

# Congregational worship writing guide

You might love playing music on a Sunday and leading the congregation in worship but what happens when that passion for glorifying God leads you to a desire to start writing your own worship songs? This guide is a brief explainer of the things that you need to think about when starting to write your own music. It's probably worth mentioning that this is coming at it from the point of creating congregational worship music and not Christian songs of a more personal nature, as they are two different things altogether, but hopefully you should find some good ideas in here to set you on your way.

## Why do we write worship music?

So, the first thing to talk about is *why* you want to start writing worship music. Every generation produces great worship tracks and any church should always be looking to keep their song list fresh in order to keep the worship from sounding stale and samey. But in order to produce new worship songs, the church needs to be producing new worship songwriters. If you have a passion for writing worship music then you could end up playing a part in this process! Not everyone involved in worship has this passion though, and it's perfectly fine if you have a great desire to be involved in the worship ministry at your church but really feel no pressing need to start writing tracks. The church doesn't need half as many worship songwriters to survive as it does musicians on stage on a Sunday morning, so don't feel bad if it's not something you feel called towards. If you do feel called though, it can be an incredibly rewarding and expressive experience.

It's also worth noting that not every songwriter's songs will make it on stage on a Sunday. It takes a lot of time and effort to refine song writing as a skill and even experienced songwriters in the church don't get every one of their songs played in a congregational setting. Your desire should be to glorify God with your writing, regardless of the success of your music. If you're writing songs for pride or to glorify your own abilities, you're in it for the wrong reasons. Hopefully that's not the case though.

Another important point is that there are several elements to a worship track and not everybody finds it easy to write all these themselves. It's perfectly normal to team up with another songwriter or lyricist if you are struggling writing. Some people are incredibly gifted at lyric writing; others at writing chords and melodies. If you can create all the parts of a song yourself, great, but if you can't, try to partner up with someone who is strong in the areas you are weaker.

So, if that's the *why*, let's jump into *how* to write congregational worship.

## What makes a good worship song?

Worship songs are songs (obviously!) but if we think they are directly comparable to the songs we find in popular music, then we could make some fundamental errors when it comes understanding them. Whilst a popular music track might be about all manner of things from a love song to telling a story to protest music to pure entertainment to actual nonsense, worship music is, at its heart, all about glorifying God. The theme, focus and message may vary from worship song to worship song, but their purpose as a piece of music is to lead the congregation into worship of God and reveal something of His nature. In no particular order, the ingredients for creating a congregational worship song are:

**Lyrics** – It should go without saying that the lyrics are the most important part of any worship song. Whilst the chords and melody may be incredibly catchy, it's the lyrics that are the thing that lead someone into worshipping in the presence of God. The lyrics contain the theology of your song and need to be treated with care and attention.

**Chords** – The backbone of your song. The chords are the thing that underpin the melody and provide the structure to your track. You need to understand how different chords fit together, what it means to write in a certain key, how your chords will translate across different instruments and in different settings, and what makes up a good chords sequence.

**Melody** – If the lyrics are the message, then the melody is the medium. When writing the melody, it's important to understand the vocal range of the average congregation member, the vocal ranges of different types of voice (soprano, alto, tenor, bass etc.), and how these factors will influence your own melody to make sure it's as accessible to sing as possible. You may have a phenomenal vocal range but, if you sing at the limits of your own abilities, you may produce something un-singable for the average church goer.

**Quality control** – This is something that often gets overlooked by any songwriter. Once you've finished writing a song, it's important to refine it as a piece of music to get it better. A painter spends time touching up a picture, a director spends plenty of time editing their film, and in the same way a songwriter needs to make time to polish their own work. Maybe the lyrics need a little more work, maybe the verse is too long or too short, maybe the song itself is way too long (a very common thing in song writing). You can do this quality control by yourself but it's often better to get a fresh pair of ears to have a listen to your music. Find someone whose opinion that you trust and get them to be honest with you about what they think of your song. Maybe even get a few opinions, but you need to go through this process to refine your music and create the best song that you can do.

## How to start

This is perhaps the trickiest question to answer in this whole guide as there really is no universal answer. Some people start with the chords and then build a melody up on top of that. Some people might start with the melody and then work out the chords later. Some people write the lyrics first. It completely varies from person to person, so there's really no 'one size fits all' approach.

