THE
ESSENTIALS
IN WORSHIP
TOOLKIT

5 BEST PRACTICES FOR LEADING WORSHIP FOR CHRISTMAS

worshiptraining

INTRODUCTION

How do we lead worship for Christmas?

Every year, one of the two most important holidays of the Christian church comes around – Christmas. It's the celebration of the incarnation, the culmination of the season of Advent, and a time for us to come together to rejoice over the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

How do we plan worship sets that are both specific to Christmas, and also incorporate music that is exciting for our church to sing? In a traditional church, how do we create a Christmas worship environment that reflects both the tradition of which we are a part, and also draws in fresh expressions of sound our church might connect with?

INTRODUCTION

1. Follow Advent into Christmas.
2. Find fresh versions of carols.
3. Mix your set.
4. Weight sets.
5. Tradition is important.

PRACTICE 1 - FOLLOW ADVENT INTO CHRISTMAS

Follow Advent into Christmas.

The church year is broken up into seasons, and Advent is the beginning of the Christmas season. Advent is made up of the four Sundays before Christmas Day, and provides a natural “on ramp” into Christmas.

Allowing Advent to be a season of expectation and anticipation is important at this time of year. Hymns like “O Come O Come Emmanuel” were designed to lead us toward Christmas. “Come Thou Long Expected Jesus” is another great Advent song, built to reflect the longing the Jews had for their Messiah to come, and the longing we have for the Messiah, Jesus, to return once again.

Save the Christmas-big-gun songs, like “Joy To The World,” for Christmas Day, and allow your church to linger in the anticipation that is the Advent season.

PRACTICE 2 - FIND FRESH VERSIONS OF CAROLS

Find fresh versions of carols that work for you and your congregation.

Search through the new music of the season to find version of carols that really work for you, your band, and your community. What do you think will move your congregation? You may want to create fresh versions of the carols yourself; ones that become known and appreciated uniquely in your church as you apply them year after year.

Add in some extra spice or alter the tempos of the carols a bit, but stay away from altering the melody or drastically changing the rhythm. Tradition is more important to people during the Christmas season than even they realize, and a cherished melody altered can draw a negative reaction from even the most flexible congregant.

Find some fresh versions of carols that work for you and stick with them. Build on them, and bring them into your worship experience each year. Try adding a special chorus in the middle of carol or hymn to add a sweet moment of worship during the song.

PRACTICE 3 - MIX YOUR SET

Mix up your set with new and old songs.

Like a good Christmas cookie, different ingredients can create special flavors in a Christmas set. Bring in carols that are particularly meaningful to you on a personal level. Draw in old, traditional carols into your worship setting, and then make the rest of your set contemporary worship songs. This mix of new and old gives a balance to your set that helps your congregation worship while they engage with the more dense lyrics of the carols.

Mixing your set up can also stir unity in the congregation, as you intersperse the deep theology of (many) carols with the fresh pulse of contemporary music.

PRACTICE 4 - WEIGHT SETS

Closer to Christmas day, “weight” your sets.

As you move through the Advent season, consider weighting your sets differently as you approach Christmas. Progressively add in one extra carol into each set as you head toward Christmas. Coming closer to Christmas, weight these sets even more – 50% carols two weeks before Christmas, then 75% the week before Christmas – all the way until Christmas Eve. Christmas Eve’s set may be 100% carols for your church, or less as seems fitting.

Only you know the percentages your church appreciates, so be sensitive to them and to what the pastor would like to see happen during Advent and Christmas worship.

PRACTICE 5 - TRADITION IS IMPORTANT

Tradition is important to people, and there are no excuses for avoiding Christmas carols.

Traditions (family and church) are especially important to our congregations during the Christmas season. For many, the carols provide a sense of connection to the fondest memories of Christmas.

Don't make excuses for the carols, their lyrics, or their melodies. Many of them are filled with powerful theology packed into dense phrases and obtuse melodies – just let them be what they are and celebrate with them.

As Christmas approaches, don't assume that because carols are more complex musically than more straightforward worship anthems, that this difference means you should avoid carols (some worship leaders do!). There are simple arrangements available for every carol.

Carols can be incredibly powerful worship songs – leverage this time of year to integrate them into the worship life of your church.

ACTION STEPS

> Try at least one idea this Christmas.

Connect your congregation to the season by choosing a mix of traditional Christmas carols with contemporary music. Follow Advent's natural progression in your set building as you worship through the season, and celebrate with weighted sets that add carols increasingly as you hone in on Christmas.

And don't forget to stick to the carols that your church knows and loves. Introducing new carols, or carols with which many may be unfamiliar, can elicit a negative response during worship.

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