

Although sharing much common ground when it comes to philosophy and ministry, often Mary and Bob find themselves approaching ministerial concerns from different angles... *He said - She said* is a venue to share differing perspectives and provide food for thought.

Two-Sided Coin

Mary's Perspective

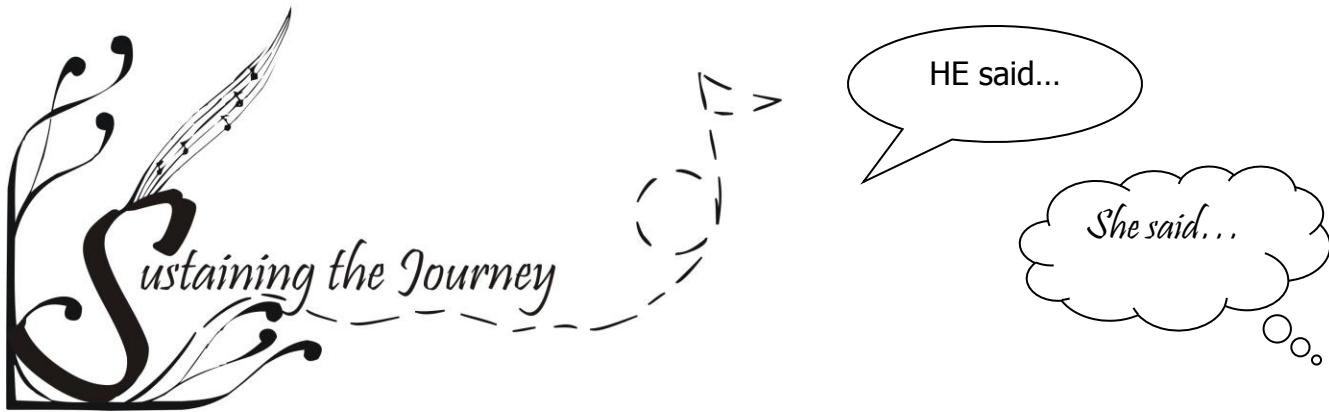
A friend recently asked me a loaded question: “Have you ever kicked a member out of your choir?” We are both paid professional ministers who direct choirs comprised completely of volunteers. Obviously, his choir was experiencing some inner turmoil. This led to an interesting conversation. Entrusted with the care of many, should we reject any? In a time when our choirs are dwindling in size, is it appropriate to turn away volunteers? If someone is looking to volunteer for ministry within the Church, are we allowed to – or *<gasp!>* supposed to – say NO THANK YOU occasionally?

While some musicians may be characterized as temperamental, I am a pretty easy-going person. However, I believe the resounding answer to the above questions is YES!! But I think this bears deeper analysis. Usually, when situations like this arise, there is more to the story than meets the eye of the casual observer. Consider this (fairly common) choir situation...

Choir meets regularly throughout the academic year, both to practice and to exercise their ministry. Sometimes (okay, often), as the seasons go on, some undesirable behaviors crop up – in both the participants and the leader. Such behaviors may include a persistent tardiness, negative comments, talking while someone else is speaking, and a general negative attitude. A member may believe that it’s okay to show up late, because all they are missing is warm-ups, announcements, or prayer. Perhaps the director has “lost his filter” and offers critiques that are more critical than constructive. And anyone who has participated in a meeting – whether it’s a choir practice or a work meeting or a team planning an event – has experienced a time where several of the members have their own little conversations throughout, providing a disrespectful distraction. That behavior makes others wonder if the offenders believe themselves to be more important or knowledgeable or “above” the leader of the meeting.

I believe such behaviors are indicative of more going on with the offender than simply an inability to play by the rules. Certainly Negative Nellie is a distraction at practice, with the ongoing stream of negative comments muttered under her breath. But perhaps Nellie's negativity stems from an inner turmoil of sadness, anxiety, fear, or pain. Perhaps Nellie is facing a health crisis, job insecurity, or the physical pain and restrictions of arthritis. Sometimes Nellie doesn't even realize how destructive her behavior is to relationships around her. Now I'm not making excuses for her – simply offering the possibility that everyone deserves compassion and respect.

From Nellie's perspective, perhaps she really enjoys choir practice, and doesn't realize the habit that her stream of comments has become. Perhaps she believes she's simply being sarcastic, funny, or commiserating with fellow choir members. It's even possible that she has become hard of hearing, and doesn't always recognize that she's speaking while the leader is speaking. Whatever the reason, Nellie has become a distraction to others and maybe doesn't enjoy choir as much as she used to. But it's what she has always done – Nellie has been a member of the choir for over 20 years!



