



THE  
*Dwell Richly*  
COURSE

leading others in singing the gospel

## 5. LEADING ON A SUNDAY

## 5. Leading on Sunday

*Come, thou Fount of every blessing,  
Tune my heart to sing thy grace;  
Streams of mercy, never ceasing  
Call for songs of loudest praise.<sup>1</sup>*

### Intro

So, it's Sunday! Whether we're volunteer church musicians, or we're employed by a church, we've spent time prayerfully making preparations during the week. We've come longing that the word of Christ might dwell richly in those who will be there later this morning.

How does our understanding of music as a ministry of the gospel shape the way we lead our band in rehearsal, and lead the congregation in singing?

We lead on Sunday both practically *and* spiritually. Let's think about each of those: first for our band, then for the congregation.

### Leading your band spiritually

Often, when we turn up to rehearsal, our minds become consumed with the practicalities:

- Why can't I hear the keyboard? Is a cable broken?
- When are we repeating the chorus in that song?
- Where's the drummer?!

No doubt our musicians are thinking some of the same things! We want to remind our band of the spiritual priorities that drive our practical considerations. That's good for our own souls. Our hearts can grow hard if we make the gospel truths that we sing secondary to our musical practices. It's also good for the congregation when the musicians are delighting in Christ and His gospel; we'll be able to lead the congregation much more effectively if the band models an appropriate response to Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Robertson, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing", Public Domain.

Here are a couple of things we may want to consider doing to help remind us of our spiritual priorities...

### **1. Start with the Bible and with prayer**

As we start, being reminded of all God has done for us in Christ re-aligns our priorities, puts our stresses in context, and expresses our unity under Christ in our big shared goal of letting the gospel dwell in us. This is something that's too precious to miss out on, and its value far surpasses anything else you could do in that 10 or 15 minute window as you begin.

Spending time opening God's word when you're already running late may seem counter-intuitive; the pull to start working through songs is strong. This can be especially true in a morning rehearsal, where time feels more pressured and everyone is a little more bleary-eyed. And yet it's in these times I've most appreciated looking to Christ in His word. We must remember that we're not primarily there to make a sweet sound, but to show people Christ. Starting with the word and prayer does more to that end than working through arrangements ever could.

### **2. Communicate the supreme importance of responding to the gospel ourselves**

So often when we're leading, we can get tunnel vision – our thoughts get consumed with the practicalities and without even realising, we disengage spiritually.

Instead of being refreshed by gospel truths, we end up assessing everything by how well we played. Meanwhile, instead of modelling an appropriate response to the gospel, we might look like we're performing rather than leading, or we can appear indifferent to the wonderful truths we sing.

Practically speaking, it may be good to remind our musicians to play simpler things so that we have the headspace to think about the words we're singing. We'll explore this more when we think about leading the congregation below. I often say to my musicians: "play the words" when talking them through a song arrangement. By that, I mean: let how and what you play be directed by the truth we're singing about and how that truth is conveyed. That puts the focus on the truths of the gospel, not on musical ideas. Our creativity finds its impulse in the word of Christ; that is to say: our response of worship starts with adoring Christ in our hearts, and our actions of playing and singing are included in that response.

# Leading your band practically

## 1. Be clear

Explaining the way we've structured your arrangement will help the musicians know how and when to play to underline the main theme of the song. Being specific about when we want people to play and not play is a way to love them. Often inexperienced musicians are nervous and tend to instinctively play all the time. Giving them direction takes the pressure off and will build their confidence over time.

## 2. Watch your jargon

Not all of our musicians will have the same level of training or come from the same musical background. We need to be careful about using too many technical terms. Not everyone has had classical training, so they might not understand what you mean by "modulate" or "key signature". Likewise, not all musicians will be confident with pop terminology like '4-on-the-floor' or 'groove'.

## 3. Think about what to rehearse

This might seem odd, because our default is to run through all the songs for the upcoming service in order. But sometimes we might have a song that everyone can play with their eyes shut and a new song with a tricky bridge. We need to think about what requires the best time in our rehearsals. So, we could:

- Play a more familiar song right at the start as a warm-up, and give yourselves time to make sure everyone can hear each other.<sup>2</sup>
- Give more time to a new or tricky song when people are fresh near the start of the rehearsal. To make time for that, we can spend less time on songs everyone knows.
- Spend time on one particular section of a song, working on one aspect (like groove, vocal harmonies etc.) and skip verse 2, which might be easier to play and similar in feel and groove to another verse.
- Work on transitions between songs. Most of the time, when a band (or congregation) is up-and-running in a song it knows, all goes smoothly. The tricky bits are getting from the chorus back to the verse, or from one song to another. Chances are, they've never played even the most familiar songs

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<sup>2</sup> You might be using foldback monitors or in-ear monitoring system to help with this.

back-to-back before! We can help by practising the links between songs as you go, perhaps by starting our run-through of each song with the end of the previous song.

Allowing time in rehearsals to work on specific rhythmic patterns and transitions will give the band confidence and teach them musical skills, which helps them grow over the long term more than just being able to play one particular song.

#### **4. Listen carefully**

This will be the first time you actually hear your arrangement with this band. Something you planned to do may not work in practice, or someone may have interpreted your instructions completely differently to how you imagined. We need to listen carefully to what each member of the band is doing as we play through songs (not just focusing on what we're doing).

When you've finished a song, take time to:

- Encourage the band about what worked well: maybe how two musicians worked together, or how one line of the song really helped the word to dwell richly in you because of the way someone played.
- Ask for people's thoughts, and if they'd like to practise anything again.
- Offer your own feedback, and suggest what specific things to practise.
- Be patient and gentle, especially when you have to repeat things, and help everyone feel they can ask questions and make suggestions.

