



What Types of Hymns and Songs are Available?

Short Guide No 2: What Types of Hymns and Songs are Available?

Once, it was “hymns”. In recent years, many churches have adopted “worship songs” – sometimes alongside hymns, sometimes instead. Inevitably, however, the picture is far more complex than this. There are many different genres available for congregational use; here are a few of the main types and some of their strengths.

Traditional Hymns

- Traditional hymns began to be written in English in around the seventeenth century; they capture the great truths of the Christian faith and Christian living, typically developing a single theme in a logical way.
- They have stood the test of time and link us into our heritage, the church through the ages.
- The genre lends itself to many types of material: narrative, praise, confession, petition proclamation, encouragement, instruction, commitment, lament, thanksgiving ...
- There are hymns readily available on many different subjects, ranging from the great doctrines and seasons of the Church calendar to specific topics such as church anniversaries or protection for seafarers.

Contemporary Hymns

- The final third of the twentieth century saw a burgeoning in new hymn-writing with many hymns being written; there are still practitioners at work in this field, producing texts which may be traditional in form but are often distinctive in language and content.
- Contemporary hymnwriting has reached out to embrace a wider range of subjects, bringing many aspects of everyday life in today’s world into the range of worship.
- The language of these newer hymns is also usually recognisably modern, avoiding the phraseology and vocabulary of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries which now sound dated.

Praise / Worship Songs

- Culturally, praise and worship songs reflect the structure of much “pop” music; the genre originates in the mid-twentieth century and has continued to develop since. In terms of content, the genre has a narrower range than hymns.
- Songs of this type are often lively and engaging, drawing the worshipping congregation into joyful expressions of praise and commitment.
- The use of the first-person singular helps to personalise what is sung, which can be helpful for encouraging individual commitment and devotion.
- These songs are able to promote and encourage a particular mood, engaging the singer at an emotional level rather than in a purely intellectual way.

Modern Hymns

- Some more recent writing combines the metrical fluidity of the worship song with the linear development of thought of the more traditional hymn to give a newer hybrid form which is currently proving popular.
- These modern hymns with their straightforward tunes are often easily accessible to contemporary congregations.
- Writing in this genre is starting to explore more widely in theology and practice, producing texts of greater depth and maturity.

Taizé Songs

- The short songs of the style emerging from the Taizé community often have a simplicity similar to some “praise and worship” material but are usually in a more reflective style. Latin has sometimes been used as a linguistic common denominator in these songs.
- The gentle, thoughtful character of much of the Taizé material enables its use alongside prayer and at other points in a service.
- The short, repetitive nature of the songs allows the worshipper to absorb and meditate on a single phrase or thought.

Music from the “World Church”

- This label is generally used within the UK to indicate songs and hymns which were not originally written in English. Sometimes they are used in translation, sometimes in their original language, and sometimes in a partially-translated mixture.
- Songs from the wider church remind us that we are part of a greater whole; they implicitly link us to our brothers and sisters in other lands, helping us to share their joys and their struggles.
- Many such songs are fairly easy to learn, even in another language, and their use can add colour from a broader palate to a service.

“All-Age” and Children’s Songs

- Material specifically written for children is found in some genres, including traditional hymns and praise and worship songs.
- These songs are usually simple, direct and easily learned – they can often add enjoyment and freshness in an “all-age” context, helping the children to recognise that they too are part of the church family.

The above labelling is by no means a comprehensive list; it deliberately focuses on congregational genres, excluding choral anthems and also seasonal carols. No specific mention is made of the use of psalms, which have been adapted to many different styles. Remember also that some songs and hymns span more than one category.

Some final thoughts for reflection: *the strengths seen in one genre may be absent from another genre – which may be that genre’s weakness. What might be the implications of drawing on worship material from only one or two genres? Could your congregation’s spiritual life be enhanced by broadening its core repertoire of worship material?*

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