

Challenges of Creating a New Hymnal

This is one in a series of articles introducing Glory to God, the new Presbyterian hymnal.

"The church of Christ in every age, beset by change but Spirit-led, must claim and test its heritage."

—Fred Pratt Green, "The Church of Christ in Every Age"

How Many Presbyterians Does It Take . . .

How many Presbyterians does it take to change a hymnal? A classic light bulb joke answer springs to mind: "Change?! Who said anything about change?!" But perhaps we can be more precise than that. At the local church level, we might answer something like: Seventeen: *one* worship planner excited about the possibility of choosing new songs for worship that aren't available in the current hymnal; *five* members of a music committee who hear about the new hymnal from this worship planner and investigate the possibility of using it their congregation; *nine* members of a session who act upon the report of the committee; *one* administrative assistant who places an order with the publishing house; and *one* church treasurer who cuts a check in the appropriate amount.

Or, speaking nationally, we might instead answer: Thousands: those who participate in a feasibility study about the timeliness of a hymnal change; those who take part in a

subsequent survey to rate the usefulness of all the items in the current hymnal, or respond to an open call to submit new items for possible inclusion; those who write letters filled with suggestions to the project editor; those who apply and those who are appointed to the committee charged with making content decisions; those who field-test liturgical and other materials; those who attend music and worship conferences to learn about the possibilities of a new congregational song resource; those who attend General Assembly, learn what this new resource has to offer, and vote to endorse it for congregational use; those who participate in presbytery meetings where songs from a hymnal sampler are incorporated into workshops or worship services; those who serve on deliberative

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bodies in their local churches; those who make it possible for their congregations to purchase new hymnals without touching a penny of their

operating budgets by donating books in memory or in honor of loved ones . . .

The list could go on and on. Unlike changing a light bulb, changing a hymnal requires a literal cast of thousands. Once every generation, groups undergo this labor-intensive process as a way of staying fresh in their worship and faithful to the God who does new things and calls for the singing of new songs.

“Beset by Change . . .”

But change is not easy—which is why the “Change?!?” answer to the light bulb joke evokes such a smile of recognition. Twenty-first-century congregations are no different from our forebears in this regard. Back in 1918, the great hymnal editor Louis Fitzgerald Benson noted with some chagrin:

Even in our day of progress and enlarged resources a hymnbook in possession is not readily superseded by a revised edition. There are still Presbyterian congregations contented in the use of *The Presbyterian Hymnal* of 1874.¹

So we might say, in *our* day of progress and enlarged resources (consider the sheer glut of material on the Internet), there are still congregations quite happy with the “blue” hymnal of 1990, the “red” hymnal of 1955, and even the “green” one of 1933. Persuading such groups to let their current volumes be “superseded” by the “cranberry” or “purple” *Glory to God* of 2013 could be a tall order.

Sociologists who study the process of cultural innovation note that people fall into identifiable categories when it comes to accepting change.² A small number, around 2 percent, are *innovators*—people who come up with new ideas or develop new products. A further 18 percent are *early adopters*, enthusiasts who thrive on experimentation and enjoy their reputation as trend-setters. At the opposite end of the spectrum are 18 percent characterized as *late adopters* who hold out against change, equally prizing their reputation

as traditionalists; and another 2 percent of *never adopters*, those stalwart few for whom the “seven last words of the church” were coined: “We’ve never done it that way before.” In between these extremes lies the vast majority of the population: the 60 percent of *middle adopters* who take their time before making a decision, but will eventually embrace a new idea if they can be persuaded that the benefits outweigh the risks.

Any church member can probably imagine faces to exemplify each of these categories: the cheerleaders, the critics, and the cautious questioners. Congregational leaders often end up in their positions because they possess the dispositions of innovators and early adopters. Indeed, ordination vows in the Presbyterian Church commit deacons, ruling elders, and teaching elders “to serve the people with energy, intelligence, *imagination*, and love.” (W.4.4003[h]) The challenge for such visionary individuals is realizing that not everyone else immediately warms to new ideas . . . and that some people, in fact, will *never* warm to them, no matter how persuasive or compelling. Much energy can be lost in fixating on a few vocal opponents of innovation; much energy *should* be invested in addressing the concerns of those in the moderate middle.

