



Jazz Musicians in a Pop Music World:
A Conversation with Joe Scrivner
April 29, 2026

Mark Ramsey: Friends, this is Mark Ramsey of the Ministry Collaborative, and I'm here with my colleagues, Jennifer Watley Maxell, Amy Valdez Barker, and one of our regulars, Joe Scrivner. Welcome to all, and especially to you, Joe. Joe, can you just say a bit about where you are located in your multiple-faceted ministry?

Joe Scrivner: Sure. That's one nice way to put it. I serve as Dean of Chapel at Stillman College, and as pastor of Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church. They are next door to each other in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

Mark: Great. A few weeks ago, you wrote an article on our platform entitled "Sober Judgment", which we really appreciated, where you used the movie *No Country for Old Men* as a springboard to talking about challenges in ministry. Something to say right off the bat: this is not going to be a movie review, but we do want to talk about the essential elements you lifted from that, and dropped into ministry today. Can you say a little bit about why, and then we'll take it from there?

Joe: Sure. Well, I love the sheriff character played by Tommy Lee Jones, and he represents somebody who knows his job very well. He's seen a lot of things, but he's overwhelmed as the criminal element is getting, in his view, worse and worse, and harder to manage. The movie starts with his narration about the good old days, and then as it develops, he ends up confessing that he feels overmatched. And so, I thought there was a lot about his character that resonates with our work in ministry. There are forces larger than what we control. We feel like there are too many things pulling against what we're trying to do in church. And sometimes, if we're honest, we're not quite sure which way to turn, or how to best manage what we're going through. So, I just really appreciated those points of connection.

Jennifer Watley Maxell: I think you're spot on when you talk about that feeling overmatched and overwhelmed. I hadn't seen the movie when I read your article, but I did go back and watch the movie. And, I think, to me, what is palpable throughout the movie is the increasing overwhelm that the sheriff feels over time. And you really do get that sense of hopelessness and despair, and almost like a spinning of the wheels. He's moving, and he's investigating, and he's doing things, but it's obvious he feels like he's not making progress. But what's interesting in the movie is he actually is making progress. Even though, according to his narration and the conversation, he doesn't feel that way.

What it really caused me to ask was, what really is our job and what is it that we're really supposed to be doing? Because I think part of what leads us to feeling overwhelmed is kind of feeling like we have to show up and be everything to all people, speak to all the issues, be at all the community gatherings, be there for everybody in the community, when, really, I think moments like these can really help us to kind of dial down and more center on, "Okay, what is the work that we are called to do in this place? What does this particular community need at the time?"

Amy Valdez Barker: Yeah. I appreciate, too, that you did bring in the scriptural passages reminding us in the article, talking about Moses asking God, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight?" And then even going to Elijah, you know, feeling like he was all alone. So

it, to me, is one of those reminders of the history – of our human history. Here we are, always thinking we’re trying to do the right thing. And every time we lean into it, it seems like there’s one thing after another, sort of beating us down, and we sit here wondering, “Why me, God? What do I have to bring to this? Am I making any progress at all in mission and ministry?” And you just feel overwhelmed. Yeah, overmatched, as you noted.

Joe: Right. As a preacher’s joke, I’ve wondered if Moses thought, “You know, I should have just kept walking when I saw that burning bush. Things were good. I had a family and a good job. I should have just kept walking.”

Amy: For real.

Joe: And then, in Exodus 32, you know, sort of humorous in retrospect, of course, but God’s ready to quit. And Moses is like, “Wait a minute. You can’t do that.” And I think being able to identify it – and to you all’s point, so when you feel that way, “Okay; let me center, let me focus, let me realize that sometimes less is more. Let me be clear about what’s in my lane, and what’s in other people’s lane.” So, I think those stories in the Bible and movie analogies can always help us center and refocus – make sure we’re doing the things that are most important.

Mark: It seems to me that the refocusing is the issue, which I think we’ve all lifted up. I was at a large gathering last week of ministry leaders, and the person who convened us started – you know, well-meaning, but started with a sigh and said, her opening words were, “We all know we’re living in challenging times.”

