

Worship Leading Essentials

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Table of Contents

- Chapter 1. Setting the Base*
- Chapter 2. Letting Go*
- Chapter 3. Teamwork*
- Chapter 4. Putting Together a Song List*
- Chapter 5. Spiritual Leadership*
- Chapter 6. Skill or Spiritual Maturity?*
- Chapter 7. Selecting Musicians*
- Chapter 8. Song Transitions*
- Chapter 9. Band Conflict*
- Chapter 10. Dealing with Criticism*
- Chapter 11. Setting Monitors*
- Chapter 12. Stage Presence*
- Chapter 13. The Art of Invisibility*
- Chapter 14. Leading Rehearsals*
- Chapter 15. Band or Rotating Musicians?*
- Chapter 16. Going from Band to Pool*
- Chapter 17. Limit the Gear*
- Chapter 18. Rest*
- Chapter 19. Life Long Learner*
- Chapter 20. It's Not About the Music*

Chapter 1 – Setting the Base

My great friend and worship leader, Shawn Wallace IMs me and asks this: “What are your top suggestions for an aspiring worship leader?” That started me thinking. In this series of articles I will share some of the things I have learned along the way, mostly by trial and error. Lots of trial, even more error. I have had the opportunity to lead worship for about 20 years and have made a fair share of discoveries. In this series, we will unearth some of those discoveries, and probably have some laughs along the way.

Life Journaling

Several years ago I was introduced to [Life Journaling](#). I had been struggling for years in my daily devotions. It was producing some pretty mediocre results and while I really wanted to learn more about God and sense his direction, I always seemed to come up short. Some friends of mine from [New Hope Christian Fellowship](#) started hammering me on Life Journaling. After some persuasion, I caved. It changed the landscape of my spiritual life.

Life Journaling is pretty simple. It is a system of daily Bible reading followed by writing some thoughts. I Journal each morning. Sometimes it is dry and tough to pull some application out, sometimes the heavens seem to open and I get some incredible insights for the things I am struggling with. By Life Journaling I am allowing the Spirit of God to speak through the scriptures and bend my life to be in tune with what God is speaking. For a worship leader, daily time with God is a non-negotiable.

More important than your vocals, your chops, or your leadership ability, is your spiritual base. Worship leaders lead worship. We don't lead music. You can fake it for awhile. You might even be a fantastic musician and can read a room like a book, but sooner or later you will burn out on worship. You will be frustrated and the people you are leading will be frustrated. You simply can't take people where you have not been.

So where are you when it comes to your spirituality and worship leading? Here is a good test. Listen to the things that you say before a set or a song, or listen to the prayers that you pray during a set. Are they words that are coming from your quiet time? Are they the same old tired things that have been overused and are simply not authentic? This becomes a checkpoint for me. I hear myself saying things like “We love you God. We praise you. You are good.” Not bad things but they are more borrowed than original. When my devotions are at their best, I am praying to God with new insights from my journaling. It is both refreshing and authentic.

I believe so much in Life Journaling and daily devotions that we ask all of our worship musicians at [exchange](#) to Life Journal. As a matter of fact, we encourage everyone at [exchange](#) to Life Journal. There is simply no substitute for connecting with the one we have given our life to. You may be the most talented worship leader on the block, but if are leading from a place of low connection to God, I am not interested in your worship leading. Neither is God. Worship leaders have a responsibility to lead out of an overflow.

Stand as an authentic worshipper of God, connecting daily to the word, letting the Holy Spirit shape your life like Christ. Put down the guitar and the aspirations of being the next Crowder or Tomlin and connect to the one that we orient our lives around. You may never be the same.

Chapter 2 – Letting Go

At last count, there were at least 25 things blasting through my mind as I led worship. Is my guitar in tune? How is the tempo? Is everyone participating? Is that guy picking his nose? Sounds like the keys missed a note. Are the vocals loud enough? What is the next song? I think I forgot the transition coming up The list never ends. Let your mind run away and you can fry yourself on the matrix of details, resulting in a less than adequate worship leading experience.

So the real question is: **How do you deal with all the details and actually worship while you are leading?**

1. Close your eyes. Sometimes I have to close my eyes just to shut the room out and focus my singing and playing toward God. My eyes can find way too many distractions, which gets my mind running (is that guy leaving or going to the bathroom). It allows me to hear and feel the music, concentrate on the words, focus my attention on God and it sets an example. People see that I am not focused on the music, but on God and they are visibly encouraged to do the same.
2. Open your eyes. It's a delicate balance. Part of being a worship leader is losing yourself in the worship. The flip side is not running so far ahead of people that you leave them in the dust. There have been times when I have not been paying attention and I miss the fact that there are people praying in groups around the room, or people standing, or crying. I occasionally grab a quick read of the room to make sure I am on track, then back to the focus of worship.
3. Define a successful worship gathering. I have come out of some worship gatherings and heard band members say "Man, that was terrible." I would wonder why they thought it was so bad. "Man, the tempo was too quick on the opening song, we blew then ending on the second song, the 4th song was sloppy and I was a bit out of tune." So then what is a successful worship gathering? According to my band-mates it was a gathering with good music. Not true. Music is a support to the worship experience, not an end in itself. We define a successful worship gathering by answering this question: Were people able to connect with Christ? Defining success allows us to worship. It puts it all in perspective. So, the kick drum is too loud in the monitors? Can I hear well enough to play and lead others? If so, it's not a big deal and I get back to worship.
4. Worship from the overflow. There have been times when I have known that I shouldn't be leading worship. My heart just was not in the right place. I had not spent daily time in devotions, and I was nearly playing songs.
5. Practice. The more familiar you are with your songs, the more relaxed you are. When playing the songs become second nature, It is just one less thing to worry about.
6. Relax. The truth of the matter is that you are not in control; God is. And he is bigger than anything that might happen. Do your absolute best and have fun. If you enjoy leading, tell your face.

Realize that this will all take time. The more you lead worship, the more comfortable you get. I'm a worrier by nature and most of what I have worried about happening during a worship set never came true. May you get so lost in worship that you naturally draw other along with you and God finds your worship so appealing that he can't help but show his pleasure, and you can't help but smile.

Chapter 3 – Teamwork

If you set your team up as being a one man show, it will eventually be a one man show! I have learned some hard and painful lessons on teamwork over the years. Tons of mistakes and tons of learning.

