



# American Lutherans and their Hymnals

MARK GRANQUIST

A key theological distinctive of the Lutheran Reformation was Martin Luther's understanding of the Word of God, and how encountering that Word created faith in the believer. In worship that Word became real when it was proclaimed to the people through preaching and sacraments (both equally Word), which is why the worshipers had to actively hear, understand, and participate in worship as the Word as it came to them. Along with preaching and sacraments, however, there was another way in worship in which Christians heard and participated in the Word, and that was through the singing of hymns. Luther knew that joining in congregational hymn singing was a key way in which Christians both heard the Word and expressed their faith. The combination of text and music in a hymn was distinctively effective in deepening faith, and over the centuries hymn

*Hymns play a crucial role in Lutheranism, especially in carrying down the traditions, and teaching the people the gospel message in ways that few other vehicles can. Hymnals are also records of the changing face of Lutheranism — they can be elements of unity, or signs of disunity, depending on the context*

singing became an integral part of Lutheran identity. Lutherans are a singing people.

Lutherans developed a rich tradition of hymns and hymn singing. Over the centuries, as Lutherans expanded through Europe, North America, and eventually all around the world, their hymn traditions were broadened by contacts with hymns and music from other Christian traditions. Beginning with Luther's first collection of hymns in 1525, Lutherans have developed countless hymnals to pull together their songs of faith.<sup>1</sup> But each hymnal is a theological act; although there are innumerable hymns, not all hymns (even some of our favorite ones) are equally helpful in the task of creating faith. And as language and religious tastes change over time, some older hymns drop out of favor, while others are added. So, the making of hymnals is a complicated and often controversial task, and there is often much conflict involved; given the centrality of hymns to Lutherans and their faith, they become possessive of their hymns and their hymnals. Change is difficult.

From the sixteenth century on, Lutherans in Europe developed regional hymnals based on their areas and linguistic traditions. These variations were further complicated by inter-Lutheran theological debates, such as those between the Lutheran scholastics and the reforming Pietists, between theological traditionalists and rationalists, and between modernists and conservatives, just to name a few. Over the centuries changes in musical and lyrical expression also complicated things, to the point that there were often more competing hymnals, some official and others not sanctioned, that vied for attention. Every time there was the need for a new hymnal, there were competing visions of what should be included (and excluded) from the previous versions. As Lutheran hymn scholar Gracia Grindal has observed, "each hymnal is something of an attack on the previous hymnal."<sup>2</sup> The reason Lutherans fight so much over hymnals is that hymn singing is so central to their faith lives. All hymns are not created equal.

<sup>1</sup> On Lutheran hymn traditions, see Robin A Leaver, ed. *A New Song We Now Begin: Celebrating the Half Millennium of Lutheran Hymnals, 1524–2024* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024) and Ernest E. Ryden, "Hymnbooks," in Julius Bodensieck, ed., *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, vol. 2. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965), 1072–1090.

<sup>2</sup> Gracia Grindal, "Treasured Hymns Unearthed or Buried," *Lutheran Forum* 49, no. 2 (2015): 25.

*In the ubiquitous immigrant trunk, many immigrant Lutherans brought with them several religious books; usually the Bible, Luther's Small Catechism and collections of his sermons, devotional works such as Johan Arndt's True Christianity, and the Psalmbook (hymnal) of their variety of Lutheranism. These were for them more just religious books, these were their portable church...*

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When Lutherans began to immigrate to North America, they brought with them these hymnal traditions and controversies.<sup>3</sup> In the ubiquitous immigrant trunk, many immigrant Lutherans brought with them several religious books; usually the Bible, Luther's *Small Catechism* and collections of his sermons, devotional works such as Johan Arndt's *True Christianity*, and the *Psalmbook* (hymnal) of their variety of Lutheranism. These were for them more just religious books, these were their portable church, especially important because there were often no Lutheran congregations in the places to which they were headed. As they developed their congregations and denominations, these hymnals were the key to maintaining their faith in a quite foreign land. Think of the comfort that an old and deeply felt hymn could have had to a stranger in a strange land.<sup>4</sup>

