

Have Hymnals Become Dinosaurs?

By Karen B. Westerfield Tucker | Volume 1.1 Fall 2014

This essay is an edited and adapted version of the Kavanagh Lecture, entitled "Have Hymnals Become Dinosaurs?: The Costs of Extinction," delivered on October 24, 2013 at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music.

Three scenarios — all of them real — can set the stage to address the question of the “extinction” of hymnals.

A congregation oversubscribes the cost of buying new denominational songbooks that contain a mixture of old hymns and recently-composed songs. The congregation’s minister approaches a pastoral colleague assigned to a smaller, struggling congregation, and offers her the surplus money for a similar purchase. “No, thank you,” she says. “We no longer use books since the lyrics are projected on the screen along with the other texts for worship. Although we are small, this is a forward-looking community. We are not interested in print books that are a relic of the past. Besides, we don’t want to be encumbered with books to hold because we prefer to be free to lift our hands or clap as we sing.”

In speaking about resources for worship, the pastor acknowledges that he never uses the denomination’s hymnbook. “I like having the freedom to choose music from any source. Of course, we have our CCLI [Christian Copyright Licensing International] and onelicense.net licenses. I find songs that best fit the theme of the day and that can get the congregation really ‘in’ to their worship. Hymnals are far too restrictive.”

A student in my introductory worship course, upon learning that the day’s session will focus on music in worship, comments in class: “I hope you aren’t going to talk about hymns and hymnals. They really are irrelevant to today’s worship. The music is old fashioned and the words are often boring. I’d like for us to talk about ‘contemporary’ music and music that is produced individually or collaboratively by people in an emerging-style congregation. That really would be more helpful for us as future pastors.” Although the Masters of Sacred Music students in the room cringe at that remark, they are a minority compared to the heads nodding in affirmation of the student’s request.

We are all aware of churches where the blue, red, black, or green hymnal remains safely tucked in the pew rack for the duration of the Sunday liturgy. In some instances, denominational leaders have encouraged hymnal-using congregations to lay their books aside in the name of growth and “relevance.” Indeed, some of these churches have experienced growth in numbers after giving up their hymnbooks. Even in Catholic churches, the *Gather* or equivalent songbook collects dust while the monthly rotation of “missalettes” is used. So it is a bit of a surprise that, in 2013, two new denominational hymnbooks were born: the joint publication of the Christian Reformed Church in North America and the Reformed Church in America presented under the title *Lift Up Your Hearts: Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs*; and *Glory to God*, from the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. In response to the trends of the times, both of these books are available in hard-copy and electronic forms. *Lift Up Your Hearts* comes in multiple

digital formats that include schemes for projection, printing, and reading. *Glory to God* is offered in a web-based electronic edition that is searchable and includes audio clips. What some declare to be a dying life-form has been acclimatized to the digital age.

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Is this simply a last-ditch effort to save the hymnal from extinction as a species? Should hymnals go the way of the dodo and the dinosaur, given the changes in today's worship climate? Most certainly they should, if one considers the comments of many church leaders, worship leaders, laity, and seminarians. Yet, it is clear that the leadership of these three Reformed denominations had a different perspective when confronted with the choice between reinvigorating the hymnal — helping it adapt to a new environment — or to letting it pass away. The "Theological Vision Statement" (2009), written by the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song and included in the back of *Glory to God* as Appendix I, succinctly articulates their logic for the continuation of the hymnbook genre. I state it here in full, for it provides a foundation for a more fleshed-out discussion of the costs of extinction.

Collections of hymns, psalms, and spiritual songs give voice to the church's core beliefs and theological convictions. Their texts are "compact theology," and the selection of hymns and songs, the order in which they are presented, and even the ways in which they are indexed shape the theological thinking and ultimately the faith and practices of the church.

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

This collection of hymns and songs, however, 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 where eclectic spiritualities often fail to satisfy deep spiritual hungers. It will be used by worshipers who 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.

