

## **Q1. What makes a song singable for a congregation?**

“Singable” is a tough term to define. Usually it means familiar, yet there are also musical characteristics that need to be considered when thinking about congregational songs. Most reflect the fact that congregations are groups of people – corporate song (which is very rare in our society) – and those people are often novice singers (in part because corporate song is rare in our society.) With a group of amateurs in mind, musical issues to consider are:

1. Range: C to an octave and a step D is about it for amateur musicians. Anything lower than that and it’s just grovelly; anything above that is a bit strained. If tunes are too high or too low, transpose them. The key for the congregation singing is more important than the key for instrumentalists.
2. Leaps: Step-wise melodies are easiest. They can also get boring. A few characteristic leaps make the melody interesting. Too many leaps, particularly awkward ones make the melody difficult to remember and thus to sing.
3. Melismas: More than one note per syllable is very hard to hear and hard to sing. Most good group song has one (maybe two) notes per syllable.
4. Rhythms: Simpler rhythms are easier, but like step-wise melodies, they can get boring. A few characteristic rhythmic motives, particularly if repeated exactly within the tune, are interesting and catchy. Several complicated rhythms make a melody confusing. A syncopated rhythm or two is a characteristic rhythm. Several syncopations in a row (particularly within a melisma) leaves groups befuddled
5. Rhythmic consistency: Each stanza should have the same rhythm. Verses with differing numbers of syllables and rhythmic variant are very confusing. Rhythmic repetition is the key to developing familiarity.
6. Rests: The end of one phrase should generally be the beginning of the next phrase. Longer rests means the people don’t know when to come in on consecutive phrases.
7. Phrasing: Phrases should be long enough to express a coherent thought, but not so long that one can’t sing it in a single breath. However, merely breaking up a text into short musical ideas destroys the notion of phrase.

This list is far from exhaustive, but provides a few simple guidelines to consider when selecting (or writing) songs for a congregation. These aren’t rules per se, since much quality congregational music exists that don’t follow this model on every point. However, consideration of these musical elements can help achieve an important balance in developing a repertoire of singable music for a congregation.