However, for Lutherans in North America, hymnals could as equally divide as they could unite. When the German immigrants came to colonial America, they came from different Lutheran areas, with different hymn traditions. Lutherans from southern German states could barely understand the dialects of those from northern German states. Though they gathered together in Lutheran congregations, they quarreled over which hymnals they should use in their common worship. There were also other German immigrant Protestants, mainly

<sup>3</sup> For a good overview of the hymnody of American Lutherans, see R. Harold Terry, "Lutheran Hymnody in North America," in *Hymnal Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship*, ed. Mary Kay Stulken (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 82–114.

<sup>4</sup> On the general history of Lutherans in America, see Mark Granquist, *Lutherans in America: A New History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), and E. Clifford Nelson, ed., *Lutherans in North America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972).

Reformed and Moravian, with whom they settled, and whose hymn traditions influenced them. The leading German Lutheran leader in colonial America, Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, struggled with how to help referee these internal conflicts, and dreamed of developing a common Lutheran hymnal to be used by all Lutherans in North America. It was a dream he never was able to realize, but one that lived down through subsequent generations.

Muhlenberg thought in terms of a German-language hymnal, but even toward the end of his life, these colonial Lutherans were beginning to undergo a sharp and painful struggle over language, especially the transition to the use of English in their worship. Immigrants often quickly adopt English for interactions with the larger culture around them, but the immigrant languages often are retained within their homes and congregations. Language acquisition is an art, and takes a long time; since religious language is often complex and metaphorical, and high-concept language use, such as preaching and hymn singing, lags behind. And for the colonial Lutherans, it was not even clear that Lutheranism could be expressed in English; this had never been done before, and they were not sure that it could be done. One old immigrant was forced to admit that, yes, God could understand English, but he quickly added, “God doesn’t like English.”

Whether God did (or did not), the younger generations of Lutherans came very much to like English, and increasingly insisted on worshipping in this new language. The struggles of religious language transition were sharp, but the outcome was never in doubt, as the new generations supplanted the older ones. So, Lutherans began to worship and sing hymns in the language of their new country, and they encountered an entire new and rich tradition of Anglo-American hymnody, from the Puritans, the Methodists, the English Evangelicals and Baptists, the Presbyterians, and the Anglican Episcopalians, as well as the revival hymns of the frontier preachers. Lutherans struggled to produce viable translations of their European hymns, and to sift through this bounty of new hymns, not only in a new language, but also hymns whose theology was often at odds with the theology of Lutheranism. But the new English hymns were often judged more singable by Lutheran laity, and many found their way into Lutheran hymnals.

The process of developing English-language Lutheran hymnals began in the early nineteenth century, but without strong

denominational organizations, the process was initially *ad hoc*, with individuals and groups developing their own hymnals, often with the assistance of publishers, who sought to make a profit off of printing new hymnals (the profit motive in hymnal production is not to be discounted). The early English Lutheran hymnals were often haphazard and quickly put together, but their quality improved through the century as Lutheran leaders and hymnwriters gained fluency with English and with the wider world of Anglo-American hymnody. The nineteenth century saw a veritable explosion of English-language hymnody, and many of the hymns that American Lutherans hold dear were developed in this time period, or were resurrected from earlier hymnic traditions, even back to the Greek and Latin writers.

The period from 1820 to 1920 saw a massive renewal of European immigration to the United States, and millions of Lutherans came to the new world from Germany, Scandinavia, and other parts of Europe. These new Lutheran immigrants quickly developed congregations and new denominations based on linguistic or theological affinities, and in some cases gained control of older Lutheran synods already in place in America. Most of these new Lutheran denominations sought to create their own hymnal traditions in the new country. At first this meant utilizing and reprinting hymnals from their old country, although there were often disagreements over which hymnals to use. But as these new immigrants settled into the new homes, some church leaders began to advocate for new hymnals for use in their congregations, and some went so far as to develop their own hymnals, either to supplement the older European psalmbooks, or to replace them altogether.

