

Changing Keys Without the Cheese

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While it is possible to put together a list of songs that are all in the same key, there are several good reasons for not falling into this "Worship in D" approach when preparing for a worship time. For one, it can become monotonous, even if the songs are most naturally played in the same key. Secondly, it will seriously limit the range of usable songs. Even if you are easily able to transcribe the songs chosen into the target key, and have a voice like Mickey Mouse on helium, too big a jump from the original tried and tested key may well leave most of the congregation physically unable to join with you in worship.

On the other side of the scale (there may be a pun in there ...) continually changing key between each song can be unsettling and detract from a smooth sense of flow. So most experienced leaders will tend to balance their use of different keys, sometimes keeping to one key for a few songs in a row, then changing to a related key to subtly change mood, or to a very different key perhaps to start off in a fresh direction.

Perhaps some discussion of what constitutes a "related key" or a "very different key" would be useful here ... If this kind of theory bores you and you would prefer just to move on to a few tips, then scroll down to the dotted lines below

We will consider the family of keys most common in Western music known as the major keys. As there are twelve notes in an octave, it would be tempting to imagine that there twelve such keys. In this case we could list them as follows: Starting with C, then going up chromatically (that is, counting each note in order, whether a black or a white key) we would get C, C sharp, D, D sharp, E, F, F sharp, G, G sharp, A, A sharp, B, then back to C again. The complication is that several of these keys have another possible name - A sharp is the same note as B flat, D sharp the same as E flat, and so on. This obviously applies for all of the black notes, but also for some white notes (for example B could be called C flat ...)

Another way to begin to list the keys is not just think of where they are on the piano keyboard, but consider how many sharp or flat notes each has. The reason we so often begin to talk about keys with the key C and not A, (the first alphabetically) is that C is constructed of only white notes on the piano, that is, it has no sharps or flats. If we next list the key with one sharp, we get G, the D with two sharps and so on. The entire sequence of sharps is as follows:

C - no sharps or flats
G - 1 sharp
D - 2 sharps
A - 3 sharps
E - 4
B - 5
F# - 6
C# - 7

What you will notice is that the interval between each pair in the sequence is exactly a fifth interval - in other words, G is the fifth note in the C scale, D the fifth note in the G scale, and so on.

The sequence of flat keys is constructed similarly, except that instead of moving up by a fifth interval each time, we move down, getting the following sequence:

C - no sharps or flats
F - 1 flat
Bb - 2 flats
Eb - 3 flats
Ab - 4 flats
Db - 5 flats, which is really another way of naming the notes that make up the key of C# with its

seven sharps.

It's quite rare to consider the following keys, but we could continue ...

Gb - 6 flats

Cb - 7 flats

So we could easily arrange the 12 notes in an octave in a circle, with each pair of adjacent notes a fifth apart, and with some of the notes having two feasible names: Starting at C and moving clockwise (perhaps try writing this as a circle on a piece of paper) we would get **C, G, D, A, E(Fb), B(Cb), F#(Gb), C#(Db), Ab(G#), Eb(D#), Bb(A#), F(E#)**, and back to **C(B#)**. This "circle of fifths" contains all of the possible major scales, some of them with alternative names.

So looking at this sequence of keys, we could say that "related keys" are two keys close to one another on this circle - for example C and G, and that "very different keys" are keys on opposite sides of the circle - for example C and F#, or C and C#.

So when thinking about key changes in a selection of worship songs, it is easier to create a seamless flow between songs when the keys are related, and more difficult or jarring when the keys are very different. So in order of difficulty, if we are starting off in the key D (2 sharps), it is very easy to flow into another song in D, fairly easy to change key to A (3 sharps) or to G (one sharp) but not as smooth to change to B or to Eb.

So, a few tips.

1. If you are wanting to create a flow between songs, try if possible to group songs of the same key, and modulate (change key) when necessary to songs with closely related keys.
2. If you want to keep some sound playing between songs, find the common tones between where you're ending up and where you're headed. This is easy when the keys are closely related. If you're finishing a song on a G chord and want to start on a D, the note in common is a D. Let the keyboard player or guitarist hold this note.
3. If this sounds a bit empty, alter the last chord of the song before. For example instead of playing a full G chord, play something a bit less definitive, such as a G2 without the third (the notes A and D). This will be interpreted by the ear as a G when played with a G bass note, but can be held through as the bass note changes for the beginning of the next song, and will become a D. This "second chord" technique works well for keys with only one sharp or flat different between them.
4. For songs in more distantly related keys - say with two sharps/flats between them, consider ending the previous song on a different chord if the melody allows. An example might be ending a song in C on the chord F, holding the notes F and C, and starting the next song off in Bb.

In all of the above, the trick is to try and find at least two notes which will work with the last chord of the previous song and the first of the next. Preferably at least one of these notes should be common to both chords, and the other a note which is in the key of both of the songs.

5. For key changes of a tone, such as from C to D, an alternative to tip 4 is to use the pitch bend on a keyboard. Hold C and gradually bend up to D. This is quite dramatic, but can be effective if used sparingly and tastefully.
6. Don't make the musicians do all the work. Drummers can also help out in transitions. (Sorry, couldn't resist one of Matt's drummer jokes!) But seriously, think of using just cymbals to create a wash of sound that holds the mood but enables the rest of the band to subtly ease out and creep back in in a different key.
7. If the keyboard player is using layered sounds, sometimes the very specifically tuned elements can be faded out of the keyboard sound to create a similar effect. Same with guitar with a good array of effects.
8. Don't be afraid of silence. A complete silence of about 10 seconds is sorbet for the ears, and will enable you to come back in a very different key without people feeling jarred. This is great for changing by a semitone, for example from A to Bb. Such a change upward feels hopeful and lifting, whereas a similar change down usually creates a more reflective mood (depending of course on the song!)
9. A way of both breathing new life into a song and getting through a transition is to do a part of

the next song without changing key, in the same mood as the previous song - perhaps a part of the chorus, or the bit before the chorus. This introduces the next song and prepares the congregation. Then let that hang and start the next song in the correct key and tempo, perhaps with a musical introduction.

10. Lastly, how you change key is quite dependent on the style of music you use in your tradition. For gospel and RnB styles, there are many really clever ways of getting from key to key through a series of chord changes - a bit like turning a truck around on a freeway. Most of these techniques involve modulating from one key to another through a series of smaller modulations, basically working your way around that circle step by step or with a few tricky jumps. I guess if you're playing in those styles a lot, you probably know a few of these techniques anyway - just use your ears and ask anyone you can about anything interesting you hear.

And that's the bottom line really - navigating through key changes is about doing what's appropriate and tasteful in the context of musical style and worship flow, and there are many ways to approach it. Armed with a bit of knowledge about how the keys relate to one another, and what notes they have in common, it is possible to find ways of putting together almost any selection of songs in a way that feels right. Always bear in mind that the goal is to bring the congregation along with you in a way that keeps them engaged and confident, not to demonstrate a flashy set of handbrake turns. As CS Lewis remarked once, Jesus' instruction to His disciples was "Feed my sheep", not "try experiments on my rats"!