



Through the Church, the Song Goes On

MARIN R.T. JACOBSON

The apostle Paul's words in Colossians 3:16 seem to call forward through the ages to people of all times identifying why we sing, what we sing, and to whom we sing as worshiping communities:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

Lutheran pastor and hymn writer Martin Franzmann began his Reformation sermon "Theology Must Sing" with Colossians 3:16, and contemporary hymn writer Paul D. Weber discusses Martin Luther's "spiritual songs" as models for his own hymnody in the Preface to

The process of producing new hymns is an art that mixes many different elements, often in a changing cultural and religious context. In this article, scholar and musician Marin Jacobson enters into dialog with three contemporary practitioners of the art of hymnody, hymn writers Carol R.S. McDaniel, Steven P. Mueller, and Paul D. Weber.

So Great a Cloud of Witnesses: A Paul D. Weber Hymnary.¹ Contemporary creators of hymn texts and tunes follow in the 500-year tradition of Martin Luther, Johann Walther, and other early Reformation hymn writers. Robert Marshall and Robin Leaver identify vernacular chorales as fundamental to Luther's theology of the gospel; chorales enabled congregations to respond with joy to gospel proclamation, expressing faith and offering praise to God.² As 2024 marks the 500th anniversary of the first Lutheran hymnal, *Etlich Christlich Lider*,³ it seems appropriate to explore recent hymns created by living hymn writers whose aims are similar to Luther's. This article will examine three hymn writers who have been nurtured in Lutheran congregations and schools, who continue to serve the church today, and whose hymns may enrich congregational worship. Brief biographies reveal formative experiences, and interview responses relate creative process and craft as well as insights for other hymn writers. Practical details regarding congregational use of unpublished hymnody are also addressed.

CAROL R.S. MCDANIEL

Carol R.S. McDaniel (b. 1961) began playing the piano at age four and the organ at age twelve. As a student in a Lutheran K-6 school, she fondly remembers memorizing "I Am Jesus' Little Lamb," "God Loves Me Dearly," and "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus." She began leading congregational song as organist and pianist at Zion Lutheran in Tacoma, Washington while in high school, and then studied at Concordia University in Seward, Nebraska earning a bachelor of science in education with a music concentration and a church music minor. Formative collegiate experiences included playing organ in chapel, singing in the Singers Choir, and accompanying the choir. In addition to musical opportunities, doctrinal and theological studies deepened her understanding of her faith. During graduate study at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, she studied hymnody, the development of

¹ Paul Westermeyer, *With Tongues of Fire: Profiles in 20th-Century Hymn Writing* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995), 67. Paul D. Weber, *So Great a Cloud of Witnesses: A Paul D. Weber Hymnary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2022), 6.

² Robert L. Marshall and Robin A. Leaver, "Chorale," *Grove Music Online*, 2001.

³ Marshall and Leaver, "Chorale."

liturgy, and organ performance, earning a master's degree in organ performance. Studies at the Robert E. Webber Institute of Worship Studies enabled Carol to explore theological and musical connections, faith formation, spiritual formation and implications for worship. Her dissertation focused on the recovery of the spiritual disciplines as preparation for corporate worship. She has served as a teacher in Lutheran schools, a director of parish music ministry, and a college professor. She is currently adjunct professor of music at Concordia, Nebraska.⁴

I had never attempted to write any hymn texts or tunes. Studying hymn playing and improvisation with Charles Ore, and singing hymn concertatos under David Held's direction in the Singers Choir at Concordia, Nebraska gave me a new appreciation for text painting and interpretation and solidified my love of hymns.

MJ: Could you describe courses or workshops that have contributed to your development as a hymn writer?

CMD: While I had composed some choral and organ music during my undergraduate years, I had never attempted to write any hymn texts or tunes. Studying hymn playing and improvisation with Charles Ore, and singing hymn concertatos under David Held's direction in the Singers Choir at Concordia, Nebraska gave me a new appreciation for text painting and interpretation and solidified my love of hymns.

After being introduced to several newer texts in the late 1990s and early 2000s (with the hymnal explosion that occurred), I decided to join the Hymn Society. The workshops, the quarterly journal and connections with their membership encouraged me as well.

⁴ Carol R.S. McDaniel, email to author, December 10, 2023.

In 2008, I attended a hymn writer's workshop at the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod's Conference on Worship after the *Lutheran Service Book* was published. I also attended two more hymn writer workshops at Concordia Seminary in Fort Wayne. Rev. Stephen Starke—a prominent hymn text writer in the LCMS—attended each of those three workshops and worked individually with us in evaluating and improving our craft.

