

Truths, Myths, and Falsehoods on How Latter-day Saints are to Use Music in their Worship Services

OFFICIAL SOURCES

<http://lds.org/churchmusic/0,17932,4586-1,00.html> ... LDS.org's general music pages
<http://lds.org/pa/display/0,17884,6747-1,00.html> ... for those with music callings.
<http://lds.org/cm/display/0,17631,4987-1,00.html> ... current Handbook of Instructions on Music
<http://lds.org/pa/display/0,17884,6755-1,00.html> ... Q&A on appropriate music for Sacrament Meeting.

MY COMMENTS:

Having served in the Armed Forces and having moved from place to place, I know that the 'official' rules on how music is used in Latter-day Saint worship services can vary from place to place. There are several reasons for this:

One, local leaders are expected to make certain decisions left to them by the Handbook, and they will make them differently according to culture, locale, and experience.

Two, some local leaders take an opinion expressed by a higher authority as gospel truth and not as the opinion it was meant to be.

Three, the local leaders are not reading or following the most-current Handbook of Instructions.

Four, some local leaders hear the decisions other local leaders make and choose to follow those instead of reading the Handbook and making their own decisions.

Let's read from the current instructions the First Presidency has given at the internet address shown above. The Church Music Committee tells me personally that these are the only instructions; there are no others - none, nada, zip. No secret communications - just the Handbook of Instructions. If one is not following the instructions above then one is not following the First Presidency.

Let's break this down what's said in the above internet addresses:

One, Stake presidents and bishops are to determine what music and musical instruments are suitable for any given meeting, not the artists within the ward.

Two, the hymnal is the basic resource for music for church meetings. If other music is used it must be in keeping with the spirit of the hymns in the hymnal and texts are to be doctrinally correct.

Three, the purpose of the music is not to be a concert but to aide in worship. The performance should draw the congregation towards the Spirit of worship and not towards the talents of the performer.

Four, the use of instruments other than piano and organ should be in keeping with the spirit of the particular meeting. There is a "such as" used to give an example of instruments that would be less-worshipful in sound and therefore considered not as appropriate, but this is not an outright ban on them - situations should be weighed on a case-by-case situation. Previous handbooks outright forbade guitars, but you will notice they are not mentioned here. I have been in many Sacrament Meetings in which a family sang accompanied by Mom or Dad on a guitar, and it was well within the spirit and scope of the meeting. (Think of the Trapp Family Singers as portrayed in The Sound of Music.)

In addition to the Handbook of Instructions, the First Presidency followed this up with the following policy letter to all church leaders:

November 7, 2002

To: General Authorities, Area Authority Seventies; Stake, Mission, and District Presidents; Bishops and Branch Presidents.

Dear Brethren,

MUSIC FOR CHURCH MEETINGS

Inspirational music is an essential part of worship. When prayerfully selected, music can invite the Spirit of the Lord, increase devotion to the gospel, and lead to greater spirituality.

We remind Stake Presidencies and bishoprics that they may consider both the hymns and other appropriate music when planning meetings. The hymns of the Church are the basic music for worship services and are standard for congregational singing. However, in addition to the hymns, other appropriate selections may be used for prelude and postlude music, choir music, and special musical selections.

May you be blessed in using inspirational music to enhance worship and strengthen members of the church.

Sincerely your brethren,

Gordon B. Hinckley
Thomas S. Monson
James E. Faust

From this policy letter we learn that the current hymnal is to be used for congregational singing, but other music in Sacrament Meeting - prelude, postlude, choir and other special numbers - may be from other sources as long as they are appropriate for the meeting as already defined.

BREAKING MYTHS

Okay, we've read the First Presidency's directions, and what they say takes precedence over local leaders - local leaders are supposed to follow the First Presidency's guidance, not the other way around. Additionally, a local leader's decision affects only the area over which they preside; not the entire church. Other local leaders are free to make different decisions for their area of responsibility.

Let's consider some of the myths and rumors:

#1 ... "The First Presidency says we can only use

the hymnal in our meetings." ... FALSE ... The handbook and letter quoted above show this is false. If a local leader makes this decision then he needs to own up to it and stop blaming the First Presidency. The Church Music Committee has told me personally that the First Presidency has never issued a "hymnbook only" policy; see the next statement.

#2 ... "When the current hymnal was published we were told to not use anything else in our meetings." ... FALSE ... When the 1985 hymnal was published the

First Presidency encouraged us to use it often and and to get familiar with it, using it in as many meetings as we could. Many local leaders took this to mean "hymnbook only", which was not said and was not intended. Referring to the out-going hymnal, for example, the First Presidency wrote: "you may sell them at a nominal cost to members for use in their homes. You may wish to retain a selected number of old hymnbooks for possible use by your choir." (Sept. 1985 ENSIGN Magazine)

#3 ... "Congregational singing is to be from the current hymnal; other musical numbers can be from other sources." ... TRUE ... This is a true statement. The ward music leader shares the proposed musical numbers with the bishop to get his final approval. Hopefully the bishop has a music leader who reads the handbook and follows it, but it should still be presented to him for his approval.

