Theological Vision Statement

Collections of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs give voice to the church’s core beliefs and theological convictions. Their texts are "compact theology,"¹ and the selection of hymns and songs (both the themes that are emphasized and those that are overlooked), the order in which they are presented, and even the ways they are indexed shape the theological thinking and ultimately the faith and practices of the church.

Previous hymnals have responded to the needs of the church and the world by highlighting the rhythms of the church year, the centrality of the Psalms in the prayer and praise of Reformed churches, the corporate witness of the church to the world, the seeking of God’s peace and God’s justice, and the rich musical and poetic resources of world Christianity. All these motifs remain important and should be retained, in one way or another, in this collection.

The next Presbyterian collection of hymns and songs, however, will be published amid different conditions than those that molded previous ones. It will be offered in a world in which trust in human progress has been undermined and eclectic spiritualities often fail to satisfy deep spiritual hungers. It will be used by a church many of whose members have not had life-long formation by Scripture and basic Christian doctrine, much less Reformed theology. It is meant for a church marked by growing diversity in liturgical practice. Moreover, it addresses a church divided by conflicts but nonetheless, we believe, longing for healing and the peace that is beyond understanding.

To inspire and embolden a church facing these formidable challenges, the overarching theme of the collection will be God’s powerful acts of creation, redemption, and final transformation. It will also bespeak the human responses that God’s gracious acts make possible. In other words, the framework for this collection of congregational song will be the history of salvation.

This theme of salvation history answers the needs of the church and the world in the following ways:

- The priority placed on God’s acts offers hope to those whose faith in human efforts has been undermined.
- A focus on salvation history reminds a church and world riddled with anxiety, frustration, and conflict that love has come to earth and that the risen and ascended Christ is alive and active.
- The emphasis on God’s provision for us invites our grateful response. It makes a place for expressions of corporate commitment (a special emphasis of the previous hymnal) as well as personal devotion.
- The framework of salvation history is widely inclusive. It has places for existing hymns and invites the writing of new words and music to supply major omissions. It makes room for the whole of the biblical witness, not only psalms and the Gospels that are well reflected in hymn texts, but also the segments of
the Scriptures that are not. It incorporates the events of the Christian year, the
sacraments, and the mission of the church throughout the world as Christ’s
living body.
• As such, this framework both encompasses and enriches the liturgical practices
that exist in the church. It includes the Christological rhythm of the liturgical
year, from Advent to Christ the King, but also places the liturgical year in the
wider framework of God’s covenantal acts in creation and towards Israel. It
challenges all users, whatever liturgical patterns they use, to shape their worship
by the full extent of the biblical narrative.
• The rich narrative of salvation history – with the real life stories of people like
Abraham and Sarah, Eli and Samuel, Boaz and Ruth, Philip and the Ethiopian
eunuch – makes audible the manifold ways in which God engages people
different in age, nationality, race, and gender.
• The framework of the history of salvation offers a theological rationale for asking
us to learn songs that come from cultures different than our own: Pentecost
teaches us to speak and hear the gospel in many tongues and languages and
only thus, “with all the saints,” to comprehend the breadth and length and
height and depth of the love of Christ (Eph. 3:18). We do not sing hymns and
songs because they were birthed in our culture; we sing them because they
teach us something about the richness that is in God.
• Likewise, the notion of salvation history invites us to bridge the divide between
different musical styles and traditions. As scribes who have been trained for
God’s reign will bring out of their treasures “what is new and what is old” (Mt.
13:52), so musicians are invited to lead us in songs both old and new, in praise
of a God who is the first and the last, the ancient of everlasting days and the
Lord of the new creation.

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1 "Compact theology" is a phrase used by the late David Allan Hubbard, biblical scholar
and president of Fuller Seminary, to describe hymn texts.

A Statement on Language

Language is close to the heart of Christian faith. As befits a faith community called into
being by a God we know as the Word made flesh, we pray, proclaim, teach, comfort,
admonish, serve and administer justice with words woven in and through all our
actions. Language used in worship has great power. Therefore the language used in
collections of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs matters a great deal. Worshipful
words joined to worshipful music deeply shape the faith and practices of the church.

