



What Gift Can We Bring: A Pastoral Musician Looks at the United Methodist Hymnal

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What gift can we bring, what present, what token?
What words can convey it, the joy of this day?
When grateful we come, remembering, rejoicing,
what song can we offer in honor and praise?

Give thanks for the past, for those who had vision,
who planted and watered so dreams could come true.
Give thanks for the now, for study, for worship,
for mission that bids us turn prayer into deed.

Give thanks for tomorrow, full of surprises,
for knowing whatever tomorrow may bring,
the Word is our promise always, forever;
we rest in God's keeping and live in God's love.

This gift we now bring, this present, this token,
these words can convey it, the joy of this day!
When grateful we come, remembering, rejoicing,
this song we now offer in honor and praise!

Jane Marshall, 1980
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My letter read, "Dear Mr. Yarrington, at the May 13-14 meeting of the Hymnal Revision Committee (HRC) you were named as a consultant to the Language Sub-Committee. I welcome you to this group." Thus began my odessey with the revision process of the new United Methodist Hymnal, a journey fascinating, exciting, humbling, frustrating, and rewarding. I was a small cog (a cog with voice but no vote) in a very large proceeding.

The mandate of the HRC, which began its work in 1984, was to come up with a "model of a new Hymnal." Speaking of the first meeting of the committee, John Lovelace observed:

One thing is for certain about the proposed new hymnal for the United Methodists—it will be small enough to fit into hymnal racks on the backs of church pews. That’s about the only thing known about whatever the book may be called and what it may contain in what sequence. But members of the HRC showed no panic May 13-14 about what they admit is the impossible job of pleasing everyone with a book—or books—to replace the 1965 Book of Hymns. They even had fun breaking into unaccompanied song at the mere mention of an old favorite like “Come Thou Fount” or rising immediately to sing with spirited piano accompaniment all four verses and improvised refrains for “All Glory, Laud and Honor.”¹

The members of the HRC were balanced and representative of a wide variety of church membership. Several held graduate degrees in music or professorships in homiletics and sacred music. A number served in professional positions as local church ministers of music and were concerned and sensitive to what the church said it wanted in its hymnal. In a meeting with the committee, Dr. Lyle Schaller, church researcher and futurist from Indiana asserted:

This is probably the most influential committee I have ever met with because it will have the most impact on the denomination. The denomination needs three distinctive marks of identification: (1) a news magazine, which it does not have; (2) a dominant seminary rather than a group of seminaries; and (3) a hymnal.

A hymnal is important because it helps assimilate new persons into a denominational tribe, but only if they recognize something familiar, perhaps something they have learned in another denomination. Denominational loyalty when it comes to buying things like a new hymnal, is not what it used to be.²

From the beginning, the HRC sought to find out what United Methodists wanted in their hymnal. The committee expanded its ears and information by adding twenty-three professional consultants, experts in every aspect of worship, hymnody, and liturgy to the process.

Additionally, a questionnaire went out to all United Methodist ministers, soliciting the ten most frequently sung hymns in their respective congregations. A network of eight hundred “reader consultants” was established, including seven people from each of the seventy-four annual conferences plus United Methodist officials in leadership positions and some members at large. Through a series of questionnaires, this consultant network was asked to comment on everything from binding color to language guidelines. An update was sent to pastors twice a year, sometimes containing sample hymns. Each annual conference heard a report from a reader consultant who was available to answer questions and receive input.

Because of the open and public process of this hymnal revision, many in the Methodist church had a voice in what was included. This is good news for those of us who think the church’s song may be sung and heard in many different ways. Already, in its brief life, my experience with the book is positive, and I find its diverse resources exactly what most present-day Methodist congregations need and will use. Allow me to open the cover and introduce the book to you.

¹John A. Lovelace, “Hymnal Revision Committee Okays 240 Probables in Early Decisions,” *News Notes* 30/12 (1985) 8-9.

