



Soon after a program revamping by the Music department at Mississippi College, Dr. Will Bishop was named the first director of the newly established Worship Leadership Program. With musical tastes that ran the gamut from the blues to church hymns from the Renaissance, Bishop brought an eclectic and varied musical background in addition to his passion for the new program that blends both traditional and contemporary church music with ministry studies and biblical studies. He also radically expanded the ensemble offerings, including the MC Worship Collective, whose original songs have now been shared worldwide with thousands of listeners.

PROFESSOR SPOTLIGHT

Worship Leadership at Mississippi College

Constructing a Degree in Worship Leadership

In 2015, Mississippi College launched a new bachelor's degree in worship leadership, along with a curriculum designed to meet the challenges of the 21st century music ministry by incorporating skills needed for adapting to contemporary styles of music and advances in worship technology.

The curriculum includes music courses, music technology, and a course on popular music and society. In addition, the program includes conducting, a seminar in worship leading, and a required internship at a local church. The worship studies minor includes classes such as church administration, music education techniques for young children and teenagers, youth ministry, and biblical hermeneutics.

In their revamping of its degree program, the MC Music Department was working to reflect the changes they saw in trends affecting churches across the nation. They wanted to ensure their graduates were fully prepared to serve in any worship setting upon graduation.

As a response to the needs of a changing church, Bishop understood that what's "best for your church" can change from season to

season. He also knew students must build their social media skills in order to promote church activities and share their messages, while blending musical, ministerial, and biblical/theological training.

Shepherding Through Song

In addition to serving for seven years as associate minister of worship at Mobberly Baptist Church in Longview, Texas—and leading over 100 students at Mobberly's Academy of Performing Arts—Bishop was a faculty member of East Texas Baptist University for several years. He was the perfect fit to take the Workshop Leadership Program to new heights.

While most of the students in the program have a musical background, Bishop explains that being an effective worship leader is about more than being a gifted musician or vocalist. "At its core," he explains, "worship is the act of loving God." Thus, worship leaders must love God and also love people in order to effectively shepherd those they lead.

Filling a Unique Space

The program is built around three key concepts: First, the most important part of the program

is for students to recognize that submitting to God is the only way to use all of their potential; secondly, knowing and following God's word is crucial, for the theology of a church is set by the music as much as the sermon—with worship leaders as "gatekeepers for the theology of their church"; finally, the program emphasizes servanthood, so they stay focused on serving each other rather than seeking personal affirmation or ego boosting.

Because he views worship as always about God first and foremost, Bishop doesn't focus on the style of music, for that's not what matters most. The idea is not to encourage people to focus on the greatness of a song, but to encourage the performers and their audience to focus on the greatness of the God they are serving.

He tells his students, "We need songs that are full of God's word...and interesting...and creative." So, he encourages them to be "different" or even be "weird," as long as they are approaching the song with an open heart and a desire to share the gospel. "You don't have to be like everyone else," he tells them, challenging them to write and produce songs that are "filling a unique space."



Bishop believes worship leaders learn best through practice, which is why—rather than investing in travel as many schools do—he asks his students to volunteer their time and talents to local churches, or at their home churches during breaks and vacations, or to seek out events near the college where they have an opportunity to serve.

The MC Worship Collective

The primary worship music ensemble of Mississippi College, the MC Worship Collective—which represents students of many majors—is focused on both performing music and developing original songs.

With a passion for songwriting himself, Bishop wanted that creative, personal element to be a hallmark of the program, so he met with any students interested in learning more about the art of writing music.

In 2018, he organized a retreat for a dozen budding songwriters, and—though he expected

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maybe one or two songs to result from their collaboration—the students wrote ten outstanding pieces of music. Within just three months of sharing seven original songs to streaming services, they had more than 40,000 downloads with listeners from ten countries.

Authentic Worship

In their performances on campus or at local churches, The Worship Collective is sharing the gospel, balancing their faith and music in a way that is unique to Mississippi College.

Bishop wants them to create music that’s “biblically rich and musically interesting.”

