

Training feature

Musically challenged?

Nick Harding

Picture the scene: The small group of young children are sitting on the carpet waiting to sing, while the helpers are sweeping the glitter from the rough woodblock flooring. The leader is determined to teach a new song, even though it has rather too many words, fast hand and arm actions that a baboon would find difficult, and very confusing super-spiritual concepts. She begins to strum her guitar, playing a delicate, tuneful introduction. Then suddenly and without warning or invitation, the children launch in to the theme from the latest pre-school TV programme. 'That's it,' mutters the leader to her husband as they go home after church, 'I'm never going to do singing with them again!'

Why make the effort?

- Music is something which touches all of us. Even the youngest babies can be startled, excited or transfixed by music. If we think back, there are often songs which remind us of occasions or incidents in our past.
- Music is great fun. Most children really enjoy singing and even making up their own songs and tunes, while many adults sing happily to tapes in the car or in the bath! There's nothing wrong with children having fun in church (and adults too, if only they knew it!).
- Children of all ages with special needs can benefit greatly from what music therapy has to offer, bringing some out of their own world and into God's. Music touches the heart in a unique way.
- Listening to music helps the development of aural skills, with children learning to listen to sounds as well as words. In addition they learn how to listen and repeat, a key factor in language development.
- Making music can develop physical coordination and basic motor skills. Simply by clapping rhythms or tapping drums, children are using their hands and arms educationally!
- Successful music-making, be it as simple as learning a very easy song, helps develop young children's ability to concentrate, and gives them a sense of success and satisfaction essential for development.
- Making music together brings a sense of unity and purpose to any group, be it children or adults - hence the large number of bands, orchestras and choirs that people of all ages belong to!
- But most of all it has got to be worth making the effort because music in church groups of any age can and should be a part of worship.

Worship with young children

Let's be clear about this - often the music that we do with 5s and under doesn't sound or seem like worship! But the fact that it isn't always very tuneful, peaceful or restful doesn't mean that it loses worth in God's eyes. God delights in our worship, and even the discordant offering of toddlers is precious and special to him.

Worship is part of being in God's family Adults worship with hymns and songs, and children need to get into that habit at a young age. It may be that young children do not understand fully what they are singing, but as they sing words and express their love for God they will also be learning basic words and phrases which will make sense later on.

Worship is real The worship you lead with your group is not a practice for 'real' worship in church services, despite the fact that, like most church resources, musicians are rarely made available to children's groups. Whatever the children offer to God is real for them at that time, and shouldn't be undervalued. God calls us all to worship him, and delights in our worship.

Worship is not performance I am pleased that in many churches the concept of children being dragged to the front to 'perform' a little song has passed. Children learn songs to worship God, not to make parents or grandparents go soppy in the pews! Seriously, there is a place for children to share what they are learning, but this shouldn't be the only outcome of worship in the group. Ultimately it's just as easy for children to teach a song to the adult congregation as to perform, and more Biblically appropriate too.

Worship without songs

There's a great deal you can do in worship which does not have to rely on singing. Worship in the Bible involves dance and movement, responses and chants, and physical demonstrations of our love for God. By trying some simple exercises you can work on the concentration of the group and even develop your own skills in the process.

Playing music

Play quiet worship tapes or CDs when you want the children to settle down to pray. Not only will they listen and take in some of the words, over time they will learn that this is the time to be calm and talk to God. If you use the same song each time you do this it will be learned quickly.

Actions

Actions don't always need to belong to songs! Simple phrases such as 'I love God' and 'Thank you, Jesus' can be said with very easy made-up or sign language actions, and the children may be able to suggest the actions to use, helping them 'own' the worship. Actions also add a new dimension to prayer, for instance when used as a response.

