

Worship Leading

Preparing a worship set

How do I choose songs for a worship set?

Theme: The first thing to consider is your setting. What is the theme of the service or event you will be leading at? Try to choose songs that complement the theme. Next, consider what the songs are about. Some worship leaders look at it as moving from the “outer courts” to the “inner courts” – from general and congregational praise to more personal and intimate songs. We will generally begin with energetic songs about God, extolling His characteristics, etc. Then we may move into songs that focus on our commitment to God. This is not a rule, though. It’s just important to consider what *each song is about*. Think about how the themes flow from one song into the next – and don’t forget to consider the theme of the event or what the speaker will be talking about.

New/Old Songs: Consider the group you will be leading. Try to choose as many songs as possible that they will already know. However, don’t be afraid to teach new songs. Maybe one new song per time you lead them, as a rule of thumb. The Bible says, “Sing to the Lord a new song” more than once for a good reason! There’s something about a new song that touches our hearts in a fresh way. However, consider the difficulty of the new song you are choosing. Try to choose songs that are “catchy” and memorable, with melody lines that are at least somewhat predictable (but not boring!) so that they can follow along even the first time they hear it. If you can, sing through the chorus for them before starting the song.

Key: If at all possible, choose songs all in the same key for a set. This helps keep a worshipful flow. If you have to have different keys, try to move up in keys (such as 2 songs in the key of D and then a song in the key of E). This keeps the feeling of worship moving forwards.

How many songs? We find that a song will be 4 minutes on average, so plan according to how much time you are allotted for worship. We find that a 4 song set (which will end up being 20 minutes if you talk or pray at all during it) is a good amount of time for people to worship. Some like more, some like less, though, so you need to consider your context.

Speed: Often times, we will move from fast songs into slow songs. But this doesn’t have to be the rule. Changing it up some times creates variety and keeps you from falling into a rut. (See “Creating ‘Flow’ in Worship” section for more on this).

What key should a song be in? Try to place a song in a key that is comfortable for everyone to sing who will be worshipping with you. For instance, it is not comfortable for women to sing songs that are consistently high (if the notes are at a C above middle C or higher for much of the song). In this case, we would try a lower key. It is important for you to consider the group you are leading, and not just yourself when choosing a song. If you are a tenor, you might tend to place songs in higher keys because that is the most comfortable for your voice. However, if you are leading women, it will most likely be too high for them. It will also be too high for most men.

As a general rule, if someone is untrained at singing, they will not like to sing high. An exception for this is for those who are accustomed to singing hymns from a hymnal, which are often placed in a high key. In this case, you could have the key in a bit higher range. It is never a good idea to have song go any higher than a high E above middle C. In the same way, it should never go lower than a G below middle C (for women). You can often adjust a key one notch in either direction, especially if you are trying to place it in the same key as another song you are playing.

Remember, if you are a pianist playing with a guitarist, that the easiest keys for them to play in are G, D, and E. C and A are also doable for most guitarists. If a guitarist has a capo, they can also raise the song from the key they are playing in to the key the pianist would like to play in. For instance, if the pianist would really like to play the song in a key that the guitarist is uncomfortable with, such as the key of B, the guitarist need only to place his/her capo on the 2nd fret and play the song in the key of A. It may be necessary to have a lead sheet prepared separately for each instrumentalist according to which key they are playing in.

If you are attempting to play a hymn in a praise song style, it is very likely that you will need to change the key from the key in the hymnal, because they tend to be written very high, and usually not in a good key for a guitarist to play and even can be difficult on piano.

Creating “Flow” in Worship

It’s important to think about the “flow” of worship as a worship leader. Your goal should be that the people you are leading have the best possible environment to personally enter into true worship of the Living God. Therefore, your job is to remove all distractions and do what you can to help them worship. Here are some simple tips.

1. **Making the Set a “Whole”.** Consider the worship set as a whole entity, not 4 separate songs. Don’t stop between songs unless you absolutely *have* to. It really helps if your songs are in the same key, then you can flow straight into the next song. If you have two songs back to back that are in differing keys, transition the keys if you know how to. If you don’t know how to, try to make your ending of the first song and the start of the next song as seamless as possible so as not to yank them out of the worship mindset they are in. This may be a good place for you to pray, either way – if you are transitioning instrumentally or if you have to stop playing to change keys. Practice talking while you play so you can pray/talk while you are transitioning – this also keeps the “flow” of worship from breaking. TRY TRY TRY to avoid just singing through a list of songs – with no direction and no purpose. Then it becomes about the people, the songs, the music. HOW CAN YOU MAKE THIS ABOUT GOD?
2. **Playing the “Intro” to a song.** Most songs will have an instrumental “intro”. If you can’t figure it out from a recording or from the music you have been given, try playing through the verse or the chorus chords, or even just the first line or so of the song until you find a progression of chords that sounds right! We like to sometimes go right into the singing and skip the intro – usually not on the first song of the set, but maybe on one song in the middle or at the end of the set.
3. **Talking during the worship time.** If you feel you must say something, keep it short and succinct. Refrain from saying “trite” sayings – only say what you truly mean in your heart. If possible, plan ahead of time what you will say so that you don’t ramble. Remember that the whole point of you saying anything should be to point them towards God and to help them worship – so keep the focus off yourself and on God. We like to say something to put people at ease at the beginning of the set, especially if it’s people whom we don’t really know. Also, to help

them focus on Christ. It's good to read Scripture that goes along with a song, or to say something that will help them understand better what a song means. Try to avoid saying things like, "for our next song..." or "the next song we will sing..."

