

LEADING SONG SERVICES

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Ways of Structuring Song Services

1. Begin with a passage of scripture, an event, a parable, etc. Hymnals normally have a scripture index that indicates the connection between hymns and scripture passages. Before each song the leader or someone in the assembly can read a passage that correlates with the overall theme or the distinctive point of the upcoming song.
2. Pick a theme and sing songs that fit with it. Hymnals have topical indices in the back that facilitate finding songs in that hymnal which belong to many relevant topics. If the body of the hymnal is topically arranged, you can turn to that section of the hymnal and sing one song after another. This format is useful especially if the whole service is dedicated to singing.
3. Organize songs around a picture like (life as a) "journey" ("Each Step I Take," *etc.*), "sailing" ("Master, the Tempest Is Raging"; "Sail On"), pastoral images.
4. Requests may be taken from the audience. Normally it is best to have one song to get started while people find favorites they can request. If you choose to use this format, make sure your instrumentalists—pianists, organists, guitarists—can handle anything in the hymnal that is likely to come up. If you are not certain they can sight read that well, check with them beforehand so there are no surprises. Embarrassed musicians may not be willing to put themselves at risk again. If they are not sufficiently skilled, their accompaniment may detract more than help. Also make sure you know most of the songs if you plan to call for requests. By all means do not set up the principle that if you do not know the song the requester has to come up front and lead it. That works against participation and sets up possible embarrassment. In all likelihood you are just trying to protect yourself against embarrassment.
5. Let the song service provide the structure for the entire meeting. Any message(s) that would be conveyed additionally can be organized around the songs. The approach simply reverses the more usual format that organizes music around the spoken message. This is essentially what many current "concertizing" vocal artists do. Whereas musical artists do virtually all the "program" themselves, the format can involve any number of participants who can take turns introducing the next selection by reading a scripture, making comment, giving a testimony, and so on.
6. Use the words of songs as readings done in unison—and then sing them, perhaps. The whole "song service" might be transformed into a "reading service." The exercise focuses attention on the words of the song in fresh way. Reading the words in unison can be used if a familiar text shows up unexpectedly with an unfamiliar tune.

This technique does not work with many newer religious songs because the music and words form a whole that is interdependent. The words read by themselves are too repetitious or are too lacking in meter to provide a satisfying experience. The same can be said for many of the older “gospel songs.” In general, however, the older hymnody was poetry set to music so that the words can stand on their own. Contemporary “scripture songs” are an exception to the above generalization about today’s music-words, “whole-cloth” composition.

7. Songs can be grouped without separate introductions for each. These do not have to be announced, but this format assumes a leaflet or list of numbers for the leaders and musicians so they can go directly from one to another. The approach works with a series of songs known by heart or ones that can be projected on a screen with overheads. (Four-verse songs are not likely to be known by memory by very many people.) The songs you use need to be played in the same key or modulations need to be worked out for the transitions unless the musicians automatically know to provide a brief introduction.

Do not overdo trying to find a connector between songs that have not really been selected with a connection in mind to form some kind of sequence. The audience can probably tell you are just making something up off the top of your head.

8. Sing the same texts to several hymn tunes. A whole service could be constructed around different settings for the Twenty-Third Psalm, especially if specials and choral presentation are interspersed in the congregational singing. Many texts could be sung to the same hymn tune. The weakness, of course, is loss of interest because of repeating the same text. Greater variety can be achieved if several songs about an event like the wilderness wandering are sung as a set.

9. Turning the previous pattern around, use the same tune for several texts. Hymnals have hymn-tune lists in the back and give the meter for each one. The metric patterns of the poetry can be matched up with the meter of the hymn tune with satisfactory “fits” in most cases.

10. Use several antiphonal possibilities. One part of the audience can sing one segment and another part can sing another. “Send the Light” is a song where this can work. The choir, a soloist, and ensemble can sing the verses and the congregation can sing the chorus. On a song like “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today,” the smaller group can sing the “statement” and the congregation can respond with the “Allelujah.”

11. Song services can be organized by direction, that is, vertically to God as second or horizontally to other people. A third grouping is third-person reference to what would be thought about or done. A vertical example might be “Father, I Adore You,” “My Jesus, I Love Thee,” “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.” A horizontal direction could be used for encouragement, testimony, information/doctrine, invitation.

12. Sometimes it is effective to sing all the verses and use the chorus only on the final verse, especially if the chorus is long, if the verses form a natural sequence of thought, if the chorus melody or words repeat the verse. Note “I Must Tell Jesus” in this last respect.

13. The song service can be started and ended with the same song—like a set of book ends. This device is used in preaching and writing to create the sense of unity and conclusion.