Currently we have a worship “pool” of musicians and vocalists. We pull from this pool to make our teams each week. Each week the band is made up of different musicians that have to come together as a team. Many have asked me if I like this approach better than having set bands that rotate. I love it. It functions well because our people serve as a team. **So, how do you establish teamwork with your worship team?**

1. Establish leadership. Flat out, there HAS to be a leader. I have been a musician in bands where there is no leader. It is uncomfortable. Band members need someone to take the lead, establish direction, and make decisions. It frees them up to do their role on the team. We tell all of our team members that we all throw creative ideas into the arrangements, etc, but someone has to be the one to make the final decision. That is the leader’s job. Strong, compassionate leadership is an essential in teamwork.
2. Establish expectations. When we audition potential team members, we lay it all out. We expect each team member to be [Life Journaling](#), we expect them to model their personal life after Christ, we expect them to be proficient at their instrument, to show up on time, and to be a team player. We try not to pretend that everyone knows the expectations. On occasion, I have had to have conversations with members of the team and gently say that some expectations are not being met and find out what is happening. Sometimes this goes well, other times, not so well. We use a huge amount of prayer, honesty, compassion, and love.
3. Establish the win. What does a successful worship gathering look like? This has to be answered early on. Because there are many different ways to define a win, the leader has to make it crystal clear.
4. Care for your team. Last week we had a friend (Floyd) come in and observe our rehearsals. Floyd is on a hiring team for our [EPIC](#) community. EPIC is hiring a new worship leader and Floyd wanted to get a feel for how we do things. He was asking some questions of Jeff (our vocal director) and me after rehearsal. Floyd asked if I felt like people sometimes didn’t respect me or my leadership, or if we all got along. That’s when it dawned on me. As I looked around at our team that night (they were packing up), I was struck with how good of friends I am with the team. I have been in most of their houses, I know their families and their lives. We share experiences outside of worship leading and live life together. You have to see your team as more than musicians filling a slot. They are people with hurts, disappointments, and great untapped dreams. It may be that the songs you play are less important than the people you play them with. Care for them.
5. Play. Bestselling book [FISH!](#) is a great resource which, among other things, challenges us to play and have fun with our teams. Great team leaders play with their teams. It doesn’t take much time for our team to start verbally slamming each other, throwing jabs back on forth - all in fun. As a worship leader, you have one of the most enjoyable roles on the planet. Relax and enjoy it!



Teamwork can not only make or break a worship gathering; it can make or break a worship leader. If your elementary report card continually said “doesn’t play well with others,” you better get a grip. Healthy teamwork is critical to worship leading.

Chapter 4 – Putting Together a Song List

One of the most rewarding and most difficult tasks of leading worship is putting together a song list. Do it well and it comes off seamless. Don't do the prep work and it becomes a train wreck. It takes some work, but with some simple planning, you can put together a solid worship set.

First a look at a typical [exchange](#) gathering.

We begin the gathering with an opening song. I would like to think this is a highly spiritual time where people are swept into a realization of the presence of God and that they are transformed from the distractions of the day to becoming keenly aware of what God is saying. Truth is (for us anyway) that it serves as a trigger for people to finish their conversations and coffee in the atrium and come into the sanctuary.

Following the opening song is a welcome, some announcements, prayer, and teaching. We follow up the teaching with a 30 minute worship set. During the set, people are active. They come to the front to take communion, give their offering, pray at the altars, pray with friends, or spend time at some of our designated worship spaces.

Now that you know where we are coming from, on with the nuts and bolts.

Putting the worship set together is like dumping all your worship songs in a funnel. The ones that make them to the bottom become your set. There are some factors which will shape your funnel and determine which songs get passed through. Here is what I do in selecting the songs:

1. **Pray.** I have to remind myself that I am leading worship, not songs. It is a serious position that shouldn't be taken lightly. If my last [Life Journal](#) entry was 3 weeks ago, I shouldn't go to step #2 until I get my grounding. If I throw up a quick prayer and hope for the best, I'm on shaky ground.
2. **Look at the master song list.** I have a list of all of my song titles, in no certain order (note to self: get a grip on this list and organize it).
3. **Take a look at the theme/direction of the gathering.** The theme could be anything from forgiveness to sex to serving. Every evening has a theme. I look at what we are trying to accomplish. This is deeper than the theme, this is the direction. Good teaching should answer these two questions: 1. What do you want them to know? 2. What do you want them to do? If I can answer these questions, I can get a feel for the direction of the music.
4. **From the master list, write down all the songs that fit the theme or direction.** I write down every song that fits. Sometimes the list is short, sometimes very long. Don't worry about tempo, key, or anything with this list. If it touches the theme/direction, I write it down.
5. **Make the final list.** After I have narrowed the big list to say 15-20 songs, now the real work begins. Sometimes this step takes me 10 minutes. Sometimes it takes me an hour. In this step I have to look at a ton of factors. My lists are typically 8 songs. Here is where I start to number 1-8. I look at the following funnel factors to get to the final list:
6. **Theme.** Are there songs in this list of 15-20 that have a stronger theme than others? Choose the ones with the closest ties to theme/direction.
7. **Band.** Who are my musicians for the gathering (we rotate different musicians)? Sometimes the band members determine what songs we can pull off.

8. **Tempo Flow.** Typically I try to start with some slower songs and build the set into intensity, sometimes into a frenzy at the end. Songs 1 and 2 are slower, 4 and 5 build a bit, 6 even more aggressive, and 7 and 8 are usually flat out rockin'. I favor lists that flow like a loose medley of songs.
9. **Key Flow.** Making a change from the key of D to the key of Bb can be like taking a sharp left when your passengers think you are turning right. Key changes between songs are necessary, but I try to keep them smooth. When I do change keys, I try to make it flow from one to the next.
10. **Rehearsal.** Sometimes what looked good on paper in my office in step 4 sounds like trash in rehearsal. We adjust. Many times I will switch the order of songs or throw a song out after rehearsal.

In short, it's about taking a big list and making it smaller, keeping in mind all the parts that make up the funnel.

Other stuff:

I typically choose 2-3 songs as extras. Sometimes the night goes a different direction than I anticipated. I may go to these songs as a backup. Sometimes the Spirit moves differently in the middle of a gathering than it did in the middle of your office. Don't let this throw you, just adapt and go with it.

Follow these steps and you will have a flawless worship set. Nice wish. Every week I find things that I should have done different. A look at my [weekly evaluations](#) will prove that. Live and learn. Don't fear making mistakes. Fear making mistakes and not learning from them.