The easiest thing to suggest is that you experiment until you've found the thing that works for you. Some of these methods you'll find easy, some you might find very hard, so just keep trying until you've found your own way of working. Also, if you get stuck with writer's block, changing up how you write your music might just give you the new inspiration you need.

There are some pros and cons to think about with each approach though:

**Starting with the chords** – Many people start with the chords and this is a really good way to getting a song on its feet quickly. You can easily get the feel of a song by starting with the chords and it gives your melody a starting point too. The downsides are that the feel of the chords will often dictate the feel of the lyrics. You can't start with a really bouncy and lively chord progression and then hope to fit it with really emotional and serious lyrics. It also limits the scope of your melody too, as your melody needs to fit the harmony of your chords.

**Starting with the melody** – Starting with the melody is a great way of producing something really catchy and musical as your top line. This is a little rarer in terms of the way people work and it gives you a bit of a headache afterwards working out which chords go with the different parts of the melody. It's also a lot harder to start with a melody if you don't have any lyrics yet either but this way works for some people regardless.

**Starting with the lyrics** – Starting with the lyrics allows you to easily map out the song in terms of the structure of the verses, choruses and any other sections. It also allows you to clearly lay out a theme for your song and helps you create chords that tie in with the lyrical content (more mellow lyrics can be accompanied by more mellow chords for example). The downside is that it's easy to create really wordy sections of the song with far too many lyrics if you write the lyrics first. You may end up having to do a lot of work chopping down sections of the song later on, or struggling to fit syllables to your melody.

## **Different sections of a worship song**

This next section is designed to give you a little more insight into each of the sections that we've talked about already. It's not in any particular order, as we've already seen that you can start pretty much anywhere when starting to write a song, but it is designed to go into a bit more detail about what you should be thinking about with the different parts of your song.

## **Theme and lyrics**

As I mentioned earlier, the lyrics and theme of your song are the most important things when writing a congregational worship song. This is the part of the song that vocalises our praise to God, teaches the congregation ways of thinking about God and their Christian lives, and, hopefully, enriches scripture itself by exploring themes in the bible or setting biblical passages to music. Some of the things you should be thinking about are:

### **What is this song about?**

The first thing to think about when writing your lyrics is 'what is this song about?'. Is it going to be a song of praise to God, declaring who He is? A song of confession? A song about God's love? A song about Jesus' sacrifice? A song about God's forgiveness? There are a great many themes to explore from scripture and you need to outline what your song is about. A great worship song knows what it's about and what it's trying to say. A confused worship song might have an uneven theme, for example a verse and chorus about God's glory but then change into a confessional song when it gets to the bridge. If you double the theme of your song, you halve the impact of each section.

### **Are the lyrics biblical?**

Another important consideration when thinking about writing a congregational worship song is whether the lyrics themselves are biblical and a true reflection of God and our relationship with Him. You're literally putting words into the mouths of the congregation and those words need to be speaking truth.

If you're using scripture for your lyrics, you might want to be thinking about whether the passage you've chosen works when it's out of the context of the book or chapter that it's in. If you've had to cut words out of the passage to make it fit with your melody, make sure that the lyrics still mean what they originally meant and haven't suffered as a result.

If you're writing original lyrics it's even more important to check that the themes you are exploring are biblical. Someone like a fellow team member, church leader, or Pastor, are great to run things by to see what they think about whether your song matches up with what the bible says.

### **Are my lyrics accessible to everyone?**

Are the lyrics in your song able to be sung by the whole congregation? By this I mean that a phrase such as *"Our God is an awesome God"* is accessible to all because the lyrics are not based on any personal experience, but are based on a universal truth about our faith. There should be no Christian in our church that should feel conflicted by declaring that our God is awesome. But when it comes to worship lyrics that include words like 'me', 'I', 'my', 'us', things start to get a little trickier.

It may be a good idea to take a short detour to look at scripture for a moment. Take the following, incredibly popular, Psalm:

## **Psalm 23**

<sup>1</sup> The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,

<sup>3</sup> he refreshes my soul.

He guides me along the right paths  
for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk  
through the darkest valley,<sup>[a]</sup>

I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup> Surely your goodness and love will follow me  
all the days of my life,

and I will dwell in the house of the LORD  
forever.

