

The Master of Arts in Worship: A Reflection and a Path Forward

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The School of Church Music at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary has a rich heritage of musical training, rigorous theological instruction, and the use of a broad range of methodologies. From its infancy as a small department within the School of Theology to its present state as a full-fledged music school offering undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral degrees, the School of Church Music has sought to consistently review and adapt its curricula to the changing state of affairs in its primary constituencies—the local churches of the Southern Baptist Convention. Throughout its history, a common commitment to biblical fidelity, musical excellence, and pastoral development has coursed through the School, enlivening the classrooms, studios, and venues of worship.

This commitment is evidenced in the words of the first permanent professor of music and Music Director at Southwestern, I. E. Reynolds. In his initial assessment and goals for the curriculum, Reynolds wrote to L. R. Scarborough, second president of Southwestern, and outlined three priorities:

1. Spiritual and evangelistic fervor
2. Scholarly and efficient musicianship
3. Practicality in application²

These principles have served to guide the efforts of the School of Church Music throughout the various changes in leadership and across the turbulent decades of cultural and musical change since Reynolds articulated these statements.

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² William J. Reynolds, *The Cross and the Lyre: The Story of the School of Church Music* (Fort Worth, TX: The Faculty of the School of Church Music, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1994), 4.

This article will focus on the Master of Arts in Worship (MAW) degree program and will demonstrate the ways it reflects Southwestern's commitment to offering biblically rich theological training conjoined with practical ministry skill development. The MAW has served as a flexible vessel throughout its seventeen-year existence, undergoing several revisions since its initial proposal in 2002. Throughout the course of this examination, I will interject the stories of graduates of this program to show how it has positively shaped their ministries and their understanding of the Scriptures.

Shift in Emphasis in Graduate Theological Studies in Worship Ministry

In order to accurately tell the story of the Master of Arts in Worship degree program, it is necessary to discuss the dramatic changes that seminaries and other institutions of theological education have implemented in recent years, specifically in the areas of music and worship leadership. Historically, talented musicians were able to pursue various degree programs in institutions of Christian higher education that were largely similar in scope and content. Naturally, each denomination and its assorted institutions had their own perspective on the manner in which these students were trained in worship leadership, but fundamentally there was an agreement that the musical tools that made an effective church musician, such as music theory, musicianship skills, and conducting, were to be joined with theological knowledge, historical study of the music of the church, and practical skills including administrative training. As we examine today's landscape, we see a radically different perspective regarding the role of the worship leader in the local church. Consequently, the previous paradigm of church music training has undergone a fundamental transformation.

The past several decades have brought substantial changes to the musical and worship practices of evangelical congregations in the United States and across the globe. These changes invariably have led to a reconsideration on the part of many seminaries and institutions of higher education who seek to train musicians and worship leaders to navigate these turbulent waters. Changes in governance structure, sharp decreases in denominational financial

support, and theological turmoil within the major Protestant denominations have forced these schools to reconsider their mission, curricula, and relationships with the local church, community, and global marketplace.

In order to accurately represent the changes within the field of music and worship leadership training in theological education, I examined statistics and degree programs of the member schools of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), which consists of over 270 graduate schools of theology who “conduct post-baccalaureate professional and academic degree programs to educate persons for the practice of ministry and for teaching and research in the theological disciplines.”³ ATS provides degree program standards for courses of study that deal with the areas of music and worship leadership to varying extents. These degree programs include the Master of Divinity (MDiv), Master of Music in Church Music (MM in Church Music), Master of Arts (MA), Doctor of Ministry (DMin), and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD).

