

# What's in your playlist?



a  
system  
to make  
sense  
of your  
songs



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# What's In Your Playlist?

by Jon Nicol

Building a System  
to Make Sense  
of Your Songs

If you've got an iPod, you've got a playlist (or twenty). If you've got a worship ministry, you'll have 52 playlists this year. Our "playlists" from week to week are a significant part of building our church's vocabulary of worship. While we need to be particular about balancing the focus, feel and function of our songs, I want to look at the overall rotation of songs in [and out] of those playlists AND in and out of your ministry--the *LEARN*, the *CHURN*, and *BURN*.

After being at a church in the Columbus, OH area for 2 ½ years, I was downsized. I was told in October of '08 that my position would need to be eliminated by Jan '09, or the church would bleed dry. No one wanted to make that decision, but it was the right one. Wanting to leave the volunteer leaders with as many tools as possible, I developed something I called a "current rotation" to help them choose songs from week to week.

I had been choosing songs each month from a master list of newbies, oldies and everything in between. Every song that I had introduced in the last two years, plus the repertoire I inherited, was in it. It was a monster. Since there would be multiple volunteer leaders choosing songs, I worked with my successors to

create a more useable list. We looked at the favorites. We looked at new songs to be introduced. We looked at what we should leave behind. It was tough; there were a lot of good songs that didn't make the cut. But we came up with a manageable list of songs that could be used for the next few months. After a period of 4 – 6 months, the leaders would then review it and determine what should stay or go for the next “season” or period.

We end up diluting the effectiveness of corporate worship by having more songs than the congregation can connect with.

I used this list to choose the music for my last month at this church. I realized that I should have started using it 29 months prior.

Every church applies some sort of “rotation” of the songs to their repertoire. The problem for most is exactly what I experienced: years of build-up. Too many good songs. Too many favorites. We end up diluting the effectiveness of corporate worship by having more songs than the congregation can connect with. The

Current Rotation concept limits the number of songs we do in a given season. It also classifies them, not by theme or feel, but by how often they should be rotated.

The Current Rotation concept alternates songs often enough so the team knows and can lead them well. It also ensures that the congregation can sing them—not necessarily ‘by heart’—but ‘from the heart,’ rather than reading every word on a screen.

As we dive into how to develop a Current Rotation system, here are some pretty safe assumptions I’m making:

- **Not all worship songs are created equal.**
- **Songs have a shelf life.**
- **The average worshiper needs to experience a song several times to connect and sing from the heart.**
- **The team and leader will get tired of a song long before the congregation does.**

Here's how the current rotation deals with these assumptions:

**Not all worship songs are created equal.** Some songs will stay in your current rotation for three years or more. Some may be in and out within six months. There are no hard and fast rules about how long a song can stay. It all depends on the connection a song has with your congregation.

**Songs have a shelf life.** They are **LEARNED** when they're new; **CHURNED** once they're established (*think*: propeller in the water rotating to create momentum); and **BURNED** at some point. There are a few songs throughout history that have escaped the dust of disuse, but most songs eventually get sidelined. The Current Rotation systematically moves songs through a *learn/churn/ burn* pipeline towards one of two places:



*Songs are retired with no plan to bring them back.* They've received a Burn Notice. (Admit it, you like that show, too.) Or...

*Songs can get a reprieve from the “burn notice” by being moved to what I refer to as “classic” status. No matter how loved, a song will run its course. But some songs still resonate with the congregation, so don't want to throw them out completely. They're best used on a very limited basis, say, one to two times a year.*

**The average worshiper needs to experience a song several times (and in different ways) to connect and sing from the heart.** Even those rare gems that have a universal and immediate connection with the masses – e.g. Mighty to Save, Shout to the Lord, Here I Am to Worship, etc.—still need to be played a few times for people to learn. This system allows for a higher rotation of new songs. Think about Top 40 CCM, Country, Pop and AC radio formats – how often do you hear the same songs? Feels like every 20 minutes. In the same way, our newer songs need *repetition* to really connect.