One of the reasons that this Psalm resonates with so many people is the way that the author invites you to not only hear about his own struggles and joys but to picture what that may look like in your own life. You can read a phrase like *“He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake”* and, as a reader, you should be thinking of what ways God is guiding you. What destructive path are you struggling from taking a detour down? What ways has God helped you with recently? The whole Psalm is littered with phrases that invite the reader to get them to think about how each line matches up with their own life. Take another look at the Psalm and note the different ways that it makes you feel as a reader. What images does it conjure up in your mind?

On the other hand, let’s look at a very different Psalm:

## Psalm 110

<sup>1</sup> The LORD says to my lord:

“Sit at my right hand  
until I make your enemies  
a footstool for your feet.”

<sup>2</sup> The LORD will extend your mighty scepter from Zion, saying,

“Rule in the midst of your enemies!”

<sup>3</sup> Your troops will be willing

on your day of battle.

Arrayed in holy splendor,

your young men will come to you

like dew from the morning’s womb.

<sup>4</sup> The LORD has sworn

and will not change his mind:

“You are a priest forever,

in the order of Melchizedek.”

<sup>5</sup> The Lord is at your right hand;

he will crush kings on the day of his wrath.

<sup>6</sup> He will judge the nations, heaping up the dead

and crushing the rulers of the whole earth.

<sup>7</sup> He will drink from a brook along the way,

and so he will lift his head high.

Now, both the Psalms we've looked at are attributed to David, both are in the same section of the bible and both are written in the same time and place as each other but this second one has a very different purpose. Psalm 110 is one of the most quoted OT passages in the NT; it's dense with biblical imagery, it's Messianic in nature, it involves prior knowledge from the reader about things like who Melchizedek is and what being a priest forever in his order means, it needs the reader to understand the concept of the 'Day of the Lord'. Basically, it invites the reader to examine it and to search for its meaning through careful study of other areas of scripture (I invite you to look up a commentary on it, it's fascinating!). It does not lend itself to being used as lyrics for a congregational worship song though.

To bring things back into a more contemporary setting, let's look at something more modern. A song like *Reckless Love* might use a phrase such as "*When I was Your foe, still Your love fought for me*" and this works, like Psalm 23, because the phrase can mean a great many things to different people. For some in the congregation it could be because we've ignored God throughout the week and not taken our prayer life or bible study seriously, but through it all, God still loves us. For others, it could be because we've knowingly sinned and led ourselves away from God, all the time whilst God is fighting to lead us back to the right path through His love for us. For others still, it could be a line that reflects where they were before they were saved, and that God was still fighting to know them and save them, even when they didn't know it themselves. It forces the congregation to engage with the lyric and to picture what that might have looked like in their lives.

On the other hand, a lyric saying something like "*When I was first saved, in your sanctuary, I was broken and crying, lying on the floor*" might be very personal to you and may be a very real moment where you were saved in church for the first time. But what if someone in the congregation has never been in that place? What if their journey to faith looked very different to yours? Some people have a very emotional moment of salvation when they may have cried and offered themselves to God. Other people may have come to God through being brought up in a Christian household, or because they started to come to church and their faith slowly grew over time, or they found faith through reading scripture with a friend. It's not to say that this lyric isn't true for you as the author but you need to ask yourself whether it invites engagement from a worshipper or whether it might distance themselves in that moment. You should go through any lyrics you write with the thought that your lyrics should be applicable to the entire congregation. Put yourselves in their shoes. How might different Christians be feeling when they sing your line together in a church service?

## Are there any other tips to writing lyrics and themes in worship songs?

Yes, there are a great many tips and tricks to writing good lyrics to your songs and I'll try to sum up a few here, but this isn't an exhaustive list. There are many articles, podcasts, videos, blogs and books that deal with writing congregational worship songs and if you are really serious about improving your craft, I'd invite you to do as much research as you can. You don't have to know everything before you start, but if you want to know how others write and learn about the subject of song writing for the congregation in your church, you should be prepared to do some reading to find out more. Having said that, let's look at some other things that might help you.