According to its list of Approved Degrees, ATS currently provides accreditation to twelve “basic programs oriented toward ministerial leadership.”⁴ These degrees include the Master of Sacred Music (4 schools), the Master of Music in Church Music (2), the Master of Arts in Liturgical Music (1), the Master of Church Music (1), the Master of Arts in Church Music (2), the Master of Arts in Music (1), and the Master of Arts in Music Ministry (1). It also accredits twelve “basic programs oriented toward general theological studies,” including the Master of Arts in Worship (4), the Master of Arts in Liturgical Ministry (1), the Master of Arts in Media Arts and Worship (1), the Master of Arts in Formative Worship (1), the Master of Arts in Worship Ministries (2), the Master of Arts in Worship Leadership (1), the Master of Arts in Liturgical Studies (1), and the Master of Arts in Liturgy (1).

The flagship degree for most theological schools is the Master of Divinity. ATS accredits the MDiv at 223 institutions. Eighteen of these schools have concentrations within the MDiv in areas related to worship, church music, liturgical arts, and the worship arts.

³ “About ATS | The Association of Theological Schools,” accessed October 27, 2018, <https://www.ats.edu/about>.

⁴ “Approved Degrees | The Association of Theological Schools,” accessed October 27, 2018, <https://www.ats.edu/member-schools/approved-degrees>.

Two other programs do not have a specific concentration in music or worship but have a music proficiency requirement or a substantial portion of the core curriculum devoted to music.

On the doctoral level, ATS recognizes a variety of research and professional programs. Currently four institutions offer doctoral programs in church music including the Doctor of Musical Arts (2), the Doctor of Pastoral Music (1), and the Doctor of Church Music (1). Additionally, ten schools offer PhD programs with concentrations in worship, music ministry, liturgical studies, and other worship-related disciplines. Other professional doctoral programs with music and worship concentrations include the Doctor of Ministry (DMin) (11) and the Doctor of Education Ministry (DEdMin) (7).

In its 2017–2018 Annual Data Table, ATS affiliated institutions recorded a total head count of 72,896 students and a full-time equivalency of 45,855 students in their various programs of study. While specific enrollment data in the various concentrations of non-music specific degrees is not available, according to the *Table 2.10-A Head Count Enrollment by Degree Category and Program, All Member Schools*, 98 students are enrolled in the MCM, MSM, and MMCM programs in the United States and Canada.⁵ This is a marked downturn from 205 reported in 2016. What was once the primary seminary graduate degree for ministers of music, worship pastors, and other church musicians is in precipitous decline.

The Historical Development of the Master of Arts in Worship

Throughout its history the School of Church Music has offered courses of study that provided rigorous musical training as well as theological and pastoral instruction. From its beginning as the Department of Gospel Music in the School of Theology, through its various incarnations as the School of Gospel Music, Sacred Music, and now Church Music, and across its wide range of curricular options, the task of training men and women for music and worship leadership in the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention and

⁵ Association of Theological Schools, *2017–2018 Annual Data Tables*, retrieved from <https://www.ats.edu/uploads/resources/institutional-data/annual-report-forms/all-forms.pdf>.

in a variety of other capacities has never ceased. Across the decades, the School of Church Music has offered a range of degree options including a Bachelor of Gospel Music, Bachelor of Music in Worship Studies, Master of Sacred Music, Master of Music in Church Music, and Doctor of Musical Arts in Church Music.

Each successive generation of degree programs refined the core knowledge and skills education while adapting methodologies that connected graduates with the needs of the current churches and cultures. Training in the fundamentals of music theory, performance, and history has complemented the rigorous study of congregational song, theology, and applied ministry. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, seminaries and other institutions of higher education began to radically reconsider their degree offerings. In an effort to bolster the ongoing programs in church music, the faculty of the School of Church Music, led by then-dean Benjamin Harlan, submitted a new degree, the Master of Arts in Worship, in the spring of 2002 for curricular approval to the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM).

According to the Prospectus for Plan Approval, the initial goal of this new offering was “a more intense focus on activity — the planning and leadership of public corporate worship — which is normally central to the role of the minister of music.” While maintaining its long heritage of graduate church music education, the faculty recognized that “we must prepare students to lead worship in a variety of settings and styles. The Master of Arts in Worship will allow students some flexibility to adjust their training toward different styles. This adaptability strengthens the entire curricular offering of the school and makes it more appealing to a wider range of students.”

