

## LEARNING TO LOVE VARIETY IN WORSHIP SONG SELECTION

Andrea, music director at the Blue Note Church, straps in and selects her song picks for the worship team to consider for Sunday. She decides to pick some of her favorites that match the week's theme. Letting out a big sigh and worried that her congregation might be stuck in a musical rut, she grabs her satchel and heads to the meeting.

What could help Andrea's uncertainty and how can music leaders let go of old patterns? Breaking out requires the music leader—whether pastor, music director, band leader, instrumentalist, or singer—to be more objective in selecting songs and find variety. Making this easier, the past fifty years has seen an increase in the variety of music available to churches in denominational hymnals, song lists by Christian Copyright Licensing International<sup>1</sup> (CCLI), and platforms like YouTube. To help in song choice, Constance Cherry, professor of worship at Indiana Wesleyan University, acknowledges the vast range of worship music and sorts them into two broad categories, short and long form.<sup>2</sup> By considering the *types* of songs available instead of the songs themselves, music leaders can avoid the rut of favorites that have always been used.

### Longer Form Songs

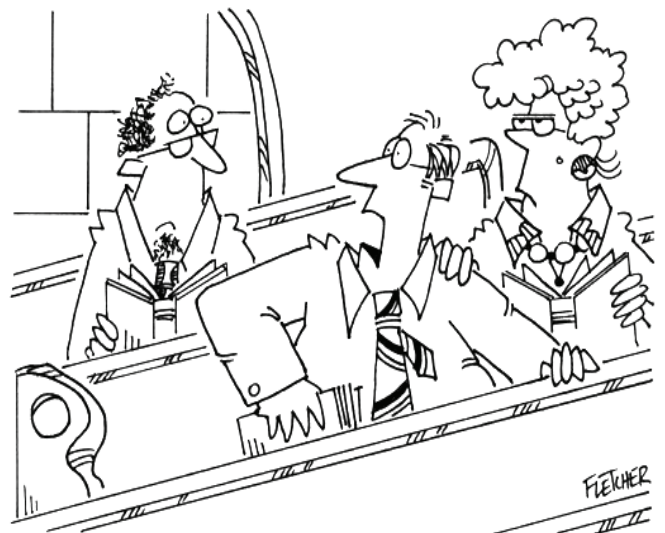
**Classic Hymns** sung by Western Protestant churches in the last six hundred years are perhaps the most familiar congregational songs. The long format allows for a more developed statement of theology, witness, or praise. Often organized into stanzas, some hymns use a refrain to tie the themes of each stanza together and deepen worshippers' connection to the material.<sup>3</sup> When considering classic hymns, don't forget contemporary hymnists such as Brian Wren, Thomas Troeger, Carl Daw, Richard Leach, Ruth Duck, Shirley Murray, Daniel Damo, Sylvia Dunstan, Fred Kahn, John Bell, and Jane Marshall.<sup>4</sup>

**Gospel Hymns** emerged out of revival camp meetings of the Second Great Awakening. With hymnals and trained song leaders in short supply, preachers would improvise a call and response, singing out a phrase, and congregation would respond with "Amen!" or "Halle-

lujah!" Or the preacher would sing stanzas to a familiar hymn as a solo with the congregation joining in the refrain. Through plain words and a simple, swinging melody, Gospel Hymns use a direct, unvarnished approach to conveying the message of a salvation available to all.

**Metrical Psalms** are hymns that paraphrase a specific biblical psalm and arrange it musically. Unlike hymns that are based on psalms (such as "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" based on Psalm 90), metrical psalms restate the psalm verse by verse as strictly as possible. This type was developed out of the early sixteenth century by Reformers like John Calvin, who did not approve of hymns not strictly based on Scripture. Metrical psalms allow worshippers to more deeply internalize the meaning of the psalms through giving voice in song, and can be used to better highlight the Scripture of the day.

**Modern Worship Songs** emerged from the contemporary worship movement and drew inspiration from the praise choruses of the 1970s and 1980s. Some songs, such as Graham Kendrick's "Shine, Jesus Shine" resemble traditional hymns in their use of stanzas, regular meter, and rhyming. Others adopt a verse and chorus structure



SINGING TO THE LORD A "NEW SONG",  
DOES NOT MEAN MAKING UP LYRICS AS YOU GO!

typical of popular music. These writers sought longer songs with more musical complexity (including more elements such as a prechorus, bridge, and tag) and theological substance. Congregations would benefit from incorporating these songs when they want to experience understandable lyrics with soaring, emotionally satisfying melodies as heard in contemporary popular music.