**Using consistent imagery** – This is a great way of unifying the theme of your song. One of my favourite hymns is 'Here is love', mainly because of the incredibly clever use of imagery in the language. Here are the first two verses:

*Here is love, vast as the ocean,  
Loving-kindness as the flood,  
When the Prince of Life, our Ransom,  
Shed for us His precious blood.  
Who His love will not remember?  
Who can cease to sing His praise?  
He can never be forgotten,  
Throughout heav'n's eternal days.*

*On the mount of crucifixion,  
Fountains opened deep and wide;  
Through the floodgates of God's mercy  
Flowed a vast and gracious tide.  
Grace and love, like mighty rivers,  
Poured incessant from above,  
And heav'n's peace and perfect justice  
Kissed a guilty world in love.*

The song is obviously about Jesus' sacrifice on the cross but it's worth noting the constant use of water imagery. They tie the lyrics of the song together and bring a richer depth to their meaning. We may struggle to understand the breadth of God's love sometimes, but framing it as comparable to the vast expanse of the ocean creates a new way for someone to think about it. 'Loving kindness' is great as a phrase, but linking it to a flood – an unstoppable and overwhelming force – creates a vivid image for our brains to latch on to. It's worth thinking about whether you could use repeating imagery to tie the lyrics of your song together. This doesn't work for every song though, so pick and choose your moments.

**Using a rhyming dictionary or a thesaurus** – These are often very underrated tools in lyric writing. A rhyming dictionary is a great tool to look up words that rhyme together if you're really stuck. A thesaurus is equally as useful for looking up synonyms for a word or a different way of saying the same thing. Often, we fall back on words we've heard a thousand times before, and it can lead to over-using phrases like 'I love you Lord', 'amazing grace' or 'with all of my heart'. If you've written a good song but feel that the lyrics are a little cliché, try to go back over it and find a new way to say the same thing. Swapping words for others that mean the same thing is also a good way of managing your syllable count so that your lyrics match up better with your melody.

**Make sure that lyrics are sung in the same way that they are said** – Sometimes the way that the lyrics match up to the melody is a little clunky if you're not careful. You can end up with the emphasis on a weird part of a word that would sound strange if you said it in the same way in real life. It's important to scan your lyrics to see if they feel natural to sing or whether you need to rejig things in order to create a better fit with the melody. If you say a phrase like "*I lift my hands to you*" the accents naturally fall on the words *lift*, *you* and maybe *hands* (depending on how exactly you say it), and that's where the accents should really occur when singing it too. If a big part of the melody falls on *I* or *to*, it starts to sound a little off when you sing it, as you'd never pronounce the phrase as "*I lift my hands **to** you*". This is not a huge factor to think about when writing a song but if something sounds a little off and you can't quite put your finger on what it is, sometimes this is the problem.

**Lyrical hooks and repetition** – Having a repetitive hook for your chorus, bridge or even in your verses, is a great way of creating a strong and memorable song for the congregation. Often this is the thing that sums up the theme of the song and sticks in the mind of most worshippers (think of a song like *How Great Is Our God*). Lyric writing can often be a wordy affair though, and you can end up with far more lyrics than you actually need when writing songs, so it's worth looking at your lyrics sometimes to see if there's a line that could be repeated or simplified to create a stronger message. As a general rule of thumb, verses should have more ideas and words than choruses but don't take my word for it, go and see for yourself. Study some of your favourite worship songs. What ways do the writers use repetition? What parts of the song? Why do you think they chose to repeat a specific line or words and what effect does it have on you as a worshipper? Song writing is a craft, and the more you study, the better you'll become.

# Music

So, we've looked in detail at the importance of theme and lyrics in our worship songs but what about the music? The following section will hopefully help you with some of the different approaches and problems you might encounter when trying to get the music written for your worship songs.

Before we get underway though, I want to revisit a point I've already made several times: if you want to be successful at song writing, you need to study other people's worship songs. Understanding what worship music is, how it's put together, common writing tricks, the vocal range of the average congregation, different ways people structure their songs, and having a passable knowledge of music theory are all vital to being a successful songwriter. The more you study, the better you'll get!

## Should I start with the chords or melody first?

We've briefly discussed this earlier but there's no real right answer to this one. Some great song writers like to write a chord progression first and then try to fit a melody over the top. Others like to map out a memorable melody and then try to work out the chords later. I'm going to delve a little into music theory when we look at these two approaches but I'll try to keep it accessible in case your musical knowledge is a little hazy (if it is, don't feel too bad, none of the Beatles could read or write music and they managed to write a decent song or two over the years!).

