

THE SETLIST

Choosing Songs for Corporate Worship

A concise guide that helps worship leaders prayerfully select songs, integrate scriptural themes, honour their team's strengths, and remain open to the Holy Spirit's leading in real-time worship settings.

“
We must not rest until
everything inside us
worships God
-A.W. Tozer



**THE EVER-PRESENT,
NON-NEGOTIABLE
NEED FOR PRAYER**

PRAYER

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

Proverbs 3:5-6

- **Be Proactive**
Take some time to be prayerful days before crafting your set. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal themes to you prior to your planning session. Pay attention to the people that God brings into your week and the things going on in their lives.
- **Partner With the Lord**
God knows the needs of every person attending the worship service that day. Prayer brings us into alignment with God and aids us in keeping in step with the Spirit (Gal. 5:26). Beginning with partnering with God allows us to be open-handed in the planning process.

SCRIPTURE AND SERMON ALIGNMENT

Connecting with the preacher before the sermon allows you to have insights into the scripture(s) and themes that will be addressed from God's Word.

Taking time to familiarize yourself with the scriptures and themes of the sermon will allow you to choose key songs (specifically before and after the sermon) that can enhance the message being shared that morning.

Note:

Sometimes finding a song that correlates directly with the scripture is difficult and contrived. This does not negate the need to sit in scripture prior to choosing songs.

Songs of Alignment

Some songs will correlate directly with the sermon theme. Eg. "Back to Life" following a study in Eph. 2.

Songs that Respond

If the sermon has a high level of conviction, perhaps songs that reinforce grace and repentance would be an engaging and uplifting response.

4 Common Themes

SERVICE ORDER & THEMES

Choosing songs based solely on musicality or popularity may be tempting, there are important themes that lead a congregation through a time of spiritual formation.

Different themes provide different functions within a service. It is easy to fall into patterns or formulas that “psychologically” make sense, however the theological implications should not be ignored.

Integrating three to four themes with support from prayer and scripture helps provide a robust and enriching sung-worship experience.

Declarative

These songs boldly proclaim truths about who God is, His attributes, and His works, inviting the congregation to join in declaring God’s greatness and faithfulness.

Confessional

These are songs that acknowledge personal or corporate sin, brokenness, and need for God’s mercy, often leading to repentance and renewed dependence on Christ.

Gospel-Centric

These songs focus on the narrative of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, celebrating redemption, grace, and the core truths of the gospel story that unite believers.

Kingdom-Minded

These songs emphasize God’s mission in the world, calling believers to active participation in advancing the kingdom through justice, mercy, love, and service.

HONOURING THE CONGREGATION

Every congregation is unique. As a worship leader, it is vital to be connected with those you are leading. Understanding their desires, comfort-levels, theology, and spiritual needs is key in choosing songs that resonate, shape, and enhance their spiritual walk.

+ Singability

Use songs that are singable and accessible. Is the key of the song too high or too low? Is the melody easy to follow along?

+ Corporate or Individual?

Many worship songs use “Me” language, be sure to include songs that honour the corporate nature of worship by choosing some songs that use “We” language.

Familiarity

Be sure to track how often songs are being sung. Try to balance songs that are familiar with songs that are new to ensure the majority of the set is easy to follow.

HONOURING THE BAND

While song choices must be thoughtfully chosen to both honour God, Scripture, and your community, you must also be mindful of the band you are serving with.

The skill-level of the band must match the expectations of the musicality found within the songs.



Vocalists

Consider each vocalist's abilities for the song you are assigning to them. Take into consideration the song key, dynamics, intensity, and even lyrical tone.



Lead-Lines

Some teams have strong guitarists or keys players, or a mix of either. Considering the difficulty of lead-lines in songs helps you craft a set with few distracting blunders.



Familiarity

As with the congregation, asking your band to learn three new songs in one weekend is a much larger ask than asking them to learn one new song.

SETLIST DYNAMICS

After thoughtfulness has been put into the previously-mentioned facets, there is also a practical musical awareness that needs to be applied to song choices as well to ensure both flow and dynamics properly hold the attention of the congregation without being distracting (either flashy or boring).

