

TIPS FOR STARTING AND MANAGING A WORSHIP BAND

“How often, making music, we have found a new dimension in the world of sound, as worship moved us to a more profound Alleluia!”¹

The worship band represents a way of discovering “a new dimension” in sacred music, yet that music must be carefully shaped and the band well managed. Managing a band, and forming one in the first place, is a piece of work. Just as the church organ requires regular maintenance and the choir and soloist require ongoing rehearsal, a worship band has to come from somewhere and someone must lead it, whether it’s the church’s music director or a person specifically designated for that job. Whoever the leader is, knowing a few management tips can make the job feel much less intimidating.

Recruit a Leader

Forming a worship band typically starts with recruiting a leader. This person must possess not only musical skill but also the ability to recruit and manage others. Well-resourced churches might consider hiring an experienced contemporary music director to help with the hiring and interviewing, yet the basics of the search are the same for any congregation. Call pastors or church leaders in surrounding churches with musicians who might be qualified to lead when they are not playing elsewhere. Post a flyer on the bulletin boards at university music departments, music stores, or recording studios. Network with others using the snowball technique, which involves asking one person to recommend two or three others who might know someone who plays. Advertise on job search websites dedicated to musicians or to contemporary music in particular.²

Expand the Circle

Once the leader is in place, it is time to recruit musicians for the band. The recruiter must discern the potential band member’s level of skill, usually through an audition. However, calling it an audition may raise unnecessary fears for recruits who may have experience and skill yet be a little rusty and may feel intimidated by the prospect of stepping into the spotlight. Calling it a jam session and inviting potential recruits to play together at the same time provides cover for the amateur and is a lot more fun than a one-on-one audition.

When promoting the jam session, frame the experience as a chance for someone whose instrument has not been played for years to explore their interest in this music ministry. At the jam session itself, the music should be familiar, and band members and potential recruits can all play together. This allows current band members the chance to evaluate the musical potential of recruits, and provides recruits the



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opportunity to learn what the band is like. Granted, this way of conducting auditions makes it harder to assess a musician's true ability than a simple one-on-one audition, so the band leader will need to listen carefully to each musician both for their immediate ability and for their potential to improve.³

Schedule Musicians

When band members play week in and week out with each other, they can build musicianship, strengthen teamwork, and offer sense of predictability for worshippers. Unfortunately, some bands become so self-contained that when one band member must be away, the substitute finds it difficult to fit in. Rotating musicians in and out of the band on a more regular basis can solve this dilemma. In this alternate model, the band leader asks members to provide dates when they will be unavailable in the coming six to eight weeks, then shapes the worship schedule around it. Short-term scheduling like this addresses a key problem for many worship bands: musicians' busy family life and work schedules.

This more flexible arrangement could especially benefit churches with a limited pool of available musicians. In one small church, the pastor, who also coordinated music for the contemporary service, contracted with four different musicians to serve as the music leader one Sunday per month. The designated leader then brought in musician friends from outside the church or asked church members to play whenever available, similar to a game of pick-up basketball.

Sharpen Musical Skills

Band leaders can offer musical training to help musicians gain confidence. Start with vocal training by offering a full-day or half-day workshop taught by a vocal coach from a local university or by providing resources for private or team workouts when the band rehearses. See Chris and Carole Beatty's website, *The Vocal Coach* (www.vocalcoach.com) for downloadable MP3 resources or compact discs.

Instrumentalists can learn to improve their technique by playing more inversions of the chord using printed resources or online videos. Every chord can be played in several different ways. Each variation creates a different tonal quality to the sound. Keyboardists and guitarists who play more chord inversions can add variety and interest to a simple song.

Second, instrumentalists can improve their reading skills. Some guitarists play solely by ear, while others prefer to rely on lyric sheets with chords written above the words. A chord chart, which many jazz and pop musicians use, offers a more detailed road map than the lyric sheet by providing information about how the piece should be played (time signature, rhythm, and key notes in the melody) without specifying how and when every note should be played, as sheet music would do. Chord charts provide a little bit of structure with ample space for musicians to improvise without having to play the piece entirely by ear.

Third, instrumentalists can improve their technique by listening to each other during rehearsal and performance. Think about the song in sections and leave spaces and holes in each for players to add their contribution, rather than having everyone play in every section. During rehearsal, after finding parts for each piece and spaces when each musician is silent, memorize it or write it on a chart, and commit to play it the same way every time for a while.⁴

A More Profound Alleluia

Listening to and singing along with a worship band, with its richly amplified sound of vocalist, guitars, electronic keyboard, and drums, can be a profoundly moving experience. For those who grew up with rock and pop music in the surrounding culture, a worship band's music can serve to integrate two halves of an otherwise divided life—sacred music and everyday experience. For this reason, it's no wonder that the worship bands have become a fixture in a variety of congregations.

1. "When in Our Music God Is Glorified" (No. 68) in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989).

2. Lance Winkler, *Starting a Praise Band* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 28-29.

3. Stacy Hood, *ReKindling Your Music Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 28.

4. Tom Lane, *Worship Musician Presents! The Worship Band Book* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Books, 2012), 93-95.