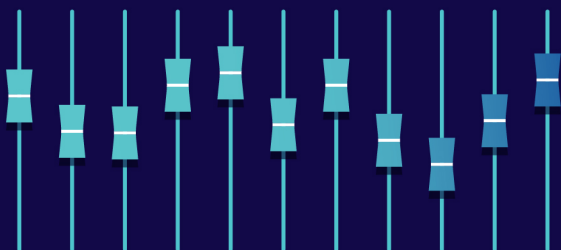


I LOVE JESUS

BUT I HATE CHRISTMAS

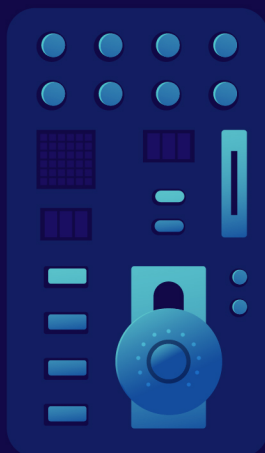


TACKLING THE CHALLENGES OF
BEING A CHURCH TECHNICAL ARTIST



W. TODD ELLIOTT

founder of the *FIL0 Conference*



I LOVE JESUS BUT I HATE CHRISTMAS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Who knew it was so difficult to write a book? This has been a very long journey that started back in 2006. What started as simply writing down ideas in a document from time to time, then moved into writing a blog, has turned into a full-blown book. Why has it taken so long? Because. (Stop asking questions!)

In reality, it has required a huge support system for me to be disciplined enough to get this done. As the FILO Conference has grown from a small experiment in 2015 to multiple events in 2020, the FILO team has also grown and become a huge reason why we are finally crossing the finish line.

To the FILO Core Team, whether you've been directly involved in the book process, you have all helped to make this happen. Joanne, Dave, Aubrey, Cassie, Caleb, Delwin, Sarah, Nate, Jodi, Chelsea, words cannot express how much you all mean to me! A huge shout out to Chelsea who really provided the structure necessary for me to get my act in gear long enough to get to this point.

Thank you to all of my friends who helped read through this and give me such solid, constructive feedback to make the book as good as possible. I believe everything gets better with honest critique, and I so appreciate what each of you brought to help make the best resource possible for the FILO tribe.

Going back further in time with my thank yous, so much of what I learned about what I believe to my core, I learned from my time at Kensington Community Church and then had reinforced while I was on staff at Willow Creek Community Church. Mark, Steve, Kristin, thanks for taking a chance on someone without real experience and then teaching me how to become an adult and a leader. To then move to Willow Creek and be given a chance to lead in some pretty amazing situations was an experience of a lifetime.

To my parents for being such good examples of hard work and excellence. And for supporting me when I told you I didn't want to be an engineer, but I wanted to go work at a start-up church that met in a junior high school.

To my wife, Bissy, for being willing to go where we felt God was leading us at each turn. Working at a startup church in freezing cold Michigan. Moving to Chicago. Quitting my job. Starting a conference. You must be crazy! Thanks for loving me and supporting me through it all. I'm so glad I get to share life with you. To my kids whom I love so much. You didn't really help write the book, but thanks for being proud of your pops, poppi and/or buddy.

Finally to Ryan Morrill who came up with this book title back in 2002. Who knew it would become an actual book!

INTRODUCTION

Gear is easy. When I buy a new piece of equipment, it comes with an owner's manual. If I am trying to figure out what equipment to buy, I can usually find literature, a magazine article, or some other tech person who can help me figure out what I need.

What about dealing with the life I have chosen as a production person? A technical artist? Where can I go to learn how to be all that God has created me to be—a so-called techie? Where is the manual that helps me navigate the relationship with my music director? Or where can I learn how to deal with last minute changes that always seem to come my way?

As the title of this book states, I love Jesus, but why do I hate Christmas? For years, I wondered if I was doing something wrong. Was there something wrong with me? Have you ever had that thought cross your mind, yet you didn't dare express it because how could anyone hate Christmas?

It turns out, you're not alone.

Regardless of the size of the congregation or how big your budget is, there are challenges we all face in the tech world, and yet there are very few places to turn for help or answers. We all struggle with not having enough money, with church leadership that doesn't understand our world, with working too many hours at Christmas time ... OK, working too many hours all the time!

How can we navigate all these issues? Or are these struggles just the way it has to be? Since we all deal with them, it might seem like we have no choice. Yet, I believe we are called to change the world through the use of the technical arts in the local church, and that won't happen if we are constantly feeling victimized by the very churches we are called to serve.

I once led a discussion with about 20 technical artists from various churches near Calgary, Alberta, where we talked about issues technical ministries deal with. Halfway through the day, a couple of guys came up to me and said that everything we were talking about didn't apply to them. I'm sure I looked shocked.

