



# IS THE WHOLE CHURCH PARTICIPATING IN WORSHIP?



by Doug Gould, Worship MD

What is corporate worship, and does it live up to expectations? Some words used to describe it are collective, joint, shared, united, combined, communal and common. So, we could say corporate worship is the church as a united body of believers, collectively with one voice to worship and praise Him, the Triune God, the only One worthy of our devotion. As the song says:

*You are the One that we praise.  
You are the One we adore.  
You give the healing and grace,  
Our hearts always hunger for.  
Oh, our hearts always hunger for!*

Most churches want their congregations to join in and participate in worship, while sadly, there are those churches that do not.

### **HALLMARKS OF CORPORATE WORSHIP**

For this article, we're focused on corporate worship in the context of congregational singing. First, of course, it should be scriptural. But that doesn't mean it can't be creative; creativity is part of the Imago Dei (image of God).

Second, it should be simple. You have highly talented musicians and singers leading the service, but for some reason, that's just not working for the congregation. This isn't because they can't play or sing; they can do both exceptionally well. Rather, in many cases, the congregation simply can't sing along or follow the often intricate and musically challenging songs.

Congregational singing is not the place for a key so high it can break glass. Nor is it a place for rhythms and time signatures that are too difficult to follow. This is especially true when all the



congregation has to follow are words on a screen, which often do not communicate any clear pattern to follow.

Third, congregational singing is not the place for music leaders to show off their vocal range. Frankly, some songs, even outstanding ones, are not made for corporate singing. They are fine as solos but not for a congregation to sing together.

Fourth, skilled leadership is essential. A person doesn't have to have a degree in music to lead your church in congregational singing. However, leadership should be significant enough that it's thought about before Sunday. What I mean is that we want our instruments to honor the Lord by sounding the correct notes – which also means our voices. That doesn't mean we can't let "beginners" lead – we can and should. The point here is to put thought, time, and practice into leading for the inclusion of everyone in the service.

Finally, congregational singing should serve one another. We serve one another by singing others' preferred songs. We might call this the Philippians 2 principle of singing (see *Philippians 2:3-4*). This means that we all have favorite songs and styles that we enjoy. As leaders, we can serve our congregations better by thinking of songs and styles they enjoy, singing them with joy, knowing that we are honoring God, and loving our brothers and sisters in Christ as we sing with them.

Unfortunately, song selection has become divisive in many churches, primarily because of style. While it's important to remember the vertical aspect of our singing, we must also not forget that there is a horizontal aspect: corporate singing. In our worship, we serve one another by singing loudly (I don't mean obnoxiously). We serve one another by singing truth (*Colossians 3:16*).

At a training event recently, I was asked: "What is considered too loud for the music portion of the service?" I replied with a non-technical answer: "I observe the congregation and determine if it's too loud or soft by their posture. If it's too loud, they will be sitting and watching, not singing, not engaged."

It's the "If I can't hear the person next to me singing, it's too loud" syndrome. If the band is the only thing you hear in the room, it's too loud. I certainly don't need a dB audio level meter to know this. I use my eyes and can see it. It's obvious. The same goes for a worship team that can barely be heard; they should be playing a little louder than the congregation to lead. The congregation may not want to sing out if they don't have a strong voice to follow.



A beautiful balance happens when the worship team is leading, and the congregation is included as part of the team, just like a choir, singing praises collectively, as if with one voice. In the end, we're all in the band.

At this same training, a person teaching alongside me voiced a different opinion. He explained to the class that leadership has decided that they DO NOT want to hear the congregation

singing in his church. The main PA system sound level is set to mask the congregation's voices. Did he really say that? I thought I was hearing things. I'm not here to judge, but that's certainly not biblical.

The Bible contains over 400 references to singing and 50 direct commands to sing. The longest book of the Bible, the Psalms, is, in fact, a book of songs. In the New Testament, we're commanded not once, but twice, to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to one another when we meet (*Ephesians 5:19* and *Colossians 3:16*).

I don't know where your church leadership falls on this issue, and I intend not to try and change anyone's viewpoint. However, if you're part of a church that wants to include your congregation in your collective corporate worship, I want to offer some ideas and ways to help.

### **A LITTLE HISTORY**

Prior to the Reformation, worship in any form was primarily done for the people. Music was played by professional musicians and sung in the official language of the church, Latin, which laypeople couldn't read, speak or understand.

The Reformation brought open worship back to the people, including congregational singing using simple, attainable tunes incorporating biblical Scripture for lyrics in the common language people spoke daily. Worship has now become participatory.