Clapping

Clapping rhythms are a good developmental exercise, helping children to coordinate physical movements and improve listening skills. Rhythm exercises also prepare young children for another aspect of worship. Try this:

- 1 Begin by trying rhythms with 4 beats or syllables. This is fun and therefore worthwhile in itself, regardless of whether you move on to the next step.
- 2 Once each rhythm is established you could add simple phrases of worship or liturgy which are easy to say and clap: I love Je-sus, God is so good.
- 3 Then move on to slightly more complex sayings demanding quicker claps, still based on 4 beats but with more syllables: I love Fa-ther God, God made eve-ry thing. Again, encourage children to come up with their own phrases and statements about God.

Instruments

Instruments are easy to make, and there are plenty of variations possible using basic, easy-to-find equipment and materials. Drums, wood blocks, scrapers and even simple xylophones can be made in the group. Allowing children to go wild with percussion does not help them learn about worship, but introducing instruments for the rhythm work or simple songs makes the time a little more special for the children. Who is allowed to play an instrument also has a positive discipline implication, as most children will desperately want to play!

Chants and raps

Chants and raps can be frightening to leaders, but even 5s and under are not too young to extend the rhythm phrases mentioned earlier into chants and raps. These are best learned and used by the leader saying each line in rhythm and the children repeating

it. The more you practise, the easier it will become for the group. Here's an example:

God I know it's really true,
I can always turn to you.
There is nothing I can say,
That will make you turn away.

Songs in worship

Singing with children helps them grow in all the ways mentioned above, teaching physical, mental and spiritual skills vital for development. The mainstay of church worship is singing, and many churches do it very effectively. Your 5s and under can worship through song too, but it's not going to be easy!

Musical leaders

Young children enjoy singing with enthusiasm and energy, but not always the best sense of melody! Sometimes the worst leaders to teach singing with 5s and under are musical ones! They might want to achieve standards which are unattainable, or seek a tunefulness and clarity which comes later for most children. Leaders who are good are those who accept the maxim that we are called to make a joyful noise to God, not necessarily a perfect one! These leaders don't wince when one child is loud and a quarter-tone out of tune, they don't scowl when the children start to sing at different times, and they don't groan when it takes two verses for everyone to land on the same pitch! Most of all, the best leaders are in it to teach children to worship, not to perform.

No musicians

Having no musicians can be a liberation as well as a hindrance. Without musicians, it is easier to stop and start, to repeat verses or to speed up and slow down. There are backing tapes available for some song books which can help develop confidence and give the group a pleasant background to sing along with. But the best and most versatile instrument is the voice of the leader! Even if your singing voice is weak, or it embarrasses you, the children will not notice. Very few adults are really tone-deaf, so there's no excuse for the majority of us. If you are willing to start singing a familiar song without accompaniment, the children will join in very quickly, and most will settle on a pitch together. All it takes is a little guts and little pride!

Familiar songs

It is good to use familiar songs, but as well as familiarity children also relish a little variety. You should be aiming for a balance each week, perhaps

introducing and learning a new song over a period of 4 sessions to ensure that it is established in the children's memories. As a rough test, if you are teaching children a majority of the simple worship songs that you learned as a child it is time you extended the repertoire a little!

Permission for songs

Most churches now hold one of the Christian Copyright Licensing agreements giving permission for music and/or words to be reproduced. It is worth checking that your church does, even if you learn the words by rote and don't have a musician.

Choosing new songs

There are some good songs around now which are written for 5s and under, many of which include actions and catchy tunes. When choosing songs, remember to look at the words; make sure that they are accessible to the children and that the content is worth singing! Lyrics like 'I'm not a banana, I'm a child of God' may be true (assuming you don't have a singing banana in your group), but seem a little pointless to me! If you are not a musician, ask one to play the tunes through and record on a tape, and then learn the tune by playing it over and over again in the car or wherever. But it is best to teach new songs to the children with voice only, at least to begin with.

A balance of songs

The singing time in your group should not be seen solely as a time-filler, a way to use up the energy of the children, or a means by which the other leaders are free to tidy up! Worship deserves planned time and careful thought to ensure that the songs you sing are appropriate to the children, relevant to the theme, and balanced in style and content.

