



Presenting and Responding to Hymns

Hymns form a significant element of much worship. Although spontaneous singing can occur, most hymn singing is planned in advance. We should not assume that everyone is familiar with the conventions of communal singing, so the following suggestions may be helpful for those who are entrusted with preparing and leading worship.

Announcing hymns

How do worshippers know that a hymn is to be sung? What information is given and how is this conveyed?

Some hymns need no spoken introduction, as they are part of a predetermined liturgical framework. Usually, though, hymns are announced, or their details appear on a screen. The most basic instructions can be along the lines of: 'We now stand to sing Hymn No. X', possibly also including the first line of the text. This approach is functional but not particularly welcoming.

Some explanation about the relevance of the hymn and its background may also be instructive. This additional comment can help to draw the worshipper into the flow of the worship. Succinct information is all that is required – not a sermon, at this point! (See Short Guide No. 29, 'Finding Out About Hymns'.) Radio programmes such as The Daily Service (BBC Radio 4) provide excellent examples of how to introduce congregational song.

Musical support

Hymns are designed to be sung, and congregations will normally need, and welcome, some musical support. This need not be sophisticated, indeed, cantor-led unaccompanied singing can be most effective, especially if the singer has visual contact with the body of worshippers.

However, most congregational singing is accompanied by instruments. The initial introduction, or play over, is crucial, for this sets not only the musical parameters of a hymn but also its mood. The instrumental prelude must be unambiguously clear, so that singers know when to start. What works for a metrical hymn will be different from the introduction to a worship song, and experienced musicians will know how to adapt their playing to match what is required on the day. Tempo, dynamics and the overall ambience of the hymn can be indicated in a short introduction. Pitch is also a determining factor in how comfortable a congregation will feel about singing.

Commercial recorded accompaniments have the facility for a play over, though mechanical resources are less flexible in what they can provide.

Once the singing has started, the accompaniment will continue to provide a firm support. This may reflect particular sentiments or words in the text: 'loud organs', 'sweet harps' and even 'birds singing sweetly in the trees' can be given instrumental colouring to enhance what is being sung. The dynamic indications which appeared in hymn books of previous generations are now out of fashion but variety in an accompaniment will help to give a hymn a sense of life and progression. A solo accompanist can do this as the hymn progresses; members of an ensemble such as a music group will need advance notice of any such nuances of interpretation.

Congregational singing can be greatly enhanced by members of a choir giving a lead, or by a soloist singing into a mike. Recorded singing can also add to what a congregation is able to utter.

Whatever resources are used to accompany and sustain congregational singing, an individual member of a congregation has the option to participate in any way they like, being secure in the knowledge that the singing will continue, whatever their own contribution to the experience.

Further ways of making the most of congregational song

- Different groups of people sing various verses of a hymn: solo / everyone; choir / congregation; higher / lower voices.
- Musicians explore creative ways of interpreting hymns. (See Short Guide No. 28, 'How Choirs Contribute to the Singing and Interpretation of Hymns'.)
- A medley of hymns and songs which could be incorporated into worship.
- Favourite hymns to be requested and then sung, together with some words of commentary.
- Exploration of different tunes for familiar texts (e.g. O WALY WALY to 'When I survey' as an alternative to ROCKINGHAM).
- And not everything needs to be sung! Words of hymns can be read aloud, in choral speaking, possibly by one side at a time, as in responsorial psalmody.

Recording of hymns – and our response

Zooming or streaming of church services conveys a real-life experience, much welcomed by those unable to attend worship in person. However, what works perfectly well in a church service is not necessarily so effective online. The better the quality of the recording, especially when words are clearly articulated, the greater will be the benefit for those viewing or listening at home. This is especially so for the sung parts of worship. Words sung by the congregation will not be picked up by microphones set up for use by service leaders; microphones for a choir or group will help.

Recordings of hymns abound. CDs, videos and YouTube recordings add to our knowledge of sacred song, giving access to material from diverse Christian traditions across the world. CDs and the like often include hymn texts and background information, giving the context of what is sung. Professional performances are able to demonstrate musical artistry and clarity of expression in ways which can be hard to achieve in a normal church service. Remember, though, that the use of commercial or other recordings in a streamed or broadcast service will have copyright implications.

When we listen to a recording it is possible to become totally immersed in the experience, almost as if we were there in person; or we can dip in and out, using fast-forward or pause at our leisure. This puts the recipient in charge of the process of reception. Background or foreground, it is our choice.

Hymns for meditation and reflection

Hymn books are well known as resources for personal faith. Although fewer people now own copies of hymn books, the prevalence of recorded hymns and songs on media platforms means that thousands of examples of sacred song are readily available at the touch of a switch or the click of a mouse (for the technologically minded).

'Sacred listening' is, increasingly, a vital part of today's religious experience.

A Festival of Hymns

The sequence of hymns and sacred songs in an Act of Praise is another expression of corporate worship, which is spiritual, educational – and fun! Practical considerations will include:

- Who, what and when, with publicity and outreach.
- Any copyright implications for the presentation of the material – will this be specially printed?
- Details of the content: a thematic approach, a balance of old and new, sacred songs from different traditions?
- Will the choir or musicians leading the event need to rehearse more fully than usual?

Finally

Whenever we present our hymns and sacred songs, whether in traditional guises or through the means of contemporary media, we will strive to 'Sing of the Lord's goodness ... melodies of praise and thanks to God'.

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