

Family Albums for the People of God

Mary Louise Bringle

In the spring of 2009, I was given the opportunity to preach at my home church (Trinity Presbyterian, Hendersonville, North Carolina) and provide an update on the process of creating a new hymnal for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Only after I had accepted the invitation and marked it on my calendar did I realize that the date upon which the pastor and I had agreed also happened to be Father's Day. Now, I admit that Father's Day is a secular rather than a liturgical holiday, however the day in honor of significant male figures in our lives remains one of those occasions, like Thanksgiving or Memorial Day, that one ignores at one's peril—at least in some pulpits, in certain parts of the country. My (relatively) small town in the South is one of those places.

So, my sermon preparations took on an unanticipated wrinkle. Not only did I need to find a way to link the process of hymnal-creation to some broader homiletic theme (after all, I had been asked to *preach*, not deliver a committee report!), I also needed to make some meaningful connection between the sacred theme and the secular occasion. Fortunately, I was able to find guidance in reflecting on personal experience. Since my own father had died in the fall of 2008, the spring of 2009 would mark the first Father's Day when I would not at least

be able to call him on the telephone and engage in our ritual singing of "Happy Father's Day to Yooooouu," warbling in harmony on the closing line. So, as June approached, I found myself increasingly dwelling in family memories. I even dusted off stacks of my father's old vinyl record albums and began playing them as I pattered around the house.

One of the records in particular I played over and over: Tennessee Ernie Ford's *Sing a Hymn with Me*, complete with a miniature hymnal stitched inside a flap on the front cover to enable listeners to sing along. The album contained so many oldies but goodies of the faith: "Onward, Christian Soldiers"; "When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder"; "Count Your Blessings"; "I Love to Tell the Story." I remembered singing these hymns on family trips. I remembered Daddy's voice as that steady bass in "O come, come, come, come, / Come to the church in the wild wood . . ." So, it dawned on me that at least in terms of my own experience, to talk about hymns and hymnal-creation on Father's Day was a perfect fit, because I had come to my love for hymns as a direct legacy from my father.

But then, it further dawned on me that talking about hymnal creation on Father's Day also was a good fit scripturally, because a hymnal is one of the primary ways we follow the directive of

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Psalm 71:18: to “proclaim God’s mighty acts to all the generations to come.” Singing hymns is, after all, an *intergenerational* affair: It is something fathers and mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers, and older generations in general have long done to offer up a legacy to their children. In a hymnal we find mementos of those who lived in generations before us: whether the *subjects* of hymns (Abraham and Sarah; David; Mary and Joseph; Jesus and the disciples) or the *authors* of hymns (Martin Luther and [allegedly] John Calvin; Charles Wesley and Isaac Watts; Fanny Crosby and Mrs. Cecil Frances Humphreys Alexander). The small print in a hymnal hints at story after story of what our distant cousins and aunts and uncles and great-great-great grandparents did and sang about on their journeys of faith. In other words, I concluded, a hymnal is a sort of musically embellished *family album for the people of God*.

A DENOMINATIONAL FAMILY ALBUM

This image has proved suggestive for me in a number of ways as I have attempted to explain to people beyond the congregation why the PC(USA) has embarked on the complex venture of creating a new hymnal. First of all, most basically, to conceive of a hymnal as a *family album* helps to account for why we continue to publish denominational volumes at all rather than seeking some common compendium of songs that all Christian churches can use together. As denominational “families,” we each have our own particular memories to cherish and legacies to preserve.

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I confess I had not been particularly aware of these distinctive legacies until several years ago when I moved from teaching religious studies at St. Andrews Presbyterian College in Laurinburg, North Carolina, to teaching at Brevard College in the mountains of western North Carolina. Brevard is affiliated with the United Methodist Church, so I suddenly found myself called upon to do programs for United Methodist congregations, as I had long been accustomed to doing for Presbyterians.

