



Practical input

4. Finding the key of justice – fuller sung worship for every age

This article is part of a series of resources exploring the relationship between worship and justice and how this specifically applies to children, young people and all-ages together. (Find the others, podcasts and more at www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-everyage or www.rachelturner.org.uk)

Like the other practical input sheets in this series, it is structured in two parts. The first provides a brief teaching overview on values, and the second explores practical approaches for parents and leaders to explore in order to apply these principles.

You may find it helpful to download our outward focused song indexes (available for children & all ages and youth & adults) at www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-othersongs or to visit www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-songs to download songs as they become available.

The big questions:

What has singing got to do with justice?

How do we write outward focused worship songs for kids and all-ages?

Will young people connect with these types of songs?

Part 1 – Value input

At the end of Disney's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the credits roll, and after a few minutes we are launched into Alanis Morissette's *Wunderkind (German for wonder child)* – written especially for the film, and inspired by the character of Lucy Pevensie. Some of the words are below:

"I am a magnet for all kinds of deeper wonderment
I am a wunderkind...
And I lift the envelope pushed far enough to believe this
I am a princess on the way to my throne
Destined to serve, destined to roam ...
I am a pioneer naive enough to believe this
I am a princess on the way to my throne ...
Destined to seek, destined to know
Most beautiful place reborn and blown off roof
My view about-face whether great will be done ...
I am a ground-breaker naive enough to believe this
I am a princess on the way to my throne...
I am a Joan of Arc and smart enough to believe this
I am a princess on the way to my throne ...
Destined to reign, destined to roam"

Imagine for a moment that the story was different... and Lucy thought the point of her being in Narnia was only to meet and know Aslan. No battles fought; no risks taken – and a land still in winter with an unjust witch still on the throne. What kind of song would have accompanied the credits to that film?

Ok, so it's just a film and Alanis Morissette isn't the go-to for kids' worship songs, but the whole point is that *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* was always supposed to be an allegory of the Christian story. And it's a brilliantly effective one. Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy all come to meet and know Aslan. His death and resurrection make a way for Edmund to be forgiven and restored to relationship. Aslan calls them to his world to make a difference – to summon courage and love enough to partner with him to overthrow the injustice of the White Witch's cold and evil reign – and then to reign with him in the true kingdom.

Lucy is a magnet for all kinds of deeper wonderment – she is a groundbreaker, a pioneer and a princess. But not just in identity. She is these things because of her purpose; she has a destiny to seek and know – but also to serve, roam and reign. She is naive, and smart, enough to have faith that she is on her way to a glorious throne.

This is the gospel story that each Christian, and each child and young person, is invited into. It's an adventure; a quest; a destiny to defeat the winter of injustice and separation from God, and then to reign with him forever. It's the kind of story that inspires brave songs of wonder, compassion and sacrifice.

The problem is that many of us have reduced this epic story to the second, tamer version... and it's happened so gradually that we've barely noticed it. But the songs many of us are singing say it all – they're mostly about us and Aslan, or about us being princesses, rather than the faith and risk of the quest – and very few of them contain any reference to the wintry world outside our safe, church walls.

It's all about me – an even more effective carbon copy

Many worship-leaders are waking up to the fact that in a genuine and right pursuit of two vital things – intimacy with God and encounter with the Holy Spirit – we have forgotten that the 'more love and power' we are asking for is not supposed to stop with us. As Andy Flanagan puts it in his song, 'We are blessed... to bless a world in pieces'.

The reality is that many parts of the church today more typically stop mid-phrase, immediately after 'blessed'. The focus of our songs has become increasingly insular. We sing about our identity in Christ, and our relationship with God, but it's in danger of becoming more about me than it even is about God. And it's rarely even about us and we – let alone you and them.

Does it matter? Put simply – yes. Our songs reflect and further shape our theology, and a litmus test on our current repertoire doesn't look good for how we are prioritising mission, justice and outward focused love.