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

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

- The priority placed on God's acts offers hope to those whose faith in human efforts has been undermined.
- A focus on salvation history reminds a church and world riddled with anxiety, frustration, and conflict that love has come to earth and that the risen and ascended Christ is alive and active.
- The emphasis on God's provision for us invites our grateful response. It makes a place for expressions of corporate commitment as well as personal devotion.
- The framework of salvation history is widely inclusive. It has places for existing hymns and invites the writing of new words and music to supply major omissions. It makes room for the whole of the biblical witness, not only psalms and the Gospels that are already well reflected in hymn texts, but also the segments of the Scriptures that are not. It incorporates the events of the Christian year, the sacraments, and the mission of the church throughout the world as Christ's living body.
- As such, this framework both encompasses and enriches the liturgical practices that exist in the church. It includes the christological rhythm of the liturgical year, from Advent to the Reign of Christ, but also places the liturgical year in the wider framework of God's covenantal acts in creation and toward Israel. It challenges all users, whatever liturgical patterns they use, to shape their worship by the full extent of the biblical narrative.
- The rich narrative of salvation history — with the life stories of people like Abraham and Sarah, Eli and Samuel, Boaz and Ruth, Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch — makes audible the manifold ways in which God engages people of different ages, nationalities, races, and genders.
- The framework of the history of salvation offers a theological rationale for asking us to learn songs that come from cultures different from our own: 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 (Eph. 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.
- Likewise, the notion of salvation history invites us to bridge the divide between different musical styles and traditions. As scribes who have been trained for God's reign will bring out of their treasures "what is new and what is old" (Matt. 13:52), so musicians are invited to lead us in songs both old and new, in praise of a God who is the first and the last, the ancient of everlasting days, and the Lord of the new creation.^[1]

To address the question of whether or not hymnals are outmoded, it is necessary to consider their functions and purposes. First, we will focus on the hymnal as a theological primer, and then consider the hymnal as the repository of the church's witness through the ages. Finally, we will look at the hymnal as a witness to the present age and the age to come.

The Hymnal as a Theological Primer

The Presbyterian "Theological Vision Statement" makes it clear that, above all, the hymnal encompasses layers of theological reflection on the Christian faith. By the "compact theology" found in each hymn, pieces of the narrative of God's salvation and the hymn writer's interpretation of them are provided. They are then, in performance, knit into the larger fabric of the doxological and liturgical event. No single hymn or song is capable of conveying the full story of salvation. As we know, some are better at articulating basic Christian beliefs and experiences than others. Ideally, the text and tune of each hymn or song serve as a memory aid, reminding the singers of the broader narrative of God's work in creation and in human life. What is expressed in a hymn is, by design and of necessity, incomplete.

To speak of hymns, however, is not necessarily to speak of hymnals. The pastor previously described

was quite happy to retrieve the sung repertoire of his congregation from a variety of sources and not just out of a single, discrete publication of texts and melodies. Positively put, such an approach may provide greater musical flexibility in worship planning and practice. In addition, communities may engage new musics as they emerge rather than wait for months or years before they are approved for a collection. Congregations, and especially worship leaders and pastors, are free to develop their own repertoire. But what is seen as beneficial may be also regarded as problematic. The freedom to develop a repertoire might mean that certain aspects of the narrative of salvation and the experiences of Christian life are overlooked or, at the other extreme, over-emphasized. Preachers often have their favorite homiletic axes to grind, and a musical repertoire of limited theological content may be used as an aural lubricant to ease the delivery. Along with the problem of a truncated range of songs of faith, there is the dislocation of the repertoire of a congregation from the wider song of the church. Hymnal committees, slow though they may be, select songs to speak to a broad constituency. Through a system of checks and balances, a representative committee also gives attention to theological diversity and integrity. The loss of such diversity and integrity can be registered as but one price that would be paid for the extinction of hymnals.