They went on to tell me they served at a portable church and had many

practical questions they wanted answered. It would have been crazy for them not to take advantage of a room full of other technical people from their city who could help them with their equipment issues.

When they finally asked their question, it was about whether or not to use electric drums. While this is a valid question, they weren't really asking about what equipment was right for their church. Their real issue was that their drummer played too loudly for the room, and no one wanted to talk to him about it. That has nothing to do with the difference between electric or acoustic drums. Many of the most difficult challenges we face as technical artists rarely involve gear but require more from us.

God has a special plan for you as a technical artist, and it's my prayer that what you read next will help you reach *your* God-given potential, so God's church can reach *its* full potential.

So, wherever you are on the spectrum between first-time volunteer and seasoned veteran, small church or mega church, I encourage you to open your mind and your heart to receive what follows. These truths apply to us all.

BOOK STRUCTURE

In an effort to make this resource as effective as possible, I have divided this book into four parts.

Part One will set up the idea of what it means to be a technical artist. I'll share my story and the journey I have been on over the years. We will talk about how it has shaped me, and how I think God designed the technical artist to function in the local church.

In **Part Two**, we'll talk about the practical, everyday production values that are key to success, regardless of the event or worship service.

Part Three builds on the foundation of production values and adds a layer of collaboration with other artists.

Part Four will look into how to effectively lead a group of technical artists.

At the end of each section, there are questions to help you discover who you are as a technical artist. Either as an individual or as a team, I would encourage you to let these questions stretch and challenge you.

As you make your way through this book, I hope the principles found in the following pages will help you become, not only the best technical person you can be, but simply the best version of yourself.

PART 1

TECHIE OR ARTIST?

IN THE BEGINNING

I began innocently enough. Like so many technically inclined people, I started getting interested in soundboards and microphones early in high school. The church I was attending with my family was just beginning to require sound reinforcement, and I learned as the church grew. I sat with a friend who ran the soundboard for our one microphone, and he trained me on the finer points of hitting the record button on the tape deck. It was big stuff.

Then one day it happened. The unthinkable.

My friend didn't show.

Now what?

Could I figure out how to run the sound board for the one mic AND operate the tape deck at the same time? As it turned out, I was able to manage the chaos.

From there, we added a few more mics, then a keyboard and then a (gasp!) guitar. These were heady days. It soon became obvious that I loved doing production work. I had no idea what I was in for, but the whole audio thing made sense to me. I became the kid at school who knew all about the sound system in the gym. I was the boy who fixed the warbled film projector. (If you don't know what I'm talking about, Google it!) When I ran sound at my church, things went well. When the music team saw me behind the soundboard, they knew everything was going to be all right. (Not that I didn't get complaints from some people who said it was too loud and could I please turn it down.)

One of the fortunate coincidences of my audio learning process was that

my church's music director also led a performing group at my school that used lots of production equipment. I started out as a musician in this group but soon became the main tech for getting everything up and running for our performances. He and I developed a great relationship and an understanding of developing a great mix. This transferred to every event I mixed.

As time went on, one of the values that developed at our church was planting other churches. The associate pastor was charged with developing a team of people around him to plant a church, and he had a vision to start what he called a "Willow Creek" style church. None of us really knew what that meant, so while I was on a break from college in 1989, a group of us piled into a van and drove from Detroit to Chicago to attend a mid-week service at Willow Creek Community Church.

Before this, I was pretty clear on what production could do for a church service. You know: 16 channel sound board, 8 par cans, no gels; maybe drums, definitely not electric guitars; meeting in a high school gym. Even though I was knowledgeable, I was not ready for my first experience at Willow Creek. Not only was the building huge, but the service was like nothing I had ever been a part of.

There was a band. The band rocked! The mix was amazing. The lighting was inspiring. I didn't even know you could be creative with lights in a church. There were side screens with the lyrics on them. And not a hymnal in sight.

On the drive home, we talked about all the great possibilities for a church like this one in the Detroit area.

Shortly after this trip, Kensington Community Church (KCC) was formed in Troy, Michigan in 1990. I was still in college, but I was heavily involved working behind the soundboard and helping with setup when I was home on break. Right from the start, we were loaded with great production possibilities. We met in a middle school cafetorium—you know, a cafeteria with a stage. We used nasty folding chairs, and there was no air conditioning, just big noisy fans. Turning the fluorescent lights on or off was our lighting rig, and we hauled in our sound system from the back of a Ryder truck.

It wasn't much, but we were sold out to the vision of what God could do in the Detroit area through us. We did the best we could with what we had and

made up for the rest with adrenaline.

After holding services in the middle school for about nine months, Kensington moved into the performing arts space at the local high school and then onto the brand-new high school's theater that sat 750 people. About this time, I graduated from Auburn University with a degree in Industrial Engineering and got a job working at Kensington.

