QuickSheets
Fast and fabulous ideas for ministry
PRESBYTERIAN ASSOCIATION OF MUSICIANS
Office of Christian Formation

Improvising & Reharmonizing in Worship

Practical tools for extending music, supporting worship, and bringing fresh life to familiar hymns

Why Improvisation Matters

Worship is rarely predictable. Communion may take longer than expected. Collecting the offering may continue after the final verse has ended. A prayer may extend beyond what was planned, or a transition may require additional music.

Rather than treating these moments as interruptions, church musicians can use improvisation to support the movement of worship with confidence and flexibility. Improvisation in worship is not about performance. It is about serving the congregation by allowing music to respond to what is happening in the room.

Five Simple Improvisation Techniques

- Repeat a musical phrase with subtle variation.
- Create a simple vamp using I–IV, I–vi, or ii–V.
- Use a pedal point beneath changing harmonies.
- Develop the texture by changing accompaniment patterns.
- Shape the moment through dynamics.

Reharmonizing Familiar Hymns

Reharmonization changes the harmonic language while preserving the melody. The goal is not to surprise the congregation but to illuminate the text in fresh ways. Before changing harmony ask:

- Does this support the text?
- Does this invite singing?
- Does this help the congregation worship?

Useful Harmonic Tools

- Secondary dominants
- Passing diminished chords
- Suspended chords
- Modal interchange
- Gospel harmony
- ii–V progressions
- Tritone substitutions (used sparingly)

Practical Applications

- Communion: Extend the final refrain rather than repeating the entire hymn.
- Offering: Use a simple vamp until the ushers return.
- Prayer: Support spoken prayer with quiet textures.
- Congregational Singing: Reserve richer harmonies for introductions, interludes, or final verses.

Guiding Principles

- Serve the liturgy before serving the music.
- Honor the melody.
- Support the text.
- Leave room for the congregation to sing.
- Simplicity is often more effective than complexity.

Improvisation and reharmonization are tools that allow musicians to accompany worship with sensitivity, flexibility, and creativity.

Suggested Resources

Mark Levine, *The Jazz Theory Book*
Tom Trenney
Richard Webster
Marilyn Mason
Keith Jarrett
African American gospel accompanists

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