

Trusting a new song: How to introduce music for worship

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In congregational song a fluid tension exists between known and unknown music. A well-loved song brings to mind our personal faith, our faith family, personal joys, and personal sorrows. Singing it gives us confidence: we know from experience that the song will “go well” in worship.

But there are new songs to sing, songs in a variety of genres and from a variety of traditions and cultures. Many new songs are waiting for us in new hymnbooks. These songs remain dormant until we sing them—until we take them from a fixed page and bring them to life.

But trying a new song can be a risky venture for leaders and congregations alike. We’re not sure what will happen. How do we worship leaders present new songs in ways that inspire trust? Here are some guidelines.

Consider context. Church music is not its own thing: like speech, visual art, or drama, it is one of many worship elements. In well-planned worship all of the elements work together in a kind of conversation. Any song, old or new, should seem right at the moment it happens. It should fit the focus and flow of the worship. The song’s context, or where it’s placed, helps determine how worshipers experience and make sense of a song.

If we are hoping to expand our congregation’s scope of songs and genres, we music leaders will have to expand our own repertoires. Our habits or training predispose us

to favor certain styles and genres of music. We need continued training and a discipline that helps break old habits and create new patterns. We might, for example, rotate inclusion of a global song, a short chorus, or a guitar-based song—any genre that’s been missing from our worship. The congregation doesn’t need to know the once-a-month plan. It’s more important that the song enhance the day’s worship and the congregation’s own worship experience.

Pay attention to the text. Teach the words by using them in nonsinging moments. Can a song text be worked into the liturgy? Commentators are quoted in sermons—why not quote a new hymn text? Use a stanza as a prayer. Print it in the bulletin as a preworship meditation. Find uses for the lyrics that weave the song into the congregation’s mind and heart.

Get the song out there. Before singing a new tune, have an instrument play it as the prelude or gathering music. Let the congregation hear part of the song—maybe a single stanza—before they sing it. Use a stanza for a choral introit or as a prayer response. If worship planners can place a new song near the end of worship, there are more opportunities to introduce some or all of it earlier in the service. This is not a spoiler; the song’s impact will be heightened, not lessened, by a preview.

Share the song. Alternate the singing of a song between the full congregation and specific musicians or groups. Use choirs of all sizes and ages to help lead and teach; they are part of the congregation. Have them sing a stanza or two with everyone joining in on later stanzas. If there are stanzas with a refrain, have the congregation sing only the refrain. Do this with familiar songs too; the congregation will be more comfortable when a new song is introduced. Don’t put a spotlight on specific musicians or set them apart. In this setting they are not performers, but part of the congregational singing.

Teach and lead a song. Teaching conveys a vote of confidence in the people; a leader who takes the time to teach a song is saying not just that the song matters, but that congregational singing matters. The trick is to teach without being verbose, patronizing, or long-winded.

- Sing and invite people to echo you. Use short phrases rather than complete stanzas.
- If the song has a short stanza or chorus, sing it once, then sing it again and invite people to hum with you before they sing along. Humming allows people to

become comfortable with a tune in a way that is quiet and natural.

- Add a flute or other treble instrument to help clarify a tune.
- Don't use the occasion to show off your singing voice—people want to be able identify with the voice that they are being asked to echo.
- Give visual cues; hand gestures that describe the shape of a melody help people “see” a tune. Keep the gestures subtle and simple; don't conduct or exaggerate the gestures.
- Teach before worship begins rather than during a service; it's more informal and friendly and allows the song to be integrated as an act of worship when the time comes.
- Give a brief introduction and briefly acknowledge the song's newness. Don't apologize by saying, “This hymn may be a little tricky at first.” An introduction via apology does not inspire confidence.
- Likewise, avoid being overly enthusiastic. “I know you'll love this song as much as I do!” You don't know this.
- Keep instrumental accompaniment simple. The goal is not to pull or push people into the song but to invite them. Accompaniment should be supportive.
- Lead with reliability but also flexibility. Stability and steadiness are necessary, but so is give and take. Take time for breathing, and allow some expansion of tempo, which helps people learn the tune while managing new lyrics. This is important even with familiar songs and can make a crucial difference in new songs.
- Teach the song in other settings. Use church mealtimes, meetings, educational classes, and other gatherings as singing opportunities. The more informal settings put people at ease and make learning more relaxed than on Sunday.

Know your music. We've all known teachers who never look up from their notes. If we're teaching a song, we should know it. If the song is to be learned and sung without printed music or words, teach it that way. You're not just introducing the song—you're inspiring confidence that both song and leadership are reliable.

Tolerate a little messiness. There are audio files and recordings of songs available, but recordings, while helpful, offer fixed versions of songs. Congregational singing, on the other hand, is fluid and organic. It has to work for these people and this space and should not try to imitate some other rendition.

Congregational singing is not meant to be a stellar performance. There's room for a slower learning curve. There's time for levity at odd, awkward, and funny moments—and for the surprise when a confident congregation breaks into full voice.

It takes time for a new congregational song to gather strength. Worshipers will pick up the song tentatively, sing it quietly, and only gradually make it theirs. This does not mean that the song hasn't worked or been received—the process may be slow but still profoundly powerful.

If faithfulness has been present in our planning and teaching, in our prayers and in our sharing, then it will be present in the singing of both the classic favorite hymns and new potential favorites.