I. INTRODUCING THE BOOK

The initial and most obvious reaction is that worship resources are placed first. These include a basic pattern of worship and several word and table formats complete with musical settings (five) for congregational/choir participation. Baptismal services follow with musical response provided. This placement of worship resources was a conscious choice, affirming that the hymnal constitutes the “worship book” of our corporate experience.

The first hymn (No. 57), “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing,” is followed at No. 58 by the printing of all seventeen verses of Wesley’s original text, and at No. 59 by Federico Pagura’s translation of the same hymn, “Mil Voces Para Celebrar.” This translation provides a visual signal that the book celebrates our ethnic heritage and diversity; more than seventy hymns of African-American, hispanic, Asian-American, and Native American descent, as well as prayers and other worship materials from these traditions are included.

The hymnal provides what the congregation needs for Sunday and other times of worship (including the sacraments): rites of marriage and burial, morning and evening prayer and praise, with additional worship materials topically placed among the hymns. Other prayers, litanies, and creeds follow the occasional services.

The core of this Hymnal is the abundance of well-known hymns from Greek, Latin, German, Scandinavian, Wesleyan, English, and North American traditions. Alongside these the committee has placed representative evangelical hymns and songs from the recent popular repertory, as well as proven hymns from the recent “hymnic explosion” of England and North America.

Seventeen canticles from traditional and contemporary sources with sung or spoken responses are also included. Service music appropriate for the congregation is found within the services and among the hymns.

The psalms, with spoken or sung responses, occupy a more prominent position than in previous editions. One hundred psalms prescribed by the lectionary of the Consultation on Common Texts as well as psalms for special occasions are included.³

The title of my article comes from the new hymn quoted at the top of this essay. It speaks of a song offered in honor and praise and gives thanks for the past, for the “now,” and for tomorrow. I propose to speak briefly about some of the hymns in the new book using the categories defined by Marshall’s hymn.

II. A SONG IN HONOR AND PRAISE

The wonderful African-American hymns, adapted and arranged by William Farley Smith, represent the best of scholarship as related to performance practice. “Blue” notes abound and harmonizations are rich and interesting in hymns such as “O Mary, Don’t You Weep” (No. 134), “Jacob’s Ladder” (No. 418), “I’m Goin’ a Sing” (No. 333), “Old Ship of Zion” (No. 345), “It’s Me, O Lord” (No. 352), and “Do Lord” (No. 527).

Hispanic hymns include “¡Canta, Débora, Canta!” (No. 305), “Cantemos al

Señor” (No. 149), “Niño Lindo” (No. 222), “Mantos y Palmas” (No. 279), “En el Frío Invernal” (No. 233), “Camina, Pueblo de Dios” (No. 305). This is a rich tradition, presented in singable possibility.

Asian-American hymns with their special aura (I love pentatonic tunes) are represented by “That Boy-Child of Mary” (No. 241), “Lonely the Boat” (No. 476), “Saranam” (No. 523), “Here O Lord, Your Servants Gather” (No. 552), and “Rise to Greet the Sun” (No. 678).

Finally, hymns such as “Heleluyan” (No. 78) and “Daw-Kee, Aim Daw-Tsi-Taw” (No. 330) present Native American hymnody in accessible fashion.

III. THANKS FOR THE PAST

The core of the hymnal represents an abundance of well-known hymns from Greek, Latin, German, Scandinavian, Wesleyan, English, and North American traditions. One of the treasures of the “past” is representative music by Bach, Clark, Croft, Crüger, Franck, Gerhardt, Handel, Hassler, Luther, Neumark, Beethoven, Givvons, Goss, Haydn, Mendelssohn, Palestrina, Praetorius, Schubert, Schumann, and Tallis. Much of what we would consider classical hymn tradition is preserved, and this is important, particularly to those who feared we might lose these treasures.

Another “past” treasure is a good selection of gospel hymns, camp-meeting songs and the like. One section of the book looks like it might have been lifted from a more evangelical hymnal, but, remembering Schaller’s reference to the “song of the tribe,” it seems not only appropriate but necessary that this “song” be represented.