The Presbyterian Statement acknowledges that hymns articulate the faith of the church, and that the organization of the collections themselves does so as well. The Presbyterian committee was not the first to make this observation. Almost 230 years earlier, the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, wrote in his Preface to the voluminous *Collection of Hymns for the Use of The People Called Methodists* (1780) that the book was “large enough to contain all the important truths of our most holy religion, whether speculative or practical” and that the contents were not “carelessly jumbled together, but carefully ranged under proper heads, according to the experience of real Christians.” The book was “in effect a little body of experimental and practical divinity.”^[2] Thus the value of hymnals is not just that they conveniently contain the repertoire of words — and often music — to be used for Christian worship and devotions. Hymnbooks or songbooks, by their contents and by the method of their organization, teach the faith of the Church — and, in the case of denominationally authorized books, convey the particular doctrines or theological emphases of that branch of the Christian tradition. Between two covers, the *lex orandi* and the *lex credendi* stand together.

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Because hymnals are intended for the congregation, they are, in effect, *the* liturgical and theological books of the people, who are thus enabled to articulate their praise and thanksgiving. Since these books are literally “at hand,” their contents — the words of hymns and the theological shape of the entire collection — can (ideally) be more readily assimilated and “owned.” What is “confessed with the lips” therefore can both reflect *and* shape what is “believed in the heart” (Rom.10:9).

While hymnbooks, by their organization, offer a theological framework, this structuring cannot be identified as a systematic theology. As the hymnologist Paul Westermeyer observes, the arrangement of hymns should be identified more as a “synthetic” theology than one that is systematic. Hymns are usually multivalent and so can fit under more than one heading typical of a systematic theology; indeed, the “individual parts and their whole draw together many connections in a totality about the Christian faith that is fundamentally doxological and cannot be easily systematized.”^[3] This is one reason why it is difficult to locate a particular hymn by using a topical index. But the absence of a systematic theology and the utilization of a synthetic theology do not mean that there is no theological coherence or flavor to a hymnal.

To return to John Wesley's 1780 *Collection* "organized according to the experience of real Christians" as an example, we find a hymnal that takes the shape of Wesley's proclaimed *via salutis*, or way of salvation, so important for Methodism as a movement within the Church of England. The *Collection* begins with hymns inviting to repentance, and continues with hymnic prayers for repentance and true faith. The penultimate section provides hymns under the headings "Rejoicing," "Fighting," "Praying," "Watching," "Working," "Suffering," "Groaning for Full Redemption," "Brought to the Birth," "Saved," and, interestingly, given the personal focus of the previous headings but in keeping with Wesley's missionary convictions, "Interceding for the World." The final section is designated for the worship of the Methodist society with the headings "Giving Thanks," "Praying," and "Parting," a tripartite simplicity that little indicates the spiritual and emotional intensity of society gatherings. The *via salutis* structure (in full or in part) persists in Methodist hymnals on both sides of the Atlantic more than two centuries later as a type of identifier for Methodist hymn and song collections. The *United Methodist Hymnal* (1989) tucks the old *via salutis* scheme into a broader five-section structure, in which the first three sections are assigned to each person of the Trinity, the fourth section identified with "The Community of Faith," and the fifth focused on the eschatological "New Heaven and New Earth." The old *via salutis* structure straddles the section assigned to the work of the Holy Spirit (beginning with invitation and repentance) and the "Community of Faith" section in a sub-part that is designated "The Nature of the Church," in recognition that Methodism no longer self-defines as an *ecclesiola* but as an *ecclesia*. For Methodists, the preservation of a theological organizational shape within the hymnals across the generations has been a conscious recognition of a particular Methodist identity. This organizational structure also played a catechetical and instructional role for Methodists. Prior to the existence of a seminary education for aspiring clergy of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, assigned books were read as part of a ministerial Course of Study, and on the list was the denomination's hymnal. An 1860 essay describing this Course indicated that consideration was to be given to the hymnal's arrangement: "parts, sections, sub-sections, consecutive order of the hymns; as they are all arranged in philosophical order, with headings suggestive of the particular subjects, and specially framed to assist in selection for particular purposes and occasions."^[4] The Preface to the *United Methodist Hymnal* (1989) affirms this heritage: "Next to the Bible, our hymnals have been our most formative resource."