And the thought occurred, “When’s the first day from now forward that we’re not going to say that?” Is there ever going to be a day where we’re not going to say, “We’re living in challenging times?” And if there’s not a day, and I can’t see a day, at least as I look out on the landscape of my future where I’ll ever be able to say that, then isn’t it time to recalibrate our expectations and our needs? Because, frankly, I’ve gotten tired of people telling me “We live in challenging times and everyone is stressed and tired.” Even though that is true, man; time to move to a different frame of view. And that’s what I heard through your article, Joe.

Joe: Yeah. It’s the story of David, you know. When David mourns and he sits in sackcloth and ashes, then there’s a certain point where he stops mourning, and he changes his clothes, and washes his face, and has to move forward. And so, whatever grief we may be feeling, whatever sense of being overwhelmed, there’s a point where you have to take your break, refresh, do whatever you need to do, and then say, “Okay, here’s what I’m going to do. This is the way I’m going to tackle what’s in front of me.”

Jennifer: Yeah. And I think you raise a great point in terms of what our grief practices are. What is our restoring work? What are our refreshing practices? And I think about, during the Civil Rights movement, there was a lot of intentionality about the community coming together – not only to strategize, but also to worship together, to lift spirituals, and sing hymns together, and to fellowship together, and to laugh together amidst all the work that must be done. And I think part of what has happened, despite so many recent efforts, is that ministry is still a very isolating and lonely place for a lot of people. And, I think really identifying – to your point, Joe – not just the feeling and what is happening in context, but then also what are our go-tos? What are those Scriptures that we lift? And, in our context, who are those people and what are the rituals that we share in together?

And, I don't think we have a lot of community rituals. It's something that I've been thinking about a lot as we look at our work at Ministry Collaborative in the way we do our cohorts. What are the rituals that we establish for our cohorts and in community that help us to be able to process and navigate and hold all of these very big emotions and things in tension? I was thinking the other day that the Pandemic was six years ago. And I'm wondering, like, "What did we learn? What was that all about?" Like, "What have we taken forward?" Because in a lot of ways, it seems like we're kind of just repeat, repeat, repeat where we were back then.

Amy: Yeah. I echo that, Jennifer. And I wonder why we get into that routine? Why is it that we continuously go back to that space of, "Woe is me. Oh my, the world is continuing to fall apart every year"? It's not even a gap of time between the Pandemic and now, but again, historically in the Bible, every time we just get to these places where people are constantly saying, "Woe is me." When can we turn? What are the rituals that we can turn to?

I love that you pointed out, in the article, back to Paul in Corinthians, where he's reminding us, "We have this treasure in clay jars", so that it may be clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God, and does not come from us. I want to lean into that extraordinary power that belongs to God. How do we invite pastors and leaders, and even the people who do show up at church and who don't show up at church, into something greater and more mysterious and hopeful? How do we get people to lean into something that has that extraordinary power that they just can't touch in our everyday lives?

Joe: I was looking up Nehemiah 8: "This day is holy to the Lord. Do not mourn or weep. The joy of the Lord is your strength." And there's songs like James Cleveland, "I Don't Feel Noways Tired." Well, I think you sing that when you feel tired, and you keep singing it until you feel refreshed. And so, I think also with Nehemiah, to remember, you know, the joy of the Lord is my strength. I do have this vessel, this wonderful Gospel, this Good News, and I'm going to resist being beaten down and torn down and turned negative and turned ugly and turned unkind. The joy of the Lord is my strength. I will proclaim. It is good news. We do have something to say, and to be refreshed and insist on proclaiming that good news in the midst of everything around us.

Mark: Yeah. Our friend and colleague, Tom Long, likes to say that preachers are in the news division of the church. And that's the news. And I hear that in your question, Jennifer, "What are we to proclaim even if we don't feel it?" And what do we proclaim as an individual; but what do we lend our voice to a community to proclaim? Community is a wonderful thing because, if I'm not feeling it, hopefully I'll surround myself with people who are feeling it, and they can proclaim it until I get my voice back; and I'll do the same for them. In your article, Joe, you say, "They were reminded that God is faithful to empower and sustain...through all ministry's countless challenges." Do we believe that? And can we believe that as a community?

