

USING MUSIC IN WORSHIP

Music, both traditional and contemporary, is a vital part of congregational worship. St Augustine of Hippo (354–430) is often quoted as saying: ‘Whoever sings, prays twice’ (see *Commentary on Psalm 73:1*). Here, the people give to God of their time, talents, praises, laments, confessions and intercessions. Music is a ‘rallying cry’ for the sending out in mission of God’s people. What should be kept in mind when selecting and leading music (be it vocal or instrumental) in Christian worship? The following points are offered.

Ensure theological diversity and integrity. Avoid an almost-exclusively ‘praise’ orientation that denies the opportunity in worship for music that is confessional, intercessory, missional or educational. The danger of a narrow praise orientation is that it presents a less than holistic picture of faith and discipleship. When it comes to contemporary song, the best of this genre avoids the overuse of the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘me’, preferring songs from the *community* of God’s people offering worship to God. Having said this, our faith response must always be grounded in the personal relationship we have with the triune God.

Use music with purpose. Use music as a genuine act of praise, a response to the Word of God, to nurture Christian community, as an act of offering and commitment to God; never as a ‘filler’ or to whip up emotion. Avoid too much ‘new’ song. In a service of worship, limit the amount of new music, and ensure that for these, there is opportunity in the near future to re-sing them.

Ensure the material is culturally appropriate. Always remember ‘who’ the people are, keeping in mind children, people with disabilities, the ethnic composition of the worshipping community and other special needs groups. Consider the demographic and missional contexts of the worshipping community. Consider congregational size. Small numbers of people often struggle with grand settings of music or demanding tunes with syncopated melodies and rhythms.

Select from a variety of sources, remembering to stay within copyright license parameters. Think in terms of Christian ‘song’ – ‘Sing a new song to the Lord’ (Psalm 96:1a). The concept of Christian ‘song’ (not ‘songs’) may prove to be helpful in breaking down traditional vs contemporary; hymn vs chorus biases.

Ensure the ‘song’ chosen is appropriate for the liturgy and the Christian season. This will mean taking into account the tempo, melody, mood and other attributes of the music. Consider the Christian seasons, e.g. ‘Alleluias’ are not appropriate during Lent. Music in minor keys generally sounds ‘sad’ and may be used to advantage during this season. Up-tempo rhythms match songs of praise and thanksgiving. Greater use could be made of the ‘cantor-antiphon’ approach.

Encourage variety in the singing and instrumentation. Ensure musicians and singers undertake appropriate preparation. This implies both spiritual and practical preparation. Music creates and reflects mood. Music, being both vocal and instrumental, may be used liturgically to reflect the ‘mood’ at any point of the worship. Remember, the voice is a marvellous instrument in its own right; a *capella* singing may be very beautiful.

Some music options

Worship planners need to use their discretion when ‘injecting’ music into various parts of the liturgy, ever conscious of the danger of an overuse of musical settings.

CALL TO WORSHIP	This may be sung by a soloist, worship leader or the congregation. A cantor or soloist may be located in different places within the congregation. The Call to Worship may include or be directly linked to the Prayer of Invocation. The Psalm might be sung here if it is appropriate.
PRAYER OF INVOCATION	This prayer may be a song or hymn.
PRAYER OF CONFESSION	This may be sung, or a sung response. A sung prayer may be a ‘prelude’ to spoken confession, or to silence. Instrumental music may sometimes be helpful here.
DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS	This may be a song/hymn that affirms the forgiving grace of God in Christ.
READINGS	A preparatory phrase may be sung. The Psalm may be sung in a variety of ways. Responses may be sung after each of the readings, particularly after the Gospel. Alleluias are often sung, although not during Lent.
RECEIVING GOD’S WORD	Sometimes, particularly in a longer sermon, or one with two or three distinct segments, the inclusion of a song/hymn may be a helpful tool of summary or affirmation.
PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE	Responses or whole prayers may be sung.
HOLY COMMUNION	The liturgy offers numerous opportunities of music, particularly with sung responses. [See The Service of the Lord’s Day 1 and 2 for examples]
BAPTISM	The liturgy offers numerous opportunities for congregational participation: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The creed• Aaronic blessing• Congregational response