I remember preparing to give a talk on sung versions of the Twenty-third Psalm and looking in the first-line index of the United Methodist hymnal for the metric paraphrase by Isaac Watts, “My Shepherd Will Supply My Need.” To my dismay, it was nowhere to be found! This led me to consult the hymnal’s author index, thinking that perhaps the first line had some variant of which I was not aware. Sure enough, Isaac Watts was listed, with eleven different texts to his credit—but his version of Psalm 23 was not among them. Then, my eye happened to travel down the index page from Watts to Wesley, where I discovered a full forty entries for Charles alone, not even counting those by his brother John. (To save curious readers the effort of performing their own comparative counts: the 1990 *Presbyterian Hymnal* contains twelve different Watts texts and a mere eleven by the younger Wesley sibling.)

This was an “A-ha!” moment for me, though it may well exemplify what my students would refer to as a “Duh!” moment for many others. Since I was trained in theology rather than hymnology, coming to the latter avocation only in midlife, I had never before given much thought to denominational differences in texts selected for inclusion in hymnals. I did, though, vaguely know that churches differed in the tunes they chose to accompany texts, since when the blue Presbyterian volume supplanted the burgundy one in pew racks in the early ’90s, I discovered to my surprise that “Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus” could be listed to some melody in addition to HYFRYDOL and, even more shocking, that “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” might be set to HYFRYDOL in place of BEECHER! These fairly happenstantial discoveries led me to think more systematically in recent months about what materials belong in a distinctively *Presbyterian* family album, a question now uppermost in the minds of those of us working on the committee to create a new worship resource for our denomination.

For example, it is hard to imagine a Presbyterian hymnal without “I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art,” sung to the tune TOULON. Admittedly, recent scholarship suggests that the original French poem from which this English translation derives may not have come from the pen of John Calvin at all, despite frequent attributions of the words to him in collections beginning with Philip Schaff’s *Christ in Song*, published in the 1890s.¹ Nevertheless, the poem does date to an early metric Psalter printed in 1545 in Strasbourg, a city where Calvin

happily worked as a pastor to French refugees from 1538 to 1541 after theological controversy had forced him to leave Geneva. Regardless of its authorship, the text represents an important place and period in the early history of Reformed worship. Furthermore, Presbyterians perhaps cannot be too severely faulted for wanting something in our family album that plays the role of “A Mighty Fortress” for Lutherans or “O, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing!” for Methodists.

If we lack an authentically original hymn text from our sixteenth-century founding figure, though, it should ultimately come to us as no great surprise. After all, the musical hallmark of Calvin’s movement for worship reform (unlike Luther’s a few decades earlier or that of the Wesley brothers 200 years later) was an insistence on singing nothing in church other than metric versions of biblical passages—most particularly the psalms but a few other texts as well. Calvin did write a few such paraphrases himself, published in the 1539 *Psalter* of Strasbourg while he was ministering there (Psalms 25, 38, 46, and 91 come from him, as well as versions of the Song of Simeon and the Ten Commandments). However, he had the good grace to recognize that he was a better theologian than poet and ceded the latter role to others like Clément Marot and Theodore Beza once he discovered their greater facility for the genre.²

What we *do* have as Presbyterians that remains as an authentic part of our family legacy from these foundational years are the tunes published in the various *Psalters* of Geneva after Calvin returned to the city in 1541 to finish out his career. With an extraordinary gift for composing robust melodies, Louis Bourgeois answered Calvin’s call for musical settings of the scriptural lyrics his colleagues were creating. Many of these melodies remain in our denominational family album—tunes for numerous psalms as well as for the Song of Simeon (NUNC DIMITTIS) and the Decalogue (LES COMMANDEMENTS DE DIEU). Apart from the setting now known as OLD HUNDREDTH because it was used for a metric version of Psalm 100 when the tradition of psalm-singing passed from the European continent to the British Isles, we do not find Bourgeois’ work nearly so well-represented in the hymnals of other denominations, nor should we expect to do so. After all, he is *our* distant relative, not theirs!

