

## Managing Worship by Syler Thomas

(Originally published in *Youthworker Journal*, Jan/Feb '04)

The very title suggests something almost sacrilegious, doesn't it? You don't manage worship. You just do it. Well, it's my estimation that those who don't spend some time managing their group's view of and practice of worship will suffer the consequences.

Many others far more eloquent than I have succeeded in offering a proper theology of worship, so I won't go into the details here, but I do feel like it's important to say the most important thing first. Worship is not just singing, but a lifestyle understanding that our lives are to be lived to reflect and celebrate God (Romans 12:1). Worship as displayed in a time of singing is one way that the desire to live that life is given full expression. A helpful analogy is to think back to math class, as painful as that may be, and picture a very simple Venn diagram, with one smaller circle inside a larger circle. The largest circle is the broad picture of a life of worship, and the smaller circle is our times of corporate singing. To say that worship is only when we crank the amps up to 11 and pound out the latest worship tune is quite limiting. You might even want to limit your use of the word "worship" as the description of the corporate singing time.

### WHO'S IT FOR?

We also have to be careful about the attitude we encourage students to bring to a singing time. It's a delicate line here, but let me try to walk it. On one hand, we shouldn't come to God as a consumer. The point of a worship time is not to improve our self-esteem or to cheer us up, or even to enjoy good music. I cringe when a certain song goes up on the wall and I hear students say, "Yes! I love this song!" As though that's what this is about. This isn't karaoke, or American Bandstand. The focus shouldn't be on which song you like, nor on whether "worship was good" or not. The question shouldn't be whether it was good, but whether you were able to meet with God and exalt him in your heart and mind. Was your heart softened? Were you called to repentance and also to action?

But on the other hand, we shouldn't come to the time thinking we have something to give God, and nothing to gain. John Piper compares God to a mountain stream, over against a water trough. A water trough needs help in order for it to be full, while a mountain stream is self-replenishing and needs nothing. And how does one honor a mountain stream? By drinking deeply of the water. And that's precisely God's invitation in worship, to come and drink deeply of His living water. God doesn't need our worship, but we can come to Him expecting to have our thirst quenched.

### THE WORSHIP JUNKIE

This discussion is especially important as the contemporary worship movement cranks into full gear. I for one am eternally grateful for all that this movement has done for my own relationship with God. It is precisely the thing that caused my understanding of God to widen when I was a senior in high school: coming to the realization that I can actually experience the presence of God when I sing songs of worship to him. But we can breed a dependence on a worship experience if we don't also foster in our group a passion for things like study, evangelism, and ministry. Our students can become worship junkies, people who are only happy when they are "in the Lord's presence in

worship.” They can very easily worship worship, not God. So for example, we need to teach our students that they can experience the presence of God while sharing Christ with a lost friend just as much as when they are singing “Open the eyes of my heart, Lord.” Granted, especially when students are new believers, they may need to initially go through a period of soaking up times of worship as God transforms their hearts. But eventually, they need to see that while God can be found *in* a worship time, he is not *the* worship time.

So make sure a teaching on worship and the related concerns are included in your curriculum, and periodically do mini-teachings before your singing times as reminders to your regulars and by means of explanation to your newcomers. Having just briefly touched on some of the theological issues, I now turn to a few of the very practical issues related to worship development.

#### DON'T BE A THIEF

Some of you have inadvertently been stealing! No, I don't have surveillance cameras in your church, it's just that some of you are unaware that you have to *pay for* the right to use the music and sing the songs you sing! Thankfully, one company owns the rights to virtually all of the songs you likely play, and one check per year to this company covers you legally. The company is CCLI and their phone number is 503.257.2230. You will pay according to the size of your group. It's possible your church already has this number, in which case you can piggyback on theirs, so talk to your church secretary or music director. You can also check their website for specifics at [www.ccli.org](http://www.ccli.org), which also has other helpful resources.

#### EMBRACE THE PLACE YOU'RE IN

Some ministries have 10 students and some have 1000. Let your audio/visual equipment reflect the size of your group. Don't feel compelled to go out and spend a huge chunk of change on a hardcore sound system when going acoustic is what your group needs. In fact, if you're small, don't have a complex about it: embrace it and enjoy what being small allows you to do, which is to enjoy the intimacy that smallness brings. A little hint: you should probably have more people in the crowd than you do in the worship band.