For children and young people of course, the patterns are the same – but perhaps even more extremely so. As a result, songs that have been written for kids worship recently are dominated by lyrics about God's love for me as an individual, and how I am special or 'super' because I have Jesus living inside me. Doing a quick audit of them highlights the wider problem with contemporary worship as a whole more starkly than ever. This is probably for four main reasons:

1. Generally the songs we write for children are condensed or boiled down versions of our own songs – they can't contain the full detail of Biblical imagery or theology, so they have to pin down the essence of what we're trying to say – often through a modern metaphor.
2. In many churches, children's workers and those leading all-age settings will make use of far fewer songs in their "repertoire" than adult worship-leaders do. (Most have a repertoire of just ten to fifteen that they use regularly.) This is for good reasons – children do take longer to learn songs and become familiar enough with them to use them in worship – but if you only have ten or fifteen songs to play with, you would have to be incredibly intentional about their theological spread to cover most main themes.

3. We are aware that children (especially now) even more than adults, struggle to always remember the detail of talks, but find it much easier to retain the lyrics of songs due to their “catchy” repetitious nature.
4. Generally, most of us worship out of our default context – ourselves. If we are not living lives of mission, then our heads and hearts won’t be filled with individuals and situations that are heavy on our hearts, when we come to God’s presence. We’ll just be preoccupied with our own feelings, circumstances and challenges. Children are usually more insular than adults in their community context due to their more limited spheres, so we will naturally reduce our (already highly insular) adult context further inwards when we write, and lead, worship for children and young people.

Why outward focused songs matter – for everyone

You can read about why this issue matters so much in the context of the whole church by reading our fuller articles on worship and justice www.thesanctuarycentre.org/resources/article-worship-and-justice-1-why-does-it-matter.pdf and www.thesanctuarycentre.org/resources/article-worship-and-justice-2-creating-an-ever-flowing-stream.pdf. But in summary of the wider discussion, and with specific relation to children and young people:

- The Bible’s songs and prayers (especially the Psalms) contain a much wider diversity of approaches than most of our song repertoires do – and contain many songs and prayers petitioning for God’s love, justice and mercy for others (for example Psalms 10 and 20).
- In our culture, if our songs don’t say it, it’s very unlikely that our lives will be living it. (Even though obviously just singing about loving others is no good either.)
- Songs are memorable, and foundational for shaping our theology, lifestyle and priorities.
- Songs come out of the overflow of our hearts and speak to our Spirits in a deep and powerful way – they both deeply reflect what we believe and value; and also deeply influence these things.
- Worship is supposed to draw us closer to God’s heart and Jesus tells us that loving God and loving others are the same – so something odd is happening if in the times when we are drawing closest to God, it’s only ourselves that are in focus.
- Similarly, worship and mission are interrelated, so the place of intimacy should also be the place where we are remembering, and lifting to God, the individuals and situations that are on our hearts – as well as our own triumphs, struggles, and desires.
- Children and young people are forming their ideas about what worship means now – building a wrong foundation will be harder to undo later.

We want to lead our children and young people in true encounter, and into an even deeper connection with God and his heart of love and justice than we have experienced.

So often in the church there is a flight to extremes; a choice between either or... a church is passionate about loving others *or* it’s passionate about loving God... people are focused on pursuing intimacy *or* on praying for the needs of the world. It’s time for the *both and* generation to rise up.

So what worship songs should children, young people and all-ages be singing?

The answer is all kinds. Praise; declaration; lament; adoration; repentance; worship; petition; intercession...

Songs are simply sung prayers – so they should reflect the whole spectrum of types of prayer – particularly if we are in churches where sung worship is our principal form of liturgy and expression.

Children should be singing songs which help them declare who God is; draw close to him; ask for his forgiveness; press into his presence; pray for his world; ask him their questions; seek him for answers; declare who they are in him; commit to be more like him etc...

And they should be singing about a wide spectrum of theological and Biblical truths. They need to sing about the cross; the resurrection; the fact Jesus is coming back; creation; the church; the nations; the broken; and what God is calling them to do to partner with him in ending winter and establishing the fullness of his kingdom.

Part 2a – Singing differently

How do we make sure the right range of songs are being sung?

A number of very practical things need to happen:

1. Worship-leaders (in all contexts), and kids leaders who are leading or planning worship, need to honestly examine the songs they are using in worship (paying special attention not just to the ones that are on file, but the ones which actually get used most of the time) and find the gaps and under-emphasised areas.

