

# Liturgy and Music / Song Selection Guidelines

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Our New Apostolic liturgy—the format of how our services are conducted from start to finish—shapes the divine service experience. Each element of the liturgy impacts the overall experience and helps bring into focus the significance of each moment (worship, Holy Communion, etc.).

Music is one such element, as it has a direct effect on whether or not the liturgical moments within the divine service are experienced in a heightened manner. This is why it is important that all music fit with the liturgy.

**Liturgy and music should not only build off of each other, they should also complement one another.**

**The connection between liturgy and music is what makes the song selection process so important.** In the past, the typical practice was to select songs based solely on the divine service guide. While it can certainly be appropriate, and often impactful, to include music in support of the message and theme, **it is not necessary that every song be connected with the divine service guide. What is necessary is that the songs fit with the liturgy.** Where music can be selected both in support of the message and in accordance with the liturgy, this is ideal. But the moment must never be secondary. When selecting songs, one should ask—what does this particular moment call for? What type of song best complements the liturgy here? A hymn of worship? A hymn of reflection? A hymn a praise? **The liturgical moment should dictate the music.**

This is why the designations that we use for each moment serve to define **what we're doing** in these moments (worshipping, responding, accepting, repenting) **rather than where these moments occur** (before service, after the bible verse, between ministers). It's important that these specific designations be used in each congregation in an effort to highlight and make clear the connection between liturgy and music.

**It's also important that the music leader or song selector share the proposed song list with the minister in advance of each divine service experience.** Not only does this give the minister an opportunity to better connect music and message, it also helps ensure that any issues that could result from lack of communication are avoided, and any distractions from worship minimized. Ideally, the two should act as a team, communicating and collaborating not only on Sunday, but also throughout the week.

Following are some guiding thoughts to assist you when selecting songs for the divine service experience.

## Worship

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**Songs in worship should be songs of worship.** In these holy moments before the sermon, the focus should be fully on the Triune God, and on bringing His divine nature and characteristics to the forefront through music and Scripture. Where songs can be included that are worshipful and also in support of the message, wonderful. However, worship is the priority.

Songs like *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*; *What a Beautiful Name*; *Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise*; *Goodness of God*; *Worthy of Worship*; and *How Great Thou Art* are always appropriate in the moments of worship—no matter the sermon message or theme—as they bring clear focus to who God is.

**To help fix the focus on God and inspire the congregation to worship, a call to worship can be very impactful.** This can be included at or near the beginning of worship and done through Scripture and/or song. Psalm 100, Philippians 4:4, and Psalm 150 are great examples of Scriptural calls to worship, while *All Creatures of Our God and King*; *Lift High the Name of Jesus*; *Come, Christians, Join to Sing*; *O Worship the Lord*; and *Doxology (Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow)* are just a few examples of songs that call the congregation to worship.

Something to consider: no matter who presents the call to worship—whether it's the worship leader, a soloist, pianist, organist, or the choir—it should always be followed by a song of worship. **Wherever there is a call to worship, there should be a response of worship** (note that listings of both calls to worship and songs of worship can be found on our Music Companion website).

Once one has come to a greater understanding and awareness of God, it's only natural that one then feel compelled to respond *out* of this awareness. **Songs in worship not only bring focus to the truth of who God is, they can also provide opportunities for the congregation to *respond* to these truths.** Such responses might include praise, thanksgiving, exaltation, and adoration. Or, the response might be more subdued and humbler in nature. Songs like *I Surrender All*, *My Life is An Offering*, and *Dear Lord, I Give Completely* can also be very appropriate in later moments of worship, as our worship progresses toward the opening hymn.

**Lastly, it's important—and expected—that there be opportunities in worship for the congregation to participate. The word liturgy literally means, “the works, or participation, of the people.”** There should be at least one or two songs that provide an opportunity for the community of believers to express themselves in worship, and to respond to the truths of God. Of course, the congregation shouldn't sing *every* song in worship, either. Moments of participation should be balanced with moments of prayer and reflection.

**God is worthy of our creativity in worship.** May the songs we select be a reflection of our understanding of the importance of worship, and may we continue to recognize and teach the value of these essential liturgical moments.

## Opening Hymn

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**The opening hymn serves as a launching point for the sermon, a precursor to the invocation, and the culmination of our time spent together in worship.** Subsequently, it should be upbeat, powerful, praise-filled, and full of life and energy. Also, and so that the congregation can sing it with confidence and conviction, **it should be well-known** (the opening hymn is not the right time, for instance, to introduce a newer, less-familiar song to the congregation!).

Similar to the songs in worship, the opening hymn does not need to be connected to the Bible verse or sermon theme (although it certainly can be powerful when this hymn includes the characteristics listed above and also supports the message). Some examples of always-appropriate opening hymns include: *Praise Thou the Lord*; *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*; *Holy, Holy, Holy*; *To God Be the Glory*; and *Rejoice, the Lord is King!* Any of these songs could serve as the opening hymn any given Sunday, no matter the verse or theme.

