

Practical input

Exploring using contexts to bring justice themes into worship

One way to bring new themes through in worship is to change the content. I.e. we can literally shift the focus of our worship by changing the subject of our songs, the words we speak, or introducing other new elements which deliberately speak of the poor, the broken, or the nations.

But another way that is often just as effective, and almost always more flexible, is to simply change the context of our existing content.

What do you mean by context?

God is always the same – and we come to praise him for who he is and what he has done for us universally through creating us to have relationship with him, and redeeming us through his son. The same Spirit is present as we worship, inhabiting our praise, and unifying us as a church.

But worshipping God is not about relating to him in a bubble which only focuses on his glory and goodness. Clearly it is also responding to him, expressing our hearts for him and offering ourselves to him. We bring to him who we are, as well as celebrating who he is. And who we are is our context. It is the world we live in; the culture we embrace; the people we love; the issues that we are passionate about; the things that are the first to mind in any given season; our worries, fears, hopes and dreams.

When we come to worship together, or even when we pray individually, we all bring a context. For each of us it is highly complex, and whilst we share certain elements of it, it is basically unique to every worshipper.

I may be singing a song and meaning its words with all my heart. So might you. And so might another friend. We might all be genuinely worshipping God – pressing in to seek him and his will for our lives. But one of us might sing 'You are the defender of the weak' and think of an area we are struggling in, one of us might think of a person close to us who is seriously ill, and another might think of someone who is malnourished and voiceless on the other side of the world.

All these contexts are valuable. All of them are true. All of them express different parts of the experience of walking with God, worshipping him, and struggling with what it means to live out our lives for him in the face of suffering.

The problem comes when our context becomes too narrow. Or when we always focus on our default context - which for most of us is ourselves and our own narratives.

And as those of us who create worship songs and other resources do so out of our contexts, we can end up in a situation where we begin to perpetuate this context in any new content we create too.

Indeed, for some of us, our own context becomes so loud that unless a song or prayer is absolutely, unavoidably about someone or something else, we will make it about ourselves. And perhaps if we're honest, when it is unavoidably about someone or something else, we cease to engage.

Why is it helpful to change people's context for them?

Ultimately, the real context that needs to change is us. As we catch more of God's heart, pray for his transforming work in our hearts and society, and step out in loving action, our focus and context will shift. If we have spent our weeks truly loving our neighbours, and sharing in, and mourning for, their struggles, then they will be more readily in our contexts when we worship.

Likewise, if we have spent time praying for a country in the news – if we have allowed it to connect with us – it will be in our hearts already as we come to worship. If we have made myself available to love people – whether they are in our circle of friends, or the homeless people we have met that week in our city centres – our hearts will be full of them as I come to worship.

Jesus said that if you look at how we spend our money, you will find where our hearts really lie (Matthew 6:21). This applies to our time too. How we choose to spend our time, and the proportion of our thought and prayer life's focus tell us much about what we hold most valuable – whether this is our finances, our family, our relationship with God or our own personal actualisation. And as we invest our time – in action, thought, and prayer – beyond ourselves, and allow the Holy Spirit to build his fruits and priorities in our lives, we will widen the natural context and focus of our hearts.

But this is the end goal.

At the moment, most of us need some help if our worship and prayer is to stretch to any context wider than our own personal 'heartscape'.

By consciously introducing, providing, or suggesting a new context in our leading, we can help shift the focus off ourselves and on to a more balanced, bigger picture.

We might ask people to think about something different or specific as they sing or pray something, use a stimulus (such as an image) to change their focus, or temporarily amend the actual content of a song or prayer to change its natural focus.

Why can changing the context be more helpful than changing content?

Obviously, as mentioned above, introducing new content will help shift focus too, but there are several limitations to this, particularly in relation to introducing poverty, justice and intercession themes, and particularly in relation to songs (which have to be learnt):

- Something new can be distracting, or unpopular, whilst using something familiar can often take the focus off the tool, and onto the issues
- While people are learning a song, particularly if it is about subjects they consider unusual (or is more difficult musically or lyrically), most of their attention is taken up with learning it, rather than on praying it
- You can introduce new themes and contexts more often, and more in passing, rather than waiting for an occasion where a whole song about poverty and justice feels appropriate (i.e. as an application or sending song following a sermon on the issues)
- You benefit from existing connections – e.g. if people already find encouragement in a song, or find they really connect to what it is saying, you are adding more depth to it that they will remember if you apply that song to a different context.

How can I do it?

