

The Hymnal and Our Great Body of Song

by Nancy Raabe

Approaching the happy task of worship planning, most of us begin with our hymnal. We take it from the shelf. We're ready to get started. But what if we were then to ask: "what *is* this book to us?"

The hymnal is not an object that we grab thoughtlessly from the shelf when we happen to need it. Rather it is a living entity that welcomes us at every turn into new experiences of the triune God in the risen Christ. It has ancestors and spawns offspring. It has a predictable lifespan—not the "seventy years, or perhaps eighty" of Psalm 90 (v. 10a; NRSV), but more like 25 years, or perhaps 30.

It is a dynamic force shaped by the prevailing political, theological, and social issues of its time and also a force that shapes our lives as Christians. It determines our vocabulary of words, phrases, and images that become part of our collective memory as the church. It tells us what to think about God, sin, death, our place in God's creation, and each other.

Like the word of God, the hymnal is "living

and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow" (Hebrews 4:12a). In the history of Lutheranism in America the hymnal has been a powerful agent of unity in bringing denominations together. But we know from the colorful tale of *Lutheran Book of Worship* (*LBW*) that the hymnal can also be an agent of fraction. *LBW* was conceived in the hopes of bringing the major Lutheran bodies together; instead, through no fault of its own, it served to wedge those bodies farther apart than ever.

Perhaps for this poignant reason the "old green book" seems never to be far from the minds of those whose congregations used and loved it. Talk about personality: not only does *LBW* possess a pioneering spirit, having laid the foundation for our worship life in almost more ways that we can count, but it also sports a winsome character. Even with the cranberry or dark burgundy hymnals (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* and *Lutheran Service Book*) well established in our pew racks, *LBW* keeps popping up in

surprising ways. It's our highly accomplished but quirky great uncle who no longer attends family gatherings but whose memory persists, often causing us to smile wistfully.

LBW once again surprised me while I was reading Gracia Grindal's lively essay "Treasured Hymns Unearthed or Buried,"¹ a reflection on her service from 1973 to 1978 on the Hymn Text Committee of the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship (the multifaceted body that prepared liturgy, text, and music for *LBW*).

"Leland Sateren [of the Hymn Music Committee] and I talked about the *LBW* once," she recalls, "and for different reasons, I suspect, we agreed that it could be thought of as 'an archive with an attitude.' He wanted more contemporary, difficult music. I wanted it to have been more open to things that people actually liked and treasured."

When the committee was asked to increase the number of hymns, one member pointed out, "We don't hurt people by what we put in, but by what we leave out." Grindal continues, "In my work with those who have made hymnals over the past 30 years, I have always been struck by their missionary zeal to give people new things they should like, rather than old favorites they love."

LBW ended up aiming more in the former direction than the latter, and our newer hymnals have tried to correct that to some degree. But where does each of *us* come in on this matter? Do we vigorously promote the use of new hymns in our mission to expand the congregation's repertoire? Or do we tend to stand staunchly by those hymns that are familiar and already well loved?

There are many fine resources for worship planning, including an extensive series of guides posted on the ELCA's website, many under the heading "Music" (www.elca.org/Our-Work/Congregations-and-Synods/Worship/FAQ#music). These are well worth your time.

In response to the question at hand, however, there are three basic yardsticks you can keep in mind as you get to work on your weekly hymn selection.

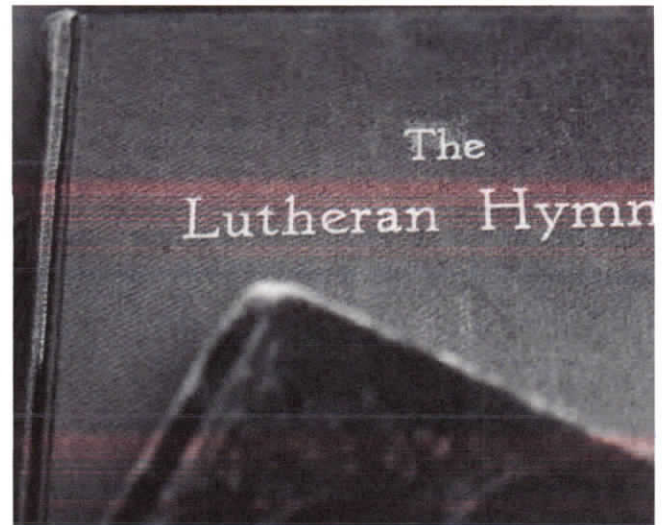
First: is a hymn singable according to the average ability of those in your congregation?

Singability implies not only a well-crafted melody but also one that is tuneful, with at least one surprise—a musical setting that stands a chance of taking root fairly quickly in people's musical memories.

Second: is the text theologically sound in a way that deepens faith by means of engaging forms of proclamation? Every hymn should tell some part of the story of salvation, yes, but a really good hymn uses combinations of words and images that invite us to experience the gospel in a new way.

And third: does the marriage of music with text bring out the best in both? Do they unfold in tandem? Is the pacing appropriate? Do the high points resonate with each other? Is it impossible to imagine this text without this particular tune and vice versa?

With these considerations in hand, you may just find you don't have to face the issues of new or old at all. Simply select hymns appropriate to the day or season based on these intrinsic qualities. Then, over time, the new and the old will be joined together naturally into in one great body of song.



Nancy Raabe is Associate in Ministry at Luther Memorial Church, Madison, WI.

Note

1. Gracia Grindal, "Treasured Hymns Unearthed or Buried," in the article "Two Memoirs of Making the Lutheran Book of Worship" (with a memoir by Philip H. Pfatteicher), *Lutheran Forum* 49, no. 2 (Summer 2015), 27.