**The team and leader will get time tired of a song long before the congregation does.** By learning and performing the song, the worship team experiences the song on a whole different level than the congregation. They will be ready to

discard current songs before the congregation tire of them. They also want to introduce new songs at a higher rate than the congregation can handle. A Current Rotation system helps guard against this. It keeps the band from introducing new songs too quickly. And it also prevents throwing out a song after a few months just because the band is getting tired of it.

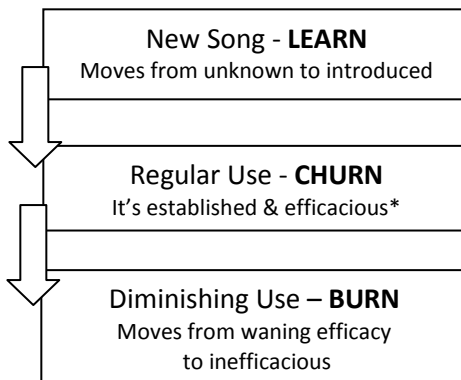
Let's look at some of the practical aspects of a Current Rotation.

## **Duration**

Consider your rotation period by season or by quarter: something longer than a month, but shorter than 6 months. Plan to re-evaluate the list part way through the duration, and begin to make plans on how to move songs as the next season/quarter/period begins.

## **Designation**

Again, songs can be classified in several different ways: tempo, theme, key, etc. You shouldn't throw away your lists that group songs in these different ways. This system specifically helps determine frequency and groups the songs by where they are in the life cycle:



[\***efficacious**: able to produce the desired result]

A three tier system works well to group songs by life cycle:

**Tier One** are the songs that are brand new or newer and need high rotation in order to be **LEARNED**. As soon as a new song is introduced into congregational worship, consider using it at least 3 – 4 times in a 6-week period. For example, plan to do a new song three weeks in a row. You'll likely hit most of your attendees in that time. Give it a rest for a one week and then use it every-other-week for a month. If my math is right, that's about 5 times in 8 weeks. NOTE: it's helpful to incorporate other "prep" steps

before a song is put before the congregation to sing along. [See “**Prep Steps for New Songs**” on page 9.]

Remember, congregations differ in how quickly they pick up a tune. You may not need that much time before a song connects with your church. You may need more.

Once the introduction stage is completed, it remains in Tier One and should probably be played 1x a month, or likely 3 times every two months, until it becomes established.

If a song isn't resonating after the introduction phase and 2 – 3 months of being on Tier One, it's likely **not** going to connect. For whatever reason it lacks efficacy—it doesn't produce the desired result. There are too many great songs out there to continue forcing something that doesn't work. It might be a stellar song, but just not for your ministry. Retire it early and open up space for a song that *will* connect.

## Prep Steps for New Songs:

1. Get the mp3/CD and leadsheet into the hands of the band pronto. Let them get connected with it.
2. If you use pre-service CD or iTunes playlists, include the new song in the mix. It will start to creep into people's heads.
3. Include the song in rehearsals for a few weeks before playing it. This will help your band get comfortable with it.
4. Consider playing it live as a pre-service song. We will sometimes do a live song to help bring people in. (I call it the "herding song.") This is a great way to get it in your congregations ears *and* solidify it with your band.
5. Use it as a performance piece the first time it's played in a service – for example, an offertory, communion preparation, etc.

All this preparation might seem a little excessive. But I can tell the difference that it makes with my team and congregation when I take the time to ease in new songs in. It's more time and work, but the song inevitably gets established quicker and stronger than when I've sprung a new tune on everyone for the next Sunday.

**Tier Two** *CHURNS* the established songs that have connected with the congregation and are still connecting. You risk overexposure if you keep a song too long on a high rotation (think “*Hold My Hand*” by Hootie and the Blowfish). There is something to the adage “leave them wanting more,” so Tier Two songs will likely be done 1x a month *maximum*, probably more like once every two months. An example in my current ministry is “In Christ Alone” by Townend/Getty. My congregation fell in love with it years back and it still moves them. Hands down, it’s a great song. But I think part of the reason for its continued effectiveness is that we just won’t do it every month. I’m at a point now to move it to Tier Three in order to keep it from being overdone.