Stop in next time when we will explore being the spiritual leader of your worship musicians. Until then, may your next worship set serve to point people to the Creator.

Chapter 5 – Spiritual Leadership

As a worship leader, you have a big responsibility. Beyond the song prep, scheduling, rehearsing, creating, and executing, your primary role is to be a spiritual leader. It may be the most important thing you do. If you can spiritually influence your musicians, you can influence others through them. **How can you be a solid spiritual leader?**

1. **Lead yourself.** You have to take responsibility for yourself. Your daily devotions are not optional. I was once sitting in on a college class taught by one of my long- distance mentors, [Dr Wayne Cordeiro](#). There was a quiz that morning. Lucky me, I was exempt because I was just dropping in. First question: The number of times you did your daily devotions (life journaling) in the past seven days. As they were grading their tests (I think they traded and graded the tests), a young lady asked “What if we had 4 or 5 for the number of days we did devotions?” Cordeiro responded, “Mark it wrong if it is anything but seven. You are in leadership. Daily devotions are not a choice.”
2. **Recharge.** With the pace that most worship leaders try to maintain, it is essential that you get away and recharge. You need to build in time to recharge spiritually and personally. Give yourself permission to take a day (yes, a whole day) to be quiet. Go hike in the woods or swing in a hammock. The staff at [Maryland Community Church](#) (where I pastor) is supposed to take one sabbatical day a month to recharge. I stink at this.
3. **Pastor your team.** You spend a large amount of time playing music with your team. If you are not getting involved in their lives, you are not leading them. Like we have said before, the people you lead with may be more important than the songs themselves. Wade into the lives of these people. Be their friends. If they are hard to be friends with, suck it up and do it anyway. You are probably not the easiest person to get along with either.
4. **Live what you believe.** Listen, if you are just in a worship leader position because you love music and the rush of being on stage, do us a favor and quit. At least for a little while. If you don’t, it won’t take long until you are found out. You will build a team of creative musicians who love to play but are not on mission with Christ. You may get an A+ as the leader of a great band, but fail as a spiritual leader.

Pastoring your team comes with the territory. The better you care for your team, the better followers of Christ they will be. They will bring to the platform a level of spirituality in direct proportion to the level of your spiritual leadership. Lead well my friends.

Chapter 6 – Skill or Spiritual Maturity?

“I get excited when I some of our worship team start becoming Christians.” What? My friend Greg Telle and I were standing in the middle of a [Vineyard Community Church](#) in Cincinnati, Ohio. The comment came from the worship pastor. I remember looking at him and saying “Huh?” He went on to say that they used musicians from all walks of life. Many of them were in other bands, touring the local scene. He did make the comment that he rarely had a problem with musicians who normally played the bars. They wouldn’t complain about monitors and other things, they were just happy to play. They were in a good atmosphere and some were becoming followers of Christ. No doubt they were highly skilled. Skill outranks spirituality.

On the other side of the coin is [Matt Redman](#). In a small gathering with Matt, he said that you should always use totally devoted Christians. He contended that worship is sacred and should be led by those who have given their life to Christ. Spirituality outranks skill.

So which is it? Is it a requirement that your worship team be followers of Jesus? Does it matter? Do you base your requirements on spiritual maturity or skill?

This question has to be wrestled with. What do you think?

We have had to wrestle with this over the years. I am pretty happy where we have landed.

At [exchange](#), we have a group of musicians (about 25) which we call the “musician’s pool.” Each week we pick from the pool and make a band. Most of the people we use are people who have committed their life to Christ and are part of exchange. In our audition process, we explain that when you are on stage, people look at you and assume that you are sold out to the cause of Christ. Like it or not, that is the way it is.

Do we use people who are not followers of Christ? Yes. I know that sounds hypocritical, but let me explain. There are occasions when we invite people to come and be part of the band for a gathering or two. The only reason they initially come is to play. If we can get them hooked to the kingdom by an invitation to play occasionally, I can totally justify that. We are honest and up front with people on this. If, after a while, they drop out of exchange, or only show up when they play, we have another conversation. As a matter of fact, I got a call from a guy who had not played or been to exchange for a long time. “Let me know if you need me to play, I would love to play.” I told him I would love for him to play but first step was to get back and get settled in exchange. He has yet to come back.



I do think that we have a responsibility to lead with integrity. I also believe that Christ is passionate about those who have yet to know him. If that means that we risk putting up someone who is less that sold out in hopes that they come to know Christ, I’ll take the risk.

Chapter 7 – Selecting Musicians

As a follow up to the last article, let's explore the selection process of musicians we use at [exchange](#). Instead of using set bands, we have around 25 musicians and vocalists that we call the “musician’s pool.” Each week we draw from this pool and create a new band. The pool needs filled.

Somewhere along the way you have to settle on a process for selecting musicians. Get it lined out or when someone asks you if they can play in the band you will be stuck with the uncomfortable “Um, well, I, uh . . . hmmm.” So, **how do you screen and select musicians for the worship team?** Here is what we do:

1. **Have people e-mail requesting an audition packet.** When people walk up and inquire about being in the band, I explain the process and have them e-mail me requesting an audition/interview packet. It's the first step in a few hoops that we intentionally set up. Setting up a few simple obstacles weeds out those who are not serious. If you can't take a few steps and be patient with the process, you won't fit well in the musician's pool.
2. **Send an audition packet.** Once people contact me, I send them a packet that contains a cover letter as well as an audition form. Once they fill out and return the form, we move on to step three. If you would like a sample form and cover letter, just drop me an e-mail.
3. **Schedule the audition.** Once the paperwork is turned in, I schedule the interview. Typically this is on a Sunday afternoon, prior to band rehearsal.
4. **Audition.** This is the most important part of the process. I sit down with our vocal leader (Jeff) and together we conduct the audition. It is an informal deal, but I am looking for two things: to get to know them (1) spiritually and (2) musically. We talk openly about their relationship with Christ, their spiritual journey, musical experience, and life experience. It is also a time that we answer any questions that they have. Jeff also explains the process and workings of the musician's pool and scheduling.
5. **The verdict.**
6. **If no,** we tell them they have little skill and should stick to playing at home or singing in the shower. We then scold them for wasting our time. If we make them cry, it's a bonus. Actually we rarely say “no,” but we do say “not yet.” It is a tough arena to play with a band and some people are not ready. If they are not ready spiritually, we encourage them to be part of the exchange community for a bit longer and continue their journey with Christ. If they are not ready musically, we encourage them to get some lessons, improve their skills and come back for another audition when they feel they are ready.
7. **If yes,** we invite the person to be part of a worship band for a worship gathering. When we began this process, we would give them a yes and they would be part of the pool. Experience has taught us that a person may do well in an audition but not be at the level needed to play with a band. The sure-fire way to find that out is to put them with a band for a night of worship leading. Put them in the fire and see how they do. After their first time with the band, we again talk and decide if the person will become part of the pool on a regular basis.

