



Using Music to explore Scripture with young people

Music has been used throughout history both to praise God and to teach people about God. The powerful mix of melody, beat, words and silence often expresses something that would be hard to convey using just written words or visual arts. Music is also a key element of youth culture, and, although we may find it fairly foreign to what we're used to, harnessing the music that young people listen to can really help explore Scripture and faith-themes with a group.

A SHARING EXPERIENCE

A good starting point if you want to explore the deeper meaning of music is to ask group members to select a song that means something special to them, and have a meeting where each person can play their song and talk about why it's important. You'll be surprised at the potential depth of sharing, although you should carefully steer conversation so that nobody feels obliged to share if they would prefer not to. You may also need to be ready for some music that you really don't like (or can't even see as music)... the key factor is not necessarily the music that is chosen, but instead the reasons for which the choice has been made.

Note: if your group are young teenagers, it would be appropriate to suggest some rules for what they can bring to the meeting – nothing with bad language or sexually explicit overtones. As they get older, you instead might find that the group either self-censor, or that these grey areas provoke interesting discussion.

A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Another way to use music is to explore a particular theme, topic or Biblical passage using a piece of music. For instance, you could use 'Perfect Gentleman' by Wyclef Jean to cast a contemporary slant on the Gospel story of the woman caught in adultery; 'What I've Done' by Linkin Park could be an interesting way to explore reconciliation and forgiveness.

Finding the piece of music is the first challenge. If you don't know where to start, each month Youthwork Magazine has a 'ready-to-use' discussion based around a particular album. 'Damaris' is an online service with articles from an evangelical perspective about music, film and culture (www.damaris.org/cw/) Alternatively, you could ask your group, (or some particular members) to come up with a list of songs that have a deeper meaning that they would like to explore.

Once you have a few suggestions, you need to spend a bit of time researching the options. No matter whether you have a ready-to-use guide or not, you should read the song's lyrics to check that you're happy with what they say. You can go to www.google.co.uk and search the title of any song, along with the word 'lyrics' and you should have a variety of different sites that will give you the song lyrics. This should give you an idea of which song to pursue, depending on which lyrics you think best fit your theme.

Once you have decided on your song, you can either download a digital version (normally for 79p, from iTunes) or you can buy a CD with the song on (up to £14 per album). If you buy a digital version, be aware that most laptops don't have internal speakers that will carry the song beyond a small area around your computer – if you are meeting in a large room, or would like a 'fuller' effect, use some external speakers or burn the song onto a CD so that you can use a stereo system. Always check you know how your particular equipment works before a session.

At NYMO, we tend to print off the lyrics, so that you can play through the song once without them, then pass around the lyrics and listen again, so that the group are able to follow how the song goes. For many of your group it might be the first time they've listened closely to a song's words. It's helpful to discuss any words or ideas that the group don't understand (so that they don't get left behind in conversation) – again, this is dependent on you making sure you've listened through beforehand, and if you don't understand, checking out the meaning online.

Once you have discussed the practical theme of the song, you can look behind the superficial message, at what themes the song unpacks. You might like to do this by examining any characters that are in the song, the words of the chorus, how the song made the group feel, what they think it says about life, or even playing the video to the song, if you can find it on www.youtube.com or as an iTunes download (for instance, the video to the song 'Beautiful' by Christine Aguilera brings a much deeper perspective to the words).

Finally, you should always look at what the Bible (and the Church) says about the topic or theme you are discussing. A good place to start is www.biblegateway.com, where you can type in a particular theme or topic, and it will provide you with a whole bunch of scripture references relating to that theme. Alternatively, you could look up a theme at the back of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and find the corresponding paragraph, which will provide you with an understanding of what the Church teaches about a topic, as well as some key scriptures and quotes from saints and church documents. Again, at NYMO, we think it's a good idea to just use one, or maybe two Bible passages, and either 'compare and contrast' what the song says, and what the Bible says, or spot the similarities.

A PRAYERFUL EXPERIENCE

You might also consider using songs as a prayerful reflection to finish a group session. Using a song from the charts might surprise your group, and help them to recognize that God is in the midst of music, as well as everywhere else in life!

Again, you should be selective about the music you choose, but, as you're not drawing a session of exploration out of the music, you don't necessarily need to print out lyrics or discuss the meaning of the song in too much detail.

As it's a prayer time, you'll normally find that playing quieter, slower and more reflective songs will work better, although don't overlook the opportunity to play high energy songs to empower a group prayer.

As songs normally last a minimum of 3 minutes, you might find that your group need a focus during the time the song plays. You can use a candle or image in the middle of the room.

Alternatively, if you have some reflective images on a slideshow or video that fits in with the theme of the prayer, you could play this using a data projector during the prayer.

As it may be an unfamiliar way for your group to pray, remember to sit near the volume control, so that if they're becoming very restless, you can gently fade the music down.

RESOURCES

As music moves so swiftly, it's tricky to find any written resources that don't feel dated on using music in ministry. We do keep a back catalogue of songs that we've used on the Micahspace site at www.themicahspace.com/musicarchive

Individuals, bands or groups that you might like to keep an eye on, as their music is often useful (not necessarily Christian) are:

- Athlete
- Beyonce
- Coldplay
- The Killers
- Lily Allen
- Miley Cyrus
- Pink
- The Script
- The Streets (beware the language)
- Will Young
- U2