

Worship Leading for Small Groups

Contributed by Martyn Layzell
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You know the deal&ldots; ten people crammed into a living room with hardly enough room to swing a cat let alone a Takemine! The night seems to be going well; the tea is flowing, the chocolate hobnobs have all been consumed, the conversation is just heating up and suddenly someone reaches for their guitar. Almost instinctively the room has filled with terror. Everyone starts rubbing their throat as if there's no way their going to sing with such a sore one! Coughing has now replaced conversation and the kitchen suddenly becomes a hive of servant activity. Without realizing it the small group has shrunk to tone deaf Tina and Wayne the West Life wannabe.

I don't know if something like this has been or indeed is your experience of worship in a small group. But it doesn't have to be. Perhaps leading worship in a small group fills you with dread. Perhaps your small group expression of worship is one of enthusiasm, creativity and sensitivity. Great. Although we can't do much as worship leaders and singers about the ability of our fellow small group members, we can do a lot to teach them about the value of worshipping in a small group environment and leading them in such a way that minimizes any embarrassment. Matthew 18:20 says, "For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them." One of the biggest temptations we face when we are leading worship in a small group is to try and replicate what we see on a Sunday or at a large conference. It's important that we get our motives and values right when we come to lead people in this way. This is not our chance to show off our talent or how well we can play the latest songs. Small group worship is not merely a stepping-stone to leading worship in the grander place of church on a Sunday. Our role is to lead people nearer to Jesus. Remember He should increase and we should decrease (John 3:30). Obviously, the dynamic of a small group is very different to that of a larger congregation. For example, pumping out 'Lord of the Dance' alone on your 6 string may not have quite the same drive amongst 5 of you as when there are 5000 dancing passionately along to a fully amplified band on the last night of a conference. We can get it into our heads that these larger contexts for worship can be the only useful expression. Anything less is a flop. However, nowhere in this verse in Matthew do I see anything about large conferences, Power Point word projection, Fender amps, band arrangements or radio microphones. The one and only factor is that Jesus' name is glorified and that can be done when there is a few or a few thousand people. As the phrase goes size doesn't matter and small groups hold advantages all of their own. The first question we should ask ourselves as worship leaders before we get onto some more practical stuff is what value does the group place on worship? If the group you're in just sees worship as a bunch of songs before the 'real' stuff begins, then it might be good to sensitively do some teaching about the biblical value of worship. Do people understand that they can engage with God in worship? Do they have a heart for worship? Do they live lives of worship or is it a bit of a duty when it's time for 'church' or 'home group'? Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:26 "When you come together, everyone has a hymn (song), or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church." How can you redefine 'EVERYONE'? You see worship is everyone's own responsibility. Once people see beyond the songs through a heart of worship, a place of personal encounter with the Living God can replace the sniggers of singing love songs to the ceiling. When leading worship in a small group, it's important to think before you begin. It's amazing how we can trade common sense for so-called inspiration when choosing our set lists. Ask yourself some questions&ldots;

- What has God been saying to the group recently?
- What is the group thinking or concentrating on?
- How can I reflect these things in this time of worship?
- What does God want to say to the group?

Think about Theme: It's often good to think around a general theme. This doesn't mean that every song has to express that theme, but the main thrust of the set should draw people's attention to that particular focus point. It may be that one song is particularly appropriate or fresh which you can build your set around or towards. This can also prevent you just choosing your top ten favorites or songs you can play that just fit together musically! For example if the group was looking at the subject of the Cross-, you could use songs such as 'Jesus Christ' (Once Again) or 'You led me to the cross'. When you have thought a bit about a theme and what songs could express this through their lyrics and feel, you can think about stringing the songs together. When worshipping, we want to allow people to focus on Jesus. With this in mind, it's best to keep any other distractions to a minimum. Try and create a seamless flow of worship using some songs that are in the same key or require the same capo position. E.g. 'Open the eyes of my heart' and 'Salvation'. Try and work hard at memorizing chords and lyrics. This will help you focus on God and leading the people rather than the barre chord that is looming. If however you have to use song sheets or a song book, think about photocopying and reducing them in size onto one A4 sheet of music or mark the relevant pages. The flow of worship can really be broken if you have to fumble with pages after every song. It's also a good idea to take the phone off the hook, switch off all mobile phones in the room and remove the cat! Think about who is in your group: What is the vocal ability/range of the group? Don't exhaust a non-vocal group with song after song after song or with songs that require an excessively high or low range. People are more self conscious in a smaller group setting, so try and transpose some songs that are too high into a lower key such as 'He is the Lord' from (G) to (E). What is the distribution of males and females?

