

LEADING WORSHIP



Welcome.

Thanks for downloading the Speaker Notes for the Worship Central Course.

In this third session, we've outlined the structure and key points for the talk, and left space for you to add your own examples. Feel free to personalize the examples and make it your own, but we'd please ask that you keep the core material the same, as we want people to be able to experience the same course wherever they are.

We pray this course will be a great blessing to you and your worship team, and we stand with you as you seek to encounter God, equip the worshipper and empower your local church.

Tim Hughes & Al Gordon

Introduction

Welcome to the Worship Central Course. We all long to grow as worship leaders and musicians. But how do we do this?

In this session we' re looking at the practicalities of leading worship.

Insert Story

Start with a personal humorous story of when you first led worship and it went horribly wrong.

For example, Al tells the story of when he was giving his best, lost in wonder, love and praise, perhaps a little out of tune but full of passion and power. After a while he noticed that his fellow worshippers were taking it in turns to leave the room. 'Must be the presence of the Lord,' he thought. 'God must be moving so powerfully that they need to step out of the Glory to gather their thoughts and catch their breath.' Years later, he discovered the truth. Yes, they were trying to pull themselves together, but only because Al' s singing and playing were so dire. They were taking it in turns to leave the room, collapse in hysterics, compose themselves and come back in, allowing some other poor soul to take a rest from the musical onslaught.

Try to use your own example using Al' s story to help you prepare. If you do not have an example of your own, you can tell the story about Al.

Example story

Al: 'I remember the first time I ever led anyone else in worship. I had just become a Christian a few months earlier, and had joined a small group at HTB, my local church. It was a Tuesday, and I got a desperate phone call at about 5pm from the small group leader to say that the worship leader was ill, she'd tried everyone else, and I was the only person left: could I lead worship that night?

Ever since I'd come to faith in Jesus a few months earlier, I would spend hours sitting in my room trying to play guitar and worshipping God. But the thought of having to lead others in worship was absolutely terrifying. Anyway, there were no other options, so I agreed. My skill on the guitar was limited to two chords, G and C, and I only knew one song, which had four chords, but that was not stopping me.

As we began the time of worship, something extraordinary started to happen. I was convinced that the Spirit of God was powerfully at work, because after about two minutes the group began to rotate into the corridor outside the room, taking it in turns to come in and out. Full of faith, I presumed that revival must have been breaking out on the streets outside. Perhaps there was a spontaneous crowd gathering trying to get into the building. Convinced that things were going really well, I carried on for about another fifteen minutes, singing the same song with only half the needed chords.

They were such an encouraging small group that it was only years later that I found out what was really going on: it was so painfully tuneless, that it was actually quite funny. Rather than laugh in front of me, they were so nice that they left the room to collapse in fits of hysterics in the corridor, and when they had composed themselves, they would come back in and try and keep worshipping! Thankfully, they didn't let on how bad it had been, but encouraged me to keep going.'

Leading others in worship can be a challenging responsibility: standing in front of a group of people, wearing our hearts on our sleeves, making ourselves vulnerable is not an easy job. It takes time, patience, practice and a lot of prayer to move on from the kind of tricky first experience so many of us share.

Whether we've had a bumpy start or not, if we are involved in the worship life of a local church we are worship leaders. If we're leading, singing, playing an instrument, serving upfront or behind the scenes, then we will be helping lead people into the presence of Jesus by what we do. Forget the idea that it's only the person up the front who is the worship leader; all of us, as musicians and team members need to have a sense of ownership, commitment and responsibility towards what we do, and all of us must see it as a holy and serious calling.

We're going to look at three practical questions that apply regardless of our context, model or style of service. These questions apply to all of us and, taken together, they will help us all grow and develop as worship leaders.

The first question to ask is:

1. How are we preparing?

There's something that unites sporting legends, astounding singers and brilliant performers. The more effortless they appear, the greater the amount of work and preparation they have done. And so it is with leading worship. If we want to be effective we need to work hard behind the scenes.

Before leading a time of worship, we need to ask ourselves, how are we preparing both spiritually and practically?

It involves both:

i. Prayer *and* practice

When we think about preparation, there are two extremes to avoid. Firstly, we've got to avoid making it all about the music and the visuals. To spend hours tweaking and testing, only to finally get round to praying just minutes before the service starts ... that's just not going to work. Without realising it, we develop a culture within a team where people rely primarily on their own strengths and gifts rather than on God.