With everyone we interview, we explain that leading worship is a spiritual and musical issue. We lay out the expectations. We expect each team member to be a follower of Jesus, to Life Journal every day, practice their instrument, be honest, and to be a team player.

I feel fortunate that in several years of working with a musician's pool, we have not had any significant issues. The success may be in part to this process, but I would guess it is that this whole thing is surrounded by prayer, honesty, and the grace of God.

Chapter 8 – Transitions Between Songs

”What you do between the songs is as important as the songs themselves.”

This advice was given to me about 10 years ago from an influential worship leader. It may be a bit overstated, but often times worship leaders give little thought to the transitions. That is, until the transitions come.

For some reason, I am hyper-sensitive to transitions. Maybe that is because when a transition goes bad, I feel yanked out my prayer and worship. All of a sudden, the drastic change calls attention to itself and the worship flow takes a jolt.

I have seen it done poorly and done it poorly myself. It’s a bad feeling to come to the end of a song and realize the coming transition is going to taste like a swig of lemonade after a bowl of ice cream. Here are some ideas on a few things to do between songs.

1. **Pray.** Sometimes I will pray along the lines of where I sense God has been taking us. For example, say the teaching has been on forgiveness, we are ending the hymn “Wonderful Cross” and transitioning into “Oh Lead Me” (by Delirious). I may say something like “God, thanks for the reminder tonight of our forgiveness. Thank you for the beautiful and disturbing cross. God, we ask you to forgive us and again say that we choose to follow you, the forgiving one.” As I prayed this, I might be playing the transition musically. I do not script my prayers. I prefer them to come in the moment. Although I use them as a transition, I speak them from the heart. If the only reason I pray is to transition, I just shut my mouth. It can get dangerous if you use prayer for what it is not intended for. This is a tricky one.
2. **Read Scripture.** Scripture is a great way to transition. If I am going from the key of D to Bb, I may end the song and have a band member read scripture. Again, the scripture would fit the flow and the theme.
3. **Drum transition.** Once we are in a more aggressive part of our worship set, we may put a big ending on a song. As the chord dies out, the drummer would start the beat of the next song. The band comes in after the drummer lays down a couple of measures. In another option, the drummer clicks a count and the entire band comes in. Do this at the right place in the set and it works well. Do it at the wrong time and you will want to crawl into a hole.
4. **Call for silence.** There are times when I sense that we need some quiet time. I simply say “let’s be quiet for a moment.” When I feel it is appropriate, I will begin the next song, or cue the musician who is to start it.
5. **Don’t stop.** There are a few song combinations that will flow into each other almost seamlessly. An example would be “Facedown” and “O Sacred King,” both by Matt Redman. While “Facedown” starts in Em, it ends with a G and C vamp- the same as the into of “O Sacred King.”
6. **One instrument transition.** There are times when I tell the band to end the song and I will transition. I take the key and rhythm from the song we ended and slowly change it to the intro of the next song. Sometimes our keyboard player will do this as well.

I always try to make the entire set flow as smooth as possible. The better I have done at planning the worship set, the easier the transitions. Check out Chapter 4 of this eBook for more details on getting the set to flow.

Chapter 9 – Band Conflict

“Worship Wars.” Most of the time worship wars are discussed, they are in the context of traditional music people warring against the peeps who prefer a more culturally relevant form of music. They lob grenades back and forth until one finally gives up.

Like it or not, conflict also makes its way into the worship team. It crops up announced and can take us by surprise. **So, how do we deal with band conflict?**

1. **Nip it. Nip it the Bud.** Like Barney Fife used to say, “Nip it. Nip it in the bud.” Conflict must be dealt with right away. I have hoped that conflict would go away and realized that I was living in a dream world. Conflict’s natural course is to destroy. Take immediate action.
2. **Talk it out.** If the conflict is with two other team members, get them together and talk it out. You will need to act as a third party; a counselor of sorts. If the conflict is with you, recruit a third party to mediate.
3. **Don’t call out in public what you can discuss in private.** The middle of band rehearsal is the wrong time to say “Dave, seems like you and Chris are not getting along. Let’s talk about it.”
4. **Refer to the expectations.** Most conflict comes from frustration. Frustration comes from unmet expectations. If you have not set the expectations for the team, you may be in trouble. Try to keep your expectations clear when you bring people on the team and keep them in front of everyone by living them out (not by making them read them on a list only). Many times your conflict will find its way to unmet expectations. One you get to the expectations, you have something to work with and can gently correct people back to the unity.
5. **Foster an environment of honesty.** When people are free to express themselves, they will not keep their concerns locked up inside of them. Lock them up long enough and they come busting out looking ugly.

How important is all of this? Your response to conflict can make or break your team. Conflict can bring some healthy results. I’m not sure I would try to squelch conflict, but it needs to be correctly handled.

Conflict will come. When it does, you can say “We have been expecting you. We didn’t know when you were coming, or exactly how, but we knew you were coming.”

“How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!” - Psalm 133:1 (NIV)

Chapter 10 – Dealing With Criticism

The more you are in front of people, the more criticism you get. It comes with the territory. If you can't deal with it properly, it can eat you alive. Criticism will come. Count on it.

