



Which Hymn Belongs Where in the Service?

Short Guide No 4: Which Hymn Belongs Where in the Service?

Some hymns are obviously ill-suited to certain services, or to certain parts of a service. It would make little sense to sing 'Go forth and tell! O church of God, awake!' as an opening hymn, or 'Come, ye faithful, raise the anthem' at the end; 'We plough the fields and scatter' is unlikely to be appropriate during Advent. Here are a few other considerations ...

At the opening of the service

Sometimes this may include some kind of “call to worship”: at any rate, a hymn near the beginning of a service can help to set the tone for the whole act of worship. It may be beneficial to choose something which helps to focus on God, or to point towards themes which will be explored and developed later in the act of worship. Alternatively, a very general hymn of praise—such as a hymn to God as Creator—may be suitable here.

At the point where confession is made

In many services, it is appropriate to allow time for quiet reflection and confession of sin, whether in silent, individual prayer or by means of a corporate response. A hymn which expresses sorrow for wrongs committed and re-dedication to obedient discipleship may prove useful at this point. Sometimes a hymn which expresses lament may be suitable instead; sometimes one which brings a focus on the holiness of God may be better. After confession and the assurance of God’s forgiveness, a hymn of gratitude could be chosen.

When an offering is taken

If a hymn is used to accompany the giving of offerings, then it may be possible to use a quite general hymn, or one which is related to the parts of the service immediately before or after this point. There are, however, hymns which are specific to bringing offerings, especially around harvest; there are hymns which express thanksgiving to God and rededication to his service, and these may also prove suitable.

At particular times of the church calendar

Most good hymn books contain either specific sections on the major Christian seasons or indexes which point to texts suitable for use at these times. In some traditions, these are a major guiding factor for the worshipping life of a congregation, which may indicate hymns to choose—or may suggest the need to have more general hymns as a balance to the liturgical focus.

Similar considerations may apply for morning and evening services, or for special services: those for prayer, for healing, for Christian unity, for church anniversaries and so on. For a major event such as a congregation’s centenary or the opening and dedication of a new building, it may be possible to plan well in advance and commission a new text and tune especially for the occasion.

When the Scriptures are read

Here there are several possibilities. One is to select a hymn which picks up the theme of one or more of the passages being read, such as one based directly on one of these sections, especially if the reading is a psalm. The Scriptural indexes of various hymn books will suggest hymns on these or other passages, for example, narrative texts based on gospel stories. Other options include hymns which remind us of how God has spoken through the Bible, and those which express a willingness to be quiet and to listen for his voice.

When the sermon has been preached

This is perhaps where the choice of hymn could most usefully reflect the theme of the sermon or of the service as a whole. A sermon will usually look for a response from the congregation: a hymn can be used as a vehicle for this, whether the response should be praise, thanksgiving, prayer or a fresh resolve for action. Hymns on the various aspects of Christian discipleship are numerous, and a suitable hymn of thoughtful recommitment is a good way to provide the congregation with a chance to respond to the challenge presented by the preaching.

When prayers of intercession are used

Once again, there are a number of hymns which explore the theme of prayer, and may provide a suitable way to introduce a time of intercession. The theme of the prayers themselves may suggest possibilities, as may other parts of the service, the season of the church year, or recent news events. There are also a number of fine hymns which are prayers in themselves, or which express encouragements to pray in particular ways.

When a creed is recited

If some kind of credal formula is used as part of the service, it may prove possible to include a hymn which either reinforces or complements this. There are various hymns which express central aspects of the Christian's faith or particular doctrinal themes, such as creation or the calling of the church. If such a theme is central to the service, it may be apposite to choose such a hymn at this point, to emphasise the relevant section of a credal confession.

When communion is taken

There are very many good communion hymns. First, some focus on the historical roots of the celebration of communion, including the last supper, Christ's struggle in Gethsemane, his trial and his crucifixion. Secondly, there are texts which meditate on the meaning of the cross for those who believe. Sometimes it may be better to focus on the specific aspects of self-examination, repentance and lament; or of gratitude, adoration and recommitment.

At the conclusion of the service

Here is another occasion to choose a suitably rousing hymn, one which will focus the hearts and minds of worshippers on the task ahead as we move from an atmosphere of worship to the demands, pressures and opportunities of daily life. Themes which have been central to the service can be re-emphasised, especially in renewed dedication; hymns on such subjects as mission, witness and service are also well worth considering. Ideally a hymn used at the conclusion of the service will enable the congregation to keep in mind what they have heard and said, and help to guide on how this can be put into Practice.

As noted in some of the preceding paragraphs, the arrangement and indexing of major hymn books can provide a useful source of guidance for hymns appropriate to the various points of a service. There are also published suggestions to accompany some of the most commonly-used lectionaries, and these can similarly provide useful suggestions.

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