



How Can We Encourage the Use of Hymns in Worship?

Short Guide No 5: How Can We Encourage the Use of Hymns in Worship?

Some ideas to be shared with worship leaders

Have a suitable range of hymns available to illustrate the session. A group of well prepared musicians is a great asset! You must involve the audience throughout and be sensitive to people's interests and concerns. Encourage participation and aim to stimulate discussion which leads to positive outcomes. These notes represent one way of designing a presentation. Other approaches could focus on individual books or collections, or on specific themes such as Holy Communion or Creation.

Introduction: two or three contrasting hymns

For example: 'The Lord's my shepherd', a metrical psalm; 'Abide with me', a devotional hymn from the C19; 'In Christ alone', a contemporary hymn/worship song.

What is a hymn?

'A hymn is a congregational expression of praise to God. It is most often conceived as sacred poetry in regular stanzas, usually in metric and rhyming form, and set to repeated music for corporate singing. It may focus on different aspects of doctrine or the devotional experience of individuals. This genre includes metrical psalms, but does not necessarily include the less structured pattern of most 'worship songs'. (From Hymn Society Guides)

- Does this definition adequately represent your own experience of hymns today?
- Think of your hymn book or worship resource. Are all its contents 'hymns'? How would you classify carols, Taizé chants and other songs which have become congregational favourites?

Have people's experience of and knowledge of hymns changed in recent years?

- Positive
 - Many hymns and sacred songs have been written in recent years.
 - The contemporary repertoire includes hymns from other religious traditions and other countries.
 - The language of hymns aims to be easily understood.
 - Hymn singing programmes on radio and television continue to be popular.
 - Recordings of hymns of all types are easily available.
 - The singing of hymns and songs in churches large and small and at festivals such as Greenbelt is often inspiring.
 - A variety of musical accompaniments support hymn singing.
- Negative
 - People have less experience of corporate singing generally.
 - There is less singing of religious songs in schools.
 - Changing patterns of worship often require less formal singing; in some emerging churches hymns would be at best counter-cultural, at worst anathema, the emphasis being on other media.
 - Smaller (and older) congregations find singing increasingly difficult.
 - There is a lack of experienced accompanists.
 - Recorded music can take over from the live experience of singing.

What is to be gained from the use of hymns in worship?

When people sing together they can help to build up the body of Christ. St. Augustine said that when people sing together they actually pray twice! Singing a hymn can play a vital part in the lives of individual believers and worshipping congregations. The words of hymns, when matched to familiar tunes, often stay in the memory. The repertoire of hymns includes something to suit most tastes. [Illustrate!]

Some practical issues

How do people actually learn and sing hymns?

- A traditional hymn book; service papers; words on a screen; listening to a cantor or choir; singing along to a recording.
- What are the advantages of using an actual hymn book?
- Should a melody line be made available?

What are the best ways of introducing unfamiliar material?

How can we get to know more about our repertoire of hymns?

- Examine your own book. How is it arranged, alphabetically or thematically? What indexes does it contain and how helpful are they in finding specific words and music? Does the book help you to identify suitable hymns for times and seasons, for faith and life themes, and for links with biblical passages?
- Use the internet (but beware of rogue data!) to get information on specific hymns and hymn writers and also to find new hymns, e.g. www.twelvebaskets.co.uk, where new hymns related to the lectionary appear each week.
- Consult a book about hymns, such as Ian Bradley's *The Penguin Book of Hymns*; Frank Colquhoun's *A Hymn Companion: insights into 300 Christian hymns*; J.R. Watson's *Awake my Soul: reflections on thirty Hymns*; Anne Harrison's *Recovering the Lord's Song: getting sung scripture back into worship* (Grove Books).
- The Companions to individual hymnals are invaluable resources for those who wish to go into more detail.
- Listen to *Songs of Praise*, *Sunday Half Hour* and programmes on local radio.
- Join the Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland!

Some practical steps to take

- Think of your hymn book as a devotional companion to take with you on life's journey.
- Learn more about the meaning and purpose of individual hymns.
- Introduce some new hymns, perhaps from different religious traditions.
- Encourage worship leaders to integrate hymns and songs within the structures of formal and informal worship. Use the RSCM's *Sunday by Sunday* as a guide.
- Ask people for their favourite hymns and organise a service or informal session around these choices.
- Arrange a Festival of Hymns. This could be in conjunction with another church or with a local radio station.
- Organise a hymn writing workshop.
- Ask a local writer or composer to come and share in worship or give a talk.

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Ref HSSG105. For more in this series, see the web site below.

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For anyone who enjoys, sings, plays, chooses, introduces, studies, teaches or writes hymns ...
The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland. Visit www.hymnsocietygbi.org.uk for more details.