

Using Music as the Basis of Faith Formation

Ask any church-going person their favorite hymn or worship song and you will likely get a variety of strong opinions. It is somewhat a given that Christians from the oldest members of our congregations to those just being nurtured in the faith can recall stories of the Bible, specific characters, emotions, or characteristics of their faith by recounting a song. “Zacchaeus was a wee little man.” “Jesus loves me! This I know.” “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound.” The songs of our faith play an indelible role in the formation of our faith.

The theologian/scholar/musician, S.T. Kimbrough, coined the term *lyrical theology* to describe the way that theology was embedded in the poetic texts of our songs of faith. Unlike systematic theology, *lyrical theology* does not set out in an orderly way to explain the mysteries of the Christian faith, but *does* play a role in shaping the life, beliefs, and actions of the assembly. Studying and understanding the church’s song as theology is not the same as reading a commentary on the Gospel of Luke! He writes in an article for *Theology Today*, “The hymns of the church are theology. They are theological statements: the church’s lyrical, theological commentaries on scripture, liturgy, faith, action, and hosts of other subjects which call the reader and singer to faith, life, and Christian practice.” Similarly, Don Saliers argues that singing the faith is an essential spiritual practice of our faith, “[singing our faith], far from being an ornament or decoration to Christian worship and the life of faith, is intrinsic to worship and faith experience... where people sing of God, an embodied theology— a way of living and thinking about life in relationship to God— is formed and expressed.” (Don Saliers in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*. Dorothy Bass, ed.) For these reasons, Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs should receive full consideration in the curriculum of faith formation.

How then do those charged with faith formation within our communities bring the songs of our faith alongside traditional Sunday school lessons, youth group gatherings, Bible studies, or and activities that encourage the deepening of one’s faith? Understanding music as the basis for faith formation— or at the very least, an active partner— can and should take many forms. Congregations can engage in a number of activities that strengthen their connection to the songs of faith while also strengthening a sense of identity in their faith. A list of musical resources is included below to empower leaders— either professional staff or lay volunteers— with these suggestions.

SUGGESTIONS FOR MUSICAL ENGAGEMENT OUTSIDE OF WORSHIP

➤ Practice the hymns

Offer a time outside of the worship service for congregation members to practice the hymns for Sunday, or a small collection of local favorites, so that they may engage more fully with the text as a part of their worship and faith formation experience. See John Bell’s *The Singing Thing Too* for suggestions on how to lead singing for even the most novice of musicians!

➤ **Sing regularly**

Make singing a part of all congregational gatherings. This does not need to be an elaborate endeavor! Consider how the texts of hymns or other songs speak to the purpose for the gathering. For example, open a session meeting by singing verse three of “They’ll Know We are Christians by Our Love” (“we will work with each other; we will work side by side; [Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal](#) #300) or a Presbyterian Women’s gathering by singing “Woman, Weeping in the Garden” (*GtG* #241) to reinforce the important role of women as the first messengers and preachers of the resurrection. Work diligently to reframe the hymns not as supplementary to the gathering or entertainment but firmly connected to the purpose of the gathering.

➤ **Offer formation activities specifically geared toward deepening faith through music**

Consider offering short-term studies or other events specifically focused on understanding the music of the church. Learning basic terms related to hymnology, reflecting on the backstories of favorite hymns, or using seasonal hymns as the in-road to Bible study are all ways to engage music as the basis for faith formation. Make worship and music a category for your faith formation planning alongside Bible study, current events, Presbyterian tradition, etc. Consult with your music director for ideas. The [Presbyterian Association of Musicians](#) also offers a wealth of resources and people that can help with these offerings.

➤ **Sing lots of songs**

Understand the music of the church as a way that people form meaning. When doing this, recognize that the diversity of your church’s repertoire should emulate the diversity of Christ’s church. By adopting this mindset, the music of the church moves well beyond entertainment or simple praise to God, but rather, becomes an embodiment of the church as we are and the church we hope to become. The texts of our songs should challenge us as well as comfort us, remind us and teach us, meet us where we are and encourage our growth as disciples of Jesus.

➤ **Trust your voice and your context**

Throughout church history, the ownership of the musical expression of faith has changed— ebbing and flowing with the resources, preferences, and understandings of the local church. However, music has always been a constant. Whether it was grand choral works or simple Psalms, music has been a crucial part of our life together. Embracing music as a part of faith formation means trusting that faith can be deepened through this practice regardless of talents, skills, experience, etc. of those singing. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it, “The more we sing, the more joy will we derive from it, but, above all, the more devotion and discipline and joy we put into our singing, the richer will be the blessing that will come to the whole life of the fellowship from singing together.” (in *Life Together*)

RESOURCES ON MUSIC FOR FORMATION USE

The following resources are not exhaustive but provide some useful information for non-musicians seeking to deepen their connection to the songs of faith for formation purposes:

- John Bell’s [The Singing Thing](#) and [The Singing Thing Too](#). GIA Publications. Makes the case for congregational singing as well as practical tips and tricks for engaging with music in the church.
- Thomas Troeger [Music as Prayer: The Theology and Practice of Church Music](#). Oxford University Press.

- The History of Hymns Series produced by the United Methodist Discipleship Ministries <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/history-of-hymns>
- Webinars, Townhalls, and printed resources produced by the [Presbyterian Association of Musicians](#) and the [Call to Worship Journal](#).

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