

## Practical issues in worship ministry: A Case Study

*These notes from a fictional church meeting are designed to represent some fairly typical comments about worship services for your consideration.*

“At a recent church meeting, person A suggested that there should be a greater variety of special music.

Person B said that people weren’t singing as well as they used to, and it’s because of all these new songs that nobody knows. We should sing more of the great hymns of the faith.

Person C didn’t enjoy singing hymns because there were too many words and they were dirge-like and boring.

Person D said they always enjoyed it when the worship service flows, and they would like us to do several songs together.

Person B said she can’t stand up for very long, so doing several songs together is difficult and becomes painful.

Person C said that we didn’t have to stand up for all of the songs, but Person E said that, if you sit down while others are standing you can’t see the words on the screen.

Person F would like printed music to sing from.

Person A wondered if we could welcome newcomers and get the Pastors and leaders to introduce themselves. It would help people to feel more at home.

Person D agreed and thought we could become a friendlier, more welcoming church. Perhaps we should all wear name tags?

Person G would like the children to remain in the service longer before going to their classes.

The meeting ended with prayer and some ongoing conversation...”

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### **Discussion starters:**

Let’s consider each of these comments and what they might reveal about how each person thinks about the church’s worship service. There are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers, here; but there are some that would help your church’s culture to address the issue...

**Special Music.** “Person A asked about a greater variety of special music.” One good reason for asking this would be to get more volunteers participating in the service. It’s a great idea to encourage school students and youth group members to offer

their gifts in the context of worship; regularly, if possible. On the other hand, sometimes we're tempted to make our services more entertaining or attractive for visitors. We may think the service is boring, or even be concerned that the 'offence of the gospel' is too strong a message for our visitors. Who is the service designed for?

**New material and quality.** From the comments attributed to Person B, who loves hymns but can't stand for too long, we detect a love for deep, familiar expressions of the faith – and we are reminded that too much standing is difficult for some of us. However, we also hear some prejudice against 'too many new songs', which is really missing the point that, for any body of believers, our current testimony needs fresh expression. As a leader, I want to make sure that the new material we use is of good quality and lasting value.

There's also an issue here about learning style. In the twentieth century, many people learnt songs from reading music; now, most people learn new songs by hearing them repeatedly, perhaps on the radio or a personal stereo. We have to find ways of introducing material that helps everyone to learn and 'own' it. How do we want to go forward?

**Songs and Hymns.** For Person C, hymns 'have too many words' and are 'dirge-like and boring'. However, what I think they are saying is that the words are sometimes obscure (there are a lot more words in a rap, but we don't often criticize rappers for their style) and perhaps unfamiliar. Our musicians can usually find more lively ways of playing hymns (where appropriate) but it may be that Person C doesn't 'identify' with any hymns. If they knew someone who loved that hymn - for whom it was a precious expression of their testimony – such an objection may well disappear. Do we associate songs with testimony?

**Flow.** Singing several songs together in a flowing 'segué' (Person D) is a feature of some orders of worship. This comment may be a simple preference, or it may be a plea for a style of worship that seeks to see music as a transcendental or sacramental element in the worship. What do we believe?

**Posture.** Persons B and C had a small conversation about standing up – and there are several "all-age" issues that we need to consider when planning worship services – more on that later. Older people and those who find it hard to stand for a long time will appreciate our "social permission" to adopt sit while we stand, or adopt another posture; but it's often difficult for some of us to do something different from the majority of the congregation. Posture is significant, but we don't want to be prejudiced about any ability or age group. Our highest priority is to

honor God; and a hospitable, generous atmosphere and a welcoming spirit will go far in helping people to feel that we value them, and don't want them to be discomforted by such matters. Are we free to sit or stand, move or stay still? Are we free to kneel or make a sign of the cross?

**Books or screens?** For some people, the idea of style is also associated with whether or not we're holding books. These days, I often put words, and music too, on the screen – using a high contrast ratio, and (for my church) at least a 36 point type size. I like to use screens because people are looking up and singing out. Those of us who are older really appreciate the larger font for easy visibility, and I always announce the hymn number, for those in the congregation who still want to hold a book. Person E is right; if I'm sitting down and others are standing, it's tough to see the screen. Could we put the words in the bulletin, too?

**Nametags.** Person A and D would like our church to be more welcoming, and introductions might help sometimes. Not all the time, but to be welcoming; same with name tags – it helps if people who can help have a pin that says "May I help you?" Does that suit our culture?

**All-age.** Person G has a good point, too. Worship in the scriptures is described as both individual and communal, and we often see examples of the whole extended family worshipping together. However, we recognize that different ages have different learning styles, so we divide up for our teaching times. Nowadays, it's easier for many of us send our children out to a children's service or Sunday School and we pick them up after church. Later in their school career, they go to youth group and worship separately once again. When do your children learn that the whole church is called to worship together? Furthermore, if the children do come in – sometimes it's to do 'special music' – we often seem to make them a showpiece, processing in and out and performing for us. How do we want to go forward?