The proposed degree plan included courses from three primary areas: seminary core, church music foundations, and worship practicum. The 17 credits of the seminary core included classes in evangelism, Old and New Testament theology, and systematic theology. As part of the church music foundations (14 hours), students took a variety of courses, such as church music administration, conducting, theory for contemporary worship, and private study in an applied area. The heart of the degree plan lay in the worship practicum area (17 hours) with required courses in worship, music in worship, and worship design. Students were allowed to choose sev-

eral electives in areas such as worship literature, technology in worship, worship leadership teams, and creative worship planning. Lastly, students participated in two semesters of Oratorio Chorus, completed a two-semester internship, and took comprehensive exams.

This first iteration of the MAW represented the efforts of the faculty to address a new set of challenges and skillsets. As they sought to develop a curriculum that would prepare students for worship leadership in a variety of contexts, the faculty was careful to distinguish this new degree from the flagship Master of Music in Church Music degree. The degree plan received approval from both ATS and NASM and began to be offered shortly thereafter.

John Francis, 2016 Graduate

John Francis currently serves as an assistant professor of music and worship at Hannibal-LaGrange University in Hannibal, Missouri. A trumpet player by training, John has a Bachelor of Arts in Music in Trumpet Performance from Eastern Kentucky University. For years, he served as a professional trumpet player, worship pastor, composer and arranger, and clinician. Francis explored the intersection of worship leadership and the role of the trumpet in worship as he completed his MAW with a thesis titled “Trumpets in Scripture: The Representative Voice of God.” He has completed course work in the Ph.D. in Worship at Southwestern and is currently preparing for his qualifying exams.

When asked why he pursued the MAW, Francis emphasized the degree’s flexibility:

I had been a worship leader for thirty years, with a bachelor's degree in music. I never had the time to be tied down to a brick-and-mortar program. So the MAW at SWBTS gave me the freedom to pursue this, and at the same time began to prepare me in the career change that I undertook from church work to now being a professor of music and worship at a Baptist University (Hannibal-LaGrange).⁶

⁶ John Francis, e-mail message to author, March 9, 2019.

Francis went on to describe how his studies at Southwestern prepared him for his current place of service. “While I had the music ‘chops’ to teach music at a small private university, my state school music experience did not prepare me to have a firm foothold in the academic sphere in which I now dwell. The MAW program stabilized my thinking into firm orthodoxy, and not simply teaching ‘what works.’”⁷

As the Master of Arts in Worship degree moved from concept to reality, it was apparent that the initial format posed challenges that needed to be addressed in its second iteration beginning in the Fall 2007 semester. Shortly after the school received approval for the degree plan, the seminary underwent a presidential change as well as a substantial revision to the core curriculum. In an effort to further distinguish the degree from the other graduate offerings, this new program had flexibility as one of its primary goals. It was assumed that incoming students would have a foundation of undergraduate-level of musical training (BA or BM). Under this new design, one-third of the degree plan would be available in an online format. There was a commitment to utilize I-term courses (shorter terms in between the fall and spring semesters) as possible. The ministry department developed a creative approach in which some of the courses were offered in two-week intensive residency formats along with online components. This was to allow students who were not residents on campus to participate more effectively. The ensemble and applied study requirements were removed in an effort to encourage higher enrollment numbers. Lastly, a thesis option was offered for the first time, whereby a student could substitute several required courses for a graduate-level thesis.

The entire course of study was reduced from 48 hours to 40 hours, consisting of 31 required hours and 9 hours of electives. The core seminary studies reflected the changing core curriculum of the seminary and contained courses in Spiritual Formation, Great Themes of the Old and New Testaments, Systematic Theology, and Baptist Heritage. The primary worship studies course load included

⁷ Ibid.

