



The Future of the Denominational Hymnal

PAUL WESTERMEYER

FOURTEEN DENOMINATIONAL HYMNALS

For the past year I have been living closely with fourteen denominational hymnals.¹ When GIA Publications asked me to write a book about hymn tunes as an update of Erik Routley's *The Music of Christian Hymns*,² I had to figure out some way to access this huge topic. In order to bring it under some control, I first tried to get a sense of what hymn tunes are in use in English-speaking Anglo-European churches in the United States and to some extent in Canada, and through them to impose some limits. To that end, Kristin Rongstad, my assistant in the Master of Sacred Music program at Luther Seminary, graciously and with amazing speed and accuracy generated a list of the hymn tunes and their allied details in fourteen denominational hymnals. Keith Havergo, database administrator at Luther Seminary, made a database of this material. From it, I started counting and discovered that the 8,386 entries comprise 2,787 different hymn tunes. I then figured out which tunes were repeated and how many times. The information I gleaned is not especially scientific, nor precisely accurate, but it did give me a sense of the central

¹This article is derived partly from edited portions of a book tentatively titled *Let the People Sing: Hymn Tunes in Perspective*.

²Erik Routley, *The Music of Christian Hymns* (Chicago: GIA, 1981).

With all their diversity, the hymns and tunes found in present denominational hymnals exhibit a remarkable consensus. The future of the denominational hymnal cannot be known, but decisions regarding the hymnal pose the perennial question, Christ or Caesar.

pool from which the English-speaking Anglo-European portion of the church in this country has been drawing its tunes. This pool was not all that I had to consider, but it disciplined the choice of tunes to be studied. Organized in a quasi-historical way, almost all of the examples cited in the book come from these fourteen hymnals.

The hymnals Kristin Rongstad and I chose to include are from the last round of hymnal production that began with the *Lutheran Book of Worship* in 1978 and ran close to the end of the twentieth century.³ We made no particular attempt to be up-to-date with supplements, the many published and unpublished new tunes that continue to appear singly or in clusters, or the new round of hymnal editing that is now under way. Since hymn tunes transcend generations, the older ones that have survived repeated use are the ones we need to study. Relatively few tunes from any given period endure, so attempts to be up-to-date with what is new are doomed to be out-of-date very quickly. Several generations from now it will be time to study the tunes that may have survived from our period.

ECCLESIOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITION

The ecclesiological presupposition at work in denominational hymnals and their use in this study is that the church's very nature presumes continuity from age to age. This presupposition may well be labeled conservative, but it is really radically liberating. It frees us from the idolatry of fads, locates new life in God rather than in human ingenuity—no matter how momentarily intriguing—and respects the finest of human crafting for the glory of God over long periods so that we are not stuck in the mistakes and constraints of any one time and place, including our own.⁴ It presumes that we and our generation, like all past generations, did not invent the church, but are baptized into a stream that precedes and follows us. It presumes the Holy Spirit has been and, as promised, will continue to be active in that stream.

THE CHURCH'S DIVISIONS

Since my concern in the book is for and about the church, I was forced to face

³They are the following: *The Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville: Convention, 1991); *Chalice Hymnal* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1995); *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1993); *The Covenant Hymnal: A Worshipbook* (Chicago: Covenant, 1996); *Hymnal: A Worship Book Prepared by Churches in the Believers Church Tradition* (Elgin, IL: Brethren; Newton, KS: Faith and Life; Scottsdale, AZ: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992); *The Hymnal 1982 according to the Use of The Episcopal Church* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985); *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978); *Moravian Book of Worship* (Bethlehem: Moravian Church in America, 1995); *The New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1995); *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990); *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: CRC, 1987); *The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989); *Voices United: The Hymn and Worship Book of The United Church of Canada* (Etobicoke, ON: The United Church Publishing House, 1996); *Worship Third Edition: A Hymnal and Service Book for Roman Catholics* (Chicago: GIA, 1986).

⁴Another way to say a similar thing is to ask with Kenneth A. Myers whether music in the church is commodity or legacy and whether one consideration for choosing music in church ought to be whether it has lasting value over five generations (from the question and answer period of the lecture "Media, Music, and the Meaning of Life: Miscellaneous Notes about Notes and Their Habits," Stadium Village Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 21 April 2004). Myers is the author of *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1989).

the deadly dilemma of its divisions. These fractures mean that the bones and ligaments of the church's life together have been broken and torn, contrary to Christ's intention.⁵ Along with the rest of its life, the church has ripped apart its common song by means of denominational tribes and has no common discipline to help put it together. Rather than stand in relationship, figure things out with each other, and sing together, the church has split itself into pieces and denied itself the wisdom of its differences, musical and otherwise.