The other extreme to avoid is for a worship team not to rehearse at all but to rely solely on prayer. They gather to pray before the service, thinking that they don't need

to prepare practically. The team may have an impressive depth of spirituality and passion, but as they lead, if the musicians play out of tune, out of time, making frequent mistakes, a congregation will struggle to engage in worship. As worship leaders we need to value both spiritual *and* practical preparation.

ii. Private *before* public

John Wesley was once asked to describe how he balanced his prayer life with his busy schedule of preaching and outreach. He replied, 'every morning I set myself on fire for Jesus, then I go out and people watch me burn.'

Imagine what the impact on the local church would be if every worship team spent time before every session, seeking God passionately in prayer and private worship, as well as in musical and practical preparation. The influence on the worshipping life of the church would be amazing!

As leaders of worship, one of the greatest gifts we can give to our churches is that of being spiritually alive and fresh. There are no shortcuts to developing authentic spirituality. It comes down to the important and obvious disciplines such as reading God's word, spending time in his presence and a dedication to seek him through prayer. If we have no private cry, then how can we stand in front of others pretending that we do? Worship leading involves us taking our private cry and making it public.

iii. Picking the right songs

How do you pick songs in a way that helps people respond to God in a worshipful and meaningful way? There's more to it than throwing together the five most popular songs of the week.

First, find a theme. A theme can bring a focus to a time of worship. A few songs clustered around a particular theme provides direction and a sense of journey for a congregation. As you pull together your set-lists, ask yourself whether there is a clear theme being developed throughout the lyrics of the songs; themes such as God's sovereignty, his mercy, his faithfulness, his creation, or his heart of justice. Let's not just jump randomly from one song to another.

Second, balance substance with simplicity. We are called to worship God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. It is essential to have songs that inspire and stretch our minds in worship, songs that are rich in content. The great hymns are an amazing gift in unpacking and poetically communicating the character of God. But our worship is not merely with our minds; it must also stir the heart.

Paul talks about this to the church in Corinth saying, 'I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind' (1 Corinthians 14:15). We need to get the right balance.

Third, keep it fresh. Introducing new songs can help here – so be on the look out for new material and think through how you can flow these new songs within your more familiar repertoire.

Fresh doesn't have to mean new though: singing an old hymn or song that hasn't been used for a while can be just as powerful. Find new and interesting arrangements and use the best of the old hymns and the best of the latest contemporary songs.

Fourth, think about whom we're leading. The context will have an impact on what songs we choose, the style of service or the equipment we use. Obviously weddings have different requirements to youth celebrations. Or, if you are leading on Alpha, with lots of people who have never been to church, you would chose different songs than you would on a Sunday.

Insert Story

If you have one, insert a humorous story about a time when a worship song was used inappropriately or did not fit the occasion. For example, Tim and Al tell a story about a friend of theirs leading the song 'Happy Day' straight after a very moving and serious moment in the service.

If you do not have a story of your own, you can use the example story below.

Example story

One worship leader was leading worship at an event. Just before he stood up to lead, a video was shown highlighting the plight of the victims of human trafficking.

Unfortunately, during this time the worship leader had momentarily popped out of the room and completely missed a very serious and emotional moment.

Unaware of what had happened, he returned to the stage with a big grin and clicked into Happy Day. Needless to say, it was a disaster.

If you're leading when the service is focusing on issues of poverty, suffering and injustice, it's probably a good idea not to start with 'Happy Day'.

Some songs work brilliantly with a great band and excellent sound system but don't always work so well in someone's living room. In these small gatherings people understandably feel more vulnerable and exposed during worship.

Our role as worship leaders is to enable people to feel secure and free to bring an offering of worship. If they spend the evening terrified that their voice may crack or that people will laugh at their out of tune voice, then they will not engage in worship. In smaller settings it often works better to use simpler songs – particularly songs that are easy to memorise. It is often helpful to pitch the songs in a lower key, making it more comfortable for everyone to sing.

The second question to ask is:

2. What is God doing?

At every moment, on every occasion, in every context, during every time of worship we lead, we need to be asking God what he's doing, where he's leading and how we should respond. We should never just assume or switch off. God has a plan and a purpose for our gathered meetings that he is keen to share with us. Our role is to tune into this and obediently follow.

i. Ways we can lead worship

Generally speaking there are three ways we can lead worship. The first is badly led worship, where basic mistakes are made, songs are sung out of tune, the choice of songs seem unimaginative and random. People are distracted by the glaring mistakes and it is hard for people to enter in.

The second is good, solid worship, where the basics are done well. For instance, the band is led effectively, the songs are well thought through and the congregation can easily respond. For many of us this is where we settle, but there is so much more.