It starts with leadership. Pastors and elders set the tone, and it flows down to the worship team, the techs, and the church at large. If you have a problem with church policies, don't stay and be divisive; don't rebel and reject the proper authority



over you. If you can't agree with the church's policy or doctrine, please do not become a backbiter or a grumbler.

If leadership desires a concert style of worship, then that's what you should strive to deliver. I am certainly not advocating doing something that flies in the face of what your pastor and elders have mandated.

On the other hand, if you want participatory worship shared with everyone present — but for some reason, it's just not living up to expectations — here are some suggestions that may help facilitate your congregation's participation and encourage their engagement.

## **NEW SONGS**

Relatively recently, the church — regardless of denomination — had a collection of songs assembled over many years that became part of our communal worship fabric. We knew the songs and, in many cases, the page number of those songs, and we all sang them together, whether it was a hymn or chorus. These songs were, of course, found in the ubiquitous hymnal, a relic in many churches and a shim for floor monitors in others. These are songs that survived generations, songs that are instantly recognizable. We sang them by heart, without the lyrics being projected onto a screen.

Do you still hear them in your church, or do you long for them? Don't get me wrong; I like new songs, too. Bob Sorge, the great speaker and author, has a great line about the old song/new song debate. He says, "Old songs gather us — new songs propel us!" True! However, when a licensing service (like CCLI) has over 300,000 songs in its library, it will be necessary to say "No" to some of them. I typically teach audio and music tech classes with the occasional team-building session. Because my students come from different denominations and regions,

with unique backgrounds and varying skill levels as musicians or singers, I ask them to stand up and sing the Doxology together, a cappella. This helps to unite us in our devotion to God, and nothing brings you closer than singing a familiar song. The sound of this group of complete strangers singing praise to God with one unified voice is pure, unadulterated sweetness.

If you're part of a church that is constantly teaching new songs, then you're forced to repeat them over several services so that they become a part of the church's repertoire. There are different methods to teach new songs to the church, and I will include links later in this guide to give you some examples.

Does your worship team have complete command and understanding of how to play and sing the new song you will teach? Worship teams, on average, are almost always composed of volunteers, who usually have less time per week to rehearse and memorize songs than a professional band. If this is the case, and it usually is, your worship team may not know the song better than the congregation.

Some worship pastors will compile a song playbook of 40–50 songs for the year. The band and singers thoroughly memorize the songs, which allows them to enter worship more freely with the rest of the church. If the worship leaders know the song intimately, it helps everyone else join in because it has now become part of the collection of songs we know and love to sing together. Limit new songs to 10–12 a year. Here is an excellent video from Paul Beloeche talking about this: [Introducing a New Song at Church](#).

### **CAN THE CONGREGATION SING ALONG? ARE THE KEYS TOO HIGH?**

My good friend, Kenny Lamm of *Renewing Worship*, says: “We are singing in keys too high for the average singer. The people we lead in worship generally have a limited range and do not have a high range. When we pitch songs in keys that are too high, the congregation will stop singing, tire out and eventually quit, becoming spectators. Remember that our responsibility is to enable the congregation to sing their praises, not to showcase our great platform voices by pitching songs in our power ranges. The basic range of the average singer is an octave and a fourth from A to D.”

My wife, Sheri Gould, a well-known vocal coach and teacher, has a favorite phrase for a song's melodic range: “C to shining C!”

## **CAN I HEAR THE PERSON NEXT TO ME SINGING?**

John Stackhouse of *Christianity Today* says, “Now, I like Palestrina (choral music), and I like good Christian rock. So, church musicians, if you want to perform a fine song that requires advanced musicianship, do it. We will listen and pray and enjoy it to the glory of God.

“But when you are leading us in singing, then lead us in singing. And turn it down so we are not listening to you – or, even worse, merely enduring you. I know that’s not what you want to happen. But I am telling you that’s what is happening.”

How many worship leaders and musicians, including me, have our hearts and spirits lifted when we sing together as a unified body?

I worked with Chris Tomlin in the early 2000s when in-ear monitoring was becoming a thing. He would always pull one in-ear out (not recommended) to listen to the congregation sing. Chris would step away from the microphone, pull out an earphone and let the church lead him in the song. A giant smile would be on his face, and you knew that these were the moments he cherished. As a worship leader, hearing the church singing with you in full voice is why you are there – worshipping in spirit and voice.

## **ARE YOU INTENTIONAL IN INVITING THE CONGREGATION TO PARTICIPATE?**



Do you have a plan to encourage congregational singing? Are you providing opportunities in the service for them to participate? Do you, for instance, have the band stop playing and sing a cappella together with the congregation? At times, it’s very uplifting to just stop and listen. I can’t imagine a more beautiful sound than hundreds of voices singing together.

