

Q#2. How does one introduce new congregational songs?

Presenting a congregation with a new (or unfamiliar) hymn, sight unseen, on Sunday morning during the worship service can backfire. In a typical congregation, most people cannot read music and would become very frustrated in this situation. If the parish musician merely played through an unfamiliar hymn accompaniment once, and then expected the congregation to jump right in on the first verse, the result would be a solo performance on the organ. The most successful way to teach new hymns to a congregation is to adopt a multi-faceted teaching approach which includes the following ideas:

1) Have the organist (or another musical leader) teach the new hymn to small groups within the congregation first (i.e. Sunday school opening devotions, Ladies Aid meetings, LWML meetings, church council meeting devotions, etc.). By teaching the Sunday school children the new hymn, you will teach their parents the hymn also. As those of us with children have experienced, as soon as they learn a new song (especially the very young), they sing it ad nauseam at home, and those living with them are bound to learn it as well.

2) Plan to use the new hymn as a "Hymn of the Month" and sing it during every worship service during that month.

3) Use a choir (adult, or children's choir) for the first one or two Sundays to introduce the hymn. That way, those who have not had the chance to participate in the learning of the hymn at church devotions or meetings during the week will not be asked to sing it right away without having heard it. Using a children's choir to introduce new hymns works very well. The children will be excited to do such important work (teaching adults!) within the Divine Service. The choir may sing all verses the first week, then one or two verses the second week with the congregation joining in on the remaining verses, and finally, the congregation will be able to sing the entire hymn on the last two or three weeks of the month. If there is no choir, consider having the pastor or a cantor sing the first one or two verses each week.

4) If there is no choir and the pastor is uncomfortable singing a solo, careful attention should be given to using the organ (or whatever instrument is used) to effectively introduce the hymn tune. The organist must decide what to play as an introduction and how to play it. If the hymn tune cannot be heard clearly, how will the congregation be able to follow? Playing the melody only, sans accompaniment, enables the listeners to hear all the melody notes clearly without becoming confused by harmonies. (Sometimes harmonies can be mistakenly heard as melody notes.) Equally as important is the choice of organ registration for the introduction. Using the organ's foundation principal stops (8' stops on the manuals and 16' stops on the pedals) works best because it gives the same pitch as the human voice. Adding mixtures or mutation stops is not a good idea because they add harmonics to the sound which may interfere with the clarity of the melody. If the instrument used is a piano, then playing in octaves with both hands works well. If the tune is particularly difficult or long, the first one or two sung verses should be played "melody only" as well.

5) Play pre-service music (or music during the offering or during Holy Communion) that is based on the new hymn. It will familiarize the listeners with the tune.

Successfully teaching new hymns takes a great deal of planning in advance between the pastor and the parish musician. Ideally, the pastor and organist should have regular planning meetings several times a year in order to plan the year's worship services. The teaching of four or five new hymns may be integrated into each yearly schedule without difficulty by following the suggestions above.