During in my junior year, I decided not to go into engineering immediately but try to make a career out of mixing audio. I had no idea how that was going to pan out, but I felt like I needed to give it a shot. Fortunately for me, the people at Kensington knew when I was behind the soundboard things went better. My first job at KCC consisted of leading the audio team, writing out the music charts for the band and vocalists and leading the creative process for our mid-week service. It still makes me laugh to think about how I did all those things at the same time.

As KCC got bigger, my responsibilities focused more on the technical side, and I was able to stop charting music. It also became obvious that I needed to stop leading the creative process since I kept getting stuck on how to make it happen and constantly felt overwhelmed.

One of the things I learned early on in my years of working half the time in production and half the time in the creative arts was that I didn't feel like I fit into either category. I was a musician, but not a very good one. I could be creative, but only after someone else had come up with an initial idea. I was a technically minded person, but I didn't have the patience or the aptitude to learn more than what I needed in the moment. I was an Industrial Engineer but didn't necessarily remember all the details of any of my classes. I felt like one of those misfit toys from the "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" movie.

Around 1995, KCC began discussing the construction of our own building. To help with this, we hired a consultant to guide us through the process of figuring out what we needed. One afternoon I told him I felt trapped between creative arts and production, and I didn't seem to fit into either category. He listened patiently, and then basically summed it up for me. "God has created you this way. You just need to be confident that God knows what he is doing and be patient that he will reveal to you what His will

for your life is.”

It’s possible he was just tossing out advice to get me to shut up, yet it is something I have never forgotten. At the time it didn’t hit me, but after about

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five years, it began to ring in my ears:

“God made you this way. Be patient.”

Fast forward to 2003. I had been on staff with KCC for 11 years. I started out as the only production person on staff, and now I was leading 12 amazing technical artists on staff. In the beginning, I only knew about audio. During my time at KCC, I shot

and edited videos; built and led teams to do image magnification (IMAG) during the service and designed, built and lit the stage on a weekly basis. The technical operating budget had increased 20 times since I started. We moved from the “cafetorium” with the nasty folding chairs to a 1500-seat auditorium with comfortable theater seats and one regional campus. Even though things weren’t perfect, God had truly blessed the production ministry at Kensington, and he had blessed me to be a part of it.

I am not an emotional person, but in the summer of 2003 I experienced an amazing worship service that brought tears to my eyes. There was a full rhythm section along with a combined choir of people from our church and a church in the inner city of Detroit. At one point in the service, I noticed the lighting change, and then a complimentary graphic changed at the same time. In that moment, I realized I could clearly hear everything happening on the stage. Every instrument, every voice. It was unbelievable. (For those of you who work with a choir and a rhythm section, you know how hard it is to have tons of open mics on stage and be able to hear anything distinctly.)

I started to cry. I looked around to see if the moment had made an impact on anyone else and saw I was the only one who seemed to be having this specific experience. And I knew this was what God had made me for. Our ministry transformed that worship service. I had a vision of what a technical arts ministry could do to transform something good into something great. I

felt God saying to me, “Todd, this is right where I want you.”

As it turned out, God was giving me a confidence in who he had made me to be so he could rock my world. In the next several months, I left Kensington and started a new job as the weekend service technical director at Willow Creek Community Church.

This was not something I saw coming or even wanted. I loved Kensington and would have been content to stay there forever. Obviously, God had other plans. My wife and I began a spiritual journey with God, decided to take the chance and step away from everything we loved to watch as God moved and worked in our lives.


I began to see that all the principles I learned at Kensington applied at Willow Creek as much as they were in my first volunteer job at the record deck. I have had the opportunity to see many different churches from all over the world and see that the challenges are the same everywhere. We might speak different languages, but I’ve found that technical artists in Germany are the same as technical artists in Nigeria or in the United States.

I have been doing production in the local church since I was 13. I don’t know everything there is to know. I have been fortunate to be surrounded by people who know a lot more than I do. God has put me in some pretty interesting situations that I have learned from, but many of those have been very tough. As technical artists we have all wrestled with these situations and come away wondering if it is all worth it. Is it possible that God intended production in the local church to be difficult, and there are only a few people suited for the work? And could it be true that I need to figure out how to thrive at it?

The answer is yes.

I believe we *can* survive it. I believe it *is* worth it. I believe God has a plan for you and your production ministry that is bigger and better than most of us are experiencing.

The following chapters will be connected to my story. They will fill in



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the gaps of time between when I started in full-time ministry in 1992 to the present. We will journey through my major learnings together.

When I look at the state of production in the local church, I am inspired. There are many churches reaching people, changing lives and families through the use of the technical arts. I am also saddened to see so many individuals barely hanging on, being overworked, their spirits crushed under the pressures of the local church. I hope this book will challenge and inspire you to the possibilities for the technical arts in your church and how you can play a part.

