

CHAPTER THREE

The sandlot: How informal groups can play

The game of baseball in the backyard is fun — for a while. But soon a family tires of it. There aren't enough players to make a really good game. It's hard to improve when you're playing with the same small group of people. There's nothing to really work hard for. That is why the game usually drifts over to the sandlot. All the kids who were playing ball in the backyard now come together in a sandlot and have a more spirited, competitive game.

Music needs the same thing. You need the support and the opportunity to grow that the sandlot gives you. The sandlot is any venue for playing and singing that goes beyond your family but is not yet that organized and formal. Everyone is allowed to play on the sandlot and no one sits on the bench.

Extended-family gatherings are a great excuse for singing and playing — birthday parties, baptisms, marriages, Christmas parties, etc. Cousins could bring their instruments and show grandma and grandpa how they are coming along. A family hymn-sing could issue.

The extended-family music time gives your

own family a venue to practice for. Cousins may be competing to keep up with each other on their guitar lessons. At the same time, a rich extended-family singing tradition is being developed — a tradition that will pay off in the future during large family celebrations and crisis times.

Sometimes your extended family is not open to these kinds of things. Maybe half the family is not Christian, or are just into other things, or live so far away that you rarely get together. Then make use of surrogate extended families. These are families nearby who have a family situation like you and also have the same interest in developing music in their families as you.

Once a month, get together with a few families for music. Have an instrument recital. Sing songs. In the summer, do it around the campfire. In the winter, go skiing together and gather in the evenings to sing the songs you have learned by heart over the last year.

Learn from each other. I play the guitar — in fact, I own four of them — and have never paid for lessons. In 1978 I went on a summer mission program that landed me in the middle of nowhere in Nicaragua. Bill Green was my partner, and we each bought a \$10 guitar from the market. Every day we tried to play the guitar. Every day we got a little better. Then,

*Sounds good,
but can we
really do all
this?*

while at seminary in 1980, I started hanging out with Harley Faber, who taught me how to lead singing with the guitar. We played together. Our wives soon joined us, and we formed a band.

Make little bands of all ages and abilities in the sandlot. Being around musicians at your level will keep you from getting either too bored or too discouraged. Bands are fun, they're great for learning music, and they'll connect you to your relatives and neighbors. Most importantly, a band practices not only for its own enjoyment but to eventually play in front of people. And that's the direction we're heading: out of the sandlot and into little league.

CHAPTER FOUR

The little league: How church groups can play

Playing ball in the backyard is fun. Playing ball in the sandlot is exciting. But the better you get at the sport, the more you'll desire to play at a bigger, more organized venue. I remember putting on my first Little League uniform. When I looked in the mirror I saw a baseball player looking back.

This is where the church is uniquely placed in all of society to create such venues. Of course, it has the weekly church service. But for most this is too much of a talent leap. Most are not ready for the major leagues. So why not create the minor leagues?

Most churches used to provide opportunities for minor-league play with monthly hymn sings. Because it was not the Sunday worship service, there was a certain informal freedom to try things — new songs, new instruments. It was a venue where people could come forward and do things they would not feel comfortable doing in the worship service. But this venue for music has all but disappeared. People are not playing the music game in their backyards or sandlots, so the love of the

game has dwindled. When churches try to do a little league event, no one comes.

But if there are strong backyard and sandlots in the church, a “praise sing” can become a popular field for all this musical energy to go to the next level. Families working on songs could come up and sing and play. Informal bands could take turns leading some of the songs. And because this is the little league, the quality does not have to be perfect. A band of seventh graders learning the guitar could come up. A trio of third graders. A quartet of guys who are taking voice lessons.

What if the church had talent night twice a year? Think of the fun and excitement. When my wife and I spent time as missionaries in the Philippines in the early '80s, some of my fondest memories were of the talent nights. I was amazed at what average people ended up doing. Music was often a part of it. The genius of the little league is that it gives motivation for average people to play the game in their life. If there is no place to bring one's talent, then no one works at it.

