

# DIY jazz church services

THE first jazz church service that I attended featured the Phil Mason Band, I think at a Dove Holes Jazz Festival, about 20 years ago. I found it to be a wonderfully uplifting experience.

Soon after came the period when the Isle of Man—where I have lived this last 30 years—had its own jazz festival, and each year the festival featured a Sunday morning jazz church service. This took place each year at an Anglican church; the vicar at the time was knowledgeable and enthusiastic about jazz. Each year one or other of the visiting bands would lead the music and it was always an enjoyable occasion.

Then one year, which coincidentally happened to be the last year that the Isle of Man festival took place, the Rev had been replaced with a new vicar with no knowledge of jazz. He had arranged a service choosing from the normal Anglican repertoire of hymns, without consideration of whether they could be interpreted with a jazz slant. He then sent this play list off to the designated visiting band (which shall be nameless) and arranged for a classical soprano to be the featured soloist.

Meanwhile in England, the band had received a list of hymns of which they had never heard. They did not read music, so reached the conclusion that there was nothing they could do about the situation and thought no more about it.

Came the Sunday morning it becomes apparent that unless the regular church organist can be quickly co-opted, there is no accompaniment for the chosen hymns. Luckily, he is found. Meanwhile

by COLIN CLARK



our visiting band sit centre stage (or church equivalent), doing nothing except looking most uncomfortable, except for when they play a gospel song from their repertoire somewhere in the middle of the service.

This fiasco was an embarrassment for all concerned and its memory stuck in my mind.

## Meaningful

So about 10 years ago it occurred to me that there didn't need to be a festival or a visiting band in order to have a meaningful jazz church service. I had been gigging since my teens, then giving me a 50 year track record (now 60 years plus). I felt that I could not fail to do better than that recent travesty!

My first job was to establish whether my own church, Laxey Methodist church, would welcome a jazz service. I somewhat diffidently put the suggestion to our

church council and was greatly encouraged by the enthusiasm with which the idea was accepted.

I then had to find my band. At that point I was leading a five-piece band, playing a trad to mainstream repertoire with an unusual line up, comprising myself on alto, a clarinet and tenor player, electric guitar, electric upright bass and drums. The guitar player was not keen on the whole church thing, but fortunately one of the stalwarts of our church was (and is) a talented guitarist and singer, so she was co-opted. It then co-opted a trombone player and a keyboard player, friends playing in other bands, and we had a seven-piece band.

I then started looking for a format for the service and appropriate music. The format of our services closely follows the regular Methodist format with five hymns, two Bible readings, a sermon, a soloist and two tranches of prayer.



Left is Laxey Methodist church which held the jazz service put together by Colin Clark. Above is the seven-piece band sharing in the worship.

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One innovation that has become a tradition over the years is that we do not say the Lord's Prayer together, but listen and watch Mahalia Jackson at the 1958 Newport Festival (a performance that still moves me to tears every time I hear it). Our hymns are all taken from one or other of the hymn-books used in Methodist services and we have tried many over the last 10 years, some of which have become perennials. Some favourites are "Mine eyes have seen the glory", "The old rugged cross", "What a friend we have in Jesus", "Send the fire", "Amazing grace" and "Walk, walk in the light".

I was delighted to note that in the *Methodist Recorder* (July 14, 2017) "My top 20 formative Christian artist albums" by Tony Jasper listed Mahalia Jackson at Newport as his number one choice and his top choice from the album box version of the Lord's Prayer.

In addition to the music within the service, we always play gospel songs for 15 minutes before the advertised service time and finished with "The saints" after the benediction. The before service period gives the band its best blow and we try to encourage the congregation to arrive early for this. Some of

our favourites for this section are "Lord, Lord, Lord", "Lonesome road", "Just a closer walk" and "We shall overcome".

Of course, even a jazz service needs some practice and my musician friends are all busy people. So what I have done for the last several years is choose the music, some being repeats and some new to us. For the new music I have sent to the musicians in advance either full music or chord symbols (whatever is available) together with hyperlinks to videos. And we assemble one-and-a-half-hours before service time for an hour's run through, so that we can have a short break before the service. This seems to work for us.

## Successfully

I have also taken the initiative in inviting a preacher each year. For our first year I invited Anglican preacher, the Rev Brian Partington who had successfully run the services in Douglas during Jazz Festivals. Since Methodism has itinerant preachers in charge of several churches and chapels, assisted by many lay preachers, it has been possible to have a different preacher each year. Some of them having a knowledge of

jazz, some totally without. All seem to have enjoyed the experience. While not trying to influence the subject of their sermons, I have tended to point out the connection between the history of jazz music and the history of slavery, the civil rights movement and race relations.

One of the goals of my jazz services has been to try to get some different people into church. This in turn requires some effort put into marketing. Here we are probably fortunate in being in the confines of the Isle of Man. In addition to getting posters into various shops and other locations, we have been able to get free mentions on local radio, the local newspapers, a village newsletter and in recent years various websites.

During the early years it was necessary for me to type up and copy an order of service featuring the words of the hymns etc. Thankfully, in recent years the installation of a projector system has removed the necessity of this.

The annual jazz service has become a feature of our church year. If anyone else has an inclination to do something similar in their community, I would encourage you to do so. If I can be any help, please contact me at colinclar@manx.net



A performance taking place at the Isle of Man's Jazz Festival.