



Lutheran Hymns and Hymnals on the 500th Anniversary of the First Lutheran Hymnal

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Hymns, the singing of hymns, and their centrality in Lutheran worship over the past 500 years is a given. Peder Balslev-Clausen, a Danish pastor and scholar, argued that hymns are constitutive of Danish Lutheran worship, a rule that could be applied to most Lutheran traditions.¹ When Luther introduced the singing of hymns by the congregation into the service, it changed many things. Suddenly the people had a voice, an active part in the service that was different from their participation in the mass. Now they were joining

¹ Peter Balslev-Clausen, "Salmerne og Gudstjenesten," *Hymnologiske Meddelelser* 18, no. 1 (1989): 5–29.

Hymnals reflect the times in which they are printed, and are the result of changing theological truths and cultural verities. In some sense, each hymnal is in dialog (or attack) on previous works. As ways of communicating change, especially in the electronic age, there is still a central need for hymnals to provide for the religious heritage of Lutheran worshipping people.

voices, women and men, to sing to each other the truth of what Scripture and the preacher had just said. It was a thrilling thing. Many of the early reformers from the North, Sweden's Olaus Petri, (1493–1552), Denmark's Hans Tausen (1494–1561), and Finland's Mikael Agricola (1510–1557), were studying in Wittenberg during Luther's time. Most had heard the Wittenberg congregations singing hymns and returned home to their respective countries and churches eager to introduce Luther's innovation to their people. Singing hymns together as a congregation marked the new movement and changed the people's understanding of their part in the service (*gudstjeneste/Gottesdienst*) radically.

The first collection of Luther's hymns, *Achtliederbuch*, the anniversary of which we are marking this year, had eight hymns in it, most of which are still in current hymnals. Most of them were intended to be sung as part of the ordinary of the liturgy. This was a major change: to move from prose chants set to Gregorian tunes that could only be sung by trained clergy choirs, to strophic poems set to folk tunes the people could easily sing together. It enabled the people to participate in and understand the service. As each country produced its own versions of Luther's hymns in its own language the corpus of Lutheran hymns began to grow. Not only did the founders of the various national churches translate the German hymns by Luther and his compatriots, they added their own hymns. These were also meant to be sung in the service as part of the ordinary, but as time went on, for the propers, or the biblical texts, for the day. The number of hymns and hymnals increased geometrically as time went on.

When hymnals could be easily printed, people owned them and used them at home where they were read and sung, memorized, and referred to in daily conversations. People, sitting at home in the long dark winters of the Lutheran north, sang hymns together, and in the frequent repetitions, learned them by heart. I do not think they spent time trying to memorize them—they simply learned them from constant repetitions, like many of us know at least the first stanzas of many Christmas carols.

As hymnal traditions developed over the centuries in the Lutheran lands, and as new spiritual movements, such as Pietism, developed, they printed their songs in collections by individuals, such as the Georg Lybecker (c. 1670–1716) collection of hymns in Sweden in 1717. These song books, although opposed by the establishments,

became popular and defined a new spiritual movement as people began to add these songs to their repertoire, sometimes shunning the authorized hymnal.

At first these songs would be sung in informal gatherings, not during the official church services of the kingdoms, but later the most popular ones were included in the next hymnal. One can see that in the ELCA's collection of songs, *With One Voice* (1995). Many of the gospel songs included in it such as "Blessed Assurance" by Fanny Crosby, shunned by previous American Lutheran hymnal, were included in the *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* book of 2006. These songbooks served as a conduit for new songs. This was a way, in some sense, to admit the presence of other pieties and new spiritual movements that would ultimately enrich succeeding hymnals.

THE MAKING OF A HYMNAL

While it is possible for one person to compile a collection of hymns and songs and publish it, especially today when the publishing of books has never been greater, the chances that it will sell and be used by large numbers of congregations is virtually nil. Today, instead of royal commands, we have church bureaucracies who call for and approve a new book.