When asked what it was like to be famous, [Chris Tomlin](#) said that it used to be nobody offered him any advice or criticism. The more that he becomes known, the more people criticize him. Criticism has happened to you as well. You may not know it, but they talk about you when you are not listening. Everyone is a critic. Paranoid yet? Relax, it's all part of the job. So, **how do you deal with criticism?**

1. **Deal with your critic face-to-face.** The more you let it fester, the more both sides get things blown out of proportion. Get pro-active and offer to talk to your critic one-on-one and discuss the issues. Avoid talking to other people about the issue until you have talked with the critic.
2. **Find the truth in the criticism.** Someone once said that “there is truth in all criticism.” Find the truth and deal with it. Sometime my critics have been painfully correct. Sometimes the truth has been that they are a whack-job looking for vengeance on someone. In that case, I look at them and say, “You’re an angry elf.”
3. **Know why you do what you do.** A woman visited our gathering at exchange one Sunday and told me she thought the music was too loud. She was from a church out of town. “This music would never work in my church,” she said. I politely told her that I didn’t doubt it and that I was sure her church was good. “This gathering,” I said, “is not designed for people like you.” We know why we do what we do. We don’t apologize for that.
4. **Apologize.** You will not always be right. There are times I have to say, “You know what? You are right. God is convicting me through you and I appreciate you talking with me about this. I am sorry” Be confident, but don’t be a jerk. You will not always be right.
5. **Realize you can’t make everyone happy.** Been there. Done that. Doesn’t work. Your job is to lead in the way that is directed by God, under the authority of your Senior Pastor. Some people are chronic critics and are on the hunt for someone to shoot. Since you are visible, they put a laser on your head and come at you fully loaded.
6. **Know that the criticism voiced is not always the issue.** Many times people are all worked up over something that they do not want to reveal. Instead they find something easy to complain about and lash out. I once had a conversation where someone was being critical with me. I stopped the person and just said, “This isn’t the real issue is it? What is this really about?” The whole tide of the conversation turned to the real issue. The result was something much more productive. In another conversation with a friend and team member, in the midst of ranting criticism, I looked at this team-mate and said, “How is your Life Journaling?” He stopped and his face fell. Do your best to get to the real issue.
7. **Don’t take it personal.** OK, easier said than done. As artists who create and risk, when people complain it is hard to not take it personal. You have to realize that they are not critiquing you, but some of your actions. Huge difference.
8. **Use criticism as a way to gauge the guardrails.** I sometimes listen to criticism to find the way in this new territory. An example. For a season in the early life of exchange, my playlist was more intimate and less rock-and-roll. I had several people say that they really enjoyed the more aggressive stuff. I fought it for a bit and then after some guiding from God realized that they were honestly expressing that they connected to God through the louder and more aggressive experience. If I had not listened to the critics, I would have missed part of the road we were to travel.

Don't be surprised when criticism comes. We know it is coming. We just don't know exactly when. I do not welcome criticism, but I learn from it. Criticism has refined me. It makes me a better leader.

Chapter 11 – Setting Monitors

“My mix was awful.” I have heard that statement more times than I would care to admit. There is something about the monitor mix that has the ability to hinder a worship set or make it excel. It should not, but it does. We have given some attention to our monitor mixes and have a system down pretty well. We try to make the process simple and quick.

First some preliminaries and then our practical “how-to.”

Prelim:

You need to determine the following:

1. Number of monitor mixes you will use.
2. Who will share mixes.
3. Where monitors are run (front of house position, or from stage).

How to set a monitor mix:

1. Make sure the monitor (or FOH) tech has a signal from each instrument and knows where each mix is. Once he gives the thumbs up, we are ready to roll.
2. I turn and face the band and make sure everyone can see me and hear my vocals in their mix. I am the only one that communicates with the monitor tech. The band members tell me what they need and I tell the tech. Simple.
3. The drummer lay down a groove. I look at the drummer. He tells me what he needs; I tell the tech. When he is satisfied, I move on to the bass player and ask him what he needs with drums. When he is satisfied, I move on to the next band member until they are all satisfied with the drums. We then move to the next instrument, acoustic guitar, and start the process over, each band member telling me what they need from the acoustic guitar. I usually play 2 measures of G, and 2 measures of C and repeat. The band slowly builds a song as they come in, one at a time. We call it the “monitor song.” Yes, we are incredibly creative sometimes. This is our normal order of instruments playing (each building on the other): drums, acoustic guitar, bass, electric guitar, keys, auxiliary percussion, and lead vocals (usually just a “la ... la...”). We keep most of the background vocals out of the instrumentalist’s mix, just to make it a cleaner mix.
4. Once everyone is set and the whole band is playing the Monitor Song (copyright 2001), I ask if anyone needs anything different. If so, they tell me and we make adjustments.
5. After we rehearse the first song, I again ask if anyone needs any adjustments. Typically, little adjustments are made after this point, and we are free to concentrate on arrangements, etc

When things are clicking technically, this process takes us about 5-7 minutes.

Sometimes I wonder if we have become much too spoiled with our technology. If we have a bad monitor mix, it is easy to become frustrated. It is interesting that the Beatles and many other bands of the 60’s played (and even recorded live) without stage monitors. They had yet to be developed. Maybe we should take monitors away from the band one Sunday. That would be interesting!

Chapter 12 – Stage Presence

Stage presence is critical to worship leading. Like it or not, the people you lead will be looking at you. It's just the way it works, you are leading them, they are following you. What will you be telling them through your actions? Here are some things I have "heard" people say through their stage presence:

"Check out my new flashy guitar."

"I'm in awe of God."

"I should be in awe of God right now, but I'm not so I am going to fake it."

"I'm so scared to be here I think I just wet my pants."

"Oh, are you there, sorry, I was lost in worship."

"I don't really care if I am here or not."

"Pay attention kids, I'm rippin' a killer solo here (thank you, thank you very much)."

"This song is just part of my life of following Christ."

"I am very, very, cool."

"Once again I am astounded by the extent of my sin and the depth of my forgiveness."

Chicago. [Steph](#) (my wonderful wife) and I were in a dirty High School auditorium in a worship gathering with one of my favorite worship leaders, [Matt Redman](#). In that one experience I saw stage presence done wrong, and done right.

Right: Redman is not flashy, but the guy is solid as a rock with stage presence. He has an ability to make you feel like you are in a living room with him leading on guitar. He steps up to the mic and starts singing. He wasn't jumping around or shouting instructions. He was singing his heart to God and inviting us to join in. He was aware that we were there, but he wasn't playing for us, but with us.

Wrong: In Redman's band that night was a young lady on BGV's. She had a killer voice. Amazing. Her stage presence, though, was over the top. I totally think her worship expression was legit, but it was also distracting. She was jerking around in some kind of dance, working it hard. I am all about undignified worship, but when it starts drawing attention to ourselves and not God, I think we are on shaky ground.

Here are some ideas for stage presence. I think we need to convey the following:

1. **Presence.** When you are leading, there is probably no other place you would rather be at that moment. I tell our teams "If you enjoy worship leading, tell your face." Smile.
2. **Calm Confidence.** Your nervousness will make them nervous. Know your instrument well and know the songs well.

