



What are the Pastoral Considerations when Using Hymns?

Short Guide No 10: What are the Pastoral Considerations when Using Hymns?

The pastoral use of hymns covers both the occasional offices of the church—baptism, weddings and funerals—but also those relating to healing and healing services. It is also necessary to examine the pastoral impact of hymns in ordinary and seasonal acts of worship. Here are some principles which may be applied in various contexts.

General pastoral criteria in the choice of hymns

Initially it is sensible to consider the context in which hymns will be used and those who will be using them. People leading worship may find themselves ministering to diverse congregations; each congregation will consist of people from different backgrounds with varied life-experiences, both general and recent. Singing hymns can have effects far beyond those of the words or music alone. From a pastoral point of view the choice of hymns may need even greater care than the choice of words in a sermon or a prayer.

Three initial criteria must be taken into account:

1. *The words must be acceptable, with integrity, to the person leading worship.* This will usually be the case, though when the choice of hymns is determined by people not immediately connected with the service, this cannot simply be assumed.
2. *The words must be sensitive to the needs and expectations of individuals within the congregation.* This is less easy to determine and at times will require pastoral insight and empathy by those leading worship.
3. *The words must be acceptable within the particular denominational or congregational context in which is worship is taking place.*

These criteria are thrown into sharp relief if we consider the different needs and practices of say, Roman Catholic, Anglo-Catholic, Anglican Evangelical, Reformed, free-church, Salvationist or Pentecostal congregations. The ‘confessing’ churches, where credal beliefs control what might be said or sung, have clearly defined expectations for clergy and congregation. Expectations are no less clear-cut, though less obvious, in other contexts.

Ways forward for a variety of real contexts will be explored in this guide. Guides relating to the Pastoral Offices and hymns related to healing will be produced separately.

Hymns at a time of national or local disaster

Pastorally the first question that ought to be asked is, to what extent should worship be influenced at all by what has happened? In some contexts and congregations it will be assumed that what has occurred is ‘secular’ and needs no reference in worship. Others will anticipate acknowledgement in prayers. A development of this will be the hope that something in the act of worship will relate to the crisis. In each case there is still a need to reflect pastorally on what has happened. A hymn with a phrase like ‘carried downward by the flood’ might be a natural choice on any occasion for some, but would be insensitive at a

time of flooding. ‘Send down the fire’ which would normally be seen in a metaphoric sense in a particular congregation would be, at best, unhelpful following a factory fire within the parish. While these examples may be obvious some are more subtle.

Natural disasters

To attribute natural disasters to God’s action and control will be acceptable to many. To begin to align these with God’s judgment is more questionable. While Noah’s flood may be cited as giving Biblical warrant, not everyone in a congregation will get the point. ‘Who has told every lightning bolt where it should go?’ assumes that the answer is ‘God?’ If your father has been struck while out playing golf that is less helpful; if a plane is struck over the mid-Atlantic it assumes that God’s judgment is indiscriminate. Theologically, debating such issues might be acceptable; offering such a hymn to a congregation shaken by the after-effects of such an event is, arguably, pastorally inept, even if the Biblical warrant is, again, cited. ‘God moves in a mysterious way’ might be nearer to the point.

Seasonal Worship

- Most **Christmas** carols focus on childbirth, parenthood and infancy. It may be difficult to avoid images of ‘Little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes’, but a pastoral awareness that some parents may have been driven ragged with sleepless nights may be helpful. For the childless and those with broken family relationships, special care is needed.
- **Holy Week** and **Easter** emphasise suffering, crucifixion and resurrection and bring a special challenge. Crucifixion can enable reflection on death and suffering, but suggesting the cross is ‘wondrous’, or speaks of ‘victory’ may be more difficult. Resurrection of the body can feel very hollow a week after walking from the grave of someone you love. Nevertheless, there are many sensitive texts, such as ‘Were you there when they crucified my Lord?’ And ‘The day of resurrection’.
- **Remembrance** provides a wealth of images in hymnody and tradition which must, again, be used sensitively. The words, ‘They fly forgotten as a dream’ from ‘O God our help in ages past’ have generated some debate. What is “forgotten” here is the dream that dies with the opening day. It might be inferred from Psalm 90:5 in the New English Bible that the psalmist means humanity is eminently forgettable; the Revised Standard Version seems to emphasise human frailty rather than the erasure of humanity from God's memory. Did Watts and the psalmist even mean the same thing? While the familiarity of these words comforts many, the reality of them may hurt some: so should we use the hymn, avoid it or (as it is out of copyright – but see below!) amend it? What is pastorally significant is often what is perceived rather than what is intended.
- **Other seasons and settings** present themselves at different times with themes of harvest or homelessness, race or AIDS. All may have a sharp edge for members of a congregation or their friends or relatives.

Inclusiveness

The church is built on human relationships but its hymnody, often more than its liturgy, can exclude. Sometimes that is because the language is new in itself. If you are visually impaired (and even if you are not) you may sing from memory. The change of a single word can throw you. An unfamiliar tune can distract. This is not a counsel always to use the old and familiar: ‘Stand up, ye men of God’ excludes by both gender and the archaic use of language. It simply serves to indicate the difficulty and complexity of the pastoral task in choosing and using hymns, but also points up its necessity.

Andrew Pratt & Graham D.S. Deans – September 2012 – © The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland

Ref HSSG110. For more in this series, see the web site below.

Opinions expressed in this paper are not necessarily those of the Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland.

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.