

How to plan and lead worship

Leading worship can be nerve wracking and feel like a big responsibility. You can feel under pressure to put on a good 'show', by providing a profound, insightful message and beautiful worship. Actually, you are as much a facilitator as a leader. You are not the star of the show; your job is to create a space where people can approach God together.

Place

What is your venue like? Is it easily accessible? Is it a place people would be happy to worship in? People can get distracted by the simplest things. Is it draughty or cold? Are there comfortable seats to sit on?

Where are people going to sit? Consider what message that sends to people. Sitting in a circle or semicircle makes everyone equal, but also makes them a focus of attention, whereas lines facing one way focus attention on what is happening up front. Sitting in sofas or grouped around coffee tables makes it informal and relational, whereas sitting separately in lines helps the individual focus on private devotion.

People

Think about how many people you are expecting. The style and pace of worship can depend a lot on how many people are there. What is their religious background? What style of worship are they used to, and what songs do they know? You don't have to stick to what people know all the time, but you may have to teach new songs beforehand, and if you want to use liturgy, give out copies so people know what to say.

If people come from different denominations or faiths, be aware that they may be comfortable with different styles of worship, but don't get too worried about this – try to let it open doors to creativity instead.

Before the service

What happens before the service affects the atmosphere of the worship. If people chat beforehand (refreshments always help this), there is a feeling of unity and community. If you have music on before the service, you can encourage people to prepare for worship in silence, so they can come with an attitude of devotion.

Atmosphere

Worship can be sombre, lively, formal, informal, thoughtful or celebratory. Some people like worship to be conducted seriously, other people prefer a more relaxed approach. The first approach might be appropriate to an important occasion or a large congregation. The second approach can be more appropriate to a small group of people who know each other. It doesn't have to be formal and planned down to the last detail, but it should feel calm and under control.


Style and format

Services can use different styles– Taizé, Iona, Quaker, Christian Meditation, Charismatic, Emerging Church. If you are using an unfamiliar style of worship, explain it to people beforehand, and, if possible, explain why you've chosen it.

Services can also follow many different formats. A hymn-prayer sandwich often follows a particular structure: call to worship-thanksgiving-Bible readings-sermon/reflection-response-confession and intercessions-closing prayer/Lord's Prayer- blessing. An alternative style of worship



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might have an extended period of praise and thanksgiving, followed by readings and a talk, and responsive worship to end. Think about what suits your group, your setting, and your theme.

Theme

What is your worship about? Think of a theme and try to draw it out in the prayers, songs, poems and readings you choose. If you're lost for inspiration there are many resources available to help you. You could use an online lectionary to choose Bible readings. You can increasingly find resources online. The SCM website contains worship resources on many different themes.

Content

Are there things that people might find offensive? Read the lyrics of songs you choose, don't just go by the first line. If you pick prayers off the shelf, make sure they fit the theme. Your own prayers can be just as good or better, even if they're not very poetic.

Consider adapting liturgy to use inclusive language (referring to God as 'Father and Mother', or as 'God' rather than 'him'); you'd be surprised what a difference this can make to some people's experience of worship.

Get creative

There are lots of creative things you can do in worship that take little effort but can have a great effect.

Dramatised Bible readings – if you are reading a story or parable, ask one person to read the narration, and others to take the voices of different characters in the story.

Symbolic actions can be effective and get everyone involved e.g. lighting a candle, writing a hope, fear or prayer onto a piece of paper and offering it to God, taking a stone and writing your name on it to symbolize being chosen by God, taking pieces of string and tying them together to symbolize unity.

Other things take more work. For example:

A sketch or drama.

A powerpoint presentation. These can be very powerful when accompanied by music, and can work as an aid to meditation and prayer.

Godly play. This is where you tell a Biblical story in your own words, and illustrate it with visual aids or models/puppets. This is followed by a series of questions that encourage people to think about the story and how it has affected them.

Encourage participation

Anyone can pray alone. People come to worship together for a reason: to affirm their faith with others, and to strengthen their commitment to God and each other. Active participation is a good way to make people feel part of what is going on, and to help them engage with each other. Hymns, responsive liturgy, sharing the peace and an offering get people involved.

You might like to try something a bit more exciting and experimental. Get people to move around. Use people's senses other than hearing – sight, smell, touch. Encourage people to talk, to respond. Worship should not be like going to the theatre.

Adaptability


Be prepared to adapt your service according to what resources you have. If you don't have musicians you could use a CD, or use songs that work well with just voices. If you don't have an ordained person to lead the Eucharist, why not have an agape meal instead? Use what you've got. If you have budding poets or artists or musicians in your congregation, encourage them to contribute. If someone has recently been abroad or done some work for a charity or campaign, why not ask them to talk about it.

Rhythm

Good worship should flow. Leave people room to breathe and reflect. Speak slowly and don't be afraid of silence. Worship often follows a natural rhythm.

And finally...

Relax! At the end of the day, leading worship is not about creating a polished performance, but about worshipping God together. If things don't quite go to plan, it's ok. Don't worry, and don't be afraid to ask others for help.



A note about singing and choosing songs

The key to leading singing is confidence. Make sure you know the song, and preferably that some others do as well, but never assume that everyone in the group will know it (even if you've been singing it since you were 5). Try not to introduce lots of new songs at the same time.

When you start, make sure you're not pitching it too high or too low (sing it through in your head to make sure), and give people a clear signal of when to start. Instruments are useful, but not essential to lead singing. If your group is really small, and/or no one is willing to admit to playing anything, consider singing along to a CD.

Remember above all that it is not a performance – it doesn't have to be perfect (and won't be, at first). Remember why you are singing.

When you're choosing songs, think about the theme of the worship. Look at the readings and prayers. Most hymnbooks have a thematic index that can be good if you're drawing a blank! Iona and Taizé chants are favourites for small groups, because they are so simple to learn.

Don't be afraid of old hymns (if your group 'doesn't do singing' the words of hymns can work really well as spoken prayer). For some more ideas, get together with your group and make up a song book of everyone's favourite songs to use in worship.

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