Let's first look at how to write a song starting with the chords first approach:

**1. Understand the key you're in and what chords you have to play with –** It's important first to understand what chords you have to write with in any particular key. Most songs stay in one key, and using chords that are not in that key is unusual (but not totally against the rules). If you're new, or not as experienced, with song writing, keeping to a key is probably the easiest way to avoid any big mistakes when writing your chords. The chart on the following page shows what chords you can use in any key to create your progression. It may look a little confusing but if you want to write a song in **F major**, say, just go to that line and it'll show you that you should be using **F major**, **G minor**, **A minor**, **Bb major**, **C major**, **D minor** and **E diminished** to create your song. If the last chord, **E diminished**, sounds rather unfamiliar to you, it's because this is pretty rare to come across in a song, so I'd advise against using it for the most part. If you use any of the rest of the chords, you should be off to a good start though!

Key	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
C major	C	Dm	Em	F	G	Am	Bdim
G major	G	Am	Bm	C	D	Em	F#dim
D major	D	Em	F#m	G	A	Bm	C#dim
A major	A	Bm	Cm	D	E	F#m	G#dim
E major	E	F#m	G#m	A	B	C#m	D#dim
B major	B	C#m	D#m	E	F#	G#m	A#dim
F major	F	Gm	Am	Bb	C	Dm	Edim
Bb major	Bb	Cm	Dm	Eb	F	Gm	Adim
Eb major	Eb	Fm	Gm	Ab	Bb	Cm	Ddim
Ab major	Ab	Bbm	Cm	Db	Eb	Fm	Gdim

There's a similar chart for if you want to write in a minor key but, again, I'd probably ignore the diminished chord that makes up the second chord of each line, unless you're an experienced song writer.

Key	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
C minor	Cm	Ddim	Eb	Fm	Gm	Ab	Bb
G minor	Gm	Adim	Bb	Cm	Dm	Eb	F
D minor	Dm	Edim	F	Gm	Am	Bb	C
A minor	Am	Bdim	C	Dm	Em	F	G
E minor	Em	F#dim	G	Am	Bm	C	D
B minor	Bm	C#dim	D	Em	F#m	G	A
F minor	Fm	Gdim	Ab	Bbm	Cm	Db	Eb
Bb minor	Bbm	Cdim	Db	Ebm	Fm	Gb	Ab
Eb minor	Ebm	Fdim	Gb	Abm	Bbm	Cb	Db
Ab minor	Abm	Bbdim	Cb	Dbm	Ebm	Fb	Gb

**2. Create your chord sequence** – Next you need to string together some chords to create your different sections. Usually a chord sequence is a 4 bar sequence of three or four chords. You can repeat this 4 bar sequence to create 8 or 16 bar sections for your verses, choruses and bridge as you need.

**3. Create a rough structure** – Once you've got a few rough sections of your song planned you need to loosely get them into some kind of arrangement. A very common pattern for your arrangement to follow would be:

**Intro – Verse 1 – Chorus – Verse 2 – Chorus – Bridge – Chorus x 2**

This does not have to be rigidly followed, as some worship songs have pre-choruses (a short section between the verse and chorus), instrumental sections

and outros, but it's a good place to start. Once you've got your chords written it's time to add vocals.

**4. Try to find a melody that works over your chords** – This is very much trial and error as you try to find a melody line that works with your chord sequence. Some people find this easy; some find it hard. You just have to give it a go but don't feel bad if you have to rework your chords if they don't quite sit properly with your melody or lyrics.

### **So, what changes if you start with the melody first?**

There are a few things you need to watch out for if you start with your melody first and then add chords later. The melody writing should be fairly straightforward but it becomes a little tricky when you're working out what chords you can fit to it. First of all, you need to find out what key you've written your song in. If you don't play an instrument (or you're not sure how to work the key out), getting someone with a little more experience to help you is vital. Once you've worked out the key you should look at the chord charts above and find out what chords are available to you in that key. You'll find that there can often be more than one chord that fits with a melody note in a key, so use your ears, experiment and you should be able to find a chord sequence that sounds right with your melody.