Demystify the tools

Don't be afraid of changing things that already exist. It's important to give people credit for things they have created, but you shouldn't view them as so finished that you can't adapt them, or give them a different flavour – whether this is for a one-off use, or on a more ongoing basis.

Matt Redman wrote the song 'Can a nation be changed?' with the UK in mind. And many of us have sung it in worship and intercession for the UK. But if you sang these same words in America, France, South Africa, or any other nation of the world, you would most likely be interceding for that nation. And this would not be strange. You can't imagine the song-writer being offended...

Similarly, there's nothing to stop you, wherever you are leading worship, using such a song to pray for another nation entirely – for example I have led this song with the context of praying for Zimbabwe, Bangladesh and Israel without even changing the words – either by way of explanation, opening prayer, or images. The song is a tool which can help us in a number of different contexts.

Going one step further, perhaps we might begin to change some words to bring through a different resonance – we might say 'can 'Bangladesh be changed?' or reapply this song of intercession at a different level as a prayer for 'a city'.

The song is a tool – it has an author and it is finished, and yet it can be re-created again and again by you to help your local church. Don't feel you don't have a right to do this.

Set the scene

You can change the context of something simply with the words you speak or pray before or during it. For example, you could ask people to sing the words of a particular song thinking of a different nation, or situation you have mentioned; pray for the homeless before singing a song about us finding our refuge in God; or take some extra time out in the middle of a more general song declaring God as faithful to the weak, and the comforter of all who mourn, to re-frame it as appropriate to specific situations, nations, or groups of people.

Change the words

We are not necessarily talking here about writing new alternative words, or a new chorus or verse for something (although this is a good thing to do to).

You can change the focus of a song simply by changing the pronouns from 'I', 'me' and 'my' to 'we' and 'our', or 'they' and 'their'. (A practical note on this – if you know you are going to do this in advance, do an alternative version of the words for people to use – even when people are used to very free worship, they often trip over pronouns that are hidden in the middle of a line.)

You can also change the level of focus of a song. For example we have already mentioned this in relation to 'Can a nation be changed?' – here you can change the specific nation being prayed for, or change it to be a song about interceding for your city. But you can do this with songs that are ostensibly not outward focussed intercession songs to start with. For example the chorus of Kathryn Scott's 'Hungry' could lead you to a place where you declare, 'Jesus you're all this *church* is living for' or Jude del Hierro's 'More love more power' might move out from 'in my life' to 'on our streets', 'in our city', 'in our nation' or even 'for the homeless'.

Practical input

Using contextualisation to bring through justice themes

There is a time too for writing new settings of songs (essentially what people have been doing for hundreds of years in writing new lyrics to existing refrains) or parallel lyrics using the same creative ideas, but reapplying their focus. Or writing a new chorus or refrain to use sometimes alongside the existing lyrics of a song.

Physically different

Sometimes you might need to help re-shape the context by doing something very different. This might be by introducing new content, as discussed above, which makes a different context unavoidable (e.g. with sending songs such as Tim Hughes' 'God of Justice') or it might be by breaking into a totally different media and execution within the worship slot (e.g. by encouraging people to write prayers on a specific theme and bring them to the front, by completing campaign action cards during worship, or even by sending people out litter picking whilst they listen to mp3 players).

You might not want to do these more radical things very often, but occasionally they could provide quite a startling re-focus which when complemented with more ongoing, subtle shifts, could have transformative results.

Relating different contexts to each other

A problem worship leaders often encounter when focussing on wider contexts than the individual in worship and prayer, is that people simply don't connect or engage in the same way.

One way to help with this is by regularly changing context – moving between things that personally resonate for people, and wider themes, or even framing the latter in the light of the former.

As discussed above under 'Why can changing the context be more helpful than changing the content?' and 'Changing the words', using a song that people know and are connected by to gradually move to one or two wider themes is a helpful start.

Another thing to do is to look for a few songs or prayers that move through, or dialogue between, more intimate, and more intercessional worship. Such songs either pray into a situation on the basis of personal testimony (e.g. Liz Baddaley's 'I'm coming right in' available at www.thesanctuarycentre.org/whereworldandworshipmeet-songs) or move from personal adoration through to global or sending verses such as David Ruis' 'Lily of the valley' or Liz Baddaley's 'Kneel me down'.

Lead from the heart

Like anything, a widening and variation of context will be caught rather than taught. Pray for God's heart for the poor, the broken and the nations to really catch hold of your church. And spend time yourself consciously seeking to worship and pray differently so that what naturally comes out of you begins to shift.