

Music is led from within the congregation

A RECENT change at St Jude's Church, Southsea, is to place the worship group within the congregation itself – rather than at the front.

It's designed to show that the musicians are not supposed to be the focus during worship – their role is also to worship God alongside the congregation.

The keyboard player, guitarists, drummer and singers are placed in the middle of the nave, with chairs arranged in a V-shape around them.

The vicar, the Rev Adam Tams, plays keyboards and is one of the regular worship leaders. He consulted other musicians about the change before it happened.

"The team concluded that we were struggling to engage people, especially those who were further away from the band," he said. "Some of the band weren't keen for us to be upfront, so we decided to place them in the centre of everyone. That allows the focus to be on the cross, as people look to the front."

"We are astounded by the difference it has made. It also meant the musicians can be in a circle looking at each other, allowing them to be more



The worship group placed in the centre of the congregation at St Jude's Church, Southsea

responsive to the Spirit as they can see each other and the congregation."

Adam also believes in the value of contemporary worship songs – not necessarily because he thinks they'll appeal to younger people, but because they can allow churchgoers to focus on their relationship with God.

"I believe it's really important spiritually for us to meet under the banner of worshipping God, and sung worship can engage every part of us,"

he said.

"Hymns are often a great way for us to exhort theological truths, and I love singing them. When my wife Jess and I went through a tough time with a miscarriage, it was traditional hymns and liturgy that we went to."

"But repeating certain phrases – whether it is meditating on Scripture, singing Taize chants, using liturgy, or singing a worship song – does allow me to engage with God in a more intimate way. You're thinking less

about what the next line is, and more about the meaning.

"I'm not a very good musician. When I lead it tends to be more reflective, as I'm leading from the piano and it's harder to be upbeat without a full band. We did have a paid worship leader, who we chose not to replace, but it's not a bad thing for the vicar to model what worship might look like in a very visible way."

"There can be a tension between traditional and modern worship, but it's not

always what you expect. We have half a dozen students who come to our 9am traditional service, rather than the 7pm one we specifically created for that age group. That's challenged my thinking."

"The reality is that we all experience worship differently, and all a worship leader can do is to try to make it as authentic as possible for those gathered in the church that day."

traditional hymns and more modern worship songs, we try to plan them as a hybrid team. That means the worship group and the choir working together, which for us seems to work successfully."

Andrew Day, Director of Music at **St Paul's, Barton**, on the Isle of Wight, feels that any tension between traditional and modern worship styles has dissipated – they went through that transition decades ago.

"When I became Director of Music here in the second half of the 1990s, we had more of a 'hymn/song sandwich' kind of service, and we introduced a block of worship songs," he said. "It was a challenge to start with, but now that's part of our DNA."

"A series of worship songs gives people the chance to really engage with the Lord and listen to his voice. I know that, as lead worshipers, we have to resist the temptation to think that our 'worship time' is just when we sing – we worship God in the rest of the service and in our day-to-day lives."

The St Paul's band includes Andrew, who plays the keyboard, his wife Liz on the bass, his sister Jude on the piano and Tom on drums. Andrew and Liz share lead vocals with Jude and Tom providing harmonies.

They've been leading worship together for so long that if they haven't had time to rehearse, they can just turn up and play.

"If we're singing a new song, we send a Youtube link to the musicians, and provide lead sheets, and Liz and I practice at home," he said.

"But we've been working as a team for so long that we can ad lib the music a little. We don't have a big playlist, but we do sometimes retire a song because it's a bit tired, and introduce something new."

"I'm not that comfortable with the model of having the band at the front, as it's God we are worshipping. We tend to be to the side. And although we're happy for new members to join the band, it's good for them to become part of the regular congregation first."



The worship band leading music at Hart Plain Church

Worship band integral to all-age services

YOU don't need to audition or to have passed music exams to play in the worship band at Hart Plain Church. They have an open door to new members.

But that doesn't mean they lack musical expertise. Several of their members play or sing in other bands and choirs, and the core group have played together for years. The keyboard, drums, guitars, ukulele and vocalists are an integral part of their all-age services on the first Sunday of each month. They're also invited to play on other occasions.

And the deacon-in-charge, the Rev Kate Macfarlane, who tends to lead all-age services, said: "It's important to me that everyone feels welcome, so we don't audition musicians or singers. If someone says they'd like to join, they can do so."

"We have a faithful and forgiving congregation, so if someone happens to make a mistake, we just laugh about it and move on. It's not supposed to be a concert – we're joining together to worship God. But actually, the musicians do want to give of their best to God, and they often sound amazing."

"Because we're a local ecumenical partnership, people come from all sorts of backgrounds. So our congregation enjoy both traditional hymns on the organ, and worship songs played by the group – we only have the one service each Sunday, so everyone experiences everything!"

The group is led by Kathy Gunn, who has sung there for more than 30 years. She said: "It is a mature group, but that reflects our congregation."

"Our guitarist and bass player are amateurs, but play with the group Dragonfly to a good standard, and one of our keyboard players is a music teacher. A couple of those who sing are part of Milton Glee Club."

"The singers sit at the front, whether they are being the choir or the vocalists for the worship group, and we use the lectionary to choose songs that fit the theme."

"Music is really important to me, and is crucial to my faith. We missed worshipping together during Covid, and I was passionate about us coming back together. People in the congregation do look engaged when we are leading worship, and we want to set a good example by worshipping God too as we lead."

"We try to learn new songs, but we only rehearse once a month, so it's hard. The group would benefit from some new, younger voices, who would also like to express their faith through songs."

One song sung each week is the Hart Plain Church prayer, created after the diocese's Leading Your Church Into Growth (LYCIG) training, and was set to a familiar tune.

Four of the Hart Plain Church group are also in a band that plays for Havant deanery events, such as deanery synod.