Comments on Song Leading

Set a positive tone in song leading as well as in worship leading generally. Do not, for example, chide people for not singing, not singing loud, not smiling, not clapping, not swaying, not raising hands, and the like. Smiling, loud singing, *etc.*, do not necessarily have anything to do with quality of worship or the sincerity of it. Besides, it is not your business to pressure other people to express their worship in ways you choose. Smiling "on cue" is artificial anyway, and the words of the song you are singing do not necessarily call for that mental condition. You do better to achieve your concern by demonstrating in yourself a joyous spirit and happy countenance and by doing collateral things that create an atmosphere for rejoicing in which the audience then naturally takes part.

Sometimes people do not feel comfortable trying to do certain things as acts of worship. Insisting on certain responses is not only insensitive to their perspective, but in fact may drive them away from further involvement with your worship gatherings because they cannot trust you. It looks to them like you are more interested in manipulating them than in edifying them or praising God. Young people have to be especially careful here when it comes to intergenerational settings because of the cultural differences between youth and adults in their forties and on up. The cardinal rule is that leaders serve and accompanists accompany.

In a similar vein, it is not usually wise to make people move up front. You have to be very sure of your audience and their positive attitude toward you before you try such a thing.

Do not call people up front and make them do things that have the potential to embarrass. We get together for worship and fellowship not to act silly and play.

Faster is not necessarily better. The tempo of music is determined particularly by the frequency of harmony changes. Trying to push the tempo faster than what the harmony and other musical features dictate is not musically satisfying. If there are lots of eighth notes in the music, pace the song reasonably enough that people can read the words and music meaningfully; this is especially crucial if the song is new to them.

Indicate the verses to be sung by announcing them ahead of time. Do not try to call out the number between verses. Better to hold up the number with your fingers if you forget to indicate the verses ahead of time. When giving a list of songs to the instrumentalists, you do well to indicate the verses you intend to use; that helps them keep track of where you both are in the song.

Oftentimes a congregation has developed a habit of singing a song "wrong" rhythmically or tune-wise. You do well to leave that alone especially in more traditional churches. It does not matter all that much. The point of the song service is not to put on a technically correct concert.

Song Leader and Instrumentalists

When you are leading songs, you and the instrumentalists form a unit unless you do your own accompaniment. Be sensitive to the skill levels of the pianists, organists, guitarists, etc. Be careful about "springing things on them." Many people are not that confident about public performance. Giving them a list of songs ahead of time may be greatly appreciated. If the particular songs are difficult for any reason, they have a chance to practice them in order to work out the harder parts. Be careful about trying to get them to play faster even if they are dragging; they may not be able to play faster and do it cleanly. Do not ask them to raise or lower the pitch unless you know they can play the selection by ear in other keys or can transpose it spontaneously from the music. Transposing is more difficult than you realize if you yourself are not a musician. Do not expect them just to play "by ear" a song that just comes to mind in the middle of the song service even though it may be "just the thing." They may not know it; or if they do, they may not know how to play it or what key to put it in. Of all things do not just start singing and expect them to start playing. You may be pitching the song between keys. If someone is giving a special on, say, a guitar or horn, do not just call on him in the middle of the service to join in with the pianist to help accompany the singing. His instrument may not be in tune with the piano.

If you are the instrumentalist in the song leading, set the *speed* of each song by the way you play the introduction. Do not play it faster or slower than the congregation will sing it. The introduction sets the meter (3/4 vs. 4/4, 2/4, etc.) and the pitch as well as the speed. You may as well forget trying to speed up the song after the congregation begins singing. Increasing tempo may be possible with a choir, but it seldom works with a whole congregation. Work out an introduction to each song that sounds natural. By the way they are marked some hymnals suggest a portion you can use for an introduction. Instrumentalists need to think about the speed from the standpoint of the singing rather than the playing. Playing too fast is easier than singing that fast. Forming the words clearly and getting your breath is harder if the piece is played too fast.

As an aside here, the larger the audience the slower you need to sing. An assembly of several thousand has a harder time keeping together than a group of fifty does. You have to go for power more than speed in such cases.

Do not get overly "flowery" in your accompaniment. Too much improvisation and fill-in obscure the beat and detract from one of the main reasons for having instrumental accompaniment. This is especially crucial if the song leader is not directing. As a matter of fact, the congregation will follow the instrument more than the director if they are not together; so make sure you are together so as to avoid confusion.

If you are the pianist or organist, keep a *steady beat* in your mind especially through the holds at the end of the line. So many pianists simply play a set of notes, pause, and play the next set. A congregation cannot keep together without an assumed rhythm. Directing songs by hand may help if the pianist tends to be a note player. You may have to beat out the beats on the end of the line (at least with one hand) rather than use a hold signal as is often done. Sometimes song directors that hand direct do not hand direct prayer and communion songs in order to avoid distracting the thoughts of the assembly.

