



# The Presbyterian Hymnal Project

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## Theological Vision Statement

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

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

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

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

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

- 30 • The priority placed on God's acts offers hope to those whose faith in human  
 31 efforts has been undermined.
- 32 • A focus on salvation history reminds a church and world riddled with anxiety,  
 33 frustration, and conflict that love has come to earth and that the risen and  
 34 ascended Christ is alive and active.
- 35 • The emphasis on God's provision for us invites our grateful response. It makes a  
 36 place for expressions of corporate commitment (a special emphasis of the  
 37 previous hymnal) as well as personal devotion.
- 38 • The framework of salvation history is widely inclusive. It has places for existing  
 39 hymns and invites the writing of new words and music to supply major  
 40 omissions. It makes room for the whole of the biblical witness, not only psalms  
 41 and the Gospels that are well reflected in hymn texts, but also the segments of

- 42 the Scriptures that are not. It incorporates the events of the Christian year, the  
 43 sacraments, and the mission of the church throughout the world as Christ's  
 44 living body.
- 45 • As such, this framework both encompasses and enriches the liturgical practices  
 46 that exist in the church. It includes the Christological rhythm of the liturgical  
 47 year, from Advent to Christ the King, but also places the liturgical year in the  
 48 wider framework of God's covenantal acts in creation and towards Israel. It  
 49 challenges all users, whatever liturgical patterns they use, to shape their worship  
 50 by the full extent of the biblical narrative.
  - 51 • The rich narrative of salvation history – with the real life stories of people like  
 52 Abraham and Sarah, Eli and Samuel, Boaz and Ruth, Philip and the Ethiopian  
 53 eunuch – makes audible the manifold ways in which God engages people  
 54 different in age, nationality, race, and gender.
  - 55 • The framework of the history of salvation offers a theological rationale for asking  
 56 us to learn songs that come from cultures different than our own: Pentecost  
 57 teaches us to speak and hear the gospel in many tongues and languages and  
 58 only thus, "with all the saints," to comprehend the breadth and length and  
 59 height and depth of the love of Christ (Eph. 3:18). We do not sing hymns and  
 60 songs because they were birthed in our culture; we sing them because they  
 61 teach us something about the richness that is in God.
  - 62 • Likewise, the notion of salvation history invites us to bridge the divide between  
 63 different musical styles and traditions. As scribes who have been trained for  
 64 God's reign will bring out of their treasures "what is new and what is old" (Mt.  
 65 13:52), so musicians are invited to lead us in songs both old and new, in praise  
 66 of a God who is the first and the last, the ancient of everlasting days and the  
 67 Lord of the new creation.

68 (Ratified by the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song  
 69 [PCOCS] February 2009)

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

## 72 **A Statement on Language**

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

79 The church has been enriched by several decades of conversations about language used  
 80 for God and for the people of God. Christians in denominations like the Presbyterian  
 81 Church (U.S.A.) have become aware that our language can exclude and stereotype, but  
 82 also that carefully chosen language can embrace and include people who have been  
 83 separated from the centers of power. A commitment to inclusive language for the  
 84 people of God reflects the consensus of the church.<sup>1</sup> When it comes to use of language  
 85 for God, however, the conversation is still ongoing. While many are deeply nurtured and  
 86 comforted by traditional imagery for God, many others are concerned about  
 87 associations of patriarchy and other forms of domination and are looking for other and  
 88 more diverse language.

89 In negotiating these different convictions, the Presbyterian Committee on  
 90 Congregational Song is guided by the theological framework of this new collection of  
 91 songs: salvation history. Scripture uses an abundantly rich array of prose and poetry to  
 92 tell us about God’s powerful acts of creation, redemption, and final transformation.  
 93 Much biblical imagery is indeed masculine, but there is also a wide variety of other  
 94 metaphors that are either feminine or gender-neutral. Most important, behind *all*  
 95 biblical narrative lies the deep and prevailing sense that God is the one whose ways and  
 96 thoughts are as beyond human speech as the heaven is higher than the earth (Isa.  
 97 55:8). Our lips need to be cleansed by a burning coal before we speak or sing any word  
 98 about the holy God (Isa. 6:5).

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

102 Given these commitments, the Committee seeks a songbook that is characterized, as a  
 103 church document formulates it, by “inclusive language with reference to the people of  
 104 God, and expansive language with reference to God.”<sup>2</sup> Thus the committee uses the  
 105 following guidelines:

106 *Language used for the people of God*

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

118 *Language used for God*

- 119 • The collection will draw from the full reservoir of biblical imagery for God and  
 120 God’s gracious acts. The final product will include both metaphors that are  
 121 comfortable in their familiarity and those that are enriching in their newness.
- 122 • The collection will emphasize that the God who meets us so graciously and  
 123 intimately in salvation history is at the same time one who is wholly other and  
 124 beyond gender.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, texts will reflect a strong preference for avoiding the  
 125 use of male pronouns for God. In evaluating each hymn or song, issues of  
 126 tradition, theological integrity, poetic quality, and copyright will all be  
 127 considered. The goal is a collection in which traditional hymns and songs are  
 128 balanced with others that are more gender-neutral or expansive in their  
 129 reference to God.
- 130 • Two references to God should be preserved in the collection:

- 131 1. In the biblical narrative both the God of Israel and Christ are called  
 132 “Lord.” The practice of calling God “Lord” goes back to Greek-speaking  
 133 Jews who sought to avoid pronouncing God’s holy name, YHWH, by using

134 a replacement term: Lord (*kurios*). The practice has since been followed  
 135 by virtually all Christian Bible translations. Rather than being an  
 136 expression of domination or masculinity, "Lord" stands in for the name by  
 137 which God chose to disclose Godself in Hebrew Scripture (Exod. 3:15).  
 138

139 That "Jesus Christ is Lord (*kurios*)" is one of the oldest confessions  
 140 concerning Jesus. It has both a Roman and a Jewish background. On the  
 141 one hand, "Lord" (*kurios*) was the title of the Roman emperor. When the  
 142 writers of the New Testament confess Jesus to be Lord, they thereby  
 143 proclaim that not Caesar, but Christ rules this world. On the other hand,  
 144 in applying the reference to the name of Israel's God to Jesus, the New  
 145 Testament makes a startling identity statement: that in Jesus this very  
 146 God has become present among us.  
 147

148 Were we no longer to use "Lord" for Israel's God, we would no longer  
 149 understand what we claim about Jesus' identity when we confess him  
 150 Lord. Were we no longer to use "Lord" for Jesus, we would lose the  
 151 strongest defense we have against empire: that Christ is Lord, and not  
 152 Caesar.

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

165 (Ratified by the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song  
 166 [PCOCS] October 2009)

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- 169 1. Cf. the *Book of Order* W-1.2006-a, the PC(USA) "Report and Recommendations  
 170 in Response to Referral on Inclusive Language," and the "Report to the Church  
 171 on Issues of Language and Gender."  
 172 2. *Well Chosen Words!* Published by the Women's Ministries, National Ministries  
 173 Division, and the Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns, a ministry of the  
 174 General Assembly Council of the PC(USA). Cf. also the *Book of Order* W-1.2006-  
 175 b.  
 176 3. Cf. the PC(USA) *The Study Catechism*, questions 11-13.