3. **Worship.** Do you believe the songs you are singing? It's one thing to sing "Mission's Flame" and think that it is a groovy little tune. It is quite another to think of it and think of friends who don't know Christ. "Find Me in the River" takes on a new dimension in the context of getting beat up because of your allegiance to Christ. These are not just songs; they are anthems of our lifestyle.
4. **Authenticity.** Be who you are - and make sure who you are is a lover of Jesus.
5. **Invisibility.** More on this in our next article.

Chapter 13 – The Art of Invisibility

He must increase, but I must decrease. - John 3:30 (NASB)

“Part of your job is to be invisible.” I tell that to our worship teams from time to time. Our role as worship leaders and band members is to make God more visible and ourselves less.

How is it that we can be an invisible worship leader? Hmm. Let’s have some fun. **Here are my top 10 ways to be a VISIBLE worship leader:**

1. **Use many solos.** I have to watch this. I am a sucker for electric solos. I was watching Clapton last night just ripping it up (like always). I could listen to a guitar solo for a looooooong time. I could pray and worship to it. Most cannot. When we rip a solo in a song on into or ending, I am very careful. If it calls too much attention to the man with the axe, it calls attention away from God.
2. **Frown.** People will look at you. You are on stage. You are facing them. You are holding an instrument. It makes noise. When people look at you leading worship (which is natural) a smile can move the attention from you and to the object of your smile. If you’re happy and you know it, tell your face.
3. **When you are not playing, stick your hands in your pockets and don’t move.** Just last Sunday I saw Michael, our electric player for the evening, with hands stretched wide, eyes closed and looking up. He was visibly invisible.
4. **Give instructions before each song.** Sometimes I hear leaders say “This song is about blah, blah, blah and it really means a lot because.” I find myself wanting to stand up and scream “Shut up! Shut! Up! Lead us in worship.” But then I would become visible, and embarrassed.
5. **Act bored.** If you don’t enjoy what you are doing, it will show. The best worship leaders convey that the only place they want to be at that moment is where they are. Be present.
6. **Play poorly.** If it all falls apart and is second rate, you will become visible in a hurry. Play skillfully or not at all.
7. **Shake your money maker.** Too much movement on stage and people will be drawn to your moves. I have to watch this one. I can get pretty charged up and I don’t mean to brag but I have been known to cut a little rug. Yea, like Napoleon Dynamite, I got skills. Note: if you know me, you know this is so untrue.
8. **Be tied to your music.** I stink at this. The more I am tied to my music, the more I have to direct my attention and energy there.
9. **Dress like a rock star.** I’m all cool with looking your best, but let’s be modest. If your clothes get more attention than your God, we gots issues. I will quote one of our drummers, Chris Austin, when I say “Ladies, don’t cause a brotha to stumble.”
10. **Give too many instructions.** A worship leader needs to be a gentle leader. I have been in sessions where leaders say things like “Everybody raise your hands.” “Everybody dance around.” “Lift your eyes up to the heavens.” “Stand up, sit down, turn around, praise my Lord.” There is a place for direction but too much and it is a giant Simon Says session where everyone is looking at you for the next command.

Simon says “drop in for the next article as we explore another worship leading essential.” Keep reading. You are out. I didn’t say “Simon says.” Geeze.

Chapter 14 – Leading Rehearsals

It's no secret that there is a ton of work before the big dance. Rehearsals are a given. I figure you might as well make them as much fun as possible. Here are some tips for making rehearsals more fun and less stress.

1. **Know your material.** I have been busted a couple of times and just had to say “Sorry guys, I have not spent time with this song, so I can't lead you very well.”
2. **Let everyone contribute ideas.** We have a rule with our musicians: Everyone gets to offer suggestions in arrangements, etc, but I (or the worship leader for the evening) gets the final call. Somebody has to take the lead.
3. **Let them run.** A 10 second pause and the drummer starts a groove, then the guitar player, followed by the bass. You were looking for your capo and they take off on Sweet Home Alabama or the latest Britney Spears hit (does she have a hit??). Let it run for a bit before you reign it back in. You might find some creative ideas there.
4. **Listen to the actions of your band.** If your bass player is normally energetic and comes in looking beat up, find out what is up. You are not just a worship leader; you have the role of Pastoring these people. Note: I wouldn't bring this up in front of the band. “Hey, Chad, you look like you just got fired. What's up?” Trust me on this one.
5. **Don't be afraid to say what you do and don't want.** I often say things like “We are falling apart in the chorus. Let's put the bass on quarter notes and not so much rhythm from the electric. Also, let's find a pad instead of a piano sound.” Our musicians know up front (we intentionally tell new musicians) that I am not criticizing them, I am just saying that they are playing like an incompetent first-grader. Kidding of course. They know we are looking for the right arrangements in order to be invisible. Separate the person from the playing.
6. **Smile and have fun.** Don't take the rehearsal crazy serious. You will stress the band out. I used to freak when rehearsals were bad. By the time we get to Sunday, everyone does their homework and it comes together.

I expect some train wrecks along the way. We are all human and things fall apart. It just comes with the territory. Above all, I try to encourage the band individually and have a good time. Sometimes I just shake my head that I actually get paid to play music. Enjoy the ride!

Chapter 15 – Band or Rotating Musicians?

Last week a worship leader emailed me and asked for some advice. His church is about 500 people. They have been using the same worship band for ten years. He is wanting to go to a pool of musician’s that rotate each week. He asked me if it was the right thing.

Is it the right thing? Absolutely. Some churches have limited musicians and cannot form more than one band. In that case, you work with what you have. However, if you have multiple musicians, I would make the switch to use many musicians. At [exchange](#) we have a group of about 25 musicians and vocalists. We call them the “musician’s pool.” Each week we pull from that pool to create a totally new band. We do not have set bands (band A, B, or C); we create a new band each week. Early in the ministry of exchange, we had a set house band. True, there are several advantages to using the same musicians each week. **In my opinion, using multiple musicians is much healthier.** Why?