Changed or modified theological and liturgical emphases are often indicated in the organization of a denomination's hymnal. A good example is demonstrated by a comparison of the Congregational Church's *Pilgrim Hymnal* (1958) with its successor the *New Century Hymnal* of 1995, which was produced as the second hymnal for the United Church of Christ, the denomination born from the union of the Congregational Church and the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Missing from the older hymnal is an explicit section-heading that references the liturgical year, though the Preface to the book notes that the hymns mark "the changing yet recurring accents of the Christian year," and christological hymns pertinent to Advent through Ascension and Reign appear under the heading "Our Lord Jesus Christ." A new denomination and the influence of the liturgical movement likely encouraged the liturgical year heading in the *New Century Hymnal* under which includes, quite remarkably for historic Calvinists, hymns for All Saints Day.

The synthetic theological aspect of hymnal organization identified by Westermeyer is especially evident when comparing the 1940 and the 1982 Episcopal Church USA hymnals. Both books include a section of "General Hymns" that contains texts that overlap in content with selections in the other headings of "Daily Office," "Christian" or "Church Year," and "Sacraments and other Rites." The subsections of the 1982 book are far more detailed than that of the 1940 collection, especially under the section "General Hymns," which supplies subsections in roughly a creedal outline. The placement of service music, which

moved from the back of the 1940 book to the front of the 1982 book, speaks of both convenience for practice and of liturgical identity.

Even hymns in collections designed for multiconfessional or nondenominational use are often framed within a theological system. Two books produced in Australia by editorial committees with Anglican, Churches of Christ, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, and Uniting Church members took up the same creedal structure in each book (*The Australian Hymn Book* [1977]; *Together in Song* [1999]). Such collaborative work and the repeated structures in the books gave testimony not only to the theological and liturgical sharing of the ecumenical creeds, but also to a type of hymnic ecumenism that recognized the possibility of separated Christians singing many of the same songs together. An example of a nondenominational book is *A Hymnal For Colleges and Schools*, published in 1992 by Yale University Press, which is organized according to salvation history, from creation to eschaton. Embedded within this scheme, in a section designated “The Faithful Life,” are subsections placed in a sequence corresponding to a liturgical ordo. Though not confessional, this book’s organizational agenda places the worship of an academic community within the narrative stream of the whole church.

With the loss of a hymn and song repertoire demarcated between the two covers of a book — or with the absence of an organizational system delineating theologically the contents of a digital file — the church has lost a key mechanism for teaching the faith both obviously and subtly. A single song text projected on a screen or printed in a worship leaflet dislocates that text from the wider theological and doxological milieu.

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While it is true that the single song text may function as a memory aid or mnemonic device, its usefulness may be much more limited when separated from the wider and deeper pool of the hymnal, where a text connects thematically with those before and after it. For newcomers to the faith, a text’s wider theological connectivities might not even be recognized.

My own earliest theological education, besides church school and Sunday worship, came from reading the hymnal. Headings and indices were not neglected as I combed through our church’s hymnal as a way of amusing myself during especially boring sermons. I supplemented my experience of the liturgical year as celebrated in the congregation with hymns under the appropriate headings; the poverty of Advent hymns in our book was not lost on me. As a young pianist and then organist, I routinely played through the family’s copy of the denominational hymnal to put in my fingers what I had read with my eyes. How can my faith-formative experience be replicated to a generation that knows no hymnbooks in the pew or in the home? Such is a cost of extinction.

The Hymnal as the Repository of the Church’s Witness through the Ages

Just as a circumscribed and theologically synthetic hymn and song repertoire is better able to express and convey the fundamental teachings of the Christian faith, so too it is more capable of exposing diachronically the lived faith of Christian communities. The inclusion of representative texts and tunes from previous eras and the current one declare implicitly that the church does not in each generation re-create itself *de novo*, although it is always an *ecclesia semper reformanda*, offering “new songs” to the Lord (Ps. 144:9; Rev. 14:3).^[5] In a sense, a hymnal that includes the song of the church through the ages functions as a poetic and musical witness to the communion of saints, both the triumphant and

militant. The diversity of the saints of the church is therefore represented by a variety of poetic texts and musical styles.

