

Most congregations have people, young or old, who have hidden talents. At some stage or another they have played a musical instrument. It may be something very basic like banging a tambourine or playing the triangle or it could be playing a harp or a contra-bassoon. For most it will lie somewhere in between. Many young people play instruments and with a bit of forward planning an enthusiastic leader can make them part of a group even if they have only just begun to play, and quite often they will bring friends along too.

To start a music group may seem a rather daunting prospect but is well worth while, as long of course that there is no strong objection to the idea - and even the most sceptical in the pews can usually be persuaded to give the idea a chance!. A leader will ideally be able to produce simple arrangements for the available instruments and of a degree of difficulty that includes all the players, but there are many commercial publications available which give arrangements of hymns and songs.



To give some idea of the possibilities here are 3 different real-life stories

The Well Established and Accepted Group

This church has two services on a Sunday morning. At the earlier service the congregation is mainly in the 50+ age range and follows a traditional pattern with well-known hymns, although often by contemporary writers.

The accompaniment is provided by using a keyboard with a rota of volunteers. The music at the later service is provided by a band of 20 or so people (age range from 14 years - 50+) There is a variety of instruments, including, flute, recorders, drums guitars and keyboard. There is no singing group but occasionally a choir is put together for special events. The members are committed to playing in the band and are constantly trying to recruit new members, especially among the younger people in the church; they do not have to be expert musicians - but are encouraged to learn and develop from the experience of playing with others.

The band is enthusiastically received and is now an established part of regular church worship. The only problem is in finding enough rehearsal time as everyone seems to have such busy lives.



The Occasional Music Group

As a rule this group plays for special occasions accompanying the singing. The organiser works hard in providing instrumental parts using a computer programme (Sibelius) thus ensuring that everyone has their own music and that some tunes can be transposed in order that too many sharps or flats in any part can be avoided!

The members of the group are mainly young people, and having been playing together for 3 years or so. Some are now moving on to university and are no longer available and so far there have not been any replacements forthcoming. The group has a range of instruments: violins, viola, cello, saxophone, flute, oboe, recorder a trumpet and piano. There was a drummer, but this, it seems, was a step too far for the congregation! Sometimes, in addition to the hymns, the group will perform a special item.

The “Would-Be” Music Group

In this congregation there is an enthusiastic musician who would love to organise a music group and is trying hard! So far she has identified a keyboard player, some recorders, a violin, a guitar, a clarinet, an oboe and a flute. Unfortunately one person plays 3 of these instruments! There is some percussion available in the children’s church cupboard – banging and shaking only! The two organists are encouraging and will use the piano rather than the organ if requested. The group have played on a couple of occasions, mainly to accompany suitable hymns and whilst some of the comments received have been favourable - the main response has been silence! Rehearsal time in busy schedules can be a problem - but with some forward planning and discussion with the person leading worship on a particular Sunday there is some hope that the group will become a more regular part of worship and rehearsals will become a regular fixture too. The enthusiast is sure that there are more musicians in the congregation, but so far they seem to be too shy to share their talents. However she will not be deterred and is trying hard to make sure that a music group becomes an established part of worship - not every week but perhaps once a month. It’s a start!

So how can we help the “Would Be” become the “Established”?

The answer is by encouragement and help in providing resources. A not very large sum of money can be a real bonus to a group starting up. Music is expensive and even photocopying costs money (and it is often illegal!). Some people may have instruments lying around unused at home that would be welcomed by an embryo Music Group. Encourage positive comments - it does help musicians to know that someone has noticed that they are playing and a few positive words of praise go a long way. The performance may not be perfect but these people are doing their best to the glory of God and to try to help make worship relevant in today’s world.

To those who say that their preference is for respectable organ accompanied hymn singing (preferably with words written pre 1900) direct them to music history books and how church music was performed in the 18th and 19th centuries, usually with a band and sung with a real beat and enthusiasm. There is an excellent CD of Maddy Prior and her Carnival Band, performing hymns in the style of the 18th century they may be surprised!

The United Reformed Church Musicians’ Guild

Starting a Music Group or Band

