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## SAMPLE PAGES

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# A SECRET CHORD: MUSIC AND MISSION

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STEPHEN HANCE



presently serve in the National Church Institutions of the Church of England as part of the Vision and Strategy Team, with responsibility for supporting our churches in their vital work of mission and evangelism. Getting to this point has been an interesting journey. Prior to this, I was dean of Derby, one of our smaller cathedrals that nevertheless punches above its weight in many ways, not least in music and mission. I have also been director of mission for the diocese of Southwark, canon missioner at Southwark Cathedral, and a parish priest, mainly as vicar of Ascension Balham, an open evangelical church in southwest London, where I served for over 13 years.

Mission has been at the heart of all those roles, and music of various types has been central to many of them: for example, through jazz evensongs in Derby, or Eucharists carefully planned to connect with the folk festival, or at Ascension where we ran a series of outreach events under the title of Café Church, and at which music anywhere from Radiohead to John Coltrane would be performed and then explored as a pathway to connect with God.

All this reflects some of my own spiritual journey. As anyone who has visited my home knows, music is central to my life; there is a room filled with under-utilized instruments, and another with wall-to-wall vinyl. Much more than a hobby, music has always been for me a way to the soul, a way to the divine, a way of connecting with God: from the Beatles records I heard as a child and still love, to the hymns of my Baptist upbringing, to the contemporary worship songs of parish life, through to the gift that was the discovery of cathedral music when worship songs had lost their power for me. I have experienced God in churches and cathedrals, in cityscapes and countryside, but also in concert halls and blues clubs. Music, faith and mission: those connections have always been integral to me.

### THE SECRET CHORD

In his best-known song, *Hallelujah*, Leonard Cohen (1934–2016) wrote: ‘Now I’ve heard there was a secret chord that David played, and it pleased the Lord’. He goes on to describe the chord sequence as being a fourth, a fifth, a minor fall and a major lift.

Cohen was a Jewish poet, novelist, songwriter and performer, whose life and work was strongly influenced by an interest in Christianity – especially

the person of Jesus – and the practices of Buddhism, all without abandoning his own faith tradition. Something about his writing and his performing touched and moved people from many faith backgrounds and none. I remember, after seeing him perform, talking to my then director of music about why it was that his music affected me at a spiritual level in a way that most of the songs we were then singing in the parish did not. There was a depth there that made many of our songs seem trite. On the one occasion I met Cohen, I asked him why he thought people were so moved at his concerts. ‘The spirit is with us, Stephen, the spirit is with us,’ he said. To which I replied, ‘I think you are right.’ When the spirit is with us, music touches us at a level that words rarely do.

But what about my title, this ‘secret chord’? What is that all about? The song perhaps confuses us because what Cohen talks about isn’t a chord at all, but a chord sequence: the fourth, the fifth, the minor fall, the

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*We want to be a church that is younger and more diverse, and music is a crucial part of that plan*

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major lift (which is the sequence used at this part of the song). But a chord, as you know, is a combination of notes, played together to create a harmony. So perhaps a secret chord is an unexpected or rarely used combination of notes, one that we might not think works, and yet somehow does.

And that takes us to the second part of my title, ‘music and mission’. I want to argue that music and mission are a kind of secret chord, a combination that lots of us have missed and that can be extraordinarily powerful when combined. We think of music as being to do with worship, which is something that Christians do within our worship communities, while mission is something we do to engage with those who are not part of our worshipping communities. But the beauty of connecting music and mission is that music draws all of us, wherever we might be on our faith journey, towards God: it becomes a way to encounter God and puts us all on a level playing field. Through music, the Spirit of God invites us all to come further on and further in, no matter what our starting point.

Left: Leonard Cohen. Reproduced under the Creative Commons. Rama.



### THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND VISION FOR THE 2020s

The Church of England exists to be a church in every place for every person, serving people without exception and pointing them to Jesus. This has recently been expressed in our Vision for the 2020s, from which three strategic priorities flow, and which is illustrated in the graphic opposite.

It starts with Jesus at the centre. But what strikes me is the fact that all three priority mission areas have a strong relationship with music.

For example, we want to be a church of missionary disciples. This flows from the Great Commission that Jesus left the eleven at the end of his earthly ministry (Matthew 28.18–20).

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

We are called to be disciples. Of course, to be a disciple is to be a worshipper, someone who puts Jesus first in all things and lives life for him, and yes, someone who gives God praise. One of the most important reasons we gather in church is to offer our worship to God, and we do that in part through music. But we are also called to make disciples, and so our concern is not just to offer our own songs of worship to God, but to make it possible for others to do the same.

We also want to be a church that is younger and more diverse, and music is a crucial part of that plan. Diversity is of course about education, background, economic status, ethnicity, gender, age, and lots of other things that we might group together under the heading ‘culture’. One of the most important aspects of culture is music, which is a powerful cultural signifier.