1. **It allows people to experience the gathering from both sides of the stage.** If your only experience during a worship gathering (service) is leading worship, it is easy to become one dimensional. We can minister more effectively when we have the perspective and experience of worshipping with others as well as leading.
2. **Playing in the worship band is seen as a privilege, not a right.** Once a band is established, it is easy to become territorial. “I am the guitar player at this church.” Everyone else is locked out of this ministry. It is unhealthy on both sides.
3. **Burnout is less.** Let’s face it; you can’t play in a band every week without it eating on you. Among other things, you will likely suffer spiritually. I have seen it several times. Musicians play every week hoping that nobody finds out that we are spiritually bankrupt. Eventually something gives. Sometimes it gets nasty.
4. **Creativity is higher.** When there is time away from the weekly schedule of rehearsals and Sundays, there is more room for creativity. Some of my best creative ideas have been when I am on a break from weekly leading.
5. **More people are able to use their giftings.** Like I said, we had a house band in the early days. They were a group of exceptional musicians and we made some great memories. The downside was that we locked some people out of using their giftings. There were several musicians that could have used their abilities on the worship team, but we simply didn’t have a slot for them.

I have been on both sides of the fence on this whole issue. There are positives and negatives for each side, but I can tell you one thing: unless it was a small church with limited resources, I would always opt to use a pool of musicians.

Chapter 16 – Going from Band to Pool

So you feel the need to move from having a set band to using a pool of musicians. One little problem: you need the support of the current band. Get it, and you will be golden. Don't, and life will be miserable for a season.

In our congregation, we made this move twice (in different worship gatherings). Each time it was pretty ugly and we lost people. After a couple failed attempts, I have learned a few things. **Here is what I would do to move from a band to a pool of musicians:**

1. **Pray.** This is a spiritual deal and you need to make sure that the timing is right. You also need to make sure that you are sensitive to the people and that God is directing this decision.
2. **Realize the increase workload.** If all this happens, your workload will increase. When I played with the same musicians, it got to the place that we could put things together incredibly fast. With multiple musicians you will now add to your workload things like auditioning musicians, scheduling musicians each week, getting new members acclimated to the band and music, as well as taking more time at rehearsals.
3. **Discuss this with appropriate church leadership.**
4. **Talk one-on-one with each band member and get their thoughts.** “Here is what I am feeling like God might be asking us to do. What do you think?” I would ask each member to pray about it and see if they hear anything from God. It is at this point that you will find how well you have led these people spiritually. If they never pray or have a shallow relationship with Christ, they won't offer much besides their thoughts. That's why setting the base is crucial.
5. **Wait.** You will have already made up your mind. You are ready to move. You have identified potential musicians for the pool. You are ready to pull the trigger. Resist the temptation to run ahead. Wait. Your people need time to process all of this. Don't run ahead of them just yet.
6. **Pull the trigger slowly.** I would suggest working in new musicians slowly. This will maintain the current sound and experience and help get the new musicians acclimated to how things work. If you need to make a huge and fast overhaul of the way things are done, I would suggest you make a sweeping change and work with mostly new musicians. This may need to be done to reset priorities and leadership. Just realize what you are doing and go in with your eyes open.

This can be a hard process. Make sure that you are confident of the switch and do your best to maintain relationships while having a strong resolve. It is not an easy transition, but with some time and attention, it can be done well. Above all, continue to guard your quiet time as you seek out the movement of God in this and all of life.

Chapter 17 – Limit the Gear

OK, don't get me wrong here. I am as much a fan of gear as the next person. I get all crazy when I walk into a store and smell a wall of high-end acoustic guitars. I could spend hours playing with the latest gadgets and such. I would love to have a collection of guitars, both rare and everyday. Throw in a home studio decked out with Pro-Tools and I am set. The truth of the matter is that too much gear IS a bad thing. Stay with me here.

I usually meet two kinds of musicians.

1. **The guy who can play like Clapton and Matthews.** Unless this guy is on tours or a serious studio musician, he probably owns a few guitars and a few pieces of gear. He can make a \$200 Yamaha acoustic sound like a presentation series Taylor. All talent, limited gear.
2. **Guy number two has way too much gear and way too little talent.** You have met this guy. He has the latest and greatest. More guitars than your local Mom and Pop music store. Each one is high-end. The problem is that Mr. Guitar Man has spent most of his time figuring out how to max another credit card rather than spend the time on practicing his chops. We have all been this guy at one time or another. We fall into a trap of thinking that if we just had a little better rig, we would sound incredibly better. It's a fantasy.

Each new piece of gear comes with two prices - the sticker price (in dollars) and what we will call the FT price. The Focus and Time price. The FT price is whatever the gear will cost you IN ADDITION to the cash. Consider adding the following to the cash:

1. **Focus.** Each new piece you add will force you to focus on it. Small pieces will usually take a smaller focus. Let's say you get a \$4500 guitar. It's now a whole new ball game. During a worship set you worry about getting it scratched. Someone wants to play it and you cringe. A little smudge and you get a tear in your eye. It becomes a focus of discussion. This can be dangerous. I would rather have people talking about kingdom movement and life change than the new tool. It's not about guitars and gear. The focus has to be on the mission of Christ. Anything else and you are in some dangerous territory.
2. **Time.** The more you have, the more you have to manage. The more you have to manage, the more time it will take. Change strings, fix a problem, transport this, polish that. The clock ticks. Last time I looked, I did not have an overabundance of time.

I'm not saying that we shouldn't add to our gear. I am all about experimenting with new and creative things. I think it is vital to the craft of music to do so. We just need to be careful. I have seen too many people be distracted by the means and not the end.

So, lest you call me a hypocrite, let me give you my gear rundown. Back in the day when I was a gear-head, I had a Gibson 335 and 2 new Taylors, foot-pedals, wireless rack-mounted system, and other goodies. That came somewhere after the notion that I had to have a keyboard, sequencer, and 4-track. Later, I came to the place where I dropped my gear down to only two guitars; a Taylor 514CE and 710KCE. I used the 514 as a backup in case I broke a string. After awhile I realized that I barely touched the guitar. It seemed a waste of money to have a \$2000 guitar as a back-up. My wireless unit became outdated and I went back to the old fashioned 1/4" cord.

So what do I use today?

I have some fun recreational instruments like a beater Yamaha that is barely campfire worthy, and a ukulele I purchased last year in Hawaii.

As far as stage gear, I use a single guitar ([Taylor 710KCE](#)), a 1/4' cable, and a set of [Ultimate Ears](#). I always request or have a backup cheap-o guitar just in case I break a string or my main guitar takes a dive. I may eventually get a decent backup guitar, but it will be reasonable. With this rig (and some misc items for the gig bag) I lead worship at [exchange](#) almost every week and do limited touring.

The truth of the matter is that the gear is here to serve us, not the other way around.

For more great thoughts on limiting your gear, no matter what your profession, check out what High McLeod of [Change This](#) has to say about [How to Be Creative](#) (step 10, page 18).