Beyond the Swiss-French branch of the family tree, we Presbyterians also have a considerable

heritage of Scottish forebears. Again, this is a *distinctive* heritage, as I discovered recently when guest-lecturing on the history of congregational song to several music classes at Wingate University. Because Baptist hymnals were most readily available, I needed to draw all my lecture illustrations from them. I had wanted to demonstrate the mix-and-match nature of early English-language psalm-singing to show how multiple common meter texts (four-line poems with alternating lines of eight and six syllables) could be sung to a mere handful of melodies. I began searching for examples from the early seventeenth century that were familiar to me, things I could have easily located in a Presbyterian hymnal as products of the *Scottish Psalters* of 1615 and 1635—tunes whose names read like a travelogue: CAITHNESS, CULROSS, DUNFERMLINE, DUNDEE. But I searched in vain, brought up short again with the realization that I should not expect to find *my* ancestors in someone else’s album.

This is the case not just for tunes but also for texts representing the tradition of metric psalmody that spread with the movement of Reformed worship from Geneva to Scotland to our own shores. An exception, the metric version of Psalm 23 cobbled together by the Westminster Assembly for the *Scottish Psalter of 1650* (“The Lord’s my shepherd / I’ll not want”) does appear in Methodist and Baptist collections, among others. More confined to the pages of our Presbyterian kindred, however, are metric texts from the *Psalter 1912*, a collection produced by the cooperation of six North American denominations from the Reformed tradition. Twenty of these psalm paraphrases appear in the 1990 *Presbyterian Hymnal*. Zero appear in the most recent hymnal of the United Methodists.

Such observations about the distinctive legacy of Presbyterian songs, however, raise interesting questions about the formation of our next denominational album. While it is true that the tradition of psalm-singing, whether making use of texts and tunes from Geneva, Scotland, or North America, is most historically and characteristically *our* tradition, it also is true that drastically decreasing numbers of the churches in our denomination actually sing psalms regularly in worship any more. This fact was brought home to me upon reading through survey data compiled by the Research Services office of the General Assembly Council of the PC(USA) in preparation for creating the new hymnal. Three respondents from each of 292 randomly

selected Presbyterian churches around the country—a clergyperson, a musician, and a lay member of the congregation—were asked to provide input on each hymn in the blue 1990 volume, noting how often each had been used in worship in the past year and how strongly the respondent felt about keeping or eliminating it in the next hymnal. According to the tabulated responses, one of the *least* used portions of the 1990 volume is the Psalter section running from Hymn 158 (Psalm 1) to Hymn 258 (Psalm 150). Of these 101 items, 85 were reported as “Never” having been used in worship in the past year by at least three-fourths of those surveyed.

Now, granted, for churches that do include the singing of a weekly lectionary psalm, the numbers would have been better if usage data had been requested for the past three years rather than the past one. And further granted, many of the psalms “never” used were not metric paraphrases from the Reformed heritage but responsorial psalms from quite a different tradition. Still, the low usage numbers are dramatic enough to raise a concern. Do we continue to give precious page space in a next hymnal to psalms that the people in the pews are not singing, simply because the singing of such texts is our legacy? Do we launch a search for fresher, more engaging psalm settings that will attract new generations to an old practice? Do we conduct training workshops for clergy and laity, musicians and non-musicians, to explain more about our family history? Do we keep a few metric psalms for memory’s sake (“The Lord’s my shepherd, I’ll not want”; “I to the hills will lift my eyes”) and let the rest—like faded photographs or withered corsages—fall away? The questions are real and important, and already are demanding careful and prayerful deliberation.

A CONTEMPORARY FAMILY ALBUM

A hymnal is not just a repository of our denomination’s distinctive musical and textual legacy. After all, if preserving history were the only reason for creating hymnals, we would have no need to publish new ones but could simply have stopped (as some, no doubt, still wish we had!) with the green *Hymnal* of 1933 or the red *Hymnbook* of 1955. Beyond being a bridge to past generations, a worship book also is a resource for the current generation and an outreach toward generations to come. The church keeps changing, and new collections are called for every twenty to twenty-five years to reflect those changes.