See the Sanctuary's how to guide on conducting a song audit at

www.thesanctuarycentre.org/resources/practical-input-establishing-an-outward-focused-song-repertoire.pdf

2. Choose some new songs to fill the gaps – and try to make sure you avoid a tick box mentality by taking time to choose some songs for different contexts – i.e. when looking at subjects on justice and loving others, try not to just choose sending songs that deal with what people will do when they leave the building, but also to have some songs that can be used to pray for friends, school, difficult situations etc during your time together.

We have produced two outward focused song indexes to help with this – one for youth and adults, and one put together especially with children and all-age settings in mind. Download them at

www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-othersongs

3. New songs need to be written intentionally bridging the gaps and empowering worship-leaders, children's group leaders, and families, to incorporate more outward focus into their worship. As the song indexes show, there is a need for more choice, particularly when it comes to songs which will resonate with children and all-age congregations.

We are challenging song-writers to try to write more all-age worship songs in this area, and in order to encourage this have devised the following brief. (Feel free to use it, pass it on, and then to email

info@thesanctuarycentre.org if you come across, or create, any great new outward-focused songs for children, youth or all-ages – particularly if you find songs suitable for under 5s.)

A song-writers brief – writing outward focused songs for every age**1. General tips for writing songs that children can connect to:**

- *Think simple not kid – most of us when we were young did not necessarily like ‘kid’ songs best, and in terms of all-age, simple is a much better choice because the song will work better with adults too.*
- *Pitch songs between middle C and the C an octave above, and try to keep songs largely around the middle of this.*
- *Try to use simple time (i.e. 2/4 3/4 or 4/4) rather than compound wherever possible ... though 6/8 can be effective if the song is quite simple in other ways.*
- *Try to avoid symbols and metaphors as young children find these difficult to understand. Similes work better.*
- *Try to make a song about one main idea so it’s not too difficult to grasp.*
- *Short is sweet – multiple verses, or lots of words all make singing the song itself more of a challenge, leaving less space for children to connect to worship and harder for them to remember away from church.*
- *Avoid listing songs where possible (e.g. songs which provide lots of parallel phrases, or long lists of examples). They may look fun, but children benefit most from worship songs that can help express their heart to God immediately. Listing songs, rather like songs with lots of words or verses, can often lead to children having to concentrate so hard on keeping up with reading the list off the screen that they don’t connect.*
- *Children find upbeat songs easier than slow songs – this doesn’t mean no one should write slow songs for kids – but slow songs are of more limited use because of the number of songs of this pace you can do in a session.*

2. What types of songs are needed most?

- *Songs which help children pray for people to meet and know God*
- *Songs which help children pray for people that don’t have enough, or much*
- *Songs which help children pray for people that are frightened*
- *Songs which help children to pray for healing and transformation in people’s bodies, hearts and situations*
- *Songs that tell God we are sad about the pain we see and are asking him to heal it*
- *Songs that ask God to give us his heart to pray for, and help, those who need it*
- *A chorus that talks about God bringing his peace, light, hope etc (and possibly an instrumental verse) that could be used to intercede for lots of different situations*
- *Songs that commit to speak up, and speak out for those who are in need or pushed to the edge*
- *Songs that talk about going to those in need and songs that talk about sharing the gospel (There are a few songs which cover these themes, so they’re not quite as urgent as some of the above, but we could do with more, and especially ones that cover these themes individually, rather than both together, or listed among a lot of other different things we want to do for God.)*
- *Songs that thank God for what he is doing among the lost, lonely, poor and broken and celebrate his heart and action for those in pain.*

Beyond writing more songs

Of course, it's not all about writing more songs.

Children and young people need to be helped to connect to these songs, and initially this might be difficult, after being used to a much narrower focus.

You can read more about ideas for connecting to outward focused worship in our how to guides on using different media alongside songs - www.thesanctuarycentre.org/resources/practical-input-using-different-media-to-connect-different-hearts.pdf , and on adapting existing songs which don't focus outwards as tools for shifting contexts - www.thesanctuarycentre.org/resources/practical-input-exploring-contextualisation-to-bring-through-justice-themes.pdf

Of course, it can't stop with the songs. We must help children, young people, and all-ages move beyond songs into heartfelt intercession (sung, spoken, drawn and more) and lives of outreach to the poor, the lost, and the broken. But as we change the sound-track to our lives, we will start to find our lives sing a different tune too.