MJ: Are there particular hymn writers whose work you admire? What aspects of their work have been influential?

CMD: Jaroslav Vajda's and Herb Brokering's hymn texts were the first ones to catch my eye. I was fascinated by their fresh thoughts and words. In essence it was the scriptural truths that they penned and then wedded with tunes that helped them come alive. Hymn texts that fascinated me were "Earth and All Stars," "Thine the Amen, Thine the Praise," and "Now the Silence," "Where Shepherd's Lately Knelt," "Someone Special" as well as "Go My Children With My Blessing."

Brian Wren, Thomas Troeger, Timothy Dudley-Smith, Gerald P. Coleman, Herman Steumpfle, Gracia Grindal, Susan Palo Cherwien and Marty Haugen are just a few of the other writers that I have come to treasure. *The Anatomy of Hymnody* by Austin Lovelace is an amazing resource that I still review and study today.

MJ: When did you become interested in writing hymns?

CMD: I wrote my first hymn, "O Father of the Journey" in the summer of 2006. I used it as a "prayer" in the writing of my dissertation and published it in 2007 as part of the preface in that document. We used it several times in worship where I served as minister of music, and it was very well received.

MJ: What theological teachings are most important to communicate through the hymn texts you write?

CMD: I want to emphasize God's sovereignty, God's abiding presence, the Trinity, the hope of heaven, God's continual work in our lives, prayer, and God's understanding of mental illness and long-term illness.

MJ: Have you written hymns for specific occasions? Do some hymns hold special meaning for you?

CMD: Yes. A congregational music festival, two confirmations, my pastor's 25th anniversary service, a farewell hymn after I left my church, a hymn about prayer, and then two hymns for parish themes. One hymn I wrote after the Newtown, Connecticut killings while my friend was suffering from her second round of cancer, and another hymn I wrote as a friend was dying from Parkinson's.

MJ: How do you begin writing a new hymn? Where do the ideas flow from?

CMD: God's Spirit is a wonderful motivator and counselor. Sometimes the Spirit plants an idea in my heart and the words flow rather quickly. More often, however, the Spirit plants a seed about the need for a hymn on a certain topic and then I search the scriptures for supporting texts. The next step is making word clouds and phrases which come to mind for possible use. Sometimes I use rhyme, sometimes not. Sometimes I use a public domain tune to help bring the words to life. Once I have something that seems workable as a complete text, I offer it up to one of my theology friends for their input.

MJ: Please describe your creative process for hymns in which you have written both text and tune?

CMD: I have only written three of these, "God at Work," "So Loved," and "We Thank You Lord for This New Day." These tunes were gifts from the Holy Spirit ... they flowed easily, quickly and didn't take much time at all. I don't spend much time trying to write tunes. When they come, hooray!

MJ: Several of your hymns have been arranged for vocal and instrumental ensembles. With which composers/arrangers have you enjoyed working?

CMD: The two composer-arrangers I have worked with to date are Alex Guebert and Dr. Christian Guebert, both of whom are former students of mine from Concordia, Irvine. Incidentally, they both took Irvine's hymnody course with me. They are brilliant church musicians, and I am proud to now call them colleagues in church music ministry.

MJ: What advice would you offer regarding how to write hymns, text or tune?

CMD: Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest as many hymns as possible. Look at (and sing!) what others are writing.

Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the Holy Scriptures, particularly the Psalms. This should be a daily discipline.

Set aside time to brainstorm and practice the craft.

Work with others.

Read books about hymns, especially *The Anatomy of Hymnody*, by Lovelace. (GIA publishing)

Join the Hymn Society, and/or attend their national conferences.

MJ: Can arrangements be made for use of your hymns in congregational worship?

CMD: Absolutely. I usually grant permission for texts without charge for use in a regular worship service. For choral arrangements or hymns with tunes, I typically charge a flat rate with permission to make copies. People may contact me directly at carolrsmcdaniel@icloud.com.

