

LEADING CONGREGATIONAL SINGING: SONG LEADERS AND INSTRUMENTALISTS

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Instrumentalists serve to enhance congregational participation in worship. Their work should not distract or confuse worshipers' participation. Mistakes should be minimized, for example, which means preparing the music ahead of time instead of relying too much on sight-reading ability.

Introductions can establish tempo as well as pitch for each selection. So, instead of coming to a *hold* after the introduction, maintain a steady beat for starting the singing. Newer hymnals have marks that show what musicians can use as an introduction. Usually it consists of the last four measures of the hymn. Perhaps a better way is to combine maybe four measures from the beginning with two or four measures from the end. That reminds the congregation how the hymn begins, a useful aid especially if it is a song that is less familiar.

The length of the introduction need not be more than enough to set pitch and tempo and make obvious what the song is. Four to at most eight measures should suffice. More traditional church services may have an instrumentalist play through the whole song, but that need not be done except for songs that are unfamiliar to the people.

Maintaining rhythm between verses can avoid having to re-establish tempo on the next verse (*a tempo*). Sometimes instrumentalists get into the habit of coming to a hold instead of maintaining rhythm between verses. A slight retard and brief hold, however, is good if the music does not allow singing to catch a breath before continuing. But that should not happen at the end of individual lines within the verse; the congregation can "keep" together easier if the musicians keep the beat with arpeggios or chording between the lines—or at least unconsciously. (There is an except to this point too with songs like *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* when written with *firmatas* (bird's eyes) at the end of the lines.) "playing notes" without regard to the beat is distracting; some musicians evidently do not have a good sense of rhythm; so they will add in notes without regard to the flow of timing. The musician's role in congregational singing is to maintain tempo and pitch and to help set mood. Groups singing a cappella typically slow down (and go flat). Hand directing alone does not correct that problem with large groups of untrained singers.

Musicians and vocal leaders need to avoid "stylizing" the music. Soloists vocal and instrumentalists may fall into *rubato*, "playing with the beat." Fudging the beat while leading a congregation takes away from the confidence with which the congregation can sing.

In places where *fermatas* appear in the music, it is advisable to maintain rhythm by adding one beat and then beginning the musical phrase. Some newer hymns have done that very thing with *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*.

Tempo should take into consideration the size of the congregation. The larger the number of people the slower the music needs to go to help keep everyone together. Instrumentalists are more inclined to play faster than people are inclined to sing, particularly in a larger group. Of course, pacing the song unnecessarily slow detracts from interest and makes singing more difficult, because singing requires managing longer segments per breath. People automatically take extra breaths to compensate. Slower tempo and shorter segments weaken the continuity of thought in lyrics with longer grammatical constructions. At the start, making sure the tempo is fast enough is important because speeding up the tempo disrupts what the congregation is doing. The instrumentalist may be able to use fill-ins or chording between verses to quicken the pace, but it is probably better just to “live with” where things are, and do a better job on the next song.

Slowing the tempo slightly and/or raising the volume can happen, say, between the last two verses to “freshen” the singing of the selection. That usage works well with powerful hymns like “Crown Him with Many Crowns.” Slowing the tempo adds grandeur and emphasis.

Singing the last verse without instrumental accompaniment can also freshen the singing experience. Since it is the last verse, the concern about losing tempo or going flat is minimized. If organ and piano both accompany, one can fall out on the last verse.

Coordination between members of the worship team is essential. If the leader sets the tempo by voicing or hand directing, instrumentalists need to stay with the leader. If there is a different inclination about tempo, “it is more important to stay together than to be right.” Let the worship leader take the reins. Most of the time, the instruments are sufficient for establishing tempo without hand directing.

The accompaniment volume should be appropriate to the size of the congregation and the auditorium. An organ can play so loud it overwhelms the singing. That makes it more the center of what is going on than the worshipers are. Increasing volume slightly and slowing the tempo on the final verse can give new energy to the hymn. Of course, playing too quietly makes the use of a instrument meaningless.

Concerns about volume also apply to worship bands. Contemporary church music is often amplified too much even for hearing safety. The group experience takes on the mold of a rock concert, where exhilaration overwhelms content and worshipers cannot hear themselves sing. The congregation becomes more of an audience with a weaker worshiping role, and multiple singers with mikes replace the traditional choir. That leaves the congregation participating more with rhythmic clapping than with singing.