The breadth of the church's tradition of song is well represented in the previously mentioned *Lift Up Your Hearts* and *Glory to God*, published in 2013, as well as in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* of 2006. To start at the beginning chronologically, all three of these books include psalms, scriptural canticles, and translations of one of the earliest known hymn texts: the evening hymn *Phos Hilaron* is attested, in the fourth-century *Treatise on the Holy Spirit* of Basil the Great, to be an already well-practiced hymn. Each contains texts from successive periods, for example to name only very few: "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence," from the Liturgy of Saint James; the Venerable Bede's "A Hymn of Glory Let Us Sing"; "All Will Be Well," from Julian of Norwich; "O Sacred Head Now Wounded"; Martin Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"; "I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art" from Calvin and the Strasbourg Psalter; Isaac Watts's "Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun"; Charles Wesley's "Lo, He Comes with Clouds Descending"; Fanny Crosby's "Blessed Assurance"; Thomas Dorsey's "Precious Lord, Take My Hand"; Pablo Sosa's "O Look and Wonder"; Shirley Erena Murray's "Touch the Earth Lightly"; "In the Darkness of the Morning," by the emerging Mennonite hymn writer Adam Tice; and texts by Chris Tomlin and Graham Kendrick, who are known for their contributions to contemporary Christian music (CCM).

The texts of different eras were accompanied by music written in the particular and preferred styles of their age. These musical styles of past generations were in their own time a "new song," and each functioned to help capture hearts, minds, and voices in conveying the faith — a type of sonic evangelism.

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The three recent hymnals have incorporated a range of compositions, ancient and modern, into their collections. The previously mentioned *Phos Hilaron* is, for example, put to two different settings in the Presbyterian *Glory to God*: one a ninth-century Sarum plainsong (Mode IV), and the other a nineteenth-century metrical tune that is paired with a 2011 translation and versification of the ancient text. These hymnals also contain both music of the classical composers and new tunes by current writers. German chorale tunes, Anglican chant, folk tunes of the various nations and peoples, eighteenth-century English and Victorian tunes, Hispanic melodies, gospel music, the quasi-plainsong of Jacques Berthier and the Taizé Community: all these and more find a place. There is no mistaking the fact that, when the full repertoire of these books is embraced and engaged, our participation in the sonic worship of the saints is diverse indeed.

A chronological accounting of the saints is one way to read the musical output of the cloud of witnesses. Another is to consider their geographic representation. All three of these hymnals are committed to the inclusion of historical and current texts that represent more than North America and Western Europe. They also pay attention to the sounds produced by this geographic spread. *Lift Up Your Voice* includes music by composers from countries not previously represented in many hymn collections. Settings from the continent of Africa include sounds from Cameroon, Congo, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, South Africa, Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe.

The texts of hymns and songs together in a discrete collection provide a time-specific — yet in many ways also ageless — compendium of Christian life and experience: sorrow and joy; repentance and

forgiveness; praise, adoration and thanksgiving; communion and mystery; and so forth. These texts and tunes still speak to the spiritual journey and experience of Christian people today, and in most cases the date of their writing is forgotten. How often is it remembered that “Amazing Grace” is an eighteenth-century text written by a former slave trader and usually sung to an early nineteenth-century tune? In our generation, it is a hymn of comfort sung at Christian funerals; and it is embraced widely in American society at times of community protest or tragedy. Another example, the ubiquitous “Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow,” was written in the late seventeenth century and is commonly set to a sixteenth-century tune. The hymnic witness of the past is enduring. Such timelessness and timeliness is also shown in the creation of new texts based on the work of earlier writers. The hymn writer Jean Janzen, born in 1933, often finds her inspiration in such ancient works as those of Julian of Norwich:

*Mothering God, you gave me birth in the bright morning of this world.
Creator, source or every breath, you are my rain, my wind, my sun.*

*Mothering Christ, you took my form, offering me your food of light,
grain of life, and grape of love, your very body for my peace.*

*Mothering Spirit, nurturing one, in arms of patience hold me close,
so that in faith I root and grow until I flower, until I know.*[\[6\]](#)