Here it might be helpful to examine, as typical, the experience of one such tradition, the Swedish-language Augustana Synod.<sup>5</sup> Most of the Swedish Lutheran immigrants brought with them the official *Psalmbok* of the Church of Sweden, either in its 1694 version, or the revision of 1811. But as many Swedish immigrants, as well as the leaders of the Augustana Synod, were deeply influenced by the pietist awakening in nineteenth-century Sweden, they also brought with

<sup>5</sup> See Maria Erling and Mark Granquist, *The Augustana Story: Shaping Lutheran Identity in North America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 91–93. Also, Mark Granquist, “American Hymns and Swedish Immigrants,” *Lutheran Quarterly*, 20, no. 4 (2006): 409–428.

them collections of hymnal compiled by pietist hymnwriters. In the early Augustana congregations both the official hymnal and the pietist collections were used in worship. When the synod began to coalesce and grow, its leaders decided to publish hymnals for its congregations. They chose a pietistically-oriented revision of the 1811 Swedish *Psalmbok*, which was, for many years, published by the denominational press. But there was popular pressure for a hymnal that represented the pietist hymns of the nineteenth-century revivals, so in 1891 a synodical committee developed a supplemental hymnal, *Hemlandssånger* (Songs of the Homeland) which contained many of the new pietist hymns, as well as English and American gospel hymns in Swedish translation. Although the official line was that the *Psalmbok* was for Sunday morning worship, while *Hemlandssånger* was for Sunday evening and other informal services, this distinction was rarely observed.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, it became obvious to synod leaders that the Swedish *Psalmbok* needed revisions or replacement for their congregations, so they began to imagine a new, Swedish-language hymnal of their own. But events overtook them, as it was becoming clear that their congregations needed an English-language hymnal that represented their own traditions. In 1901 the synod published its first English hymnal, rather hastily produced, as well as English hymnals for youth and Sunday Schools. In 1925, the synod produced a new English hymnal, which was a great improvement, and basically merged together the old *Psalmbok* tradition and the newer *Hemlandssånger* hymns. The example of the Augustana Synod was typical of that of dozens of other American Lutheran denominations.

Just as colonial-era Lutherans struggled over the transition to the use of English in worship, so did the nineteenth-century immigrants about one hundred years later. Up to the First World War, most of these later immigrant denominations maintained the use of European languages in their congregations, because of concern for older generations, and the perceived need of ministering to immigrants yet to come. Yet the relentless desires of the new generations for the use of English, and the xenophobia of the First World War, pushed these immigrant denominations into a rapid transition to the primary use of English, a transition that was generally accomplished by 1930.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> On the language transition and Americanization, see E. Clifford Nelson, *Lutheranism in North America, 1914–1970* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), especially

The transition to the widespread use of English in Lutheran worship had an immense and complicated impact on American Lutheran hymnody. Hymn translation is a complex art, and it is often difficult to translate the subtle nuances of hymns from one language into another. American Lutherans of that day often did not have the linguistic skills to provide the translation of the classic Lutheran hymns into English. Many of the most famous Lutheran hymns had already been translated into English by Victorian English translators, such as Catherine Winkworth (1829–1878), although in truth many of these translations were rather more like paraphrases. But there were hundreds of other Lutheran hymns to be translated, and the job of providing good English translations of them was a laborious task. Some of the early translations were rather wooden and literalistic.

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chapter 1.

<sup>7</sup> See Leigh D. Jordahl, “American Lutheranism: Ethos, Style, and Polity,” and Niel M. Johnson, “Lutherans in American Economic Life,” in *The Lutheran Church in North American Life, 1776–1976, 1580–1980* eds. John E. Groh and Robert H. Smith (St. Louis: Clayton Publishing House, 1979), 33–55, 132–164.

became increasingly more difficult, given all the options from which to choose.