Invite the congregation into the journey of worship, and then do all you can to encourage that experience by singing familiar songs as well as new songs that have been appropriately introduced and sung in the vocal range for your congregation.

One thing that works is to incorporate and use choirs. For a few years, my wife trained and led choirs at Bob Kauflin's Worship God conferences. She was given a day or two to organize and train a group from various parts of the world into a unified conference choir. It never ceased to amaze me how those choirs inspired the conference congregation to sing out with passion and abandon. Seeing a choir singing on the platform always makes me want to sing. Here are some great examples of leading with choirs:

- [Andrew Peterson – Is He Worthy](#)
- [Jacob Collier – The Audience Choir](#)
- [Pub Choir](#)

### **GETTING THE SOUND RIGHT**

Let's focus on the sound operator's responsibilities and look at the sound system to see where we can improve. We want the congregation to get a balanced mix at the right volume level for everyone in the sanctuary. While we usually look to sound operators for anything and everything sound-related, they are not the only ones responsible for problems we may encounter.

Communication between the worship leader, band, and tech team is vital, so it's crucial for everyone involved to develop a strong relationship that encourages trust between team members. You must be able to say things to each other without fear of offending. If the guitar player is too loud, try to create a friendly relationship with them before you tell them to turn it down. Remember, if the band is too loud on the stage, the main mix in the sanctuary will have to be that much louder.

This needs to be worked out ahead of time. Some churches use SPL (Sound Pressure Level) meters to establish thresholds for the loudness level in the main sanctuary. However, these levels may often not be based on the reality of that room. They only show an average or peak level. They won't show how musical, bright, dark, distorted, noisy, unbalanced, nuanced, or inarticulate a mix may be.



A scientific study from Dr. David Gauger, a music professor at Moody Bible Institute, found that such sound levels discourage congregational participation. “When you get above 90 dB, it drops off dramatically,” Gauger said. “They do not feel they can worship. They cannot hear their own voice. They do not feel supported.” Meters have their place, but your ears are your best tool. For example, 90 dB may or may not be the right threshold for your room; it should not be looked at as a rule for all rooms. Listening is the best way to determine loudness levels and whether the mix is right.

Simply put, if the volume level is too high, it can hurt worship. People will be distracted, and instead of focusing on the words and worshipping, they’ll be thinking about how loud it is and that their ears are hurting — or they will just leave. I know it’s impossible to please everyone, but as church sound technicians, we do not want to chase people away or cause hearing damage because our services are unnecessarily loud.

On the other hand, the volume levels may be too soft. As a sound operator, you need to be aware of your surroundings. Use your eyes and ears to determine if the levels are too much or not enough. The congregation will not engage if it’s too loud — it’s now become a concert. If it’s too soft, they won’t engage because they don’t want to be heard over the band.

Gauger’s study determined that music that’s too soft also deterred congregational singing. The lack of sufficient volume hurt the worship service because it stifled the congregation’s participation. If participation is a priority, we now have some sound evidence to set reasonable audio levels. When God’s people gather to worship, what should it sound like? Gauger concluded: “The real issue is, can the congregation hear itself?”

Let’s look at the sanctuary system for a moment. The goal of any sound system should be to provide articulate, intelligible coverage of the room in every seat at the right level. Some churches don’t have enough loudspeakers in the room to do this. You may have one pair of speakers in the front of the hall with which you’re trying to fill the entire room. The people in the back are straining to hear while the folks in front are crushed by too much sound. In longer rooms like this, we would typically set up a delay speaker(s) so that the people in the back can hear comfortably while still providing a normal level for the front sections. In some cases, we may need to provide coverage in other areas, like the sides, under the balcony, foyer, etc.

When we can cover the room equally, we will have greater potential to provide the right level for the whole church. Don’t skimp here.

## Resources:

- [Now Hear This! A Critical Look at Loudness](#)
- [How Loud the Worship Team](#)
- [Words of Wonder: What Happens When We Sing](#)
- [Seven Biblical Reasons Why Singing Matters](#)
- [Why Do We Sing in Worship?](#)
- [11 Effective Ways to Introduce New Songs to Your Congregation](#)
- [How to Teach a New Song to the Congregation](#)

## IN CONCLUSION

It's all about "...singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart" (*Ephesians 5:19*). It is to Him, and about Him, that we sing! Singing is such a unique way of bringing your heart, soul, mind and strength together to focus entirely and completely on God. Singing together brings us together and helps us unite.

I hope this article has helped in some way to assist you in your quest to bring your congregation closer together in corporate worship.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Over the last 18 years, Doug has been a very effective presenter at hundreds of worship conferences throughout North America and beyond, focusing his experience on consulting and teaching.

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