How Do You Choose Your Songs For Sunday Worship?

by Mark Cole

Worship leaders, do you have a process for deciding what songs you are going to sing this Sunday? I was recently asked how I decide what to sing. Here is some insight into what has worked for me.

1. Compile a list of the top 50 songs for your congregation

What are the main songs that your congregation has been singing for the last 3-6 months? What songs have resonated with your congregation? A congregation can only comfortably learn and sing so many songs. I go through the most recent set lists and pick out the top songs and make a list to work from. Here is my list of Top 50 worship songs for 2015.



2. Pray and ask God what He wants

Everything begins with God. Is your heart right before God? What is God speaking to you about? What is God speaking to your congregation about?

After praying, God usually brings a main song to my mind that I will build the set around. The song might be an opening song, an ending song or a middle song. When building the set I will consider factors like theme, tempos, use of different keys, styles, key signatures, key changes, transitions and other musical factors that will help take the congregation on a worship journey.

My main goal is for the congregation to worship God. I want them to encounter the living God in our weekly corporate worship times. I just don't want to sing or perform nice songs. People need to sense that God cares about them and loves them. The congregation should know that He is there in the midst of their worship.

3. Is there a theme for this Sunday?

There are certain times of the year when themes are huge: Christmas, Easter, Palm Sunday, Missions Sunday, Communion, Mother's Day, Evangelism and in the city where God has called me ~ Calgary: The Calgary Stampede (i.e. country music).

Does your pastor do sermon series? Does your pastor ask you to develop a musical theme with his series? I am usually working on the set list 2-3 weeks in advance and not many pastors have asked me to do total theme services. If possible, I try to tie in a closing song with the message. But that is usually some type of altar call, response, or communion song.

My general theme for normal Sunday's is getting people to focus on and worship God. Sometimes the song list might follow a general theme of the faithfulness of God, the love of God, the Holy Spirit, Jesus or miracles or whatever attribute my main song's theme is.

4. Putting the song list in a good order

My Sunday morning set list is normally 5 songs or a half hour of worship. I try to keep a balanced list of fast songs, medium songs and slow songs.

I have found that an up-tempo song (tempo range 98-120) is often the best kind of worship song to start with. I want to find a song that gets people moving, involved, clapping, singing and praising God as soon as the service starts. The song will usually be about God as opposed to singing directly to God.

The congregation is often rushing to church and their focus can be all over the map. I want to find a song that is easy for them to sing and bring their focus to God.

From there I have often found that a slightly faster song second song will move the congregation ahead in their focus and worship to God. After the two opening songs I will often do a transitional medium tempo song that will continue the congregation on their worship journey to worshiping and focusing on God with their whole heart, mind and strength.

For the last two songs, I will normally pick two powerful slower worship songs that have the congregation singing directly to God. There is something very powerful about directing their hearts and worship directly towards God. That's usually my worship goal: getting people to focus upwards. I want to get the congregations hearts directed toward the One who heals them, forgives them, never leaves them, loves them and provides all their needs.

5. What new song is God speaking to you about?

Different congregations have a different disposition towards learning new songs. I usually teach 2 new songs per month. My normal practice is to make sure the 'new song' is sung three times in the first month. I will repeat the 'new song' the next week after introducing it, give it a week off (when I'm usually teaching another new song) and then repeat it again the 4th Sunday.

By that time you will really know if the song will work for your congregation. If the congregation is not singing it whole heartedly by that time, it usually means that song doesn't work for your group.

Special note: The first time you sing the 'new song'…. It is generally not a good idea to put the new song first or last on in your list.

Here is my blog on picking great new songs for your congregation.

6. Can your band and singers that week do a good job with that song?

Another factor that I consider when choosing songs is who the main players are for that week. I really try to develop the band and singers so that all the players can handle any song but sometimes there is a player who cannot handle a specific part. As a leader you need to aware of that and either pass on that song for that week or adapt the arrangement to work for that player.

7. Check your list against the top songs and churches in the world

I have found that CCLI's SongSelect Top 200 list is extremely valuable. CCLI has developed a system to find out what the main songs that are being sung around the world. I want to stay in touch with what songs are ministering and touching the world-wide Body of Christ.

I will also often listen to the worship sets from some of the top churches in North America, Australia and England. I will sometimes stream the worship from Hillsong (Sydney),Lakewood Church (Houston), Gateway Church (Dallas) or another great church that God directs my attention to. I want to see what great churches from around the world are doing.

Question: How do you put your list together for Sunday morning? What factors are important to you and your congregation? What is working where you lead?

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Mark Cole: Jesus follower, Husband, Father, Worship Leader, Writer, Pastor, Church Consultant, Founding Arranger for Praisecharts.com, squash & tennis player, blogger & outdoor enthusiast (biking, hiking, skiing).

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

Check out Mark's new book - "Leading Worship ~ Notes from a Grand Adventure" available in Kindle or Soft Cover Editions. This is a great gift for the musician or worshipper in your life.