What Is Full-Time Worship Ministry?

JOHN BARNETT

"So, John, are you full-time?" asked yet another pastor over dinner. This question followed me across the United States, through Canada and even overseas when I began leading worship at conferences in 1988. While my songs enjoyed growing visibility and popularity, I found that practically everyone I met had the same question for me, "Are you full-time?" Full time in ministry, that is.

Well, to some of us worship leaders, that is like asking a housewife if she has a real job! This question bothered me because I felt that if I was not on the full-time staff of my church as a worship leader, my ministry and calling were somehow second rate. "Real" worship leading was accomplished by full-timers.

I'm not the only non-staff worship leader to feel this way, as I have discovered. The Lord led me to really think through why I like being a worship leader who isn't on the church staff. I want people like me to fulfill our callings not only as worship leaders, but as worshippers in every area of our lives.

Paying the Bills

I am an electrician, I enjoy it very much and find it rewarding. My full-time job also pays my bills. If I were to leave that job to go "full-time" at my church, there are a few things that would have to happen. First, I'd ask myself, 'How are they going to pay me?' Even if I were willing to join the staff, I'd wonder, 'Could I work for an amount that my church could afford to pay?'

My first and primary reason for not seeking full-time status at the church is that I do not want to become a financial burden. Most churches are small in size with small budgets. They cannot afford the luxury of employing all the people that they want.

Additionally, by saving money on me, the church is free to spend their money on other things, like programs or improvements. For example, my church is upgrading our sound system, improving our walls for better sound and building a youth area in our basement. I feel that I have helped that to happen by not burdening the church with my salary.

What's a Worship Leader to Do?

When I've been asked to consider a full-time position on the church staff, my response has been, "What would I do all day?" I wonder what I would do on Monday morning. As I've thought about it, I came up with this list: I could make song books, clean the stage, schedule special events and devote more time to prayer and Bible study.

But the problem, as I see it, is that eventually I would be looking to something else to do. It reminds me of the guy who retires and says, "All I want to do is go fishin'." So every day he gets up and goes fishing. But one day he gets up and he doesn't want to fish, so he has to find something else to do. His dream of fishing all the time was not what he thought it would be.

In the same way, I do not think my dream of being full-time would be all that I might imagine.

I want to clarify that if the church is large enough and can demonstrate the need for yet another full-time staff person, then I believe it is an honor to be able to devote one's working hours to developing and implementing worship in the church. There are those worship leaders who are also pastors in their gift-mix.

I Write the Songs

For some reason, some people believe that those who write worship songs live in a world balanced between incredible intimacy with God and worship leading for large groups of people. This cannot be farther from the truth. Songwriters do not need to be paid staff members in order to get their inspiration.

I believe song writing is a gift. Songs are written through experience. It is hard to write a song of desperation if you have never been desperate. It is impossible to write a song that is theologically balanced if you do not know the Bible. The list goes on.

My point is that I write worship songs out of the experiences of my life and the things that I learn in the Word of God. Some Monday mornings, I go to work with a desperate need to have the Lord be with me. Other times, there have been stolen moments at lunch when I spend some time with the Lord, and then I realize that I spent all morning gossiping or being a poor employee. These kinds of encounters with the Lord fuel my song writing.

There are other moments when I've been meditating on the Scripture and it develops into a melody with substance. On occasion, I have laid down my instrument to spend time with my family, or I've faced sin and embraced forgiveness. And still other times I've had to be willing to let my songs be heard by Him alone.

Song writing is like opening the door to our personal "junk closet." We open the door and all the "junk" in our lives starts to fall out: insecurity, pride, anger, unforgiveness, to name a few. These things hurt us for a time, but we also get to write songs about them. These songs may speak to others going through the same things.

The day to day experiences of my life drive me to write songs. By working an ordinary job, I have an acute understanding of what it is like to need God in a world that does not care for Him at all.

Some feel that having more time to devote to prayer and Bible study would make song writing easier. It might be. On the other hand, we all need to pray, to study the Word and to fellowship with God whether or not we are in the full-time ministry. Song writing requires gifting and calling which only God can produce.

I truly believe that God has gifted people to write worship songs. I also believe that He has "seeded" our lives with the experiences and revelation of the Word that we will need to write the songs He has ordained for us to write. I heard Carol Wimber say, "There are the songs that *we write* and there are the songs that *Jesus writes*." I know which ones I prefer.

Be a Team Player

So how does the church function without a staff worship leader? I like a team approach. In my church, I work closely with my pastor, the associate pastor and another person who administrates the jobs that have to do with worship. She puts together the schedule for the worship bands and makes the calls for any special meetings we have.

There are a few drawbacks. At times it has been impossible for all of us to get together. Some decisions have been made without my input. I've been tempted to let myself feel left out of the process. But I've learned not to look at it as a liability. It is an opportunity for me to find my security in God and His calling, not in a position.

The team idea of administrating worship in a church takes work. Most pastors lean one of two ways regarding worship. Either they feel they do not know anything about music, so they leave the musicians to themselves, or the pastor feels he has to control and delegate everything pertaining to worship in the church. This leaves the worship leader and team in a state of frustration, constantly under the pressure of control.

It has taken my pastor years to understand musicians. It has taken me years to understand pastors. He is not a musician; I am not a pastor. But together we are something more. We become one in a common

goal. We share the victories as well as the failures.

The Priesthood of All Believers

A number of years ago at a conference, a woman approached me to tell me that I should be on the full-time staff of our church because I was a Levite. As a Levite, I was to be a priest in the house of God and that my calling was to be devoted fully to ministering to the Lord in music…and on and on.

I wondered what to do. If this was a biblical mandate, then for me to fulfill my calling, I needed to make a change. Or did I? Was the church at fault because it had not put me on staff as the worship leader? I began to examine the Old Testament history of the priesthood, the life of David (who was not a Levite), and other wonderful examples of the power of praise and the place of music in the kingdom of God.

One day while reading the book of Hebrews, I found what I was looking for: the "priesthood of all believers." Hebrews chapters 7 through 10 talk about the priesthood of Jesus. Jesus is from the tribe of Judah, not Levi. We are in the priesthood that Jesus has established. We enter into the holy place through faith, by the blood of Jesus, the perfect sacrifice.

I asked myself, 'Has He not made us *all* priests?' We are "being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Where is the line drawn that says, "This is a full-time priest; this is a part-time priest?"

We are full-time worshippers and ministers. Our very lives are to be presented to God as living sacrifices. We do lead worship when we stand before the congregation. But we also lead worship when we are honest at work, love our wives and children, when we feed the poor, preach the gospel, play with our kids, and in everything else we do down to the most trivial aspects of life.

Let us work to let all we do demonstrate the "priesthood of the believer" and to bring glory to our God whether we get a church salary or not.

John has been the worship leader at the Mission Viejo Vineyard for the last nine years. He has written songs such as Unending Love, Holy and Anointed One, Throne of Grace, and Hail, Hail the Lamb of God. He and his wife, Marie, have three children and live in Mission Viejo, California.