“rather than stand in relationship, figure things out with each other, and sing together, the church has split itself into pieces and denied itself the wisdom of its differences, musical and otherwise”

If a common discipline is lacking, we are left with the individual disciplines of our divisions. The hymnals had to be chosen therefore from pieces of the broken body of the baptized, each of which has its own checks and balances. Books assembled by individuals or independent groups, though valuable, were not chosen because they are not disciplined by the checks and balances of some portion of the body of the baptized.

A COMMON SONG

A profoundly constructive and positive note emerges from counting the database. It trumps our divisiveness and indicates that we have not been able to pull our song apart as much as a superficial glance suggests. The tunes we use cross our confessional divisions, and their number is small enough to form a common core. In spite of our fractures, we still tend to sing a common song. From the fourteen hymnals surveyed,⁶ 179 tunes are common to nine or more of the hymnals. They come from the twelfth century (or earlier) through the twentieth century and from a wide variety of styles. There are over 800 texts associated with these common tunes. That number quickly diminishes if you ask which of the 800 texts are used with the same tunes (of the 179) in the various hymnals. There are 123 texts used with the same tunes and twenty-four more common texts with different tunes (still from the 179). Those 147 texts come from the fourth to the twentieth centuries and from across the whole gamut of the church's liturgical year, occasions, and themes.

This is a remarkable circumstance. During the period when these hymnals were assembled, a “culturally friendly” civil religious and commercial crusade, which takes the sting and mercy out of the faith, has sought to dismantle the church's historic patterns of worship; omit, modify, or truncate biblical readings and ecumenical creeds; and abandon hymns. In spite of this, a common catholic

⁵See John 17:11.

⁶There are surely mistakes in the counting that follows, but the figures are accurate enough to allow a sense of the landscape to emerge, which is what I was trying to discover.

heritage of hymnody nevertheless remains in the church's hymnals. Visits to congregations reveal that, wherever the people are singing participants rather than spectators at worship—where their “office” at worship is affirmed—that hymnic heritage is being used. It may be weak or vigorous (both extremes are present as well as a wide spectrum between them), but it is present.

Though this circumstance is remarkable, it is not surprising. It points to the church, which by its nature loves the culture around it but will not be embraced by its death, and which keeps on singing the various themes of its song in season and out of season, no matter who or what tries to stop it. That song, from Baptists to Roman Catholics, relies on a common core that has not been coopted by cultural fads, but sings out the subversive message of liberation in Christ in spite of all the forces—no matter how large—that are arrayed against it.

TROUBLE AND A CHALLENGE

While all that I have just said is true, the analysis also reveals a troubling and countervailing motif, namely, that over 40% of the common texts and over 48% of the common tunes come from the nineteenth century. If a nineteenth-century *style* is used as the criterion, the percentages are even higher. This is in part because the nineteenth century was a productive historical turning point, when many authors, composers, and editors bequeathed to us a large and rich array of hymnic materials. It would be wrong for us to avoid this vein in our history and the people to whom we owe grateful tribute. It would also be wrong to avoid acknowledging nineteenth-century mistakes, as in Victorian romanticizing of, or patent lies about,

“the church that marries the spirit of an age becomes a widow in the next generation”

Christmas, for example.⁷ Both the good and the bad have been bequeathed to us. The problem in either case is that the nineteenth century is gone and has left its shell. What has put some leaders of the church into such a frenzy of fear is their realization that the shell is a dead casket. Their analysis is correct, but their frantic solution to substitute a new “contemporary” shell is disastrous. It allies the church's message to an even thinner skin that will atrophy more quickly than the one from the nineteenth century which, in at least some of its manifestations, included depth from the church's earlier life that undercut its mistakes. The error of allying the church with any period points to the truth of William Inge's observation: “The

⁷C. Michael Hawn, *Gather into One: Praying and Singing Globally* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 218–219, quotes John Bell, who acknowledges that many Christmas carols “are good,” but then says, “There is no biblical evidence to support the theory that ‘snow had fallen, snow on snow,’ but there is substantial evidence to suggest that Jesus did not ‘honor and obey’ throughout his childhood. What about running away from his family when he was in Jerusalem?...The Victorians dumped on us a legacy of forced piety, sentimentalism and deceptive images of God in their hymns.”

church that marries the spirit of an age becomes a widow in the next generation.”⁸ It also traps the church in the culture’s allegiance to Caesar, or the Caesar known as commerce, and not to Christ.

