

by Mike O'Brien

Dear Pastor: Here's Why Worship Leaders Struggle to Play Fast Songs

Dear Pastor,

I get it. You want an engaging and energetic service. You don't want to ignore the

pain and depression of this world, but you don't want to contribute to it. Musical worship takes up a significant portion of our services and sets the pace. When the Church gathers, those that are leading worship should be hopeful and expectant. For the record, the Bible backs up your desire, continually telling us to worship with fervent hearts:

Psalm 100:2 Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.

Somewhere along the way, many musicians in the church thought that if we desired to be "real" or "relevant", we should only show fear, shame, or melancholy on our face! See Dan Wilt's post on **Smile** . Because of this, our songs started to match our emotion – all in the name of authenticity. We watch perfectly edited mega-church videos full of exuberant congregants clapping and singing; yet, we hang our head knowing that it's what you want, but we can't deliver.

Here is the thing. Lean in. This. Is. Important. **The church is the ONLY place on planet earth that rock-n-roll is**

played before noon on a Sunday! It has unique challenges for worship leaders. We need your help and understanding.

I've been sitting across from you for 20 years on Monday evaluation meetings, and I know what you are going to say. The music was great, but can we up the tempo a bit? You might be thinking:

Why can't church music be fun?

Is Jesus the light of the world?

Has he redeemed us from a life of death?

If so, will someone please tell the singers and the band because they look and sound like they are playing at a funeral!

I understand and I get it.

Here are some reasons why worship leaders struggle to play fast songs:

1. Drummers = Slow is Easy and Fast is Hard

Just about any drummer can play at a slow or medium tempo. **With most instruments, slow is easy and fast is hard.** Sometimes fast is literally impossible. A drummer that *can* play fast might also play very loudly, which might be the greater sin! If our drummer is young or inexperienced, the best bet is to keep it medium tempo. Many times, even our

best drummers can't pull off the peppy radio hits. Lack of a skilled drummer is one factor why we struggle to play fast songs.

2. Up-Tempo Songs that "Work" are Difficult to Find

Every third post on a worship blog is someone pleading "give me your top 5 fast songs now!" **Scarcity of great uptempo songs is a common problem.** We are are racking our brain on Friday afternoon for the foot tapper that will get everyone from the coffeeshop into the sanctuary. Many times they are cheesy, void of theological depth or just don't fit our culture. The shelf life of an upbeat song is short. It's difficult to lead something that seems so foreign to us. Up-tempo worship songs that the band can play, the singer can own and fit the culture of the church are few and far between.

3. Bad Sound is "Badder" During Up-Tempo Songs

Faster is usually louder. Loud can be offensive at 10AM when the room is empty. There are more drum hits per minute and fatigue sets in quicker in smaller rooms.

Proverbs 27:14 gives some insight here:

> *If anyone loudly blesses their neighbor early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse.*

Singers can't hear themselves and musicians rush. The train can go off the tracks quickly. If our gear is "budgetville" (including the stuff purchased 12+ years ago), all

those bad sounds start to pile up. For us, it's safer to just coast in medium and slow land.

Solutions for Pastors and Worship Leaders

Solutions for Pastors

- When planning services, let "energy" be your language, not "tempo."
- A celebratory culture is just as much the Pastor's responsibility as the worship leader's. If you don't embody these values then don't expect them to flow from your worship leader and team.
- If you want more positive uplifting environment, EVERY team in your church should embody that value, not just the worship team!
- Ask any worship leader and they will tell you how wonderful it is to have a skilled drummer. Champion great drummers in your church. Buy a great sounding drum set. Focus your resource on a great snare drum and big, dark cymbals. FYI – $350 buys ONE great cymbal, not a whole drum set.
- Attend a church or concert together and discuss the emotional arc of the event. How did elements OTHER than music play a role in engagement?

Solutions for Worship Leaders

- Schedule one on one time with your drummers and jam on up-tempo songs with a metronome. I've spent literally thousands of hours doing this and it works.
- It's awkward playing fast songs when the room is slowly filling up. Do it anyway. Lead and model.
- You can make medium songs sound "faster" by just pushing the tempo and/or starting with the chorus.
- Longer rehearsals. Play through the songs more. Speed comes with confidence, and confidence with repetition.
- When researching songs, it's helpful to play along and give them a chance to take root in your heart. They should feel great even without all the musical production and sonic candy.
- Write some new up-tempo songs of praise that resonate with you.
- You can ALWAYS bring a song of joy, thanks, and praise to God. It's not disingenuous to celebrate when you are not "feeling it." As leaders we guide the people in celebration and lament.

My name is Mike O'Brien and I am passionate about teaching and mentoring worship leaders and teams. My calling is to use my experience as producer, worship leader, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist to come alongside musicians, helping them more fully worship God with their instrument and lives. Contact me to talk about how we can raise the bar through virtual or on-site training for your worship ministry.