All the small groups of the church can be possible little league venues. The youth group can be a showcase for all the youth who are learning various instruments, and singing, and harmony. They could make use of music at

every meeting. There could be various youth bands that lead the music at the youth meetings. They could do their own talent nights. They could do a mid-year “praise carol” (like a Christmas carol) where they visit some of the older folks of the community and sing some of the old songs outside their door. They could have singing evangelistic groups in the park. Any of the groups in the church could do the same — young couples, MOPS, Bible study groups, Sunday school, even the nursery.

The church could sponsor a song-writing contest. When my wife and I arrived on Negros Island in the Philippines, we were surprised that our mission was teaching English church songs to the people in the villages. We were told it was because the people liked to sing English. But we quickly learned they liked to sing English for prestige’s sake; it was not the language of their heart. We decided our students should sing in their own language, but the problem was there were no church songs in their language. So we sponsored a song-writing contest among the 40 or so students. The songs they wrote were so great we put them in a book, and some of those same songs are still being sung 18 years later.

If the church holds such a contest every

year, we'll be just as amazed at what comes out of it — individuals, families, and groups of people working in creative and unique ways to produce praise music that will not only honor God, but bring our people closer together. One contest could be for writing special songs to mark special events in our church's history — events that will be remembered year after year with the singing of the song.

The church could hold a music honors ceremony. Philippians 3:17 says to "Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you." Often missed here are the key words "take note." If you want people to grow in a certain area, you have to take note of their progress. We do this in all areas of life — with grades, with promotions, with trophies, with awards and plaques. If we want people to succeed and grow in the music game, we need to find ways to let people know that they are on the right track and progressing forward. Honor all the people learning an instrument. Have a "show and tell" for those making their own guitars. Get creative in what and whom you recognize. Let the church be the one giving out a certificate honoring them for their progress.

The little league is so important. It's at

this level the church leadership has to step to the plate to make things happen. The harder the church works at the minor leagues, the more skilled people will be to participate in the major league — the church service.

CHAPTER FIVE

The major league: How the church can play

Two dollars were burning a hole in my pocket. I was out with the guys, on a long bus ride. I tingled with the anticipation ... the wonder ... the excitement. It was 1967, and our destination was Tiger Stadium, home of the soon-to-be world champion Detroit Tigers. The Little League team I had played for was on a field trip.

I had never been to a professional game. I soaked in the atmosphere of the stadium: The feel of the hard benches. The smell of hot dogs and stale pop. The sounds of laughter and excitement all around. And finally a sight I had never seen before — thousands of people, young and old — a crowd so large they looked like ants making their way up and down the bleachers.

It was a strange feeling. This baseball field was like our baseball field. This baseball team was like our baseball team. This game that was about to be played was the same game we Little Leaguers played. But it was different, too. It was bigger. It was brighter. And it was definitely louder.

The players finally game out. The crowd cheered. We did, too. We were a part of the crowd. Even though we did not know a fraction of those gathered there in historic Tiger Stadium, we all felt part of each other. We didn't need to know much about the people in the crowd. It was enough that they loved the same thing we did.

Not only were we connected in our love for the game, we also felt like our contribution made a difference. If we cheered louder and with more heart, somehow good things happened. And what umpire could possibly get things right without a little help from thousands of distant eyes that could see clearly when it comes to who is safe and who is out?

Not only did we influence the players as they battled on the field, we became the players. When a Tiger got a hit, we all got a hit. When Mickey Stanley slid into second base, we all slid into second base ... headfirst. When Willie Horton hit a home run, we all trotted around the bases to the cheers of adoring fans.

For three hours, the players, the crowd, and I were one. When it was over, we got in the bus and headed for home.

Where is the stadium experience for those playing the game of music? Where can they sit

down with a big crowd and join a group of talented players and feel like they are one? Where can the excitement of big-league play energize them for their daily practice? The church service, of course.

In most churches, the Sunday service is the focus of the music program's energy and resources — but in the farm-team system, the service is just the end product of the behind-the-scenes efforts of the music program. The service is just the final expression of all the effort and enjoyment that has been going on all during the week.