**Tier Three** songs are on their way out. They might be gone after this rotation period or hang out for few more. Regardless, they’re close to running their course: the band knows these songs like a Skynard cover-band knows *Free Bird*. And the congregation is close to hitting auto-pilot when they sing it. The rotation for these songs will likely be one time every two months, at the most. They might only even get played one time in the rotation period. As you evaluate for the upcoming current rotation, these songs that have one of three fates: 1) remain on Tier Three for

another rotation (continue a slow churn); 2) sent to pasture (burned); or 3) moved to the high-end assisted living home of song lists: the “classics.”

Speaking of classics, sing with me: *“Lord, I lift your name on high, Lord I love to...”* yeah, that’s my reaction, too. For years, we sang it at camp. We sang it at retreats. We sang it at revivals. We won the drum wars and sang it in church. (And a lot of us are still singing it apparently, since it’s still #15 on the CCLI charts as of this writing). But for most of us, it has run its course and then some. We can rock it, ballad it, jazz it, but forget it: a lot of us just yawn through it. And that’s unfortunate. It’s a GREAT song. But it was one of the few great songs in that era and we just wore it out. We Hootie-ized it.

The “classics” designation is an attempt to rescue great songs before they become cliché. By reserving these songs for a few services a year, we honor their effectiveness and the gift the songwriter (and God) gave us. Look for the songs that have had a tremendous

If we systematically limit and classify the songs, we’ll better serve our teams and churches.

presence in your corporate worship but might be getting a tad overdone. Move them before people start getting that glassy-eyed gaze as they sing it.

Use the classics to your advantage. For example, have a classic song flow out of a brand new song. The unfamiliarity people had with the new song will be forgotten as they start singing an old friend. Or do a mash-up (which just sounds so much more millennial than “*medley*”) of old and new. Also, don't be afraid to make the classics fresh. Just because “Shout to the Lord” is ALWAYS played in A and driven by the piano, doesn't mean that you can't crank it up to C for your Tomlin-esque tenor worship leader and use power chords to drive it. It'll tweak off somebody in your congregation, but that's pretty much in the job description for any worship leader.

The other, and unfortunately, more common destination for aging songs is the retirement bin (BURNED). It can be a hard decision to put a song out to pasture, because it may still has emotional connection with many people. But make the tough call and cut some songs. You can always bring a tune back, especially if Michael W. Smith puts it on his next worship project. Also, fight

the urge to put everything in the classic category. You won't serve your team or congregation well by having a 120 "classics" you can pull from.

One other category I use is "hymns." In most ways, these songs are similar to "classics": there's already a solid history and connection with much of my congregation. However, things change when I introduce a specific arrangement of a hymn. For example Paul Baloche's "How Great Thou Art"—it retains the original melody, but the feel is modern and requires a learning curve for the band and congregation. So I designate within my hymn list which ones should have a higher rotation.

Again, one of the benefits of a Current Rotation system is the limiting factor. It produces a manageable number of songs for the team and congregation alike. This is tough with hymns, because you could easily stack that list with 30 or 40. It's probably wise just to choose between 5 and 15 that will be repeated once or twice in the rotation period. Of course, the size of your "hymn" list will depend on how often you use hymns. In my current ministry, I tend to use one, maybe two, per Sunday. That means I

can have 10 to 15 hymns that will be rotated once, maybe twice during the period.

So you'll end up having these categories of songs with a flow from Learn to Churn to Burn.

To help facilitate the song selection, you can create guidelines for each tier, based on what you want as a church. One way to guide selection is to designate how many songs from each list get chosen each week for example:

*First Tier – 1 – 2 songs per Sunday.*

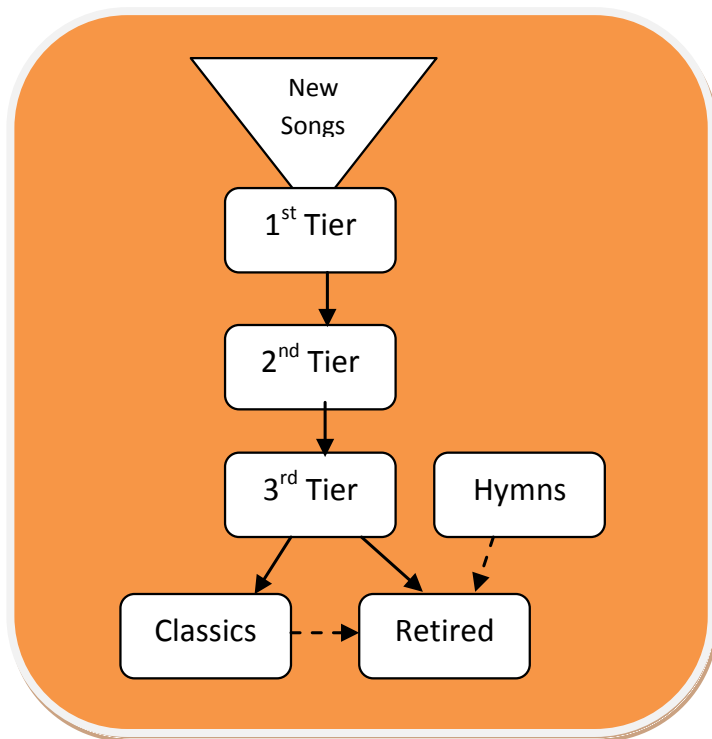
[Make sure you're not mixing too many newer songs in together.]

*Second Tier – 2 – 3 song per Sunday*

*Third Tier – 1 - 2 songs per Sunday*

*Hymns – 0 to 1*

*Classics – 0 to 1.*



Remember, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> tier songs are the ones that resonate with the congregation. You want the bulk of your service to contain songs that are already connected.

Figure out how many songs you want every Sunday. Determine an ideal mix for your church. For instance, your church might average five songs per service. A simple guideline you might adopt would be: (1) First Tier song, (2) Second Tier songs, (1) Third Tier song and (1) hymn.

I've found it helpful to create a guideline that determines how often a song should be used. For example:

*First Tier Songs – 1 to >1x per month.*

*Second Tier Songs – 1x to <1x per month*

*Third Tier Songs – 1x per two months*

Again, it's just guidelines, so don't be too rigid. Find out what works for your ministry.

Before we wrap up, there are a few other advantages worth noting about the Current Rotation system:

1. ***If your ministry has more than one leader choosing songs, it will keep them all on the same page.*** Too often, multiple worship leaders will have their own “list” they work from. This, again, will result in too many songs for the congregation (and likely, the band) to connect with.
2. **If a smaller ministry is dependent on volunteer leaders**, this limited song selection benefits them by 1) taking away the pressure to introduce new songs constantly, and 2) keeping the band from getting overwhelmed by a huge repertoire with few repeated songs.
3. **If you plan songs out a month at a time, this rotation is a great tool to determine what songs are ‘due.’** I know that sounds a little mechanical for something as important as corporate worship. But remember, we’re contributing to and developing our congregation’s vocabulary of worship. Just like our reading developed in kindergarten and beyond, we build our worship language by repetition and experience.

The Current Rotation will help you serve your team and congregation better, as well as streamline your planning process. But again, it's a tool and needs to be adapted to work with your situation. To help get you started in creating your own Current Rotation, I've included worksheets that walk you through the process.

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## Current Rotation Worksheet – Instructions

1. List all the corporate worship songs (hymns and choruses) your ministry has done in the last 18 months.
2. Determine how many songs in each tier will be played each week and how often songs in each tier are rotated on an average.

Tier	Number of Songs Each Week	How Often Rotated	Rate of Rotation
One			
Two			
Three			
Hymns			

3. For each tier, determine the “rate of rotation” number for each tier, which is the average number of weeks between each rotation of a song. For example, if a song should be repeated twice a month, it would have an average of two weeks between each rotation. So it’s rate of rotation would 2. Once a month would have an average of four weeks in between each rotation. It’s “rate of rotation” is 4. So if you want a newer song to repeat once or twice a month, it would have an average of three weeks between each rotation (rate of rotation = 3). Here’s a quick guide:
  - a. 2 = Twice a month
  - b. 3 = Once or twice a month
  - c. 4 = Once a month
  - d. 6 = Once every other month
  - e. 8 = once every two months
  - f. 12 = once a quarter
4. Multiply the “rate of rotation” by the Number of Songs each week, and you’ll have the one number by the other to come up with how many songs should be in each Tier.