The topic I have been working on challenges the church catholic to resist a narrow hymnic practice from any single period and to embrace the fullness of its resources, which will help protect it from idolatry. This particular study gets at that challenge primarily from within the resources of the Anglo-European portion of the church. It also resonates with Michael Hawn’s message in his study of “global” hymnody.⁹ Our English-speaking, Anglo-European heritage is one part of a large global repertoire. Our temptation is either to investigate everything else to the exclusion of our own heritage (often on the premise that our own traditions are bad), or to investigate our heritage to the exclusion of everything else (often on the premise that everybody else’s traditions are bad). Either of those choices is wrong and leads to a dead end. We need to see the whole and how we are part of it. We need to examine therefore both what we sing and have sung as well as what others sing and have sung. We need to sing the song of others, as Michael Hawn has explained, but that does not mean neglecting our song.¹⁰

We can only work at small parts of the whole at any one time, and we have to realize that no community can escape its skin. We must do the work in our own heritage if we are to sing at all; but, if we do it to the exclusion of the rest of the world, we isolate ourselves at our peril. Creativity and new musical life come from cross-fertilization and from seeing the cross-fertilization that is already present in our own stream, which is itself many streams. The only way to get at that is to study it. The study I worked on therefore is unapologetically about one piece (that has many parts) of the whole, the English-speaking, Anglo-European piece, always viewed as part of the larger picture even when the larger picture is not explicitly mentioned.

ECUMENICAL CONSENSUS AND DENOMINATIONAL DIVISIONS

Since the book I have been working on is concerned with hymnody in relation to the ecumenical church and its public gatherings at worship, I had to acknowledge not only our period’s denominational divisions, but a curious paradox as well. Denominational groups and their hymnals provide checks, balances, and discipline for their members, as I have said. With the checks and balances go postures and perspectives that grow out of important confessional roots. These get at central themes, which we avoid at our peril. However, there are even deeper roots and relationships under the denominational ones that push toward common flowerings. In our period, the investigation of separate confessional roots has itself led

⁸See Paul Westermeyer, “Liturgical Music: *Soli Deo Gloria*,” in *Liturgy and the Moral Self: Humanity at Full Stretch Before God: Essays in Honor of Don E. Saliers*, ed. E. Byron Anderson and Bruce T. Morrill (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998) 207.

⁹Hawn, *Gather into One*.

¹⁰See, for example, his seven assertions, in Hawn, *Gather into One*, 14–17.

to reevaluations and reconfigurations that reveal these deeper and more common ecumenical roots. These have, possibly paradoxically but probably not surprisingly, accentuated internal denominational divisions. Some divisions within denominational groups are sharper than divisions between denominational groups. A group of Episcopalians, Methodists, and Roman Catholics, for example, may well agree with one another on any number of issues more than they agree with some members of their own confessional bodies.

“perhaps that is how the church always moves: like silent yeast, not destructively visible tornados”

This reconfiguring is apparent at worship. It once was possible to distinguish between a Presbyterian and a Lutheran practice. (At least we thought it was possible; often we minimized or neglected significant differences that were actually present within what was presumed to be a single common confessional allegiance.) Such distinguishing, though still perceptible and because of the inertia of our traditions not likely to disappear, has nonetheless become increasingly difficult. A rather remarkable consensus about worship across the ecumenical spectrum has emerged. Common liturgical research and grassroots cross-denominational practice from the nineteenth century onward has brought Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, English Baptist, continental Anabaptist, and Wesleyan communities into new dialogue and whetted their appetites for contact with Eastern Orthodoxy. Common agreements and concerns have emerged about baptism for many groups. Common ecumenical shapes for the Eucharist and prayer offices have become clear. A largely common three-year lectionary has brought congregations together across denominational divisions. Resources have been widely shared in hymnals and other publications related to worship. Though some have resisted this ecumenical consensus, it has also been widely affirmed in quiet ways that do not garner press coverage. Perhaps that is how the church always moves: like silent yeast, not destructively visible tornados.

THE FUTURE OF THE DENOMINATIONAL HYMNAL

I have no idea about the future of the denominational hymnal, but our ecumenical consensus means I have no idea about the future of denominations either. The consensus I just described is broader than the details. In, with, and under its details is a strong affirmation of God’s grace. With it go ecumenical creeds, strong preaching, and a strong sacramental life. And with that go concerns for justice and peace, for the world and its ecology, and for the finest music and art allied to an equally strong concern for the people’s song: the song of the folk, utilizing a wide variety of congregationally accessible styles. There is no one denomination that represents all these characteristics in equal measure, but congregations of all denominational stripes are linked by them. Different emphases and congruencies are

apparent, and I do not mean to minimize the distinctions that would probably become apparent if these groups ever got together and talked. But as I visit various churches and conferences of churches, an inchoate consensus that has little or nothing to do with denominations is palpable.

Curiously, one symbol of this quietly confessing church is the hymnal. It is not the only such symbol, but it is one of them, and a strong one. Because it recalls the fullness of the story, which is expressed in many times and places and cannot be collapsed into one cultural moment, it bodies forth the gospel against our marketplace of greed and exploitation, where anything and everybody are for sale at a price. It proclaims the gospel's freedom from the twenty-first century's bondage to the marketplace, where selling wares, gaining as many customers as possible, bottom lines, and being number one are the things that matter. I have no idea what the future of the denominational hymnal is, but what it symbolizes is clear. It poses the either/or the church always has to confront: either Christ or Caesar.

