How To Start A Worship Circle In 7 Steps

Many years ago I gathered about 50 college students into a room on the upper floor of our small university's main building. I had called the idea a "Worship Circle," based on a phrase that was floating around at the time. I invited anyone who wanted to come, from kids, to students, to adults. I wasn't prepared for what would happen that night.

Since that night all those years ago, I've run many Worship Circles with groups of 5 to 200, in many denominations – and they work. First, I'll give you an example of a Worship Circle, then we'll look at how to start your own.

An Example: My First Worship Circle

After we set a night and chose a room that was big enough to hold us, but small enough to create a sense of energy (sanctuaries rarely work), we told everyone to bring their instruments. It didn't matter what they played, could barely play, or didn't play, they could bring something. Many students weren't even musicians that we knew of. Before the event, I and a few of my students gathered as many cajons, djembes, guitars, mandolins, keyboards, and anything we could find – and put them in the room.

Then, we set the room up in tight, packed, rough, concentric circles. The chairs were a bit staggered, and some areas gave more room for bigger instruments. In the middle were our strongest musicians. A solid drummer was on cajon, another on djembe, a few acoustic guitars, a violin, a bass, and an electric guitar rounded out our "inner" circle. They were going to keep us locked in and musical.

I had brought about 30 sets of chord charts, with 10 familiar songs we had chosen in each. Familiarity and quick connection was key. My goal was to, with another worship leader, model the flow of a worship set and lead us into more spontaneous spaces. The students in our Worship Arts program would benefit, but what about all the others students? If we brought extra instruments, what would they do? Would the music fall apart if musical chaos ensued?

Anything but chaos happened that night. As the buzz of student laughter and conversations filled the room, we in the center began. Instead of everyone getting quiet, because the room was small and were packed in like sardines, they joined the fray.

Within minutes, students were following chord charts, keeping with the groove of the inner group, and engaging in passionate worship.

We ran worship circles weekly for whoever wanted to come, and over time, more musicians (with worshipper's hearts) were being born. Now, I run them anywhere I can – they are fun and are a great learning tool.

How To Start A Worship Circle

Once you get an attractive invitation put together (youth need to be drawn to it), and set the night (1.5-2 hours should be enough), let people know early and invite every age to come. On the invitation, tell them to bring an instrument of any kind, even if they are new to it – but they don't have to.

Once you've invited everyone, here are 7 steps to running an effective worship circle.

1. Choose a room that has good, rich acoustics, and gather instruments. Choose a smaller room, as when people are packed in, it's a more energetic experience. If you can, find comfortable seating and have snacks available on the perimeter. High ceilings can kill worship circles. You want to be able to hear each other well, and for the sound to resonate (it's why we love to sing in bathrooms!). Your church sanctuary, unless it is very small or the only option, is typically not the best choice for this. A large living room is.

Then, gather as many instruments as you can. You don't need 3 keyboards or more than 2 electric guitars, but an unlimited supply of guitars and percussion never hurts.

2. Create a small, inner circle, big enough for a few solid guitar players, a cajon/djembe player, a bass, and a keyboard player. Put amps in close so as not to take up too much room. The tighter, the better. They don't have to rehearse before it, but they should be pretty good. They will be the glue that makes the night work. If not, just make sure you have a locked in, good guitar player at your side.

3. Put chairs out, staggered, but in concentric "circles" radiating out from the center. Leave room for kids or youth to sit on the floor. The more "family" it feels, the better. Note: The circular shape matters – horseshoe shapes, rows, or any other shape does not work as well in my experience.

Again, pack it tight – people can always move their chairs.

4. Create and hand out a 10 song chord chart pack, enough for everyone to take one. People will use this during the Worship Circle, but will also take it home to practice. You are modeling how you would follow a chart, and diverge from it as well. Their mistakes will be swallowed up in the larger sound. You don't need to do every song on the list. Have enough to choose from. Make them generally familiar.

5. Ask everyone to tune up to a tuner near them. If you can find a bunch of PT-10 tuners, and get those going around, it helps. Make some fun out of the tuning experience. It will sound crazy for a few minutes.

6. Begin by leading a more mid-tempo, familiar song. Let people find their way in, and a medium groove is just easier to follow till everyone gets comfortable. I encourage you to vary the song feel that night, and incorporate fast, medium and slow tempo songs. Note that a whole set of 90% familiar songs is the big win. 7-8 songs for the night is fine. Let them drag out.

7. Take your time, and let a 1-1.5 hour (or longer) night unfold. If a Stomp-fest begins on a certain song, let it go. When things flow naturally, as in a good worship set, the whole experience is better for everyone. Avoid stopping and starting too much, and create one long sequence of music – and worship. If people start locking into a groove, and it gets "Stomp-like" in the room (the Broadway musical where percussion instruments are made out of anything from brooms to chairs), just go with it. In fact, start it if you can.

Variations On Worship Circles

- Do a small one, in a living room, with just your worship leaders. Sensitivity and musicality will grow.
- Candlelight a room, and make it a special night of more intimate worship.
- Find a highly acoustic space (like a stone chapel), and try it there. Fun – except djembes and tambourines must be checked at the door.
- At Christmas, do a Worship Circle with Christmas Carols. Everyone wants to learn those.
- Do a Youth Only Worship Circle. However, I encourage mixing generations whenever you can.
- Do a Hymns-based Worship Circle, and focus on… hymns.
- Do a "New Songs" Worship Circle, and get everyone learning new material (tougher).

Benefits Of Running Worship Circles

- Young people gain confidence in both playing instruments and flowing in worship expression.
- Older people break out of their confines and try new things.
- The "all-age" dynamic brings people together.
- Songs are taught to small group leaders.
- Band members learn how to linger in a song, rise and fall with dynamics, and respond musically to changes.

Video Lesson

Here is my video on how to start a worship circle, if you need more help.

Question: Have you run Worship Circles in the past? Or did you recently try one? What was your experience?

Resource: I talk about musicality, and Worship Circles as a tool for team building, in the Essentials In Worship Leading study.

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