Example:

Tier One will have 1-2 songs per week. The average rate of rotation for songs in Tier 1 is

5. Determine your “Target Number” for your Current Rotation: What’s the number of songs during a typical worship service? Take that number and multiply it by the average amount of times your songs are rotated in a year. This number is your “target” number. Write this answer in the blank in Step 3.

For example –you typically have 5 songs per week. Each song gets rotated at an average of song 6 times per year (remember, *average* is the key word. Some of your songs may rotate more often, some far less.) So  $5 \times 6 = 30$ . So 30 would be the target number you write in step 3.

6. Determine which \_\_\_\_\_ songs should be kept in the rotation.  
(target number)
  - Be a little ruthless. It's easier to add a song or two than it is to try to trim more later.
  - this process is so much better when done with a group of people – not your whole team. If you do this by yourself, you may have trouble with your team or leaders going along with it. People need to weigh in before they buy-in.
  - Your target number is simply an estimation. You may need to adjust as you go along
7. Once you pare down the “keeper list” as close to your target number as possible, begin to insert them in the appropriate Tiers. Also fill out your hymns and classic choruses.
8. Determine guidelines for each tier. After wrestling through all this, you'll probably have a good idea of how often songs in each tier should be rotated during the period.
9. Next, write down the new songs you plan to introduce in this period. You can always add to the new song list during the period. But just beware that if a “Mighty to Save”-type of song comes out of nowhere, you'll need to delay the introduction of other new songs you have planned.
10. Once the first draft is complete, have “wise counsel” look it over – the senior pastor, an elder, a respected long-time member. Heed the input from these people.
11. As you introduce the Current Rotation to your team and team leaders, present it as a tool that will better serve them and the congregation – less songs to learn, no new-songs-surprises on Sunday morning, etc.

## Current Rotation Worksheet

Part 1 – List all the songs your church has done in the last 18 months:

## Current Rotation Worksheet

### Part 2 – Determine Your “Target” Number:

Typical number of songs per service: \_\_\_\_\_  
Average number of times songs are rotated in a year: X \_\_\_\_\_  
Your “target” number: = \_\_\_\_\_

Part 3 – Determine which \_\_\_\_\_ songs from Part One to include:  
(target number)

### Part 4 – Classify Each Song

Go back and add a designation next to each song:

①=First Tier ②=Second Tier ③=Third Tier #=Hymn C=classic

Part 4 – Fill in songs and determine guidelines for each tier

Part 5 – Determine Guidelines for Each Tier

**First Tier – Newer, Higher Rotation**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_
11. \_\_\_\_\_
12. \_\_\_\_\_

Guidelines:

Songs should be repeated \_\_\_\_\_ times  
per month

and/or

\_\_\_\_\_ (#) songs should be used for each  
service

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Second Tier – Established, Medium Rotation**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_
11. \_\_\_\_\_
12. \_\_\_\_\_

Guidelines:

Songs should be repeated \_\_\_\_\_ times  
per two months or \_\_\_\_\_

and/or

\_\_\_\_\_ (#) songs should be used for each  
service

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Part 4 – Fill in songs and determine guidelines for each tier

Part 5 – Determine Guidelines for Each Tier (cont.)

**Third Tier – Established, Lower Rotation**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_
11. \_\_\_\_\_
12. \_\_\_\_\_

Guidelines:  
Songs should be repeated \_\_\_\_\_ times  
per rotation period  
and/or  
\_\_\_\_\_ (#) songs should be used for each  
service  
Other: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Hymns**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_
11. \_\_\_\_\_
12. \_\_\_\_\_

Guidelines:  
Hymns should be repeated \_\_\_\_\_ times  
per rotation period  
and/or  
\_\_\_\_\_ (#) hymns should be used for each  
service  
Other: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Classic Choruses:**

Guidelines:  
Classics should be repeated \_\_\_\_\_ times per rotation period and/or \_\_\_\_\_ (#) classic should be used for each service  
Other: \_\_\_\_\_