We will only know where we are headed after we have been there, when history and the hand of God have trumped our pretensions. It is impossible therefore to know what the future of denominational hymnals or anything else might be. We do have some knowledge about what denominational hymnals have been, are, and represent, however. Here are some of those things.

WHAT HYMNALS REPRESENT

1. Hymnals are the minutes of the last meeting. They tell us where we have been and what our sisters and brothers in Christ before us have done—their mistakes and their wisdom.

2. Hymnals give us the legacy of the church's hymns, hymn tunes,¹¹ and liturgical materials. These are not *ideas* about what the congregation sings, but the actual things themselves.

3. Hymnals are systems of checks and balances. They are prepared by representative groups, who are charged by a given portion of the church to fashion between two covers what expresses a denomination's confessional orientation and is worth the time and effort to use. These representative groups may be criticized, may or may not do their work well, and inevitably exhibit their versions of political power; but they are characterized by checks and balances that challenge individual or factional control. Whatever their demerits in our sin-soaked world, denominational hymnals are quite different from individual collections and represent their denominational configurations.

4. Hymnals are the church's central memory bank. The church remembers the outlines of hymns, tunes, and the liturgy, but not all of the details. (Every body of believers that meets a second time has a liturgy. The question is not the presence

¹¹Though hymns and hymn tunes, for good reasons, run together as one in popular parlance and Augustine's definition (sung praise of God), any study of them has to distinguish between hymns as poetic texts and tunes as musical melodies.

or absence of liturgy, but how a group's liturgy relates to the faith and the church's historic practices.) Hymnals supply both the outlines and the details. They are cue cards for the church, making it possible for the church to sing. Song is central to memory, as anyone who has visited people with strokes will tell you and as any group that sings knows.

*“song is central to memory, as anyone who has visited
people with strokes will tell you and as any group that
sings knows”*

The matter of a memory bank is no small thing. Without memory an individual has Alzheimer's disease. Without memory the church has communal Alzheimer's—no identity, no knowledge of God or the neighbor, no mission, no purpose, no coherence, no understanding of its being or of the world it is called to serve. Scripture does not substitute for this memory bank. Scripture rather impels, propels, compels, corrects, informs, renews, reforms, and drives it.

5. Hymnals include new pieces from their periods which seem to have enough substance to be worth trying. Editorial committees use their best judgment here, replete with mistakes, but also with enough repetitive practice before publication to merit best guesses.

6. Hymnals protect people in the church from one another, especially from leaders who intentionally or unintentionally seek to force their private agendas. Hymnals give complete current versions of texts. For Lutherans and some other denominations, they give complete liturgical forms, with leaders' and people's parts. Hymnals make it unmistakably clear that the people have a role to play that is equally as important as the clergy's or musicians' roles. These roles in Christ's body are “offices,” related to no less than baptism and Christian vocation, when the church gathers and when it scatters in the world. They cannot be altered on a momentary whim. When leaders overstep the discipline of their offices, leave things out, or add their own private opinions, hymnals make it possible for the people to see if they have been betrayed. Hymnals give the current version of the fullness of the musical and textual lore of the baptized, from twenty centuries and from around the globe, through a given confessional filter, to the extent possible between two covers. People have access to it easily and quickly. Hymnals, more than any of the church's other publications, are the people's books—profoundly so. They symbolize the priesthood of all believers and the often forgotten realization that the church does not belong to its leaders, whether they are clergy, musicians, or anybody else.

7. Hymnals are devotional books. They contain not only hymn texts and service materials for Sunday and festivals around font, word, and table—all of which can be used for devotional purposes—but they also contain treasuries of prayers, lectionaries, brief orders for daily prayer, and indices that can be used at home or

elsewhere. People can carry hymnals in their pockets, backpacks, suitcases, cars, and motorcycles; bring them to their offices, classrooms, and hotels; and keep them at home on piano racks, bookshelves, nightstands, or next to kitchen tables.

It is fashionable to say people never use hymnals in these ways. That, of course, is patently false, but, were it true, there is no reason for the church to accede to an ill-conceived absence or a faulty practice derived from the culture, which ultimately poses yet again the perennial question, Christ or Caesar. A church that has not lost its salt will know how to answer. The future of the hymnal is not at issue. The church's integrity, faithfulness, and vocation are. ⊕

PAUL WESTERMEYER is professor of church music at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, a past president of the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada, and a past editor of its journal, The Hymn. He has been on sabbatical leave, writing a book on hymn tunes for GIA.