So, if we want to reach some under-represented cultural groups, we need new music. I don’t buy the argument that if you want to draw more young people to church then you need a worship band; cathedral congregations are growing among the young. And yet, it is true that, if we want to attract people who are different to those we already have, we will have to think about what music will help that cause. Whether it’s a worship group, a cathedral choir, or a laptop with iSingPOP on it, our music shapes who we attract and who we repel.

Our third priority for the 2020s is to be a church in which a mixed ecology is the norm. In other words,

a church that explicitly recognizes that one size doesn’t fit all and that there is no new approach to common worship that is going to attract or work for everybody. We need the best choral worship we can offer and the most welcoming prayer groups meeting in the coffee shop. We need the most chaotic singing of ‘toddler church’, and the super-tight worship group leading people into extended times of praise. We need it all. That’s what the mixed ecology means.

Obviously, this has implications for music. It means that one approach won’t do. So, while the Vision for the 2020s doesn’t specifically reference music, the fact is that approaches to music and mission are implied throughout.

### MAKING THE SECRET CHORD REAL

That’s the theory. What about the practice? How do we play this secret chord so that it does what it should? A lot could be said on the subject, but I will make just five points.

First, it’s not about the music most of all, but about God. Now, I will caveat this in a moment, but perhaps you have had an experience working with a church musician who cared a great deal about music but did not seem that interested in God. Music is chosen by this person to demonstrate the technical dexterity of their musicians rather than helping the congregation to engage with God. Hymns or songs that the congregation can sing well are discarded on the basis that they are too simple or too old.

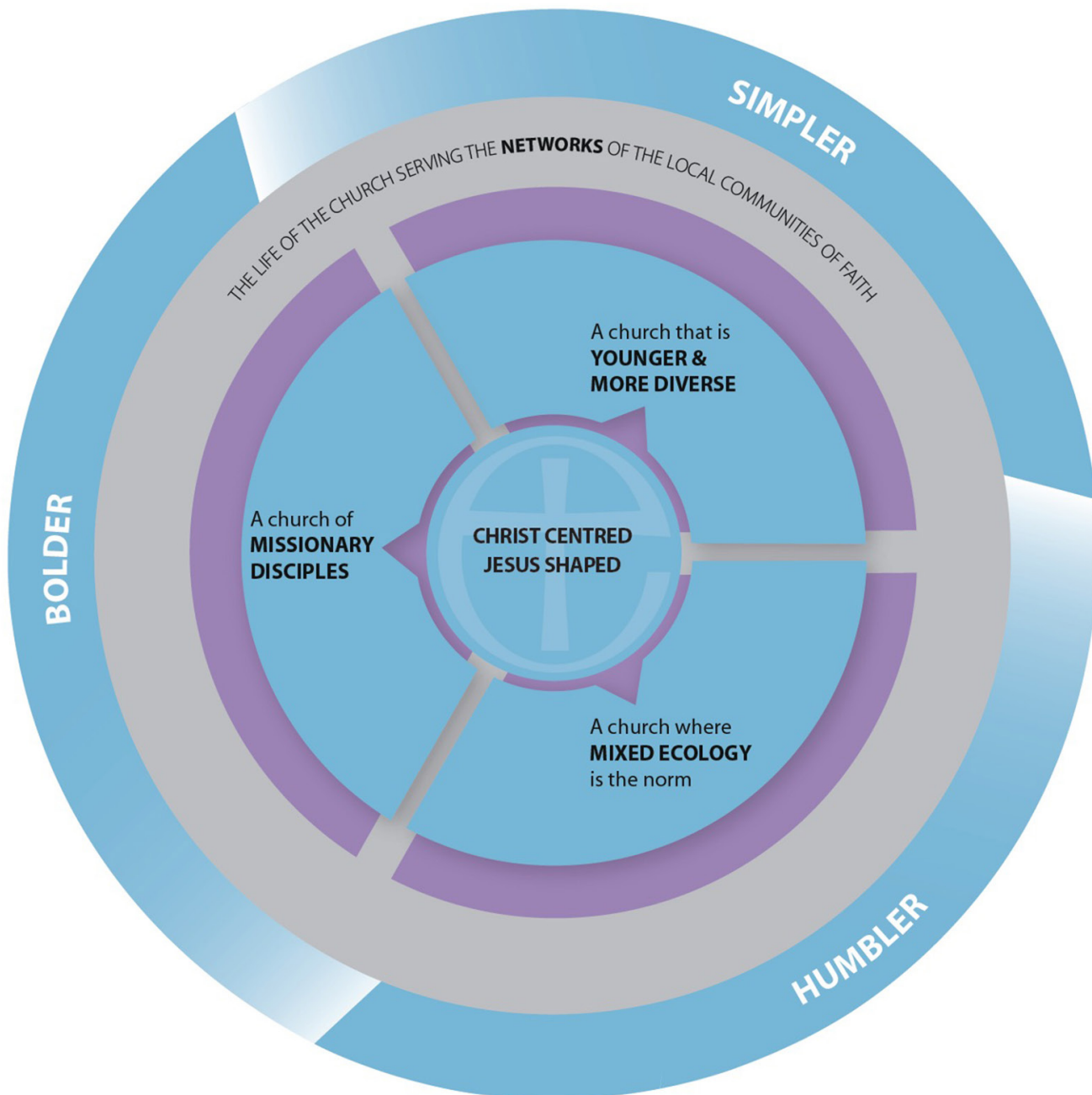
But the secret chord of music and mission depends on putting God at the centre of it all. Mission is, as wiser people than I have said, about ‘finding out what God is doing and joining in’. Worship and discipleship are all about God, too. If we lose that Godward focus then we may have something beautiful and impressive, but we won’t have mission. The music is secondary. Only God and God’s glory are primary.