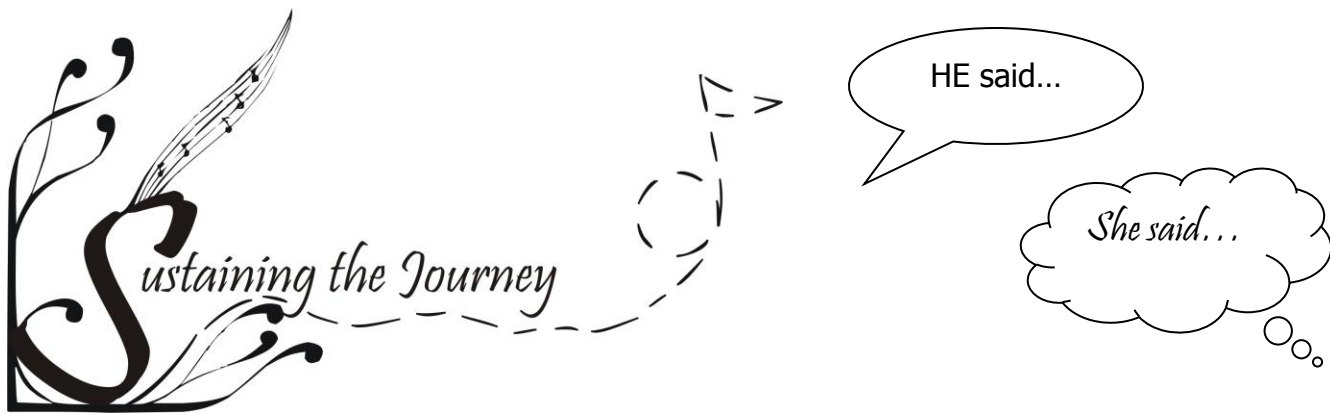
So back to the original question... how do you make the decision of when it's time to move on? For both participant and leader, open communication facilitates a better transition. If you've been a volunteer in a specific role, it may be hard to acknowledge that it's not a good fit any more. Change is hard. But one needs to look at the big picture. Perhaps volunteering is important to you, so you might consider other volunteer opportunities. If not choir, maybe lunch-packing ministry? Assisting with upkeep of the flowers and landscaping? Providing transportation to doctors or shopping for the home-bound?

For the leader, it's important to address these situations in a way that preserves dignity but also is fair to the entire membership. Although I believe music ministry happens year-round, this is one of those times when I welcome the summer break. It gives everyone a built-in opportunity to evaluate needs, skills, desires, and fit. Summer is a great time for the leader to communicate with all members of the particular ministry, to offer gratitude, observations, and suggest possible areas of growth. In the conversation with Nellie, the leader should acknowledge her contributions to the group, but also in all fairness point out the negative impact her stream of comments has not only on the group, but undermining the leadership. A good leader establishes the expectations of commitment, abilities, and behavior, and communicates that to all the members. If Negative Nellie is not able or willing to participate at the level expected, then the leader should offer suggestions of other ministry opportunities that may be a better fit. This provides direction without embarrassing Nellie in front of the group.

I am also a firm believer that people can change, if they want to. Given the opportunity, Nellie may choose to participate in a different ministry, or may work at keeping the negative stream of comments in check. However, once the situation has been addressed privately, if/when old habits start to sneak back in, I believe the leadership should address the situation directly. When expectations are applied universally across the ministry, all members are respected.

One more thought... if this situation sounds familiar to you because Negative Nellie is YOU, the summer offers a good time for some soul-searching. You may feel like life has become hard. Nobody understands, you feel alone, you are overwhelmed or frustrated, perhaps it's hard to put a finger on just what is making it challenging, but somehow you are angry and sad. Often, those we are closest to – whether it's fellow ministry members or blood relatives – become the recipients of our frustration or vents. Sometimes we hurt those we love the most, not intentionally, but because they are safe and we know they will continue to love us, even amidst the dark times. So if this resonates with you, I challenge you to take some “me” time this summer. Meditate. Walk. Pray. Make lists. However you organize your thoughts, try to figure out at least one change you can make that will make life better for you. Perhaps it's giving yourself permission to sleep in occasionally. Maybe rearranging furniture or priorities or commitments will have positive impact. Perhaps stepping away from something that is no longer life-giving, and trying something new, whether that's a volunteer position or a relationship or a new food. Negativity is like a cancer that permeates all aspects of life, but positivity breeds positivity. If you've forgotten what it's like to feel positive, take little steps like starting a gratitude journal. I've been inspired by my daughter, who at the end of each day writes a word or phrase on her calendar of something that happened that made her smile. It doesn't have to be monumental – sometimes the beauty in life comes in the smallest encounters – but looking at that month on her calendar with something positive jotted in each day never fails to bring a happy memory and a smile. Start small.

Need a little inspiration? Check out Josh Wilson's song [Dream Small](#).