In October 2019, the Worship Collective released their third album, “Portrait of Grace,” with nine new songs—following up on “Glory’s Streets” in 2018 and “All For Thee” in May of 2019. Their fanbase has been expanding quickly. Currently, their songs have been streamed over 85,000 times in nearly 40 countries.

One of their fans, in fact, is the new president of Mississippi College, Dr. Blake Thompson, who invited The Worship Collective to perform



at his inauguration. Perhaps even more importantly, President Thompson has worked with Bishop to reinvent “Chapel” meetings, a requirement for all MC students, so they could bring music, joy, and a much-needed diversity to the events to ensure all MC students felt welcomed and embraced.

Open Ears and an Open Heart: Appreciating All Styles of Worship

Dr. Bishop made it a priority when he came to MC to increase the racial diversity in the worship ensembles that he leads. One of his students, Maya Thompson, told him that non-white students were not involved because the music program and the Chapel services did not seem to be about them.

In particular, Thompson noted that during the Chapel services, the speakers, musicians, and singers were almost unfailingly white. Thompson states, “I remember other black students coming up to me saying, ‘Why aren’t you pushing for songs that we can worship to?’” She felt terrible, she adds, because she knew she needed to be a voice for them, but she didn’t know how to be heard until Dr. Bishop asked her directly.

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She recalls, “We talked for maybe an hour and some about incorporating gospel into Worship Collective and it happened. It’s amazing to see the different faces of worship collective and the different styles of singing. Dr. Bishop’s open ears and open heart has brought a true meaning to ‘Worship Collective.’”

As a result of that conversation, Bishop developed another worship ensemble—the MC Gospel Collective—which currently boasts a membership of twenty-five students, twenty in the choir and five in the band. The students are a mix of races: Caucasian, African-American, and Hispanic.

The MC Gospel Collective performs some of the older gospel pieces, some modern gospel, and are currently working on a few songs in Spanish to share with local Spanish-speaking churches.

Quite deliberately, Bishop produced a gospel group that would blend the lines between “White Church” and “Black Church” to create something whole and full—people connected by a common purpose.

In a beautifully restored and updated 1920s church on the MC campus, Bishop’s students can rehearse and perform their music every week in God’s house. The church has the original stained glass windows and oak pews, but with modern sound and lights.



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Reinventing Chapel Services

In 2019, Mississippi College hired Cassidy Crenshaw, the worship pastor at Pinelake Church in Clinton, Mississippi, as an adjunct music professor. Crenshaw coaches the newly formed Chapel Band, training students for

musical performances and offering encouragement on their song selections.

Crenshaw first met Bishop in 2013, both students at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, and they reconnected in Clinton a few years later when Crenshaw became

Pinelake's worship pastor. Bishop had been thinking of ways to strengthen the chapel programs and the worship on campus when he reunited with his old friend, and he saw the ways he equipped the young church-goers at Pinelake to become effective leaders.

Crenshaw shares that one of the aspects of Bishop's character he loves most is the way he operates within an academic world while his scope of influence reaches beyond any constraints of academia. He notes that Bishop has "a pastor's heart," in that while he works to inform the mind, he's "far more concerned with the soul—with the shepherding and shaping of people."

Bishop's history is pastoring, Crenshaw states, and he remains actively involved with local churches, whether he's leading with his students, subbing for another minister, or serving in an interim role. "Will never stops learning," he explains. "I love grabbing lunch with him or spending time with him because our conversation is always a two-way street: there's mutual challenge and encouragement in every encounter."

Having grown up in Mississippi, Crenshaw has long-hoped to see a prestigious, respected program developed for worship leaders within his home state, and he believes Bishop is the reason he can be part of this movement now. He shares, "There's no doubt about it: this program has seen its success because of Will's God-given vision and his gifting to recruit, develop, and lead the pastors of today and tomorrow."

In planning for the upcoming fall, Bishop has been asking himself, "What kind of needs can we meet?" He wants the ensemble to serve as a campus ministry and a "force for good," as they continue to grow. He is not concerned with their majors—all are welcome to participate—because he tells them he wants them to also be leaders in their churches one day, wherever their lives and careers may take them, and wherever God may place them.



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