Part 2b – Doing things differently

Families

- Use the Children and all-age *Outward focused song index* to source some new songs, and put these together with any other worship songs you have found particularly in helping you, or your children focus on praying for, or committing to help, others. Create a playlist, or CD that you can listen to, sing along to in the car or round the house. Consider chatting to your children about what some of the songs mean, and help them apply them to people and situations where that's helpful.
- Change some of the words of an existing song your children love, or write another, different verse, so you can use it for intercession, or to declare God's heart for justice as well as for its original focus. Many songs work well when adapted for a wider focus than ourselves simply by changing their pronouns, or other key words.

Children's workers and worship-leaders

- Carry out a song-audit to review the focus of the songs you regularly use as suggested above – there are notes available to help you do this in the *How to* section at www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-articles
- Source some more outward focused songs using the children and all-age *Outward focused song index* available at www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-othersongs. Try to pick from a range of the different sections, so that you get some songs which enable children to pray for others, as well as sending songs. When choosing the songs, try to balance ones you think fit the gap you've found well lyrically, with songs which will help your kids connect. Consider simply adapting existing songs instead, and introducing them with a new context, if you think that will help children connect to the issues better. You can find help on doing the latter in the *How to* section at www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-articles
- Write or ask others you know to write more songs, and pass on the brief provided above if you think that will be helpful for them.

- Get kids writing their own songs/verses/choruses, lyrically or musically. Find a worship leader to partner with them to help with this and use the songs in your group, or in main church services. This is obviously great for building ownership and empowering the children, but may well also help them bring up, and then pray and sing about, the issues that God has placed on their heart specifically – whether it's for a poor country they've heard about, or for people who are bullied at their school.
- **A note on truth versus connection**

It may be helpful when looking at the songs we are singing with children to delineate between songs that lay out a truth of the kingdom and songs that explicitly empower connection between the children and God. Both are needed in our worship sets, but sometimes we can realize we are emphasising only one type.

For example, "Our God is a Great Big God" is a truth song. It describes God's size and how he feels about "me". Adults are very good at taking truth songs and connecting to God through them. One only needs to see people singing "How Great is Our God" to see this demonstrated. But to do this it requires the singer to think about the truth of the words, infer their own connection, images, and life circumstances into the song, and then sing about God (but effectively to him directly) with all that behind it.

Children don't tend to make this jump easily. They need explicit words to help them position themselves in front of God, and often need help understanding how to engage in worship to complete the connection. For example "I love you Lord" talks directly to God about our feelings, helping the child meet with God directly.

To help children to intercede out of a place of connection, we need to be using truth and connection songs to shape a worship set that guides children to that place. For example, you could try starting the set with an upbeat truth song, followed by an upbeat connection song, and then a slow connection song and then an outward focused song.

- **A note on "Help Me/I want" versus "I will/Please do"**

Outward focused songs for children tend to fall into two categories with only a small, but highly significant distinction between them. And if you are working on a song audit, it is helpful to consider both and choose what is right for your children at this time, and what will help you get them to where you are wanting them to go:

- "Help Me/I Want" songs focus on telling God that we want to be like him, do things for him, or see things happen in ourselves or the world. They often ask God to give them gifts, strength, and help to accomplish this and ask for a filling of love or power to step out.
- "I will/Please do" songs focus on expressing to God our commitment or choice to proactively do what he has commanded us to do, or are actively seeking him in prayer to do what he has said he will do in the world. They acknowledge the desires of our heart and what God has given us and express the next step that we are choosing to take.

It is helpful to ensure that we don't always get stuck in the "Help Me/I want" step on the way to the "I will/Please do". Of course, we don't want to get stuck in that one either... and we look forward to having more songs that also express "Thank you/You are doing this, bless you".

Youth work

- Encourage the young people to find and suggest songs that help them pray for, or commit to, God's plans for the world.
- Ask young people to talk about the issues they connect to and then help two or three of the young people to write songs that the group can own.

All-ages together

See the above section for children's workers and worship-leaders as all of these suggestions are equally applicable in all-age settings.