Consider that at this point in the divine service experience, the message has not yet been delivered, and so it does not necessarily need to be communicated through the opening hymn. **The focus here can just be on greeting God, glorifying His name, and giving Him the praise!**

## Response Hymn

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**The response hymn follows the reading of the Bible verse, and should be sung or played as a response to the verse.** For this reason, this is an ideal moment to select a song that is connected with the verse and sermon theme.

**It can also be appropriate, however, for this song be a response to the presence and power of God** made known up to this point in the divine service experience. Songs such as *I Stand in Awe* and *In His Presence* are always appropriate as response hymns, no matter the verse or theme.

**In addition, songs that express a hunger for God's word or a desire to experience the power of the Holy Spirit through the preaching of His word can also be impactful here.** Examples of these types of songs include: *Speak, O Lord*; *Holy Spirit*; *Show us Christ*; and *Breathe on Me, Breath of God*.

Keep in mind that this hymn is just to be a **short interlude to the sermon**, and should therefore be concise—no more than a verse, and ideally under two minutes. At this point in the experience, the congregation is eager to hear the preached word of God.

If it's a Christian holiday and a Bible reading is included, a short song can be prepared to follow the reading (noting that this is optional). If you decide to include a song here—and to help lessen the number of songs having to be selected overall—you might consider using another verse of the response hymn, one that wasn't used previously. This way, there is an intentional connection of thought and flow between the response hymn and the selection following the reading.

The response hymn can be sung by the choir or congregation, or a solo or small group can also be appropriate.

## Acceptance Hymn(s)

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Acceptance hymns comprise the hymns during the sermon portion of the experience, between assisting ministers (or, if there are no assisting ministers, directly following the sermon). **These hymns should reflect the congregation's acceptance of God's word and undeserved provision.** For this reason—much like the response hymn—songs that are connected with the verse and sermon theme can be very appropriate here. However, **acceptance hymns can also just be general songs of praise, thanksgiving, and worship, or songs that resolve and/or submission to God and His will.** Hymns such as *Mighty God, We Praise Thy Name*; *Surely the Presence*; *Send Me*; and *Take My Life and Let It Be* are always appropriate as acceptance hymns.

**These moments within the divine service experience are an ideal time for congregational singing,** given that the congregation has been sitting and consuming for some time. It's important that they be given an opportunity now to stand and participate, and to also express their acceptance of God's word and provision. Of course, **the choir can also sing during these moments, and sometimes just a simple piano solo with representative lyrics included on the screens or in the song sheets can also make for a moving moment of individual reflection and acceptance.**

**Finally, note that these hymns are optional depending on the guidance of the officiant.** Here and there, and especially when there are no assisting ministers, the officiant may prefer to go directly from the sermon into the moments of repentance and preparation for Holy Communion. This is an example of the importance of advanced communication between minister and music leader.

## Repentance Hymn

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**In light of the sacrifice of Christ and the deep love of God, the repentance hymn should lead the congregation into prayerful and humble awareness of—and reflection on—their sins.** This song should be meditative, introspective, and inward-focused, serving to create a peaceful atmosphere leading into the Lord's Prayer, the absolution, and Holy Communion. Robust, upbeat songs are not appropriate for these humble moments.

The repentance hymn is a wonderful opportunity to utilize a soloist, small group, or the choir. If the congregation sings, this should be done in a modest manner. Instrumental solos can also be impactful in this moment, provided the song is familiar and gives the congregation an opportunity to reflect on the known lyrics.

Some examples of always-appropriate repentance hymns include: *Just As I Am*; *Lord, Have Mercy*; *I Hear Thy Welcome Voice*; *Jesus Paid It All*; *How Deep the Father's Love*; and *O Come to the Altar*. The latter song shows that songs of invitation can also be appropriate.

This moment within the divine service experience has the potential to be very impactful for the congregation. **Consider working closely with the minister to align your song selection with their intended message,** thereby enhancing their preparation—and in turn the congregation's preparation—for the sacrament of Holy Communion.

## Holy Communion Hymn(s)

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**In the holy, awe-filled moments of communion, the congregation has direct and intimate fellowship with Jesus Christ. The communion hymn(s) should reflect the significance of this fellowship, and serve to maintain the holy and peaceful atmosphere that the repentance hymn helped establish.** Communion hymns should be invitational (we are invited to the table of Christ), contemplative, and centered on the Lord. These songs should never point to us—only to Him.

During the dispensation of Holy Communion, consider having just the piano or organ play a few verses of a hymn so that the initial atmosphere is one of meditation and reflection (a vocal or instrumental solo could also work well here, or this could follow the piano/organ solo, creating a “layered” approach). Then, once most, if not all, members have received communion, the congregation could sing a hymn together that is more upbeat and celebratory in nature (this could either be an extension of the same hymn, or another song that is similar and connected). Another option when it comes to the congregation hymn—especially if a newer, more contemporary hymn is used and a worship leader is leading—is to have the congregation join only on the chorus (again, once most or all members have received communion).