The transition to the use of English also provided further complications, as the adoption of this new language undercut the continuing need for separate, linguistic American Lutheran denominations. If they were all now using English, what was to keep them from consolidation and merger? In the early twentieth century, the first wave of mergers brought together the “Muhlenberg” Lutherans into United Lutheran Church in America in 1918, most of the Norwegian-American Lutherans in 1917, and four of the Midwestern groups in 1930. But advocates saw this as but the beginning of further consolidations.

Hymnals played an important role in these mergers, and hymnals developed in common by the merging groups paved the way for such actions. The *Common Service Book and Hymnal* (1917) and the *American Lutheran Hymnal* (1930) were two such hymnals, while the merging Norwegians had to settle for two hymnals to meet the theological needs of their newly-merged denomination. The trend toward merger was one part of a larger trend toward widespread consolidation and centralization in American religion and the wider society. Common hymnals were an integral part of creating a shared identity among worshippers, and providing a kind of “brand loyalty” among them. The widespread adoption of a common hymnal meant that congregations of the same Lutheran denomination would have a similar worship experience wherever they were located.

Lutherans in America also created a wide-range of institutions and resources to develop and support the art of singing hymns within their congregations. Lutherans are a singing people, but it took effort to see that these traditions were passed down to subsequent generations. Areas of Lutheran numerical strength, such the upper Midwest, are renowned for their choral singing, which were encouraged on many levels. Musical education began early, with congregational choirs for children and youth, singing among youth groups and congregational auxiliaries. Lutheran Sunday schools, parochial schools, and bible schools, as well as choir camps contributed to musical literacy. Lutheran colleges and universities became nationally known for the excellence of their choirs. For many decades, Norwegian-Americans had annual Chorale Union meetings which brought together people from across the country to sing. Congregational choirs were encouraged, and denominational publishing houses produced large



amounts of sheet music and resources to support choirs and congregational singing.

Muhlenberg's dreams of American Lutherans united in a single denomination, using a common hymnal, was a strong ideal for Lutherans during the middle of the twentieth century. The first wave of mergers was generally of groups sharing common affinities; the subsequent mergers would need to be accomplished by drawing together more distinctive American Lutheran denominations. Starting after the Second World War, complicated merger negotiations fell short of the final goal, but did result in three major denominations; the newly-merged Lutheran Church in America (LCA - 1962) and the American Lutheran Church (ALC - 1960) joined the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) to represent over ninety-five percent of all American Lutherans.

Beyond this, the publication of a new common hymnal, the *Service Book and Hymnal* (SBH) in 1958 represented the combined efforts of eight denominations that constituted the new LCA and ALC, and meant that now two-thirds of all American Lutherans were using a single, common hymnal.<sup>8</sup> Impressive as this was, and the subsequent mergers, they did not satisfy the urgings to bring about Muhlenberg's dream, and almost as soon as the SBH was published and the mergers accomplished, there were calls for the final realization of his dream. During the 1960s developments in that direction seemed positive; all three Lutheran denominations joined in a common agency for cooperative efforts in 1965, and in 1969 the three denominations entered into a process to produce a hymnal common to all of them. With all the momentum in these common directions, could a merger be far behind?

Yet, despite all this positive energy, the final realization of Muhlenberg's dream proved to be elusive. As the LCA and ALC were headed in liberal directions after the 1960s, including the ordination of women to the ministry, there was a strong conservative move away from the center within the LCMS. Negotiations to finalize the new common hymnal, the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) were

<sup>8</sup> On the SBH and LBW, see Mark Granquist, "Chasing Muhlenberg's Dream: From the *Service Book and Hymnal* to the *Lutheran Book of Worship*," in Leaver, *A New Song We Now Begin*; and Ralph W. Quere, *In the Context of Unity: A History of the Development of the Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2003).

complicated by these developments, and eventually the LCMS withdrew from the new hymnal, and produced its own version, *Lutheran Worship* (1982). Representatives of the LCA and ALC grumbled that the LCMS had pulled out of the process at the eleventh hour, and “stuck” them a bunch of “un-singable” sixteenth and seventeenth-century German Lutheran hymns. By the 1980s, the moment of full unity seemed to have passed, and the ALC and LCA, along with a break off from the LCMS, the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Congregations, merged together in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (1988).

