

Practical input

Creating your own songs and prayers

Three reasons why it's good for you to create for your church

1. Your creativity is needed

There are a number helpful songs, prayers and ideas being written, or previously written, in many parts of the church. But in a number of traditions, there is less that is recent and relevant which helps us lift up the poor, the broken and the nations to God.

There is a need for a radical re-emphasis which will only come as more people consciously seek to respond to the world around them, and express this creatively.

It's good to use what others have written but as you respond to what is in the news and on your heart, and seek to connect to your own church's unique context, it is likely that you will sometimes draw a blank with what's out there.

2. You know your context better than anyone else

It is a huge blessing to be able to use and access the resources of others, and with the media and distribution systems in place we are benefiting like never before from others' creativity.

But gifted as others are, and helpful as their resources might be, using their work should never form the whole picture.

The creatives in your church need to be released to create for your church. Responding to your specific community, what God is doing with your congregation, and reflecting the passion and emphases of the individuals that make up your church family will give you songs, prayers and ideas that are owned in a different way, and complement the more universal resources that you are using.

3. We were created to be creative

We are all made in the image of a Creator God. And we are all unique individuals with a story to tell and a heart set free to celebrate. We share mourning and rejoicing, but our hearts are moved by different things.

Throughout history God's people have been singing, praying, drawing and writing to connect with God, make sense of their world, and lift before him the injustices they see.

It's not time to stop now. We are called to be in relationship with God. Relationship means dialogue. What do you have to say? What do you believe God is particularly stressing to you and your church at the moment?

Ten top tips for working with poverty, justice and intercession themes

1. Think about the need

Spend time finding out about the needs and issues you are seeking to respond to, and use empathy to imagine what life would be like if you were in that situation.

2. Get inspired/seek stimulus

Are there images that move, or inspire you... spend time with these... or listen to something... or go for a walk out into God's creation. Consciously spend time finding out about the world, the news, and areas of need. What particularly connects with you? What is current and in people's minds at the moment?

3. Get connected

Spend time praying, and listening to God... read your bible... think about what other people have said... how does this issue relate to our faith? Do you have questions or doubts as a result? How can you and others engage with God on this issue?

4. Get symbolic, or very specific

Symbols are very powerful and so are specifics but avoid vague specifics - i.e. a song lyric like 'an African woman is struggling to feed her children'. This kind of lyric is not very accurate, and less inspiring than something which captures the essence of what it means to be this kind of a woman through a symbol, or tells a very specific story.

5. Focus on one main idea

This is just a universal creative tip – don't try and cover off everything... you'll have more success if you have one creative idea, one issue, or one person being focussed on, which moves through everything.

6. Use contrasts and associations

Links, parallels, and jarring or surprising contradictions can be really useful – whether in creating lyrics, or in constructing interactive and kinaesthetic prayer experiences...

7. Experiment with different media

You might think of yourself as a musician, writer or artist, but don't be afraid to leave your natural medium behind and try worshipping with another. This is helpful for three reasons:

- a) Different people respond to different media so using, or incorporating, different types of worship, could really help different people engage .
- b) We can become very set in the way we worship and using a fresh medium can help us all to see things differently, and connect with God in a different way.
- c) If you are an accomplished artist, musician, writer or speaker sometimes it is very liberating to use different media to your own, so it is easier to focus on worship than on the quality of what you are producing.

8. Don't be scared of adapting someone else's work

We're not talking about plagiarism here! But don't think you always have to start from scratch when you need something to respond to a new context. Substituting different words into a song to make it relate to a city, country or situation, or projecting pictures behind it to make it relevant to that context will transform it and make it work like a new song without you having to write it, or people having to learn something new.

Other options include setting, or re-setting some words, using a quote, or extending an existing written prayer with your own mirroring lines to include the context you want to focus on... the list goes on and on.

This can be a particularly good place to start if you're more nervous about creating, or you are working with a new medium for the first time. (Just remember to copyright what belongs to someone else where at all possible.)

9. Gather some like-minded, supportive people together

There is safety (and incredible creativity) in numbers – especially in small groups where there is good level of relationship and trust. Try creating with someone else to bring freshness, courage or support. Also, if you're starting out with writing, making or drawing your own stuff, it's a good idea to show it to some supportive people first, before using it with a larger group. They can help you with ideas, check your theology or biblical context, pray for you as you step out, and stand by you afterwards. Other creative people are a brilliant choice, but the most important qualities to look for in someone to bounce ideas off, or create with, are a heart for worship, an understanding of the context you will be using what you create in, and a genuine concern for, and belief in, you.

10. Just go for it!

Worship and prayer are about expressing our hearts to God, not creating beautiful masterpieces. So don't be frightened of trying new things to help you and others worship and pray with passion and conviction.