Bob's Perspective

Putting someone out of Music Ministry (or any group for that matter) is a very serious undertaking. Unfortunately, I've had to make that decision several times in the course of life – both in the ecclesial and private sectors. For me, the best way was to be discreet and direct about the situation at hand. This doesn't always (actually, almost never) come easily, but sometimes it's what a director is called to do. In a group dynamic, the most essential element of success is high morale. A well enthused group will go a long way. Conversely, it doesn't take much negativity to bring them spiraling down.

Some time ago, I had a situation where two members of a particular group weren't getting along. In itself, not a big deal – until I began to notice a hint of polarization among some of the other members. My first tact was to address the group as a whole in very general terms. I talked about the concept of “love one another,” from the standpoint that we don't have to necessarily become bosom buddies with each other, but we need to be charitable and respectful.

In different circumstances, this tact has worked well. However, the case at hand was a bit more difficult. After a short period of deliberation, I decided to take this to the next level. I met with the two individuals (separate from each other) so I could assess the root of the problem. I was able to determine that this had become a battle of two egos and was unsolvable by individual appeal.

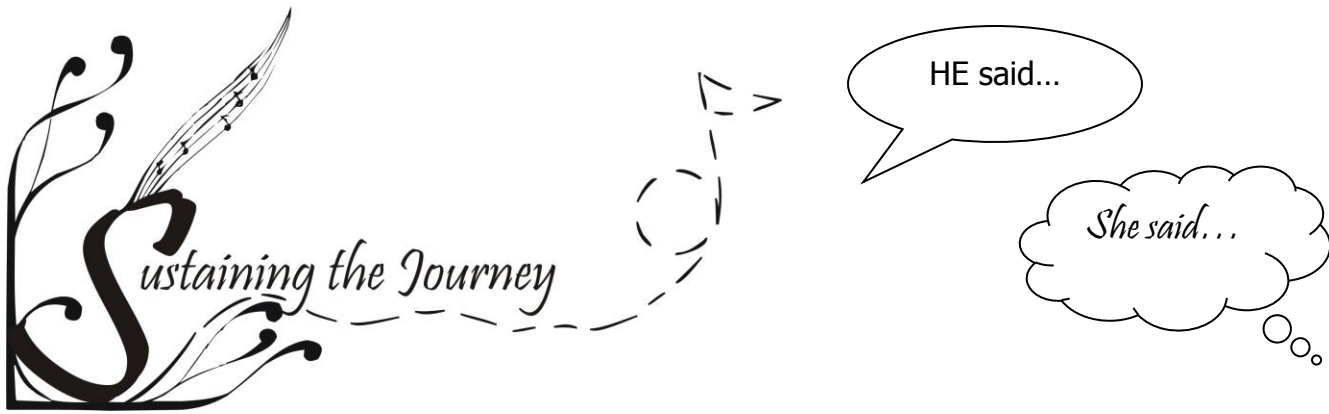
Utilizing the concept of positive peer pressure, my next move was to bring the two members together to converse with me. I prefaced my remarks by saying that I was brought up to believe that all actions (good or bad) have resultant consequences. My parents didn't punish me when I did something wrong. Rather, I experienced the consequences of my behavior or lack thereof through my own accord. I then explained that the morale of the group is paramount, and the result of their behavior toward each other was having an adverse effect on the group. This situation was totally unacceptable and would not be tolerated. I was polite and calm, but pulled no punches in that regard. That got their attention.

Then I proposed the following assignment. They were given one week to formulate, co-author and submit a plan for being able to work with each other in a charitable and respectful way – and to determine how they intend to heal the damage they had done to other members of the group. There was no expectation for them to become lifelong friends, but merely a peace treaty of sorts. The consequence of this treaty would result in a more congenial atmosphere within the group. On the other hand, if they didn't comply with my assignment they would BOTH be immediately terminated (expelled – not killed). Whether they stay or go wouldn't be a punishment, but a direct consequence of their own action (or inaction). They were both shocked (and somewhat dismayed) that I would be willing to lose both of them, after which I replied, “those are the terms, take them or leave them.”

Two sides of the coin:

Heads - at worst one or the other (or both) would quit on their own – problem solved.

Tails – they would figure out a way to make this work – problem solved.



I counted on the fact that neither of their egos would allow them to leave – and I was correct. The coin flip resulted in ‘tails’. It was amazing how well they worked together, and things expediently healed up in the group. Sacred Scripture has a lot to say about these types of dilemma:

1. Our Lord had several stories about the vine and the branches
 - sometimes pruning is necessary to keep the vine healthy.
2. St. Paul talks about the steps in which we should approach those who need correction.
 - begin with discretion, uphold dignity, be firm in resolution.
3. The Wisdom of Solomon and Proverbs can have very practical applications in the modern day.
 - present consequences that are less palatable than the reality.
 - Expel the arrogant and discord goes too; strife and insult cease. (Proverbs 22:10)

More to come later.