Perhaps even more important than these developments were the cultural and religious developments sweeping the United States from the 1960s onward, including the popularity of folk and rock music, and its impact on congregational worship. The solid growth of conservative and evangelical Protestant churches, especially the new “mega-churches,” was often based on new “contemporary” worship and hymnody that borrowed from folk and rock music.<sup>9</sup> Informal worship styles, along with “praise bands” of guitars and drums, produced new worship music (hymns?) that became very popular. These trends found their ways into traditional Protestant congregations, including Lutheran ones, sparking the “worship wars” between proponents of traditional and contemporary worship. Traditionalists sniffed that the contemporary music, including praise songs, were thin musically and theologically. One snarky line went that praise songs consisted of only “three words, two chords, and fifteen minutes.”

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<sup>9</sup> See Scott Thumma and Jim Peterson, “Goliaths in our Midst: Megachurches in the ELCA,” in *Lutherans Today: American Lutheran Identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Richard Cimino (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 102–124.

The worship wars laid bare long-standing tensions over worship and hymnody that went back over a century, tensions often between the religious professionals that produced the hymnals and the “people in the pews” who used them. While this can be overstated, laypeople often treasured and appreciated hymns that the professionals did not, and *vice versa*. Each new hymnal had to discard or reject many hymns that were important to lay people, and included new hymns, some of which were not appreciated by them. And bound hymnals were inflexible; they were limited and could not respond quickly enough to the new trends and new demands in hymnody. Denominational officials and publishers responded with new, “experimental” hymn collections, such as the *Hymnal Supplement 1991* and *With One Voice* (1995), opening the way for more diversity, along with hymnals in Spanish, and hymnals representing the African American tradition. Some congregations found other hymnals to use or to supplement, especially “gospel” hymnals of American evangelical hymns. A new Lutheran hymnal, *Reclaim* (2013), attempted to bring back older and forgotten traditions of Lutheran worship and hymnody. The ELCA and LCMS both introduced new hymnals in the early twenty-first century, but the dream of one, common Lutheran hymnal seemed to be receding quickly.

All these new hymnals crowded into the pew hymnal racks of Lutheran congregations, complicating the experience of worship, as parishioners had to attempt to juggle multiple books in a single service. With the growth of electronic resources and computer equipment, an increasing number of congregations opted to forego printed hymnals and bulletins altogether, in favor of worship materials that would be projected on screens in the sanctuary. Certainly, this made for flexibility, and some claimed a more streamlined worship experience (though this author disagrees). The big question is whether these trends will see the eventual elimination of printed and bound hymnals altogether. If so, how will Lutherans in the twenty-first century maintain their five-hundred-year-old tradition of hymnody, especially outside of worship?

Perhaps more important is the perceived decline in congregational and corporate hymn singing and its attendant musical facility. Across the board, people in contemporary America have many less opportunities to sing together than they did in the past, and this is a trend found in Christian congregations as well. Hymn-singing is

a theological art that does not simply happen by accident; it has to be built and nurtured. The question is whether Lutherans and other Christians can continue the traditions of hymn singing for which they have become known. This is not simply a question of musical taste or preference; if, as was suggested at the beginning of this essay, it is a matter of how people encounter the Word of God being proclaimed to them in worship, then the continuation of these hymn traditions is of the essence of the evangelical (gospel) tradition itself. Time will see how this crucial form of hearing the Word of God is maintained for and among future generations. ☩

*Mark A. Granquist is the Lloyd and Annelotte Svendsbye Professor of the History of Christianity at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, and the editor of Word & World. He is the author of Lutherans in America: A New History (2015) and A History of Luther Seminary, 1869–2019 (2019), as well as several other books and numerous articles and reference book entries.*