Selected hymns by Carol R.S. McDaniel:

God's Love is Grace, suggested tune: O WALY, WALY
Oh, Children of the Promise, suggested tune: ELLACOMBE
God at Work, Tune: GOTTESDIENST (original tune)

More Than We Can Ever Measure, suggested tune: GALILEAN
So Loved, Tune: Not Yet Named—original

“God’s Love is Grace” by Carol R.S. McDaniel

*Persuaded: Yes, Of this, I’m sure!
God’s Love is strong and will endure
His Spirit gives me faith to see
God’s love is grace; God’s love is free!*

*Baptized in Christ, I do believe
That Jesus died and rose for me.
His love is true and deep and high,
God’s love is grace, God’s love is wide.*

*When days are dark with doubt and fear
If nights are long and paths unclear
Though demons rage: around, within
God’s love is grace, God’s love will win.*

*The risen Christ gives victory
His Spirit pleads eternally,
With gift of water, Word and meal,
God’s love is grace, God’s love will heal.*

*Where life knows only joy and peace
Where mercies fall and never cease
Where saints now sing around the throne
God’s love is grace, God’s love is home.⁵*

STEVEN P. MUELLER

Rev. Dr. Steven P. Mueller (b. 1964) was raised in a musical family and participated in the church music program at Bethany Lutheran Church in Long Beach, California. While attending Christ College, Irvine, he sang in the choir, rang handbells, and played trumpet in

⁵ Carol R.S. McDaniel, email to author, December 10, 2023.

the instrumental ensemble. At Concordia Seminary, Fort Wayne, he sang with the seminary Kantorei directed by Richard Resch; the choir's focus on hymns nurtured Steve's appreciation for hymnody. After completing the master of divinity and master of sacred theology, Steve was called to serve Redeemer Lutheran Church in Sioux City, Iowa; during his pastorate, he began doctoral studies at the University of Durham, England.⁶ In 1995, he was called to teach at Concordia University Irvine and presently serves as Vice President, Chief Mission Officer, and Professor of Theology.⁷

MJ: Are there particular hymn writers whose work you admire?

SM: Jaroslav Vajda and Stephen Starke. I learned a lot from Starke about his hymn-writing process as a parish pastor writing hymns for worship.

MJ: What theological teachings are important to communicate through the hymn texts you write?

SM: My preference is to start with a Biblical text and to communicate it in a Christocentric way. I am a Lutheran; Christ is at the center. My academic specialty is systematic theology and Christology, in particular.

MJ: Have you written hymns for specific occasions? Are there particular hymns you've written that hold special meaning for you?

I wrote "Lord, You Call Us" for the inauguration of Kurt Krueger as President of Concordia University, Irvine; I later wrote a hymn for Concordia's 40th anniversary, and [one] for a university hymn festival. I wrote "Your Word Brought Forth the Universe" for a church anniversary in Florida, and for the weddings of two of my children I wrote "In the Garden God Created" and "Love's Tapestry." "Christ Alone the World's Redeemer," on the Reformation *solas*, was included in Concordia's Reformation 500 concert.

⁶ "Theology Major, Faculty, Christ College," Concordia University Irvine, <https://www.cui.edu/academicprograms/undergraduate/majors/theology/faculty>.

⁷ Steven P. Mueller, interview by author, December 6, 2023.

MJ: Are there particular writers of tunes whose music you feel drawn to?

I tend toward early American and Appalachian tunes from collections like Southern Harmony because the tunes are singable and they have been somewhat neglected in Lutheran hymnody. For instance, when I wrote “Christ the Word of God Incarnate,” the tune Holy Manna was not in use in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

SM: Not writers per say, but I tend toward early American and Appalachian tunes from collections like *Southern Harmony* because the tunes are singable and they have been somewhat neglected in Lutheran hymnody. For instance, when I wrote “Christ the Word of God Incarnate,” the tune Holy Manna was not in use in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Most of the time, I write with a melody in mind. I have found there is greater willingness to use hymns when they can be sung to melodies people recognize.

MJ: How may pastors and church musicians become familiar with your hymns?

SM: “Christ, the Word of God Incarnate” (HOLY MANNA) is included in *Lutheran Service Book* and *Christian Worship*. “Christ Alone the World’s Redeemer” (IN BABILONE) and “Lord, You Call Us” (JOYOUS LIGHT) are published in *Christian Worship*. “Lord, You Call Us” is also published in a choral setting by MorningStar Music. People may also contact me at steve.mueller@cui.edu to access unpublished hymns.⁸

⁸ Steven P. Mueller, interview by author, December 6, 2023.