4. **Musical "Flow"**. We mentioned before how key and tempo affect the worship set. So, to say it again, try to keep the set in the same key, if possible. And consider how the tempo differences from song to song "flow" into one another. For instance, it would be awkward to do a fast song, then a slow song, then a fast, then a slow, etc. We like to start with a fast "clapping" tempo song at the beginning of the set – to help everyone to move into a more reflective time later. Also, think about how differences in time signature will feel when you put songs back to back. Going from a 4/4 song to a 6/8 and then back to a 4/4 might not be as good as doing the 4/4 songs together and then the 6/8.
5. **How long should a song last?** It will usually depend on the song – they each can be different. As a general rule, though, you want to sing through each section of the song (verse, chorus, bridge) twice – especially if it's a new song. Obviously, if there are multiple verses, only sing each one time (unless you come back to the first verse at the very ending of the song, which happens sometimes). For the bridge, often times it is repeated. If you are teaching it as a new song, you definitely need to sing it more than once, so they can learn it and have a chance to try it. We will often do two choruses at the end of the song, to "build up" to a more powerful ending. Here is a typical "form" of a song: Verse 1; Chorus; Verse 2; Chorus; Bridge; Chorus; Chorus. However, don't feel tied to any of this – especially if the song feels like it's dragging out too long and you want to cut off the repeated chorus at the end. Remember, though, if you make the song too short and try to include too many songs, the people never have a chance to learn each song and worship can feel like it has ADHD!

Other Things to Consider

1. **Confidence**. Don't play like you are scared. Play out strong – God deserves it! It's not about you – it's about God! It's SOOOO tempting to talk about how nervous you are or whatever. Don't do it. Don't take the focus off of God. Because then people will be focusing on how good / bad you are doing instead of on worshiping. Even if it's your very first time leading on your instrument, if you don't tell them that, then they are assuming you know what you're doing. They won't be nervous for you and they'll focus on God. You, in turn, can play your best without thinking about their evaluation of you. At all costs, direct their attention to Him.
2. **Spiritual Preparation for Worship**: This probably goes without saying, but if you aren't spiritually prepared to lead, you probably won't be worshiping. Take the time to humble yourself before the Lord, to ask for His help and His guidance, to repent of pride or concern for how *you* might look/sound. Ask yourself, how can I make this totally about God and not about me? This includes false humility – which is a form of pride. Also, fishing for compliments... All of these things must be brought to Him ahead of time – so that you can guard your heart and be ready to point people towards Him.
3. **To Stand or To Sit, (that is the question)** We will usually have people stand, probably because it *feels* more honoring to God. However, in the right setting, sitting can be appropriate – especially if you aren't doing any fast and energetic songs. It's hard to be energetic when you are sitting. Sometimes we'll have people sit as we move into a slower part of worship, so they can find it easier to kneel or bow more easily. However, if they still have to keep their head up to see the screen, this isn't helpful sometimes. Sometimes,

if we move into a more powerful part towards the end of the set, we may have them stand again, to help promote the sense of greater honor to God. If you are leading worship on an instrument and must sit, but you want the people to stand, try to have someone singing with you who can stand.