Moderates resist innovation—whether a new hymnal, a new worship service, or a new format for the coffee hour—not so much from lack of vision as from fear of loss. As with the text of the Fred Pratt Green hymn used as the epigraph for this lesson, moderates feel “*beset by change*,” assailed by perceived threats to something whose preservation they value. The songs chosen for worship serve as flash points for such fears because music is so significant in our lives of faith. Music touches us deeply, stirring up rich (and often pre-rational) associations with occasions when certain texts and tunes have been sung: a revival meeting attended with a beloved grandmother; a child’s wedding; a parent’s funeral. It is understandable, therefore, when churchgoers greet the proposal of a new hymnal with skepticism and reserve. Will

the book contain the “old” hymns—whatever their actual date of composition—that are familiar and comfortable to *me*? Will I be able to sing the songs I know from memory without tripping over some textual alteration that a well-intentioned editorial committee has selected? Will someone else’s theological or political or musical agenda rob me of those songs that bring a lift to my heart or a lump to my throat every time I sing them?

“... but Spirit-led”

Such questions are crucial for people deciding whether to adopt a new hymnal, or how to integrate a newly adopted one into worship. They are crucial as well for committees that revise hymnals

pages were dedicated to “orders for the public worship of God”: services for baptism, confirmation, and receiving new members; for marriages and funerals; and for the Lord’s Day, with or without the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. This important focus on litanies and liturgies meant that the volume contained only about three hundred hymns, in contrast to the more than five hundred available in the *Hymnbook* of 1955.

As a result, congregations tended to keep the “red” *Hymnbook* in their pew racks to sing from. For the sake of familiarity and continuity, this was fortunate; for the sake of innovation, perhaps less so. By the time the “blue” 1990 hymnal appeared, a gap of *forty-some* years, rather than the customary

twenty-some, separated the editions. Meanwhile, dramatic changes had been taking place in the world of church music. There was the “hymn explosion” of the 1960s; a growing interest in

songs from formerly underrepresented parts of the globe; a new focus on social issues like ecology and inclusive language; and experimentation with singing the Psalms differently from the traditional Presbyterian pattern of metric, rhyming verse. How was the committee to treat this abundance of material and at the same time produce a single book of reasonable size?

Although I did not sit on the 1990 hymnal committee, on the basis of my experience with the 2013 committee, I can imagine some of the excruciating choices the earlier group faced. To do justice to the rapidly changing hymnological scene, they weighted their collection toward newer material, with the result that only about 35 percent of hymns from the 1955 *Hymnbook* carried forward. This did not mean, however, that the remainder of the resulting 1990 collection was appearing for the first time ever in a Presbyterian hymnal. The intervening *Worshipbook* would have introduced

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from one generation to the next. Determining the ratio of familiar to new materials in any congregational song resource requires a balancing act: there must be enough “new” material to warrant the efforts that thousands will make to change the publication; but there must also be enough “old” material to reassure people that their traditions are being carried forward and that their “heart songs” will be preserved.

Within the Presbyterian family, different committees have handled this balance differently. The particular challenge for the group that created the 1990 *Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs* was that the customary twenty-year cycle of hymnal review and replacement had been altered by the publication of a joint hymn and liturgy resource, *The Worshipbook: Services and Hymns*, in 1975. Outstanding as this resource was, it did not gain widespread currency as a hymnal-proper—nor was it intended to do so. Half of its

congregations to songs like “Comfort, Comfort You My People” or “Earth and All Stars”—if congregations had used that intermediate collection.

In part because of the “Spirit-led” choices made by the 1990 committee, the task of the 2013 group, the PCOCS (or Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song), was considerably easier. Research Services of the PC(USA) assisted the PCOCS by conducting a survey of congregations around the country to assess the frequency with which each item in the 1990 hymnal had been used, and the strength of support for carrying each forward. Our decisions in the PCOCS about content could thus be shaped by data telling us what songs from the 1990 hymnal had already become “heart songs.” The PCOCS also benefited from correspondence—literally *hundreds* of e-mails and *thousands* of suggested pieces of music—telling us (among other things) which hymns from earlier hymnals people were acutely missing because they were not included in the 1990 book. This did not mean, however, that we made every selection on the basis of a popularity contest. In ways analogous to general Presbyterian polity, we recognized that the guidance of the Spirit can be made known through the voice of the wider congregation, but that leaders are also expected to exercise personal judgment and not simply represent a majority view.