The church has been enriched by several decades of conversations about language used
for God and for the people of God. Christians in denominations like the Presbyterian
Church (U.S.A.) have become aware that our language can exclude and stereotype, but
also that carefully chosen language can embrace and include people who have been
separated from the centers of power. A commitment to inclusive language for the
people of God reflects the consensus of the church.¹ When it comes to use of language
for God, however, the conversation is still ongoing. While many are deeply nurtured and
comforted by traditional imagery for God, many others are concerned about
associations of patriarchy and other forms of domination and are looking for other and
more diverse language.
In negotiating these different convictions, the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song is guided by the theological framework of this new collection of songs: salvation history. Scripture uses an abundantly rich array of prose and poetry to tell us about God’s powerful acts of creation, redemption, and final transformation. Much biblical imagery is indeed masculine, but there is also a wide variety of other metaphors that are either feminine or gender-neutral. Most important, behind all biblical narrative lies the deep and prevailing sense that God is the one whose ways and thoughts are as beyond human speech as the heaven is higher than the earth (Isa. 55:8). Our lips need to be cleansed by a burning coal before we speak or sing any word about the holy God (Isa. 6:5).

The framework of salvation history requires a collection of songs that reflects the full extent of the biblical narrative and also the full array of biblical language used for God—even if that leads us to using words and imagery that go beyond our natural comfort.

Given these commitments, the Committee seeks a songbook that is characterized, as a church document formulates it, by “inclusive language with reference to the people of God, and expansive language with reference to God.” Thus the committee uses the following guidelines:

**Language used for the people of God**

- Language that stereotypes persons according to categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, sexual orientation, age, or disabilities will be avoided.
- The “generic masculine” is no longer generally understood to include persons of both genders and will therefore be avoided. Texts that employ the generic masculine will be evaluated individually to determine what alterations, if any, are poetically appropriate.
- Salvation history invites us to sing joyfully of the creative and healing presence of our God. We will be sensitive, however, to potentially denigrating implications of poetic metaphors in our songs, especially with respect to persons of color or with disabilities.

**Language used for God**

- The collection will draw from the full reservoir of biblical imagery for God and God’s gracious acts. The final product will include both metaphors that are comfortable in their familiarity and those that are enriching in their newness.
- The collection will emphasize that the God who meets us so graciously and intimately in salvation history is at the same time one who is wholly other and beyond gender. Therefore, texts will reflect a strong preference for avoiding the use of male pronouns for God. In evaluating each hymn or song, issues of tradition, theological integrity, poetic quality, and copyright will all be considered. The goal is a collection in which traditional hymns and songs are balanced with others that are more gender-neutral or expansive in their reference to God.
- Two references to God should be preserved in the collection:

  1. In the biblical narrative both the God of Israel and Christ are called “Lord.” The practice of calling God “Lord” goes back to Greek-speaking Jews who sought to avoid pronouncing God’s holy name, YHWH, by using
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a replacement term: Lord (*kurios*). The practice has since been followed
by virtually all Christian Bible translations. Rather than being an
expression of domination or masculinity, “Lord” stands in for the name by
which God chose to disclose Godself in Hebrew Scripture (Exod. 3:15).

That “Jesus Christ is Lord (*kurios*)” is one of the oldest confessions
concerning Jesus. It has both a Roman and a Jewish background. On the
one hand, “Lord” (*kurios*) was the title of the Roman emperor. When the
writers of the New Testament confess Jesus to be Lord, they thereby
proclaim that not Caesar, but Christ rules this world. On the other hand,
in applying the reference to the name of Israel’s God to Jesus, the New
Testament makes a startling identity statement: that in Jesus this very
God has become present among us.

Were we no longer to use “Lord” for Israel’s God, we would no longer
understand what we claim about Jesus’ identity when we confess him
Lord. Were we no longer to use “Lord” for Jesus, we would lose the
strongest defense we have against empire: that Christ is Lord, and not
Caesar.

2. The church confesses a Trinitarian God: one God, in Father, Son, and
Holy Spirit. This is the formula by which we are baptized; this is the name
that unites us with each other and with all Christian communities beyond
our denomination (Matt. 28:19). This three-fold name will not be
eliminated. At the same time, many other images and metaphors for the
Trinity will be welcomed, as long as they express the principles of
Trinitarian theology:
   a. God exists in three persons, but there is nevertheless only one
      God who knows and loves and acts;
   b. In salvation history, no person of the Trinity acts alone; every act
      is an act of all three persons in the one God;
   c. Each person of the Trinity is not a part of God, but fully God.

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1. Cf. the *Book of Order W-1.2006-a*, the PC(USA) “Report and Recommendations
   in Response to Referral on Inclusive Language,” and the “Report to the Church
   on Issues of Language and Gender.”
2. *Well Chosen Words!* Published by the Women’s Ministries, National Ministries
   Division, and the Advocacy Committee for Women’s Concerns, a ministry of the
   General Assembly Council of the PC(USA). Cf. also the *Book of Order W-1.2006-
   b*.