



Managing Worship

By Syler Thomas | December 21, 2009

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The very title seems almost sacrilegious, doesn't it? You don't manage worship. You just do it. Right? Well, it's my opinion that those who don't spend time managing their group's view and practice of worship should expect to suffer the consequences.

Many others far more eloquent than I have offered proper theologies of worship, so I won't duplicate their efforts here. We must recognize that worship isn't just singing—it's an understanding that our lives are to be lived in order to reflect and celebrate God ([Romans 12:1](#)).

Worship as displayed in song is one way the desire to live that life is given full expression. Think back to math class, as painful as that may be, and picture a very simple Venn diagram with one smaller circle inside a larger circle. The largest circle is the broad picture of a life of worship, and the smaller circle represents our times of corporate singing. Yes, singing is worship; but all worship isn't song. To say that worship is only when we crank the amps up to 11 and pound out the latest worship tune is quite limiting; but for the purposes of this column, we're going to deal with corporate worship as expressed through singing.

Who's It For?

We also have to be careful about the attitude we encourage students to bring to a singing time. It's a delicate line. On one hand, we shouldn't come to God as a consumer. The point of a worship time isn't to improve our self-esteem or cheer us up or even to enjoy good music. I cringe when a certain song goes up on the wall and I hear students say, "Yes! I love this song!" as though that's what this is about. This isn't karaoke or "American Bandstand." The focus shouldn't be on which song you like or whether "worship was good" or not, but whether you were able to meet and exalt God in your heart and mind. Was your heart softened? Were you called to repentance and action?

On the other hand, we shouldn't come to the moment thinking we have something to give God and nothing to gain. John Piper compares God to a mountain stream against a water trough. A water trough needs help to remain full, while a mountain stream is self-replenishing and needs nothing. How does one honor a mountain stream? By drinking deeply. That's precisely God's invitation in worship, to come and drink deeply of the living water. God doesn't need our worship, but we can come and have our thirst quenched.

The Worship Junkie

This discussion is especially important as the contemporary worship movement cranks into full gear. I for one am eternally grateful for all that this movement has done for my own relationship with God. It caused my understanding of God to broaden when I was a senior in high school and led me to the realization that I actually can experience the presence of God when I sing songs of praise and worship. If we don't also foster a passion for study, evangelism and ministry, we can breed a dependence on a worship experience. Our students can become worship junkies, people who are only happy when they're "in the Lord's presence in worship." They very easily can worship the act of worship instead of worshipping God.

We need to teach our students that they can experience the presence of God while sharing their story with a friend just as much as when they're singing "Open the eyes of my heart, Lord." Granted, new believers may need to go through an initial period of soaking up times of worship as God transforms their hearts; but eventually, they need to see that while God can be found in a worship time, the worship time is not God.

Make sure your curriculum includes a teaching on worship and its related concerns, and periodically do mini-teachings before your singing times as reminders to your regulars and means of explanation to your newcomers.

Getting the Music out There

My favorite system for getting the music in the hands of students comes from one of my church mentors. Get a cabinet or portable file box, and create a file for each song with the guitar chords written above (one sheet per song). Make 10-15 copies of each song, and staple the original to the folder (assuming you're CCLI license is current; see Ccli.com for more information on copyright questions). File the songs by first line, so people aren't confused between what the song is called and what it's titled. (For instance, the song many of us know as "I Cry Out" is actually titled "Good to Me.")

Whenever anyone asks for the music for a particular song, tell them to take whatever they want out of the file, and try to put it in a location that's easy to get to. Every few weeks, go through the file and restock any folders that are running low.

Raising up a Worship Team

If you don't lead worship yourself, do your best to find a volunteer in the church who can, or even consider paying someone to lead; you'll get your money's worth. Then find someone who can start teaching others how to play the guitar. You'll find that some people can pick it up in a matter of weeks. I've seen some students who were leading worship within a few months of learning guitar. You have to give them opportunities. Have them shadow the worship leader, and don't even bother plugging in their guitar (if you use a sound system). After a while, let them lead one song on their own, then a couple, and debrief with them afterwards. Mike Pilavachi, who is worship leader Matt Redman's pastor, said he had to let Matt be a bad worship leader before he could become a good worship leader. Likewise, we have to be willing to let our newbies fail a few times so they can learn to get better.

In terms of the rest of the band, this is often a great place for new or fringe people to get connected. Have an open jam session in which you invite anyone to come in and sing or play their instruments. This is much less

intimidating than a formal audition, and you can evaluate everyone's potential in the process. Do your best to use as many students as possible in the worship time. Remember that it'll take time, energy and sometimes money to nurture and encourage students; but it's worth it. If someone has a lot of potential but needs instruction, offer to pay for half of a music lesson if your budget allows. On rare occasions, a person might not have enough raw talent to be involved; you can't hand a microphone to a person who's literally tone deaf; but this must be handled very delicately, and he or she should be urged to find other ways to connect in your ministry.

You might be tempted simply to find the people with the most talent and put them up front. I'd rather be led in worship by five average musicians with a heart to worship God than five excellent musicians who are more interested in magnifying themselves. Don't forget the process of developing worship teams must include an element of teaching what it means to lead with an attitude of worship, not as the cool, elite musicians. If it's possible, go through a book like Redman's *The Unquenchable Worshiper* with the whole team.

Embrace Your Place

Some ministries have 10 students and some have more than 1,000. Let your audio/visual equipment reflect the size of your group. Don't feel compelled to go out and spend a huge chunk of change on a hardcore sound system when going acoustic is more appropriate for your group. In fact, if you're small, don't have a complex about it—embrace it and enjoy what being small allows you. Enjoy the intimacy that smallness brings.

Finding New Songs

This used to be a lot harder, back in the old days when I had to walk uphill both ways and contemporary worship consisted of what Maranatha, Hosanna and Vineyard were putting out each year. A great place to start is a compilation CD such as *WOW*, which has a broad spectrum of popular worship songs, though some of them are a little dated. Michael W. Smith and other contemporary Christian artists recently put out worship CDs with great congregational songs. Utilize your local Christian bookstores. Spend a couple of hours; or, better yet, take a couple of students and stay a couple of hours in a Christian bookstore listening to the worship offerings. Don't be afraid to use songs that you see or hear others using. This is the part of ministry where stealing is encouraged! Another great Web site is Worshiptogether.com, which has tried to bring folks from various labels together as a resource.

The Really Old and the Really New

In my experience, the most effective songs are the ones that are extremely cutting edge and also the hymns and some choruses that have stood the test of time. Don't miss out on teaching a little history to your students—that the old hymns were once the contemporary praise songs of generations gone by, and that the organ was looked on with the same dubiousness as a drum set in some churches today.

Foster Creativity

Encourage students to think outside the box; the youth group is the perfect place for this to happen. Just because you've always done something one way, help your students see that it doesn't have to happen like that every time. Offer some suggestions to get them thinking: What would happen if we sang a cappella one night? What if we did a song in another language? What if we put the band at the back of the room instead of in the front? Then let them brainstorm with you. Let them own it. Worship is a treasure of the church. Care for it.