Some examples of always-appropriate communion hymns include: *Beautiful, Glorious Moment; I Praise God’s Love in Adoration; I Will Sing of My Redeemer; Blessed Assurance; Behold the Lamb (Communion Hymn),* and *The Lord Is My Salvation.*

**It is imperative that these moments not be rushed. Instead, they should be given as much time as is necessary to underscore the significance of the sacrament.** The last person receiving Holy Communion should be given the same opportunity as the first—to receive the sacrament, return to their seat, and express their thanksgiving through prayer and song.

If just the piano or organ plays during Holy Communion—which is not only fine, but also encouraged from time to time—the pianist or organist should be careful not to end the song abruptly, nor extend it unnecessarily. Rather, the song should come to an appropriate ending once the members of the congregation have received communion and the chalices are back on the altar. This may be the time when an extended postlude or a repeat of the chorus may help to create these feelings of peace and completion.

For more guiding thoughts related to Holy Communion music, see [here](#).

## Holy Communion for the Departed

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When celebrating Holy Communion for the departed, the liturgy calls for a hymn of preparation. This song should be fairly short, ideally no more than two minutes. It should also be **centered on communion with Christ, and not on eternity**. In this way, it resembles the repentance hymn that the visible congregation sang just moments before. Songs that focus on nearness to the Lord and a longing for grace and mercy can be especially impactful here (e.g. *Nearer, Still Nearer; Lord, at Your Throne of Grace; and Near to the Heart of God*). Lastly, note that choir or vocal solos/ensembles are preferred for these moments.

**The reflection hymn following Holy Communion for the departed should start immediately after the act,** as soon as the minister says, “Amen.” It should be around a minute or so, and no more than 90 seconds. Instrumental solos are ideal for this moment, including piano and organ, provided the words are familiar to the congregation (if not, they should be included somewhere for reflection). Vocal solos can also be effective here.

Much like the song rendered in preparation for Holy Communion for the departed, the reflection hymn should not have an eternity focus. Rather, **it should be a reflection on and expression of our thankfulness for the sacrifice of Christ, and for the saving grace of God born out of His love for all.** As such, it can be

appropriate that these songs be more joyful and celebratory in nature (e.g. *My Heart Is Resting*; *Amazing Grace*; and *O That I Had a Thousand Voices*).

Songs focused on eternity should be reserved for our services for the departed, for funeral services, or for services with an eschatological theme and focus.

## Praise and Thanksgiving Hymn

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**As a final expression of communal worship, the praise and thanksgiving hymn is ideal for congregational singing**, or for the combining of choir and congregation (for instance, the choir sings a verse of a hymn or song, and then the congregation is invited to join). Only here and there should this hymn be sung solely by the choir. If the choir *does* sing this hymn, please note that they should never come to the front and face the congregation, as this gives the feel of a performance rather than worship.

This closing hymn is an expression of the congregation's acceptance of God's word, and provides an opportunity for collective praise and thanksgiving. **It should be energetic and upbeat, thus creating an impactful send-off for the congregation.** Just like with the opening hymn, these characteristics should outweigh the song's connection to the verse or sermon theme (although it can be powerful when the song has these characteristics and also supports the message). Songs like *Now Thank We All Our God*; *Psalms 150 (Praise the Lord)*; *Praise Our God with Joyful Singing*; and *Thank Ye the Lord* are always appropriate for these closing moments.

Occasionally, you may consider repeating a song that was sung before the service, or singing the final verse of a hymn—maybe a song from worship, or an acceptance hymn, where perhaps only one or two verses were sung previously. Not only does this help reinforce the message of the hymn, it can also serve to alleviate the strain of selecting and singing a large amount of music for each divine service experience.

## Additional Thoughts

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When selecting hymns, take quiet moments to feel the impulses of the Holy Spirit. This opens the opportunity for Him to guide our thoughts, and helps us to find a contentedness in our hymn selections. As Jesus taught us, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.” (Matthew 7:7)

All song selections need to be about God, and thus sacred in nature. Secular songs do not have a place in the divine service experience, nor do patriotic songs (the latter should be reserved for concerts or more casual gatherings, such as outdoor fellowships). Classical pieces can be used when they are fitting for the moment, as many were originally written for church use (although discernment is still encouraged). All of the musical selections within the experience should be focusing our thoughts on God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Soloists, instrumentalists, and small groups should stand to the side of the church when singing or playing. Always remember that we are not performing, but rather making an expression to God. Worship is always the aim, and the glorification of God the goal.

Where possible, it may be beneficial to select songs in advance of each month. This way, everyone on the worship and music team knows the plan for the month, and directors and accompanists have plenty of time to rehearse and prepare. Having the songs selected in advance of each month is also helpful when it comes to knowing which selections need to be rehearsed. Rehearsals—which are important, and should be taking place—become more intentional and purposeful this way.

Lastly—for different Christian holidays, seasonal songs are not the exceptions to what is laid out above. A Christmas or Easter song still has to fit in the moment where it is placed in the divine service. No matter what the season, always consider the characteristics of the song, the placement of it, and the flow and connection between liturgy and music.