My second point is that quality matters. I don’t know if you have ever had someone say to you after a piece of worship music has gone particularly badly, ‘Ah well, it only says to make a joyful *noise* to the Lord!’ I confess, that makes me want to scream, especially if it is used as an excuse for not practising properly.

Of course, the intent matters at least as much as the execution. And if we try to do something at the limits of our abilities that doesn’t quite come off, we shouldn’t beat ourselves up about it but should instead celebrate the ambition. But the ambition should always be to give our best. And this is important for at least two reasons. First, because, as we have established, our church music is for God, and God deserves our best. And second, because it’s important

# A VISION FOR THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND IN THE 2020s

A CHURCH FOR ALL PEOPLE IN ALL PLACES  
... a Christian vision for every person ...  
... a Christian vision for the world ...



"If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation"  
(2 Corinthians 5:17)

for mission. Beautiful music, however simple, can draw people into God's presence. If we put in no effort, why should we expect people from outside our worshipping communities to be interested?

My third point is about inclusion. It's about inclusion. What I mean is that music has the great capacity to draw in people who are not currently committed Christians, but who are talented musicians, and who may find, if they are allowed to put their gifts into church music, that faith emerges.

I think of Chris, who played the bass guitar, and who probably wouldn't have come to church all that often on his own account. We asked him into the worship team, and, over time, faith became real to him too. I think also of the choristers at Derby Cathedral, who came from many faith traditions and none, but who were there week in and week out, sharing in the worship and the liturgy, hearing the Bible readings and the prayers, and, during their 'choir in context' sessions, having some of what they were singing explained to them. Who knows what impact that has on a life? I think we need to start speaking more about choirs as ways of engaging children and young people in the life of the Church and the journey of faith. They can be just as formative as Sunday school or youth group.

Fourth, this secret chord of music and mission is about people development. Again, church and cathedral choirs are masterful at this. It isn't just about what a person is already, it's about what they could become. It's about working with potential and enabling growth.

I've seen this in the parish where I attend and help – St Leonard's in Streatham. Streatham is a resolutely ungentrified and unglamorous bit of south London, perhaps best known for having won an award some years ago for the ugliest high street in Britain. Harsh, perhaps, but fair – and I say that as a resident. St Leonard's is a thoroughly ordinary inner-urban church. It's a little bit catholic, but not really; a little bit evangelical, but not that much; a building with beautiful bits, except for the hideous cladding from the 1960s. And we have a congregation that looks like the area: young and old, black and white, outwardly normal and then, well, not so much. You get the picture.

Except that attendance at this church has doubled over the five years the present rector has been in post. The rector hasn't done anything left-field or wacky but has instead invested in doing what we do to the best of our abilities, especially the music and the liturgy. The present music director has built a wonderful choir through hard work and skilful

networking, and the music on a Sunday morning is always excellent. We now have a children's choir, too. It's all about the right level of investment in people, in helping them to discover and develop their skills and talents. In the Christian world we have a word for this. We call it discipleship. 'Make disciples,' Jesus said. And, as we enable people to discover what they have inside them and to grow through hard work and practice, that's what we are doing.

Fifth, this secret chord is about variety and accessibility, and accessibility is dependent on variety; not variety in any one church, necessarily, but variety across the Church. We live in a culture that is fragmented and diverse. What radio stations do you listen to? You probably have one or two favourites. And, given my subject matter, I am probably being read by a lot of Radio 3 listeners. This may shock you, but most people never listen to Radio 3 at all. Now, that's not to say that the Church shouldn't offer worship that appeals to a Radio 3 audience. But Radio 3 worship shouldn't be the only thing the Church offers if we want to engage in mission with the people of this nation. We need Classic FM, Radio 2 and Radio 1 worship. We need Jazz FM and Kiss FM worship.

I am not arguing for dumbing down. I want the Church to offer music for worship that is as challenging as it can be, but not just of one or two styles. And I am not arguing for blended worship: for different approaches in the same church or service. If you have the musical resources to allow you to offer music in multiple styles, then praise God. But most of us don't, and there is nothing worse than trying to deliver a musical offering that is neither authentic to us, nor of the quality we could manage in another style.

We should be investing in and supporting the development of high-quality creative music for worship in every style that we can imagine, or at least every style that connects with significant numbers of people in our nation today, be that our glorious choral tradition or electronic dance music.

So, that's my secret chord: music and mission. Music that is God-centred; music of high quality; music that is inclusive and diverse and that makes disciples. And, like the secret chord that David played, this too pleases the Lord.