### **Any other tips for writing the music?**

Yes, in no particular order some other things to be thinking about are:

**Make your choruses more memorable and energetic than your verses** – The chorus is the part of the song that people usually go away singing, so make sure it's catchy. They are usually a little bit louder and have a bit more energy than the verses too.

**After the second chorus, change the dynamics** – This is very common in worship songs. After the second chorus most worship songs go to a bridge or an instrumental and, to keep it interesting, they either kill the dynamics completely before building them up or absolutely rock out hard after the second chorus. A great song uses dynamics to build or break down the song at various points so don't neglect dynamics in your writing!

**Make sure your melody is singable** – Something touched upon earlier. The aim here is to write a *congregational* worship song and it's not going to be a very good congregational worship song if the singing range is totally out of the range of the average parishioner. Get to grips with the singing capabilities of the church (usually from Bb below middle C, up to the D an octave and a half

above that). If you want the congregation to sing your song, make sure it's singable.

**Always be on the lookout for a good tag** – Songs like *How Great Is Our God* are so versatile because they can be sung as an entire song or just used as a shorter tag. This doesn't apply to all popular worship songs, and it isn't something you need to shoehorn into your writing, but if the opportunity arises for a good tag or repeating section, don't be afraid to write one.

**Don't neglect intros, interludes and instrumentals** – There aren't many songs that launch straight into the melody so you'll probably need an intro section in your song. In the same way, there are also very few songs that go straight from the chorus back into the verse with no gap. What chords are you going to use for these sections? Repeating the verse chords as an intro or interlude between the chorus and verse works well but you don't have to stick with chords you already have. Some songs, like *In Christ Alone*, have separate chord sequences for these sections and they are also a good opportunity for an instrumental melody on top. Likewise, some worship songs have an instrumental section before or after the bridge so this could be something you may want in your worship song too.

**Does your song work with different combinations of musicians?** – This is more for the advanced writer. It might be great that your song sounds fantastic with a huge band, backing tracks, pads and multiple singers, but great worship songs need to be versatile. Not every church may have your church's resources or level of musicianship, and if you write a song that other churches would struggle to recreate, your music isn't going to venture much past your own congregation. Try your song acoustically, or with a smaller band to see how adaptable it is.

**Watch out for how long your song is** – Most modern worship songs clock in at around three to four minutes so this is what you should be aiming for too when you start out. There might be an amazing Hillsongs song you love that goes on for eight minutes but it'll be written by experienced song writers and recorded by some of the best players in the industry, usually at one of their services. Start small and, as you get better, you can start to experiment with longer structures to your music if you want. Sticking to three to four minutes at the start of your writing career also forces you to be strict with the different sections in your song. Chopping down (or even getting rid of) different parts of your compositions is one of the hardest things to do as a writer, but it's a vital step in creating the best songs that you can. If you're really struggling to edit your work, running it by another experienced musician that you trust is a great way to get some objective advice.

# Quality control

We've looked at the process of writing the lyrics for your worship song and we've also looked at ways to create the music too, but there's one final step in the song writing process and it's one that often gets ignored: quality control. As previously mentioned, this is one of the hardest things to do as an artist; you've spent ages writing and composing so the last thing you want to do is to cut sections of your song down (or even out). This part of the process also involves critically listening to what you've written to try and judge it with as much objectivity as you can manage. Let's take a look in a little more detail.

## Why it's important to edit a song?

We've previously mentioned the fact that you need to be wary over how long your song is when you're starting the writing process by aiming for a three to four minute song length. This should be your mindset heading into the writing process, but what if you've accidentally written a five or six minute long song without realising? Why is it important to refine and edit your song?

One of the reasons is impact. Cutting down the amount of things you're saying to just the essentials is a great way of maximising and concentrating the impact of what you leave in. Some of the best sermons I've heard in my lifetime at church have been short and to the point, and have been exceptionally memorable as a result. This isn't to say I've not heard some fantastic sermons that have gone on for an hour or longer over the years, but properly editing your work down to a shorter format forces you to concentrate on what you really want to say and makes what you say easier for the congregation to engage with and remember.

It's also a cultural thing too. Our ears and brains are used to three to four minute songs. We hear them in church, on the radio, in bars and pubs, at festivals. We're not used to epic eight minute songs (unless you're a hardcore Pink Floyd fan) so creating material in a format that your average congregation will be familiar with is a great way of making them feel comfortable when engaging in the words and message in your song.