The third way is Spirit-led worship, which has little to do with style, form or tradition, but rather where there is a deep and dynamic exchange between the Holy Spirit and

the congregation. It is here that we see breakthrough, where we see lives changed, vision birthed and passion fuelled. But, we can't make it happen by simply reading a book or taking a course. It takes time. We have to wait in God's presence and practice the art of listening to the leading of the Spirit, allowing him to fill us with power and love, even as we lead worship. It also involves us allowing space in our worship for God's Spirit to move, to not hold the reins so tightly as we try to drive our agenda through.

With all the pressures of playing with a band, remembering chords and words, watching and observing a congregation's response in worship, we can forget to ask 'What is God doing?' But it's often when asking this question that a thought comes to mind: sometimes it's a different song; sometimes it's a line to sing out; perhaps it's an encouragement to worship in silence. It's as we step out in this that we learn and grow and begin to see God at work.

ii. Pastors v prophets

In discerning what God is doing, we need to tread the balance between being pastors and prophets. We need the prophetic to move people on in worship. We need to take risks, allowing space and time for God to take control. However, we do need to be careful and use discernment. If the prophetic is unchecked there is a danger of leaving people feeling confused and fearful.

At the same time the pastoral without the prophetic can result in a church stagnating. We want to see churches moving forward in worship, whilst at the same time taking as many people along with them as possible.

Another thing to remember is that you are there to

iii. Lead worship, not just songs

If we want to be led by the Spirit then we can't just be the kind of person who selects the songs, rehearses the exact arrangements and has the worship all tied up before the congregation has even gathered, never swerving from the set-list no matter what goes on. Worship is so much more than this – it is an encounter with the Lord of heaven; it is a heartfelt response to his initiating love. We can't simply close our eyes, turn up our monitors and forget that there is a group of people that we are meant to be leading. We need to be able to see the people who we are leading, watching out for signs of how and when they are responding or not responding, when they seem to be engaging or disengaging. As worship leaders, we need to have one eye on the Lord, and one eye on the people. As we lead worship we need to regularly open our eyes to see what is happening around us. We can still worship with our eyes open. It doesn't kill the holy moment. Presumably at Pentecost someone had their eyes open to see and record where God moved in great power and when people were responding.

iv. Who are we leading?

During a time of leading worship it's helpful to note some simple observations on how people are entering in. How are people responding in terms of the level of singing and involvement? If you look out to a sea of blank expressions and it seems that the congregation has no pulse whatsoever, then we need to ask ourselves some questions. Are we singing too many new, unfamiliar songs? Are we relying on the same songs we've used for the last month, are people just bored? Is the band too loud, drowning people out? Is the band too quiet, making people feel self-conscious and awkward?

When things get really tough, it's often helpful to find a familiar song that you know really works for your church. If people are still disengaged after singing this then take time to think and pray afterwards. It might be the church is going through a dry season. Perhaps the people need to be encouraged and affirmed.

v. Worship is both caught and taught

Worship is both caught and taught. If we really believe that worship is our highest calling and therefore our first priority, then we need to be continually teaching our congregations on the subject of worship, what it is and how we can respond in both a private and corporate setting.

We need to model worship if people are going to catch a vision for it, and we need to teach into it. This is where the relationship between the worship leader and the senior church leader is so important. Having times together to discuss the spiritual climate of the church is a key aspect of team leadership.

Insert story

Tim shares a story about a time when he was frustrated by a lack of visible response when leading a particular congregation in worship. He felt that he had to work hard to make the worship time meaningful. However, God challenged him instead to love the people and pray for them and through this he saw a remarkable change.

If you have one, share a similar story, or alternatively share Tim' s experience described in the example below.

Example story

Tim: 'I remember leading a particular congregation regularly in worship where the response always seemed minimal. Every time I'd leave the stage after leading worship I'd feel frustrated and angry. During the sermon I'd be quietly fuming and complaining to God. On one such Sunday, where things had been particularly tough, I started moaning to God. My assumption was that he too must feel angry and disappointed with the congregation's response. In the midst of my angst and gripes, God challenged me saying, "Tim I love these people and I want you to love them

too.”

I felt convicted and from that day on would pray, ‘God give me compassion for these people. Help me to love them.’ Over weeks and months, something shifted in my heart and I’m sure the congregation began to notice. Rather than leading aggressively when people were slow to respond, I began to lead with a sensitivity and grace which was God given. As I led with a new sense of love, the congregation began to respond with fresh passion and vigour.’

When we feel discouraged by the apparent apathy or disconnect of a congregation, it can be easy to start leading out of frustration. But we are called to feed the sheep, not beat the sheep. We need to pray that God would give us his grace to keep loving and serving.