Biblical/Historical Foundations of Worship, Music in Worship, a study of the Spiritual Life of the Worship Leader, as well as coursework in administration and worship design. Students were allowed to select from electives in Resources in Worship, Multi-Cultural Worship, and technology and practical studies.

One new feature of this revision included a 9-hour track of study that allowed students to have a specific concentration within the degree plan. The Music track allowed students to take additional hours in applied instruction, ensembles, or graduate music courses. The Education track included classes in Ministry of Education, Church Staff Leadership, and electives in the School of Educational Ministries. Additional courses in Systematic Theology, Hermeneutics, and theology electives made up the Theology track. An Evangelism track included an Introduction to Missiology, Contemporary Evangelism, and practica in missions and evangelism. Lastly, students could pursue a Missions track by participating in a short-term mission trip. These optional tracks were short-lived and only lasted one year. As an additional Systematic Theology course was added to the seminary core curriculum in the 2008–2009 academic year, the individual concentrations were removed, and students were allowed to take a 3-hour elective from any school on campus.

While this format allowed for greater flexibility through a creative approach of online, residential, and formats, it was expected that students would spend at least a portion of the degree as full-time residential students on campus. The degree continued to have a requirement of two semesters of Performance Lab in which students were required to attend a specified number of concerts and recitals on campus. The qualifying examinations remained in the curriculum and students were expected to complete these exams in their final semester of study.

Alan Yarbrough, 2017 Graduate

Alan Yarbrough serves as the Worship Pastor at First Baptist Church in Justin, Texas. During his MAW studies he served as the Worship Pastor at Calvary Baptist Church in Andrews, Texas. Initially trained in music education, Alan served as a middle school choir director in the public-school system before committing to full-

time ministry service. The rapidly changing world of worship ministry compelled him to consider graduate study in music and worship. He describes how he gained the tools to be a more effective pastor and musician while a student at Southwestern:

In the present-day worship culture, the worship pastor is inundated with new music, resources, and ideas on a daily basis. This presents the challenge to become a curator for the most biblical and edifying resources that will serve the congregation. The MAW program has brought a new depth to my decision-making process by giving me a solid biblical and historical foundation.⁸

Like many of the students in the program, Yarbrough found the flexibility of the degree plan to be one of its most attractive features.

I felt the Lord leading me to pursue a seminary degree, but as a husband and father of three who was working in full-time ministry, I could not move to attend school. I began researching and came across the MAW program and it was an answer to prayer. It was very appealing that the program is designed to allow for online flexibility as well as on campus classes that foster interaction and build relationships among the students.⁹

During one of his courses that surveyed the history of the music of the church, Yarbrough discovered the Olney Hymns collection. This collection contains the works of the English poets and theologians John Newton and William Cowper. While the hymn “Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound” is the most famous selection from this hymnal, Yarbrough discovered a rich repertoire that was relatively unknown to his West Texas congregation. As part of his Worship Project, he set several of the texts and tunes to new musical arrangements which he wrote, notated, and recorded. Over the course of the semester, Yarbrough introduced these hymn arrange-

⁸ Alan Yarbrough, e-mail message to author, March 7, 2019.

⁹ Ibid.

ments to his congregation and expanded the musical and theological vocabulary of his people.

The Fall 2010 semester brought further changes within the School of Church Music as John Simons joined the faculty to serve as the Chair of the Ministry Department. One of Simons's first tasks was to review the graduate curriculum and make substantial changes to the MAW degree plan. He introduced a third major revision to the degree plan in the 2011–2012 academic year. The school continued to refine the scope of the MAW in an effort to provide effective training for worship pastors. The 2011–2012 SWBTS Academic Catalog describes the Master of Arts in Worship as a “specialized degree designed to provide the biblical, technological, philosophical, and practical tools needed to enable a worship leader to be effective in the local church.”¹⁰