01

Upbeat/Epic/Reflective

These three “tones” can easily become repetitive in a set, however, when placed strategically, can guide the congregation through emotions that reflect the content of the songs chosen.

02

Time Signatures

One of the most easily overlooked musical profiles is time signatures. The majority of songs are written in 4/4 which can be played back-to-back with ease. However, placing two songs in 6/8 will create a nuanced feeling of “dragging” due to the swing nature of the 6/8 pattern.

03

Song Keys

Strategically choose your songs and the order they are in with their respective key in mind. An entire set of songs in “C” will create an unaware sense of boredom in your congregation. Songs transitioning from half-steps will also feel jarring in the transition period.

04

Transitions

Plan your setlist with transitions in mind. Bridging two songs together in the same key is a great way to create opportunity for prayer/scripture without pulling the congregation out of a moment.

DEVELOPING VERBAL LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Being a worship leader extends beyond leading a band and singing songs. A worship leader should provide strong, theological context, incorporate scripture, lead prayer, and respond to the Holy Spirit's promptings.

However this is a learned skill, one that takes time, experience. There are steps to take to grow in these areas that are both safe for the congregation as well as the worship leader.

● **Level 1: Scripture**

Begin by shaping songs with Scripture: it's "safe" and God-breathed, reducing pressure on the leader. Research the song and find the scriptural themes in the lyrics. Some Google searches will share the author's inspiration found in scripture. Read the scripture before the song or during an instrumental.

● **Level 2: Read a Prayer**

Rather than praying off-the-cuff, find a prayer (that fits within your conference's doctrine) or craft one yourself and read it prior to or during a song.

**"Glorify the LORD with me;
let us exalt his name together."
Psalm 34:3**

DEVELOPING VERBAL LEADERSHIP SKILLS (cont'd)

● **Level 3: Spontaneous Prayer**

Once you have grown in comfort in both sharing scripture and reading crafted prayers, you can choose moments in the set list where to pray spontaneously. This does **not** mean that you shouldn't prepare. Knowing the song, the spiritual direction you wish to set, and a scripture to be rooted in is highly encouraged.

● **Level 4: Song Shaping**

As you become more and more comfortable in your worship leading, you can begin to shape songs from personal experiences or cultural moments taking place at that time. Keep it personal and humble, sharing how God has shaped you through this song/scripture.

Know Your Role

Ask someone to help you gauge the trust that you carry with your community. Are you a spiritual mother/father or are you a "younger sibling"? Knowing the influence you carry should influence the approach and tone you use in how you engage with your congregation to help you do so effectively.

CULTIVATING A PERSONAL LIFE OF SCRIPTURE & PRAYER

Just as Joshua first scouted the Promised Land before guiding Israel to settle there, a worship leader must first venture into genuine worship before inviting others along. Preparing the heart in prayer, studying Scripture, and worshipping privately ensures that leading publicly flows out of authentic experience. We cannot effectively lead others into worship if our own lives aren't already marked by personal devotion and communion with God.

Spiritual Practices

Worship leaders should have spiritual practices that keep them in active reliance on the Holy Spirit. Scripture reading, prayer, and other acts of worship should take place outside of Sunday mornings.

ALLOW THE SPIRIT TO LEAD

The Holy Spirit is a great planner (Rom. 8:27) but the Holy Spirit is also responsive and will change plans (Acts 16:6-10). It is up to us to be aware and respond accordingly to where God is leading in worship services.

+ Flexibility

Be prepared but also be prepared to be flexible. Sometimes an element in the service that you didn't know was taking place will happen and requires a change in song order.

Sometimes a moment will take place and requires a moment of thanksgiving or intercession. Never let your planning take precedence over what God is saying to you.

+ Collaboration

Having others who are involved in the service or supporting your team may also have insights into the setlist you prepared. Be humble and willing to change if the suggestions resonate with your heart.

Spontaneous Worship

Spontaneous worship requires heightened awareness, sensitivity, and humility. While authentic spontaneity may sometimes include lingering on a lyric or bridge, true Spirit-led worship flows from genuine discernment rather than simply repeating a section out of habit.