



How can we Introduce New Hymns and Songs?

Short Guide No 12: How can we Introduce New Hymns and Songs?

New hymns and songs can be introduced in a variety of ways, depending on both the style of the item to be taught and the musical resources available. Tunes with some repetition, or at least similar musical phrases, and a predictable rhythm will be the most easily learnt. Less memorable and more difficult ones will need a more carefully thought-out plan.

Some basic ground-rules

Don't...

- Start with a turn-off announcement like “It’s easy, you’ll soon pick it up!”
- Introduce too much in one go.
- Necessarily use the whole item.
- Introduce more than one new item in a service.
- Do it all yourself if there is someone better available.
- Expect everyone to join in everything.
- Put new words on the screen only.
- Let the choir sing the harmony until the congregation are sure of the melody.

Do...

- Use the best lead-musician available.
- Learn the item thoroughly before teaching it.
- Choose a comfortable pitch.
- Use a solo voice or choir rather than instruments if possible.
- Plan some listening time as well as singing.
- Consider what is “new”: while both words and music may be new, it is possible to introduce new words to an appropriate tune which is already known; or, sometimes, a new tune for established words may be taught.
- Allow time for new words to be read through before singing, even when they are to be sung to a known tune.
- Provide copies of new words in books or on sheets (rather than displaying verse by verse on-screen) for the development of the whole text to be clear.
- Use recorded music if competent live musicians are not available, and sometimes even when they are.
- Suggest that the congregation sits during the learning process.
- Provide a melody line. Non-music readers can be encouraged to follow the ups and downs and the length of notes.
- Plan ahead.

Planning ahead

Systems vary from church to church and denomination to denomination. The hymns for many Anglican services are chosen by the organist / music director or clergy or, ideally, the two together in monthly chunks or more, probably with the Lectionary in mind. This means that tunes can be introduced over several weeks in a variety of ways. Be imaginative!

- 3 weeks ahead: The organist or band play the new tune as a voluntary before or after the service or during the collection, with reference to its significance made on screen or verbally. The words might also be within sight.
- 2 weeks ahead: The choir or a soloist sings part or all of the item as an introit, anthem or prayer response.
- 1 week ahead: The refrain or an appropriate verse might be sung by all as a repeated response to prayers of praise, penitence or intercessions.
- On the day: The musicians play the tune as an opening voluntary, to serve as a reminder before the item is sung.

Instant learning

Free Church services are often taken by a number of different preachers, and hymns are rarely chosen more than a week ahead, probably less. This is not ideal for introducing new material and can lead to frustrated musicians and discontented congregations. A request for advanced notice of new items should be made known to all preachers.

If a new item is difficult melodically and / or rhythmically, it may be best as a solo—and ideally, repeated the following week by all. Alternately, the words could be read, perhaps with men and women taking alternate verses, allowing time to consider their meaning without struggling over the tune at the same time. The tune might be played afterwards while people reflect on the words.

Here are a few suggestions:

1. The choir or a soloist might sing the verse, with the congregation singing the refrain.
2. The choir or soloists might sing verse one with the congregation seated, but invited to stand to join in when they feel ready.
3. Try “lining out”: two lines at a time are sung or played, then repeated by everyone.
4. The organist or band plays the tune several times as a voluntary before the item is sung.
5. With 6-lined or 8-lined verses, the congregation might learn only half, with the choir or a soloist singing the other half.
6. The congregation listen as a cantor sings verse 1, hum as the cantor sings verse 2, then join in from verse 3.
7. If a new tune has repeated or similar phrases, point these out.

In summary

Almost any item can be taught painlessly if approached with prayerful thought and careful preparation. Adequate time must be allowed for the learning process to be an unhurried and worshipful part of the service. Co-operation between musicians, preachers and any others taking part is essential. There is a wealth of good hymns and songs available so do take time to explore the riches, even those in styles different from your congregation’s usual diet.

Valerie Ruddle – November 2012 – © The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland
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