In the church service, all the levels get to play the game. Everyone is brought together. Those who have been learning on their own all week get to experience their music on a bigger scale — when I'm tapping my foot, it's reinforced by the bass drum. When I'm singing the notes, hundreds of others singing along makes for a richer, fuller sound. Even if I'm a little off, I'm still contributing to the overall effect because without slight variances in pitch, a choir would sound like just one person singing. In the service, there's an energy and excitement in the singing, and a sense of coming together and belonging.

For those who have been learning to play in families, small groups, and bands, the service can be a place to honor their efforts. A family

could sing “Silent Night” while they light one of the advent candles. The winner of the song-writing contest could perform the song for the whole congregation. From time to time you could even have Guitar Sunday, where everyone who can play just three chords gets up and leads simple songs. Have an annual Youth Service, Senior Service, or Moms Service. Giving others a small taste of what it’s like on the playing field might motivate them to someday join the big leagues.

For those who will be leading the music, this level is a reward for their hard work and diligence in practicing. It becomes a level in the music program to work toward: Only the best get to lead at the service. At first, this might seem inconsistent with the general philosophy of getting as many people into music as possible. Why not let everyone who is willing participate? But, remember, you don’t get to step up to the plate at a major league baseball game just because you are willing. Nor do we let everyone who is willing to preach give a sermon. There are some smaller steps that lead up to preaching or leading singing in front of the whole congregation. It’s not that you don’t get to play, but you have to play at your own level. If we do away with the levels, then we discourage people from growing in that particular area. If I practice guitar an hour a day, and you

*Phil. 3:17 -
take note
of those
who live
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practice an hour a month, and we both get to lead in the church service, then I will soon become unmotivated because there is no reward for my hard work.

The reward of playing in the service must not be based solely on one's skill, though — sometimes people end up leading music because of their innate talent, but they do not really have a walk with God. Reward people for their ability to worship God with music and help others worship God with music. The prestige of major league play can be used to encourage growing with God as well as in music.

The other important goal of the Sunday service is to help those who are not playing the music game to get involved. It is a chance to advertise the joy of learning music and making it part of daily life. It is a place to give people the tools and motivation to succeed in the backyard. You could teach some aspects of singing right there in the service by having a Part-Singing Sunday where the congregation divides up into the four parts and is taught, one group at a time, how to sing a particular song before you join again to form a choir. You could encourage people to memorize songs choosing a Song of the Month, singing it every Sunday and handing out the lyrics for people to practice, then on the last Sunday of the month

singing it from memory.

The ultimate goal of church is to bring together human beings and God. Music is a tool we use to help cement that connection. Use the same patterns we learned in the backyard for keeping families connected: repeat songs, and tie them to certain events. Try establishing traditions for important times of the church year: Christmas, Lent, Easter, Old Testament festivals, Thanksgiving, etc. Remember that most people who are getting started in music are going to need a lot of repetition before a song sinks in, so make lyrics and tapes available, and don't be afraid to sing a song several weeks in a row. That makes it a together project. Nothing contributes to church unity like one member helping another get close to God.

CHAPTER SIX

The world series:
How many churches can play

We are not a league unto ourselves. Each church does not have to try and do this music thing alone. We are part of the largest organization in the world today. There are more Christians belonging to the church than any other people belonging to any other body. And music is the language of praise for all of them. Yet we often go alone.

What if churches from all over the world were getting people using music in their lives? What if there were online forums and chat rooms where people could connect with others who are trying to teach harmony to their children in their home? What if there were Christian guitar-making guilds that consisted of interested church members around the globe? What if there was a club of Christian songwriters who could share songs they'd written for their churches with every other church on the planet? What if denominations had gatherings in stadiums, where thousands of people of diverse backgrounds could come to praise God in song?

The first steps toward these dreams will be

*Easy to
forget this*

*You are a
big dreamer,
Carl!*

**Battle of the
bands**

small. Begin with a Christian songwriting contest just among the churches in a small city or township. Or have a “battle of the church bands” in your area. Or rent out the town stadium (which may be the high school) and have a Guitar Sunday with 1,000 guitars leading the service. If even this is too hard to organize, get together with a sister church to work on these ideas.