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In America, these committees must sufficiently represent the congregations to whom they are hoping to sell the books. Congregations

need to see in the new book the hymns and songs they love so they can sing them together and hand them on to the next generation. This is an economic necessity. While *The Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) was being edited and compiled, during one of our meetings, Len Flachman, the CEO of the work, burst into our Hymn Text Committee meeting, announcing with great joy, that the owners of “How Great Thou Art” had granted us the rights to include it in our collection—to the dismay of several on the committee. “Now the book will sell!” he cried.

Just at that time, as one might predict, an attack on old line hymnals was brewing with what would become the contemporary worship movement. The LBW, which bent very little in that direction, would become the object of scorn from contemporary worship proponents. Suddenly many alternative books and settings for the liturgy were being produced by desk top publishing which was just coming into being at the time. These songs were dittoed and copied or projected on to screens for the gathered to sing during their services. This changed some of the requirements for a hymnal. Individuals like John Ylvisaker or Marty Haugen among many others could publish their own collections. Some congregations bought them to use in their services. Those songs that became popular ended up in the next hymnal.

The publishing of new collections of hymnals continues apace. Publishers like Hope Music Company or GIA can afford to publish these collections, which overall do not pay for themselves, because they can count on a few being chosen by a hymnal committee in some part of the church. With the publication of a couple of million hymnals for a specific denomination, the royalties available to the publisher and writer are fairly good and will make the publication of the small individual collection worth publishing.

HYMNALS ARE ATTACKS ON THE PREVIOUS HYMNAL

New hymnal committees, as they begin their tasks, will think immediately of wrongs they want to redress from the previous hymnal. Those who put together the LBW had their lists ready. Make “solemn litany” in “Savior, When in Dust to Thee,” rhyme, restore “O Day Full of Grace,” take out as many as possible of Methodist and Anglican hymns, especially those arranged by Lowell Mason, and add more

Sacred Harp melodies and more traditional Lutheran chorales. That was especially important now that there were three members of the committee from LCMS. In addition, there was a strong push from the music committee to get rid of nineteenth-century harmonies and update them so they sounded modern. Several musicians on the music committee wanted the music of the new hymnal to reflect the new music in the concert hall, at the time the twelve-tone serial music of Arnold Schoenberg. This meant that there were some hymns included in the LBW with harmonies that outraged many in the congregations. In addition, we updated the language and theologies to fit with the times. This has always been done, but not so radically as it was in the 1970s. Our prejudices, however, have not lasted.

As a survivor of the so-called worship wars, it is astonishing to me to realize how this has worked in my lifetime. The pitched battles of the previous generation of worship wars were left behind in the ELW. There are songs and hymns included in it from both sides. Almost like an amoeba, it spread out and included many of the songs that were on the “non-traditional” side of the worship wars of the late 1970s–1990s as well as that of the LBW with some reduction there. All that rancor seems gone and now ELCA and other contemporary Lutheran congregations can sing old Lutheran gems like “Nun Freut euch” along with old Gospel song classics like “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms.” Or many songs by John Ylvisaker or Marty Haugen. In addition to that there has been something of an explosion of new hymns by both sides: from the Ylvisaker folk song tradition to the “traditional” liturgical side, especially the work of Susan Palo Cherwien. Now with the ubiquity of publishing houses and individual creators of hymnals these new works can be instantly available to anybody who discovers them and wants to find new hymns for new occasions.

HYMNALS PRECEDE MERGERS

Another corollary for American Lutherans hymnals, as well as other Protestant church bodies, is that many hymnals in the United States were compiled by several church bodies who expected to merge in the future. The creation of a common hymnal which all the participating synods had been involved with, was shrewd business. While there might be one party that held the trump cards, they also knew

they had to listen to the other representatives if they were to produce a hymnal widely approved of by all, or at least most of, the congregations in the participating church bodies.