#### RAISING UP A WORSHIP TEAM

If you don't lead worship yourself, do your best to find a volunteer in the church who can, or even consider paying someone to lead; you'll get your money's worth. And then find someone who can start teaching others how to play the guitar. You'll find that some people can pick up guitar in a matter of weeks. I've seen some students who were leading worship within a few months of learning guitar, because they had good models and were naturally musically inclined. You have to now give them opportunities. Have them shadow the worship leader and don't even bother plugging their guitar in (if you use a sound system). Then let them lead one song on their own, then a couple, and debrief with them afterwards. Mike Pilavachi, who is worship leader Matt Redman's pastor, said that he had to let Matt be a bad worship leader before Matt could become a good worship leader. Likewise, we have to be willing to let our newbies fail a few times before they can learn how to get better.

In terms of the rest of the band, this is often a great place for new or fringe people to get connected. Have an open “jam session” where you invite anyone to come in and sing or play their instruments. Then you treat it like an audition, where you can check out the potential talent. Here’s where you sometimes have to disappoint people. Send everyone a letter thanking them for coming, and encourage those that you won’t be using in the band to be involved with the sound crew or another related ministry. If someone has a lot of potential but needs instruction, offer to pay for half of a music lesson, if your budget allows.

Make time to engage with the team on what it means to lead with attitudes of worship, not as the cool, elite musicians. If it’s possible, going through a book like Redman’s *The Unquenchable Worshiper* with the whole team would be quite fruitful.

#### GETTING THE MUSIC OUT THERE

My favorite system for getting the music in the hands of your students comes from one of my mentors at his church. Get a file cabinet or portable file box and create a file for each song with the guitar chords written above (one sheet per song). Make 10-15 copies of each song and staple the original to the folder (so that no one takes it). File the songs by first line, so that people aren’t confused between what the song is called and what people *think* it’s called. (For instance, the song many of us know as “I Cry Out” is actually titled “Good to Me.” People would never find it!) Whenever anyone asks for the music for a particular song, tell them to take whatever they want out of the file, and try to put it in a location that is easy to get to. Every few weeks, go through the file and restock any folders that are running low.

#### FINDING NEW SONGS

This used to be a lot harder, back in the olden days when I had to walk uphill both ways and contemporary worship consisted of what Maranatha, Hosanna, and Vineyard were putting out each year. The place to start would be with the compilation CDs like WOW, which will have a broad spectrum of popular worship songs, though some of them can be dated as well. Michael W. Smith and other contemporary Christian artists have recently been putting out worship CDs with great congregational songs, and in the recent years, the Passion Praise Band has been putting out music with many “usable” worship songs. Utilize your local Christian bookstores. Spend a couple hours, or better yet, take a couple students and spend a couple hours in a Christian bookstore, listening to the worship offerings. Don’t be afraid to use songs that you see or hear others doing. This is the part of ministry where stealing is encouraged! Another great website is [worshiptogether.com](http://worshiptogether.com), which has genuinely tried to bring folks from various labels together to be a resource to the church.

#### THE REALLY OLD AND THE REALLY NEW

What I have experienced is that the most effective songs are going to be the ones that are extremely cutting edge, and also the hymns (and some choruses) that have stood the test of time. Don’t miss out on teaching a little history to your students, that the “old hymns” were once the contemporary praise songs of generations gone by, and that the organ was looked on like a drum set is seen in some churches still today: an instrument that

certainly doesn't belong in a church. Some of our students' favorite songs are hymns written hundreds of years ago.

#### FOSTER CREATIVITY

Finally, encourage students to think outside the box. The youth group is the place for this to happen! Just because you've always done something one way, help your students to see that it doesn't always have to happen like that every time. Offer some suggestions to get them thinking: what would happen if we sang acapella one night? What if we did a song in another language? If we put the band at the back of the room instead of in the front? And then let them brainstorm with you. Let them own it.

Worship is a treasure of the church. Care for it.