Prelude and especially postlude music should not be so loud that it overwhelms the fellowship of congregants entering or leaving. If a church wants to establish a custom of figuring the beginning of the service when the people come in,

that is okay, of course. But such an arrangement does not match other situations outside of church services where prelude leads up to the main event. In more formal church settings, the prelude is regarded as part of the service rather than a prelude to it. In such cases a person would think that it would not begin till the stated time of meeting. Preludes in practice, however, normally happen before that stated time, and serve as a bridge between fellowship time and full involvement in the service.

Skilled accompanists may be tempted to overdo fill-in work during the lines of lyrics. Such elaborations tend to obscure the beat and the melody the people are singing. It can distract as well.

Varied accompaniment style helps keep the singing experience fresh. With guitar, accompaniment, styles can vary between open-string chords, bar chords, base-chord rhythm, chord melody, arpeggio, or different rhythm strokes—not just the “church lick” on every verse of every song. An organ may change registrations for different manuals; pianos can put the melody in the left hand or play the hymn in different octaves on different verses.

The pitch of the music needs to fit people’s typical singing range. More recent hymnals have lowered the key of some songs by a whole step or more from earlier editions. That avoids high notes that many people, especially men, cannot reach, and keeps them from having to jump octaves to get through the song. Of note is the opposite tendency to pitch songs too low because the female recording artist has presented the new songs in an alto range. Generally speaking, notes below B^b or higher than E^b do not work well for many people. The range of some songs may eliminate their frequent use. They may better serve as “special music” or prelude and postlude music. Songs with higher-pitched notes may better be placed later in the service after people’s voices have warmed up.

Changing keys between verses can renew the song, particularly if it has several verses. The change will almost always be to a higher key. Quick modulation can come from hitting the dominate chord of the new key. Going up a half-step works well because the third of the new dominant chord is the same as the tonic note of the former key, the note most people will already be singing. Changing keys between verses works well only with songs that have some beats at the end and do not have very many pick-up notes at the beginning. Ideally the number of beats used in the modulation should fall within the normal number of beats between verses, or the congregation will not know when to come in. Changing keys should usually be kept to one change per song; otherwise it gets too noticeable, hence, distracting. Doing it too often may draw more attention to the instrumentalist than is appropriate.

In churches that use hymnals and members of the congregation enjoy singing parts off the music, instrumentalists should not re-harmonize the hymns. Their harmony will not mesh with those who are singing parts.

Singing all the verses may be tedious in some songs. In older hymnody, the lyrics were written in poetic form with rime scheme and meter. The lyrics may span the verses to carry forward a narrative or pattern of thought across several verses of poetry. Dropping out a verse or two interferes with the flow of thought. Most songs, however, do not have that tight continuity across verses. Omitting verses allows for singing more songs and can help keep the singing service feeling new. Some gospel songs can be shortened by singing all the verses and then using the chorus once at the end.

In most cases, verbalizing some kind of connector between songs comes off artificial and distracting.

In contemporary services it has become customary to stand through the song service—after the fashion of rock concerts—since contemporary formatting has younger participants in view. When the circumstance of worship involves a majority of senior adults, standing and sitting needs to be planned with consideration the physical condition of the congregants.

Preparation for leading the service includes organizing materials to move smoothly between items: from prelude to first song, second song, special music, closing song, postlude, and so on. Unnatural lulls for getting hold of another book, locating the page, finding one's place on the instrument, etc., need to be minimized. Presets on organ registration can be entered prior to the service to avoid disrupting the flow. In this day of ready duplication, all the pieces of a typical service may fit on the instrument's music rack. If churches have broadcast services, timing becomes an added concern for the service planner. Anything that makes those preparations more difficult should be eliminated.

So much new contemporary music is coming out. As a result, service planners who use overheads without printed music put a burden on the congregation if they do not repeat the songs often enough for people to learn them. Being new in itself is no virtue if the people cannot participate in using them. The upfront people become performers for an audience in such cases.

Some things go without saying. Instruments should be in tune and in tune with each other. Musicians should have the music mastered so mistakes do not distract from the experience.