

## **Suggestions for Planning Worship**

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1. Assuming that the service contains preaching, get the central Scripture and basic ideas for the sermon from the pastor ahead of time.

2. Take time to pray before you plan, asking God to guide you and to plan the service through you. Just as in all other areas of life, we need to depend upon God to work through our abilities in the planning process. This may seem like common sense, but in a culture of often proud, busy, and independent-minded people, I think it is important to state. I cannot relate how profoundly effective this step is. Praying beforehand functions to keep planning itself God-centered—resulting in services which are more profound in their devotional impact. I cannot count how many times God has providentially put together a depth of correlation and flow between service elements that likely no human could contrive. This realization fully comes only as the service is unfolding on Sunday morning—always a rich and humbling experience.

3. Read through the sermon Scripture, and make notes to yourself regarding central themes. Note how these correspond to the main points of the sermon. Locate Scriptures, written prayers, and/or responsive readings that can serve in various thematic or other functional capacities in the service. Make a list of musical selections (congregational song, choral, solo, and instrumental music) that are well suited to your church and its musical resources. Services may be planned to profoundly or loosely point to the sermon—but the sermon should be kept in mind to some degree. Multiple themes or emphases are often appropriate. Take full advantage of the gamut of resources that hymnals provide—including the various indices. Also, some hymnals do a much better job of indexing than others. Gaining at least a small collection of hymnals is a great way to quickly build your resources. Also, online resources are plentiful. My church has an annual subscription to [gettymusic.com](http://gettymusic.com). This site has many of the Getty's hymns available in piano or hymn score in multiple keys, and the subscription affords your church the ability to make as many copies as you need for your congregation.

4. Considering liturgical flow and theological or devotional themes, begin putting your service together. This is where devotionally-driven creativity comes in. By devotionally driven, I mean that each service should be planned to call and lead the congregation into a devotional experience with God—encouraging the people to come humbly into his wondrous presence.

The Psalms were central in the worship of Old Testament believers and its use was carried over into New Testament practice in the life of the church (Colossians 3:16, 17). Therefore, the services we plan over the course of a year should use as a model the great range of thoughts and emotions that the Psalms express. Also, principles learned through study of the Psalms and other Scriptures lead us to structure of worship that is pleasing to God. Passages such as Psalms 95, 96, 99, 100, and Isaiah 6 offer us great revelation and inspiration regarding our position before God in worship—and the ways that He desires us to approach him. One of the patterns for prayer derived from the Scripture is the “ACTS” pattern. This acronym stands for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication.

5. Consider musical aspects in conjunction with liturgical flow in planning. When connecting songs or hymns together, consider not only the theological relationship between them, but also the keys of pieces and how they fit together. Congregational hymns and songs range from quiet and meditative in nature, to vibrant, proclamatory, or celebrative. Consider how the shifts in key direct the worshipers in regard to matching devotional thoughts with emotions.

6. When selecting songs and hymns or instrumental music that uses a hymn or song tune, be sure that the *ethos* (character or essence) of the music, including instrumentation and arrangement, deepens or compliments the message of the text in a way that constructively encourages the mind, will, and emotions of the worshiper to move in a spiritual direction (Galatians 5:16-17). We are commanded to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength (Mark 12). Thus the worship of God should always promote Scripturally-based Christian devotion. This means that wise and mature decisions must be made in the selection—and in creation of new music. In cultures that are highly entertainment driven, this cannot be overstated. In cultivating the discipling activity of worship—encompassing the revelation of God and our response to this revelation—we are wise to consider Jeremiah 17: 9 and 10:

The heart is deceitful above all things,  
and desperately sick;  
who can understand it?  
“I the LORD search the heart and test the mind,  
to give every man according to his ways,  
according to the fruit of his deeds.” (ESV)

Again we are reminded of our need for God’s wisdom and direction in our planning and selection process. Cultivating a deep relationship with God and exposing ourselves well to the ways that God has worked musically in the church over time is irreplaceable in gaining maturity in this area. Learning Scripture and Christian theology, meditating on the Psalms, and considering the rich combination of text and music in the finest of hymns that the Lord has fruitfully used in the church’s devotion for centuries—are priceless in developing excellence in our ability to select music today. Consider the substance in such hymns as “A Mighty Fortress is our God,” by Martin Luther, and “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” by Isaac Watts—noting the ways that the marriage between text and music powerfully encourage the worshiper’s thoughtful, reverent, and joyful devotion.

7. Consider well how the spoken word may be excellently used to guide your congregation— between elements of the service—and plan accordingly. Again, attention to liturgical flow is key here. I use Scripture, prayer, brief hymn stories, or personal testimony to help guide the congregation in keeping their attention upon God, Scriptural teaching, and upon the task of worship at hand.

8. Plan a written order of worship early in the week, even if the written order will only be used by leaders—so that you have time to choose or create instrumental arrangements appropriate to your congregation’s musical resources. This suggestion assumes that the leader has the musical training needed for this exercise. If this training is not yet present, developing proficient keyboard skills, taking

the music theory and ear training sequence at a local college or on the internet, and acquiring books on instrumental arrangement and orchestration can go a long way.

8. As you grow as a Christian leader—seek to replicate your relationship with God, your leadership abilities, and your musical gifts in others. Our work with choirs, vocal ensembles, instrumental groups, and soloists should be, among other things, a disciple-making exercise. Find various people to sing solos, lead in prayers and Scripture readings, or lead in other service elements. My church has several seminary students who are eager to step into these roles. Many churches are in a different position, but these occasions are rich opportunities both for various leaders in the church to model fine leadership—and for young or potential leaders to be trained in worship leadership. Of course godly wisdom should always be exercised in leadership selection.

**Recommended Resources:**

Scott Aniol. “Can Rap Be Christian? The Presuppositions,” Religious Affections Ministries; accessed on January 30, 2015; available from <http://religiousaffections.org/articles/articles-on-music/can-rap-be-christian-the-presuppositions/>; Internet.

Arthur Bennett, *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions*, (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975).

Kent Kennan, *Technique of Orchestration*, 6th ed., (UpSaddle River: Prentice Hall, 2002).

Paul S. Jones, *Singing and Making Music: Issues in Church Music Today*, (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006). See chapter 6, “Leading in Worship as an Accompanist” for an excellent discussion of the accompanist’s powerful supporting role in congregational singing. These suggestions have valuable implications for groups of instrumentalists as well.