Chapter 18 - Rest

For the past few years I have trained for the [Indianapolis Mini Marathon](#) (13.1 miles). The training starts in January and goes up to race day; early May. Each week I am on a schedule of running and cross training. An interesting thing is also included in the regiment: rest. My wife comes home and I'm lying on the couch, catching up on some TV time and resting. The most strenuous activity at the time is pushing the remote buttons.

“What are you doing?” She asks.

“Pretty obvious, isn't it? I'm training for a half-marathon.”

As a worship leader (or a breathing human being), you need rest. It must be part of your routine. I have a tendency to run hard and not rest like I should. **Here is what I find happens when I don't take time to rest:**

1. **Criticism is more painful.** When the criticism comes, it stings harder when we are tired. We don't have the mental energy to push through the conflict so our first response is to fold.
2. **Focus is off.** When we are tired, it is difficult to maintain focus. Our game suffers.
3. **Irritability.** Enough said.
4. **Prone to sickness.** Run without enough sleep and your body's immune system weakens. Think you don't have time to rest? You will think different when you are sick next week.
5. **Creativity is lowered.** When the brain moves slower, there is not the synaptic firing that we need to keep pushing the creative boundaries.
6. **Spiritual defenses are down.** We are more prone to temptation when we are tired. We don't have the energy to follow through. This can be incredibly dangerous.
7. **Life is not enjoyed.** Ever heard anyone say that they are exhausted but totally loving life? Doubtful.

Rest for you may mean more sleep. It may mean more playing. It may mean having some time that is just your own. Figure out what it is and schedule it. Guard it and do it.

One final suggestion: Sleep in the night before. Some studies suggest that we get better quality sleep before midnight. Some also suggest that every hour of sleep before midnight is worth two hours after midnight. When your pals ask what you are doing going to bed at 9:30 PM, just tell them you are sleeping in.

May your rest be renewing in such a way that you lead from a point of renewed energy and focus.

Chapter 19 – Life Long Learner



I remember graduating from [Lincoln Christian College](#) and taking my first church. I was ready to make a mark on the world. Totally clueless. I thought I knew everything. I was ready to make a contribution to the kingdom and knew that I knew everything I needed to know (say that 3 times fast).

It didn't take long before I realized that I needed more input on how to move the kingdom along. From that first ministry I have made it a point to never feel like I knew it all.

Here are some of the realized benefits from being a life-long learner:

1. **Keeps us out of the ruts.** We have a tendency to do things the same way, over and over. Left to ourselves we will repeat this pattern until boredom or ineffectiveness sets in. We need outside influence to give us fresh perspectives and motivations.
2. **Networking.** People in ministry are not in competition. We are on the same team. Some other people in ministry have what you need, and you have what they need. I have learned a ton from people who have allowed me to network with them. I am always looking to learn more, especially from guys in the trenches. Maybe that is why I dig the whole blog scene so much.
3. **Makes us critical thinkers who operate fully awake.** With no outside stimuli, the mind sometimes goes to autopilot. With no one to challenge us, there is no fight or flight response, just a “do the same thing because it is working and I have a nice routine” response. Sometimes we need to be challenged to think critically about why and how we do what we do. Some of the best learning times for me have been in research or observations or discussions with people who go against what I am doing. They don't agree with the way I do things, let alone the reason behind them. No matter. I embrace them. They make me defend what I am doing or change. Either way, it is a win for me.
4. **Keeps us up on culture.** My dream is that the church would reverse itself. History has pointed out that the church at one point led the culture. Today it is the other way around. Many churches figured out the culture the best they could, built kingdom movements around that, and then stopped learning. Some churches had booming ministries in the 1950's. It's not 1950 anymore. When we bury our heads in the sand and stop learning, culture shifts and we are left wondering what happened. I see some hope and some movement in all this, which is greatly encouraging. Understand the times, my friend, because soon we will be leading them.

I once read where [Bill Hybels](#) said something like “Never apologize for being a learner.” I dig Bill.

I do all I can to learn. I read (slowly), I observe, discuss, scan blogs, watch, critique, question myself, question our ministry, pace myself, and travel extensively. For all of those, I make no apology.

Chapter 20 – It's Not About the Music

In Chapter 1, we talked about setting the base. In this final article, we book-end the whole deal by realizing that **it is really not about the music**. Take this one to the bank. Music is an expression, a powerful art form, a beautiful medium, even a shaper of history. But don't make a god of it.

When someone says "We are a worshipping church with a great worship time," they are off base. When they say "We are all about a rocking worship time," they don't get it. They are off mission and it is just a matter of time before the whole deal falls apart. Musical worship is not the focus of the church. It is a tool, an expression. Anything more and it is idolatry. There are plenty of churches who idolize their worship. Don't be one of them. If you are in this mess, do yourself a favor and get out for a season and reconnect with the God you sing about.

God doesn't give a rip about a drum kit, bass rig, K-2's, foot pedals, or turntable. He wants to make sure that you are on the mission of seeking and saving the lost. He wants to make sure you are living in community to such a level that others are drawn to the kingdom. He wants to make sure you are connecting with the people he died for.

If you are living centered around music you are slowly dying. If your experience in following Christ is only in your music, you have it all wrong.

Worship is an anthem of the lives lived in complete abandon to this beautiful savior. Go passionately follow a Christ who is worth wrapping your life around. Live in such a way that your songs become an expression of the life that you live. And watch the kingdom explode.

Love. Live. Rock.

About the Author



Here's a personal note from Scot (seen in image above, far right, leading worship at the 24/7 Prayer room launch, October 24, 2004 at the Telle Prayer Chapel in Terre Haute, Indiana):

My name is [Scot Longyear](#) and I am the lead pastor of [exchange](#) in Terre Haute, Indiana. I have led worship for several years and have recorded 3 worship CD's (currently working on the fourth). I have opened for [Russ Lee](#), [FFH](#), [Rebecca St James](#), and some other fine folks. I have had the privilege of travelling a bit, with the highlight being a trip to Spain with the [Billy Graham Association](#) where I taught and led worship. I have also been a contributing author to [Youth Specialties](#), [Group Publishing](#), and [Worship.com](#)

Along the way I have made a TON of mistakes, had some ups, some downs, and learned a truckload of lessons. Please save yourself the embarrassment and ineffectiveness and don't repeat my mistakes.

How to Contact Scot

Visit him on his new blog, **resonate**, at <http://reson8.org> and click the About link.