

Why Has My Congregation Stopped Singing?

By Jennifer Shaw

As a full-time Christian speaker and musician, I visit many churches of various sizes and denominations each year. I often seem to have the same conversation with frustrated pastors and worship leaders, and even with members of the congregation. It starts with a question like, “Why aren’t our people singing in worship anymore?”

There are probably as many different answers to that question as there are churches with this problem, but I’ve observed several trends in contemporary worship services that are contributing factors. If you’re struggling, check these out, and if you’re doing well, you may want to look at the list and see what might make your worship time even stronger.

Here are the top seven reasons I give worship pastors about why their congregations may have stopped singing:

1. Your worship team isn’t worshipping. That may seem basic, but you can’t lead people in worship if you aren’t worshipping yourself. Many times I see teams who are under-trained and overly concerned about making sure they know their notes and words, or they are performing and hoping everyone will notice how great they are. We should be striving for excellence on the platform so that we don’t distract from the Lord, and we should know our material well enough that we can be praising God while playing or singing. We need to have the right motivation for being up front, and that is to serve others with

humility and lead them into a place of worship. If your up-front people aren’t worshipping, your congregation won’t either.

2. They cannot hit those notes. This is fast becoming my number one pet peeve in worship. Most singers are taught to find the best key for them, and many leaders are trying to do radio songs in the radio key. The vast majority of people in a congregation can’t hit those notes, so they end up switching octaves constantly which is frustrating and causes people to stop participating. The most comfortable range for most Americans is between middle C and the A above (major sixth), and they can go as far as the A below middle C to the C above (major tenth). This may not be the best range for you as a worship leader, but that is the heart of servant leadership – we make sacrifices because our goal is to lead others in worship, not just to stay where we’re most comfortable or in the key that makes our own voice sound the best. Check the melodic range of your song, fit it as closely as you can to the above range, and then see what key that is and play it there. I guarantee your congregation will thank you!

3. They feel disconnected or extraneous. Theater lighting and sound are becoming more and more the norm in churches, and I am all for it. Having spent years in the theater, I totally appreciate how much lighting can set an emotional mood, and as a musician, I know that excellent sound is very important. However, church is different from a performance. If lighting or sound is taken to the extreme, it can make your congregation feel as though they are watching a show. When you plunge the congregation into total darkness while the stage is lit during worship, you tell them they are not a part of what's going on. When the sound level during worship is so high that they can't hear themselves singing, they wonder why they should bother. Lighting and sound should feel inviting and inclusive, bringing people into this corporate thing we do called worship.

4. They don't know that song. It may sound silly, but so many churches do brand-new songs with no introduction whatsoever. I've been to many churches where the worship pastor got excited about new music and every piece on the entire worship service was new! This is just discouraging for your congregation because they have no idea what's going on. I'm all for new music. When I was the music director at our church, our band had over 300 songs in rotation at any given time and introduced new songs often- but you should introduce it first, either by playing it one week as an opening or offertory, or by teaching them the chorus so they can at least join you for part of it. When you introduce a new song, make sure to bring it back a couple of weeks later so people can cement it in their minds. And I would limit it to no more than one new song a week so that the congregation can be enthusiastic about the songs they do know.

5. They are not musicians. Musicians relate to music differently than non-musicians. We are usually very moved by sound, but most people are more visual and they aren't as excited about that cool guitar solo as your guitarist is. In their minds, that's just time when they're not involved, so keep those instrumental interludes to four bars or less. In the same way, if your vocalists are using lots of melismas and embellishments, people in the congregation can't follow the melody. Leaders should use clear melodic lines at all times so the congregation knows where the melody is going and they can participate while focusing on God, not where the leader might be going today.

6. They are not connecting emotionally. Song choice is of utmost important. Do the songs you have picked relate to and support the message the pastor or teacher is giving that day? Do your songs have amazing lyrics that move people to connect deeply with the Lord and respond in worship? Are you repeating lyrics so many times that people get bored and drop out? Do you have enough variety in tempo and emotion or have you programmed four utterly depressing or maniacally active songs in a row? Music is an amazing way to influence the emotional tone of a service and allow people to respond to what they're feeling. Are you using this power purposefully?

7. You broke the mood. Finally, I often see worship teams doing so many things well to get people to a place of worship only to break the flow and pull people back out. Transitions between songs are so important. Don't just stop playing and announce the next song. Try to move on seamlessly, and if you need to change keys and/or tempo between songs which happens often, find a musical segue or give a Scripture or a short prayer thanking God for what you just sang about or are about to sing while your band transitions. Make sure you check all your slides before the service and that the video techs know the order of the lyrics. Slides should change on the last word or two of the previous slide so the new words are up a second before they need to be sung. Nothing is more frustrating than being in worship and not having the words for two lines before the slides catch up. Making the worship flow through the entire set allows people to enter worship and stay there.

I am blessed to be able to worship with such a variety of denominations in the greater Church. May we all seek wisdom and vision from God so that we can worship with excellence and lead our people to sing again.

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