Creating Hymnals

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One of my favorite parts of The Hymn Society’s conferences is the chance to hear from editors and compilers of new hymnals as they discuss the decisions they made. In an age where tablet-sized computers and Internet-connected devices continue to affect how we read and distribute material, the hymnal continues to be an important genre. The articles highlighted in this column focus on the making of hymnals, old and new, and their lasting influence.


Liedboek, Zingen en Bidden in Huis en Kerk / Hymn-book, Singing and Praying at Home and in Church was released in 2013 by an interdenominational commission representing eight Dutch Protestant churches. Van Andel conducted research on the editorial process of creating it by attending every meeting of the editorial board as a researcher and transcribing the discussions. Some of those (anonymized) discussions in this article illustrate that every debate on the inclusion of a hymn was about not only the merits of the piece itself, but also how it fit into the different models of what a hymnal is thought to be. Three models for a hymnal are posited, each which contains a tension: mirror and motor (the hymnal as a representation of what is already going on in the world, vis-à-vis only songs that should enrich others), museum and utility (preserving a heritage vis-à-vis material that is presently useful), and aid and resource (material that can teach and enrich vis-à-vis context-free music that needs no explanation to be used.) For those who have never served on a hymnal committee, Van Andel’s work provides an intriguing peek into what can be a complex and sometimes contentious process. See also the authors’ “We Is Plural: Identity Construction in Hymn Book Editorial Meetings” in the Journal of Empirical Theology 27:2 (2014), 214-238.


Grime was the project director for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod’s Lutheran Service Book (2006). From this position he shares one challenge faced by that hymnal’s editorial committee. A 1999 survey revealed that a 36% of LCMS congregations still regularly used their 1941 hymnal, The Lutheran Hymnal (TLH), nearly two decades after the publication of its ostensible successor, Lutheran Worship. Grime discusses the development and reception of TLH but focuses on how the LCMS Commission on Worship struggled to adapt the ornate language of a much-used service, the “Common Service of 1888 with Communion” (also known as the “Page 15” service), for the new hymnal. This Page 15 service was heavily altered for Lutheran Worship, which Grime argues was part of the reason the hymnal never received universal acceptance. He expresses regret that the introduction of Lutheran Worship was not handled with more care. “The church’s liturgical rites are ever in flux, as they must be. But if that change is forced upon the faithful without consideration for the long-term memory and appreciation that the people have for the church’s heritage, we ought not be surprised by the negative reaction that sometimes comes” (219).


In this account, Wilhoit provides a biography of Robert Emmett Winsett (1876-1952), details the rise (and decline) of his music company, and describes the characteristics and reach of southern gospel music, the genre which best describes Winsett’s musical output. Winsett, a member of the Gospel Music Hall of Fame, is credited with writing nearly a thousand songs, but he is best known as an editor and compiler. His family-run company eventually settled in Dayton, Tennessee (home of the famous Scopes trial), and published music education materials and a steady supply of songbooks (such as its first bestseller, Songs of Pentecostal Power). To this day, Winsett publications are found in the pews of small churches throughout the southern United States.


Great Songs of the Church (1921) was the longest-lived hymnal of the Stone-Campbell Movement, and via that movement it spread into most of the English-speaking world. Jorgenson, emeritus professor at Truman State University, begins by describing some earlier hymnals in the Stone-Campbell movement and the thoughts of Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell on hymnody. Much of the article focuses on the life and work of the driving force behind Great Songs, Elmer Leon
In this short article, Wallace, the current editor of *Association: Journal of the United Church of Christ Musicians* (E. L.) Jorgenson, E. L. Jorgenson was a gospel songleader who spent years studying music and worship to prepare for the task of assembling a hymnal. He then had to get permission from three major copyright holders who were reluctant to see their works appear in the same book as their competitors', Edwin Excell, Rody-Tabernacle Publishing Company, and Hope Publishing Company. Jorgenson prevailed by working out a plan to pay royalties in installments. The article concludes with some notes on subsequent editions of the hymnal.


In this short article, Wallace, the current editor of *The Hymn*, illuminates the life and career of Haeussler (1891-1967, named a Fellow of The Hymn Society in 1962). Haeussler is best known for *The Story of Our Hymns*, the magisterial 1,088-page companion to *The Hymnal, Containing Complete Orders of Worship. Authorized by the General Synod of the Evangelical and Reformed Church* (1941). Wallace lauds Haeussler’s “discipline, scholarship, and patience” in balancing his pastoral commitments at St. Lucas Evangelical and Reformed Church in Evansville, Indiana, with his work on the companion during summers.


While the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints has a long tradition of congregational singing in parts, some of their members have been promoting a move to unison singing. Spencer provides background to this discussion by sketching the development of Mormon congregational song. Early influences of import are nineteenth-century singing schools and a large number of British Mormon converts who brought with them different sacred music aesthetics than their American counterparts. Spencer cites Ralph Vaughan Williams’ 1906 *English Hymnal* as an influential work that promoted singing in unison. She traces one aspect of this influence through revisions of the LDS denominational hymnal, *Hymns* (revised 1948 and 1985), in which some four-part settings are preserved but lowered over time to facilitate unison singing. After considering a 2004 pilot study that explored unison singing (and garnered negative reviews), she ponders a way forward: “The Church must determine whether it simplifies its music to increase accessibility or returns to forging a culture that expects some level of musical literacy, and, if the latter, is prepared to support these measures through some form of music education” (61).


Boisen (1878-1965) was a pioneer whose work led to modern clinical pastoral education in the United States. He compiled *Hymns of Hope and Courage* for use in psychiatric institutions. Believing that hymns could have therapeutic value, he tried to avoid hymns which might reinforce belief in the magical and he tried to include hymns portraying the love, forgiveness, and healing power of God (162). The authors of this article, representing the Christian Council on Ageing in the United Kingdom, seek to apply and extend Boisen’s work to a twenty-first century context. Their specific interest is whether hymns have a therapeutic effect for today’s older people. “Our respondents told us that many older people wish to have hymns for a variety of reasons: communal praise, private comfort, spiritual reflection, and help in daily living. They chose hymns for themselves for the same reasons that Boisen selected certain hymns . . . to improve their mental health and well-being” (176). The authors provide suggestions for worship leaders working with older people and for today’s hymnwriters.


Many readers of this journal need no introduction to *The Sacred Harp* (1844, most recent edition 1991), but readers who do will welcome this article by Gathje, a Lutheran pastor and PhD candidate at Fuller Seminary. He includes a brief historical sketch of this practice, rising to the daunting challenge of describing a musical experience with only words. Then he turns to practice theory and performance theory, as drawn from works of ritual theorists Catherine Bell, Richard Schechner, and Ronald Grimes, to analyze shape-note singing. Gathje draws out insights on the importance of individual participation, the lack of a traditional audience, and the notion of a “finished” performance. He then asks how shape-note singing might inform and invigorate congregational singing today:

The tradition of the [shape-note] singing convention is a curious blend of sacred and secular, ritual and theater, liturgy and celebration. The continuum is wide and so are the locations on it of each individual . . . For those who work regularly with shape-note singing’s close cousin, congregational singing, the understanding of what is being performed by each of the participants in worship might well be as diverse (19).

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