Thus, the decision to forfeit the use of a hymnal or a songbook in effect cuts off a congregation from its heritage and its memory. The loss of a hymnal lessens the likelihood of an awareness of the diversity and unity of Christian experience both chronologically and geographically. It also obscures the truth that “through the church the song goes on”[\[7\]](#) and that “the church in liturgy and song, in faith and love, through centuries of wrong, has borne witness to the truth in every tongue.”[\[8\]](#) As A. Royce Eckhardt, editor of the 1996 *Covenant Hymnal*, rightly notes:

*The vast ocean of Christian hymnody transcends our individual limits and our specific place.
The hymnal reminds us that God, the creator of the whole universe, took mortal flesh among
us in a specific time and place; and that the hymnal, in both its universality and its
particularity, protects us from believing that only the song of our time and our place, is the
one that really matters. No, we are part of a much larger, ongoing song.*[\[9\]](#)

The Hymnal as a Witness to the Present Age and the Age to Come

Not only do hymnals expose diachronically the lived faith of Christian communities, they also express synchronically — in the present time — the church’s witness. This is indicated by the sharing of an authorized denominational hymnal among the congregations of that denomination and sometimes by congregations outside the denomination. A note at the front of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* indicates that the book is commended for use in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, thereby linking those congregations musically and also liturgically since calendars, propers, liturgical settings, and texts for sacraments and sacramental rites are included in the book. Other congregations, and even denominations, may use this hymnal, drawing *them* into the tight network as well. These congregations are then linked by the work and music of worship — the ordering of the gathering, the proclamation of the word, the fellowship of the table, and

the sending forth to mission and service. The Introduction to *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* makes this point with these eucharistically-framed words: “May this book of the church...be [a servant] through which the Holy Spirit will call out the church, gather us around Jesus Christ in word and sacrament, and send us, enlivened, to share the good news of life in God.” The ties that bind by the use of a hymnal locate a single congregation in a broader company, which then allows these congregations to speak together to the present age. Thus, the connections between a local community and the global church become more tangible. However, this is not to suggest that churches engage in an absolute equivalence in worship practice and music selection, since what is expected in most instances is a unity without an imposed uniformity.

Although hymnals under different titles rarely have identical contents, the similarities between them connect congregations, even when words are adjusted by translation or a scrupulous editorial committee and musical settings are not alike. The sharing of a hymnic repertoire unselfconsciously pushes the work of ecumenism forward as a witness to the churches — and to a skeptical world. There is something remarkable about Catholic congregations singing “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” The hymn “Sing of Mary, Pure and Lowly” by Roland Palmer that is familiar to Catholics appears in the current United Methodist hymnal — and not in the section on Advent, which is where Mary is typically hidden in most Protestant hymnals.

Hymns in a shared repertoire connect us ecumenically and globally. Congregations in areas that once received the hymns of Western missionaries are now exporting their songs of faith to hymnals produced in countries that those missionaries came from. For example, the South African songs “Siyahamba,” “Thuma mina,” and “Mayenziwe” have become staples in North American hymnals. Spanish-language hymns are sung in congregations where there are no native Spanish speakers. Tunes, as already noted, sound the worldwide aspect of the church and animate the singers in common melodies and rhythms. Hymnals today are multicultural, multiethnic, multiconfessional, global. Perhaps there is at least musical truth when we sing:

*In Christ there is no east or west,
In him no south or north,
But one great fellowship of love
Throughout the whole wide earth.*[\[10\]](#)

The repertoire within hymnals is also designed to speak truth to the concerns of the present age and to point to God’s unfolding, yet not fully revealed, future. New texts that speak the faith and utilize the new musics of the age are included to energize the faithful and to entice the lapsed and curious. Issues of common concern are addressed, and their inclusion in hymnbooks is a check against the particular, and perhaps limited, commitments of worship leaders and their congregations. Since the 1960s, hymns that convey urgency for the care of God’s good earth have been assigned a place in hymnals. One text on this theme, written by the New Zealand native Shirley Erena Murray (born 1931), appears today in numerous hymnals worldwide:

*Touch the earth lightly, use the earth gently,
nourish the life of the world in our care:
Gift of great wonder, ours to surrender,*

trust for the children tomorrow will bear.