Selected Hymns by Steven P. Mueller:

Christ Alone the World's Redeemer (IN BABILONE)
Lord, You Call Us (JOYOUS LIGHT)
Christ, the Word of God Incarnate (HOLY MANNA)
Unto Jerusalem (SOUTHWELL)
Love's Tapestry (SLANE)

PAUL D. WEBER

From an early age, Rev. Dr. Paul D. Weber (b. 1949) was nurtured in faith; Paul's father Rev. Dr. Leslie F. Weber served as executive secretary of the Board of Social Ministry and World Relief for the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.⁹ In the Preface to *So Great a Cloud of Witnesses: A Paul D. Weber Hymnary*, Paul writes: "I remember sitting in church with my mother and hearing her brash, nasal tone sound out the hymns while she moved her finger along the words and notes to help me participate in the service."¹⁰ Paul attended Concordia College, Bronxville and Concordia Senior College, Fort Wayne. He began seminary studies at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis and earned a MDiv in the first class of Christ Seminary-Seminex. While studying theology in St. Louis, Paul also pursued musical studies at Washington University, St. Louis, earning a MM in composition and organ. He also earned an MMA and MM in composition at Yale, and the DMA in choral conducting at The University of Iowa. In the Preface to his recently-published collection of hymns, Paul describes himself as a "student of theology, a planner of worship, a musical craftsman" who loves to "craft sermons, hymn texts, melodies, and compositions based on sacred texts."¹¹ He is professor emeritus of church music at Lenoir-Rhyne University in Hickory, North Carolina where he led the sacred music program and served as director of choral activities for seventeen years. Weber's compositions include hymns, psalm settings, service music, sacred choral compositions for church choirs and advanced choirs, organ music, and music for instrumental ensemble.¹²

⁹ Weber, *So Great a Cloud*, 176.

¹⁰ Weber, *So Great a Cloud*, 6.

¹¹ Weber, *So Great a Cloud*, 6.

¹² Paul Weber, "Works," *Paul D. Weber, Composer & Conductor*. pauldweber.com/works/

Weber's experiences as a pastor, worship leader, composer, conductor, and educator inform his perspective as a writer of hymns. *So Great a Cloud of Witnesses* presents hymn texts and tunes Paul wrote from seminary through retirement, 1971–2022; he offers them to “enliven and deepen the church's faith and worship, and to affirm that the Holy Spirit is still creating.”¹³ The collection is dedicated “to the glory of God for use in public worship and private devotion, so that faith in the crucified and risen Lord may abound through the power of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴

MJ: When did you become interested in writing hymns?

PDW: I started hymn writing back in seminary. We would study the Gospel of John, and then I wrote a hymn based on the theology of John. Or, I had a couple of collaborations with an Old Testament professor Norman Habel, and he had a certain poetic way of really bringing to life the theology of the Old Testament.¹⁵ From that point on, the formative event for me was the formation of Christ Seminary-Seminex, the split in the Missouri Synod. When I went back to seminary, they featured Hebrews 12 as the first semester's foundation for our chapel services, so I started to craft a hymn around Hebrews 12.¹⁶ The impetus for me is around scripture, and trying to make that plain for a worshipping congregation.¹⁷

MJ: Did you attend any hymn-writing workshops in addition to your formal education?

PDW: While doing my doctorate at The University of Iowa, one formative experience was with Brian Wren. He shared that you don't have to put it in poetry at all, just design stanza-wise what the progression of thought is ... and then go from there. I found that very helpful because sometimes I would come up with a poetic form or meter,

¹³ Weber, *So Great a Cloud*, 6–7.

¹⁴ Weber, *So Great a Cloud*, 7.

¹⁵ Weber, *So Great a Cloud*, hymns 5, 80, and 81; texts by Norman Habel.

¹⁶ The hymn Weber wrote based on Hebrews 12 is “So Great a Cloud of Witnesses.” See Weber, *So Great a Cloud*, 191.

¹⁷ Paul D. Weber, interview by author, December 11, 2023.

but then had a stumbling block, so I wrote out long hand what my thought would be in that stanza, going through it over time, then writing the poetry and leaving it for a while, and coming back to it. Brian showed us the various renditions of “Christ is Alive, O Christians Sing” and how he started with one thing, but wound up in a different place as he edited over twenty to thirty years.

MJ: Are there hymn writers whose work you have admired?

PDW: I’ve set a lot of Vajda texts. His “Now [the Silence]” really set a new direction for text writing for Lutherans. Also, I studied with Jeffery Rowthorn at Yale; I love his texts as well. Brian Wren’s texts are magnificent. Musically, I admire various composers. Carl Schalk’s tunes flow. I come out of that period, but I don’t model myself on anybody. You try to find your own way compositionally.