Final question,

3. Where are we growing?

It’s key to understand that when we are leading worship, we give out physically, emotionally and spiritually. When we fail to take time being replenished, we are in danger of finding ourselves sinking spiritually, and even of making errors of judgment and poor life choices.

So, we need to:

i. Find time to recharge

Many of us would be lost without our phones. We've become reliant on them for our work and daily routines, but without recharging them on a daily basis they become redundant and useless. Through this regular, essential discipline, our lives become synced with God's purposes and plans. Like a regular software update, our souls become refreshed and renewed by the Spirit of God.

Spiritually, nothing brings more refreshment than time in Jesus' presence. In Mark's Gospel, we see the twelve disciples return from being sent out to preach the good news and pray for the sick and oppressed. As they gather round Jesus, exhausted by their travels and ministry, many other people join them, perhaps hoping to be prayed for, to hear more of their teaching.

The disciples were so pressed by the crowds of people that they didn't even have time to eat. In the stress and chaos, Jesus takes charge saying to the twelve, ' "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" ' (Mark 6:31).

For some of us, we need to heed Jesus' words, getting time out to rest in his presence, learning the art of remaining and abiding in Christ. It's deeply practical

advice. For this reason, praying together as a team before and after the services is key. This is a great way to thank God for all that he's done; it's a helpful reminder that ultimately our worship is all from him. But it's also an opportunity to pray for ourselves, to ask that God would pour into us after we've been giving out. This time of prayer is so important.

ii. **Develop a sustainable rhythm**

Rick Warren speaks of a rhythm of ministry that allows space to recharge. He encourages people to *divert daily*, *withdraw weekly* and *abandon annually*. *Divert daily* means finding time to switch off from work – go for a run, enjoy a good meal, watch a film, read the newspaper. By allowing a period of rest each day, we keep awake and alert to serve God. *Withdraw weekly* means taking a period of time off, perhaps a couple of days, a few afternoons or whatever works for you. In this time maybe turn the phone off, spend a day with great friends, do something fun – relax. Finally, *abandon annually* connects with the truth that we all benefit from a good holiday every year. It's often during these times away that the busyness of life settles and we get fresh perspective, and that God speaks clearly about future direction.

iii. **Embrace feedback**

As we gain experience and reach a level where we are quite comfortable leading worship, there is a danger that we stop reflecting on what we're involved in. But one

of the exciting aspects of leading worship is that there are always ways we can grow and develop; there is always more to learn. We should always be asking our team what we can do better, what worked and what didn't. And we need to be ready for the answer – we need to embrace constructive criticism, because only then will we grow.

It's essential we never lose a hunger to be the best we can be. Part of this involves inviting your senior leaders to point out areas that can be strengthened in your worship leading. For some of us this process can be hard. We may find it difficult not to take things personally. We might miss all the encouragements and focus on the one negative. Some of us have served in churches where we've been unfairly and harshly criticised. We may have been stung by the pain of harsh words spoken over us.

The truth is that we will always face criticism, some helpful, some just abusive and destructive. If it's constructive, then there will be things we can learn and embrace. And if it's harsh then we need to learn to handle it well. There are two positive ways of approaching this. Firstly we can try to find the kernel of truth in the criticism. Even if the comment was meant to harm, as you reflect on it you might see a small element of truth that you can then work on.

Second, if after reflection there is no truth whatsoever in someone's criticism and it is simply vindictive and spiteful, well, Jesus promises to bless us: 'Blessed are you when

people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.’ (Matthew 5:11–12, TNIV)

Great leadership is the art of keeping going despite setbacks and discouragements. Winston Churchill defined success as ‘the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm.’

Finally, we need to build a team of worshippers who encourage one another, who spur each other on to grow, develop and thrive.

As we close, St Paul writes this:

‘Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.’ (Romans 12:10–12)

Leading worship is the most amazing privilege. Let’s give our all as we serve the church believing that great times are ahead. The best is yet to come!

Pray

Heavenly Father, we pray you would equip us as worship leaders. We pray that by the Holy Spirit, you would renew our zeal and fervour as we serve the Lord. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Next

We'd encourage you to spend time praying for each other, asking God to equip you as worship leaders. Then break into Groups for the discussion time.

The Notes will have questions already built into them, so follow these to guide your discussions. They can be downloaded from WorshipCentral.org.

Also, we'd love your feedback on the session you've just given, as we're continually in the process of honing and updating this material. You can upload your examples and illustrations on the website.

Scripture quotations taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION.

Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society.

Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton Publishers, A member of the Hachette Livre UK Group.

All rights reserved.

“NIV” is a registered trademark of International Bible Society.

UK trademark number 1448790.

Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.