A vital part of the Methodist heritage is represented by the Wesleys. A separate Wesley consultation was responsible for attempting to place singable Wesley hymns in the book. The problem, of course, is those long-lined meters to which many tunes simply won’t work. This may account for the low usage of many of the Wesley hymns recorded by the surveys. The Wesley group did a great service by examining all possible resources and giving us many new possibilities. A wonderful example is the hymn, “Rejoice, the Lord is King” with the well-known hymn tune, “Darwell’s 148” (No. 715), repeated with a second possibility, a tune relatively unfamiliar to American ears, “Gospal,” composed especially for this text by Handel (No. 716). This jubilant, long-lined tune is one of the exciting treasures of the entire Wesley opus.

IV. THANKS FOR THE NOW

Three hymns, all with text by Brian Wren, stand out: “God of Many Names” (tune by William Rowan) explores different ways of naming God (No. 105). “Christ, upon the Mountain Peak” (with whole-tone scale tune by Peter Cutts), is a rare hymn on transfiguration (No. 260). “Woman in the Night” (tune by Charles Webb) presents eight biblical incidents of women in contact with Jesus—a stunning tune for verse and refrain (No. 274). Fourteen of Wren’s texts are included.

F. Pratt Green’s “When in Our Music” (No. 68), “O Christ the Healer” (No. 265), “Christ Is the World’s Light” (No. 188), “Of All the Spirit’s Gifts to Me” (No. 336), and “When Our Confidence Is Shaken” (No. 505) are some of the eighteen hymns from the pen of this English

Two hymns in what one might call a more popular vein are Kathleen Thomerson's "I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light" (No. 206), and "Spirit Song," with text and music by John Wimber (No. 347).

I cannot leave this section without at least mentioning "How Can We Name a Love" (No. 111; Wren text, trad. Eng. melody), "God of the Sparrow" (No. 122; Vajda text, Schalk tune), "Lift High the Cross" (No. 159; Kitchin and Newbolt text, Nicholson tune), "Come My Way" (No. 164; from Vaughan Williams' *Mystical Songs*), and "The First One Ever" (No. 276; Linda Wilberger Egan, text and tune).

V. THANKS FOR TOMORROW

Thomas Troeger and Carol Doran collaborated for a commissioned hymn containing thirty-nine names, descriptions, or metaphors for God, entitled "Source and Sovereign, Rock and Cloud" (No. 113)—a most unusual tune with rich, interesting harmony, and a more traditional refrain to complement the verse. An exciting Pentecost hymn, "Like the Murmur of the Dove's Song" (Daw text, Cutts tune) focuses on a more gentle wind with rich imagery and supple, expressive tune (No. 544). A hymn by Duke Ellington in the Methodist Hymnal? Try "Come Sunday," text and tune by Duke Ellington (No. 728). One must mention "Silence, Frenzied, Unclean Spirit" and "Wind Who Makes All Winds That Blow" (Nos. 264 and 538, both Troeger/Doran), "Serenity" (No. 499; Whittier text, Ives tune), and "Christ, Mighty Savior" (No. 684; Mozarabic hymn with Hurd tune).

VI. COMMUNION HYMNS

A wonderfully expanded section of music for holy communion includes "I Come with Joy" (No. 617; Wren text, Southern Harmony tune, harm. by Charles Webb), "One Bread, One Body" (No. 620; text and tune by John B. Foley), "Come, Let Us Eat" (No. 625; text and tune by Billema Kwillia), "O the Depth of Love Divine" (No. 627; Wesley text, Carlton Young tune), "You Satisfy the Hungry Heart" (No. 629; Westendorf text, Kreutz tune), and "The Bread of Life" (No. 633; Lew text, with Chinese tune harmonized by Robert C. Bennet).

So, this very brief survey is completed. One hopes it will pique interest, even curiosity, and that pastors and church musicians of all denominations will take time and interest to explore the resources of the new United Methodist Hymnal.