

10 Ways to Freshen Your Music Program

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Consistency, comfort, and tradition can be crucial -- or stale. Here are 10 tools to give your music program an invigorating update, collected from music directors around the northwest region. Try one or more.

1. Hit the charts
2. Drop the lyrics
3. Lose the stands
4. Get graded
5. Sing new tunes
6. Match the minister
7. Swap the order
8. Meet the neighbors
9. Improvise
10. Check the mirror



1. Keep up with current pop music. Let your weekly scheduler remind you to go check the Top 10 songs from Billboard.com. Don't judge (!), just listen. Try Youtube for the video versions. The more you dislike this assignment, the more you need it. Relevant genres for your program could be Hot 100, Adult Contemporary, Christian/Gospel, Iternative – find what's closest, what's inspiring, infuriating. Time commitment is 1-2 hrs. initially, 15-30 mins weekly.
2. Minimize written lyric usage. "But we finally got a nice big screen!" Once a sign of modernity, screens now inspire "video game face" – that wide-eyed passive stare at a non-human focus. There's brain science in this: the de-coding centers used in reading lyrics are neurologically different from the facial-recognition centers: ever notice how it's difficult to read in your dreams? Removing the screen and simplifying the singalong lyrics can increase charismatic experience, eye contact, interpersonal connection, and the devotional "worship" feeling from that area of the brain.
3. Remove the music stands for singers. "Oh God No!" When someone looks down to an Ipod or a cell phone, we feel that shift, that detachment. The same is true for a sheet of music. No music stand means no barrier, no hiding, no net. It means direct embodiment of the divine creative flow, rather than quoting a divine moment that happened before or exists on paper, in the abstract. The gain in emotional and spiritual value is astounding. The loss is my wordiness, my safety, my mask, and my complacency. Good riddance.

4. Conduct vigorous assessment. Churches sometimes skimp on real quality control practices, and instead allow moods and personal biases to muddy the waters. Clear them with disciplined assessments - fearless, compassionate, incisive. Here are several methods that combine well.
 - a. Weekly qualitative written reports, grading 1-5 on parameters like performance quality, timing, topic fit, whatever you value.
 - b. Weekly quantitative reports, on metrics like # of congregants on the stage, # of new songs, # of cd's sold, # of hours of prep, money spent on fees/supplies, etc.
 - c. Annual supervisory review, including trend results of the weeklies and 360 review from your contractors and players.
 - d. Annual or bi-annual full-church survey or congregant opinion poll.
 - e. Targeted polling of specific congregants for demographic value: e.g. newcomers, high donors, students, chaplains, etc.

Clear, disciplined assessment creates a basis for better goal setting and experimentation. No pussyfooting around pride, ego, and inertia.

5. Sing a new song.

It's a biblical mandate we often ignore. Four ways here:

- a. **Swap Out:** if you've got any "must sing" tunes - e.g. the Peace Song, Surely the Presence, Lord's Prayer - give them a rest, even if it's just once a month.
- b. **Deconstruction:** a big change of feel for an old song - like a samba version of I Am the Radiant Life of God, a reggae Peace Song, Sweep Over My Soul in a 4-beat bossa, Loving Kindness in gospel 12/8, or a Barry White version of Only Believe.
- c. **Premieres:** a brand spanking new original. Be sure to say it's the song's premiere, so listeners are conscious of the value.
- d. **Exotic Import:** something with an interfaith or global-culture feeling, like an Om Tare Tutare chant, or a tune in Portugese or Aramaic.

6. Match the day's topic. The Spirit moves your minister in a new way every week; it's built-in freshness. Connect to your minister's flow, and you'll co-create a coherent service that amplifies that message. Even with a procrastinating minister, you can leave one or two singalong slots open until the last minute and then swap in an easy favorite on the topic. Your flexibility increases with exercise and stretching, and improves your relationship.



Fresh baked music!

7. Change up the order. When people arrive late and leave early, it's time to change up the order of service. Every minister has a unique idea about the perfect energy arc, so be ready for a healthy, "stimulating" discussion about exactly how far you can stretch things. Maybe start with one tweak at a time, or maybe just once a month.
8. Network. Who are the New Thought music directors within a 100 mile radius of your church, and when did you last speak to them? Who are the musicians they use? Do they know you? Exchange music, favors, references, musician lists, and other tools with your neighbors. It may feel weird at first, but quickly brings benefits: more freedom and confidence in hiring, less competitive feeling, more growth and hybrid vigor. An in-person Sunday visit is best, so give your substitute the baton once every six weeks and go visit the neighbors. You DO have a substitute, right?
9. Create art during the service. The most sacred moment is now. Add more improvisation, try spontaneous composition, a full song or just a chant, which you might even perform on the spot, or simply adjust lyrical content in response to the message. Expand your modality by using an improvisational dancer, or including a dance break in your uptempo singalong. Sponsor an artist to make sketches of the service in progress. Borrow elements from improvisational theatre, and let the crowd choose the next tune (perhaps from a list). Results are fun, profound, invigorating.
10. Freshen yourself. When was your last spiritual awakening, and how old is that hairdo?! Inside and outside are both important, and we must consciously attend to both, or they'll go stale while we justify it with clichés. Have you taken a recent class at your church, or (gasp) at others? Yes, truths are eternal, but how old is the outfit you wore last Sunday? "You" also means your team – if you have a pianist who's stuck in 1983, tell the truth. Maybe create a professional development plan for him, or bite the bullet and move him back to twice a month. Not all of these tools will work for your ministry, which is why you need one more:
11. Tolerate/accept pushback. See your shadow, but don't run too fast back to the gopher hole. Even the best-loved leaders can't please everyone, though they make time to listen. Allow 15-20 minutes to consider, record and respond to each signed complaint, but just 1 minute's thought for each anonymous complaint.



To enter into New Thought at all, we accept the risks inherent in change. Here's to the radicals and revolutionaries!