



THE
Dwell Richly
COURSE

leading others in singing the gospel

APPENDIX 2

A2. Teaching New Songs

Intro

The songs we sing can be a significant means of God's grace to our congregation if chosen with pastoral sensitivity and arranged in a way that shows us the gospel. This gives us a high bar when considering whether to teach a new song.

We must teach new songs that our congregation needs – that doesn't necessarily mean the ones they might want!

Here is a practical guide of some things to consider when building a pool of songs, what makes a "good" song to teach, and how to teach them to your congregation...

Establishing a pool of songs and hymns

When we're building a pool of songs and hymns, we must return to our core aim: to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly (Colossians 3:16). That aim helps us ask some questions of songs we're thinking of singing:

Should I teach this new song?

- Is it the word of Christ?:
 - » Does anything in the song distort, obscure or contradict the truth of the gospel?
 - » Does the song talk about its topic (e.g. the doctrine of sin or the ministry of the Holy Spirit) in the way that the Bible does?
- Does it help that word to dwell in us richly?
 - » Does the music send the same message as the words?
 - » Is the song sing-able for a congregation?
 - » Does it make you *want* to sing the truth?

What do we know already?

If you've just arrived at a church and are planning the music, you won't have a blank slate here, so you'll need to establish quickly what people know. Go back

through past orders of service to find out what's been sung. You may need to learn some new songs yourself!

We also need to consider the sum total of our song pool. We want to give our church a "balanced diet" of songs, covering the full range of Scripture, so that no one doctrine is exalted while another is played down.¹ If our pool of songs and hymns doesn't reflect the weighting of different doctrines in Scripture, it could lead to theologically out-of-balance Christians.

When we look at all our songs and hymns, we may find that we have plenty of songs about God's love, but few about His justice. We need to ask: across our pool of songs, are we faithfully representing Scripture? Are some themes more prominent than others?

Teaching songs

When we've settled on a new song to teach, there are a few things we can do to help people pick it up quickly and accurately:

Keep it simple

When teaching a song to a congregation, it's best to minimise distractions so they can focus on how the melody goes. For the first time through the song, just go with one instrument (e.g. keys or acoustic guitar) and one voice only. If other singers join later in the song, ask them to not sing harmony, so that the melody is clear.

Teach in sections

Rather than running through big chunks of a song at once, consider teaching the different components of a song (i.e. verse, chorus, bridge etc.) and get the congregation to sing it back to you. This way, they only have to remember a short section, and you can have another go at specific tricky sections if they don't immediately pick it up well.

Repeat, repeat, repeat

Give the congregation a chance to hear the song as much as possible. You could consider:

- Writing a blog post on your church's website with a link to the new song.

¹ Zac Hicks talks about this in his book *The Worship Pastor* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2016), p.68-78

- Sending a video to your musicians to help them learn it before they lead.
- Playing the song before the start of the service (either live or a recording).
- Singing through the song a couple of times when you're teaching it, not just once.
- Singing the song for a few successive weeks. Many recommend the 2-1-1 rule: do a song for 2 weeks in a row, rest it for a week, then do it again the following week.

All of this will help people pick up a new song faster, and help you assess whether it's working or not.

It takes time to teach a song well in a service, but it's worth the investment if people are able to pick it up accurately, and quickly move past learning the melody to beholding Christ as they sing.

When to kill a song

After a few weeks, you may find that a song isn't working. It might be because it's too complicated, or people find it hard to relate to. That's ok, it happens. If a song really isn't working, there's no shame in canning it and moving on.

Songs get tired, too. Either through over-use, or because they don't age well (and sound really cheesy!), we need to retire them. We can't do this on the basis of our own musical preferences. We need to serve those we lead, and a song we think is past its sell-by date may still be helping to remind people of the gospel and help them respond freshly. We as music leaders tend to sing songs a lot more than your average congregation member. That means they're likely to grow stale for us before they do for everyone else.

If you're getting rid of a song, do so slowly, be clear on why you're retiring it, and consider how you might replace it to maintain the balance across your songs.

Things to read and listen to

1. Bob Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, Chapter 13: "Planning Sunday's Songs"²
2. Brian Chapell, *Christ Centered Worship*³ explores in depth how the church has historically shaped gatherings around the gospel
3. Don Carson (Ed.), *Worship by the Book*⁴ has several examples of service structure from a variety of traditions

2 (Illinois: Crossway, 2008)

3 (MI: Baker Academic, 2009)

4 (Michigan: Zondervan Press, 2002)

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