

Practical input

Establishing an outward-focused worship song repertoire

Choosing songs which focus on poverty, intercession and themes of justice and mercy does not on its own constitute prayer and worship that is outward-focused. But for many of us, sung worship is a crucial element of our worship, and songs are significant, or even primary, tools for expressing corporate worship in our churches. (If we are honest with ourselves, we also know that these songs shape our theology, and our worship as a result – they are often more memorable than teaching, and those we connect with make a deep impression on our hearts.)

These are all good things, but they illustrate how influential our songs are. Those of us with any responsibility for making song selection, or defining the regular song repertoire of our church, should be diligent in reviewing the emphases we are creating, as well as responsive to new and fresh songs that are coming through.

Carrying out a song audit

What?

This is an exercise which will help you review your song choice for all areas of Christian doctrine, as well as in reference to poverty, justice and intercession.

A song audit is a review of the songs you are regularly singing in church, and the combined doctrine that they convey. It gives you a chance to prayerfully consider whether there are areas of doctrine, belief and mission that are under-represented in the songs you are using, and what impact this might be having on your worship, and on the received (if not taught) theology of you and your congregation as worshippers.

This isn't supposed to be a tick box exercise or a test – but a tool for reflecting, on an ongoing basis, the journey that your church is on with its songs.

(N.B. if you are a worship leader, but are not the worship pastor or person who has oversight over the repertoire, you might want to talk to them about them doing an exercise like this, or you doing it together. But you can still look at the songs you typically choose to lead with – are you bringing through a balanced theology when you lead each time, or over a period of leading. Obviously you can't cover everything every time, but are you allowing different parts of God's character, and our worship of him, to come through?)

Why?

The songs we sing in worship are for God.

But they also help us – they proclaim the truth and help put into words things we struggle to articulate. They are often also easy to remember, and so teach us key concepts about God and our relationship with him. In short, they have a huge impact on our values and beliefs. Often their lyrics and emphases stay with us as much, or more, than messages which have been specifically designed to teach us.

Few of us would ever use a song we weren't happy with in terms of doctrine. That's a given. But sometimes our over-emphases on certain 'families' of songs, or on what is new, can begin to subtly lead us away from the breadth and depth of the gospel, and our call as disciples of Christ.

How?

- Make a list of the main doctrines and themes that you and/or your leadership team think should be coming through in your songs. (Obviously some will be much more central, or even important, than others.)
- You might also find it helpful to make a list of all the types of song that you think you should be using – i.e. praise, declaration, adoration, intercession, petition, invocation...
- Now look at your established repertoire of songs – this might be hymn or song books, a folder of songs that your worship team use, or a standing list that you have.
- Also look at any records that you have that might tell you what is actually being sung week to week, rather than what base of songs you are choosing from. (If you are CCLI registered, one of the most useful places to start would be your CCLI returns, or you might have orders or services, or simply emails with lists of songs for services.)
- Using these two lists/groupings (what you are choosing songs from, and what you are actually singing), and the list of doctrines and themes you made at the start of the exercise, see how they compare. Jot down areas which crop up as needing more focus, a bit less focus, or have few or no options.
- Be honest with yourself, and think carefully about some of the songs – are they obvious to someone singing them what they're about, or could they be perceived differently in different contexts?

What next?

When you have identified any issues, move forward with addressing them. You might need to do one or more of the following:

- Look for new songs on particular themes/doctrines and decide which ones are priorities to introduce first.
- Don't be held back by anxiety or legalism over it, but try to consciously think a bit about the themes you are focussing on in worship. Are they balanced? There will always be seasons where certain aspects of God's character are more in focus, so don't be prescriptive, but overall do you feel there is a full picture coming across.
- Speak to any other worship leaders under your oversight about song choice. Are there new songs, or older songs, that you want them to focus on, or particular themes you want to address over the coming weeks and months. Do they have questions?

Introducing specific new poverty, justice or intercession songs

If you feel you need more actual songs to help with this area, then there are more and more being written and becoming available.

Check out our songs, index of recommended songs written by other people, and links to other sites that might help you at www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-songs

And consider writing your own – particularly if these can help your church pray and worship in the context of your specific community, its needs, and the acts of love and service you are involved with as a body of people.

When choosing a new song specifically to fill a particular any theme, but especially poverty and justice issues, think carefully about whether it will be obvious to the congregation that it is about that theme. If it's not, that doesn't mean you shouldn't use it, but think about selecting a couple where the context can't be missed. For example, people might interpret general terms such as 'broken' or 'weak' in a song as referring to their own personal contexts – because of course this is true on one level – but if you want the song to highlight the need to intercede for others who are 'broken' or 'weak', you might need to think about the songs you put either side of it in the set to give it a context, or specifically introduce it so that people know its purpose.