Especially in a small group try not to do too many songs with male - female repeats such as 'I will worship'. This can be embarrassing if there is only one girl who doesn't even like singing. People also start to struggle if you do too many songs with a lot of words e.g. 'Come On All Us Singers', or new songs that they have not heard much. Small groups can be a great place to learn new songs and they can help keep things fresh, but remember the members are people not guinea pigs! Perhaps give people a sheet of the new song's words and let them know when you are going to use it. Try and also use simple songs such as 'I am yours' (Pure Like You), 'Hey Lord', or chorus sections that people know better than the whole song. For example 'Praise the Lord Oh My Soul' from 'The Lord is Gracious and Compassionate', or 'We sing of all you've done' from 'Thank You for the Blood' transposed to (A) from (C). This can help freshen things up and reduce the one song after another routine. Think about repetition: If you are repeating a line or a chorus, ask yourself the question why? Repetition can be a great tool to emphasise a line or pull the groups focus towards a specific aspect of God, but don't repeat sections just for the sake of it or because you can't remember how the next song goes. This can be a real temptation. Keep asking God what he's doing and what to do next. Don't just stay on a two chord round because it's easier than thinking of what song to do next or how to get out of (G) and into (B). If in doubt stop and collect yourself before starting again. Think about flexibility: It may be that you have prepared your set list and when you arrive the dynamics of the group are different to what you were expecting. Perhaps you got some stuff wrong and the evening is actually on a completely different theme to what you thought. Try and stay flexible. This is where learning songs off by heart or in different keys can really come in useful and will give you an ability to mould to unexpected situations. Musicianship or not! In general it is always best to underplay and to certainly play within yourself. Don't try and replicate strong riffs alone such as in 'The Cross has said it all' or 'Don't let my love grow cold'. If it is quite a large group with enough space you could ask someone to play guitar alongside you or to play some percussion to add some flavour or colour. Above all practice so that your playing becomes as unobtrusive as possible. If there are chords you know you struggle to get, practice them until they become smooth. Also be careful with instrumental sections. As a rule it's best to stick to a simple arrangement but if you feel led to lead a time of singing in tongues or 'free' worship, always try and come back to something that the group is familiar with. But I don't play guitar: Although guitar led worship is the most common, there are other ways of leading worship in a small group setting. Here are a few ideas to which I'm sure you could add many more: A cappella worship Keyboard Tape of songs recorded from CD's. Dance Act out a part of scripture Have a time of testimony, giving thanks to God Meditate on a psalm Re-write a psalm in modern language Use artistic material to express your praise to God. Say out the names that describe Jesus Silent Reflection on who God is Use percussion as a means for intercession Make a melody for the Lord's Prayer A few last words on a cappella worship: If embarking on this style, it's important that the leader has a good sense of rhythm and timing. Percussion can work well to aid this or perhaps even clapping. This lets everyone know when to come in and when to stop singing. Try not to use songs that don't have much of a melody or songs with long gaps between lines such as 'Oh Lead Me'. It's also good if the leader can extend notes at the end of a line to reduce the length of silence before the next line begins. As the leader, always lead using the melody line. If the melody is out of your range, try and transpose the song into a more manageable key. With this in mind it can be good to practice vocal key changes in case someone starts a song either too high or too low. Martyn Layzell is one of the Assistant Pastors of Soul Survivor Watford, where he has been serving and leading worship for a number of years. He graduated in Psychology from Birmingham University in 1997 and has been leading worship at the Soul Survivor summer festivals since 1998. He is married to Emily and is an avid fan of Wycombe Wanderers. Martyn recorded a joint album with Tim Hughes, Reward in 1999 featuring 'O Lord, I am devoted' and 'When words are not enough'