The degree shifted back to primarily a residential program. The 18 core hours of theological training, ensemble and performance lab requirements, and comprehensive examinations remained unchanged from the previous version. Students were allowed to enroll in the various theological courses online, but the courses within the School of Church Music were only offered in the traditional fall and spring semesters. The substantive changes were found in the Worship Area of the degree program. The Ministry department identified three primary areas of study—Worship, Congregational Song, and Philosophy in Music Ministry. Each of these sections had a required 2-hour survey course. Additional “depth-level” courses were added under each category to provide further exploration into the various aspects of worship ministry. Students were given the option to take additional courses such as Hebrew and Early Christian Worship, Comparative Liturgies, The Psalms, and the Influence of Popular Styles on Music for Worship.

Alongside these rigorous studies into the academic areas of worship, students selected elective courses from a new group of ministry practica. These included studies in Worship Design and Leadership, Worship Resources, Vocal and Instrumental Leadership

¹⁰ Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (2011). *Academic Catalog, 2011–2012*, retrieved from <http://catalog.swbts.edu/catalog/assets/File/archives/2012–2013Catalog.pdf>, 189.

Techniques, Media and Staging, and the Worship Arts. The intention of this structure was to provide a framework in which the various practicum courses could change and adapt over time to address emerging needs in congregational worship practices, while the primary academic areas would remain in place.

Jordan Gutierrez Garza, 2018 Graduate

The final example of graduates of the MAW program is Jordan Gutierrez Garza. Jordan began her studies at Southwestern in 2016. A native of San Antonio, Texas, Garza had been active in worship leadership ministry throughout her teenage and early adult years in the congregation led by members of her family. She completed a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Texas in San Antonio before considering graduate study in worship leadership. Her innovative worship project consisted of a semester-long visual art project by members of her congregation. Garza surveyed, coordinated, and guided lay members of her congregation to create artwork focusing on the parables of Jesus Christ. This work culminated in a church-wide art exhibit where the artists were able to share the stories of their works with the congregation and had the opportunity to exhibit their artwork.

When interviewed, Garza emphasized the role that the MAW has had in her understanding of biblical worship, her ability to make wise choices of music and other elements for worship, and for her own leadership skills in corporate worship. She stated, “The fact that the school offered a degree specifically for the calling I received made the program very appealing.”¹¹ Like many of those graduates who preceded her, the training, experience, and spiritual formation Garza received in the MAW enabled her to integrate her previous academic study, her creative giftedness, and her current position of service to maximize the benefits of her time at Southwestern.

¹¹ Jordan Gutierrez Garza, Facebook message with author, March 3, 2019.

In its brief decade of existence, the MAW degree program had undergone three substantial revisions. The 2013–2014 academic year would bring with it the most radical changes of all to the MAW. The purposes of the degree continued their refinement. “The Masters of Arts in Worship is designed for worship leaders who seek to deepen their understanding of authentic expression of faith and develop their leadership and creative abilities. Through graduate study in worship, theology, culture, leadership, and artistic skills, students will be prepared to plan and lead worship.”¹² Whereas previous applicants were required to have undergraduate degrees in music, the new revision allowed students with any bachelor’s degree to apply for admission.

The primary changes had to do with the method of study throughout the program.

The required courses in theological studies may be completed on campus or online. The required courses in worship studies are offered as hybrid-resident classes, with each course meeting for one week on campus with additional work online. Worship classes are offered during the winter break and summer term on a two-year rotation. The skill courses are taken on campus in conjunction with the hybrid-resident classes.¹³

This new approach dramatically changed the student experience as they enter in cohorts and continue at pace with their peer group throughout the program. The previous ensemble, performance attendance, and applied study requirements were removed from the degree program in order to accommodate the hybrid model.

The primary Worship Studies core consists of four foundational courses: Biblical Foundations of Worship and Culture; Congregational Song: Ancient and Future; Dynamics of Worship and Philosophy; and Worship Arts: Authentic Expressions of Faith. The courses are offered in week-long intensives in the summer and winter semesters. Students complete reading and preparatory assign-

¹² Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (2013). *Academic Catalog, 2013–2014*, retrieved from <http://catalog.swbts.edu/catalog/assets/File/archives/2013-2014Catalog.pdf>, 226.