*We who endanger, who create hunger,
agents of death for all creatures that live,
we who would foster clouds of disaster—
God of our planet, forestall and forgive!*

*Let there be greening, birth from the burning,
water that blesses, and air that is sweet,
health in God's garden, hope in God's children,
regeneration that peace will complete.*

*God of all living, God of all loving,
God of the seedling, the snow, and the sun,
Teach us, deflect us, Christ reconnect us,
using us gently, and making us one.[\[11\]](#)*

Not surprisingly, themes of peace and justice are topics for contemporary hymn writers and come especially from the pen of the aforementioned Adam Tice, born in the United States in 1979. His hymns are starting to appear in the newest North American hymnals and give voice to the understanding that the hymnal is a medium of prophetic witness. Tice's hymn "The Church of Christ" considers the church of the present and of the future:

*The church of Christ cannot be bound
by walls of wood or stone.
Where charity and love are found,
there can the church be known.*

*True faith will open up the door
and step into the street.
True service will seek out the poor
and ask to wash their feet.*

*True love will not sit idly by
when justice is denied.
True mercy hears the homeless cry
and welcomes them inside.*

*If what we have we freely share
to meet our neighbor's need,
then we extend the Spirit's care
through every selfless deed.*

*The church of Christ cannot be bound
by walls of wood or stone.
Where charity and love are found,
there can the church be known.[\[12\]](#)*

Conclusion

The cost of hymnal extinction is indeed high. A hymnal gives checks and balances to an individual's or a congregation's preferences and dislikes, and it pushes a community to consider the wider church in terms of commonalities of faith and similarities of practice. The extinction of hymnals may unwittingly contribute to an additional fracturing of an already broken church. An additional cost of extinction is the loss of a significant means of preserving the fullness of Christian identity and of locating individual and community in the ongoing narrative of the Christian story.

Have hymnals become dinosaurs? The energies put into the publication of recent hymnals by composers, authors, editorial committee and consultants suggest otherwise. Are hymnals an endangered species? The answer remains yes. But, from my perspective, hymnals must have a place in the church's future, whether in print, digitized, or in some other form. To conclude with the words of Mary Louise Bringle, chair of the editorial committee for the new Presbyterian hymnal *Glory to God*:

[A] hymnal is like a telephone in ways other than the fact that both bear replacing long before they physically wear out. Like a telephone, a hymnal is also a medium of communication to bridge distances and differences. Old hymns, psalms, spirituals and gospel songs serve to bridge generations far removed from each other, connecting today's congregations with resources and relatives from centuries past. New songs build bridges, too, honoring the contributions of contemporary worshipers....

Most significantly of all, however, worship songs communicate the adoration of believers to the One who gave breath and continues to inspire words in our minds and melodies in our hearts. Surely, far more important than pleasing ourselves with what we sing in worship is making a sacrifice pleasing to God. And that sacrifice just might mean setting aside our personal preferences in order to sing the heart songs of our neighbors, freshly available to us in new hymnals — even when the old ones have worn so well.[\[13\]](#)

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FOOTNOTES

[\[1\]](#) *Glory to God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), pp. 926–927.

[2] *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 7, *A Collection of Hymns for the use of the People called Methodists*, ed. Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), pp. 73-74.

[3] Paul Westermeyer, "A Hymnal's Theological Significance," in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 48 (Winter 2009): 314.

[4] "The Hymn-Book," in *Methodist Quarterly Review* 14 (July 1860): 466.

[5] See Westermeyer, "A Hymnal's Theological Significance," p. 316.

[6] *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), no. 735.

[7] From "Holy God, We Praise Thy Name" by Ignaz Franz; Eng. translation Clarence A. Walworth.

[8] From "When in Our Music God is Glorified" by Fred Pratt Green.

[9] A. Royce Eckhardt, "What is a Hymnal?" in *The Covenant Quarterly* 68 (Feb-May 2010): 50.

[10] *Glory to God*, no. 317.

[11] *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, no. 739.

[12] *Glory to God*, no. 766.

[13] Mary Louise Bringle, "Singing from One Book: Why Hymnals Matter," in *The Christian Century* (May 1, 2013); cited from www.christiancentury.org/article/2013-04/singing-one-book.



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