

HOW TO RUN A SONG CIRCLE

Song circles are a simple and effective way of nurturing song writing and song writers in your church community. The format, developed by Adam Russell & friends in Campbellsville Vineyard, KY, fosters creative community, helps writers to steward their gift and hone their craft, and cultivates a really healthy rhythm of creativity.

So how do you run a song circle? The model consists of 4 broad phases: writing, rest, editing, and trialling.

WRITING PHASE

At a glance: 6-8 writers meet fortnightly for 8-10 weeks, bringing a new song to each of the 4-5 meet ups, anyone who is unable to commit is out for the rest of the song circle. The focus of each gathering is on listening to all the new songs, with some time for feedback.

To dive into the writing phase, you will need to identify 6-8 song writers from your community, any less than 6 and there will be a certain buzz that is missing, any more than 8 and it will be tricky to get through all the songs when you meet up. You are looking for writers who are capable of independently churning out a song every fortnight for 8-10 weeks and who can commit to all the meet ups.

You might want to hold an introductory session to set the scene, but thereafter each session is a song DEADLINE, and anyone who is unable to bring a new song each time forfeits their involvement in the rest of the song circle. Yes, it is tough, but we creatives *need* deadlines to help us get down to work and learn how to steward our gift well. A new song, means one that is written fresh for the song circle, not a re-worked version of one from a previous life, consisting of at least two sections (verse + chorus, chorus + bridge, or two verses if in AAA form etc.) with at least melody and lyrics.

During the fortnightly meet ups the focus is on listening to the songs. Take it in turns to share, ensuring each writer brings enough printed copies of their chord chart for the rest of the group. Once the writer has shared their song the rest of the group gives feedback, calling out the good, affirming the writer and the strengths in the song, and then giving positive pointers for things to work on. It is important that this part does not slip into co-writing where people make very specific suggestions as to how to change the song.

The beauty of the song circle model is that everyone in the group learns so much about the craft of song writing by listening to and giving feedback on each of the songs. You just *know* when a song is good because the whole group will join in! If you're the song circle leader you might find it helpful at the end of each fortnightly session to make a note of these songs, and/or any that particularly grabbed your attention or seem to have strong potential, this will help with deciding which songs to take forward to the editing phase.

You will see as we move through the song circle model that at each stage a bunch of songs get whittled out, and only a fraction get taken from one phase into the next. It is worth setting expectations clearly around this at the beginning of the song circle so that everyone is on the same page when it comes to how many of their songs are likely to get edited and eventually trialled.

REST PHASE

At a glance: the writers have been working hard & need a break, so take some time out to rest and gear up for the next phase.

Whilst optional, this rest phase is an important part of developing healthy creative rhythms, it is a really good idea to take around a month off & give the inner creative a break.

EDITING PHASE

At a glance: Pick 6-8 songs you want to work on further, set a deadline for completion and, in groups of 3-4, drill down into the detail, rework, hone and refine to push and shape each song to the best it can be.

If you thought the writing phase was tough, the editing phase is where the hard work really happens! First you need to choose which songs from the Writing Phase you want to take forward and work further on. You can make this decision either at the end of the Writing Phase or at the end of the Rest Phase; how you make the decision will depend in part on what you want to accomplish through your song circle. If the main aim is to develop individual writers, you will probably want to choose each writer's best song; if your goal is to have useable songs for your community you might want to select the 6-8 songs that have the most potential overall.

How you go about the editing is also very flexible. You could divide your song circle into two smaller groups and assign them specific songs to work on; or you could put the onus on the main writer to gather a group of co-writers around them. However, you do it, just make sure everyone is clear on the DEADLINE for having a new version of the song ready by. Re-grouping as a whole song circle to hear these new versions is so much fun!

One of the most important things about this phase is that we enter the co-writing zone, meaning that everyone in the group gets stuck into making specific, hands-on suggestions on how to make each song the best it can be. There is plenty of good advice out there on collaboration and co-writing, one of the keys is to keep it a no-free-zone. Negativity stifles creativity, so find positive ways to express your thoughts. Not every suggestion will be taken up, but ideas spark each other; one can be a steppingstone to another, and sometimes it takes several bad ideas to recognise a really good one! Experiment with every suggestion, keep asking for input and advice, bounce ideas off each other, and see where it takes you.

TRIALLING PHASE

At a glance: pick the best of your edited songs and put them to use, experiment with arrangements, gauge how people respond to them, and continue to edit and refine as necessary.

Having made it this far, your hard work has hopefully paid off in the form of 6-8 well-crafted songs, so now is the time to see what others think of them! If they are songs for corporate worship pick 2-4, put them through your usual process for vetting new worship songs, and introduce any that get the go-ahead. If they are songs for outside the church walls then gather a group and head out to a few open mic nights. You will learn so much from using the songs, both the process of arranging them, and in seeing how they go down: are people engaging or bored? Are there any sections or transitions that feel clunky, any lyrics that are too bunched to sing or melodies that are difficult to pick up?

Having trialled a song, you might then gather the main writer and key collaborators to reflect together on how it went and discuss whether any further editing is required. If yes, make sure you do it, set yourselves another of those wonderful deadlines!

It is important, healthy and even necessary to complete the creative cycle and use at least something. Making space in our worship sets for our songs, or taking them out to local open mics, feels risky but is essential if we want to see a song writing culture flourish in our community. It's all part of the learning process, and real platforms for our work *both* force us to wrestle with questions of identity *and* call us to stretch towards writing at a level beyond ourselves where our writing becomes a means of partnering prophetically with what God is doing in our communities and cities, and our songs become keys for releasing more of His kingdom.