MJ: What theological teachings are most important to communicate through the hymn texts you write?

I do like Augustine’s definition, that a hymn is a song of praise to God. There are some texts today that speak to particular issues or to the worshiping congregation, but I am cognizant of a hymn addressing God and speaking to the whole community of faith. Even though I have some texts that are subjective in a way, they come from the place of sharing the good news in community.

PDW: God’s grace. And, I do like Augustine’s definition, that a hymn is a song of praise to God. There are some texts today that speak to particular issues or to the worshiping congregation, but I am cognizant of a hymn addressing God and speaking to the whole community of faith. Even though I have some texts that are subjective in

a way, they come from the place of sharing the good news in community.

MJ: Could you share a few stories about hymns you have written for special occasions?

PDW: In my second parish, they were celebrating their 90th anniversary, and I wrote a hymn for that occasion. One parish asked for a hymn for their 70th anniversary; then, of course, I had to build in as many references to the number seventy from the Bible as I could. The anniversary hymn that has stuck the most is “Founded on Faith,” included in *All Creation Sings*; it was written for the 125th anniversary of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Hickory, North Carolina. Each stanza expresses something about the ministry of that congregation; they were celebrating that anniversary in September of 2001, so right after 9/11 this hymn was sung for the first time by the congregation. It was a very powerful experience because of that context.

Another one was my first parish in Pittsburgh, which closed in 2014. They had their last service on Pentecost Day. I was invited to go to that final service, and I did. The bishop was there and all the appointments in the chancel are carried out of the church when a church is closed. The bishop handed me the baptismal bowl in which I had baptized two of my children, and I carried that out, so that was very poignant. I was on my way home, driving down I-79 when all of a sudden, the tears started to flow, and I pulled off the interstate, took out my I-phone and sang the melody and the words that are “Holy Emmanuel.” I always see that hymn as a parting hymn, but it’s an Advent hymn because the parish was Svaty Emanuel [Holy Emmanuel].¹⁸

MJ: Is there a particular process you follow when crafting melodies?

¹⁸ *So Great a Cloud of Witnesses* also includes baptismal and funeral versions of the text.

PDW: It has to do with vocal declamation. I will often graph the high points, the low points, and then look at that graph and craft a melody along those lines.

MJ: Are there things you've learned about the process of writing hymns that you could offer as advice, for those who are interested in writing hymns?

PDW: I don't want to lock anyone into it, but I suggest you start with the text. Begin with a model text and a simple meter. Design each stanza with the same meter and the same stress because ultimately you want your melody to lift up certain words in each stanza.

MJ: Does your collection explain how congregations may use your hymns in worship?

PDW: It's really wonderful. All of the texts are at OneLicense.net and all the music graphic files are on SundayandSeasons.com. I've told people that if they want to use a different tune to my text, that's fine. In addition to the hymns, *So Great a Cloud of Witnesses* includes indices that will be helpful for worship planning—topical, tune, metrical, expanded settings—as well as notes about each hymn.

Selected Hymns by Paul D. Weber:

Abide in Me
Come Quickly, O Lord Jesus
Founded on Faith
Holy Emmanuel, God with Us Ever
Lord Hear Our Prayer
Final Thoughts

Several common threads are evident in the experiences of hymn writers Carol R.S. McDaniel, Steven P. Mueller, and Paul D. Weber. Theological and musical education has equipped these hymn writers to respond to scripture in a manner that strives to be faithful and relevant. Their creative work follows in the tradition of Martin Luther and 500 years of Lutheran hymnody; they have learned from other

hymn writers and offer their insights to the next generation. For each of these authors, many of their hymns were written for specific occasions. Congregations, synods, universities and other church-related institutions play a dynamic role in the process of renewing the church's song; invitations and commissions facilitate the genesis of new hymns that speak meaningfully to worshiping communities today. As the church continues to celebrate and embrace the ongoing work of the Spirit through those who craft texts and tunes for Christian worship, may the word of Christ dwell richly in worshiping communities as they sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. Through the church, the song goes on.¹⁹ ⊕

Marin R. T. Jacobson is associate professor of Music, Director of Choral and Vocal Activities, Director of the Bach Institute, and the Phyllis and Richard Duesenberg Chair in Lutheran Music at Valparaiso University.

¹⁹ "Through the church, the song goes on" is the final phrase of stanza three in the hymn "Holy God, We Praise Your Name." The text from an unknown source was translated by Clarence A. Walworth (1820–1900). The hymn is included in several hymnals including *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 414.