This is where the image of a congregational song collection as a “family album” becomes particularly telling. At what point would any of us say to our children or grandchildren: “You know, our family album is getting a little too thick. We’re not going to put in new pictures any more. Forget your babies, baptisms, high school and college graduations, weddings and commitment ceremonies. We have other pictures of things like that; we don’t really need *yours*”? Just as I do not think any of us as family members would set such limits, I do not think we as a church can say, “We already have enough hymns; in fact, we’ve got lots of wonderful old ones that we never sing any more. We don’t really need anything new.”

Rather, if we are to follow the repeated scriptural command to “sing a new song to the Lord” (Psalms 33, 40, 96, 98, 144, 149; Isaiah 42), remaining faithful to a God who is perennially doing “a new thing” (Isaiah 43:19), we should be vigorously on the move, not mired in the past. Indeed, while I have used the word “hymnal” intermittently in

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these pages, one of the first decisions the PC(USA) committee made was to change our name from the “new *hymnal* committee” to the “Presbyterian Committee on *Congregational Song*,” to reflect the fact that the worship resource we are creating for the next generation will include more than conventional, multistanza hymns. The PCOCS (happily pronounced “peacocks” in honor of an ancient symbol of the resurrection) must be attuned to the colorful variety of musical genres in which the people of God come together in worship, including what is alternately labeled “praise and worship” or “contemporary Christian music,” alongside beloved old gospel songs, folk melodies, jazz harmonies, and traditional four-part chorales.

Comments offered in response to open-ended questions on the Research Services survey widely agree with such a diverse approach. While one person speaks critically of the “happy-clappy songs of the 1970s,” repeated voices call out for “upbeat new worship songs,” “new hymns and praise songs,” “a product that would lend itself to a blended service,” “contemporary offerings that are singable but theologically sound.” Some respondents note the value of rhythmic music in appealing to younger people but go on to acknowledge that older congregation members, also, enjoy songs with a beat. Many lament the divisiveness of the so-called “worship wars” and muse on the value of a single, eclectic resource that could have everyone literally “singing out of the same book.”

Of course, no single book can contain everything (certainly not while remaining a weight people can actually hold in their hands!). But it is the hope of the PCOCS that a next congregational song collection can work to bridge divisions created more over matters of worship style than theological conviction. With the possibility of continually supplementing a print volume with digital materials made available to subscribers on the Web, we have opportunities never before available to a “hymnal committee” for staying attuned to the ever-expanding repertoire of resources for singing new songs together to God.

A GLOBAL FAMILY ALBUM

Of course, ours is not only a historic and multigenerational family but also an extended family enriched by the gifts of worshipers all over the world. In addition to North American praise and worship songs, a “pentecostal” array of musical genres is

now available to us: Taizé chants, “wee songs” from the Iona community of Scotland, bilingual Hispanic/English hymns, songs from our sister and brother Presbyterians in Korea and Taiwan, Ghana and Guatemala, and elsewhere around the globe.

Reactions to this global repertoire, however, remain mixed, as responses to the Research Services survey disclose. Items from the 1990 hymnal that more than ninety percent of respondents reported “never” having used in worship are overwhelmingly ones from foreign cultures: “Holy Night, Blessed Night” from China; “Joyful Christmas Day Is Here” from Japan; “From a Distant Home” from Puerto Rico; “Our King and Our Sovereign, Lord Jesus” from Mexico, to name just a few. Open-ended comments reinforce the bias:

Please remember that including two languages in the text of a hymn makes it very difficult to sort through music and words. Consider, instead, a supplement for multicultural congregations.

Most of the Asian selections just don’t make sense to Western congregations. The space would be better used to include traditional hymns and some contemporary American pieces.

