

Working on Worship 11



The Singing Assembly

AKA Hymn Practice

Most teachers and children are familiar with 'singing assembly' or 'hymn practice'. This often takes place on a weekly basis and replaces one of the daily acts of Collective Worship. It acts as a time for practising new songs or going over older ones. It may also be used to allow teachers to do additional preparation or work with smaller groups of children.

In some schools an awareness that a 'singing assembly' may be breaking the law on Collective Worship has led to adaptations such as adding on a prayer, talking in more detail about the words of a particular song etc. In other schools it has led to a deeper review of the role of singing in Collective Worship.

Singing in Collective Worship

Singing in Collective Worship brings the whole community together, adults and children in a single activity. It can be enjoyable and uplifting and its role might be defined as:

bringing pupils into an awareness of the presence of God, or at least to consider the possibility of this happening

- providing an opportunity for an active offering of worship, a response to God, from both the individual and the community.
- planting important lessons and ideas, and teach Christian truths
- bringing worship alive, enabling everyone to enjoy it and have fun
- sending participants on their way rejoicing and with a sense of purpose

It is also true that singing in Collective Worship is not always good. It can indeed be excruciating, killing any sense of participation or community.

This paper is designed to help schools ensure that singing has positive value in bringing their worship alive. It recognises that some schools will have a limited amount of musical expertise within their staff; but a wide range of materials on CD and the internet can help meet this need.

Singing a New Song

In the Book of Psalms in the Bible, we are encouraged to “Sing to the Lord a new song” (Psalm 149.1). There is a place for old favourites but learning new songs is a vital aspect of keeping worship vibrant and alive, providing us with new ways and words to express worship, to learn about ourselves and about God. And this, of course, is where a school ‘Hymn Practice’ comes in, as a place to introduce new songs

But is it the best way to learn new songs? Does it enable worship or hinder it?

Here some things to think about:

- **Using the new song as a theme for worship**

In some schools new songs are used to support the theme for worship. It is also possible for the song itself to be a theme for worship and sung each day as the Christian teaching found in the text is explored with pupils.

- **Remembering it is not a choir rehearsal**

There is a definite place for children to learn the technical side of singing, to breathe correctly, enunciate clearly and sing in tune. But worship is not necessarily the right occasion for this.

Some schools mirror a practice seen in churches where a worship leader leads children in a number of songs, some familiar, others new. Children learn through listening and joining in when confident. Some listen to those around or reflect on the words or tune for a while. If quality songs are chosen with good tunes, children pick them up quickly using this pattern.

- **Being selective about the number of new songs**

Revisiting old favourites and enjoying the familiarity of the words and tune may encourage people to think about the words. New songs are important, but too many in one term can cause difficulties.

- **Planning ahead**

Considering where new songs will need to be introduced avoids overload and ensures you are ready for the “crunch” moments – Christmas, Leavers’ Service, etc

- **Using quality accompaniment**

Providing, strong, confident support for the singing is needed when learning new material. Chaos can result when the accompanist is also finding their way through the music. In some settings accompaniments on CD can be beneficial and provide a real ‘lift’ to the children’s singing.

- **Maintaining a sense of worship**

Berating pupils for poor singing or posture as they learn new songs can destroy any sense of worship. Try to remember that the worship should have pre-eminence and disciplining should be the exception not the norm.

Sing a New Song

Some schools have renamed their singing practice 'Sing a New Song' and try to provide a format within which new songs are learnt but without losing the sense of an 'act of worship.' The title links it to the Book of Psalms and the great tradition of worshipping God through song and of Christian song-writers continually penning new songs of praise and worship.

The approach outlined below has been tried in some schools and has particular possibilities in a church school. The format follows a simple liturgical structure - **Gathering, Engaging, Responding, Sending** - four elements already recognisable in most school assemblies. The teaching of new songs forms part of the structure.

It may sound rather formal but the structure actually enhances the pupils' ability to take a leadership role. It can ensure a sense of purpose and help pupils understand what is happening. It can also offer all present some personal space, including time for prayer and worship, opportunities often missing from singing 'practice'!

Here is an example of how 'Sing a New Song' might work:

GATHERING

1. Use a 'Gathering' song which everyone joins in as they approach the hall. The song may be sung by a small choir at the front or entrance to the hall as others arrive or could be played on CD. *Classes could bring banners, shakers or flags with them so there is a sense of celebration.*
2. Greet everyone, maybe using a formal greeting and response (Good Morning everyone or 'The Lord be with you / and also with you').
3. Welcome them to 'Sing a New Song'. *You could use the opening ritual below or invite a child to open a Bible and to read a verse from the Psalms about singing. Display these if wished on a projector.*



ENGAGING

4. An adult or older child teaches a new song, using actions and pictures as appropriate. A small group, choir or class could help with this.
5. Time is taken to engage with the words, asking children for favourite words, discussing what the song is about and why it was written.

6. A fairly new song follows, introduced by a child saying why they like it.

RESPONDING

7. A minute is allowed for 'silent' sitting – a period of reflection. The use of a metronome or a set length short piece of music helps gauge time.
- Or** individual children can say or read prayers
 - Or** a quiet song could be chanted while a candle is lit said prayer or intercessory prayer with sung response
 - Or** prayers can be offered in the form of intercessions using a sung response from the Taize community e.g. O Lord, hear my prayer. These short songs can be found and played on the Taize website.
8. Select a sung Lord's Prayer – for meditation, dance, flags, signing
- Or** use a sung psalm such as The Lord's my Shepherd

SENDING

9. Use a leaving song, song of blessing, or song from the world church, maybe in another language, to send pupils on their way singing.

An Opening Ritual

This is based on the ritual where the youngest child at a Jewish Passover meal asks questions and the adults explain why the festival is important.



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| Younger child | What is 'Sing a New Song'? |
| Older child | In some acts of worship we hear stories and see plays. |
| Older child | This is a worship-time when we sing as much as we can. |
| Younger child | Why do we sing so much? |
| Older child | We sing because it joins us together and it's fun. |
| Older child | We sing because Christians all through history and all around the world worship God with songs and music. |
| Younger child | Why do Christians worship God with songs? |
| Older child | The Bible tells us to sing. Listen to this ... |
| Older child | <i>child has chosen and reads a verse from the book of Psalms in the Bible where people are told to sing.</i> |
| Younger child | Why do we learn lots of new songs? |
| Older child | It is good to learn new ways of praising God together. |
| Older child | The Bible tells us: (<i>child has chosen one of the verses from the book of Psalms which says 'Sing a new song'</i>) |