Try to also think about the different times and contexts you want to be able to use songs on this theme – do you have songs to work for sending and commissioning, some for times of intercession, and some more general which speak of God's heart for the poor, weak and broken, and praise him for this aspect of his character. This may mean choosing some extra praise or adoration songs which are not ostensibly songs on this theme.

You need a balance of general songs which introduce the theme, and specific songs that take the theme deeper. It will not always necessarily be right or appropriate to sing a specific song on the issues. But general songs which touch on it, and help frame your general approach to worship as being about more than just us and God, will always be an appropriate addition to both praise and adoration.

Moving beyond application or sending songs

The connection between worship and justice is more than us just living out lives that give authenticity to our worship (see Amos 5:21-24, Isaiah 58 or James 1:27). It is important to have songs that can be used to help us frame response, application, or commitment to go after we have received teaching or other stimulus on mission, loving others and service. But loving God and loving others are much more intertwined.

If we want to worship God in spirit in truth, part of this is worshipping a fuller revelation of him. We know that his heart is for the poor, the broken and the nations. So we lift him up as the God of all this.

Loving God isn't just for devotion, and loving others isn't just for service. We need to connect them all. And this means remembering our context when we worship, and citing this even in the context of praise. And of course it means intercession – catching God's heart for all in need, and pressing in to him for the transformation of our world.

If we only have songs to sing about the poor which are to do with us going and serving them, then we will only remember the poor at the very end of our times of worship, or when the preaching leads us to. If we are to truly love and walk with the poor, as Jesus calls us to do, we need to be much more conscious and consistent than that. We need to be owning their struggles alongside our own in the most intimate times of adoration, and our most heart-felt times of petitioning prayer.

(See *Intimacy and Intercession – personal faith and the heart-cry for justice*, *Worship and justice part 1 – why does it matter?* and *Worship and justice part 2 – creating an ever-flowing stream at* www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-articles for more discussion on these issues.)

Working with what you've got already

The problem with introducing new songs is that it means there are more songs to teach that the congregation are less familiar with. And if they are specific songs (especially sending songs) they will take even longer for people to

own, because you won't want to sing them three weeks in a row when you're introducing them, and even if you did, it might be a while before they were the right choice again.

In addition, it has to be acknowledged that if you asked a group of Christians to think of three or four songs that really help them voice their core experience of following God, and what they want to say to him in praise and adoration, or bring before him in petition... very few would pick songs with any outward-focused content. This is symptomatic of our culture, and our recent overemphasis on individualism in worship, but it is also simply part of the human condition.

Therefore one of the most helpful ways we can refocus the content of our worship so that it is more outwardly-contextualised, is to simply bring a different context to what we have already. By using a song people know and connect with in a different context – you can often help people engage better with the issue or people group you are focussing on. Try:

- deliberately using it as a prayer for a different situation (i.e. Matt Redman's 'Can a nation be changed?' was written for the UK, but could be sung to intercede for Zimbabwe)
- changing some of the pronouns or other words which change its focus (i.e. Jude del Hierro's More love, more power could include lines such as 'more of you in our city')
- accompanying it by images or other stimuli (i.e. you could display an image of a homeless person when singing a song such as Reuben Morgan's 'Let the weak say I am strong').

(Find out more about using different contexts by reading our article, *Practical input – Exploring contextualisation to bring through justice theme* at www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-articles)

Moving beyond the sound of the West

In terms of the global context, you might want to think about how you can bring in voices, images or songs that reflect the context of a world-wide church, and many different nations experiencing brokenness.

The voiceless in society are sadly sometimes also voiceless in our worship. How many songs do you know, or sing, written by people living in abject poverty, or people living out their faith in a non-western society? If you have travelled to churches around the world, you will have heard many, or even mostly, Western songs being sung. Perhaps one of the reasons that our song vocabulary doesn't deal with poverty as much as it should do, is because we are not listening out for the songs that Christians living in poverty are writing for the church.

Think about using songs from different nations (www.ionabooks.com and John Bell have probably collected the most resources like this) or even about giving time to the voiceless in your worship, through the use of silence or through projecting the words (or listening to) 'Unheard song' – see www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-songs

And if your church has links with Christians in different countries, you might want to explore asking if anyone there has written a song you can learn and/or even incorporating what your congregation know of their words and phrases into a known song, or getting a chorus translated into their language so that you can sing it.