The Common Service, first published in 1888, clearly had a unifying principle behind its work which would be fulfilled with *The Common Service Book and Hymnal*, published in 1918. The Common Service, while not hymn based, did become a service that most American Lutherans included in their hymnals as the twentieth century proceeded. The *Service Book and Hymnal* (1958) committee, an immediate heir of *The Common Service Book and Hymnal* even if it invited leaders from the other, mostly Nordic American churches, was really the work of the ULCA's Luther Dotterer Reed. His ULCA colleagues did not want to include some Dano-Norwegian classics since they thought they were "not Lutheran" or badly translated. This meant that although the Norwegians and Danes on the committee protested, they could not get "O Day Full of Grace" or much of Kingo or Landstad in the SBH because they were either not considered to be Lutheran, or they were bad translations and did not live up to the literary standards of the committee. Still, they had to bend and include some they did not like simply because of their awareness the Danes and Norwegians now were participants and customers.

MOVE FROM HYMNAL TO WORSHIP BOOK

While most people in the pews still refer to the book in the racks as hymnals, it is of some interest to notice the change in the language of the titles—and thus the content. While before the twentieth century most hymnals had hymnal in their titles, as the twentieth century developed, there has been a redefinition in the titles. *The Lutheran Hymnary* of 1912, and *The American Lutheran Hymnal* of 1930 were named hymnal or hymnary. However, *The Common Service Book and Hymnal* in 1918 began to change that. In 1958, the *Service Book and Hymnal* had a similar title. While it contained more resources for worship than previous hymnals, but not the lectionary texts, it was divided into two parts with separate introductions: One for the service materials and the other for the hymnal. In 1978, the title of the new book was *The Lutheran Book of Worship* and in 2006 *Evangelical*

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This change did not augur well for the Lutheran understanding of the importance of hymns to the worship service. Some on the more liturgical side of this argument talk about hymns as an interruption in the flow of the service. Hymns are closed forms in the open musical form of a liturgy. Those who compose music for the liturgy think of their music almost like a through composed piece that remains in the same key, and in which one might hear motifs that connect each part of the ordinary. Introducing a hymn, a closed form, with an entirely different mood, key or tenor, troubles some of these composers. They would like their compositions to stand alone without extraneous closed forms interrupting them. This attitude diminishes the place of hymns in the service, to the detriment of our heritage.

THE NEW AGE OF ELECTRONIC MEDIA

The fact that we are now living in a world of electronic media that is more like the era of oral communication than the era of print makes the writing of hymn texts different. We hear it in the complaint about the new songs as being 7/11 songs: seven phrases repeated eleven times. While that bores many, it appeals to the memory. Once again congregations can sing their hymns and songs by heart. And because the texts are on overhead screens, singers can look up, away from their books. While these changes in retrospect look very much like a move

toward orality, it is not clear the new musicians of contemporary worship would have understood what they were doing was necessitated by the new methods of communication.

That has implications for hymn writers. Given this seismic change in communication methods, fifty years later we still are not quite sure how to write hymn texts. The production of books of new hymns continues apace. Hymn book editors have created editorial requirements that can be daunting; no sexist pronouns for God, hymns that explore new topics especially on the social justice side—ecological, anti-war, feminist, anti-racist, transgender, etc. These topics require prosaic texts and are difficult to memorize.

Too many hymn texts today seem like theological elaborations on biblical themes rather than simple memorable pieces a congregation could learn to sing without a hymnal. The old writers knew how to use repetition and form to make their hymn texts memorable. Now most hymn writers use the long sentences of print to argue for a cause. The language in the print heavy hymnals of the 1970s made services exercises in reading aloud with others, not worshipping together. The hymnals of the 1970s were done just at the end of the print era and suffer all the verbal infelicities of print.

Because most hymns written for the hymnals of the main line churches are written for the eye, not the ear, they appeal to our intellects more than our emotions. Worship planners make the service fit together with the theme of the day sometimes using unfamiliar hymns that speak to the lectionary text without considering the emotional arc of a service. That has been the place most hymn writers have inhabited over the past fifty years with the development of new lectionaries so we have ample collections of hymns for the service. While that may serve some purposes, it generally does not help the development of faith in the members of the congregations. Too much new can exclude all but the most gifted singer.