Chapter 1 Discussion Questions:

1. How did you first begin your journey in production?
2. What are some of the defining moments that have shaped how you view the technical arts ministry in your church?
3. What is the biggest challenge for you and for the technical arts ministry at your church right now?
4. What does your production team do really well? Celebrate!

ARTIST REDEFINED

art·ist ['är-tist] (plural art-ists) *noun*

Definition:

1. creator of art: somebody who creates art, especially paintings or sculptures
2. performer: a member of the performing arts; a well-known recording artist
3. skilled person: somebody who does something skillfully and creatively; an artist with a basketball
4. cunning person: somebody who is very good at a particular thing, especially something cunning (slang); a rip-off artist

When I was first involved in the production ministry at my local church, the definition of an artist applied to other people, not me. The artists were performers in dance, music, drama, singing, or some other form of visual art. I was just the person who turned knobs, aimed the lights, ran ProPresenter for lyrics—all to support the art that other people performed. It never dawned on me to consider myself an artist.

This perspective resulted in all kinds of dysfunctions in the way I interacted with people on the stage, the way I led my volunteer teams and the way I determined what was or wasn't a valuable use of my time. *I was there to serve.* My needs were not valid. Suck it up and push forward. The real artists are on stage waiting for me to deliver. Don't question, just respond. Get it done.

Statements like these led me to a very passive-aggressive place. Slowly, I became more and more bitter to the point where I was unable to serve

anybody. I was not functioning in the way God intended the body of Christ to work, and I was affecting everyone around me—artist or otherwise.

Unfortunately, this is a common occurrence in the production ministry of most local churches.

After years of feeling totally defeated and overworked, God began to change how I viewed myself and the role I filled.

This shift in my thinking became key to growing, not only a thriving production ministry, but to becoming the person God designed me to be.

Defining Mission

In 1999, it seemed like every conference I went to and every book I read said that you could not be effective without having a mission statement and values to support it. I decided it was time to create those for our team of five. Joel was doing audio, Gary was handling the technical needs of our children's program, and Curt did all the video work—pre-, post- and everything in between. Barb had just started as our team's administrator, and I was doing lighting and set design every week, as well as leading the other members of this team.

We met weekly in the new green room behind our newly built auditorium. It was our "secret" location—a place where we could work without interruption. One week I added a discussion about our statement and values onto our agenda. I wasn't prepared for what happened next.

I read through the single page of information containing about 10 values and the mission statement: "To enhance the arts and the spoken word at KCC through the use of the production arts, so that the character of God may be expressed without distraction and life change facilitated for those in whom God is moving." When I was done reading, there was silence. Crickets.

I know what it is like to be in a meeting when somebody puts an idea out there. Just listen, don't object, this person has already made up their mind, so my ideas won't matter. In the silence, I finally let everyone know that this was something for us to talk about, not just accept blindly.

Joel said something like: "I totally disagree with the basic premise of the

mission statement. It says we serve other people who are artists. Production done well is an art form, and we need a statement that attracts artists, not people who serve artists.”


That had never even crossed my mind. I was going for the distraction-free-let-us-go-unnoticed perspective. Joel and I started getting into it. I don’t generally get overheated when it comes to conversation, but he and I were pretty much yelling at each other. Everyone else around the table had to endure the two of us trying to make sense of what we were saying. Unfortunately, we were unable to see eye to eye in that meeting.

Every week after that, some part of our meeting was spent “discussing” our mission statement. These were some of the worst meetings I had ever led. It seemed totally out

of control, and I felt like if we couldn’t agree on this, how could we move forward? We were working on the foundational statement for our ministry, and we couldn’t even agree on what that should be.

After several meetings like this, it finally dawned on me that some of the statements I had as our mission, while definitely important, were more like values to guide us as we go after the mission. The mission needed to be bigger than providing a distraction-free environment. When it was all said and done, we came up with: “Using the technical arts to reflect Christ to artists, to each other, and to the local church.” From there, we let the values help to define what the statement actually meant.

I know it doesn’t read like the greatest mission statement of all time, but after a month of knock-down, drag-out meetings about what each of us really believed, everyone around our table actually believed it. And we were ready to share who we were and what we were about with our volunteers.



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Those meetings transformed the way I thought and felt about being a technical artist. We weren't just facilitating someone else's ministry, we were *doing* ministry. It was a completely new revelation that affected how I led my volunteers, my staff and how I interacted with other departments in my church.

It became the defining moment for me, not only as the leader in the production ministry, but as a technical artist. This created the foundation for how I would choose to live every following day.

Chapter 2 Discussion Questions:

1. How do you think about what you and your team do as technical people?
2. Do you resonate with serving artists or artists serving together?
3. If you are a leader, are you open to other people's opinions and challenges?