### Shorter Song Forms

**Praise Songs** use only a few measures to communicate a single idea, often personal and devotional in nature. The songs are often “through-composed,” moving forward phrase by phrase without repeating material, such as in Laurie Klein’s, “I Love You, Lord.”<sup>5</sup> Simple in structure, praise choruses do not often require written materials and are accessible to anyone regardless of age or musical training. To get started, look for praise song collections from the 1970s and 1980s, use it in the worship service for two or three weeks, then return to it again once in a while.

**Global Songs** have become more available in recent decades, aided by the internet and social media. Diverse in language, rhythmic patterns, and compositional form, these songs are difficult to characterize, except that many are short, cyclical (meant to be sung over and over), and originate from places with strong oral traditions and a high regard for community. To get started, visit ethnic or multicultural congregations, listen to global songs on the internet, buy songbooks, or visit the website of The International Council of Ethnodoxologists, an association of worship leaders exploring world music in worship.<sup>6</sup>

**African American Spirituals** often use a call-and-response structure. Reflecting the pain of the American slave experience but also the joy of God’s love, these brief songs can be highly flexible and rhythmically complex, opening space for improvisation. Listen to recordings of spirituals performed *a capella*, identify the structure, and perform them without instruments. Small percussion instruments may be added later if necessary.<sup>7</sup>

**Black Gospel Songs**, though similar to spirituals, arose out of an urban experience and drew inspiration from popular American music. Songs are more musically complex and reliant on electronic instruments such as keyboards and guitars, as well as percussion instruments. To get started, listen to recordings of late-twentieth-century artists such as James Cleveland, Edwin Hawkins, or Andraé Crouch, or more recent artists such as Israel Houghton, Dorothy Norwood, or William McDowell.<sup>8</sup>

**Taizé Songs**, written by Brother Robert and Jacques Berthier of the Taizé community in France, are sung

over and over in a meditative fashion. Acoustic instruments such as strings or woodwinds can accompany the song, with layers of sounds added or removed with each repetition as intensity builds or subsides over time. Try introducing a short song in worship in place of a spoken prayer, with the leader singing once with an instrument, then inviting the congregation to join. To learn more, visit the Taizé website, visit a Taizé service in your area, or buy a collection of Taizé arrangements from GIA publications.<sup>9</sup>

**Service Music** refers to vocal music interwoven into the liturgy, often to make transitions from one part of the service to another. Examples include a doxology such as the ever popular “Praise God from whom all blessings flow” sung to the tune “OLD 100<sup>th</sup>” or the Kyrie eleison (“Lord, have mercy”). Though historically used in more traditional churches, any congregation can experiment using any musical style. To get started, look for places in the service where spoken words could be sung instead, then find a familiar chorus or song fragment to insert.

### Build Community through Song

Breaking old habits in song selection can be difficult, but beneficial. By doing so, music leaders may strengthen the bonds of community in many directions—with the communion of the saints from ages past, with the global church in its diversity, and with fellow worshippers whose taste at times may seem unfamiliar. “Sing to the Lord a new song!” (Psalm 96:1, CEV).

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1. <https://songselect.ccli.com/>

2. Constance M. Cherry, *The Music Architect: Blueprints for Engaging Worshipers in Song* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Co., 2016), 117-173.

3. *Ibid.*, 155-156.

4. *Ibid.*, 157. For biographies of recent hymn writers, Paul Westermeyer, *With Tongues of Fire: Profiles in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Hymn Writing* (St. Louis: MO: Concordia, 1995).

5. “I Love You, Lord,” #2068, *The Faith We Sing: Pew Edition* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000).

6. Find songbooks available from the General Board of Global Ministries; <https://www.umcmission.org/share-our-work/global-praise;> [www.worldofworship.org](http://www.worldofworship.org)

7. *Ibid.*, 129.

8. Church leaders, especially those from privileged backgrounds, have the opportunity to use global or African American music from a stance of “cultural humility” and a commitment to learn from other cultures. See Ismael Ruiz Millán, “Cultural humility can help us become better leaders and better Christians,” *Faith and Leadership*, Feb. 5, 2019, <https://faithandleadership.com/ismael-ruiz-millan-cultural-humility-can-help-us-become-better-leaders-and-better-christians>

9. <http://taize.fr/en;> [www.giamusic.com](http://www.giamusic.com).