Because of the focus on the lectionary, our hymnists have not been writing much about other parts of life, outside the liturgy. Even the contemporary song writers centered their work on writing new liturgies for the ordinary of the service. Despite their rebellion against the services in the hymnals, their work needed to be printed and given to worshipers. Thus, even they, despite their intentions, were relying on print. Bach's cantatas should be a lesson to them, as he rejoiced in setting traditional hymns and new librettos which dwelt in the

provers of the day rather than yet another version of the ordinary.² How much more interesting would the contemporary worship party have been if the composers had written something like cantatas on the texts for the day, enhancing the proclamation rather than yet another setting of the ordinary.

HYMNALS TODAY

Even as it seems the printing of hymnals will have no end, the new electronic age of media that we are swimming in today, often without much understanding, is roiling the sense of what a hymnal is. In a way, we are moving toward a hymnal that is in the cloud. If a planner of worship cannot find an appropriate hymn for the proper of the day, he or she will look around for one that they deem appropriate. They will either print it in the bulletin, or project it onto a screen. People will stand silently by or come to love it. There are instant hits that sweep through the culture, like “On Eagle’s Wings” or “Borning Cry.” A new hymn can become an old favorite very quickly, but not often.

Despite the flood of new hymns that fit the lectionary topic, I would argue against using a new hymn every Sunday. It is not inclusive of the worshipers to plan services with hymns the congregation does not know. Those who cannot sing the new hymn, and spend the duration of the hymn looking down, are being kept from the service they came to participate in. Worship planners who look for hymns that fit exactly the theme of the Sunday may be, without thinking, excluding the congregation from participating. In some ways it can feel to those in the pew like those in power have not thought of them, or in fact scorn them and their homely piety. Better to sing “In the Garden,” on a Sunday featuring ministering to the homeless, than an entirely new hymn which says that exactly. Worship is not simply an intellectual program in which everything fits the idea. We are more than brains on sticks. Worship also involves the emotions and singing an “inappropriate” but favorite hymn may move someone to contribute more than if the service had been formally correct.

² See Alfred Durr’s illuminating discussion of this in his book *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach: With Their Librettos in German-English Parallel Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3–5.

The notion that pastors and musicians should keep records so they never repeat a hymn during the year does not help us add to the deposit of faith we should be building in the memory of our congregants. Bishop David Preus, of blessed memory, told me once he would much prefer that a congregation knew thirty hymns by heart to knowing bits of 600. It gives them a repertoire for their dying. My students at seminary used to be shocked by my telling them much of their Sunday school work was to prepare people for dying. One student wrote later, after years of ministry, that she began to understand that more and more as she stood by the bedsides of dying saints. Then, what was in the memory, even of the worst cases of Alzheimers, could be summoned out of the deepest recesses of their minds. Better it be “In the Garden” than John Lennon’s pagan “Imagine!”

Hymnals are the result of the sorting and sifting of the deposit of faith that we have. That sifting is harder today than when a hymnal lasted for a century. Now, with digitalization of everything, even old hymnals, everything is available again. While this may help people discover new treasures and delights, and gain access to that which was suppressed...

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In a way, that will be one way that the new communication revolution will assist the people to have their say on what hymns they sing. It would be a predictable turnabout. The people will have their songs regardless of what nameless hymn committees decide they should

want. An emblem of my entire argument was watching a group of hymnal committee members at a Hymn Society meeting who listened in horror to a worship band that had made it onto the program. Their entire MO was to go back and find the hymns that had been kept out of the hymnals compiled by these executives and their committees. Funniest to me was when the youthful leader announced one of the treasures they had rediscovered was “There’s Power in the Blood.” Every single executive in that group had fought to keep that out of their mainline hymnals. Now they were hearing the young, the group for whom they thought they were making their hymnals, telling them their work was not appreciated. It’s a rule—what you take out, the next generation will put back in, and what you put in, they will take out. That is the yin and yang of the making of hymnals of which, apparently, there is no end! ⊕

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