, and the like. With the right



intentions, a well-designed plan, and some good old fashioned hard work, we believe the Lord will provide the rest and make this fruitful.

I am, by nature, one who gets caught up in the details. In the past couple of weeks, I have had conversations with others who have reminded me of the importance of trust. One friend described her journey of running a business for 17 years, and then feeling so strongly called to ministry that she sold the business and has become a lay ecclesial minister in the church. She doesn't know exactly where this is headed but is attuned to the voice of God in her life and trusts He will lead the way. In another example, I am working with some colleagues on a retreat/formation institute for musicians. When I expressed feeling unsettled about the finances of the project, my friend reminded me to trust that God would provide. We don't always need to see the end to take the next best step.

So, it is with that kind of trust, prayer, and confidence in the next step that we proceed with this apprenticeship program.

Back to the bigger picture... having a mentor is not isolated to liturgical ministry. The most successful businesses across a broad range of industries rely on mentorship, both formal and informal. Entire social media platforms have been developed to facilitate such connections. And the idea of finding solutions to needs instead of just feeling defeated as life steamrolls by is not limited to one particular field. It would have been relatively easy for Bob to succumb to retirement (trust me, this was not an ideal solution) and lament that there are so many music openings.

Or we could embrace life coming full circle.