What I've Learned About Picking New Songs For Worship

by Mark Cole

Picking great songs for worship is one of the most important skills a worship leader needs to learn. There are many different kinds and levels of worship songs. Some songs are written about God, some songs are written to express our feelings, some songs are sung prayers, some songs are upbeat praise songs and some songs are pure worship to God. And many Christian songs are performance songs and really don't fall into the worship category.



There are fast songs, medium songs and slow songs. There are difficult songs and easy songs. But what are the best songs for us to sing with our congregations? What songs help our congregations to sing with all their hearts and connect with God?

Here is my philosophy of picking worship songs distilled from 10 years of travelling, writing charts for Praisecharts.com and over 25 years of leading congregations in worship.

1. Learn to pick great songs not just doable songs. Great songs are the ones that you will still love to sing a year from now. Different songs have a different 'shelf life'. Some songs you don't mind singing a few times but after that you just seem to forget them. Generally speaking, a congregation only learns about 15-25 songs per year. Make them great songs!
2. One of the tests of a great song is that you catch yourself singing it by yourself, in your car, in your house or when you are out on a walk. Or a congregational member tells you that they have been singing that new song you introduced all week. Or you hear your spouse singing that new song.
3. Great songs have the Spirit of God resting on them. This is a little harder to quantify. When I hear a great song, I sense God. The song moves my heart. I realize that God is in that song. Combine that with praying and asking God what songs to sing will lead you in the right direction!
4. I love to pick great songs from around the world. God is moving on anointed musicians and writers from all over the globe. We now have access online to worship bands in Australia, Canada, the United States, England, Europe, Asia and Africa. I don't want to limit my song choices to one church or one church movement.
5. It is easier than ever to find out what churches around the world are singing. CCLI (Christian Copyright Licensing International) has an invaluable online list of the top 200 songs that churches are singing. Their Top SongSelect List shows you what thousands of other worship leaders are picking for their congregations. If you are wondering what songs to sing, let me assure you that the songs on this list are like gold.

6. There are certain writers that have been writing great songs for years. Writers like Matt Redman, Chris Tomlin, Paul Baloche, Reuben Morgan, Joel Houston, Tim Hughes and Brenton Brown have consistently written great songs over a long period of time. When I see their names on a song, I definitely check it out. And there are also some great new writers: Jason Ingram, Ben Cantelon, Brian Johnson, Matt Maher, Jesse Reeves, Phil Wickham, Joth Hunt and many others.
7. Learn to keep a balanced repertoire. You need fast songs, medium songs and slow songs. Make sure you keep picking great songs of different tempos that fill that need. Keep it fresh.
8. Learn to repeat the new songs enough times for the congregation to learn them. My philosophy is to always repeat a new song the next week, give it a week off and then repeat it again the fourth week. That way the congregation is hearing the new song three times over a four week period. If it is a great song, the congregation will know it by then. Also, it helps if the song is on Christian radio (although many songs on Christian radio are not worship songs). That way the congregation is also hearing it in their cars and homes.
9. Put the songs in keys that the congregation can sing. Most people do not have a huge vocal range. If in doubt, use the 'Rule of D' principle. Make the top note around a D (C-E).
10. By all means, use original songs that are birthed in your congregation. But my advice is to make sure the songs match the quality of the rest of your list. Also, I usually use only one original song and the rest of my list is great songs from around the world.
11. Make sure the melody is singable and memorable. Does the song work without the band? Does the song work with just a simple acoustic guitar or piano? Do you find yourself singing the song when you are by yourself?
12. Start and end strong! I usually start with an upbeat praise song that people can easily connect with and I usually end with a slower great worship song that is sung directly to God. I never start or end with a brand new song, no matter how good it is. In between that I am working on transitioning musically and thematically with my main purpose of having the congregation focus on and meet God in our short time together each week. (for more tips on this check out my blog: 7 Tips On Taking Your Sunday Morning Worship To The Next Level)

Question: What can you add to this list? What is working in your congregation?

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The article above and many additional insights may be found on Mark's blog at http://markcole.ca/

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