

# SONGS FOR ALL AGES

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Some years ago, entering the gas showroom to pay a bill, I came across a little girl, sitting on a high stool alone at the counter, singing Christian Strover's *Water of life*. She was quite unconcerned by my presence and continued to sing until she reached the end, oblivious to what anyone might think. Her praise was for God and she was wrapped up in her task.

My favourite childhood hymn was 'For all the saints' and I was rather puzzled that my great aunt, whom I begged to play it for me each time we visited, remarked that it was 'a strange hymn for a child to like'. I was attracted by the tune, which initiated a life-long love of Vaughan Williams, I revelled in the exhilaration of singing 'Alleluia' so many times and How's words conjured up some wonderful images. No one ever

## GOLDEN RULES

Some golden rules for planning worship with all ages might support our thinking, in the area of musical provision as well as others.

- ▶ Work towards the role of music to liberate, releasing the spirit to praise, rather than restrict because it is too difficult. I remember being at a festival service at which 'Hail thee, festival day' was used in procession: no one seemed too familiar with the verse melodies, so these were mumbled and confused while the chorus gradually swelled as it became more familiar. Every verse was sung and the hymn seemed to last for ever. It is a glorious hymn, but it just didn't work in those circumstances.
- ▶ Invite all who wish to contribute to offer from their strengths, and encourage other people to value these

that in each service and over a period of time (say three months) there is something for everyone: young and old, of varying abilities and learning preferences – visual, audio and kinaesthetic (physical), active and reflective.

## SHARE THE TASK

I do not pretend that any of this can be achieved without effort or deliberate thought. In fact one of the pitfalls, I fear, has been to suppose that it could. The other problem to address, of course, is that the almost unrestricted choice available in the western world today, along with increasing diversity of culture, means that worship leaders face a more challenging task than in years gone by. We need to name and acknowledge this, rather than bearing it as a silent burden threatening to drown us.

If this all sounds rather gloomy, identify the areas of support and try to think of it as a kind of adventure, a journey into new territory. Work out who your companions will be, and where you can call for resources. Reassure yourself with a perspective on what you already have and be sure to use it. There is nothing so comforting as a well-loved pair of boots: you know just how they will behave and what they are capable of.

## SOME THINGS YOU MIGHT DO

Make sure that all those involved understand the scale of the task. Explain it to them: they may appreciate it (in both senses of the word). If people understand, they will usually try to cooperate.

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explained what the words meant, and I have no recollection of realizing that saints were dead – if I did, it certainly wasn't significant!

## LIBERATING THE SPIRIT

These stories epitomize the power of two very different styles of song to liberate the spirit of two quite unexceptional children. This has been the role of music in worship since biblical times, but nowadays we are challenged to trust its power, particularly in multi-generational settings.

offerings on their own terms. Make sure everyone has a stake and encourage contribution. While sloppiness and poor planning makes for bad worship, elitism in many circumstances is very excluding.

- ▶ It is probably unwise to assume anyone knows anything, and that those who were there last week/month will be there this week/month or next. Nevertheless, use those who have knowledge and skills to lift the worship and move it along with assurance.
- ▶ Create a checklist and make sure

## DRAW ON YOUR CHOIR

If you are blessed with a traditional choir, use it. Make sure they have something challenging and enjoyable to contribute if they are present. But, you will need to explain to people who know nothing about the music they perform, what is good about it, and what to listen out for. If there are musical children who are not part of the choir, invite them to learn and join in a part of a suitable anthem from time to time. Use particularly talented people to lead and draw out the best in others, instilling confidence.

## USE A CANTOR

If there is no choir or even no instrumentalist, try to recruit people who will be cantors (or animateurs) to lead the singing with confidence and demonstrate new music with skill and sensitivity.

## WORK WITH CHILDREN

If you have musical children, use them. Invite and teach them to lead something at most services. If they are capable of performing alone, they should do this on the same terms as an experienced choir. Do not patronize them by applauding – unless you are a congregation where applause is customary. If there is really no one to play for them, use a CD. Avoid this if at all possible, but as a bottom line it is just about acceptable. If you have instrumentalists, they will need parts, which are time consuming to arrange and organize. Find someone in another church with whom to share.

## TEACH THE HYMNS

Children deserve to learn traditional hymns or songs with rich content. Over time we learn quite sophisticated theology from them and by singing them under our breath, we pray through the day. But the reading level required is advanced and now that children are unlikely to learn them at school, they represent an almost insurmountable challenge for all but the most focused child readers.

If children are to benefit from these treasures, it is we who must teach them. Contemporary worship songs sometimes have fewer words with more repetition but they will not necessarily be any easier to read on first encounter.

So how? Be deliberate and objective. Before a service (or before the hymn or song is sung if this is not possible) explain why it has been chosen and what it 'does' – in simple terms. Tell people that they *can* learn it. Be positive and enthusiastic. Use all the devices

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recommended so many times by John Bell. Go for one verse for everyone to sing; the verse which is most relevant to the occasion, not necessarily the first, and when you reach it, remind people that they now know it and can sing it. People who are familiar with the hymn can sing the rest, even if that is only one person! Teach people to listen.

Finding a hymn number in a book is not necessarily easy: it is a task that Voice for Life children spend time working on. Make sure everyone has found it before you start. If you can use a screen with big print and a way to follow the words, this may help, but it is not essential. Always point out when there is a chorus or refrain that recurs, so that if the verses are unreadable there is something to join in with frequently. Try always to choose one hymn of this nature. Build your repertoire carefully with sensitivity to the challenges, but do build it. Singing the same music, however well loved, at every service would be spiritually and theologically stunting. If all this sounds rather basic and tedious – it is, but we forget how strange and difficult things are when we have worshipped for a long time.

## USE ACTION SONGS

Tiny children cannot sing sophisticated music, but they have a place in the community; if there is nothing at all for them, they quickly get the message, switch off and either become a disturbance or simply leave to play elsewhere. Yet these are the years when the fundamental emotions of faith are developing, so shutting them out is disastrous to their spiritual development. Make sure there is always one item for them: a simple action song is best. It doesn't have to have silly

words: there are plenty of such songs available with liturgical or semi-liturgical words (and there are lots of liturgical actions!). Explain to everyone who might have a problem with this why it is important. Babies don't learn table manners by eating alone: they learn them by watching us – and we tolerate the mess while they learn.

This may help more than just tiny children. In the church where I worship there is an adult with Down's syndrome whose usual communication medium is Makaton (a simple sign language), and who is liberated to worship by action songs. In the visits I make to communities of older people, action songs are often appreciated by those with severe hearing difficulties who are beginning to find the present challenging and take refuge in the past.

### ROOTS

Gill Ambrose is the editor of *ROOTS Adult and All Age*. ROOTS resources are for churches from all denominations and traditions, designed to support the worship and learning of the whole church community.

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