

Writing songs your church will want to sing

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Welcome to the early morning workshop “Writing songs your church will want to sing”.

My name is Irene Bom.

I started writing songs when I was 14, around the time I became a Christian.

It was always my goal to write songs my church will want to sing.

I’ve come a long way since the early days, working hard to learn the craft and trust the creativity God has placed within me.

These days I get to combine songwriting with my new role as part-time, itinerant minister in the Church of Scotland.

There’s not much I can teach you in an hour.

But I hope I can point you in the right direction.

I’ve prepared a handout for you, with some useful information for further self-study.

I want to especially recommend the book, “God songs” – no. 7 in the Recommended English books section.

Of the books listed, that’s the one that is most relevant to our topic today.

Most of the others are about the songwriting craft in general.

Before we go any further, let’s sing a song.

It’s no. 1 on the back page:

Christ is in our midst. He is and ever shall be.

My friend, Margriet, will accompany me on the triangle.

I’ll sing it once; then see if you can join in.

[Christ is in our midst]

I sang this in a church in Budapest a few weeks ago.

The congregation was arranged in three sections, and we sang it section by section.

Let’s try that.

[Christ is in our midst: section by section]

You could also sing this as a call and response.

If I sing the first line, will you respond with the second line?

[Christ is in our midst: call and response]

Now, let’s try it with ladies and the men. Ladies start.

[Christ is in our midst: ladies/men]

This song is still evolving.

Until a few days ago, the second half had a different tune.

Tell me if you agree that the new version is easier to sing, and more “uplifting”.

Christ is in our midst: version 1 / version 2]

The song has a distinctive form.

It’s a bit like a Taize song.

Very different from a hymn or a song with two verses, a chorus and a bridge.

The song also has a distinctive purpose.

Or it should have.

All good worship songs have an inbuilt application.

It might be strongly thematic, highlighting an important truth (about love, for example), or match a specific liturgical goal:

Praise, thanksgiving, encouragement, celebration, community-building, confession, surrender.

What would you say the inbuilt application is of the song we’ve just sung?

If you were planning a service, how would you use it? Where would you slot it in for it to have maximum effect?

I have another, more general question.

Why write worship songs anyway?

Because God commanded his people to sing a new song, and someone's got to write them.

The church is blessed with beautiful songs written by our brothers and sisters who've gone before us.

But today's church needs new songs to sing, songs for our time and of our time, reflecting our Christian faith and heritage, but interpreted into a contemporary idiom, into the heart language of the people of God living today.

How many of you are Dutch-speaking?

How many of you write songs in Dutch?

Good / that's too bad.

Who's going to write Dutch songs for the Dutch church if Dutch songwriters aren't willing to accept the challenge?

Singing songs in translation helps us connect with the world-wide church, but the Dutch church needs its own songs too.

Your knowledge of the Dutch language is a gift. Don't bury it. Use it. Lift it up to the heights of God's throne.

Writing songs our church will want to sing.

Where do we start?

We start by honing our songwriting skills, learning everything we can about lyrics, melody, song structure, arranging, etc. etc.

Guy Garvey, a songwriter and radio presenter I listen to a lot, said in his weekly radio show this week, "it's okay to stick your feelings into a song, on condition that the song is good, not just touching".

He was talking about songs in general, but the same applies to a worship song.

They have to be good songs.

Another songwriter, Dave Berg, says, "Learn the craft so you don't have to worry about that stuff and it's all about heart".

Check out some of the recommended books.

Join songu.com, an online songwriting community, like I did.

It's not expensive, and you get a lot out of it.

The web address is listed under Recommended websites.

The more you write, the better you'll get.

They say even the geniuses of the world had to put in the hours to reach the top of their game. 10000 hours on average.

Have you heard of CCLI, Christian Copyright Licensing International? Member churches submit lists of the songs they sing in their services, and the top 25 songs are listed on the CCLI site.

This is a great resource for those wanting to write songs the churches will want to sing, because these are the songs they are singing, and in many cases have been singing for years because they don't get tired of singing them and there's nothing better to replace them.

On the handout I've included the top 18 on the UK list.

"How great thou art", first published in 1953, is still serving the church well. Why? What does that say about the song? What does it say about the church?

Below the table I've included some information from the Dutch charts.

Top of the list is "As the deer".

I still remember how excited I was when I first heard that song.

The song, "Give thanks", was also a major milestone for me. It's so simple, yet so profound. There's a case study of "Give thanks" on my website. You might like to read it. And write your own case studies. Learn from the best.

Not to copy them, but to learn principles you can apply in your own songs.

Let's look at two of Graham Kendrick's lyrics, "The Servant King" and "Meekness and majesty", and see what we can learn from them.

Of the two songs, I think “The Servant King” is better.

Most of the words are short and punchy.

I love the word pictures; the graphic details.

Notice the strong contrast between “Hands that flung stars into space” and the next line, “To cruel nails surrendered” “Meekness and majesty” is very different. It’s full of abstract nouns, and complex words and concepts.

As a result, it doesn’t really connect. It doesn’t draw me in, so the message doesn’t have the necessary impact.

Not that “The servant king” is the perfect song. I wish Graham Kendrick had spent a bit of time working on the last two lines of the chorus. It doesn’t really flow. Still, this song is a glorious asset to the worldwide church.

It’s no. 17 on the UK CCLI charts, and no. 10 on the Dutch. Make some time to study it in more detail.

So learn your craft, and learn from the best.

And cast your net wider. Get to know your Bible really, especially the psalms. Read poetry. Study theology and church history. Learn to play another instrument. Be as versatile as you can, so you take advantage of every opportunity.

Don’t just study the songs; also study how they work in the context of a worship service.