#4 ... "You can only sing songs from the hymnal and the Children's Songbook while inside the church building." ... FALSE ... Then why do Scouts meet in the building and sing scout songs? Why do the Young Women have a songbook? And don't forget Seminary music! This is a local leader's decision that shows he was not in harmony with the Handbook.

#5 ... "We can only use the current hymnals & children's songbooks; we can't use books from the past." ... FALSE ... Current hymnals are the standard used for congregational singing, but this doesn't mean the old ones are 'banned' for special musical numbers. (See #2.) But do be mindful, however, of why some hymns or verses aren't used anymore.

#6 ... "We're not allowed to stand while singing, not even for the National Anthem." ... FALSE ... This is a local decision too many people assume is from a higher level. If this is true then why do we stand for the rest hymn in stake and General Conference? I dare anyone to try to make me sit through the National Anthem of my country!

#7 ... "Choirs can only sing from the current hymnal." ... FALSE ... Refer to #2 for choirs singing from past hymnals. There are well-intended leaders who encourage this because of the amount of

photocopying of copyrighted material contained in the choir closet - I have heard one member of the Church Music Committee refer to the average choir closet as a 'lawsuit waiting to happen'. Copyright laws must be obeyed, and local leaders need to budget accordingly.

#8 ... "Persons performing a musical number in our ward meetings must be a ward/stake member" with the variation "...must be a member of the church." ... FALSE ... This is totally a local decision. As long as they are doctrinally correct and are inviting the Holy Spirit into the meeting, then the Handbook does not forbid it. Where I grew up there was a nice Jewish girl who used to sing Old Testament-themed pieces in our Sacrament Meeting. It was highly spiritual and wonderful bridge-building between two congregations.

#9 ... "You can only play the organ in the chapel.... guitars are absolutely forbidden, and so are stringed instruments..." ... FALSE ... Why is there a piano in the chapel? The current handbook no longer bans guitars or other stringed instruments - it only mentions "instruments with a prominent or less worshipful sound, such as most brass and percussion, are not appropriate for sacrament meeting", with no mention about how nicely they might fit in other meetings held in the building. (It doesn't ban bagpipes, but does that mean they are 'approved'?) There is no outright ban on any instruments; only a statement that their use may or may not be appropriate in Sacrament Meeting - again, local music leaders and presiding leaders are able to make the final decision. All music used in worship services is to add to the spirit of worship, be in harmony with the style of music in the hymnal, and lyrics are to be doctrinally correct.

#10 ... "You can only play 'church music' in the chapel." ... FALSE ... What about all those cultural events we used to hold right there in the chapel? A Latter-day Saint building used to be a cultural magnet for a community with dancing in the cultural hall and concerts in the chapel complete with applause. Today we just stay home and listen to CD's...

#11 ... "We can only use 'approved' music for home and private worship." ... FALSE ... I really got angry when someone tried to force this one on me. Approved by who? "...it is not meet that I should

command in all things; for he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant; wherefore he receiveth no reward." (D&C 58:26) The only approval I seek for religious music in the home is that of the Holy Spirit, and it's amazing how many genres of sacred music He can speak through, many of which would never be utilized in a current Latter-day Saint worship meeting.

#12 ... "Hymns used as Sacrament hymns must specifically mention the bread and water or Christ's suffering." ... FALSE ... There was a policy letter to this effect back in the 1970's, but when the current Handbook of Instructions came out all previous handbooks and policy letters were pronounced superseded and no longer valid; the First Presidency even directed that they be thrown away. Today this is something left to local leaders to decide. Check the Table of Contents in the current hymnal to see what hymns the Church Music Committee considers appropriate sacrament hymns.

#13 ... "One should not write new hymns unless called to do so by the First Presidency." ... FALSE ... I was actually told this by a bishop of another ward while writing a hymn text on the bus ride home from work on a really bad Friday. The person even tried to take my pen and rhyming dictionary away from me. I'll just say that an interesting, one-sided discussion ensued, and that person won't sit by me anymore.

#14 ... "An Apostle told us at a regional meeting..." and the variation "A member of the Church Music Committee told us..." ... FALSE ... Being from the First Presidency, the Handbook of Instructions takes precedence over anything anyone else tells you (even that mystery Apostle) in a meeting. Any change to the handbook will bear the First Presidency's signature. The Church Music Committee told me in a telephone conversation that they want the names of these alleged leaders and committee members who teach the use of music in church meetings in any other way than as outlined in the Handbook of Instruction as they will take the names to the First Presidency. I am *not* making this up.

#15 ... Persons who are performing a musical number in Sacrament Meeting are not allowed to say a few words before performing; they are to just get up, perform, and sit back down. ... FALSE ... Rumor has it that the First Presidency sent out a letter to this effect. I don't know any local leader who has ever seen this letter. The Church Music Committee didn't even receive it.

Do you know any other myths or rumors about how we are to use music in our worship services? If so, please send them to me and let's compare them to what is written in the Handbook of Instructions to see if it's from the First Presidency or from a local leader and applicable only to that local leader's locale.