4. **Lyrics.** It obviously depends on your resources as far as what you can do for words for your group. If it's possible to have their hands free, then go for it. Here are some ideas, in order from our *most preferred* to the *least preferred*.
 - a. *Words on a screen from a computer* is best. Our favorite projection software to use is called MediaShout. We also use Worship Assistant (the same program where we store our songs/chords). You can also use PowerPoint – but you have to enter all of your lyrics in. It can be distracting when the person flipping running the slide isn't prompt. They should practice with you on each song at least once. The slide operator is as much a part of your worship team as you are – they can do a lot to ruin the "flow" of worship by being sloppy or enhance it by being prepared. You can prepare the slides in a way so that they never have to go back to a previous slide only keep progressing forward. For instance, have a slide for Verse 1, then Chorus, then Verse 2, then another Chorus slide so they don't have to go back to the previous Chorus slide. You can also find creative backgrounds for your slides to enhance worship.
 - b. *Words printed on a handout.* This is fine to do, though it keeps people a bit tied down and less free to raise their hands, etc.
 - c. *Words on an overhead projector.* This is good because their hands are free. But, it can be distracting when the person flipping the sheets isn't prompt. They should practice with you on each song at least once. Try to prepare your sheets so they all match (same font and size, etc.) – this will cut down on distraction.
 - d. *Words printed in a songbook.* This is good for saving paper, but it keeps you from being able to add new songs easily – which is a serious downside!
 - e. *No printed lyrics.* If you have no other options, you can do it without any lyrics. Just make sure you do songs they already know – and if you are teaching a new one, only teach one with easy lyrics to remember - teach it slowly so they can feel good about learning. If it's a fast song, you can teach it towards the beginning of the set, so you don't break the flow of worship later. If it's a slow song, don't say anything, just sing the chorus alone, and then ask them to try it again with you.
5. **Copyright Laws.** It is illegal to make copies of recorded music, such as burning a CD or making a tape of your favorite worship album for your worship team to practice. It is also technically illegal to display or print lyrics without a copyright license. We are at a disadvantage here in Africa because it appears that the CCLI license currently isn't available here. Honestly, since we just arrived, we aren't sure at this point what churches are doing here to comply with the law. If you are aware of anything, please let us know! We are contacting CCLI to inquire as to how we can legally display lyrics here. If you want to research for yourself, go to www.ccli.com.
6. **Where to find new worship songs.** If you have access to the internet, this is a great place to go. If you can get a subscription to iTunes or Napster, you can download songs whenever you want onto your computer or mp3 player. As far as discovering what music to download, the best thing to do is ask people you know who they like to listen to. If you don't have access to this, find out who your favorite composers and worship leaders are, and have a friend send you new CD's occasionally. If you have a worship leader friend here in Africa or back home, tap into them for resources, too. If you're really serious about increasing your repertoire, check out Worship Leader magazine's Song Discovery, a subscription you can get that comes

every two months with a whole CD of new worship music and lead sheets. Their website is:

<http://www.worshipleader.com/> and <http://www.songdiscovery.com/>

7. **Where to find lead sheets for songs you want to play.** If you don't feel able to transcribe a song yourself, there are a couple of options for getting a lead sheet. The easiest is to Google the name of the song and look to see if it has been posted anywhere. (ex: *"how great is our god" chords*) If you still can't find it, e-mail us and we would GLADLY transcribe it for you or send you the lead sheet if we already have it. andylesabrown@gmail.com or andy@brownfamily.ws. Our phone number is 0734-550-246.
8. **When you aren't leading, but are following a singer.** If you are just the instrumentalist, here are a few tips. First, plan it out, if possible, with the worship leader ahead of time. Ask them the form of the song, when they want to get quiet, when they want it to build up. Then, listen like crazy during worship and match what the leader is doing. If they accidentally or on purpose go into an unplanned section, follow them – don't try to lead them from your instrument. Pay attention to the mood of worship they are trying to establish, and reflect that in how you play. Give them the confidence to lead – knowing that you are right there with them, listening carefully and taking their direction. It's helpful to worship a lot together – you'll begin to learn their style and their cues.
9. **Having Others Sing with You**

Most of this will be personal preference, so please take this with a grain of salt! Also, most of this will apply to church services, and not to smaller settings. ALSO, it will apply in large part to Western worship – but some of the principles could be applied to African worship when done carefully. We still wanted to include it here, though – to help you think through common practices in the church today and think through if they are truly helpful or not.

We prefer to have a limited number of people leading singing at any one time. If it's for a small group, like a Bible study, we try to have only one or two worship leaders. If it's during a church service or large event, we feel that the more people up front during the worship time, the more chance of there being distractions from God – the more chance of it coming across as a "show". A congregation member may be thinking good or bad things about the singer's voices, their outfits, the expression on their faces, and any number of other things besides God. Now, it's true, they could be thinking the same thing about us or the instrumentalists. We have found that once a group or congregation gets used to you as its worship leader, the easier it will be for people to not think about you at all during worship. Therefore, we try to keep the number of people on the platform to a minimum and try to keep the turn-over rate low.

We've been in many churches where the "line" of singers standing in the front has distracted us from worship, so we don't think it is a good idea as a general rule. We have always preferred to have *two singers* – one on melody, one on harmony. Occasionally, we will have three singers – with two on harmonies – depending on the type of music. As far as most modern worship music goes, there is usually only one harmony – an alto or tenor. There can be more harmonies with some of the older music (hymns and choruses from 70's, 80's mostly) and with African music – so it depends on what style of music you are doing. (When choosing a style we try to choose what will be best for those we are leading, but also cannot help but be ourselves and play in our own style).

As a rule, though, you do need to be careful about who you let lead with you. They are just as much considered a worship leader as you are by the people you are leading. So, do they have integrity? Are they spiritual leaders too? Are they good singers? Do they sing off key? Will their voice add to or distract from worship? When they are singing in front of others, do they look like they are worshiping, or do they look scared? Have they been begging you to let them sing? Sometimes, when we have had someone who is strong in one area, but not another, we try to work with them and train them. Sometimes we have just had to be honest and say that we didn't feel worship leading is their gift. This was really hard to do – but we felt that God had to have gifted them in an area the church *really* needs. We would even try to help them find another area of service.

An exception to all of this can be a choir. With training, a choir can be a great addition to worship – especially because the sound of worship is greatly increased with the addition of many voices. As they stand there “as one” – they can lead the congregation in a mighty way.