¹³ Ibid.

ments before the terms begin. While on campus, students continue their work in lectures, demonstrations, and various projects. After the week on campus, they have additional summary assignments to complete and submit at a designated time. A set of three Skill Studies practica support the primary worship studies core classes. Specialized training in instrumental and vocal ensemble leadership, media and staging, and financial administration in ministry are offered in alternating summer and winter terms. These courses are designed to provide hands-on ministry skill development in a group setting.

The final innovation in this stage of the MAW is the Worship Ministry Project requirement. In lieu of the previously required comprehensive exams, students are to design a worship ministry project in coordination with a faculty supervisor. The intent of the project is for the students to apply the various facets of their coursework to a specific aspect of ministry in a local ministry context. Students are required to design a project that could be completed within a single semester. Each project includes a method for assessing the student design and efficacy of the project. An important aspect of the new Worship Ministry project is the inclusion of all documentation of the project design, surveys, and assessment materials. The intent is to create a library of ministry projects that could be made available for use by students within the School of Church Music and churches throughout the Southern Baptist Convention. A thesis track is available for students with interest in pursuing doctoral studies, whereby they could demonstrate the necessary research and writing skills to receive entrance into doctoral programs.

Looking to the Future

Throughout its history the School of Church Music at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary has consistently adapted the degree options, course offerings, and skill development to meet the needs of the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention. The fidelity to the veracity of the Scriptures and the commitment to the rich theological heritage of Southern Baptists have

served as anchors to provide a strong foundation for the various aspects of ministerial and musical studies.

The flexible nature of the Master of Arts in Worship degree has been demonstrated as it emerged as an alternative to the Master of Music in Church Music degree, yet still possessing many of the same entrance and musical requirements. It shifted to a degree that allowed for students to take classes online, on campus, or in shorter inter-term experiences. The current model provides students the opportunity to adapt a hybrid approach where they complete their theological studies online and work together in cohorts to complete their worship and skill development coursework in the winter and summer terms.

The success of the MAW demonstrates the vitality of graduate worship leadership education in the twenty-first century. While many schools are experiencing a decline in graduate enrollment, the Master of Arts in Worship continues to grow and attract new students each semester. The faculty and administration at Southwestern are committed to creatively deploying resources, faculty, and energies in tackling the most pressing issues in the church today. Students need the training, biblical instruction, and godly wisdom offered in the MAW to enable them to navigate the turbulent waters in the local church.

The advanced study in theology, biblical foundations of worship, congregational song, and philosophy join practical skill development in worship band leadership, the worship arts, and administration. This co-mingling of skills and instruction within a diverse student body reflects the changing nature of our churches. The students learn from the faculty members, yet perhaps their greatest source of encouragement and training is the student body itself. Friendship, accountability, and exhortation characterize the nature of the relationships among the students. They form an active group of graduates, current students, and prospects who are committed to leading congregations in biblical worship practices that are founded in the bedrock of the truth of Scripture, that are informed by the historical practices of the church's song, and that boldly chart a course into the future.

The creativity in educational delivery and commitment to the needs of the students have long been hallmarks of the School of Church Music and will continue to be critical markers of success in

the future. They serve critical roles within the cadre of degree options in the School of Church Music at Southwestern. Undoubtedly the MAW will continue to undergo further refinement and adaptation in years to come. Regardless of these changes, the degree will continue to train men and women for a lifetime of ministry service in various worship leadership capacities in churches throughout the state, nation, and around the world. The Master of Arts in Worship has been and will continue to be a vital tool in enabling Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary to realize its mission of assisting the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention by biblically educating God-called men and women for ministries that fulfill the Great Commission and glorify God.