The end-product of our prayerful deliberations is a collection that carries forward more than two-thirds of the hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs from the 1990 hymnal. It further includes a baker’s dozen of “come back” songs from the 1955 *Hymnbook* (e.g. “I Love to Tell the Story”), plus some “golden oldies” never before included in a Presbyterian hymnal intended for sanctuary worship (e.g. “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms” and other gospel songs more likely to have been used in Sunday school classes or Sunday evening services). Given advances in printing technology over the past two decades, *Glory to God* can contain more pages than the “blue” hymnal, in a book

of the same size (and slightly lighter weight). This makes room for some 250 *more* pieces of music: 850-plus, in contrast to 605. The ultimate balance of “old” (defined as “appearing in the immediately prior hymnal”) to “new” (not before in a Presbyterian denominational hymnal) is roughly half and half. The new hymnal will be even more familiar for congregations that have used the supplement *Sing the Faith*, as roughly a third of its 284 songs are carried forward.

“Must Claim and Test Its Heritage . . .”

But how exactly does a hymnal committee arrive at such decisions about what old material to carry forward and what new material to introduce? How does a single group “claim and test” the heritage of congregational song on behalf of the far wider church to whose service it is called? Having opened with a version of a light bulb joke, I am tempted to close with a variant of a different old chestnut: How do porcupines pass the peace?

The answer, of course, is “Very carefully.” The process of the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song entailed four three-day meetings a year, beginning in August 2008 and ending in January 2012, with considerable work between gatherings. Courtesy of the Learning Asset Management Program, a program operated by a consortium of small, private liberal arts institutions in the southern Appalachians, we had a dedicated Web site enabling easy storage and retrieval of materials for discussion: our theological vision statement and language policy, correspondence from people outside the committee, meeting notes, study documents, and digital files of texts and tunes under consideration.

The PCOCS announced an “open submissions process” to invite suggestions from the wider church. We divided ourselves into three-person review teams consisting of a “music person,” a “word person,” and a third member who might have expertise in either area, to examine the *four thousand* items submitted. Week in and week out,

each review team received ten to fifteen songs to assess. If two or more members of the team voted *yes*, the item moved forward for consideration by a subcommittee; if two-thirds of the subcommittee members said *yes*, the item moved to full committee review.

It is important to note that all information identifying the author, composer, and copyright holder was removed from each submitted item before evaluation occurred. Such anonymity remained in force from the beginning of the project until the end, when author and composer names were finally revealed to enable accurate editing. This scrupulosity about sources seemed particularly important since some authors and composers whose works were under consideration were also members of the committee, and we wanted to show no bias toward their works, or those of any other contributor.

Beyond the subcommittee that received materials sent forward from review teams, we formed additional subgroups to focus on other bodies of work: a group with expertise in global song; one with experience in the use of “praise and worship” or contemporary Christian music; one to glean materials from the collections of contemporary composers and text writers who were recently deceased and thus not able to respond to an invitation to submit their work; one to sift through the contents of other hymnals published since the 1990 collection went to press. Hymns and songs that received favorable review from subcommittees came to the full committee to be read, sung, discussed, and voted on. Again, the full committee required a two-thirds majority vote for any text or tune to make its way onto the final contents list.

In total, the PCOCS “tested” some ten thousand items in order to claim roughly 850 as the heritage to be offered by the 2013 collection. Key questions guided this process. Does the text tell the faith story, transmit the biblical narrative, or serve a needed liturgical function; are the words

poetically crafted and theologically sound? Is the music effective; could it be sung by a congregation lacking professional musical leadership as well as one rich in musical expertise? Does the piece progressively unfold its riches such that it will bear repeated singing and not grow trite after initial enthusiasm has faded? Does it offer a lasting gift to the church?

In considering such questions, we repeatedly reminded ourselves that we were not creating a collection of hymns that we as individuals happened to like; rather, we were seeking contents for a body of worshipers with vastly differing needs, tastes, and traditions. Like those porcupines passing the peace, we proceeded very carefully, recognizing that songs about which one group felt “prickly” might be the very songs to touch and transform their neighbors’ hearts. Our work as a committee was thus influenced by attempts to consider the cast of thousands, both known and unknown, who would be affected by the process of hymnal change. We hope too that it was led by the Spirit, whose guidance we sought every step of the way.

Endnotes

1. Louis Benson, “Shakespeare and the Metrical Psalms,” *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society* 9, no. 6 (1918): 250.
2. Greg Scheer, *The Art of Worship: A Musician’s Guide to Learning Modern Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 24.

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