On the organ especially, in regard to *volume* make sure you are not so loud that you drown out the singing. On the other hand, do not be so tentative that people cannot hear you well enough. Being too tentative also tends to put you just a little behind the beat all the time; over the course of the whole song you will slow down the singing or be working against the song leader as he directs. In short, avoid making yourself too prominent for the role you have accepted.

Although singing "all the verses" has been touted as "the thing to do," it is not necessary in all or even most cases. Omitting verses depends on how tightly the message of the words/poetry proceeds through the stanzas. In a text like "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" you must sing all the stanzas because the poetry builds from verse to verse. Other songs do not have verses that are so interdependent.

In the last case omitting verses is a way of adjusting the length of the singing time if you see that it is taking longer than expected to sing the songs you have chosen. Of course, you may also skip one or two whole songs to shorten the song service. On songs with long choruses or choruses that sound musically repetitious with the verse ("Victory in Jesus"), you do not have to sing the chorus every time.

Singing a cappella offers a refreshing change from accompanied singing. One drawback to not using accompaniment is that you as song leader may not pitch the song correctly. Another problem is not being able to maintain proper tempo. Having the instruments drop out during the last verse minimizes both of these difficulties. Having the musicians drop out, however, during the middle verses and come back in on the last stanzas may not work because congregations typically go flat while the instruments are not being used. When the piano or organ tries to come back in, its pitch does not match the congregation. Hand clapping has become more customary in congregational singing; it has the advantage of maintaining the tempo. Intentionally singing slow does not always keep the congregation from slowing down.

Another way to keep the music fresh is to *modulate to a higher key* on the later verses or on the last verse. A good bit of skill is needed to pull this off without causing confusion or creating distracting pauses at the end of the verse. Modulating too often is more distracting than helpful. Modulating once allows you to use the same notation and simply change the key signature in you mind by a half step. This works well if the song is originally pitched in a flat key; however, going from "F" to "F#" is beyond the skill level of most everyday musicians. Modulating a second time requires transposing the notes. Finally, on some songs it is effective to sing the final verse slower for emphasis.

You can create freshness by *changing the tempo*, but the change almost always has to be from faster to slower with a view then to creating a more dignified and powerful effect.

In summation, freshness comes from variety and change: new songs; change of key, tempo, volume; different hymn tune, singing without accompaniment, shifts from three-four to four-four or vice versa.

Do not have the congregation stand the whole time. When the leader has people stand on the last line, instrumentalists sometimes play an extra interlude while people are rising; but this is usually unnecessary and it has the effect of breaking rhythm. If you plan to make them stand as you lead songs, make sure you are on a podium or stage so they can see you. There is no point in trying to lead them if only the front row and those on the center aisle can see you.

Unfamiliar Songs or Music

Occasionally hymnals use an unfamiliar tune for a familiar text. This typically happens when a congregation changes hymnals. It happens also if you are leading songs for another congregation than the one where you normally worship. It is a good idea to do a quick check to make sure each tune is the same as the one you know for that text.

(a) If you notice the change ahead of time, you can ask the instrumentalist to play through the new tune once to acquaint the audience with it. The pianist can play all the way through it for an introduction rather than just a four-measure segment. (b) If the old tune is sufficiently familiar, you can sing the old tune while getting the words from the number you tell them. Sometime the familiar tune appears elsewhere in the hymnal; so the accompanist can play it from there. (c) If the instrumentalists are not comfortable playing the new tune—as can happen if you do not notice the tune switch ahead of time, you can have the congregation read the text in unison rather than even try to sing it.

Miscellaneous Comments on Song Leading

Do not try to command people to smile. Simply set the tone. By all means do not try to chew them out for their way of singing softly or without smiles and the like. People do not normally smile except for special reason; maintaining a pleasant expression is normally what everyone does in normal situations. Smiling is not necessarily an indication of something more spiritual anyway. Besides, smiling “one cue” is artificial; so people feel manipulated rather than inspired.

Avoid distracting, interrupting moves. They break concentration on worship and make it look like the song leader is trying to draw attention to himself.

There is a difference between being happy and acting silly or going ecstatic. Song leaders need to avoid the first and the last.

In choosing songs—especially in the morning services, avoid songs with particularly high ranges. Wait till the people’s voices are warmed up before you use such hymns.

Among young people there may be a tendency to want to stand during all the songs. This is not best because it tires people unnecessarily and certainly should be avoided in an intergenerational setting.

When people use memorized choruses or music and words projected on a screen, they have their hands free for clapping and raising their arms. It is natural then that the new styles of worship have left the use of hymnals or music booklets. It frees their hands for these other usages.