

# Ethnography and Worship: From Scholarship to Practice

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## Why Do Congregational Ethnography? A Pastoral Perspective

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Recently, I was at a retreat where a music minister shared a story in which a pastor at the church he served remarked in a staff meeting, “I’m so glad we don’t have to deal with the gay question here.” The music minister, taken aback, asked for clarification, and the pastor reiterated his pleasure at not having to address the question of human sexuality in his congregation. Of course, the music minister knew of several members of the congregation who were indeed asking those “questions,” revealing the pastor’s lack of awareness.

This story illustrates how easy it is to be ignorant of the needs of a congregation as a leader. All too often the ministerial task is understood as one of forging ahead and dragging others into the light, kicking and screaming if necessary.

Guess what?

It doesn’t work like that. And while it may be commonly assumed that such positions of ignorance are occupied by senior pastors, music ministers are often just as guilty. As may be expected by my title and through my colleagues’ essays, I believe that ethnography provides a helpful response to this ignorance. As such, this article is doing something akin to “mak[ing] propaganda” for a certain approach to pastoral ministry.<sup>1</sup>

So why do ethnography? Thinking through my opening anecdote, ethnography combats ignorance by informing a minister of the congregation’s concerns and needs. But pastoral ethnography does far more than mere education: it *ministers* to the relational needs of the congregation in and of itself. It does this by giving you,

the minister, the opportunity to *listen* to your congregants and to hear their perspectives on music, life, God, etc. This process of listening produces buy-in, building trust, while simultaneously helping you, the minister, get out of your own head and gain perspective on your own thoughts and ideas. This works against the narcissistic tendencies with which all of us are familiar.

The second reason to do ethnography is to address the reality of power dynamics that exist in congregational settings. This is especially true when we consider the fact that the voices we most often listen to are the loudest, the most powerful, or the richest. So, when you are considering *whose* voices you are going to listen to in an ethnography, I suggest you begin with those who may believe that they do not have much authority or value. In the same way that you can discern the health of a society by observing the weakest members, you can discern the health and needs of your congregation by talking to the weakest, poorest, quietest members. Talk to “the least of these” in your congregation (and of course, be prepared to not like what you hear).

Briefly, allow me to point out what ethnography is *not*: it is not a tool to control. While you may understandably feel a responsibility to make decisions on behalf of your congregation, resist the urge to use the knowledge you gain through ethnography to get your way—be that musically or administratively. Leadership works best when the agency of those being led is respected and protected. You will never be able to please everyone. However, explaining your decisions in light of your conversations with and observations of your congregation can go a long way towards upholding the relational health of your community.



1. Jeff R. Warren, *Music and Ethical Responsibility* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 2014.