

Making Full Use of Your Hymnal

A Leader Reader by Mel Bringle

Introduction

How many hymns does *your* congregation sing on a typical Sunday? While some churches use five or more, the one where I worship incorporates only two, on any kind of regular basis: opening and closing, with an occasional third following the sermon. Given that any year has only fifty-two Sundays and that some congregational favorites simply must be sung more than once a year, a significant portion of the six-hundred-or-more entries in a hymnal will thus remain underexploited—even for those communities with high weekly usage statistics.

As a hymn-lover, I find such underexploitation a shame. So I want to suggest a few ways in which hymnals can be more fully utilized—without lengthening weekly worship services beyond that magical number of minutes after which congregations grow fidgety! While there are numerous activities by which individuals may enrich their faith lives with the lyrical treasures of our Christian heritage, all three of the following “things to do with a hymnal” lend themselves to corporate applications.

Create Liturgical Elements for Worship

For anyone who ever serves as a liturgist in worship, the hymnal provides a trove of resources. Need a sentence or two with which to precede the Call to Worship? Look at the section of the hymnal labeled “Morning and Opening Hymns” and select a stanza to read aloud. How about a Call to Confession or an Assurance of Pardon? Lenten hymns offer a number of options that can be used throughout the liturgical year. So, as well, do interior stanzas of some of those “Morning and Opening Hymns” (stanza 2 of “Blessed Jesus, at Your Word,” or “Awake, My Soul, and with the Sun”; stanza

Prayer

God is here! As we Your people
Meet to offer praise and prayer,
May we find in fuller measure
What it is in Christ we share.
Here, as in the world around us,
All our varied skills and arts
Wait the coming of the Spirit
Into open minds and hearts.
Amen.

—“God is Here!” *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 461.

3 of “Christ, Whose Glory Fills the Skies” or “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing”). Potential Prayers for Illumination appear in abundance in the hymnal section focusing on Holy Scripture. Thanksgiving hymns need not be employed only on the late Sundays in November, but also supply lyrics suitable for a spoken prayer after the morning offering. Hymn texts that are familiar to a congregation will evoke a deep resonance when used in this liturgical fashion. Equally importantly, unfamiliar texts can become familiar—and words from a hymn that might never be sung by a particular community can still be prized and prayed.

Shape Devotionals for Group Meetings

Participants in groups such as session meetings and Presbyterian Women circles, which regularly open their meetings with a devotional, would do well to consider hymns as a source of inspiration. Groups can be polled

informally to discover members' favorite songs of faith, after which only a little further research is needed. Many denominations, including the PC(USA), have published "hymnal companions" which offer a wealth of information about authors, composers, and circumstances under which various texts and tunes in their hymnals came to be written.¹ If a song is used by more than one denomination, exploring multiple "companions" is worthwhile, since different editors see fit to mention different details. If a church's library does not have a number of denominational hymnal companions available for consultation, such volumes make wonderful gifts in honor or in memory of hymn lovers from the congregation. Many books and Web sites also specialize in fascinating "hymn stories"; typing those two words into a search engine brings up a wealth of information!

After a bit of background information on the piece selected, a devotional can highlight a line or an image from the piece as a focus for meditation. For example: according to an extensive survey by the Research Services office of the General Assembly Council, one of

How Presbyterians Understand Evangelism

"Evangelism" comes from the word *evangel* which means "good news." The "good news" is the gospel of Jesus Christ which the angels proclaimed when Jesus was born (Luke 2:10).

Presbyterians recognize that Christians are called to share the good news of Jesus Christ. We share Christ with people in many ways. Just as Jesus cared for the whole human person, so the church shares God's love in Christ through many activities. Among these are:

- Education
- Feeding the hungry
- Healing ministries
- Pastoral care
- Peacemaking
- Sharing our faith
- Working for justice

—*The Presbyterian Handbook* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2006), 84.

the top three "most sung" hymns in PCUSA worship (not counting seasonal songs for Christmas and Easter) is "Be Thou My Vision." So, a group could well ponder: what would it mean for God to be "our vision," for us consistently to see the world around us—indeed, to see one another—through "Christ-colored glasses"? Such a question could be particularly powerful to open a meeting in which a controversial issue was up for discussion. To conclude the devotional, singing the hymn in whole or in part can be very effective; but there is also power to hearing lyrics read aloud; or to reading them in unison, or responsively (alternating lines or stanzas between presider and people), or antiphonally (alternating women and men or sides of the room, on different lines or stanzas).

Launch a Trip down Memory Lane

Just as hymn authors and composers have stories to share in hymnal companions about how their works came into being, hymn singers have stories to tell about the songs that have acquired special meaning in their lives. Sharing these stories can be a wonderful small- or large-group ice breaker for a retreat or other gathering. Poignant details about people's faith journeys emerge as they talk about the blessing their family always sang together around the dinner table; the first song they remember being taught by a beloved Sunday school teacher or choir director or youth leader; the hymn that was pounded out on the piano (stanza after stanza after stanza!) during altar calls in the old country church attended with their grandparents; the Christmas carols still performed with word-perfect precision by an aunt with Alzheimer's disease; the clarinet solo soaring from the back balcony of a majestic sanctuary during a father's funeral. A fringe benefit of such sharing: while we may not personally care for a particular piece or style of music, when we know its meaning for a sister or brother in Christ, we hear it with new ears. Instead of being provoked to "worship wars," we find ourselves embracing a wider and more diverse world of musical expression than we had previously imagined. And that is a very good thing to do with a hymnal, indeed!

About the Writer

Mary Louise Bringle (Mel) is Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Brevard College in Brevard, North Carolina. The winner of numerous international hymn-writing competitions, she now serves as President of The

Hymn Society in the United States and Canada and is chair of the new hymnal committee for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She is a member and elder at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Hendersonville, North Carolina, where she teaches an adult Sunday school class.

Endnote

1. See, for example, LindaJo H. McKim, *The Presbyterian Hymnal Companion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster / John

Knox Press, 1993); Carlton R. Young, *Companion to the United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993); Paul Westermeyer, *Hymnal Companion to Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2010). The forthcoming worship resource being created by the Presbyterian Committee for Congregational Song will have its own companion volume, written and edited by Carl P. Daw.