#### **5. After the rehearsal**

Often, we'll have musicians who lack confidence. After the rehearsal can be a great moment to encourage them:

- What's one thing that they've done really well?
- Take time to focus on the wonderful truths we sing.
- Remind them that they have the privilege of leading the brothers and sisters in their church family, not the terror of being judged by the X Factor panel!
- Emphasise that our worship has a primary audience of One: the Lord. It's very comforting that all we do is a joyful response to who He is and what He has done, to bring Him praise and honour and to serve His people, rather than to please those in front of us.

We need constant reminders of the gospel, and praying immediately before the service starts can be a great way of re-focusing our hearts and minds on Christ and His gospel. It's tempting in those last moments to be cramming in last minute revision of what song comes when. How much better it is to prayerfully depend on God to reveal Christ to everyone gathered as we sing about the gospel! What a blessing to depend together on His grace, not relying on our performance.

## Leading the congregation spiritually

### 1. Model a right response to the gospel

As we lead the congregation, we want to model a right response to God's glory in Christ and His gospel. As soon as we stand in front of people, each member of the band *is* modelling a response to the gospel by default. The question is: am I modelling a healthy or an unhealthy response? Do I seem engaged with the truths we're singing, or cold, distant, and unmoved by the gospel?

What this actually looks like will be different for each of us with our own temperaments. But surely a gospel as wonderful as this will move us! It is more edifying for those we serve to see us delighting in our God, contrite at the thought of our sin, sobered by the prospect of judgement, and joyfully thankful for our salvation. We each have a different emotional temperament. Within that, we each need to model a faithful response to the truths we sing that will help the people we lead to Christ without pulling the focus onto ourselves. If worshipping Christ doesn't lead us to the uppermost point of our emotional spectrum, then we have to ask questions of ourselves. In his book *The Religious Affections*, Jonathan Edwards reminds us that "grace in the soul is so the effect of God's power" that in Scripture it is "fitly compared" to the power at work in creation and Christ's resurrection (Ephesians 1:17-20).<sup>3</sup> How then can we conclude "that the Almighty, in so great a work of His power, should so carefully hide His power that the subjects of it should be able to discern nothing of it?"<sup>4</sup>

Modelling a response to the gospel isn't something for the lead vocalist alone. All of us in the band are leading and modelling as we play and sing. Our body language can communicate a lot! And we're all called to respond with mind, soul and body to the glory of God.

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3 Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections* (Edinburgh: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 1986), 66.

4 Ibid., 67.

## 2. Lead pastorally by introducing songs<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes, we might have an opportunity to read a passage of Scripture or pray to help people rejoice in the gospel as we sing. Introducing songs, linking songs, or leading in confession of sin might be good moments for this. If you think there's a good moment to lead people in this way, ask the person in charge of the service in advance so they know to leave space for you to do that.

As you start out doing this, script what you're going to say carefully. This will help you lead clearly and help you order your thoughts. Depending on your church, you might want to model what you say around some pre-written church prayers like collects or assurances of salvation. Write it out in big font, so you can easily read what you've prepared and can therefore deliver what you have to say in an engaging way. It's also helpful to practise reading it aloud a few times in advance.

If we're introducing the song after the sermon, it's best to say little. The preacher will have thought hard about how to end their sermon, and we don't want to re-teach the passage or distract from what we've heard. Hopefully, it's obvious why we're singing the song that follows. If that's the case, simply reading a verse, repeating a key phrase from the sermon or just saying "please stand with us" is safe ground!

## Leading the congregation practically

Much like leading the band, the congregation are fine once they're into a song they know. That means there are certain key points where we need to lead them carefully.

Most obviously, they need to know when to come in! We can help that by:

- Making eye contact and taking a deep breath to bring them in. Knowing the words to the songs by heart is helpful, because we won't be bound to the song sheet and can look up at people. They're much more likely to come with us if we're engaging them well. A subtle nod as the line starts works well too!
- Playing clear links between song sections. Generally, congregations tend to feel the right moment to come in after 4 or 8 bars, when the musical phrase is

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<sup>5</sup> Not all church traditions will do this. Whether we say anything, and what we say if we do, needs to be under our pastor's authority. If in doubt, check with them first!

finished. Give them plenty of time, so they're anticipating the next section. Try taking the movement out of the music the bar before you want to bring them in. This indicates that something is about to happen.

- Announcing repeats down the microphone is another way to serve the congregation. (Sometimes, you'll need to break off from the previous line so you have enough time to let them know what's coming next.)

## **Service isn't over when the service is over**

When the formal part of the meeting is over, we still have the opportunity to model humble service to our church family. We continue to serve by:

- Chatting to people you know who might have been particularly impacted by the sermon.
- Looking out for newcomers or those who are on their own.
- Packing away music and tidying the stage.
- Talking mainly about how the Holy Spirit spoke to you about Christ through His word, rather than how well or badly the music went.

## **Summary**

Thoughtful leadership of our band and congregation – both spiritually and practically – helps us as leaders in our aim to let the word of Christ dwell richly in those we lead. For our musicians, it can reset our focus onto why we're really here, and allow us to be best prepared, in heart and mind, to lead others to behold Christ. And for the congregation, wise leadership helps them to engage more deeply with the truth of the gospel, to sing confidently to God and each other, and to respond with joyful thankfulness.

## Questions

- What do you find most stressful about rehearsals? What truths about God and His work in Christ could you remind yourself of to change that?
- Which of the practical steps of leading a band were you most struck by? How could you implement that with your band next time you lead?
- What might an authentic response to the gospel look like for you? Is how you respond in the congregation different to how you respond on stage? If so, why?
- Which of the practical steps of leading the congregation were you most struck by? How could you implement that with your band next time you lead?

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