I think it is a waste of money and space to print the Chocktaw and Korean versions of the text. . . . Why don’t you determine where the Cherokee Presbyterians are and then print a limited and appropriate number of the whole hymnal in Cherokee for them? I actually have a number of younger members who laugh when we sing one of those multi-language hymns.

I should add, in fairness, that the survey also produced several comments favorable to the inclusion of global music in our denominational hymnal, and that far more material is available to us now than in the years leading up to the 1990 publication. However, I might also note that the unfavorable comments share a common assumption: that “other people’s songs” are for “other people” to sing. So, if we don’t have any such “others” in our midst on a regular basis, it is not worth our time or energy (or the weight of the paper in the volume) to try to learn them.

The theological vision statement written to guide the work of the PCOCS offers a helpful response to such an assumption. When we sing together in worship, that document maintains, first

and foremost we are singing to, of, and for the God who is Lord of all creation:

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 (Ephesians 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.³

Or as the old hymn puts it: “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy, like the wideness of the sea.” Singing global songs is one way of setting sail.

Further response comes from Andrew Donaldson, co-editor of *The Book of Praise* (1997), the hymnal of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, who notes there is an inevitable human as well as divine audience for the hymns we sing. However, he insists, we are not just singing “for the person seated next to us,” but also “*for the person not yet in the pews.*”⁴ We are singing for the day—in this world or in the world beyond—when, God willing, we will be seated side by side with Mandarin Chinese and Japanese and Portuguese and Cherokee . . . when we are truly gathered from north and south and east and west, to feast at the table of the Lord. When we sing other people’s songs, we de-center ourselves, opening our hearts to welcome others, whether they are physically present with us in the moment or not.

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Even when we have to pronounce words that are unfamiliar to us, to make sounds that do not roll naturally off our tongues, to follow rhythms that are not our native “pulse” and harmonies that are not our native “key,” we sing other people’s songs because people around the world are our extended family members in Christ.

A hymnal is . . . the property of an entire house and lineage of the people of God. As members of that household, we do not ultimately sing to please our own tastes but to give glory to the One who created us and constantly sustains in us the breath beneath our differing songs.

A CONTROVERSIAL FAMILY ALBUM

Of course, *which* global songs to include in a next congregational song resource for the PC(USA) will be no easier a question to sort through than how many metrical psalms to incorporate or what balance of traditional and contemporary musical selections to maintain. However the current committee resolves the issues, our denominational family is diverse enough that someone will be displeased! I have told myself—and will doubtless tell myself many times again—that when the new song collection hits the pews in 2014, a sign of our success as a committee will be that everyone in the denomination is upset with us about something! Such universal disgruntlement will mean that no one group will have gotten *everything* it wants—but, by the same token, I hope that every group will have gotten *something* to represent its place and importance in the family.

After all, a hymnal is not the property of any individual or any group of individuals—much less, of that peculiar assortment of clergy and laity, musicians and non-musicians appointed to serve as a “hymnal committee.” Rather, it is the property of an entire house and lineage of the people of God. As members of that household, we do not ultimately sing to please our own tastes but to give glory to the One who created us and constantly sustains in us the breath beneath our differing songs.

Notes

1. Philip Schaff, *Christ in Song*, vol. 2 (New York: Randolph, 1895), 278-280. Digitized by the University of California, 2007. Critics of the Calvin attribution include Erik Routley and Peter Cutts, eds. *An English-Speaking Hymnal Guide* (Chicago: GIA, 2005), 83.
2. Elsie Anne McKee, ed. and trans., *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001), 85 ff.
3. See www.presbyterianhymnal.org/TheologicalVision.asp.
4. "Singing the Stranger's Song in Our Own Lands," unpublished paper delivered at the joint conference of the *International Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Hymnologie*, The Hymn Society in the U.S. and Canada, the Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland in Opole, Poland (July 30, 2009).



Let the children of Zion be joyful
... let them sing praises unto God.
Psalm 149:2

Ellen Cavendish Phillips