It is easy to get caught up in our small communities and programs and miss the big picture of what God has in store for the church. Ephesians 4:4 (NLT) reminds us that “We are all one body, we have the same Spirit, and we have all been called to the same glorious future.” When we join together, our churches become stronger, “so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.” (verse 16).

Before we get too enthusiastic, though, it’s important we remember not to start out with one of these big events. Churches have tried such efforts in the past with little success. They do not work because we do not have churches filled with players. Spectators, when given another opportunity to go to another big event, can take it or leave it. Players, when given an opportunity to go to a large event where they can interact with other talented players, jump at the chance.

Good point

It all comes back to the backyard. If music is not happening in the backyard, then the farm system breaks down and soon it isn't happening anywhere. The big leagues and the championships might get the most notice, but the key to the long-term success of the sport lies in the backyard: the music game in people's homes. We judge our success by how enthusiastically all the people of the church — especially new people — sing and play their instruments.

Yes!

CHAPTER SEVEN

The \$2 mitt:
How to get newcomers to play

Music is the language of the world. It is a memory catcher. It captures and communicates peoples' hopes and dreams, their joy and sorrow, their passion, their fear, their struggle, their memories, their brokenness and pain, their faith, their desires and wants. It is a powerful emotional force. It connects in a way nothing else does. It communicates, it warms cold hearts, and it finds its way past well-placed barriers to the soul.

Yet most people are content to sit and watch. They buy their CDs and tune into MTV. It is not because they aren't skilled enough to make music. It is because no one ever gave them a \$2 mitt and tossed the ball with them.

The church spends millions of dollars and man-hours each year trying to reach the unchurched, and yet most churches, far from taking advantage of the fact that almost every human being can relate to music and is interested in it, do very little with new people and music. Instead of taking advantage of the power of music, we often let it be a stumbling block. A new person walks in. Songs are sung

he has never heard before. The words, the beat, the pitch patterns are such that he has no emotional memory bank that he can relate them to, so from his point of view they feel flat. The church people don't see this, because their emotional banks are filled with these kinds of songs and think that everyone should be as moved as they are. If the new person keeps coming, no one helps him get up to speed. He is on his own.

Why not get the songs to the new people before they come to church? Put some of the songs on tape. Have people over. Create memories with them with the songs. When they finally come to your service, they will know the songs already. They will get a rush of emotions, finally singing songs they know with a group. All the energy of the past will meet the new energy of the moment, and something may happen at a deeper level.

Or use songs that tap into their past: Churches could have a '50s music service, or '60s, or '70s — who wouldn't be interested in hearing how God relates to their particular taste in music? In every era there are songs about looking for answers, seeking God, or awe of the created world. Sing these songs and show how they point toward fulfillment in relationship with God. Newcomers have 20, 30, or 40 years of layers of memories with these

*You mean
use secular
songs and
redeem
them?*

songs, but probably never considered the deeper meanings beneath the surface.

What if church was the place you went if you wanted to learn music? Already, church is the only venue where average people can go to on a regular basis and participate in music. Let's take advantage of this fact. Let's make it a place where they can find free lessons, used instruments, connections to other musicians, regular practice, and weekly musical inspiration. Let them come for the music first and get to know God in the process. Let them see that you are interested not in just entertaining them, not just trying to impress them, but wanting to help them impress themselves with their own growth. Tossing the ball with them is just one way to show, like my father showed, that we love them.

Don't be afraid to hand over the controls to new people. Often we are afraid to let newcomers really participate because they don't get have enough experience or knowledge to do it the way "we've always done it." But it doesn't take long for a new activity to become boring. It might be fun at first to watch your friend play a new video game, but before long you want to give it a shot. Help new people to become players instead of keepin g them on the bench.

Remember, the power of music is not the

game itself, but its ability to connect people to each other. It's an excuse to come together. If we do not come together with those who don't know Christ, if we instead hold up music as a barrier between us, then all our gifts and time and labor are wasted. "If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge," says Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:2, "but have not love, I am nothing."