## How do you refine a song?

This is the really tricky part. It's easy to understand why we need to refine and edit our work but actually sitting down and doing it to our own songs is another matter altogether! Here are some tips that I've used over the years. They don't work on everything you'll ever write, so pick and choose your methods. They're not written in order either, so feel free to start with any of these in the quality control part of your writing.

**Take a break from the song** – This is one of the most effective ways to gain some objectivity. Writing a song can be intense and all-consuming and by the time you've finished, you can often feel like you can't really judge your song properly. Take a break for a few days, a week, or maybe more. Some time away from your song can really clear your mind and give you fresh ears when listening back to it.

**Experiment with the bpm** – This is one of the less brutal ways to start the editing process. A friend once came up to me with a six minute long worship song and one of the first things I noticed was that the whole thing felt rather slow. Speeding up by about 10 bpm, in that instance, really gave it more energy and also chopped about 30 seconds off the length as a result. Is your track at the right tempo? Try speeding it up (or even slowing it down) to work out if you've written it at the right tempo, or if it would sit better at a different speed.

**Getting a friend to listen to your song** – This is where it starts to get difficult. Artists are notorious for hating the idea for chopping down their work (one of the reasons why a director's cut of their own film will usually be about an hour longer than the theatrical version!). This is why so many artistic industries use different people to carry out this process. When a band goes into the studio, they have a producer to give them objective advice, film directors have a separate editing team to create the finished cut, script writers have readings of their work to see if what they've written works, and behind every great novelist is a great editor.

One of the best ways of getting an objective view on your song is to get someone you trust to listen to it with a critical ear. It helps if that person is musical (obviously) but it also helps if they are experienced in worship in the church, as this usually means they have a good idea of what a congregational worship song should sound and look like. Open yourself to their ideas and try to remain calm when they make suggestions for changing something that you've painstakingly put together. You can do this in person by playing them the song to see what they think but recording the song, even just on your phone, and letting them sit down in their own time allows them the freedom to listen multiple times and, often, be a lot more objective than if you're there in front of them. Also, be careful in not getting too many people involved early on in the writing process. The more people you give your music to for opinions, the more opinions you're going to get, and sometimes these can be overwhelming and even contradictory if you get too many. Stick with one or two people you trust and build from there.

**Cutting down sections by half** – One of the best things I ever learned in song writing was from a singer I played in a band with years ago. He was fantastic at making those hard choices that you need to make when editing your work and he often questioned whether a section needed to be as long as it was. If your

intro was 8 bars, would it be tighter if it was 4? Does your verse need to be 32 bars or would it work better as 16? If the idea of bars is a little bit alien to you, just look at the lyrics for your verses and choruses and think whether you could cut them down by half and see what that might sound like. You'd be surprised how often this can lead to a much fresher sound and tighter arrangement.

**Is your song in the right order?** – Not so much to do with editing out but more re-arranging. Sometimes it's worth taking a step back to see if each section of your song sits in the right place. Very occasionally I've noticed that the bridge in a song I've written actually sounds better than the chorus. In a similar way you might want to swap verses around if it works better. Feel free to change the order of your song around to see if you've got the optimal arrangement.

**Cut sections completely** – This is the hardest of the lot as a song writer. One of the most effective ways to bring the run time for your song down is to cut out a section. Instrumental sections are probably the easiest to cut but having to chop out parts of verses, pre-choruses or bridges can be difficult. It gets easier the more you write but it's worth noting that if you do end up cutting out a section, keep the lyrics or chord progression written down somewhere. You may find that, whilst they might not fit with that song, they might fit another in the future.

## In summary

I hope this all helps in some way in the song writing process. This is not by any means an exhaustive or definitive list, so you'll find plenty more advice out there if you look around. The more you study, the better your understanding will be and, like any pursuit in life, the more you write, the better your songs will get.

The last thing to say is that if you want to be serious about writing songs for church, you need to be serious about God. Regularly reading the bible, a healthy prayer life and a deep relationship with God all go hand in hand with a privileged job like providing songs for God's people to sing. Worship song writing should not be formulaic, but born out of a deep desire to see God glorified.

Pray before you start writing, pray when you've finished and, if any of your songs get sung in church, give thanks to the one who gave you the gifts to make that happen!