Quiet songs

Even at a young age, children can learn and therefore should be taught to sing quieter worship songs. It is a myth that children have to have actions or noisy, 'jump-about' songs in order to get close to God. A balanced worship time will include action songs, noisy songs and quiet ones too.

Teaching by example

If leaders want to teach children to worship, they have to do it by example. If the group are worshipping then all the leaders should be involved with the children, not chatting at the back or putting the crayons away. Most of all, the leaders should join in with the actions, sing with gusto, and even close

their eyes and express themselves appropriately in worship without being embarrassed.

Teaching songs

- 1 If there are actions, start with those first. Teach the actions by repetition for the first verse or chorus, making sure that the majority of children have grasped them. It is quite a difficult skill for children to learn actions remote from words, but it will help greatly when you get to the next step.
- 2 Move on to adding the words to the actions, teaching the words line by line and making sure they are being said correctly. Then gradually speak the words and do the action to fit the rhythm of the song.
- 3 Sing or play the complete song through to the children while they continue to do the actions. Do not bother with OHP words, sheets or books. The skill to read, sing and do actions at the same time is beyond many adults, and certainly is not possible for most children under 9 or 10.
- 4 Move on to teaching the tune with both words and actions line by line. Once a verse or the chorus has been learned do it all through before moving on to the next. If you sense the children tiring, stop and continue with the next verse later or on another day.
- 5 When you move back to the newly-learned song again on another occasion remember that, as a rough guide, 50% of it will have been forgotten. You will therefore need to take it slowly and perhaps repeat stages 3 and 4 again.

Using songs creatively

Familiar and even jaded songs can be given a new lease of life by trying out different approaches.

Miss out words and actions

Sing the song, and if there is a regular word ask the children to miss it out each time it comes round. The same could be done with actions making it challenging and fun, especially when the leaders go wrong!

Music only

There is a good opportunity to go deeper into worship by missing out all the words for a verse and asking the children to be quiet and listen to the

music, thinking of God's love or all the good things they have.

Actions only

Doing the actions without the words can help some children to think through the meaning of what they sing, as to do this they will be thinking the words but not having to sing them.

Theme

Use a familiar and popular song as the theme for the learning session and therefore a basis for the story, craft work, games, and so on. In this way a clear link is built between the learning and the worship.

Verses

Work with the group on writing new words or verses for a familiar song tune. You could use a secular melody or one from other worship songs. This helps the children feel more involved in worship and develops group unity and a positive sense of achievement.

Resources

Children Can Worship, N Harding, Kevin Mayhew Ltd, ISBN 1 84003 434 3 gives a full guide to worship through prayer, movement, giving and all-age, plus session outlines, practical ideas and tips.

Let's Sing and Shout!, SU, ISBN 1 85999 263 3 gives over 250 rhymes, songs and prayers, many to well-known tunes; recommended often in SALT 3 to 4+.

Here's one I made earlier, SU, ISBN 0 86201 981 8 has suggestions for easy-to-make musical instruments in your group during their craft times.

kidsource, Kevin Mayhew Ltd, ISBN 1 84003 310 X contains 400 songs old and new. Like all such books, some songs will be suitable and some will not!

The Spring Harvest range of books, tapes and CDs offer newer songs. The new compilation, *The Big Book of Spring Harvest Kids Praise*, ICC, ISBN 1 8736 1330 X has some songs from the *Little Kids Praise* tapes. Spring Harvest produces an annual *Little Kids Praise* tape with backing tracks, with the music published in the annual *Kids Praise* music book. These songs are specifically written with under 5s in mind, and are all used at Spring Harvest and Word Alive. Stocks from past years may be available through Christian bookshops.

Finally...

Are you musically challenged? If so I hope this article has challenged you to get into music! The key to it all is to dive in and have a go, whether you feel able to or not. The result of doing so will bring glory to God. The result of not trying will be to limit the children's ability to and experience of worship. Go on, surprise yourself!