I also, by the way, love the line from the movie, "It ain't all waiting on you, that's vanity." Man, do I work myself into the feeling that it's all up to me, and my mood is everybody's mood, and my convictions are everybody's convictions, and my frailties are everybody's frailties. No.

Joe: No.

Jennifer: You know, I think part of the reason why it's such a big challenge, Mark, is because the things that we're talking about, we don't have great ways of quantifying and reporting them in ministry. And let's be honest: most of us, our job description and what we do every day is driven by those dad-blasted

reports that we have to submit, that tells us how many butts in the seats, what's the budget, how many people have joined, how many people have left. Like, there's all these things that we use to quantify. I'm an AME and, goodness knows, an AME church, every year, you literally have to do your annual report. And nobody asks in the annual report about the quality of ministry. Nobody asks you how many families you sat with in grief. They don't ask you what your communal rituals are. And so, I think part of it is, as leaders and clergy leaders, we have to come up with our own, I'll say, "rubric of success." What does it mean to have successful ministry in church? And we get to say what that is for us, which means, if we're able to turn the tide, as it were, in our communities, and to help our people be a little bit more hopeful, we get to name that as a value for ourselves.

I think part of what Tommy Lee's character is struggling with in the movie, is how does he name for himself what he's up against? It's some facets, it's a failure of language to even be able to put in the words what he's experiencing so that he can get to the other side and – shameless plug, I think that's kind of what we're looking at in our storytelling cohorts: really drilling down and looking at what is our story as individuals, what is our community story, and then what is the largest story that God is telling, and what is the through line? In my mind, that's kind of the basics of ministry. But I think so much of what we do is so far away from that, that maybe trying to get a little bit closer to the through line helps us get to this other side, and be able to sustain a little bit longer.

Joe: You know, sometimes in our preaching, we see mega-churches on social media and on the internet, and many of those people are very talented. And sometimes we have to be content that we are like jazz musicians in a pop-music world. So, there's Bruno Mars, who's packing stadiums; and then you're somewhere in a small night venue with 35, 50 people playing your saxophone and your improvisations, and they love it and you're talented, and you got to be okay, that might be your niche, and it's okay.

Jennifer: I love that.

Amy: Yeah. I love that. And, also pointing back to, sort of, Romans 12, and recognizing that we each have our thing to do. Each of us have our calling for that, and we have been individually gifted for each of those places. So, I really appreciate you saying that, Joe. I'm curious to hear: what is your story of hope, success, that you offer for pastors today?

Joe: Well, I think to Jennifer's point, and the point we've all made, we are encouraging people. We are touching people. We are uplifting people, and people depend on us, and they look to see us. I visited somebody in the hospital and somebody told me later, the person said, "That's my pastor." So, people are looking for us and depend on us.

I preach for chapel sometimes and every now and then a student will say, "I needed to hear that." And so, you just need those little moments. Sometimes it's one church member. I jokingly say, you can preach your heart out and somebody will say, "Uh, your stole was crooked."

Mark: I know.

Joe: And so, that one church member who will send you a text message and say, "Thank you for that message today." So, you get little signs to encourage you and remind you: you are contributing and you are touching people and making a difference.

Mark: And I do think there needs, to be to that point: all ministry is relational. It has to be. That's something we say at TMC all the time: "We're going to be relentlessly relational in how we approach this." And that means, you use the phrase, "moving forward". We move forward together. We move forward in relationship. And relationships are messy and uneven. The body of Christ is, too, but we do it together, trusting God. And also, if we are together, we can challenge all these assumptions.

Jennifer, to your point, I mean, I filled out 35 annual reports for my denomination. And toward the end, I use them as a creative act of fiction. Let's just make some stuff up, because I knew no one was going to read them, and no one was going to do anything other than crunch the numbers, and it spoke nothing to spiritual vitality. We have the power, given to us by God in ministry, to challenge those tepid assumptions about what brings vitality to ministry, and follow the Spirit. And, Joe, you really helped us get there, and so thank you.

Joe: Well, thank you. I appreciate the discussion, and I appreciate the opportunity to use a crazy movie to think about our calling.