Preparing a service is like preparing a dinner party.

You think about the people, who you might invite and what they might like to eat.

You pay particular attention to any special guests, or the occasion.

You think about the relationship between the different courses, and the ingredients in each dish.

And you factor in time for preparation and time for the food to settle.

You start making lists, pouring over recipe books.

You can stick to tried-and-tested recipes, or be adventurous and try something new.

Even if you opt for outside-catering, you are ultimately in charge.

As songwriters we offer the church new recipes, using the same ingredients, but combining them in a new way, for the contemporary palette.

In the time of King Henry VIII rich people would serve up a mega-dish that combined fish, poultry, pork, beef, mutton – just to show off their wealth – and people ate it.

Nobody would try that today.

Similarly, our songs need to be sensitive to our context.

If the song naturally fits the occasion and adds something special, it will be appreciated.

If it goes down well the first time, people will want to sing it again.

If they genuinely connect with it, it will be a keeper.

Time for another song.

A Dutch song, this time. It’s no. 4 on the back page, “Mijn hart is tot rust gekomen”.

It’s based on Psalm 131.

The challenge was to find a melody that was sweet and calming, so even if you didn’t feel peaceful to start with, after singing it a few times, you felt more centred and at rest.

[Mijn hart is tot rust gekomen]

I wrote this song during a placement with a Dutch-speaking congregation near where I live. It was quite a culture shock for me at first. In time I learnt to appreciate their faith and their musical tradition and I connected with the ministry team and the congregation. My association with that church yielded six or seven new songs in Dutch.

Because of the mutual respect, and the level of trust I was able to build up over the six-month period, I had the opportunity to write songs for various services, and people were willing to listen and to sing along.

Our relationship is woven into the songs I wrote for them. They brought out the best in me, and the best in my songs.

I doubt our songs will have much of an impact, unless they are born and nurtured in a local context.

That’s how Graham Kendrick got started.

His local church went out onto the streets to share the gospel, and he took along his guitar. He soon realized the songs they sang in church were not suitable for that context. So he wrote some new ones, specifically geared for outdoors, and they were so effective and became so popular, “March for Jesus” became a world-wide phenomenon. We continue to sing many of his songs in our services, because of the catchy melodies and the lyrics that build our faith.

To write songs that genuinely connect with people, we need to connect with them.

Here are a few tips:

Be interested in people.

Become a good listener and you’ll become a better writer.

Get to know people – not just the people you naturally feel drawn to.

Speak to the older people – find out what their favourite songs are and why.

Find out what songs helped them in the good times and in the bad.

Speak to the children – get to understand their world-view.

Become an active church member, but try not to get locked into one role.

Keep evolving.

Accept responsibility in short-term projects, so you can interact with many people, and get experience of many different aspects of church-life.

This will make you more resourceful in the long run.

Remember, your main goal is to write songs your church will want to sing.

Your other roles should feed your songwriting, not distract from it.

Be a team player.

Be opportunistic in the good sense of the word.

Take advantage of every opportunity that comes your way.

Take initiative.

Be respectful of the church structures, but don’t be timid.

Offer your services. Be faithful in the small things, and God will grow your ministry step by step.

Build relationships with the church leaders and with the music team.

Go into partnership with them.

For example, if there’s a series of sermons coming up on a particular theme, offer to try to write a song to support the series.

The more input you get from the people who will ultimately decide if the song gets used or not, the better the song, and the better the chances the song will be used.

If all goes well, your church will have a new song to sing that they can own as theirs, and that will make the sermon series truly memorable.

Whatever happens, if your goal is to build relationships, you always win.

During my placement in the Dutch church the minister invited me to sing some songs during the Christmas Day service. I had some Christmas songs in English, but instead I opted to try to write two new songs, in Dutch – one for me to sing, and one for the congregation to join in on the chorus. As soon as the songs were good enough for a test-drive, I met with the minister and the organist, and they helped me tweak the lyrics. As a result I have two songs, in Dutch, that are lyrically, theologically, musically and thematically sound. I couldn’t have done it without their encouragement, support and endorsement.

- Work on your craft
- Understand the dynamics of a worship service and the function of songs within that context
- Work on your relationships

Lastly, work on finding your voice and finding your niche.

You are unique, and your songs should reflect that.

Many of my songs are in a minor key. It’s hard-wired into me.

It’s not always appropriate, of course.

But even children’s songs work in a minor key, if there’s a groove.

Here’s an example:

[Everybody needs love, love, love, love, love]

No. 3 on the back page of the handout is also in a minor key.
It's based on Psalm 71.

[I have put my trust in you, Lord]

It's important to trust the gift God has given you,
and find out how he wants you to put it to use.
He'll open the doors, and confirm your ministry
by confirming the ministry of the songs you write.
And be open for surprises.

Take song no. 2, for example.

It goes like this.

[Another day – version 1]

When I first taught it to a group in Scotland in 2007, it struck me that perhaps the chorus was too low.
Maybe it needed to soar more.
So I worked on it, on and off, for ages and eventually settled on the following:

[Chorus Another Day – version 2]

Then a few weeks ago I got an email from a woman in South Africa who'd learnt the song at a Celtic retreat in Scotland.
Philip Noble, one of the speakers at the event I was at in 2007, has been teaching the song to groups ever since. So, version 1 it is. It clearly meets a need, even with the low chorus, possibly because of the low chorus.

So, to summarize:

To write songs your church will want to sing,

- work on your songwriting craft
- understand the dynamics of a worship service and how the songs function within that context
- work on your relationships; be connected; stay connected.
- find your unique voice, and put it out there

We have some time for questions.

In closing, I'd like to pray for you.