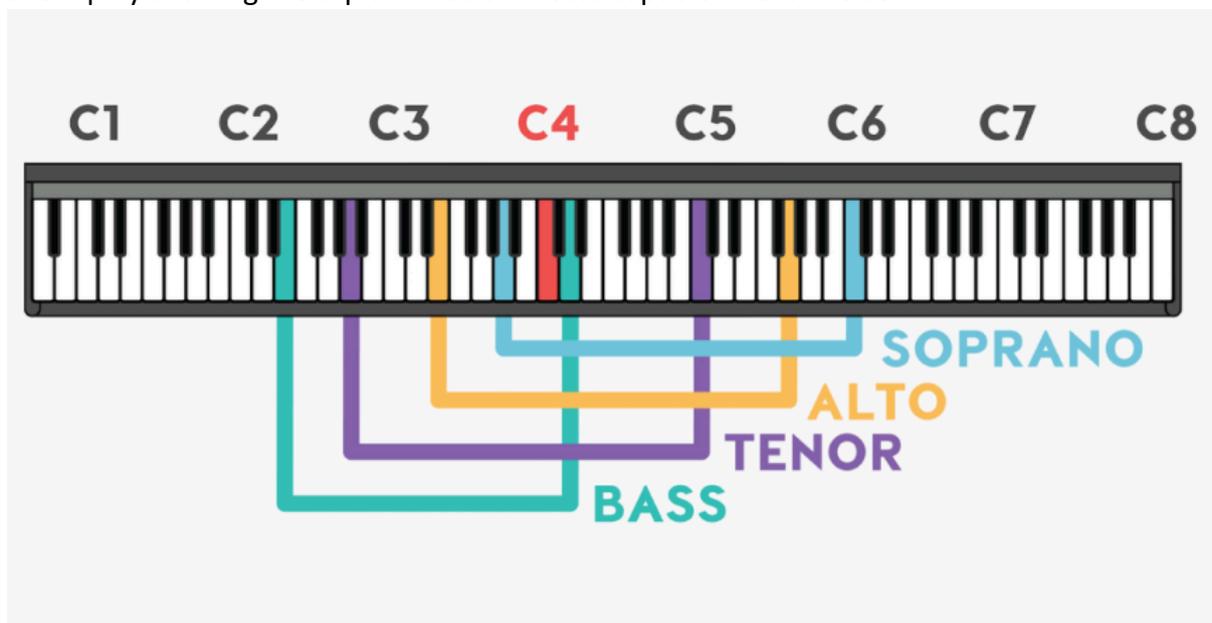


Vocal ranges

Vocal range is important to think about when choosing songs. The principle of a worship leader is to *lead* and choosing the right key for the congregation to sing in is central to this process. Choosing the right vocal range for the songs your church is singing is an important, but often overlooked, area that needs careful thought and consideration.

Different voice ranges

People can be generally split into four different categories singing wise. Males can be split into basses (lower range) and tenors (higher range), and women can be split into altos (lower range) and sopranos (higher range). This diagram below roughly shows how their ranges overlap by showing the top and bottom notes capable of each voice:



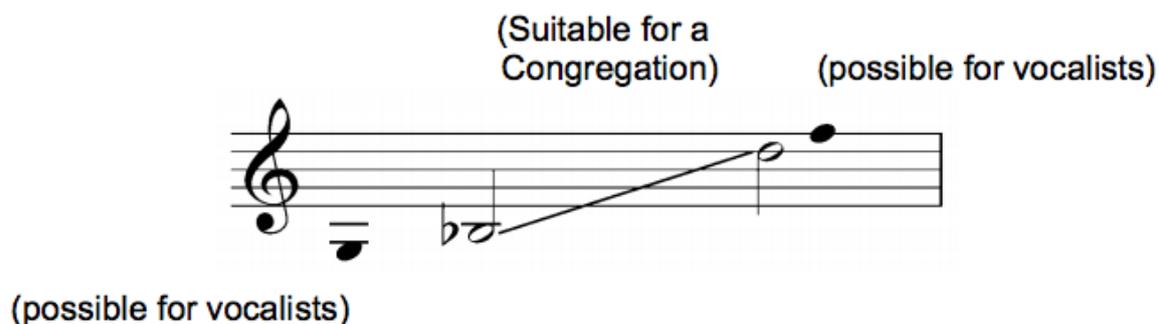
Not everyone neatly fits within these boundaries and you may see or hear of other vocal categories such as baritone (between bass and tenor) or mezzo soprano (between alto and soprano). For the time being, let's stick with these four. If we were to write out the ranges, we'd end up with something like this:

	Lowest note	Highest note
Bass	E2	D4
Tenor	A2	C5
Alto	E3	G5
Soprano	A3	C6

You'll notice that basses and altos tend to match up in their singing range (although the men sing an octave below the women). Likewise, tenors and sopranos also match up. What this means in terms of picking keys for worship is that some keys work for both men and women but sometimes you may need to change the key dependent on the capabilities of your worship leader. This is no slight on the person singing the song, just a reflection that we are all biologically different when it comes to our vocal ranges.

Congregational vocal range

Something that does bear thinking over, however, is that there is a sweet spot (shown on the staff below) of the average congregational singing range that overlaps most of the vocal ranges that we've previously talked about. A song that falls within the range from the Bb below middle C up to the D a 10th above that (an octave and a bit) will generally work for most, if not all, of your congregation.



The first thing that you should have hopefully noticed is that the range of a decent singer in a worship band is wider than that of the congregation that they are leading. This is important to remember because if the chorus you are singing constantly hits those higher notes above the D, you're going to start losing people in the congregation. They are either going to have to sing the song an octave lower at that point or else they're going to drop out singing altogether. It's also worth bearing in mind that by being a worship leader in anything other than a small church (where experienced vocalists may be scarce) usually means that you're a strong singer and that often the worship songs sound great at the top of your vocal range. But anyone that has tried to sing 'Living on a prayer' at a karaoke night knows how much of a strain it can be to keep up with a great singer! If you ping out the notes at the top of your range, how much of the song falls outside of the vocal range of the congregation? How much of the church are you losing when you pitch the song outside of their comfort zone?

This does not mean that we need to throw out every song that is in our church's songbook that doesn't fit this rigid model though. But it does mean that we need to pick the right key for our songs carefully. If the song goes above that top D limit only at the end of the bridge and only once or twice, say, then this isn't too bad. Likewise, if our top note is only occasionally an Eb or even an E in the chorus then the congregation will usually be comfortable in that range. We need to be wary of songs that consistently sing notes in that higher range, especially if they are long, sustained notes. It's also worth noting that the bigger the congregation, the higher you can pitch the melody. Always aim a little lower in smaller group setting.

Losing energy

One of the problems that leads to songs being too high in church is that the majority of worship songs are written by male writers with a tenor voice (a range comfortably above where the congregation is happy singing) and this means that a lot of popular modern worship songs are consistently hitting top Fs, Gs and even getting higher than that in places. Dropping a song by a 3rd or even a 4th down can sometimes really kill the energy of a song though and it's worth bearing this in mind when choosing ranges for your songs to sit in. There isn't really an easy solution to this problem; sing it in the recorded key and the melody is too high, sing it in a comfortable key and the backing just doesn't sound right. It's all a game of give and take.

Octave leaps

Another thing to be careful of is the whole octave leaps that you can get in some songs (the first chorus compared to the second and third choruses in Cornerstone by Hillsongs would be a good example). These octave jumps are another example of something that is achievable for a seasoned vocalist but rather tricky for your average layperson. Always be aware of how going for that octave leap can be difficult for the congregation and bear it in mind when choosing the right key. Also think about whether the congregation will know to sing that part up the octave too. You may have been practicing it all week but the congregation haven't, so if you switch up the melody, you need to make sure that enough people will follow you singing it in the higher range.

Co-leading

A great solution to some problems I've encountered in the past is to always be open to the idea of co-leading the worship set with another singer. If you're struggling to find a range that you can sing a song in, get someone else to sing it in the service, especially if they're the opposite sex, as they might feel comfortable pitching a song that you can't quite get right.