

What Goes In a Hymnal?

A Leader Reader by Adam J. Copeland

Introduction

Every time my wife's extended family gets together, they share photos. No matter where we are or what holiday we are celebrating, at some point in the family get-together someone will make the request, and out they come. Some of these photos are older, taken at events long since past. But many are newer too, from recent weddings, birthday parties, and other festive occasions.

Every year or so, someone more patient and artsy than me gathers all the photos from the previous year and organizes them in a family album. Once complete, it will go on the shelf with the others, and at future family gatherings, we will pull it out to remember and enjoy the past.

PCOCS

The Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song (PCOCS) was formed in 2008 to develop the next Presbyterian collection of hymns and songs. As Mary Louise Bringle, chair of the PCOCS has put it, making a denominational hymnal is akin to compiling a family photo album. A good family photo album has plenty of diversity—you would not make one, say, of only photos from teenagers' birthday parties any less than the PCOCS would compile of hymnal of only Communion hymns. You would not say to a couple recently married, "Oh I'm sorry, we already have photos of weddings in our family album; we don't need any more." So too, the PCOCS seeks to include new hymns and songs, even those written in the past two or three years, in the forthcoming collection.

But as anyone who has compiled a family photo album knows, a difficult winnowing process must occur as well.

Prayer

Eternal God, in Jesus Christ
you have given the light of life
to all the world.
Sanctify this new fire,
and inflame us with a desire to shine forth
with the brightness of Christ's rising,
until we feast at the banquet of eternal light;
through Jesus Christ, the sun of Righteousness.
—*Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY:
Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1993), 298.

As lovely as Uncle Frank's retirement party was, there is no way the family album would include all five hundred photos taken that night. (I love you, Uncle Frank, but let's be real.) Likewise, the PCOCS has the daunting task of shaping a body of material—as a hymnal in print and also available online—that provides the church with songs our family will sing for years to come.

How Are Songs Chosen?

How does a committee choose what goes in? One large factor has to do with context. When a committee gathers material to publish in a hymnal, it usually works with some principles that offer context and guides their selections. For instance, some hymnals shared by multiple denominations will show particular awareness of hymns that connect or are unique to the different denominations. Other hymnals are compiled to reflect the concerns of a particular community or viewpoint. Often, the introduction of a hymnal will describe the context and intentions of the compilers, and even the ordering of the songs and the index may reflect their vision.

The next hymnal and electronic resources being developed by the PCOCS is still a work in progress, but the committee has compiled a Theological Vision Statement to guide its work.¹ The committee writes:

[The next collection] will be published amid different conditions than those that molded previous [hymnals]. 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.

The Theological Vision Statement then describes how the understanding of “salvation history” will mold the next hymnal.

So, context and an overarching vision help guide what goes in a hymnal. Other practical questions also drive the process. Questions like, Will this hymn or song ever be sung in many churches? Does this fill a gap in our life of faith or do we already have five beloved hymns just like this? How will this song function as part of a worship service? Sometimes it helps to look at the words and tune of hymns separately to consider their value to the church, and sometimes a specific pairing of text and tune is essential to a hymn’s success.

Other Hymnal Uses

Hymnals are not just for use at church. Consider keeping a personal copy of your congregation’s hymnal at home for further reference and study. Hymnals also make excellent baptism or confirmation gifts.

Some hymns use words and phrases that are difficult to understand (such as, “Here I raise my Ebenezer,” from the hymn “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”). Use a dictionary or a Bible with a concordance to clear up any uncertainty.

—*The Presbyterian Handbook*, (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2006), 25.

Final Thoughts

Hymnals have always been developed in a diverse world, but recent hymnals have tended to reflect a deepened understanding of this diversity. Wise hymnal committees are aware of the range of songs being sung in their own denomination and also what is being sung in other denominations and around the world. Recent hymnals published by large denominations and denominational partnerships have included the following:

- “Old favorite” hymns long loved by many generations (The PCOCS is studying the historic hymnals of the Presbyterian Church as it considers the next collection).
- Recently composed texts never published before
- Hymns popular in the broader church but not appearing in previous hymnals
- Contemporary music (also known as praise and worship music)
- Songs from the global church
- Cyclical songs developed in the Taizé community in France
- Hymns for particular liturgical occasions (such as lighting candles on an Advent wreath, or a service held on Ash Wednesday)
- Hymn texts appearing in previous denominational hymnals but set to newly-composed tunes
- Plenty of hymns and songs not easily classifiable in these categories

What goes in a hymnal? Well, hymns, of course—but truly understanding the answer takes plenty of thought and reflection.

The work of the PCOCS is far from complete, but the next collection of Presbyterian hymns and songs will likely reflect the diversity of the church, show a deep respect for the work of previous hymnal committees, and be guided by a theological vision intended to encourage congregational singing for many years to come. The list of hymns to be included will be presented at our next family gathering—the General Assembly held the summer of 2012 in Pittsburgh. Like all hymnals, the collection will be a product of its time, but it will also be the product of thousands of hours of prayerful work, reflection, dedication, and consideration of our collective family album. But one aspect

of this hymnal will certainly not be unique: it, like all good work, it will be given to the glory of God.

Endnote

1. See <http://presbyterianhymnal.org/committeeStatements.html> for the full document.

About the Writer

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